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DETECTIVE

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CONTENTS

COVER PAINTING	George Wilson	
TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS	George Wilson and Winiarski	

THREE SNAPPY CRIME NOVELETTES

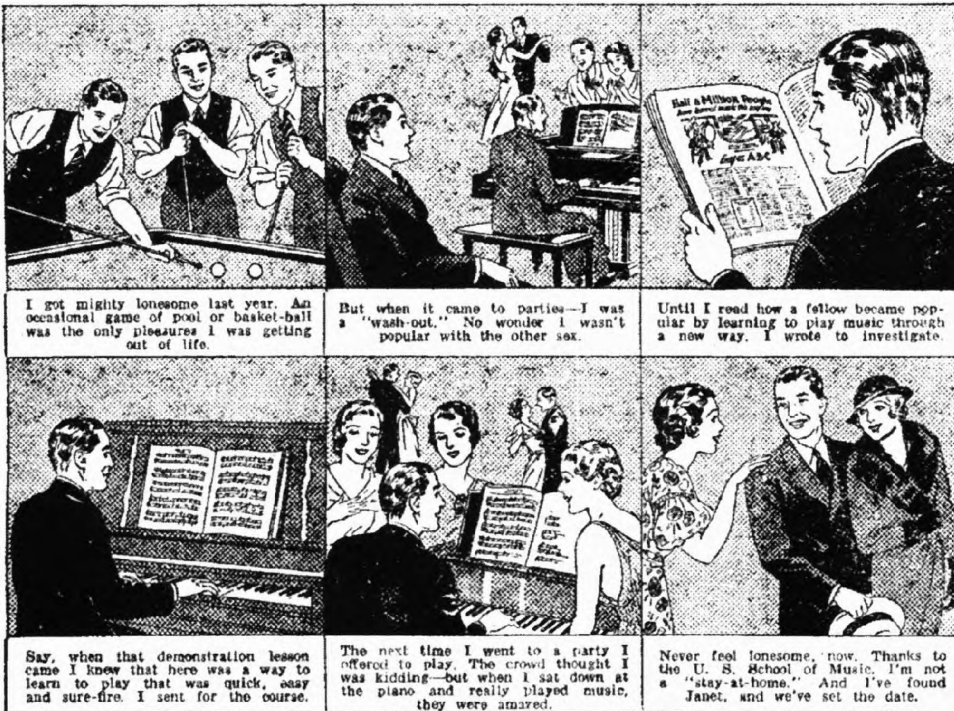
KILLER'S BAIT	<i>Crime and Mystery in Hollywood</i>	W. T. Ballard	6
BIG SHOT vs BONEHEAD	<i>Another Demonstration that Crime Doesn't Pay</i>	John Joseph	49
TOO MUCH ROPE	<i>Murder on the High Seas</i>	Bob DuSoo	69

SIX DYNAMIC CRIME THRILLERS

THE PUMA WOMAN	<i>Scrambled Love and Revenge</i>	William Allen Ward	44
EYE WITNESS	<i>He Never Liked Cats</i>	Grant Lane	66
THE COCOA KID	<i>Plot and Counter Plot</i>	John Graham	83
WALLFLOWERS	<i>Newshound Plays Sleuth</i>	Val McNamara	94
FIVE FATAL MINUTES	<i>His Watch Was Slow</i>	Westmoreland Gray	105
DRACO'S CADAVER	<i>Steve Creedon in Action</i>	William Mahoney	113

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CHAPTER I

BOYCE HAMILTON pushed open the door of the office and went in. The heavy-set man at the desk looked up, his eyebrows climbing. "Hello, Captain, I didn't know that you were back."

Hamilton said, "I flew out from Washington. I just landed this morning. How are things on the coast?"

The other shrugged. "I think I'll get out of the service. Nothing's happened here since you left."

Hamilton's lips twitched slightly. "Nothing? I've come from Vienna in ten days to straighten things out."

The man at the desk stared at him.

"What's wrong?"

Hamilton's voice was sharp. "Plenty. The state department is all worked up. Did you know that you've got a real live King in Hollywood?"

The other shrugged. "I'm not surprised. We've got everything else. What about it?"

"Plenty. Ever hear of Bulvakia?"

The man at the desk nodded. "It's in the Balkans, isn't it?"

"Yeah. After the war they set up a republic. The King was forced into exile and finally died. His nephew was brought to this country and everyone forgot about him.

"He didn't seem very important, but last week there was a revolution, the republic overthrown, and the president killed. The old constitution was re-established and a dictatorship formed with General Anton Skorvnick at its head. The Prince, or King, although he's not crowned and may never be crowned, is here. It's a question whether he will be recalled. In the meantime we can't have anything happen to him that might complicate things. At present the state department is playing a hands-off policy as far as the Balkans are concerned, but if the heir to the throne were killed in this country it would be too bad, just when the administration is at-

KILLER'S BAIT

by W.T. Ballard



tempting to build up commercial relations with the Balkans. On the other hand, we can't recognize the King as such until we learn whether he is going back. It's a situation that demands care in handling, and they've put the job up to me."

"What are you going to do?"

Hamilton shrugged. "From all I can learn Ruprecht is trying to be an actor. I hope to arrange with Rothberg out at Acme pictures to take the boy on, give him a small part, and keep him there. I'll hang around and watch, but I've got to find him first."

Jordan stared. "Don't you know where he is?"

Hamilton shook his head. "I don't, but I know a man that does."

"Well?"

"I've got to see Rothberg about spotting this kid in pictures. I can't tell him what's up, but he's a pal of mine and will do what I ask. Then I'll try to find the Prince."

"What do you want us to do?"

Hamilton shook his head. "Nothing now, but I might need help later. I wanted to warn you." He rose. Jordan rose also. "It's good to see you again, Captain."

"Glad to see you, Si." He turned toward the door.

In the corridor outside the office of the Special Agent, United States Treasury, Hamilton paused for a moment, then went rapidly toward the elevator. It was good to be back in Hollywood. For ten years after his demobilization at the end of the war he had been connected with Acme Pictures' Studio, and had then been recalled to government service because of the menace of war in Europe.

CHAPTER II



BOYCE HAMILTON, Captain of Military Intelligence attached to the state department, went into the phone booth and called a number. Bert Snyder answered. He had been corres-

pondent at Vienna, Budapest, and way stations before the war. He knew the Balkans, if any man in Hollywood did, and he kept in touch.

"This is Boyce Hamilton. I met you in Paris, remember? Could I see you for a few minutes?"

Snyder's voice was hesitant. "I've a dinner date at seven-thirty."

"It'll take only a couple of minutes. How about my grabbing a cab to your place now?"

"Fine." The receiver clicked, and Hamilton left the booth.

The apartment in which Snyder lived was off Franklin, just east of Gower. Hamilton paid his driver, went through the lobby to the automatic elevator, and rode up to the fourth floor.

Snyder came to the door without a shirt. He was short, fifty odd, with a partly bald head and heavy features. He grinned and motioned Hamilton into the front room. "There's some good Scotch. Help yourself. Seltzer, if you want it. I'll be with you in a minute." He disappeared into the bedroom, to reappear a moment later, buttoning his shirt.

"What's on your mind, Hamilton?" he asked, pouring Scotch into a tall glass and adding soda.

Boyce stared at him thoughtfully. He did not know Snyder very well, but he knew him by reputation as a former newspaper man lured into the films. "I'm trying to reach Ruprecht of Bulvakia."

Snyder set the glass slowly on the table and looked at Hamilton for a long moment before he said anything. "Why come to me?"

"Because I thought that you might know him; that if you don't, you might know someone who does. You were in touch in south central Europe for a long time."

"I'll say I was." Snyder picked up his glass and drank deeply. "May I ask you why you want to reach Ruprecht?"

Hamilton hesitated. After all, he was acting in an unofficial capacity,

and the government did not want publicity. "Something that will be to his advantage." He hedged.

The other seemed to be thinking it over. "I don't know where the boy is," he admitted finally. "I understand he's on the west coast somewhere, but where—" He spread his hands.

Hamilton rose. "Thanks anyhow. Sorry I bothered you."

"Hold on a minute," Snyder said. "I don't know where he is, but I do know someone who can tell you if he will."

"Who's that?" Hamilton turned back into the room.

"Bruno Tomaseck. He used to be head secretary at the Bulvakian legation at Vienna. After they went into the war he was Colonel of the King's personal staff, and later helped the little Prince and his mother escape. He's living out in Beverly. Wait. I'll give you a note to him, but I've an idea you won't get much. The old boy is something of a clam."

Hamilton said, "That's swell," and watched while Snyder went to a desk in the corner and scribbled a note. He took the envelope, refused another drink, and left the apartment. In a drugstore at the corner he looked up Tomaseck in the phone book and failed to find him listed. Then he tried the city directory without success. Shrugging, he went back to his cab and gave the man the address which he had gotten from Snyder. The cab went out the Boulevard to Laurel Canyon, left across Sunset, and on to Santa Monica.

The house was half way up Bolton Drive, a little stucco with a walled patio on the front. Hamilton told the man to wait, went up the walk and rang the bell. It was answered by a maid who looked at him suspiciously.

Hamilton said, "Mr. Tomaseck, please."

Her face did not change. "Mr. Tomaseck sees no one. You wish what?"

"I have a letter for him," Hamilton told her, his voice sharpening.

"Give it." She extended a bony, claw-like hand.

He hesitated for just a moment. Her eyes were on his face, uncompromising, unemotional. He handed her Snyder's note, and the door closed. For a minute he stared at the blank panel, then grinned sourly and lit a cigarette. It was fully five minutes before the door again opened and the maid stood aside. "Come in." Her voice sounded resentful and her eyes were decidedly hostile. He stepped through into a tile-paved entry hall, saw her shut the door, bolt it, and then lead the way without a word.

THE room into which he stepped was long, narrow, with beamed ceiling and an enormous fireplace at the opposite end, in which a pile of orange logs burned brightly, sending out a faint, pleasant odor. A high-backed chair fronted the fire, twisted so that Hamilton could see one arm. The maid led him toward this, curtsied, and said something in a language which Boyce did not understand.

A man rose from the chair. He had the appearance of age without seeming old. "Good evening." The voice was pleasant, the English perfect, without trace of accent. "You wished to see me?"

Boyce nodded and looked toward the maid. Tomaseck spoke to her and she turned and disappeared through a side door. "Won't you sit down?"

Hamilton took the chair indicated. "Snyder sent me to you. He said that you could perhaps tell me the whereabouts of a certain young man whom I am trying to locate."

The white head bowed slowly. "I have read Mr. Snyder's letter. And why, may I ask, do you wish to reach—this young man?"

"I'm afraid that I can't tell you that."

The other's shoulders moved in a tiny gesture, "Then I fear that you have had your trip for naught." Hamilton found the other's dark eyes on

his, noticed how intense they were, how probing.

"But you know where he is? You might perhaps deliver a letter for me?"

"I do not even admit that I know of the existence of such a person." The words were sharp, insulting almost, and Hamilton felt his temper rise.

"But this is for the man's own good. You served under the old régime, didn't you? You're a royalist living in exile."

"My friend," the other's voice stopped him, "I am nothing. Bulvakia is far away and I am an old man, old and very tired. I am sorry that it is impossible to help." There was finality in the words, and Hamilton knew that he was being dismissed. He rose as the maid appeared and, nodding to the man in the chair, he moved toward the door.

Tomaseck did not rise, but sat staring into the flames, his thin hands clutching the chair's arms. The maid unbolted the door and stood aside for Hamilton. He went out, heard the door close behind him, heard the bolt shot into place, then stood for several minutes in the dark patio, thinking it over. As he started down the shrubbery-walk, a car pulled up at the curb, a man got out and came toward the house. Hamilton, hardly realizing what he was doing, stepped into the darkness of the bushes and waited. The other passed so near him that he could have touched the man's shoulder by holding out one hand, crossed the patio, and rang the bell. After a moment the door came open, shedding light outward. Hamilton saw that the man was young. His dark head was uncovered, and the collar of his tan top-coat was turned up. The maid gave a tiny sound of surprise and curtsied deeply. "Your Highness!"

The man went past her, the door closed, leaving Hamilton in darkness. He swore beneath his breath and took one step toward the door, then halted, turned, and went to his cab, which

was parked on the opposite side of the street. "Drive down the block and turn around," he told the man. "When that car starts, follow it."

The driver looked at him sharply and hesitated. Hamilton found a bill and slipped it into his hand. "Do you want the job?"

The man took one look at the bill and grinned, "I'd run this hack off a cliff for that."

"Not with me in it," Hamilton told him, and slammed the door. The cab went down to the next intersection and made a U-turn; then the cabman pulled to the curb and shut off his switch. It was thirty minutes later when the youth left Tomaseck's house and started his car. He went across and turned into Sunset, Hamilton's man following a block behind. The car ahead went east fast, finally turning into the parking-place beside a little theater. The cab went past the parking station and pulled to the curb. Hamilton got out and stood beside the cab, watching. He saw the youth lock the car, go around in front and through the door into the theater. He waited a few moments, then followed.

THE building had once been a market, but a partition had been built across the center, making a small lobby. At one side of the lobby was a long bar, from which free beer was served during the intermissions.

The theater was a cooperative affair, operated by a group of unemployed actors. Hamilton looked around the lobby but failed to see his man; then he went to the window and bought a ticket. The crowd was small, colorless for the most part. Hamilton judged they were minor picture people who had friends in the cast. He went through the door into the main body of the theater, and saw that long rows of seats had been built across the concrete floor. The stage was small, and almost in the laps of the first-row spectators. Hamilton found his seat in the fourth row and looked around the sparsely filled house, try-

ing without success to locate his man. Then the lights dimmed and the show began. Suddenly he started and stared hard at the stage. The principal of the show was the man he had seen at Tomaseck's. There could be no mistake. He had had a good look at the other's face in the light from the open door.

He fumbled for the program at which he had not troubled to look, and found the actor listed as Ralph Arthur. He stared back at the stage, his eyes narrowed to tiny slits. Had he made a mistake? Was he following the wrong man? He looked back at the program. There was no mistake there. The man was listed as Arthur. He put the program away and tried to watch the show, which became worse and worse as the action progressed. It was no mystery why most of the cast were unemployed, but Arthur and the girl playing opposite him were turning in as creditable a performance as the creaking vehicle would permit.

Hamilton looked around the audience, trying to guess why they had come, and decided that the free beer must be the attraction. He turned his attention back to the stage just as the first act ended. The audience rose *en masse* and moved toward the bar. Hamilton waited until the aisles were well emptied, then walked swiftly to the door at the right of the stage. No one barred his progress. He mounted the three steps and went through the door.

The space backstage was small, a narrow aisle behind the back drop. He threaded his way through to the row of dressing rooms on the right. He knocked on the first and a feminine voice answered.

Hamilton said, "Sorry, I'm looking for Ralph Arthur."

"Third door," the voice told him.

He said "Thanks," and tried the third door. A voice called "Come in," and he pushed the door open.

Arthur stood with his back to the door, talking to the girl who played

opposite him in the show. He turned slowly, a good-looking kid with straight, black hair, and piercing eyes. "Well?"

Hamilton looked at the girl across the other's shoulders. She was small, with reddish-brown hair and brown eyes.

Hamilton said, "I came to see Mr. Arthur about some er—business." She nodded and moved toward the door. Arthur said, "Don't go, Lorna. I've nothing to say to Mr. Hamilton that you can't hear."

Boyce looked at him sharply. There was a note in the other's voice which he did not understand; then he did, suddenly. Arthur had talked to Tomaseck, and the old statesman had warned him against Hamilton.

Boyce said, "I wanted to see you about a part at the Acme studio." He stood, wondering if the girl knew who this boy was.

Arthur stared at him. "I am not interested." His voice was flat, final.

HAMILTON felt his anger rising. He didn't like this job, hadn't liked it in the first place, but someone had to do it. Then he grinned. The thought that this boy was a Prince was amusing. He was so thoroughly American, both in his speech and reactions, so thoroughly American and Hollywoodian.

He said, "That's up to you, Your Highness. Fortunately, or otherwise, you've suddenly become a pretty important person, and it's hardly safe for you to go as before."

The other's face reddened. "I don't like to seem rude, Hamilton, but I can't see that my actions are any of your concern."

Hamilton shrugged and found difficulty in controlling his voice. "I grant you that it's hard to understand, but if I were to tell you that our government has requested certain of us to—well, look out for your welfare . . ."

The other said, almost haughtily, "I've been in Hollywood almost fifteen years, ever since I was a child. No

one ever thought it necessary to pay any attention to me before, and if your studio thinks it can cash in on the publicity attendant upon the fact that I might some day come to the throne"

Hamilton said, "So that's it. May I ask where you got that idea?"

The other shrugged.

"Well, that's not it, Your Highness," Hamilton said. "It was thought you'd be safe if we had you working at one of the studios. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Captain Hamilton of the Military Intelligence, at present on leave."

Ruprecht shook his head. "I've always understood that you publicity men would go to any length to get material for your studios, but I refuse to let my name and position be used. Now get out before I have you thrown out."

Hamilton was angry for a moment. Then he gained control of himself, and drawing out a card on which he scribbled his hotel number, he extended it to the Prince. Ruprecht ignored it, but the girl picked it up. Hamilton turned and went toward the door. There was nothing more he could do, and he could not believe the Prince was in danger tonight. He would have men put on him in the morning.

CHAPTER III



SOMEONE was knocking on his door. Boyce grunted, sat up, and stared sleepily at the faint oblong of light that marked the window. The knocking continued. He got out of bed, switched on the light, found a robe, and padded toward the door. A girl stood outside, the girl he had seen earlier at the theater. She pushed past him into the hall as soon as the door was open. He closed it, and turned around, noting as he did so that her eyes were red, swollen from crying.

"Captain Hamilton, you've got to help us."

He said, "Sure, Kid, I'll help. What's happened?"

"They've got Ruprecht."

Hamilton swore softly. "Who have? When?"

She shook her head and her voice threatened to break. "I don't know. He and I were in a little restaurant close to the theater, having something to eat after the show closed. We stay late, you know, have a floor show in the lobby after the regular performance, and sell beer." She smiled wanly. "That's about the only profit we make."

"We left the theater about three and went to this restaurant. There was no one else in the place except the man behind the counter. We took a table by the door, and had just ordered when three men came in. They sat down at the counter and the waiter went into the kitchen; then they rose and came to our table. One of the men had a gun which he shoved against Ruprecht's back. Ruprecht didn't see him. His back was toward the counter, and he was worried anyway. They've got him, I tell you. They'll kill him." Her voice rose hysterically.

Hamilton put an arm around her slender shoulders. "Forget it, Kid. Don't go working yourself up. It may be just a hold-up. I don't think it's—it's the people you're thinking about. No one knew where Arthur—Ruprecht was. I had the devil's own time finding him myself."

She shook her head. "You're wrong, Mr. Hamilton. They did know who he is. One of them said 'Okay, Prince, let's go.' I wish he had listened to you, but he was mad. He's been trying for three years to break into pictures without much luck. He's a good actor, but he's never been able to get a chance to prove it, and when you came tonight he thought that the studio had found out who he is, and was trying to get him for the publicity of his name."

Hamilton said, "All right, forget it. The thing to do is to find him. Did these mugs look like Bulvakians?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, but their English, their slang, was good. If anything happens to Ruprecht I'd—I'd die." She said it simply, without heroics, and Hamilton tightened his grip on her shoulders. Poor kid. She seemed to be in for it either way. If Ruprecht came to the throne there would be no place for her in the picture, and if he were killed . . . Hamilton clamped his jaws on the thought. He could see the headlines in the morning papers. "Bulvakian Prince found dead. International complications feared." He couldn't let that happen, and yet—what to do. He glanced toward the phone. Should he call the police? If he did so, it meant publicity, and Washington did not want publicity. He said, "There, kid, take it easy." She was crying now, unashamedly, clutching at the rough material of his robe. He shook her sharply and the sobs decreased. After a couple of minutes she raised her head.

"You didn't tell me what else happened," he prompted.

"Well, there isn't much to tell. When they grabbed Ruprecht, I jumped up from the table. One of the men grabbed at me, but I ran back to the kitchen and out the rear door. They tried to catch me, but I hid in the alley and they were afraid to take much time to search. I heard them talking. After they left I came here. I was going to call, then I thought it was better to come and tell you exactly what happened. I didn't know what else to do. I thought about going to the police, but I knew that Ruprecht wouldn't like that. They'd ask a lot of questions, and I didn't know if I should answer them."

Hamilton nodded. "You did right. Now listen. You curl up on the couch and get some sleep. Here." He left her and, going into the bathroom, got a bromide which he dissolved in a glass of water. "Drink this."

She started to refuse, but his eyes were compelling, and she accepted the glass meekly and drank. He got a

blanket from the bed and wrapped it about her. Then he went back to the bedroom and dressed. That done, he called a cab and went down to the lobby.

IN the east a streak of grey light showed faintly, but fog was beginning to gather as he stepped into the taxi and gave the man Tomaseck's address. They went through the deserted streets fast, passing an occasional car or milk truck. Hamilton was surprised to see a light in the house as his cab pulled to the curb. He told the driver to wait and went up the walk. The bell made sharp sound in the quiet night; then the door opened, exposing the stern-faced maid.

She stared at him, her emotionless mask cracking with surprise, then started to close the door, but Hamilton gave her no chance. He pushed past her into the hallway and walked rapidly to the door of the library. The lights in the room were on and Tomaseck was at the telephone. He hung up and swung about as Hamilton entered, a small caliber gun glittering in his hand.

Amazement drove the look of age from his face. "You?"

Hamilton said, "Yeah, me." He was mad. If it hadn't been for this man Ruprecht would be safe. "I suppose you know that the Prince is gone?"

The man beside the desk nodded. His shoulders sagged and all fight seemed to have gone out of him. "They called me half an hour ago."

"Who called you?"

"The men who have His Highness."

Hamilton stared. "Why in hell should they call you?"

"Because they are offering a trade. When the republic was overthrown a number of the republican leaders were seized. These men who have the prince are their friends. They are holding him in an effort to force the provisional government to free the prisoners."

"Then they aren't going to kill him?" Relief showed in Hamilton's tone.

Tomaseck sank into a chair at the desk and buried his head in his hands. "They will unless we accede to their demands."

"Why don't you?"

The old man raised his head. "If it were up to me, we would, but, unfortunately, Captain Hamilton, there is a faction in our party which does not wish Ruprecht returned to the throne, and that faction at the moment is in control. I have cabled, but I fear the reply."

"But you know who called you?" Hamilton was losing patience.

"I—I think so, but I can't see that that helps us. I wish that I'd listened to you earlier, Captain. This might not have happened."

Boyce said, grimly, "You bet it wouldn't, but there's no use in spilling tears over that. Who called you?"

"I can't tell you. It would only make things worse. Say to your government—"

"Government?"

Tomaseck smiled faintly. "We have our own agents, Captain. We had a report about you from Washington, an hour and a half after you left."

Hamilton swore softly. "It's too bad that you didn't get the information earlier. Come on, Tomaseck. Give me the name."

The man hesitated. "It might cause the Prince's death."

Hamilton demanded, "Do you think that the provisional government will accede to their demands?"

Tomaseck shook his head, "I'm afraid to think," he admitted.

"Then give me the name. It's a chance at least, a chance that you can't afford to miss. If I can't save him . . ."

"You won't go to the police? Whatever happens, they must not be brought into it."

Hamilton's voice was grim. "I couldn't go to them if I wanted to."

"Then how are you going to proceed?"

Boyce shook his head. "I don't know. But I can't help, working in the dark. I've got to know whom I'm fighting."

"WELL—" The man was pitiful in his indecision. "If I were ten years younger—but I'm not. The man I suspect is Galkovitch. Bela Galkovitch. He was a political prisoner at one time, before the revolution which dethroned Ruprecht's uncle. For the last eight years, he has been in America, kept here, I believe, by the republic, to watch Ruprecht and myself. It sounded like his voice over the phone. He lives in Hollywood, at the Casa Vine Hotel; but I warn you, he is both tricky and dangerous."

Hamilton was already striding toward the door. Tomaseck stopped him with a word. "Whatever you do, for God's sake, don't endanger the life of the Prince."

Hamilton did not trouble to answer. He passed the maid in the hall, unbolted the door, and stepped out into the grey morning light. As he gained his cab and barked the address to the driver, his mind was busy, trying to chart his course of action.

Then he thought of the girl, sleeping at his apartment, and stopped. Certainly she needed help if anyone did. She was an attractive little thing, and loyal. Boyce liked loyalty, but no matter which way things broke it looked as if she would be hurt. The cab turned into the Boulevard and went along it, fast, pulling up before the apartment house finally.

Boyce paid the driver and went into the long lobby. A sleepy desk man looked at him without interest as he asked for Galkovitch. "I'm sorry, but he's out of town. He left some time yesterday."

Hamilton turned away. So Galkovitch was out of town. Did that mean that he had had nothing to do with the Prince's abduction? He reached

the door, just as a young fellow in a blue suit was coming in. "Why, hello, Mr. Hamilton. When did you get back?"

Boyce said, "Hello, Frank. How are you?"

The other shrugged. At one time he had been one of the film colony's leading juveniles, but the talkies had thrown him out, and he'd never come back. "Fair enough." His voice held no bitterness. "I'm desk clerk here now."

"You're desk clerk?"

The other grinned, "Yeah. I played the part once, in a picture, so I've had experience. What brings you out so early?"

Hamilton said, under his breath, "You've got a bird named Galkovitch staying here. They tell me that he's out of town, and I want a look at his room."

The former actor stared at him. "You want a look at his room? What's the gag, Boyce?"

Hamilton shook his head. "No gag, Frank. I want to take a look-see. That's all."

"Well—" The other was hesitating. "It's worth my job if I'm caught, but, hell, what's a job? Come on up to my room."

Hamilton followed the other to the automatic elevator. Once in the room, the ex-actor produced a bunch of keys. "Galkovitch is on the fifth floor, 511. That key will work." He singled out one on the bunch, then, after a moment, broke the ring and handed the single key to Hamilton. "Drop it at the desk as you go out."

Boyce nodded. "Thanks, Frank, and I won't forget."

The other's lips twisted in the first show of bitterness. "Glad to help. If everyone in pictures was as white as you always were . . . Say, Boyce, do you think there'd be a chance of my getting a bit at Acme? I've been taking voice lessons at night . . ." He let his words trail off, and Hamilton looked at him with sudden pity.

"Come around, Frank. I'll try to see that you get something, although I'm afraid that it won't be much."

The other smiled and showed the famous teeth that had made him the one-time idol of a million women. "I'd even play extra, Boyce."

Hamilton moved swiftly toward the door. He was hardened to the heart-break of the movie capital, but something about this boy's gameness got under his skin. Once in the hall he went rapidly to the elevator and rode up to the fifth floor. 511 was well back on the right-hand side. He knocked several times before he fitted the key into the lock and opened the door. The apartment inside was large, a double affair with living room, two bedrooms, kitchen, and bath.

Galkovitch was evidently spending money. Hamilton wondered whose as he shut the door and went into the living-room. It was large, furnished after the standard hotel apartment formula, with a cheap divan, two overstuffed chairs, and a small desk in the corner. It was the desk toward which Hamilton went. He felt no compunction in looking over Galkovitch's papers.

IF the man were a danger to the peace of the world, the more that could be learned about him the better. If he was a harmless foreigner, anything which Hamilton might learn from the papers would not hurt their owner. The two desk drawers were locked and Hamilton swore under his breath, then drew out a small penknife and went to work on the locks. They were cheap affairs, and he had the drawers open in less than five minutes. The top yielded nothing of importance. The bottom held a leather dispatch case. Boyce turned it over, examining the lock which held the strap, trying to decide whether or not to force it; then he picked up a paper knife and slid the blade under the metal plate. The lock pulled loose, bending the inside plate, but not damaging the case otherwise. Hamilton

opened it and drew out the sheaf of papers.

As he read, he whistled softly to himself, for the papers included a list of every prominent political visitor in the United States, and opposite each name was a number. Five thousand faced the name of Ruprecht of Bulvakia. Did the amount stand for ransom, or did it represent the amount which someone on the other side was willing to pay for the Prince's death? Hamilton did not know, but he feared that he had stumbled on a terrorist plot of gigantic proportions, an international murder syndicate, part of whose plan might be to embroil this country with one or more of the European powers.

He shrugged and went on through the papers. Suddenly he stopped and stared, for there was a memorandum of payment. Ten thousand dollars to Harry Wench.

Hamilton knew Wench, knew him as half a million newspaper readers knew him, a former liquor baron who had served time at Atlanta for income tax evasion; knew him also as the secret backer of two clubs and a dozen small gambling establishments in and about Los Angeles.

He sat there, puzzling over why Galkovitch should have paid Wench ten thousand dollars, over what service Wench would be likely to render a murder syndicate.

A careful fellow, this Galkovitch, Hamilton thought. He had kept a record of actions and expenditures. The thing to do was to get these papers into the hands of the State Department. This was too big a matter for him to handle alone, too complicated. There was enough dynamite in these papers to shatter the peace of the world.

Hamilton stuffed them into his pocket, locked the case by pushing the bent metal piece down and forcing the lock over it, shut the drawer, and rose. As he turned, a hoarse voice from the door said sharply, "Get your

hands up," and Boyce knew that Galkovitch had returned.

He obeyed slowly, his hands level with his shoulders, palms out. He wondered if the man had seen him close the drawer, and guessed not. Evidently the other did not know that he had found the papers, and Hamilton grinned, looking at him curiously.

The man was short, squat almost, with thick, heavy features, and a mop of curly black hair. His beady eyes probed Hamilton as he stepped forward into the room.

"Perhaps," the low voice was hard, with a metallic sound, "you have some explanation to offer, something which will prevent my shooting you?" The gun in his hand was steady, pointing directly at Hamilton's stomach.

Boyce stared at the other's almost lidless eyes. The swarthy man reminded him of a toad, a fat, sleepy-looking toad. That he was dangerous was obvious; that he would kill was certain, unless he could be persuaded that it would further his purpose to let Hamilton live.

Boyce said, "You're Galkovitch?"

The other nodded the ponderous head. "I am Galkovitch." He said it as one might say, "I am the King. So you aren't going to attempt to persuade me that you're in the wrong apartment—that you have made a mistake?" The accent was so slight that Hamilton felt suddenly that the man was not foreign, but American. Whatever his ancestry was, there could be no doubt that he had at some time attended school in America, probably in New York.

Boyce shrugged. "Why should I try that, when I'm looking for you?"

The beady eyes flickered once with surprise. "So? You were looking for me? You choose strange ways of doing so, my friend."

"Do I?" Hamilton sensed the doubt in the other's voice. "All right, listen to this. I represent a group that is interested in the welfare of Ruprecht of Bulvakia."

Again surprise made the eyes flicker. "And why do you come to me?"

"Because I think that you know where he is."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You think . . . where did you get that idea? But never mind, my friend." He seemed to come to a sudden decision. "Assuming that I do know where he is, what then?"

"Perhaps we might arrange a deal."

"Money?" The man spat out the words. "You offer money, and you mistake . . ."

Hamilton let his hands down a trifle, and the gun became more threatening. He raised them hastily. "Why scorn money, Galkovitch? Money will do many things."

THE man nodded his shaggy head. "You are right, and in the case of any other . . ." He caught himself, and looked sharply towards Hamilton, but there was no change in Boyce's expression. "But Ruprecht. Well, they are holding some of our friends in military prison." His face darkened. "Have you ever spent hours in a damp cell? Weeks, months, years? Well, I have. I was born in this country, but I went back, back to try to help my people, and they put me in prison instead. Enough." A sudden idea seemed to reach him. "Did Tomaseck send you?"

"Not exactly."

"Go back to him then. Tell him that I have Ruprecht, and that he dies unless all my friends in Bulvakia go free, all of them, do you understand? I meant to kill you," he added in a different voice, "but this is better. You aren't important. You're only a messenger. Now go."

Hamilton could scarcely believe his ears. A moment before he had read death in the man's eyes, and now . . . but he steeled himself, knew that he must not appear too eager, too hurried. He said, "Wouldn't twenty thousand interest you?"

"No." He replied vigorously.

Hamilton took a slow step toward the door. "Thirty, Galkovitch? Think it over."

The other made a slight motion with his gun. "A million couldn't save the Prince if our friends die. Tell Tomaseck that. Tell the old fool that Galokvitch has spoken. Now go, before I change my mind."

Hamilton went. He closed the door softly, and then raced down the hall toward the automatic elevator. In the lobby he went directly to the desk, and motioned the clerk toward him. "Listen, Frank. Can you get someone to relieve you?"

The former actor stared at him. "What's happened, Boyce?"

"Plenty," Hamilton's voice was curt. "I can't explain now, but Galkovitch came back and found me in his room."

The other swore sharply, but Hamilton said, "Never mind that. He doesn't know that you let me in, and if he did, he wouldn't report it. This is important, Frank. Can you get someone to relieve you for a few hours? Pay them anything you like, I'll stand for it."

The man hesitated. "Well, the night clerk might, for ten."

"Can you get him quick?"

"He's in his room."

"All right, ring him. Make it twenty. Now listen, Frank. Help me in this and I'll squeeze you back into pictures if I have to fake the whole sound track. Galkovitch may leave here in a hurry. I want to know where he goes, and I can't hang around myself to find out. I'll put someone else on the job as soon as I can, but until I can get someone will you tail him?"

"I'd swim Catalina channel for another crack at pictures," the man told him. "Thanks, Boyce."

Hamilton's mouth was grim. "Don't thank me, Kid, and watch yourself. That bird's dynamite."

The other was already at the phone, ringing the night clerk. "Don't worry

about me, Boyce, I can take care of myself."

Hamilton scribbled his name and phone number on a piece of paper and laid it on the desk. "If Galkovitch screams, call me." He turned and left the apartment. Once in the cab he drew the moist morning air into his lungs and let it out slowly, then looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past seven. He rapped on the glass, telling the man to take him to the nearest phone. He called Jordan, at the Treasury Department. There was no answer and he hung up again, hesitated, then went back to his cab and told the man to take him to his apartment.

THE girl still slept on the couch, curled up under the blankets. Hamilton stood staring down at her for several minutes, wondering what the next few days would bring for her. Then he went into the bedroom and called Tomaseck. The man's voice had a worn sound, as if his nerves were beginning to crack under the strain. Hamilton told him about Galkovitch's message.

He rose and went back into the other room. The girl stirred as he entered, rubbed her eyes for a moment and then sat up, looking around uncertainly. Comprehension came with a rush, and she threw the blanket from her shoulders. "Did you find him?"

Hamilton sat down at her side and took one of her hands. "Now listen, Kid. You've got to get a grip on yourself."

"He's dead." Her voice was flat. Lacked inflection. And there was a look in her eyes which disturbed Hamilton.

"He's not dead." He tried to make his tone convincing. "I told you that you'd have to get a grip on yourself. Come on, Pal, show me that you're a trooper."

She managed a weak smile, "Well?"

"There's nothing much to tell." He was debating in his own mind how much she should know, and decided

that it was safer to tell her the truth. "The men who are holding him have friends in prison in Bulvakia. They're willing to trade the Prince for the freedom of their friends."

"Well?" She was watching him, wide-eyed.

He moved his shoulders in a tiny shrug. "Tomaseck has cabled the news to his country. We're waiting for the reply."

"But surely . . . ?" Hope lifted her voice. "Surely they will free those men. Ruprecht is their rightful King. He . . ." Her voice died, and her fingers clutched Hamilton's hand. "What is it? Tell me."

He wanted to lie to her, to reassure her, but he couldn't. The brown eyes were too honest. Too trusting. He said, "I don't pretend to understand European politics, Kid, but there's a faction in the party which doesn't want Ruprecht for King. Tomaseck didn't say so, but I know he's scared."

She was silent for several moments, then, "But surely, there's something we can do."

He said, "You can do the hardest thing in the world, Pal. You can wait. And now, we'll have some breakfast."

"I couldn't eat." There was conviction in her voice.

"Oh yes you can." He rose, and going back to the phone, ordered two breakfasts sent up. That done, he tried the Treasury Department again. A gruff voice answered, and Boyce said, "Hello, Jordan! This is Hamilton. I want two good men."

"Sure, Captain." The voice changed, gained cordiality.

"Now listen, Jordan. This is all under your hat. There can't be any leak."

"There won't be a leak."

"Okay. Now get this. There's a mug named Galkovitch at the Casa Vine Hotel, room 511. I've got a man watching him now, but I want him relieved. Send your men out there. Have them ask at the desk for Frank Downey. If he isn't there have them call me here." He gave the number,

"Tell them to tail Galkovitch, to not lose him, and not let him get wise. That's all."

HE hung up and went back into the other room just as the waiter arrived with the breakfast. The girl played with her food, hardly touching it, but Hamilton forced her to drink two cups of coffee. Then he helped her into the light coat.

"What's your address, Kid?"

She gave it and he made a note. "Better stay close. You can't tell what might happen." He hesitated suddenly, "Got money?"

She nodded, "Enough. And if you hear anything—anything, you'll let me know?"

"As soon as I hear." He went with her to the door, then bolted it and went back into the room as the phone rang.

"Say, that guy Frank Downey isn't here. He went out about eight-fifteen, the man at the desk tells me, and he hasn't come in yet. What'll I do?"

Hamilton swore under his breath. "Hang around there until you hear from me. Did you check on Galkovitch?"

"Yeah. He ain't in his room either. He left just before this Downey did. I'll be here when you call." He hung up, and Hamilton sat for several minutes staring from the window.

Presently he drew the list from his pocket and, lighting a cigarette, went over it carefully, noting the names, the amounts. Their total made a staggering sum. He glanced at his watch, saw that it was a quarter to nine, and getting his hat and coat, left the apartment. He picked up a cab at the corner, gave the driver the address of his bank, and rode the twenty blocks through the thick morning traffic. At the bank he went down the stairs to the safety deposit vault, got his box, and put the list of names into it; then he drove back to his room.

He was half way through his mail when the phone rang. It was one of Jordan's men. "Mr. Hamilton?" It

was obvious that he was excited. "The cops picked Downey up on Van Ness half an hour ago. They're here now, and they want to know why we were asking questions about him."

Hamilton swore. "Picked him up? What do you mean?"

"I mean he's dead. Someone blew him all apart with a scatter gun. I had to tell them about you."

"Okay. Okay! Where's the body?"

"Morgue, I guess."

"Who's in charge?"

"Don't know. Fellow named Franklin is here. I know him, and he let me call you, but you'll have to come downtown and straighten it out."

"I'll be down." Hamilton hung up and turned around, his face set. He caught up his hat and was gone. They had covered a dozen blocks when he leaned forward and rapped on the glass. "Take me back to my apartment," he told the man, and gave him the address. The cab went right at the next corner. Hamilton didn't want to go downtown yet to face the cops. He wanted more time to think things out. The cab pulled up at the curb and he paid the man. As he turned toward the building something made him glance across the street. He saw the black car parked there, against the curb, saw the sunlight glint on metal, and leaped sideways as the gun roared. There was a crash as the glass doors broke, screams from the lobby, but Hamilton heard nothing. He had thrown himself forward onto the pavement without conscious thought, falling on his left side as the lead sprayed over him, tugging with his right hand at the gun in his pocket.

TWO men came around the black car and ran toward him, guns in their hands, and Hamilton steeled himself for the shock of the bullets which did not come. Someone from the sidewalk behind him was shooting at the men, and they were firing in return. Then the foremost threw up his hands and pitched forward into the center of the street. His compan-

ion turned, jumped for the car as it went into motion. Hamilton had his gun out now, was shooting at the car as it went down the street fast and rounded the corner, its rubber squealing protestingly on the dry asphalt.

Hamilton raised himself on his elbow and looked around. A uniformed cop stood in the doorway of the drug-store, squinting after the car, then he looked toward Hamilton and grinned. Boyce grinned back and got slowly to his feet. The cop was joined by another, who stared at Hamilton, at the gun in his hand. Boyce looked around, saw that his cab was still beside the curb. The driver had slipped down beneath the wheel until only the top of his head showed, and for a moment Hamilton thought that he had been hit by one of the slugs from the scatter gun; then the man moved, peered out cautiously, and crawled forth. He stared at Hamilton, his mouth drooping. "Gee, Governor! I figured you was washed up."

Hamilton said, "Not yet." People were pouring from the apartment lobby and gathering in little crowds. The manager hurried to Boyce's side.

"What happened, Mr. Hamilton?"

Boyce shrugged. "I wouldn't know. My nose was in the concrete. Ask the cops." He turned as the two uniformed men reached his side. The taller one, not the one who had done the shooting, said, "All right. Move on. Move on." The crowd gave slightly, and he turned to Hamilton. "All right, you. Who was it?"

Hamilton stared at him with dislike. His mind was busy trying to puzzle it out. Had he been mistaken for someone else? Or were they gunning for him? He was certain that Galkovitch did not know who he was. Certain that he had not been followed from the man's apartment. Then another thought came. He remembered the slip he had given to Frank Downey with his name, address, and telephone number. Had the killers taken the slip from Downey's body? But if so, why had they. He had it, and

cursed himself for a fool. They were after the list which he had taken from Galkovitch's desk. That was why the two men had run toward him. They had expected to find the list in his pocket.

The tall cop said, harshly, "If you don't answer we'll take you down town."

Hamilton's smile was grim. "I get shot at and you pinch me. Swell."

"Are you trying to be funny?" The man was big. His Sam Brown barely fastened across his barrel chest, and he took a half step forward.

Hamilton's voice was sour. "I wouldn't try to be funny with you. You couldn't appreciate it. Better take a look at the stiff in the road."

SEVERAL people were taking a look at him. They were grouped about the crumpled body in a little crowd which parted for the officers. Hamilton stared down at the man, noting the thin white face with its pinched features. He looked hoppy, and Hamilton was sure he had never seen him before.

The cop said, "Got a permit to carry that gun?" Hamilton found the permit and passed it over. He cursed the luck that had brought him into this. He didn't want to answer the police's questions, didn't want to talk to them.

The other looked over the permit, his face changing. "I didn't know you, Captain Hamilton."

Boyce nodded, took the permit and stuffed it into his pocket. "That's Okay. Any other questions?"

"Well—" The man hesitated, obviously at a loss as to how to proceed. "Don't you have any idea who they were?"

Hamilton shrugged, "I'm on my way downtown now to talk to Spellman. I think it will ride until then; that is, unless you want to hold me."

"Well—" The man was still undecided. "I'll have to make some sort of report to the precinct captain."

"Tell him to call Spellman." Hamilton turned on his heel and forced his

way through the crowd until he reached the taxi driver. "Still able to wheel that hack?"

The other gave him an uncertain grin. "I ain't sure that you're the kind of passenger I like."

"Make up your mind."

"Okay! I'll take a chance. They say that lightning don't strike twice in the same spot. Where to, Chief?"

"Headquarters. And make it snappy." Hamilton crawled into the cab.

Detective Captain Floyd Spellman, acting head of the homicide squad, looked up as Hamilton walked into his office, and frowned, his bushy brows drawing together over his little eyes. "Hello, Hamilton."

Hamilton dropped into a chair. "Hello. I understand that you want to see me?"

Spellman said, grimly, "I'm not sure that I ever want to see you. Every time I do it means trouble."

"So what?" Hamilton was lighting a cigarette and did not look up. Spellman fingered the papers on his desk.

"I've had two reports about you this morning. A desk clerk at the Casa Vine gets himself rubbed out and Treasury men are waiting for him back at his hotel. They claim to be working for you and won't talk."

"Well . . ."

"Then ten minutes ago I get a phone call from Hollywood that some muggs tried to blast you in front of your apartment. A woman in the lobby gets a slug in her leg, and one of the boys plant two in a tough mugg's chest. What do you expect me to do? Ignore that?"

"Give the cop a medal. He earned it." The corner of Hamilton's mouth lifted sardonically.

Spellman snorted. "Come on, Boyce. I've always played fair with you, haven't I?"

Hamilton said, "You used to cross me every chance you ever had. And got it in the neck every time that you tried it."

Spellman's voice tightened, "Don't get too big for your job, Boyce, too big for this city, since you went east. I admit that you drag weight, that you've probably got more pull than any other one mugg in town, but if you think we're going to ignore a couple of killings—"

"One." Hamilton corrected him. "You just said that the woman had the slug in her leg." He leaned forward. "Now listen, Floyd. You may have crossed me, but have I ever crossed you?"

The other's voice got uncertain. "I'm not sure. Sometimes I think . . ."

"DON'T think," Hamilton told him. "Thinking always gets you into trouble. I had two Treasury men waiting for Downey, I admit it, but I didn't kill him, and you know it. If I were going to have him rubbed out, would I leave two men around with my name and address?"

"I don't say that you killed him, but why were those boys gunning for you? If those cops hadn't parked their prowl car back of that drug store and sneaked a smoke you'd have been messed up, plenty."

"Why? That's what I'm asking you, Boyce. Do you think that if it were anyone else he'd be walking around loose? You know that he wouldn't. Come on. Play ball with us. We want to help. What are you up to. What kind of jam have you got yourself into this time? Or is this government business?"

"Sorry, Floyd, but it's nothing that I can tell you about."

Spellman's little eyes narrowed. "So you admit that there is something? I thought you'd pull that old gag about being mistaken for two other fellows."

"I'm not so sure that I wasn't," Hamilton told him.

"Nuts!" The detective captain heaved his bulk out of the chair and came around the desk. "Who are you trying to protect, Boyce?"

"So that's what you think?" Hamilton's voice was soft.

"I know you." There was satisfaction in Spellman's tone. "I watched you for three years. When you act this way you're trying to protect someone. Who is it?"

"You guess." Hamilton rose also, "Going to hold me, Floyd?"

The other shrugged, "For what? But I tell you one thing, I've a hunch this is government business. That's the only reason you're getting away with it. If I'm wrong—"

Hamilton grinned and, without troubling to answer, moved toward the door. Once in the corridor he paused to think it over. Spellman's attitude did not fool him in the least. He knew that the other had let him go with the idea of tailing him in an effort to learn what was up.

His lips set grimly as he stepped out into the sunlit street and walked rapidly toward the corner. He paused there for a moment and pretended to look at the headlines of a paper which a boy held out to him. In reality he wanted a chance to watch the doorway which he had just left. Two men came out, and his lips parted as he took the paper and handed the boy a nickel. He'd have known them anywhere for what they were, plain-clothes men. Without apparent hurry he flagged a cruising cab to the curb and got in.

He told the man to drive around the business district, then sat back to think things over. He'd lost contact with Galkovitch and did not know how to re-establish it. There was one thing left, to reach Harry Wench. The racketeer was probably furnishing the guns for the murder syndicate, but how to reach him. Hamilton had seen the man a number of times, lost money at his various clubs, in the old days, but He swore softly, and, leaning forward, told the driver to take him to a phone. They pulled up before a pool hall and Hamilton got out, paying the man, but telling him to wait.

HE went into the place, dropped a nickel into the slot, and dialed a number. A woman's voice, shrill, complaining, answered. Hamilton said, "Let me talk to Jack."

There was an interval, then a hoarse voice said, "Well, what is it?"

"Boyce Hamilton." The man's voice was crisp. "Where can I get hold of Harry Wench?"

The other said, "Oh, hello, Boyce! I didn't get your voice." He was an ex-fighter who had made a stake in oil, a bookie with connections. It was whispered around that he had a slice in a couple of clubs. Certainly he knew everyone in town who was "right." He said, "I don't know, I ain't seen Harry for a couple of weeks, I heard he went east, but I ain't sure. I'll ask around and call you back. I—" He hesitated a moment, then, "What's the rumble? Is the heat on?"

Hamilton said, "Not that I know of. This is personal, but you needn't broadcast that I'm looking for him."

"Gotcha. When can I call?"

"Better let me call back. How long will it take?"

"Half an hour, maybe. Call then." He hung up and Hamilton went back to his cab.

He saw Spellman's men further down the street and grinned when he got into the taxi. It took him forty minutes and three changes of cabs to lose them. Finally he pulled up to a drug store at Sixth and Western and called the bookmaker.

The man was apologetic. "Nothing stirring, Boyce. If he's in town he's under cover. Sure the heat isn't on?"

Hamilton said, "I don't think so, Jack. You might keep trying. I'll call later." He felt very tired and the air in the booth was close. He opened the sliding door, went to the counter, and bought a small bottle of gin. He went back to the booth, took a long drink from the bottle, and shoved it into his coat pocket; then he dialed Tomaseck's number.

The maid answered, and he gave his name. Almost at once the old man's voice reached him. Hamilton said, "Any news?"

"Bad." Pain and worry dulled the voice, and Hamilton had a wave of sympathy for the other. He realized suddenly that Tomaseck was fighting for something that was dearer to him than life, fighting with his hands tied.

Unconsciously Boyce softened his voice. "What is it?"

The other steadied his tone, "The worst. The provisional government refuses absolutely to free the prisoners."

Hamilton swore softly. "Which means"

Panic raced through the other's tone. "Don't say it. You never know"

Hamilton said, "Right. I suppose that there is no hope that they might change their decision?"

"I'm afraid not. I've cabled them again, but"

"You haven't told Galkovitch?"

"I've told no one. The message reached me only minutes ago. But if he should call?"

"Stall him." Hamilton's voice was crisp again.

"But—but what are we going to do?"

Hamilton didn't know himself. He said, "Never mind. Stall him. Don't let him find out. As long as he thinks that there's a chance for a trade the Prince will be safe."

"I'm afraid." The proud old voice cracked. "There are spies everywhere. Do something, my friend."

"I'll do something. Hang on." Hamilton replaced the receiver and slid open the booth door. He had not the slightest idea as to how to proceed. He did not know where Galkovitch was; how to reach Wench. It seemed that he had reached a stone wall, that he must wait for a move from the other side, but he did not dare to wait. He had to do something, quickly, before Galkovitch learned that the provisional government had refused his demand.

CHAPTER IV



HE thought of the Prince, then of the girl. She would be waiting for news, and he had promised to tell her

whenever there was anything to tell. He hesitated, then decided that it was only fair to tell her what he knew. People face realities much better than uncertainties.

He glanced at the clock above the soda fountain, saw that it was a few minutes after twelve, and went out to his cab. He gave the driver the girl's address and, climbing in, slammed the door. They went west on Sixth, then turned and went north on Windsor.

The apartment was a cheap affair of yellow stucco, a six-suiter with no lobby. He punched the bell under the girl's mail box and waited. The door at the bottom of the stairs clicked as the catch was released from above, and he pulled it open and mounted the four steps to the first floor corridor. A door on the right was open, and he saw her standing there, a robe of brown wool about her shoulders, her hair tousled, and her eyes questioning him as he reached her side.

"Is there any news?" She stepped back for him to enter and closed the door. The place was a single-room affair, with kitchenette and bath. He tossed his hat on the table and looked at her, making his voice slightly rough to mask all emotion.

"How much guts have you, Sister?"

Her slight figure stiffened as if from a blow. "So it's bad? Well, tell me. I can take it."

"Sure you can." He was liking her better at every moment, this game kid. With nothing behind her except her self-reliance. "It's tough, Kid, but I've just been talking to Tomaseck, and his country won't deal. I hated to tell you, but I promised if there was any news" His voice trailed off.

"Then then he isn't dead?" Relief flooded the voice.

Hamilton shook his head, "He isn't. At least I don't think that he is. But when Galkovitch learns . . ."

She said, fiercely, "We've got to do something, something before he does learn. Would it do any good if I went to the police?"

Hamilton moved his shoulders. "Maybe, but I don't think so. You see, there's always leaks at headquarters. The papers would be bound to get it, and publicity might scare the men that have the Prince."

She nodded. "Then what? I've got to do something. I just can't sit here waiting." Her voice rose, and he gripped her arms. "Steady, Pal. Don't let yourself go."

"**S**ORRY." She gulped air for an instant. "I'm all right. It's the waiting that gets me. I'd rather be with Ruprecht. I'm not afraid to die. If he dies, I don't care to live." There were no heroics in her tone now. It was level, matter-of-fact.

Hamilton stared at her thoughtfully. An idea was germinating in his mind, a vague idea which he attempted to put down, forget, but which kept coming back, asserting itself. "Do you mean that?"

Something in his tone made her stare at his face, "You've thought of something, something that will help Ruprecht?"

He shook his head slowly, "It's screwy. It wouldn't work. We'd better forget it."

She said "No." vehemently. "If it will help, if anything will help, let's try it."

He was studying her. "How much nerve do you have?"

She shook her head, and the trace of a smile touched her lips for a moment and was gone. "Ordinarily, none, but with Ruprecht, I'll have enough."

He still hesitated. "This may mean death."

She smiled now. "There are a lot worse things than death, Boyce Hamilton."

He said, "Yeah? Now listen, Kid. Disappointment is one of them, and the chances are that this will mean disappointment, that it won't work. Can you stand that?"

She nodded, "At least I'll know that we've tried, that we've done the best we could."

"Swell. Then listen." He forced her to sit down on the couch and stood before her, "I didn't tell you this morning, because I didn't think that it concerned you, but I searched Galkovitch's desk. I found a list of names in it. Ruprecht isn't the only one that this mob is threatening."

She watched him, her eyes puzzled. It was very evident that she didn't understand, did not see what he was driving at. "Well?"

He said, "I've lost Galkovitch. I had a man trailing him, and that man died. In order to do anything we've got to make contact somehow. The question is, how? I've tried, and failed. I might get a break this afternoon, if I waited, but I'm afraid to wait. We've got to do something that will drag Galkovitch into the open. We've got to set a trap, and to set a trap we've got to have bait. You're the bait."

She was still puzzled, "I don't understand."

He said, "I didn't expect you to, yet. On that list I found at Galkovitch's was the name of Countess Nina. Do you know who she is?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

He grinned sourly. "The Countess, from all reports, is quite a gal. She's young, but she's one of the most dominant forces in her country. She's over here now, no one knows quite why, or, for that matter, where. The report is that she's hiding on someone's Long Island estate until she can transact whatever business brought her to this country."

"Well?" The girl was still puzzled. "You're Countess Nina."

Panic and uncertainty showed in her eyes. "But—but—"

He said, "Don't you understand? The organization of which Galkovitch is the head wants to get hold of Countess Nina. They want her as much as they did the Prince, maybe more, because she is much more important in her country than he is in his at the moment. The rumor is that she's the real brains behind the dictator, and everyone knows that if it weren't for him there'd be war in Europe today.

"But—but—won't we get into trouble? Pretending that I'm the Countess?"

His smile was very grim, "We'll probably get into trouble a-plenty, but not the kind you mean. I'm warning you that there's a very good chance that you'd be killed."

"Will that help Ruprecht?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"I'll do it." Her voice was resolute. "But how in the world will you ever make them believe that I'm the Countess?"

HE grinned. "Listen, Sister. That's what publicity offices are for. I've never seen this lady, but I've seen her pictures. You're about the right height, and about the same age. Your hair is wrong, but that's easy. All you have to do is to keep your mouth shut and do whatever I say, no matter how screwy it sounds. Promise?"

"You'll be there?" There was relief in her voice.

"I'll be right with you, Honey." He crossed the room and picked up the phone. "Give me Rothberg."

The head of Acme Pictures said, excitedly, "The cops are looking for you. Spellman called me."

Hamilton grinned, "Let them look. Now listen, Sam. You're giving a party tonight at one of the hotels. You can decide which one."

"I'm giving a party?" Rothberg's voice was dangerous. "Is it that you've gone crazy? Listen, Boyce, this is no time for a party, y'understand. My wife's uncle by marriage is coming to our house for dinner."

"Forget your relatives." Hamilton's voice was sharp. "This is important, Sam. You're giving a party for Countess Nina di Corregio."

"A Countess, huh?" Rothberg's voice gained interest. "I will have to call Leah."

"I'll call her," Hamilton told him, "All I want you to do is not to say anything when the papers call you. Just tell them that it's a private party and that you have no statement."

"But . . ."

"I'm telling you, Sam, this is serious."

"Is it that you can't explain?"

"I will when I see you. What hotel do you want to give it at?"

Rothberg took minutes to decide. Then Hamilton called the Rothberg home and asked for the producer's wife.

Leah Rothberg said, "Ach, Boyce! I thought you had forgotten Leah since you went away."

"Not a chance." His tone gained warmth, Leah Rothberg was one of the few people in Hollywood whom he trusted, whom he really loved. "Do you want to do me a favor?"

"A favor, is it?" The voice was playful, "I knew you wouldn't be wasting your time, calling an old lady yet, unless there was something you wanted. Well, what is it?"

He told her, without giving reasons, "This is important. And another thing, Leah, whatever happens, don't you worry."

"What is it that might happen?" Her voice gained alarm.

"Now listen. Won't you trust me, Leah?"

She said, "Sure, Boyce, but it's that I know you, that I got a feeling that things ain't right by you. Tell Leah."

It was hard to refuse, but he did. There was no use in worrying her. He said, "I want this party to go smoothly. It's important. I'll be seein' you, Leah." He rang off and re-called the studio, asking for Herb Armitage, in the publicity department.

Armitage's bored voice reached him, "So what?"

"So I've got a job for you, Herb." Hamilton had gotten Armitage his place with Acme, and knew there wasn't a better publicity man in the business. "Now get this. Rothberg is giving a party tonight for Countess Nina di Corregio. Be sure that you get the name right."

Armitage swore at him, "Don't you think that I read the papers, you bum? But why wasn't I told sooner? When did she land on the coast? I thought she was hiding out on Long Island."

"Rothberg didn't know it himself until ten minutes ago. Now get this, Herb, I want it on the front page. Make the afternoon sports with it if you can. I know there isn't much time; the night final if you can't do the other. But it would be a hell of a lot better in the sports."

Armitage's voice was suspicious, "What is this? I smell mice."

"Put a pin on your nose then. I want this apparently to be a leak, see? I don't want the papers to think that it's publicity. It's got to be played up from a news angle. The Countess is here incognito. She's been here several days, and she's leaving tonight, right after the party. She can't be reached for an interview, and Rothberg won't talk. But the party's at the—— Hotel."

"Don't tell me the Countess is going to make a picture?"

HAMILTON swore at him, "Forget it and get to work. And God help you if you muff it, for I'll break your neck." He hung up, then called the studio back and asked for Max, in the make-up department. Max was a little German, five feet two, without hair or a right eye—he'd left the latter at Verdun—but he was one of the best in his business. Hamilton talked to him for several minutes, then called the costume department and gave curt orders. That done, he went to his coat, where he had tossed

it on the back of the chair, got the gin bottle and looked inquiringly at the girl.

"Want a drink, Honey?"

She shook her head and he went into the kitchenette, found lemons, ice, and mixed the drink with plain water. When he came back into the room she said, "It must be wonderful to be so powerful."

He looked at her to see if she were kidding. She wasn't. "What do you mean, powerful?"

She indicated the phone with a wave of her hand. "You're defying the police, ordering one of the biggest producers in Hollywood around, getting a fake story into all the papers . . ."

He grinned sourly. "Don't ever tell Rothberg that I'm ordering him around. It will hurt his dignity."

She smiled wanly in return, "But, but how do you do it?"

He shrugged. "You're just as important in this town as you can make people believe you are. I've got a lot of them fooled, that's all." He finished his drink and, going back to the phone, called the bookmaker. Jack reported that he had not been able to find Wench. Hamilton thanked him, hung up, and called a friend down town. "Can you get me a picture of Countess Nina? The best one you can find. Get it and send it out to——," he gave the girl's address, "by messenger." He hung up again and turned around. "Shall I send out for food?"

"There's bacon and eggs here." Her voice was doubtful.

"Swell. We'll eat the bacon and eggs." He went back to the kitchen and drained the gin bottle into his glass, adding lemon juice, water and ice; then he went back into the other room and sat down in the big chair, closing his eyes. He did not offer to help in preparing the meal. Occupation, he knew, was good for her. In twenty minutes she called him, and he carried his empty glass in the kitchen.

THEY sat on opposite sides of the table, and Hamilton told incidents of his reportorial days. In turn she told him of a childhood spent with tent shows. Her father had been a spieler, a front-end man, a stage manager, and on occasion an actor. She didn't remember her mother. She'd been in Hollywood five years without much of a break.

Looking at her he guessed why. She was too restrained for her personality to register on film, and her voice wasn't right. She was very attractive, but not the type that photographed well.

She'd met Ruprecht two years before, when both were playing extra. She hadn't believed at first when he told her who he was. There was so much phoney nobility running loose in Hollywood.

Hamilton kept her talking, saw the fixed look of fear fade gradually from her eyes. The apartment bell buzzed and Hamilton went down to the outer door. It was the messenger boy with the pictures. Boyce carried them back to the apartment and studied them before the window. There were four prints, good ones. He studied the face. It was oval, not quite as full as that of the girl in the kitchen. The eyes looked darker, and he knew that the hair was black.

Lorna finished the dishes and joined him beside the window, looking at the pictures. "It will never work. I don't look a bit like her."

"You will, Kid," he promised. "Wait till we finish with you." The apartment bell sounded again and he went to the door. Max was there with a woman from the costume department and three men with boxes. Boyce had the boxes carried up to the apartment, then dismissed the three men. Max and the woman from the costume department were studying the pictures. They had the girl pose before the window, walk back and forth, and then went to work.

Hamilton looked at his watch and saw that it was almost two. "I'm leav-

ing it to you, Max. I don't want to be able to recognize her when I get back. She's to be like the pictures, understand."

The little man said, "Sure. Trust me, Boyce," and Hamilton left the apartment. He went to the drug store and called the head of the studio police, asking him to be at a little beer hall three blocks from the studio in half an hour. Hamilton did not dare go back to the lot. He knew that Spellman's men would be waiting for him, and he did not want to be picked up now. He was having enough trouble as it was.

THE studio chief was a grizzled veteran. He'd been a sergeant in the Los Angeles department until he quit to take over the job at Acme. Hamilton knew that he could be depended upon, that whatever he learned would go no further.

He said, "That's the way it is, Mike. I want two cars of men, the first tailing us and the second tailing the first. Whatever happens, for God's sake, don't lose us, it might mean the girl's life; but also, don't strike too soon, or you'll gum the works. We've got to locate this mob's hideout, and we've got to locate it tonight. Tomorrow will be too late."

The other nodded, twisting the stein in his hand. "I don't get what you're up to, Boyce, but if you say it's okay, it's jake with me."

Hamilton said, "Swell. Pick us up where I told you. I'll be driving Sam's Rolls."

"Hadn't I better let one of the men do that? And you ride with us? It will be dangerous as hell."

Hamilton's mouth was grim. "It will be dangerous for the little girl, too."

The other shrugged. "All right. I suppose that you know what you're doing, but you're taking plenty of chances."

Hamilton rose. "Forget it, Mike. You take care of your end and I'll manage mine." They left the restau-

rant together, and Hamilton got a bus, riding it back to the girl's street. He walked across to the apartment. He wanted a chance to think, to plan. The more he thought about it the less probable it seemed that his scheme would succeed. He was scowling when he pushed open the door and stepped into the room. Then he stopped and stared at the girl beside the window.

The brown hair had given place to black, which was parted in the middle and drawn back tightly across the ears. Green jade drops swung on tiny gold chains, making the face seem longer than it was, and matching the evening dress of green velvet.

"You like it?" Max crossed the room eagerly. To Hamilton he seemed suddenly like a faithful dog craving attention. Boyce had to restrain an impulse to stretch out his hand and pat the other's head as he said, "Swell!"

The little man beamed as the girl came toward them, "I think now that she will do."

She looked at Hamilton eagerly. "And you?"

He nodded. "You'll do, but Kid, I want to talk to you for a minute."

The expression of eagerness washed out of her face, leaving it white, pinched looking beneath the make-up. "What is it? What's happened?"

"Nothing." He made his voice reassuring as he led her to the tiny kitchen and shut the door. Then he turned to face her. "I've been thinking it over, wondering if it's worth the risk."

She misunderstood. "I don't blame you." Her tone was without emotion, dead. "After all, Ruprecht is nothing to you."

"I'm not thinking of myself." Hamilton's voice was almost gruff, "I was thinking of you."

She searched his face, trying to discover if he were telling the truth, and decided that he was. "Then you'll go through with it?"

"If you still want to."

"I do. I do." She was nodding her head as if to emphasize her words, "I'm not afraid. Nothing's going to happen to me, to Ruprecht, to any of us."

He saw that she almost believed it and patted her shoulder. "Okay, Kid, I'll be here with the car at seven-thirty. We can't tell when they'll make their move. We may have to go through with the dinner party, and then they might pick us up afterward. If we do it's a chance to prove that you're a good actress. I won't be in the dining-room to help. I can't well be, in a chauffeur's uniform. It will be up to you, and remember, there will be reporters. Simply refuse to talk, shake your head, do what you think best." He turned and opened the door.

She said, in a small voice, "Will you shake hands? I—I think that you're swell."

CHAPTER V



HAMILTON fed the big Rolls gas and drove down the quiet street, the motor making steady sound. He pulled up before the apartment door, locked the car, and went in. The girl opened the door and stared at him for a moment, no recognition showing in her eyes.

He grinned sourly and said, "Do I make a good chauffeur?"

"Boyce Hamilton!" She was staring at the neat whipcord uniform, the slouch chauffeur's cap, and the tiny pin-line mustache which changed the shape of his upper lip.

He stepped past her into the room, "At least I look the part, huh?" He paused before the mirror and looked at himself with distaste; then he turned and, drawing a small pearl-handled gun from his right trouser pocket, handed it to her. "Better take this, Kid. It might come in handy."

She took it gingerly, "I don't know much about guns."

"I see that." His voice was ironic. "Well, keep it pointed away from

yourself when you pull the trigger. Here." He took it from her hand, "This is the safety. I'd better leave it on; safer that way, but don't forget to push it over."

She nodded, tried it, then slipped it into her bag, "Do you think that our plan will work?"

For answer he unfolded the paper which he carried under his arm. "Read that."

She took it and stared at the sub-head at the right of the page. "Countess here. Incognito. Producer to entertain. Countess Nina di Corregio, strong woman of Europe, whose mysterious visit to this country has given rise to a number of rumors, is in Los Angeles. Attractive, brunette, and not yet thirty, the Countess, descendant of fourteenth century nobility, has made herself a power in European affairs. Why she is in Los Angeles, or when she arrived, remains a secret, and it was impossible to reach her for a statement, and Sam Rothberg, film producer, who is her host, refused all information, merely saying that the Countess would leave tonight, following a dinner given in her honor at a local hotel. Rothberg refused to discuss her visit or to name her destination. But it is known that the film producer is close to the national administration, and while the Countess's visit is supposed to have no official" The girl looked up.

"But—but won't the real Countess see this? Deny that she was in Los Angeles?"

Hamilton shrugged, "Probably, but by that time we'll have our friends where we want them, or Come on. Get your things, or we'll be late."

SHE crossed the room obediently and picked up the wrap which the studio had lent her. Hamilton, watching, thought that no matter how beautiful the real Countess was, she could not outshine this girl. Lorna looked positively regal. A queen. The thought brought the Prince to Hamilton's mind, made him remember that what-

ever happened to Ruprecht, this girl would suffer. He held the door open for her and they went along the hall together. He helped her into the car, went around and slid under the wheel. Before he started the motor he made sure that the gun under his left arm was in place, that the long-bladed knife in its slender sheath was against the calf of his right leg, concealed by the leather puttee.

The knife was a present from a gambler friend, a man who had operated an oil field at Tampico, and in South America. He had worn it in a case at the back of his neck, its handle just below the collar line. Hamilton's lips twisted grimly. He had no thought of using it. He knew nothing about handling a knife, but some impulse had made him strap it to his leg.

The starter whirred. The car went into motion, gliding south along the darker side streets until they reached the lighted boulevard. At the corner Hamilton saw another car pull in behind, a block back, and trail them through traffic. He knew that the chief of the studio police was on the job, that the stage was set. He kept his speed at about thirty, watching the passing cars.

The Rolls was big, a glistening thing of burnished lacquer and shining chromium. Hamilton had chosen it purposely. He wanted a car that would attract attention. The dome light in the rear seat burned, showing the girl. Bait. Killer's bait.

Beneath the visor of his cap his eyes ranged right and left, but there was no sign from the gang, nothing. They reached the entrance of the long drive which led back to the hotel, and he turned into it. The trailing car did not turn, but kept on, parking half a block down the street. Hamilton tooled the big car up to the hotel entrance, got down, and opened the door. He saw Rothberg's squat figure, in dinner clothes, appear; saw a group that he guessed were reporters; heard the flash-lights make sharp sound as the pictures were snapped.

The girl started at the sound, clutched his hand. He gave her a reassuring smile as she stepped down to his side. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Kid, and don't talk." It was a whisper.

She murmured, disappointment showing in her voice. "The gang didn't fall for it, did they?"

He managed to put confidence into his voice, "They will, later. Don't worry." The girl went toward Leah Rothberg. Hamilton managed to get Sam to one side.

The producer whispered, hoarsely, "But, Boyce, what is the idea?"

Hamilton, said, "Forget it. Give your party, but don't drag it out, and whatever you do, don't talk." He stepped backward into deeper shadow as a reporter approached. Rothberg hesitated, almost said something, then turned and went back into the hotel. The reporter followed Hamilton.

"Been with the Countess long?"

Hamilton was screening his face by pulling his cap lower. He knew the man, had seen him around town, and did not want to be recognized.

"Naw, I'm Rothberg's chauffeur."

"Where's she staying?" There was a bill in the reporter's hand.

Hamilton hid his grin. "Santa Monica," he lied.

The other looked at him suspiciously. "That straight?"

"Didn't I just tell you?" Hamilton stretched out his hand and took the bill. It was a one, and he muttered, "Cheap," under his breath.

The reporter wasn't satisfied. "She's going to leave town tonight. Where's she going?"

Hamilton shrugged, "Better ask them at the air-port."

"Oh, so she's going by plane?"

"I didn't say so," Boyce turned aside. Across his shoulder he saw that the man hesitated for a moment, then turned and hurried away. Hamilton went back to the car and drove it to the parking place. He was discouraged. He'd hoped that the mob would have shown their hand on the

way to the hotel. He wondered if Gal-kovitch had seen the evening papers. He wondered. Then he stopped wondering and watched the man across the parking lot.

THERE was nothing in his appearance to attract Hamilton's attention, nothing, except for his evident interest in the car. He came across the lot slowly, well dressed, with black hair which shone as he passed beneath one of the lights.

"Nice car." He had paused beside Hamilton and was offering a cigarette.

Boyce accepted, studying the man beneath the visor of his cap. The other was too well dressed for a reporter, lacked the assurance, and the long tapering fingers which held the crumpled yellow package shook slightly. "Not bad." Hamilton lit the white cylinder with the car's lighter, afraid of the match's flare.

"Rothberg's, isn't it?" The other's voice was idle.

Hamilton made himself sound surprised. "Yeah? How'd you know?"

"Seen it around. Been with him long?"

"Too long."

"Huh? I understood that he was a swell bird to work for."

Hamilton said, "Someone's been kidding you. Look at tonight. I gotta drive this dumb Countess around, take her to the air-port. Then when I get back, he'll probably have another job for me."

"Countess?" The man could not keep the interest out of his voice. "Who is she?"

Hamilton shrugged. "Some foreign dame that Rothberg's giving a dinner for. It wasn't supposed to be known, but there was a leak and the reporters got the story. Maybe you saw it?"

The man said, hastily, "I haven't had time to read a paper tonight."

"Well, I don't know a thing about her myself," Hamilton went on, "but when the story got out, the boss was plenty sore, burned up. He accused me of talking, and I hadn't said a

word. I almost quit, but jobs ain't easy to find."

"How'd you like to make a piece of change?" The man's voice was idle again.

Hamilton shrugged. "Depends." His voice was cautious. "How would I go about making it?"

"Something might come up." The other backed away from the car. "If the chance comes, I'll let you know." He had turned and was walking away.

Hamilton said, "Hey! Wait."

"I'll be seeing you." The man did not stop, and several minutes later Hamilton saw him leave the parking-place.

Boyce settled back under the wheel, thinking it over. That the man was from Galkovitch he was sure. The question was, how would the gang proceed? He almost wished that he had not gotten the girl into this danger, as he lifted the gun from his shoulder clip and made sure that it was in working order. Then he settled back to wait.

The time dragged on. It was colder, damper, as the fog began to come in from the west, blurring the lights of the driving range behind him. Traffic made distant noise on the Boulevard, and he wondered if the two carloads of studio police were on the job. Then the call came, and he tooled the big car forward.

Rothberg's eyes asked him questions as he slid from under the wheel and opened the door. Boyce merely nodded to the producer, then helped the girl into the car. As he arranged the robe he whispered, "On your toes, Kid. They're waiting for us."

HER eyes showed very large in the uncertain light. "Are they . . . ?" But he did not want to talk. He shut the door, touched his cap as he passed Rothberg, and went around the car to slide under the wheel. The big car went into motion along the drive, reached the gate, and paused for the red light. Two men faded from the shadows and were in the car al-

most before Hamilton knew what was happening; one in the front seat at his side, the other with the girl.

He heard her make a startled sound, which reached him faintly through the glass partition which separated the rear seat from the driver's section, and, raising his eyes to the rear-view mirror, he saw that the man was pressed closely against her side. Then his eyes came back to the road as something hard, round, dug its way into his ribs, and a voice said softly, "Turn left, Bozo, and no funny moves."

He permitted himself to look sideways beneath the visor of his cap, and recognized the man who had spoken to him in the parking station.

"Hello!" He put surprise into the words.

The other said, from the corner of his mouth, "I told you you'd have a chance to make a piece of change if you played it right. This is your chance. No funny business and you'll get a present, try something and you'll get buried." He reached across with his free hand and patted the uniform coat, felt the bulge, unbuttoned the coat, and transferred Hamilton's gun to his own pocket. "Any more?"

Boyce said, "That's all, but what's the gag?"

"Forget it. The less you know the better off you'll be." The light changed and the gun dug deeper into Hamilton's side, "Turn left and keep rolling."

Hamilton obeyed. He saw the two cars of the studio police parked against the opposite curb; saw them go into motion and drop in behind the big car, tailing it. Then he quit watching the mirror, fearful that his companion would catch on. They went west to Wilton and turned north. Lights a block back showed him that the other cars were still following him. They crossed a side street and went on. Then there was a crash from behind, and Hamilton, glancing in the rear-view mirror, saw that a black touring car had pulled out of the side

street and crashed into the side of the studio police car.

The gun dug into his ribs suddenly, and the hoarse voice said against his ear, "Step on it, Mugg. Left at the next corner."

Unwillingly he pushed the accelerator toward the floor, and the big Rolls jumped forward. They went left, then right again. There were no lights behind them, no tailing car. Hamilton shivered slightly. He was strictly on his own now, could expect no help from outside. It wasn't that he feared for his own safety, but he was thinking of the girl in the rear seat, thinking that she had trusted him and risked her life to draw the killers into the open.

Well, they were in the open now. At least, some of them were, and it was up to him to do something about it. The pressure of the gun against his side had relaxed slightly as the car went on, crossed Sunset, Hollywood, Franklin, and began to climb the twisting, narrowing road which led upward into the hills.

There was no traffic here, an occasional parked car before some hill-side house. The grade became steeper, the curves sharper. Hamilton had never been on this particular road before. The houses were more scattered as the canyon narrowed, until the bush-covered sides almost brushed the shining car as it passed.

Finally they rounded a bend, so sharp that Boyce was forced to brake the car and almost creep around. The road was a shelf now, clinging to the edge of the hill on their left. Below them on the right the ground dropped almost vertically to the floor of another canyon five hundred feet below. On the left the bank rose perpendicularly, seeming to crowd them toward the edge. He tooted the car along the narrow paved strip with care, noting where the last rain had caused a cut to cave across the road in a miniature slide which had been imperfectly cleared away. Then to the left the car's lights showed the doors of a

double garage, excavated from the bank itself, and the man at his side said, "Hold it, Sport. This is the end of the line."

He brought the car to a stop, and the man beside him whistled shrilly three times. The garage doors rolled back, exposing the interior of a concrete building. It was empty except for a man who had opened the doors and stood blinking in the glare of the headlights.

There was no sign of a house, nothing except the garage and the dark bush above and around it. On order Hamilton put the Rolls into first and nosed forward until it was in the garage; then for the first time he looked directly at his captor.

"So what?"

The other grinned without mirth. "You're a game monkey, Pal." There was respect in the husky voice, "Come on. Get out, and no funny moves."

HAMILTON climbed from beneath the wheel. As he reached the cement floor the rear door opened and the girl stepped to his side. Her eyes were on his, questioning frightened. He saw that her lips twitched nervously for a moment; then she steadied herself with visible effort and faced her captors.

They were watching them closely. The man who had been standing beside the garage doors closed them and came around the car. Hamilton stared at him and almost swore aloud. It was Harry Wench.

Boyce stood there, wondering if the racketeer would recognize him. Wondering if the tiny mustache and chauffeur's uniform were sufficient disguise. He didn't want to be recognized. He feared that they would separate him from the girl; but Wench wasn't looking at him. He was watching the girl with small, pig-like eyes.

"Nice work." The words were for the two gunmen who stood slightly behind Hamilton. "Any trouble?"

The one who had ridden in the front seat said, "Cinch! There were a couple

of cars tailing us. The boys picked them out."

Wench's soft, short-fingered hands expressed his satisfaction. "Swell. Might as well take them up." He turned and walked toward the rear of the garage, opened a door and switched on a light. The light showed a short, tunnel-like passage with an elevator door at its far end. Hamilton and the girl followed him on order. He slid back the metal door, and they stepped through into a small, cage-like car. The two gunmen followed them, stood with their backs to the door, their guns ready. Wench pushed the button and the car shot upward at dismaying speed.

Hamilton was thinking rapidly. The bank had risen almost vertically from the garage entrance. It wasn't hard to guess that the elevator shaft had been dug from the hill itself; that somewhere above them was the hide-out. He wondered, even as the car came to a jarring stop, if this was the only entrance; then he stopped wondering, and stepped out into a heavily carpeted foyer. It was long, rather narrow, and seemed to bisect the house. The door made sound as it closed behind them, and Wench, with a word to their guards, turned and disappeared through a door to their right. He reappeared a moment later and motioned to the girl.

"Okay, Countess. Come ahead."

She shot a glance toward Hamilton, a silent appeal, and he managed to give her a smile of encouragement. He had feared that this would happen, that they would be separated. At least, he thought, as he saw her disappear, his plan had succeeded. He had located Galkovitch's hide-out; but now that he had found it, he wondered if he would live to make use of the knowledge.

The gunman who had spoken to him in the parking-lot stepped forward, "Come on, Pal."

Hamilton went down the long hall, through a door to the left, into a cross

passage, and down it to a room at the end. The man switched on the light, showing a small, meagerly furnished room. "You stay here for now, and—" he indicated the unbarred windows—"don't get foolish and go out. There are dogs out there that would chew you up."

Hamilton said, "But you told me that if I played nice I'd get a piece of change."

THE other grinned, "Maybe you will. Stick around, Pal." He went out, locking the door. Hamilton looked around, shrugged, and walked to the window. After a moment he walked back to the door, punched out the light and then returned to the window. The light in the room had blinded him, made it hard to see out. Now he could distinguish things in the darkness. The house was apparently built on the flat top of a small hill. He judged that the space around it was not more than a quarter of an acre, perhaps not that large. An ell to the right prevented his seeing in that direction. A high fence surrounded the yard, and beyond the fence he could see the lights of the city gleaming faintly through the fog.

The yard itself was in deep shadow, but darker shadows moved through it. Long, slim shadows, that in the uncertain light resembled wolves. Hamilton unfastened the catch and tried the window. It slid upward with faint sound, but the sound attracted the dogs, and they gathered below him, snarling and snapping among themselves. Evidently the gunman had not lied.

Sound from the hall made him close the window and cross the room hurriedly. He had barely time to switch on the light when the door came open, exposing his guard. The man shot a quick, searching glance about the room, then jerked his head. "Come on. They want to talk to you." He backed up, giving Hamilton a chance to step into the hall ahead of him, then fol-

lowed. They went back along the passage to the main hall, turned, and went to the door through which the girl had disappeared.

CHAPTER VI



IT was a large room, three steps below the hall level, with a high beamed ceiling and a fireplace at the far end. There were three people in the room. The girl, seated in a chair at the right of the fireplace, Wench, standing facing her, and Galkovitch. They all looked up as Hamilton came toward them, Galkovitch's face expressionless. Wench smiling thickly. "Who is this woman?" Galkovitch's voice lashed out, whip-like. Hamilton stared at him, caught off guard.

"Why—why—Countess Nina . . ."

"Don't lie." The man's voice was flat, deadly. "You've one chance to save yourself, fellow. Who is this woman?"

Hamilton shot a quick look at the girl. Her hands were knotted in her lap, her eyes upon them, and a long red mark showed on her cheek. He could only guess what had happened in that room, but his guess filled him with sudden rage. Then a sound beat upon his consciousness. There was a radio going in the corner, a radio turned low. He had not heard it before, had been too engrossed by the men before the fire, but the announcer's voice caught his attention now, driving everything else from his mind.

"Attention, all cars. All cars, attention. Calling all cars . . ." The radio was tuned to the police calls. "All cars stand by. A Rolls Royce. License number 1A—, belonging to Sam Rothberg, is missing. The car was last seen on Wilton, between Wilshire and Third, going north. It is driven by Boyce Hamilton. Trace this car. It is feared that Hamilton has been kidnaped. Calling all . . ." Boyce looked

up in time to meet Galkovitch's steady gaze.

"So—" The man took a quick step forward and pulled the chauffeur's cap from Boyce's head. "We meet again, Mr. Hamilton."

Wench swore sharply, took a half step forward, "Say, what's going on here?"

Galkovitch stepped back. "Perhaps the good Mr. Hamilton will kindly explain just why he is masquerading as a chauffeur, why he drives a lady who most certainly is not Countess Nina, when he is supposed to be driving the dear Countess?"

Hamilton said nothing. Silently he cursed the chief of the studio police. He realized what had happened. When the tailing cars lost the Rolls, due to the wreck, the man had become panicky, had called in the cops. Wench had come forward, "All right, Hamilton, "No one asked you into this play. You bought your own chips. Now take it." His hand snaked out and caught Hamilton full on the mouth.

Boyce took an instinctive step toward him. The gunman behind him snapped, "Steady, Cull."

Hamilton stopped. He said, brittlely, through bruised lips, "So what?"

Galkovitch pushed Wench to one side. "Where's that list that you took from my desk?"

BOYCE'S lips twisted suddenly. It hurt to grin, but he had to. It was funny. A second ago he thought he was out of the game, that his cards were in the discard, and now . . . He said, "Where you couldn't find it if you wanted to. How about a trade, Galkovitch? The girl goes out and you get the list. After all, this isn't her party."

"Talk." The other bulked before him, the wide shoulders almost cutting off the view of the fire. "Talk." He shot out one hand and caught the front of Hamilton's coat, dragging Boyce toward him. "Where's the list?"

Hamilton dug his right into the man's stomach, heard the other grunt, but the grip on his coat did not lessen. He hit the man again, and yet again; saw the face coming closer, as Galkovitch wrapped his free arm about Hamilton's shoulders. The man's strength was bone-crushing. The bunched arms slipped up from the shoulders, went around Hamilton's neck. The short fingers found his face, groped for the eyes, and pressed. "Talk." The word was a guttural.

Hamilton cried out involuntarily from the stabbing pain. It seemed that the pressure against his eyes increased, that he would never see again. The girl was on her feet with a protesting cry, dragging at Galkovitch's arm, trying to break the grip. Wench caught her, pulled her back, and threw her into the chair. "Talk." Though the word came through a haze of pain, Hamilton cursed feebly, "It's in the mail."

"The mail?" The pressure against his eyes lessened. "Where? Whom is it mailed to?"

Hamilton stood there leaning heavily against the other, trying to think of a lie, a lie that would be believed, that he could use as a lever to free the girl. He said, "It's addressed to Tom Karney, city editor of the *Press*. I called him this afternoon and told him that it was on the way, that if Miss Martin didn't call for it by ten o'clock tomorrow morning he was to turn it over to the Department of Justice."

"You're lying." Galkovitch had released his grip from Hamilton's eyes. They blurred as Boyce tried to see the man, blurred and ached terribly. He wondered subconsciously if he would ever see clearly again. He had a fear, a horror, rather, of blindness.

"—damn you, you're lying." Rage gripped Galkovitch and he shook Hamilton. "If you—if you did I'll kill you."

Hamilton's vision was clearing, and relief flooded over him. He said, harshly, "Fool. Stop it. Stop."

Galkovitch stopped. He seemed surprised that he did. "Why should you do that?" His voice was still hoarse, anger-laden, "Why, if you were going to turn that list over to the Department of Justice, should you send it to this editor?"

"Did you ever play poker, Galkovitch?"

The big man stared his surprise, and released Hamilton's coat. Boyce stepped slowly backward, straightening the coat as he went. His vision was still not clear, and he could see only indistinctly, as if his eyes were filmed. "You should play poker." He managed to twist his bruised lips into a grin. "Wench, here, will tell you that it's always wise to have a hole-card when you do play, an ace if you're lucky. That list is my ace. You wouldn't want it in the hands of the Federal boys, would you? It would kind of gum up your little plot. Okay. You've got only one chance to keep that list from going to Washington. Let Miss Martin go. Let her get it from Karney in the morning."

"No." There was a flat finality in Wench's voice. "Do you figure us for saps, Hamilton? Even if you're telling the truth about that list do you think we're going to let the broad walk out of here and bring the cops on our tails?"

HAMILTON turned slowly, he could see the man now, not clearly, but clearly enough. His eyes still throbbed, felt almost like burning coals in their reddened sockets. "Listen, Wench, I'm not kidding, but your name is in those papers. There's a record of a payoff. I'm telling you that if those papers land in Washington you'll be up against a rap that you can't beat. You've had one taste of the way the Feds do things. You don't want another."

The man's mouth fell open. "My name on that list?" He swung to face Galkovitch, "Why, you fat . . ."

The other held up a beefy hand. "Let's not get excited, my friend."

"Excited?" Wench's voice rasped. "Listen you screwy . . . I'm not getting excited, but what's the idea of putting my name on those papers? For two cents I'd . . ."

Galkovitch said, harshly, "You forget yourself. After all, who are you?"

Wench's laugh lacked mirth. "Who am I?—Hell! That's good. Listen, you fat mugg. You may be putting up the dough, see, but they're my men. If I was to say the words they'd take you to pieces and see what makes you tick. Wouldn't you, Dude?"

The gunman behind Hamilton said, "Yeah."

"Watch this bird. If he makes a funny move, blast him."

"Cinch."

"But—" Galkovitch's face was red with surprised anger.

His voice threatened to break into a shriek. "You can't do this to me. We have work to do, work which is not yet finished."

Wench's little eyes were very narrow. "Now listen, Punk. I've been taking your orders because there was good dough in it and it takes dough to hold a mob together, but when you start crossing me . . ."

"I haven't crossed you; you mistake." The man controlled himself with a visible effort. "Let us talk it over, my friend, just us, together. Take these away." He indicated Hamilton and the girl with a wave of his thick hand.

"Well—" Wench hesitated. "It never hurts to talk things over."

"You are right." Galkovitch looked at the gunman. "Take them away."

The man raised his eyes, meeting those of Wench. The racketeer hesitated for a moment. "Okay, but frisk this monkey first." He pulled a gun from his own pocket. "I'll watch them while you go over him."

Galkovitch started to protest, then changed his mind and stood silent while the Dude relieved him of two guns which he dropped into his own pockets. Then the gunman stepped

back, jerked his head toward the door.

"Let's go."

The girl rose and took Hamilton's arm. "Can you see?" She was helping him along. Her voice was soft, full of pity.

He could see fairly clearly now, but this gave him an idea. "My eyes," he groaned aloud, and clutched her arm. There was a chair between them and the door. Hamilton saw it, saw that she was attempting to steer him around it, but he managed to stumble, catching his foot and falling. The gunman swore, took a step forward, and drove the end of his pointed shoe against Hamilton's ribs.

It made Boyce grunt. Then rage welled up through him, and he cursed as he got awkwardly to his feet with the girl's assistance, and went on down the hall. As they stepped into the cross passage he whispered, "Faint when you get into the room."

She stared at him and started to speak, but the look on his face stopped her. They reached the door and Hamilton ran into the jamb. The Dude swore again and kicked him, sending him halfway across the room. The switch clicked, flooding the place with light. Then the girl gave a little startled cry, pressed the back of her hand against her mouth, and went over, her body falling loosely against the gunman. Hamilton, watching her, thought that he had never seen a better act, but he wasted no time in watching.

WITH another oath the Dude stooped and slid his free hand under her shoulders, "What the hell's the matter now." For the instant his eyes were off Hamilton, his gun arm down, and in that instant Boyce moved. His hand swept to the top of his puttee; his fingers caught the handle of the thin knife and drew it forth. He covered the distance with two flying steps, and crouched beside the man, the knife in his right hand, its razor-like point digging through the other's coat, finding the skin.

"Move, and you get it in the guts."

The other's move was purely instinctive. He half turned but stopped, stiffened as the knife bit deeper into his side. "Drop the rod." Hamilton's voice was tight.

Unwillingly the man's fingers relaxed, and the gun slid to the carpet. The girl stretched out her hand and picked it up. Hamilton got the two guns which the man had taken from Galkovitch, and rose slowly. "On your feet."

The Dude obeyed, his face sullen, "You aren't buying yourself a thing, Punk."

Hamilton's lips twisted. Anything would be better than letting Galkovitch work on us. Where's the Prince?"

"Go to hell!" The other was gaining confidence, "You don't dare to shoot, Mugg. There are two other men beside Wench here."

"Thanks for telling me," Hamilton's mouth set, "but that wouldn't help you, Dude. I've got three guns, counting the ones you lifted from our fat friend. I think I can take care of the boys. Come on. Where's the Prince?"

"Nuts!"

Hamilton deliberately shoved the knife back into its place, his eyes never leaving the man's face, the gun in his hand steady. Then he straightened, stepped toward the other, and slapped him. "That's for the kick. Where's the Prince?"

The other shook his head stubbornly, and Hamilton shrugged. "Okay! You asked for it." He brought the gun up slowly.

The expression in the man's eyes changed. "You wouldn't—I—he's on the other side of the house."

"Show me." Hamilton's voice was still tight. "And try anything Pal, and I'll blow you in two. I'm just hoping for the chance."

The other ran a long-fingered hand across his eyes. "I thought you were blind."

"I wanted you to think so." Hamilton grinned, sourly. "Come on. Get moving."

They left the room, the Dude leading, Hamilton behind him, and the girl following, reached the main hall, crossed it, and went into the other wing. There was a door at the end of the hall before which the Dude paused and said, across his shoulder, "It's locked."

"Open it."

"But I tell you—"

"Open it." Hamilton's voice was flat, but it carried a threat.

THE man swore, found a bunch of keys, and unlocked the door. He pushed it open and went through with Hamilton at his heels. The girl brushed by Boyce and darted across the room. "Ruprecht, Darling!"

The black-haired Prince rose from a chair beside the window. "Lorna! Where, how—" They were in each other's arms. Hamilton said to the gunman, "All right, Punk. Against the wall. Get your nose into the plaster."

The other obeyed without words. The girl extricated herself from the Prince's arms, "It was Mr. Hamilton, Ruprecht. He's wonderful."

The boy came forward, his hand outstretched, "I don't understand it. I don't know what happened." He was staring curiously at the chauffeur's uniform and the girl's dyed hair. "But I thank you, and apologize for the way I acted at the theater." He was hedged about with dignity.

Hamilton tried to break through. He said, "I suppose you realize that this child risked her life to come here tonight? That but for a little luck she might be dead now?"

She said, "It wasn't luck, Ruprecht. It was Mr. Hamilton. You should have seen it. That horrible man," she shuddered, "almost gouged his eyes out. And then they started quarreling between themselves."

The boy lost some of his presence. "Thank you. Thank you both." He

paused for an instant, as if searching for suitable words. "It's been rather awful here. They came in from time to time and threatened me. Galkovitch seemed to hate me."

The girl put her arm around him and he winced from the touch. She said, quickly, "What's the matter, Ruprecht? What have they done to you?"

His mouth twisted. "Galkovitch had a whip."

"Let me see." She was pulling off his coat.

He tried to protest, but she would not listen. When his shirt had been pulled away from his shoulders she uttered a startled cry, "Mr. Hamilton, look."

Boyce glanced for a second toward the boy, saw the network of angry, red welts which covered his shoulders, and swore harshly. The girl was saying, "The fiends! Oh, the fiends!"

Embarrassedly the boy pulled his shirt into place. "It's nothing. I want to thank you for coming, for freeing me."

Hamilton's voice was grim. "You're not clear of this place yet, Kid. You and the girl stand here." He handed one of the guns to the Prince. "I'm going to have a talk with Galkovitch."

The boy stopped him with a gesture, "I refuse to let you fight my battles further. You stay and let me go." He started for the door, his head erect, the gun steady in his hand.

"Don't be a sap." Hamilton's voice was harsh, and a flush crept up in the other's olive cheeks. "You wouldn't stand a chance with these muggs. I didn't risk this girl's life just to get you killed when things are breaking our way. Get back."

For an instant it seemed that the Prince would refuse. Then he clicked his heels and bowed stiffly. "You're right, of course, but we are not accustomed to having others fight our battles. It would be stupid to speak of rewards . . ."

"Take care of the little girl." Hamilton was already moving toward the

door. Just before he reached it he stopped suddenly and held up one hand. He had heard a noise outside. Someone was coming along the passage. For seconds he stood there, just inside the door, waiting, the gun in his hand swinging loosely. The man came on, the footsteps making clicking sounds on the hard wood.

He was almost at the door now. Hamilton crouched against the wall, his gun ready. Suddenly the Dude uttered a sharp cry of warning. The footsteps ceased, and Hamilton swore under his breath. From the corner of his eye he saw the Prince spring forward and rake his gun along the side of the Dude's head. The man went over like a falling tree, and Ruprecht caught him as he fell, easing him to the floor without sound.

Hamilton grinned. Prince or no prince, this kid would do to take to town. Boyce turned and came stealthily toward the door. The man in the hall called, "Dude, Hey, Dude! Was that you?" He waited a moment, then swore softly as no one answered, and came forward. The door gave slightly under his hand and Hamilton waited, his gun swinging, ready, like a sap, in his hand. The door opened a little wider, then suddenly went back with a bang, and the gunman shoved in wide.

Hamilton swore. He hadn't expected this. He'd counted on the man's peeking carefully into the room. The hall without was dark, and the other had stepped back into the shadow. His gun roared suddenly and the girl uttered a surprised sound, swayed for an instant, and went over into the Prince's arms. Hamilton fired at the flash, leaped forward, swearing as he came. The man's gun cracked again, and something tugged at Hamilton's sleeve. Then the gunman pitched forward, falling at Hamilton's feet, and lay still.

NOISE reached them from the other part of the house, excited voices, running feet. Boyce took a

quick look across his shoulder. The girl lay on her back, her head cradled in Ruprecht's arm, her face bloodless, wax-like, against the frame of dyed hair. Then Hamilton dived into the passage, and raced toward the main hallway. He wanted to reach the connecting door first, to be waiting for them there, but he failed. The door came open before he had covered half the distance, and a gun crashed, the bullet tearing into the wall at his right. The hall was lighted by a single bulb, concealed in a glass bowl in the ceiling. Hamilton snapped a shot at the light, and the glass broke with tinkling sound, leaving him in darkness. Even as he fired he fell forward, dropping to one knee as the gun roared again, and yet again. He snapped a shot at the lighted rectangle which was the doorway, heard someone cry out; then he crawled forward, his gun ready.

There was no one in sight now, no one to shoot at; but Wench's voice called through the stillness, "Dude. Hey, Dude! What's happened?"

Hamilton's bruised lips were set in a straight hard line as he worked his way forward. There were three men against him; Wench, the other gunman that the Dude had mentioned, and Galkovitch. He knew that it was up to him, that he could expect little or no help from the Prince.

Cautiously he worked forward, ever careful that he made no noise. The waiting men were getting impatient. He could hear them whispering now, their voices tense, carrying through the stillness of the house. He had almost reached the door when it suddenly kicked shut, and he heard a key in the lock. He sent one shot into the panel, and was rewarded by a heavy sound as someone fell against the door. Then the wood splintered as a gun on the other side went into action, and lead rained about Hamilton for the moment; but the shots were too high. He waited until they stopped. They had been too close to-

gether to count but he judged that there had been at least five.

For seconds he stayed where he was, then turned and crawled back toward the room which he had left. He gained the door, slid through it, and rose. The Prince was still on his knees, the girl's head cradled in the crook of his arm. He looked up at Hamilton, his eyes showing very dark against the whiteness of his face.

"What happened?"

Hamilton shrugged. "They've locked the door. How bad is she hurt?"

The boy looked at him vaguely, "I don't know. I don't . . ."

Hamilton shut the door, locked it with one of the gunman's keys, then recrossed the room and knelt at Ruprecht's side. "Let's have a look." The right side of her dress was blood-soaked, but the wound was high, through the shoulder. Hamilton studied it thoughtfully. "Probably broke the bone, but it's not fatal."

"You mean she'll live?" The Prince's voice steadied, gained life.

Hamilton's mouth twisted, "She should unless she bleeds to death, or our friends pull something." He examined the wound again, saw that the blood had almost stopped, then he looked around. The gunman beside the door was stirring. Hamilton rose and took a look at him. The man wasn't badly hurt, but he was definitely out of action, and Boyce turned toward the Dude.

The other was still out, and there was a ridge along the side of his skull where the Prince had struck. Hamilton wasn't sure that the boy hadn't struck too hard, but when he bent forward he saw that the gunman was breathing.

AFTER a moment he went back to the Prince. "Let's get her onto that couch." Between them they lifted her, and Hamilton realized how frail she was, how small. For a moment he stood staring down at the bloodless face, then he muttered under his

breath, "Poor little starved kid. She had nerve, and not much else." No matter how things broke this night he couldn't see any out for her. Queens weren't picked from the ranks of Hollywood extras. The thought made his voice rough as he turned to the Prince.

"Listen." His eyes held the other. "You've got a gun. I hope you know how to use it. If either of these mugs move," he indicated the still figures, "tap them. If anyone comes to that door, shoot through it."

"But what are you going to do?" The boy's voice sounded nervous.

Hamilton shrugged. "I'm going to get out of here somehow. We can't do any good cooped up." He moved toward the window.

Ruprecht's voice sharpened, "The dogs. There are a dozen out there. They'll tear you to pieces."

"They'll have to get hold of me first." Hamilton's voice was grim. He unlocked the sash and raised it. Outside was a pocket of darkness, intensified by fog. The window was a good six feet from the ground, which fell away sharply to the fence two hundred feet distant. Light from the room at his back drifted by Boyce, making a path across the dark lawn, showing him the dogs, huge grey beasts gathering below.

He leaned out and looked upward. The edge of the roof was only three or four feet above the window. He pulled back his head, closed the lower sash, and slid down the upper one, "Give me a hand."

The Prince obeyed questioningly. Hamilton said, "Steady my legs." He stepped up onto the sill, straddled the sashes, and turned, groped upward with his fingers. The dogs were snarling below, snapping among themselves, whining eagerly. He wondered suddenly how long he would last if he fell into their midst; then he forgot them. His fingers caught the tiny ledge at the top of the window, and he drew himself up until he stood on the sash top. The Prince had caught the

idea, and locked his arms about Hamilton's legs. "Careful."

Boyce grinned sourly in the darkness. He stood gripping the inside of the window's top with one hand to steady himself, his nose against the rough stucco of the wall. With his free hand he could touch the edge of the roof, but could he get sufficient grip to pull himself up?

FOR a minute he rested, then he let go with the hand on the inside of the window, and shifted it carefully until it was beside his other, clutching desperately the edge of the roof. "If you could raise me a few inches . . ."

The Prince's voice was tight, as if he had been holding his breath. "Can you hang on for a moment?"

Hamilton said, "Sure, if it isn't too long." His nose was beginning to itch. He felt the other's grip on his legs loosen, thought for just a moment that he was about to lose his balance; then he heard the boy set something on the hard floor, and felt the other's arm about his legs again. The Prince's voice reached him, harsh, with a strained note, "Raise one foot and put it in my hand."

Hamilton obeyed. The man's arm was still about his knees, steadying him. "Now keep your leg stiff. I'm going to lift you." He sensed how the boy's muscles were straining, but his body went up slowly until his fingers had a grip on the roof's edge. Then he lifted himself clear, drawing upwards until he thought his muscles would snap. One of his toes found purchase on the tiny ledge above the window, then the other, and a moment later he was on the roof.

It was flat, as are most California house roofs, of a tarry construction with a six-inch wall around it. Hamilton knelt on the wall and looked down. The Prince's head appeared in the window. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, watch yourself." Hamilton turned and stared about him. The fog hid the lights of the city, blending

them into a faint glow barely discernible. The house itself was built in the form of a U, with two wings inclosing a patio on the other side. Hamilton crossed the roof and peered down into this patio. It was stone-paved, dark except for light which drifted from a window almost directly opposite him. He knelt on the wall and tried to peer into the window. The room beyond was evidently the kitchen, and it seemed empty. At the open end of the patio a stucco wall with an ornamental iron gate barred the entrance of the dogs. Hamilton eased himself over the edge and dropped into the patio. The shock stung his feet, made his right leg ache. For a moment he stood still, listening, then limped across to the lighted window, his hands buried in his coat pockets, gripping the guns which the Dude had taken from Galkovitch.

He reached the window and peered in. The room beyond was empty, a big affair with white porcelain sink and electric range. There was a door to the left opening into the yard beyond the patio wall, but Hamilton could hear the dogs beyond the wall. He tried the window, found it locked, and pulling one of the guns from his pocket, reversed it, used the butt against the glass opposite the lock. It cracked but did not break. He tried again, just as a shot, followed by another, sounded from the other wing.

The upper pane broke, and Hamilton pushed over the catch, shoved up the window, and a moment later was inside the room. There was another shot, and he raced through the short corridor to the main hall. No one was in sight, and he paused for an instant, then more shots reached him from the direction of the Prince's room. Silence followed for a moment, and a voice which he knew for Wench's called, "Come on, Hamilton. Open up or we'll shoot the door down." There was more silence, and Boyce judged that the Prince's gun was empty. He worked his way along

the main hall carefully, his gun in his hand, ready. He had almost reached the opening of the other passage when he heard something hit the door, heard loud voices, then a gun exploded twice, and he raced forward until he could see into the short hall. The door at the other end was wide, and a man stood framed in the light. Then he stepped sideways and Hamilton could see two men struggling in the middle of the room. He jumped ahead through the unlighted hall, not seeing the man crouching against the wall in the shadow until he was almost on him. Their guns made one sound, and Hamilton felt a searing sensation across his left side.

HE knew that he had hit the other, but couldn't be sure where, as the man half fell, half jumped toward him, striking his shoulder, long arms about Hamilton's neck. Boyce clubbed at the other's head with his gun, raked the side of it with the barrel. The arms loosened, relaxed, and the man slipped to the floor. Boyce paid no attention, but leaped ahead into the light of the room. Galkovitch had his arms wrapped about the Prince's slender body, bending him backwards. Wench was across the room beside the window. He uttered a warning cry as Hamilton came through the door, started to bring up his gun. Boyce fired at him twice, saw the second bullet strike the man's shoulder, saw his gun slip to the rug; then he jumped at Galkovitch, catching his collar with his free hand, swinging for the man's head with the gun. He felt the metal strike bone, sensed that Galkovitch was hurt, had released his grip on the Prince, and was swinging to meet him. Hamilton struck again and yet again.

The man swayed, staggered slightly, and went to one knee. The Prince had fallen to the floor, was trying to lift himself. Wench lay beside the window, his eyes on the gun, working himself toward it.

Boyce took two quick steps toward him and kicked the gun out of the way. As he turned one of Wench's hands fastened about his ankle, and he went down hard, his head striking the wood floor, jarring him. For just a moment he lay still, his labored lungs fighting for breath, his side numb where the bullet had skinned the ribs. Wench was on his knees, his crippled arm dragging, his good hand reaching for Hamilton's gun. His fingers reached it, closed over it.

Boyce had a confused sense of alarm. His hand caught Wench's wrist and the man fell across him. They struggled for a moment, then rolled over twice.

There was a cry of warning from the Prince, and Hamilton managed to twist about. Wench was weakening, handicapped by his crippled arm. The Dude was kneeling beside the wall, his eyes on Hamilton, his long fingers about the gun which Boyce had kicked out of Wench's reach. Even as Boyce looked the Dude fired, the bullet digging into the wall a couple of inches above Hamilton's head.

Boyce twisted, rolled, and pulled Wench up onto him. The gun in the Dude's hand spoke again, the bullet striking the center of Wench's back. For an instant the racketeer stiffened. His face, which was inches from Hamilton's own, was a mask of pain. Then he relaxed, his arm went loose, and Hamilton tried to bring up the gun, but it was half under him, and the Dude's finger was already tightening on the trigger. The gun clicked and an expression of surprise, of rage, swept across the man's face. Hamilton rolled clear of Wench's body came up to his knees, the gun in his hand. The Dude was on his feet, running toward the door. Hamilton took two steps after him, then swung about as the Prince called sharply. Galkovitch was beside the window, one leg across the sill. Hamilton yelled at him, but the man paid no attention.

HE disappeared into the night as Hamilton fired, the bullet tearing into the wooden window frame. Boyce went forward and peered down into the darkness. The dogs were making steady sound below, but it was very dark, and Boyce guessed that they would not attack the other. He stood there waiting, watching for movement, but could see nothing in the gloom. Then he looked back.

The Prince was beside the couch, bending above the girl. Her eyes were open, and one hand rested on the boy's arm. Hamilton looked at Wench. The man lay on his side, his body twisted, his face away from Hamilton, but Boyce guessed that he was dead. The two gunmen were still out. Hamilton dragged the one from the dark hall into the room, and laid him beside his fellow; then with a word to the Prince he went in search of the Dude, but could find no trace of him. The man was unarmed, and Hamilton shrugged. So, for that matter, Boyce thought, was Galkovitch, but he hated to see him get away. He rode down in the automatic elevator to the garage below, found that the Rolls was gone, and rode back up to the house. He wondered if there were another way to escape from the hilltop, or if Galkovitch were still lurking in the dark grounds. Certainly he could not have used the elevator, or could he?

Hamilton swore softly as he went back to the room. He'd failed to get Galkovitch, but the Prince was safe. Yes, and the girl. He crossed to the couch and smiled down at her. "How goes it, Kid?" The smile had cost him an effort. His side was stiff, sore, where the bullet had plowed across his ribs, and his head ached.

She managed a little smile in return, a smile which still held fear. "Are you all right? Where's Galkovitch?"

"He won't bother us any more tonight," Hamilton assured her. "You were swell, Kid."

"I'll say she was swell." The Prince sounded very boyish. "Don't think

that I don't realize what she did for me, Mister Hamilton. I'm going to spend the rest of my life proving to her that I realize."

She shook her head, still smiling, but there was a trace of sadness in her smile which made Hamilton's throat muscles contract. "That's foolish, dear." Her voice was steady, low, but clear. "You don't belong to yourself, Ruprecht. You belong to your country. It won't work, Honey, and we both know it."

The Prince lowered his dark head and her fingers ran through his hair. Hamilton turned away and went in search of a phone, cursing softly. There was something wrong with the world when these two kids had to be separated by a silly tradition which ran back into the middle ages.

HE thought of the girl; she had guts, nerve. There were no heroics. Ruprecht's country might go far without finding a better queen, but that was, of course, impossible. He found a phone and called Spellman. The detective captain sounded excited when he heard Hamilton's voice.

"Where are you? What's happened?"

Boyce told him. "Keep your men watching for Rothberg's car. There's a gunman driving it, black-haired, about five-ten or eleven; and put out the dragnet for a man named Galkovitch, squat, heavy featured, weighs around two hundred. He's wearing a gray suit that's been mussed up, and has a ridge along one side of his head. I put it there." He hung up, hesitated, then called Tomaseck.

The old man himself answered, his voice quavering with excitement. Hamilton said, "You can relax now. The Prince is safe."

"Thank heaven. And Galkovitch?"

"Got away." Hamilton's voice expressed his disgust. "Shall I bring the Prince over there when the cops come?"

The other said, "Yes," uncertainly,

"but, Captain Hamilton, I'm afraid that I have bad news for him."

"Some more?" Hamilton's voice was very tired. "What now?"

"Well," the other was hesitating, as if choosing his words. "I've just received information that the republican leaders and certain elements of the army formed a plot and seized the government of Bulvakia late this afternoon. The dictator is dead, and the republic re-established. There will be no throne for Ruprecht." The old voice broke, and Hamilton guessed that the other was crying. He hung up and stood for a moment staring at the phone, his mouth twisting in a cynical smile. If the news had only come earlier the girl's gamble would have been unnecessary. He shrugged, the motion hurting his side, making him wince, and turning, went back to the other room.

They were still on the couch, not speaking. The Prince's head still bowed, the girl's arm about his neck. Both looked up as Hamilton entered, and he saw that there were tears in Ruprecht's eyes.

"How soon will the police be here?"

"In a few minutes." Boyce was silent for a moment, studying the boy's face. "I called Tomaseck. He has some bad news for you, Kid!"

"Bad news?" Ruprecht's voice was dull, as if it lacked interest.

Hamilton found a cigarette, took his time to light it. "Yeah. They've had another revolution in your country. The dictator is dead and the republic re-established. I guess you aren't slated to be King after all. Tough."

Ruprecht was staring at him, his eyes widening. "Are you sure?"

Hamilton shrugged. "Guess so. Tomaseck seemed to be all broken up about it. I'm sorry."

"I'm not." There was life in the boy's voice now. "You won't understand, but that's not bad news, that's the best news that I ever had." And Hamilton, watching the girl's face, thought that he understood

THE PUMA WOMAN

By WILLIAM ALLEN WARD

Dope Ring Dynamiters



THE stillness of the Big Bend District was broken by the whirl of an airplane motor and the distant rumbling of a high powered automobile. The aircraft came from Old Mexico while the automobile approached along the lonely desert road from El Paso.

It was night in the Big Bend District. The desert moon light sifted through the azure sky upon the wild Texas foot hills while the weird howl of a coyote in a distant arroyo was the only sound to break the silence save the rumble of the approaching motors. The aviator landed on a mesa and, stepping from the cock-pit, watched the approaching automobile. The airman was about thirty years old and stepped with the vigor of young manhood although his gait betrayed a suspicious nervousness that suggested the drug habit.

The roadster approached and stopped on the mesa within a short distance of the airplane. A beautiful young woman stepped from the car as the aviator approached. She kissed the aviator and then asked: "How much this time?"

"Fifty ounces," the aviator replied, removing a package from the cock-pit, "thirty of morphine and twenty of cocaine."

"Eddie, you are the best dope runner on the border," the girl said as she placed the package beneath the seat of her car, "a few more trips and we will be fixed for life. Blackie Garcia will pay well for this shipment. Soon we will go to California and forget the smuggling game."

"Luz, I've heard that promise many times before," said Eddie Howard,

the aviator. "When I first met you in Juarez over three years ago you won my love . . . won my heart, yes . . . my heart and I have gone the full limit of humiliation to claim you as my bride. Luz, I deserted the American air service leaving a captain's rank and entered this smuggler game in order to have you for my wife. You have put me off time after time and I now doubt if you ever intend to carry out your promise of marriage."

The woman's piercing black eyes played about her pretty white face in a menacing manner. She paused for an instant and looked straight into the eyes of the aviator. Eddie had removed a small package from his coat and, after pouring some white powder into his palm, had sniffed the substance up his nostrils.

"OF course I won't marry you," the girl snapped as her black orbs flashed disgust, "where is the woman who wants to marry a coke fiend? If you ever muster up enough manhood to conquer that cocaine habit, I'll carry out my promise but until you do, our engagement is off!"

"Now, Luz, for the first time in my life, I can understand why the federal authorities call you the Puma Woman," Howard declared, speaking in a low term, "you are as designing and as treacherous as the most savage puma that roams the jungles of Mexico. You ruined my career as an army officer, causing me to desert my squadron at Fort Bliss and I entered this smuggler game at your command with your promise of marriage as my only reward for military disgrace. I cast aside a good air record in France

just to win your love and at your word, became a common runner of contraband. Now you end the whole scene by demanding that I desert narcotic drugs, my only solace, if I expect to win your hand. The police named you right when they called you the Puma Woman because no panther of the wilderness is more heartless. Luz, I am leaving you for good!"

The Puma Woman, always master of her own emotions, spoke not a word. She gave Howard one scorching glare and jumped into the roadster. The aviator climbed into the cock-pit of his machine and headed for Mexico. Luz wheeled the red roadster around in the rocky road and began the night trip to El Paso.

In El Paso federal narcotic agents were secretly on the trail of the crafty contrabandists. For months they had known that narcotic drugs were being smuggled by airplane from the interior of Mexico and they had good reason to believe that Senorita Luz Gonzales, pretty Mexican girl, known to the underworld of the Mexican border as the Puma Woman, was the mastermind of the conspiracy. From various sources they had gathered the life history of the beautiful young woman and had learned that she was a Sonorian by birth being born of a Yaqui mother and a Portuguese father. The father, a renegade from Lisbon, had played the role of adventurer in Mexico and was known to the federal government of the southern republic many years ago as a daring conspirator against Diaz but he had acquired the drug habit and dropped from the political horizon.

"If we nab the Puma Woman we'll get the one who brings most of the dope into Southwest Texas," declared Art Borrows, narcotic inspector in charge of the border district. "Old Snake Rodriguez, the stool pigeon, has been here several times this week and told me that the Puma would be coming sometime soon with a red roadster full of dope. It would not be a bad idea for the border guards to stop all autos

of that description which approach from the Big Bend district."

The narcotic agents determined to keep a close watch on the border highways and several special guards were dispatched to the vicinity east of Ysleta, the ancient village in the valley of the Rio Grande a short distance east of El Paso. Snake Rodriguez, the informer, accompanied the inspectors because the Snake claimed to have first hand information in connection with the dope-laden automobile and also asserted he knew the Puma Woman by sight.

SNAKE Rodriguez, emaciated by years of drug addiction, was a typical narcotic fiend. Years of drug slavery had robbed him of the small spark of manhood which once graced his otherwise distorted character. With the coming of federal legislation against habit forming drugs the Snake crawled over the international bridge into Mexico where he sided with the wrong faction and found himself a hunted rebel. He crawled back into Texas and faced the problem of doing without his precious drug in the United States or getting it illegally and taking a chance with Leavenworth or going into Mexico where dope was plentiful but where he risked facing a firing squad. An adobe wall with a firing squad ten feet away never appealed to the Snake, so he determined to try his luck with the narcotic agents.

Rodriguez soon devised a clever scheme. He played both peddlers and revenue agents and consequently became distrusted by both. At length the Snake discovered he must cut one or the other, so Rodriguez became a professional stool-pigeon. In exchange for valuable information in regard to the operations of smugglers and peddlers, the Snake obtained a few grains of morphine while inspectors gave him a few coins to buy coffee and sandwiches. The Snake never worked. "I haven't got time," he told police when they questioned him.

Snake was correct. He had time for but one thing and that was to rustle narcotics.

BUT the dope ring also was on the alert. A member of Luz Gonzales' gang shadowed the Snake when he visited the federal narcotic agents' office. Through a keyhole Monkey Larson, the spy, heard the Snake inform on the Puma Woman. Ten minutes later Monkey was in an automobile going toward the Big Bend section to warn the approaching Luz. He met her several miles east of Ysleta and immediately told her that a gang of federal agents were on guard waiting for her to pass. The Puma Woman went into a fit of anger.

"I'll get that sneaking Snake Rodriguez," she raged, "I'll send the traitor to hell."

Luz took the dope-filled parcel from her automobile and beckoned Monkey to follow. The two went beside the desert road and buried the narcotics beneath a pile of rocks. Luz ordered Monkey to go ahead in his automobile while she followed behind.

Monkey had the right information. Just as Luz drew near to Ysleta, Burrows, the narcotic agent, and several other government men, surrounded the red roadster and searched the car for contraband narcotics. But they found none.

"Well, the Puma has foiled us again but we'll get her yet," Burrows declared as he called off the search and permitted Luz to continue her journey to El Paso.

"The Snake will pay for this," cursed Luz Gonzales as she speeded toward El Paso and the Puma meant just what she said. Schooled in the hard class room of the underworld, Luz knew but one law and that was an eye for an eye. It had always been her belief that the only way to settle a debt was to pay in full, good for good, and evil for evil.

But Luz was not so given to anger that she had entirely erased from her

mind the memory of Eddie Howard. Although she had said some mighty cutting things to her lover, yet deep down in her heart, she worshipped the American and fully intended to marry him.

"Looks like Eddie should know by this time that cocaine is to sell and not to use," Luz declared as she entered her apartment.

For a few moments Luz forgot her hatred for Snake Rodriguez and became just an ordinary woman. Perhaps it was the memory of Luz's long dead Indian mother that caused the hardened dope-runner to pause and consider love. The girl remembered that her mother was very romantic and loving. That had been told her by the sisters of a hospital in Southern Sonora where her mother died while Luz was still a baby in arms. Memory of the long deceased mother caused Luz to reach into a dresser drawer and take out a small cross given her by the Catholic sisters as a relic left behind by her mother. It was then Luz recalled the story told by the sisters of how, after the young Yaqui wife had heated the metal cross red hot and branded the sign of the cross upon her faithless husband as the latter lay unconscious from an overdose of morphine. According to the story told by the sisters, the mother at Luz's birth was deserted by her husband who left her helpless in an adobe shack on the Sonorian desert. Months passed and one evening the husband returned only to curse and abuse the young Indian wife. The drug-crazed husband beat the young wife until she was bleeding and bruised and then he swallowed too much morphine and dropped into a state of coma. The Indian girl, a victim of poor health and disappointment, had given away to religious fanaticism. She believed that her husband was dead and, hoping to save his soul, heated the metal cross and the red hot emblem upon his breast. The husband was revived by the intense pain and dashed from the adobe shack never to return. Luz's mother soon

died of a broken heart while Luz was reared by the Catholic sisters until early girlhood when she left to make her own way in the world.

Luz gazed upon the weird relic left behind by her unfortunate mother and then laid it aside with a curse upon her lips for her father.

"I guess you are long since in hell, cruel father," the Puma Woman said to herself, "but I wish that somewhere I might find you and settle for the way you treated my dear mother."

Suddenly Luz recalled the informer, Snake Rodriguez, She hurriedly disguised herself in the clothes of a peon woman and, arming herself with a stiletto, rushed in search of her betrayer.

FAR above the arid Big Bend section, Eddie Howard had soared on his return trip to Mexico the night after meeting Luz on the desert. The American's heart was heavy. He dearly loved Luz for her beauty had captured him and he was unable to rid himself of her vision. On this night he was overcome with despair due to the quarrel with Luz. He took an unusual amount of cocaine and took reckless chances with the air. Eddie was not afraid to die and the suicide route looked to him the easiest way out of his present misery. Memories of a once proud military record and medals won for valor crowded into Eddie's mind coupled with his meeting with Luz in Juarez and her complete conquest of his heart. Then he remembered her cruel words on the desert a few hours before when she had laughed when he told her good-bye.

"This is the quickest way out," Eddie said to himself, "no one will know!"

The aviator cut off his motor and waited for the crash. He experienced the sensation of falling and, crazed with dope, was happy because he did not realize the real consequences of his act. The airplane crashed to the earth and that was all that Eddie remembered. He regained consciousness

in an El Paso hospital several hours later and was informed that he had been snatched from death by cow-punchers awakened from their slumber on the desert by the crashing airplane. The cow-boys jerked the unconscious aviator from the burning craft and rushed him to El Paso. Physicians found that Howard was severely bruised and shaken up but had incurred no serious injury.

When Eddie realized that his death plunge had fallen short of its real purpose he sank into the depths of despair. He knew that he would be recognized by his old army companions and that he would have to face disgrace and prison on charges of desertion even if his operations as a smuggler did not become generally known. At length Howard determined to brace up and face the music.

"I'll shake it off somehow," the aviator declared to himself as the doctors patched up numerous cuts and abrasions on his face and body.

ATTIRED as a Mexican peon, Luz found Snake Rodriguez's dingy room near the old canal in the southern section of El Paso. She gained entrance under pretext of wanting to deliver a message. Luz knocked upon the Snake's room but received no response. She opened the door and found the stool pigeon lying upon a cot. He had taken too much of the morphine given him by the narcotic agents in payment for his services and was deep in a dope slumber.

The Puma Woman jerked the sharp stiletto from her cotton sleeve and prepared to avenge the wrong done her by the informer.

"**S**NAKE, you will never tell another dope sleuth about me," Luz snapped as she began unbuttoning the Snake's shirt in order to locate the exact spot where she wanted to drive the knife. The shirt front was opened and Luz drew a sharp stiletto to drive it into her betrayer's heart when she suddenly dropped the knife

in horror and screamed: "my own father!"

The sign of the cross burned on the Snake's breast many years ago by the fanatic Indian girl was grim evidence that Luz had almost murdered her own father. The dope queen was horrified by the experience and ran from the building into the street gasping for breath.

"Hey, Puma Woman, your disguise is pretty good but I'd know those eyes anywhere, come on, let us be going," called out Burrows, the narcotic inspector, "you hid the dope pretty good that night out on the desert when we were watching for you but we found your rock pile and got the fifty ounces of dope."

"So Monkey squealed, did he?" Luz sneered as the narcotic agent led her away.

The narcotic inspector did not tell that Monkey had turned stool pigeon but Luz realized, although she hated to mighty bad, that another of her trusted gang had been won over by the government. She knew the government inspectors on the border were after the offenders higher up and often willing to supply unfortunate drug addicts narcotics in exchange for valuable information in connection with the masterminds of the drug traffic. At last the Puma Woman was trapped.

"We got your aviator companion too," grinned Burrows.

Luz never said a word but her heart almost stopped beating. She did not know how it happened that Eddie Howard was caught but she could not keep from fearing that he too, had turned informer.

"Fell in an airplane and got knocked out," Burrows continued, "some cow-punchers brought him in and the doctors patched him up. Monkey told us the rest."

"That's different," the Puma Woman laughingly declared.

"Why the comedy?" Burrows questioned.

"Oh, nothing in particular," Luz

replied, "you dope cops are just funny that's all!"

LUZ furnished bond after a brief period in jail and went immediately to the bedside of Eddie Howard. For days she remained beside him and never was a woman more attentive than was Luz to the wants of her injured lover. The aviator soon recovered from his injuries and stood before a federal judge to receive sentence after he had entered a plea of guilty to violation of the internal revenue laws of the United States. Veteran federal agents received the shock of their official careers when the former army captain told the judge that he alone was guilty of the dope smuggling conspiracy by which narcotics were brought from Mexico by airplane.

"I had to have someone in Mexico who knew the ropes so I met this girl. Luz Gonzales, in Juarez and through my influence, she entered the conspiracy with me," Eddie declared to the judge, "I alone am guilty because I framed all the smuggling operations and all that Luz did was carry out my instructions by delivering the dope."

Eddie Howard's version of the drug smuggling conspiracy was taken as the truth by the federal judge. The evidence had brought out the fact that Eddie was an addict and the judge took this circumstance in consideration when he gave Howard two years in the federal penitentiary instead of a much longer term as is frequently done in the cases of peddlers not drug addicts. Luz was acquitted on an instructed verdict ordered by the judge.

"Just about the right time in which to 'shack' that habit," Luz whispered to Howard as he left the court room in custody of a deputy marshal, "I'll be waiting for you here when you 'shack' the habit and the two years!"

Eddie Howard smiled because he understood. And Luz Gonzales waited as she had promised but she kept clean the name that Eddie had cleared for her.

BIG SHOT ^{VS} BONEHEAD

by John Joseph



THE time was two thirty in the morning. A thunder storm was coming on; Stanton Avenue's few pedestrians were scurrying for shelter. Two tellers were on duty in the all night section of the Hull City National Bank and two customers at the windows.

John H. Foster Junior, otherwise "Dinny the Dude" Farley, gangland's under-cover Big Shot, shoved a thick bundle of checks and banknotes through the window, tossed his pass book down beside them and turned to observe the redheaded, thick chested young man at the other window. The stout chap had just finished counting a sheaf of banknotes which he evidently had checked out only a moment before.

"Two hundred even," he said, with a glance at the teller. "It's all right, I reckon, but I'll count her again and make sure."

Dinny the Dude's methods of acquiring the jack called for close observation for money—and other desirable property—must first be definitely located. In times gone by Dinny had been a heist guy, but of late years he had taken no active part in any sort of rough stuff. It was too dangerous, and wholly unnecessary for a man of brains. But even a measly two hundred was not to be passed up—when the job had literally been made to order as this one had.

Out of the tail of his eye Dinny surveyed the stout chap sharply. He took note of the thick callouses on the fellow's big hands, as he clumsily—almost affectionately—counted the money. The gangster harbored nothing better than a profound contempt for "saps" who worked with their hands.

"Bindle stiff!" was his inward comment. "Probably took the bonehead all

summer to grab that lousy two hundred! Nobody home. Top story vacant. Ain't got sense enough to tell his socks from his hat!"

Dinny's lips curled, he grinned at the man's awkwardness and excessive caution.

The teller deftly snapped a rubber band around Dinny's passbook and passed it out with a pleasant "Thank you, Mr. Foster." The gangster restored it to his pocket, lit a cigaret and passed leisurely out to the street. A gust of wind whipped along the street, bringing scattering drops of rain. Turning left, Dinny stepped into the first dark hallway he came to, turned up his coat collar, pulled his hat down over his eyes and produced a heavy automatic from under his left arm.

A moment later the stout chap emerged from the bank, and luckily—or so the gunman imagined at the moment—he also turned left and came on with no slightest suspicion of what lay immediately ahead.

With nothing but one gleaming eye exposed beyond a stone pillar, Dinny glanced swiftly up and down the street. Not a soul in sight. The job wouldn't take a minute. As the victim came opposite, not more than three feet away, Dinny thrust out the gun.

"Heist 'em, feller!" he rasped. "Quick, or I'll drill yuh!"

It seemed, however, that Redhead was game and had no intention of parting with his hard won treasure without a fight. With a speed that took the gunman completely by surprise, he knocked the gun aside and charged with a savage growl of defiance.

AT one time Dinny the Dude had been a professional boxer and still kept himself in fair condition. Otherwise, as he now realized, the battle would have been a short one, for this fellow had the strength of a horse and the sand to back it up to a finish.

Like wild beasts the two battled there in the narrow hallway, mauling

furiously with fist and elbow, heaving and gouging viciously at each other's eyes, fighting desperately for possession of the gun. Again and again Dinny tried to foul the other with his knee, but the stout fellow defended himself skillfully and retaliated by slamming the gunman savagely against the stone wall behind him.

With a vicelike grip on Dinny's gun hand wrist, Redhead brought the heel of his right hand swiftly up against the gunman's chin. His head snapped back against the wall. Momentarily a little dazed, he relaxed his hold on the gun and the other wrenched it free. With a lightning recovery Dinny kicked it out of his hand and it clattered to the floor.

Redhead made the mistake of stooping to pick it up; Dinny's well aimed kick caught him fairly on the jaw. He sprawled flat on his back. Dinny swept the gun up and swung it with all his strength. The gunman imagined that the fight was won. Many times he struck wickedly, but the other caught the blows on an upraised arm and finally won back to his feet.

Once more the battle was on in all its wild fury. Vicious mutterings, blazing imprecations hissed into each other's ears, furious blows, writhings and twistings, grunts of pain, hats off and trampled heedlessly under foot.

In the beginning the Big Shot had anticipated no trouble at all. He'd simply hold the fellow up, drive him into the dark hallway, belabor him into a helpless, insensible wreck, grab his roll and disappear within the minute.

But the nervy stranger, fighting for wife and babies, was putting up a terrific battle. Dinny realized that his own defeat meant a long stretch in stir, possibly something very much worse than that. He felt himself growing weaker, dangerously winded. He was ready to shoot now, as a last desperate resort. Frantically he struggled to bring the gun into play, but the stout fellow pressed him too vigorously, kept too close.

Finally Dinny lost his balance and, locked into a deadly embrace, the two fell side by side on the stairs. Struggling erect together, the stranger slipped and fell face down. The Big Shot's chance had come. He released the gun to Redhead's grip. Then, with a speed born of sheer panic, he whipped a blackjack from a hip pocket and crashed it down on the other's unprotected head. Three times more the gunner swung the sap in savage fury. Blood spattered, ran down to form a crimson pool on the floor. The man went limp and straightened out.

"Jeez!" the gunman gasped breathlessly. "Cripes! But that was sure a narrow squeak! That bird's head must be plated with boiler iron!"

IT was the work of mere moments for the Big Shot to locate the stout chap's roll and transfer it to his own pocket. Then, pausing only long enough to curse his victim fluently while he aimed half a dozen brutal kicks at the helpless fellow's head, he slipped out into the now pouring rain and quickly disappeared into the darkness of a convenient alley. And so ended the first encounter between the Big Shot and the "bonehead."

The stout chap presently began to moan and thresh about on the floor. Finally he sat up and rubbed dazedly at his battered head. He brought the hand away sticky with blood. Stupidly in the dim light he stared at it for a time, then rapped swiftly at his breast pocket.

"It's gone!" he moaned in a despairing half whisper. "Oh, my God! He got it. It's gone—it's gone—it's gone! What in the world will I do now? Molly—and the kids—what can I do? What *can* I do."

Patrolman Barney Donovan, attracted by the victim's muttering, edged into the hallway and helped him to his feet. Wabbling about on unsteady legs, the stout chap faltered an account of what had happened. The officer steadied him into the bank, where the tellers confirmed his story

in regard to the money. Donovan used a bank phone to notify the nearest police station, then turned to the stranger.

"What moight your name be?" he queried briefly.

"Dan McCulloch, sir."

"Where d'ye live? Give an account of yerself."

"I live at Brody. It's a country town eighty miles south of here. But I haven't been there, all summer. You see, I lost my farm last spring, so I've been all over, takin' on anything I could get to do to earn a winter's grub stake. Lately I've been makin' pretty good money workin' north with the harvest season. At that it took me over seven months to clean up that two hundred dollars. And that bloody devil got it all. I'm strapped now—and winter comin' on before a fellow knows it. It's shore hell, Mr. Officer!"

"It is that!" Donovan agreed. "No less. Got a family?"

"Sure. A wife and twin boys five years old."

"How come ye to drag that money out in the middle of the night?"

"I was aimin' to grab that early mawnin' train for home. No more work around here—understand?—and I was gettin' plenty homesick."

"Sure, I see. Can ye describe the robber at all, at all?"

"Not very well, I guess. It was pretty dark in that hall, and I was plenty busy—believe me! The robber was of medium size and plenty husky, and that's about all I can tell you. I'd know his voice, though. There was a funny sort of click in his throat when he told me to stick 'em up. I'll know that voice, if I hear it ten years from now!"

"It's sorry I am," declared Donovan. "I'll do me best, but if it's only by his voice ye'd be afther knowin' this bird, belike I can't do much. I'll be takin' ye to St. Elizabeth's hospital now, to get yer hurts patched up. Ye moight maybe foind the robber yerself, so when ye come out, drop around to the station and we'll talk it over."

Saying which, the officer called a taxi and presently delivered the patient at the hospital and returned to the bank. He found two police cars at the curb and a number of officers inside. No lead was to be picked up here, however, for the bank officials knew Dinny the Dude only as John H. Foster, Jr., a substantial business man who always carried a heavy balance in cash, a valued customer wholly above suspicion.

AT nine o'clock on a morning two weeks later, Dan McCulloch settled dejectedly down on a Maple Park bench and nervously lit his corn-cob pipe. His wounds had healed rapidly and there was little about him to hint at the bloody battle he had waged with the merciless gangster. He was all but flat broke now. Seven months of sleeping on the ground, of killing toil under a burning sun, of dust and sweat and "fire weed itch" that burned like red-hot needles, and nothing to show for it but a few pitiful dimes and nickels.

The despoiled and stranded farmer had read more or less about racketeers, knew that many of them dressed in the height of fashion, rode in imported cars, gambled extensively, spent fortunes on their molls, flaunted their finery in the faces of decent people.

Now that his head was again clear, he recalled tearing a starched shirt front from the robber's body, and that the gunman's clothing had given off the smell of some rare perfume. He began to picture the fellow as one of those strutting dandies who prey upon honest men, live riotously on the proceeds and shoot to kill upon the slightest pretext.

It was maddening, when he thought about his wife and children. He sprang to his feet to pace back and forth beside the bench. From time to time he had sent the wife money enough to keep the family going nicely, but why hadn't he played safe and sent it *all*—as fast as he got it?

Well, he excused himself, he'd planned a lovely surprise for the little wife; some day he'd breeze in on her and display his fat roll, and what a time they'd have planning the spending of it!

New things for the kiddies, a nice dress and winter coat for Molly, a few Christmas presents, an occasional cinema show, fresh meat two or three times a week. Relief jobs would bring in a few dollars now and then, they'd get along fine. As it was, and due largely to his own folly, he'd even have to beat his way home—and face Molly without a dime to his name. It was hell; just plain hell! And only one possible way out of it.

He'd know that gangster's voice; he was sure of that. And God pity the man if ever he found him. He'd disgorge or pay in blood and broken bones. It seemed like a forlorn hope, but there could be no harm in having a try at it, for a few days at least. The policeman had promised to help; he'd best see the man and ask his advice.

With this prudent reflection, Dan McCulloch set out briskly for the nearest police station, thus beginning a quest which, through the sometimes unaccountable whims of Fate, was presently to bring him once more face to face with the gangster and to a finish that left him limp with sheer astonishment.

CHAPTER II

FOLLOWING the McCulloch robbery, the severely battered Dinny the Dude retired with all speed to his safest hideout, a modest cottage in a quiet section far out in the suburbs. Here he lay in solitary hiding for a matter of three weeks, waiting for his wounds to heal and for the police to quiet down. Through a reliable lieutenant he had kept thoroughly posted, knew every move made by the police and Dan McCulloch.

Finally word came that the search had been abandoned; the danger seemed to be over and Dinny was free

to give long overdue attention to a matter of grave importance. He had spent most of the day storing up sleep against the serious night work immediately ahead, and four o'clock in the afternoon found him splashing about in his bath.

Presently he stepped from the tub, toweled himself vigorously, skipped gayly into his bedroom. Pausing before the dresser, he swelled out his chest, flexed his muscles, admired the reflection of his naked torso in the mirror.

"Boy!" he smiled at himself. "You're there with the goods, all-right-all-right-all-right, and no kid-din'."

The Big Shot was feeling extra fine this autumn afternoon. And why not? Wasn't he about to settle a grudge that had been burning him up for nearly two years, a grudge that nothing short of murder would satisfy? His plans were all laid, he smiled as he visualized the bloody details of the job. Turning suddenly about, he dressed with practiced speed and skill; the full equipment including a snub nosed .38 automatic buckled snugly into his left armpit.

Years back Dinny's jail experience had culminated in a three year stretch which had left him a much wiser baby. From that time on, the rough stuff had been turned over to guys with more experience and less brains, and for over six years now the dicks never had laid a hand on Dinny himself. He was known to be exceedingly proud and cocky about it.

No proxy stuff would satisfy on *this* occasion, however. A former pal had "made a monkey" of Dinny, and the too long deferred settlement must take place strictly in private. It would be the Big Shot's first personally executed murder for a matter of six years.

One room of the cottage the prudent gangster had fixed up both light and sound proof. He was in that room now. A sub-machine gun, two .44 Colt revolvers, a police riot gun, lay scat-

tered about convenient to his hand. In one corner a heavy block of wood rested on a stout, waist high shelf.

Tacking a paper rifle target on one side of the block, the gangster retired to a far corner of the room. Then, with a speed that defies description, he whipped the gun from its holster and emptied the clip. The shots came too fast to be counted with certainty. It was a daily stunt, with occasional snappy practice with the machine gun.

DINNY inspected the target briefly, smiled his satisfaction, slipped a fresh clip into the weapon and restored it to the holster. Then, lighting a cigaret, he settled into a big rocker to review his plans and his reasons for deliberately murdering an old pal.

The plans, after due reflection, appeared to be absolutely fool proof. And the murder seemed amply justified, for a matter of two years back one Shorty McFee had stolen Dinny's moll, a cabaret person whose principal assets were soulful brown eyes and legs that simply defied all competition. And two year's brooding about the matter had merely served to sharpen the Big Shot's fury.

It didn't matter that Dinny himself had stolen the girl from another guy; it didn't matter that within a month Gladys Tremaine (christened Ann Hogan) had ditched Shorty in his turn; it didn't matter that Shorty had since met up with a real girl and married her and had been working steadily for a year and half. Nothing mattered except the one grinding fact that Shorty had had the crust to actually steal the lady from *him*, Dinny the Dude, Farley, acknowledged king pin of Hull City's prospering underworld.

Up to this time Dinny had been compelled to nurse his wrath, for a strictly private murder right at home, where the dicks all knew about his feud with Shorty, would have been nothing short of sheer folly. But now Shorty had migrated two hundred miles west to take on a job in his

brother-in-law's garage at Brookfield, and the murder ought to be a cinch—the way Dinny had it doped out.

The Big Shot smiled, caressed his little black mustache, licked his thick lips in pleasant anticipation. There were other things to smile about, too. He rose abruptly to stand once more before the mirror. Handsome he was, in a hard eyed, sneering, bull necked sort of way. Topping his sleek black head with a grey fedora hat, he cocked it jauntily, strutted back and forth in front of the glass.

Here he was, Dinny the Dude, not yet thirty five, under cover owner of the Silver Plate cabaret and gambling resort—swankiest place in town—with a finger in every important pie there was to cut.

The police? The hell with the dicks! Saps, *they* were. Nothing less. Hadn't he been snapping his fingers at 'em for six years? Hell! All a smart guy had to do was to use his head, and he could thumb his nose at the whole damn bunch of jug headed dummies. Hadn't he proved it a hundred times. And with a contemptuous shrug Dinny consigned the lot of them to well deserved oblivion.

With his usual caution Dinny had already spent three days—nights rather—lamping Shorty's place of employment in Brookfield. An out-of-the-way place it was, a mere suburban filling station, with two open front stalls in the rear. Shorty washed cars and did minor repair jobs when trade was slack. It was called the Home Run Garage; Shorty had the night trick. After midnight there was no business at all. Conditions for a murder job couldn't be better; everything was jake; no chance for a slip. Or so the Big Shot figured.

Dinny's plan allowed four hours for the trip to Brookfield, two minutes for the rough stuff, and four hours for the drive back home. It would be almost too easy to be interesting! He'd make himself conspicuous before he left and immediately after he got back. He'd never be missed; his alibi

would be hole proof. He'd use the little flivver, of course; it was speedy enough, and the glistening big sixteen would attract altogether too much attention for a job like this.

Dinny glanced at his diamond studded wrist watch. He planned to reach Brookfield a little before midnight. It was now six thirty five and time to set the first prop under his alibi. Fifteen minutes later he strutted into the Silver Plate cabaret, had a couple of drinks at the bar with a party of friends, ate a modest meal with an old crony, mingled with the patrons for a time and disappeared.

AT twelve ten next morning he drove lesisurely past the Home Run garage. A stumpy little man was tinkering with a car in one of the stalls back of the pumps. Otherwise the street was dead; not a person or a car in sight. Dinny wheeled around a block; stopped beside the pumps and left the engine running. A .44 Colt lay on the cushion beside his right leg. Cranking the left hand window part way down, he sounded the horn just once and very lightly.

Shorty McFee, pretty well besmeared with grease, came swiftly out with a heavy wrench in his right hand. As he came near he noted the gun leveled through the half open window. He started hastily back a step.

"Hold it, brother!" Dinny called out viciously. "Now step right up here, son; I've got words to whisper in your ear. Careful, now! Or I'll sure as hell bore yuh!"

Shorty recognized his enemy; knew exactly what he had come for. Quite well enough he knew that his life hung on a mere cobweb; but he knew Dinny, knew that running meant a blast of hot lead from one of the deadliest shots in the world. So he stepped up close with intent to spar for time in the flimsy hope that someone might happen along in time to save the situation—and a life with it.

"You!" he gasped. It was all he could think of to say.

"Yes, me!" rejoined the Big Shot savagely. "Yuh ought t' know me; yuh stole my girl, yuh lousy bum! And yuh're gonta pay, feller, right now. Yuh laughed about it, yuh poor sap; and nobody laughs at Dinny Farley and gets away with it. I'm wantin' yuh to get things straight in yer sappy head, 'fore I bumps yuh off—get me? I'm wantin' yuh t' know who's here and what he come for, then yuh get it! Stand still, now; I've got a lot t' say t' yuh."

At that he pulled the trigger. The gun muzzle was no more than a foot from the little man's heart. He fell forward; the wrench crashed through that portion of the window glass still above the frame. Broken glass clattered down on the car floor. The gangster grinned as the body slithered horribly off the running board. The Big Shot spat viciously at his victim and profanely consigned his soul to hell.

Leaping out, Dinny dragged the body into one of the stalls and out of sight, gave it a number of furious kicks, spat upon it and dashed back to the car. He cursed at the broken glass as he let in the clutch. A scanty ten minutes and he was back on the highway. A section of broken glass had slipped down inside the door frame, leaving a corner projecting above it. It rattled incessantly.

From time to time the gangster swore at it, but finally he smiled. What did a broken window amount to, anyhow? Nothing, of course. He'd croaked Shorty, the job had been a neat one, he laughed aloud. But that infernal glass never stopped rattling. It got on his nerves.

His alibi called for speed, but maybe he could work it loose without stopping? He tried the crank; the window came up a scant inch—and stuck. Growling impatiently, he clutched the glass and tugged vigorously with his left hand, while he kept his eye on the roadway. Suddenly the glass gave way; his hand whipped to the top. Then:

"Hell's bells! Jeez! I've got it now!"

He'd overlooked a sharp pointed bit of glass in the frame top; his hand had struck it with speed and force. Cursing insanely, he slowed down to inspect the wound. It was bleeding horribly. It hurt like the devil. Thoughtlessly he gave the hand a flip—and spattered blood all over the windshield. Bad. Very bad! No way to get it off without plenty of water, and time was precious. Cripes! What luck!

PANICKY now, he drove faster. Presently he realized that his left leg was sappy with blood. Something had to be done about it, and soon. At the next crossroad he turned south and presently stopped to examine the wound in front of a headlight. No comfort there; the blood was literally streaming. Trembling now like a scared pup, he gave the hand another flirt—and smeared the headlight with crimson.

"Cripes!" he blazed. "I'll have the whole car messed up with blood like a damn slaughter house. I must be losin' my nerve."

What th' 'ell to do now? Blood was everywhere; on the floor and running board; on the headlight and windshield; his clothes were literally plastered with it. And all too soon now he'd have to fill the gas tank! It simply wouldn't do to barge into a filling station, not with blood all over everything—and that *thing* lying in the stall back there at the Home Run garage. The body *might* be discovered at any time, and that damn radio

Jeez! But he was sure in a jam now! And still he didn't as yet fully realize his peril. That could come only by degrees. Anyhow that blood must be checked—somehow. Finally he tore off part of his shirt and with shaking hands bound it up as best he could. Then, fishing a whisk broom from a door pocket, he swept the broken glass off the floor. What next! He'd have to think that over with care.

Seating himself on a running board, he lit a cigaret and attacked his problem. The longer he pondered, the worse his predicament seemed. Never had he dreamed that a smart guy—like the Big Shot Farley—could get into such a heluva scrape. Never once did his monumental conceit permit him to see that his past success had been largely due to *good* luck, or that his accident had been brought about by sheer carelessness. The one spelled brains, the other hard luck.

There had been nothing whatever wrong with his plans, he reflected, impatiently. His alibi had been studied for days; every detail of the entire job had been planned with the utmost care, even to the places where he'd take on gas and oil.

He'd slipped on only one point: he had planned originally to gas up at the Home Run garage. He'd first croak Shorty, then fill the tank himself, thus side-stepping the risk of having some nose station flunky give him the once-over too near to the scene of the crime.

But in the excitement it had slipped his mind. And now it seemed there was nothing for it but to chance the highway, even if it meant another killing or two. "Hellish luck! That's all!" he raged, and exasperated to the point of near frenzy he lapsed completely into gangland lingo and ground out a string of hair raising profanity.

Once more he glanced at the injured hand, and found the blood still streaming. He felt a little dizzy. Perhaps he was slowly bleeding to death? And now he was afraid. Terribly afraid! The strain was too much, his nerve broke for a moment and the big bad wolf began to sniffle like a flogged schoolboy. Tears of fright and rage and self pity trickled down the chalky pallor of his cheeks.

Cursing himself for a blankety-blank sissy, he sprang to his feet, snatched a quart bottle from the door pocket, drank deeply and sat down again with the bottle resting on his knee.

SUDDENLY there flashed into his mind a vivid picture of the red-headed chap as he stood counting his money at the bank window on the night of the robbery. Strange, he reflected, that he should keep thinking of this fellow so much.

He'd visualized that bank scene at least a dozen times on his way to Brookfield. The man had stood for a split second between himself and Shorty, just before he pulled the trigger; he had seen him again as he dragged the body into the stall; and now it almost seemed as if the fellow stood before him in the flesh. Was it an omen—of evil? The gunman brushed a hand nervously across his eyes.

His current moll believed in omens and ghosts and such creepy things; was always going to seances, always consulting ouiji boards and the cards, and talking about telepathy and astrology and the zodiac—whatever th' 'ell they were! Could it be possible that there was something in it? Was some mysterious force driving him on to another meeting with the stout chap.

No! Such stuff was the bunk. He'd simply got into the habit of thinking about that guy, during his recent period of retirement, and that was all about it. Still there persisted a doubt, and for some strange reason he dreaded another meeting with the fighting stranger. Again he cursed himself for a fool, took another long pull at the bottle and resumed his meditations.

Two things were certain: he'd have to get gas—somewhere—and he must keep off that highway, if possible. There'd be patrolmen there, and saps though they were, you had to give 'em credit with being eternally suspicious. And with blood all over everything he couldn't stand up under the simplest once-over inspection.

The Big Shot hesitated, pondering deeply. He might drive for hours over hick-country roads and never find a filling station. He'd be a sap to try it! It was the highway or nothing. It

couldn't be very far to a filling station on the main road. If the law stopped him, it would be just too bad for the law! That's all. He'd battle it out, Clyde Barrow fashion, and never give the police a chance. He couldn't make the situation much worse, anyhow.

CHAPTER III

THE Big Shot took another fearful drink, flicked a dust robe from the Tommy gun on the rear seat, laid both gun and forty four on the front cushion, covered them with the dust robe, wheeled back to the highway and turned east.

There was very little traffic at this hour of the night, but presently he met two cars. Both speeded by without paying him the least attention. A couple of miles farther along, the lights of a third car showed up, coming on fast. The glare half blinded the Big Shot, but he made out the forms of two men on the front seat.

As the car came near, a powerful hand light threw a dazzling beam squarely into his face. He heard the screeching of brakes behind him, and knew that the other car was being checked in a hurry. He couldn't be sure that the two men were officers, for the light had splashed into his eyes at exactly the wrong moment.

The light flashing and sudden stop were significant enough, at that. His own car was a speedy little trick, but with his limited gas supply, a long chase was something he dare not risk. He'd have to fight, right here and now, and he'd just open the ball himself. The whiskey was scorching his brain, he rather enjoyed the prospect of more blood letting, particularly if it happened to be police blood.

Applying the brakes with vicious force, he stopped the flivver, whipped the Tommy gun from the seat, leaped out and threw himself flat on his belly in the gutter, with only his head and shoulders exposed above the bank. The moon, well past the meridian, lighted up the other car, perhaps fifty yards

away and just now backing up to make the turn. The Big Shot leveled the gun; a stream of fire belched from its muzzle; the ugly clatter of machine gun fire shattered the peaceful stillness of the night.

The police car lights blinked out; the rig settled slowly back into the ditch. Dinny stopped firing to take stock of the situation. A spurt of orange fire stabbed wickedly from the other car. A string of bullets spat through the flivver's rear window, punctured the windshield high up, raked the top. The Big Shot could hear the vicious whine of slugs as they glanced from heavy iron parts and went whistling into the distance.

The gangster grinned. The police gunner had the car range all right, but was aiming too high, and plainly enough he had not as yet located Dinny's position. Came a stinging blast of sand in his face, and the Big Shot's grin vanished. The gunner had found him out, but was now shooting a trifle too low.

Dinny fired another short blast. A man pitched headlong from the police car's rear door. The firing ceased. For a few moments the Big Shot lay watching and listening. There was no sign of life around the other car.

"Got 'em both—sure as hell!" the gangster exulted. "But the jolly bulls might be stallin', so I'll just give 'em another touch of high-life and make sure," and he turned loose another careful blast. "That ought to settle their hash for keeps!" he grinned, struggling to his feet. "And now we'll see how much gas the lousy—are carryin'. Risky, but it's gotta be done."

At that he reloaded the gun, laid it back on the seat and fell to looking the car over. The slugs had all gone too high; there was no serious damage. He looked at the injured hand. Still bleeding, but not quite so badly. Once more he sampled the bottle, then climbed into the flivver and backed up to the other car.

AUTOMATIC in hand, he stepped out and cautiously approached the police rig. A grotesque figure lay sprawling horribly in a pool of blood on the pavement. The Big Shot paused only long enough to aim a few furious kicks at the body, then swung the front door open. A hideous stream of blood, so far dammed back by the door, ran down on the running board.

The driver's body lay doubled up under the steering wheel. The Big Shot dragged it roughly out and up close to the other one. Then, with the bestial savagery of the typical gang leader, he fired three shots into the nearest victim's head, emptied the clip into the other, kicked them both for a time, spat in their faces, slipped another clip into the weapon, dropped it into a coat pocket.

With a section of hose from the flivver and a bucket from the police rig, he made haste to transfer the gas to his own car, tossed the implements in behind the seat, delivered himself of another blast of sizzling profanity.

"Hell of a note!" he finished. "Only a lousy three gallons the dirty skunks had on 'em. But every little bit helps, and I can do close to a hundred miles on what I've got now. With a little luck I'll beat the game yet. Cripes! If I only knew just where I'm at, I'd stand a ten to one better chance. But I don't, and no use—"

A light flashed into his face. Another car was coming from the east. It was fairly burning the road. The Big Shot snatched up the Tommy gun. The newcomer never slacked speed, and Dinny presently made out that only one man occupied the car. Probably the driver suspected a hold-up, for he headed at top speed straight for the narrow lane between the two standing cars and the ditch at his left.

The gangster knew that the stranger could not possibly pass the police rig without seeing the two butchered officers lying beside it. The fellow would undoubtedly spread the alarm

at the first opportunity, and that was excuse enough for putting him out of the way without ceremony.

Whipping the Tommy gun up, he let the stranger have it at a distance of ten yards. The car wobbled a little as it whisked past the flivver, but held the road for a dozen yards, then swerved to the right and drove straight into the police car at fifty miles an hour. Came a terrific grinding crash of steel on steel. Then complete silence. The gangster grinned as a roaring mass of blue flames suddenly enveloped the wreck.

"Jeez!" he chortled. "He smashed square over them two skunk's bodies. I didn't see the cuss fall off the seat, but I hit him all-right-all-right, and if he lives through *that* mess I'll put in with yuh. Let 'em all go to hell in a bunch. It's oke with *me*."

WITH this pleasant reflection the Big Shot replaced the Tommy gun on the seat, took another big drink, slipped under the wheel and tramped the accelerator down to the boards. Speed was the main thing now; that and getting clear of the highway at the earliest possible moment. The butchery couldn't escape discovery for long, the radio would do the rest.

Within the mile he came to another road leading south. Turning into this, he wheeled past three roads leading east and turned into the fourth. This road proved disgustingly rocky and rough and he was forced to slow down to half speed. Presently he observed a car parked not far from the roadside. But before he came abreast a huge dog came bounding from the house, baying like the end of the world. He'd steal no gas here, for he could not afford to risk a battle with a savage dog backed up by an angry farmer and a shotgun. He'd probably have to croak them both, and the trail would be plenty hot enough without that. And besides that, the farmer might sneak up and riddle him with buckshot from behind the hedge.

For the better part of two hours he trailed slowly along, sampling the bottle from time to time and keeping a sharp lookout for roadside filling stations and parked cars. But no station showed up, and for every parked car there was at least one bellowing dog, and sometimes three or four.

Sometimes he was tempted to take a chance, but he shrank from the idea of having the other fellow start the battle from a place of concealment. Such was not the Big Shot's notion about such matters. If there was to be any gun play, he'd start it himself.

Once more he glanced at the gas gauge. Only a scant half gallon left. He stopped to consider his next play. It cheered him a little to note that the injured hand had stopped bleeding. Plan after plan presented itself, but no one of them would stand up under examination. Completely discouraged, he was taking another long pull at the bottle when a pair of headlights flashed into view some distance ahead.

At last his chance had come! Whirling the flivver square across the road, he leaped out. The other car, almost upon him now, shrieked to a sudden stop. Dinny could see that the passengers were a youth and a young girl. Anticipating no trouble with such youngsters, Dinny flashed the automatic from his pocket and started swiftly around the stranger's left front wheel.

The car door swung open a crack, a shot rang out, the Big Shot felt a sharp pain in his neck, like the sting of a bee. With a mumbled oath he swung the gun up and fired. The youth slumped limply down on the wheel. The girl, screaming like some stricken wild animal, flung herself upon her escort's inert body.

THE Big Shot swung the door open and fired again. The girl's body slithered horribly down in front of the seat. The young man still grasped his gun in his left hand. Sight of the weapon infuriated the gangster. The youth's bullet had missed a vital spot

by less than two inches! That fact and the whiskey fumes seething in his brain, aroused all the blood lust of the human tiger at his worst.

Hissing savagely between set teeth, the Big Shot emptied the gun impartially into the two young bodies crumpled hideously there on the floor. Then, still grumbling to himself, he reloaded the gun, lit a cigaret and inspected the gas gauge. It showed only a trifle over a gallon. Again he cursed his luck vigorously, then made haste to secure what little gas there was and wheeled on east.

For perhaps ten miles he kept going as fast as he dared on such a road, but he found no station and met no cars, and his gas was dangerously low again. Once more he stopped to ponder the situation. He was still in a sweating quandary when there came the long drawn out wail of a locomotive, whistling for some town.

The Big Shot brightened at the sound, for that station could hardly be more than five or six miles away. Again that picture of the stout chap flashed into his mind. He wondered if the fellow was in league with the devil himself, heading him off at every turn and driving him back to that infernal highway!

Still, he reflected, he wouldn't have to risk it more than a couple of miles, and he seemed to have gas enough to get to the town. He'd fill up there and hit the dirt roads again, and woe betide the man who got in his way! Within the quarter hour he reached the paved road and once more turned east. He made sure that his weapons were properly covered, and a mile or so farther along he topped a hill from which he could see the lights of a sizable town in the valley below.

Two parallel rows of lights at the foot of the hill indicated a bridge, and now at last the Big Shot knew exactly where he was. There was a filling station at the far end of the bridge; he remembered taking gas there on his way to Brookfield. This cheered him immensely, for he could now see an

almost fool proof way out of the jam.

To the south and east lay a wilderness of brush and hills and rocks and caves. "Pegleg" Whittlesey, a one time bandit who had lost a leg in battle with police, had long since retired to these wilds, ostensibly to eke out a scanty living by trapping and hunting.

The Big Shot had several times hidden out there, and knew the road well enough. It couldn't be more than twenty miles to the hideout, and Pegleg would gladly take care of him—for a handsome consideration—until the storm blew over. And one thing was certain; he'd have that gas *this* time, if he had to do murder to get it. One more murder—or a dozen—it didn't much matter now!

Then, with the goal in sight, the engine began to stutter. The Big Shot swore feelingly and closed the throttle. The devil and the stout chap were still on the job, it seemed; the tank was all but dry. The best he could do now was to coast as far as he could, then park the car—out of sight if possible—and carry the gas from the station.

So he idled down the hill, and near the bottom he caught sight of a small campfire perhaps fifty yards from the road. Five or six men were lounging about on their bed rolls, comfortably smoking,

"A hobo jungle camp," the gangster reflected contemptuously. "A bunch o' bindle stiffs off that freight I met back there."

HE felt that his luck was changing. He could use these birds, all-right-all-right; no trouble at all to pull wool over the eyes of such boneheaded workin' apes as these fellows. So he coasted off the grade and with the last faltering gasps of the engine brought the flivver up beside a huge log which lay a little distance beyond the fire.

The spot was ideal for his purpose, for a brushy thicket completely concealed the flivver from anyone on the highway side, and these yaps never would take the trouble to look the car over. And if they did . . .

Stepping from the rig, Dinny caught the smell of "mulligan" stew, and a second later his glance fell upon a husky, bareheaded chap messing over a five gallon can which hung over the fire. An amazing shock of brick red hair stood rebelliously out in all directions from his massive head.

With a little start of surprise, the gunman recognized the stout chap he had robbed in Hull City; the spooky shape that had haunted his imagination all through the night. A wave of superstitious dread checked his pace for a moment; a prickling sensation attacked his scalp. A moment's thought, however, banished the fear that this sappy yokel ever would identify *him*. No more sense than a cock-eyed rabbit, he reflected, as he stepped up near the fire.

"Hello, boys!" he sang out cheerily. "How's every little thing? Nifty sort of camp you've got here."

Dan McCulloch turned from his task: "Hello, feller; how are ye?" he grunted, with ox like gravity. "Stick around a while, and we'll load you up with mulligan. How'd you hurt yore hand? Must of bled a heap—from the looks of it."

"Sure did!" replied the Big Shot glibly. "I get her smashed in the car door, see? I pick up a punky kid down the road a ways, see? I give him a twenty mile lift—see?—and stop to let him out. A big truck comes wabblin' up, see? I'm plenty leery—see?—for why it looks to me like the driver's pickled. I'm lampin' this truck—see?—and feelin' around the door, aimin' to pull it shut.

"And right now the kid slams it like hell—see?—and damn near tears my mitt off. And Jeez, brother! How she did bleed! I'm out o' gas, too. I get careless thinkin' about the bum mitt—see?—and forget to fill up. Thought I might hire one o' you boys to bring me a little gas from the town over there. How about it? Pay you plenty—see? Feel kinda weak—see?"

"Sure thing!" replied Redhead sympathetically. "How much you want?"

"Better bring five gallons, I guess. That'll take me home, all-right-all-right," and the Big Shot produced a well stuffed billfold. "Keep the change," he added, as he passed a ten spot note to the other. "Yuh'll find out that John H. Foster ain't no piker, see?"

CHAPTER IV

MCCULLOCH headed swiftly for the road. The Big Shot's glance followed him. "Damn jug headed mule!" he mused. "Never tumbled to a thing. You couldn't pound a idea into that guy's head with an ax!"

The gunman settled down on McCulloch's bed roll, dug up a pack of cigarets, tossed them around to the "saps." For a time he smoked complacently enough. Presently he noted that daylight was coming on. Redhead seemed a hell of a long time gone. The gangster wondered what could be keeping the man.

The Big Shot's nerves soon turned jumpy, for he knew that too much delay spelled certain disaster. He had to stifle an impulse to jump up and run circles around the camp. It wouldn't do to betray his condition, however; not even to a job lot of apes like this. So he hung onto himself and managed to stick it out until McCulloch finally came back.

"Had to get ease goods," Redhead growled as he set the can down beside the car. "It's a wonder they wouldn't put *handles* on these blasted cans, instead of them wire things. Pour it out for him, will you, Slim? My fingers are just about cut plumb off!"

A tall young fellow heaved to his feet and stepped over to the can. Dinny followed to supervise the job.

"Got a funnel, bo?" the chap called Slim inquired briefly.

"Sure. Under the front cushion," replied Dinny—very imprudently as events were soon to prove.

"I'll get it mister," Redhead offered pleasantly.

The Big Shot paid him no attention. He had long since given up the idea

of concealing the car's condition, and what Redhead might notice was no longer of any importance whatever. Or so the gangster imagined.

McCulloch secured the funnel, passed it on to Slim and turned unconcernedly back to the mulligan. The filling was soon finished and Slim turned away. The Big Shot turned to the front door—and suddenly thought about the guns.

A hasty glance under the dust robe showed them undisturbed. Cursing himself for a careless fool, the gangster slipped under the wheel. McCulloch edged over to the big log, which lay only a few feet from the flivver's front wheel.

"So long, fellers, and good luck!" the Big Shot called out, then reached for the switch key, which he had left in the lock. It wasn't in place. Hurriedly he went through his pockets. No key. He realized that he had left the duplicate in another waistcoat pocket. A bit panicky now, he frisked his pockets with some care, inspected the floor and running board, glanced under the car.

"Hell's bells!" he husked. "What in the name of rotten luck become of that infernal key?"

Dazedly he searched himself again and again. For a full quarter hour he kept it up, mumbling crazily as he crawled about on hands and knees, pawed like a dog in the dust, searched the door pockets.

"Jeez!" he grated under his breath. "I'm sure as hell sunk now!"

HE sat down on a running board, lit a cigaret to steady his nerves. Sweat of helpless fear streamed down his sinister face. He swabbed at it with a bloodsoaked handkerchief, unconsciously smearing dust and sweat and blood from brow to chin. A hideous spectacle he was now, though wholly unaware of it.

Recovering, presently, a measure of poise, he considered his desperate plight. A police car might show up at any moment, and that inevitably

meant a battle to the death, then and there—or a craven surrender which promised nothing better than the Hot Chair. Only one chance remained; he'd have to take to the woods on foot, and time was precious. The prospect appalled him; he hesitated.

Suddenly he glanced suspiciously at the dusty "yaps." No comfort there. Wooden faces; no more expression than a stupid old cow.

"No," he whispered hoarsely, "they never got that key. They ain't got sense enough to light a match—without a recipe—and they'd have to get somebody to read *that* to 'em. I've got to—"

A car whipped swiftly off the highway. State police, the Big Shot realized, as it came to a stop directly in front of the flivver. The jig was up, and Dinny knew it. He'd have to battle it out on the spot—or burn! Two officers, one in a lieutenant's uniform, stepped briskly out on the far side of the police car.

Passing the Tommy gun up as being too clumsy for present purposes, the gangster stepped back and waited for the officers to come clear of both cars. A few seconds later, service revolvers in hand, both stepped into plain view. McCulloch whirled from the log with a stout club in his hand, and stepped up behind Dinny. The gunman threw up his hands and called out that he was surrendering.

Seeing the Big Shot in the pacific mood and attitude, the lieutenant carelessly slacked pace and glanced into the flivver. His companion's weapon was not pointed at anything in particular, but he nevertheless kept a watchful eye on the blood besmeared gunman.

The lieutenant's glance lasted only a split second, but it was long enough for Dinny the Dude. With a movement too swift for the eye to follow, he whipped the automatic out and fired with the gun still moving on the arc of the draw. The lieutenant's partner collapsed on the ground.

Then, in another fraction of a sec-

ond, four things happened. Redhead's stick cracked down on Dinny's gun hand wrist; the weapon went off harmlessly and fell to the ground; the lieutenant fired; Big Shot Farley plunged face down on the grass.

The lieutenant picked up Dinny's gun, examined it briefly, found it ready for business and passed it to McCulloch. "Watch him—careful!" he snapped. "If he makes a fuzzy move, drill him!" Turning then, he dropped to his knees beside his stricken partner. The others gathered close around, staring silently. A brief examination told all there was to tell.

"The good God!" the officer husked, rising unsteadily, his hands all sticky and crimson. "Jimmy, my old pal—shot through the heart!" Then, after a grave pause: "He was green—boys—his third day in harness—or this never would have happened. It was my own fault—my own fault. My one glance into that car—My God! The folly of it!—cost poor Jimmy his life. But this fellow was incredibly fast with a gun, or one of us would have got him. But he'll pay! He'll pay!"

The Big Shot began to roll about and moan. The officer turned him over, slipped a bed roll under his head and shoulders, examined the wound. With a gasping groan, Dinny opened his eyes.

"Shut up, you!" the lieutenant blazed. "You're not going to die; you're not even bleeding much. The slug struck 'way too high. You're just shocked—more than anything else. You'll be up and around in a week, dreaming about that nice warm seat over there at the big stone corral! Somebody scored you in the neck, too. How'd that happen?"

THE Big Shot, reviving swiftly now, felt of the injury and glared malignantly: "That's for me to know and you to find out," he growled.

"You've been playing in rare luck all night, brother!" declared the officer. "Otherwise you'd have been stretched out on a cold slab long be-

fore this. And listen, fellow; the charge against you would have been only *attempted* murder, if you hadn't gone hog wild and run amuck all night and butchered half a dozen people. But now you'll sure as hell burn. Get me? Burn!"

"What d'yuh mean — *attempted* murder?" the Big Shot snarled.

"I mean that you didn't kill Shorty McFee. The slug struck his watch and glanced off. It knocked him cold for a while, but he soon came out of it and gave the alarm. We got your name and a complete description of you and your car, hours ago, by radio. And if you'd stayed off the highway, we might have had a deuce of time landing you."

"Jeez!" the gangster groaned, with a blast of profanity. "I wouldn't mind burnin'—not so much—but I let that bum get away. That's what burns me up inside. And now *I'll* be the one that gets croaked, and that dirty skunk will live to laugh about it. Cripes! What luck!"

The lieutenant grinned as he set about searching the prisoner. A breast pocket yielded a bulky red leather billfold. The officer glanced at the contents.

"Holy Smoke!" he rapped. "Thousand dollar bills, what? All fixed up for bad weather, eh, Dinny? But don't kid yourself, brother. A hundred times that much wouldn't save your murdering skin, *this* time!" Saying which, he carefully sealed the billfold with tape and pinned it into an inside vest pocket. The prisoner glared but held his peace.

The officer now searched Dinny for other weapons. Finding none, he turned to McCulloch: "And by the way," he smiled, "how did you get wise to this bird in the first place? You didn't explain that, when you telephoned in to headquarters. Blood on the car, I suppose?"

"Not altogether," Redhead grinned easily. "You see, this guy robbed me of two hundred in Hull City a while back. It was done in the dark, so I didn't know him by sight, but I spot-

ted him the instant he opened his trap when he hit our camp here. Knew his voice, understand? I knew he couldn't get anywhere without gas, so I took my time getting it, and just kept stallin' him off, aimin' to hold him—one way or another—till you got here.

"I did suspicion something plenty wrong—right off the reel—on account of this smart guy drivin' in here out of gas, with a window busted and a car shot up and his hand cut and blood all over him and the car too. It was plain enough from the start he didn't think any of us had sense enough to pour water out of a boot, so I reckon he figured we'd never notice anything wrong. A smart guy like that ought to be easy to fool. I says to myself. And he shore was!"

"But what cinched the thing was this: He said he picked up a kid and give him a lift, and after a while he stopped to let him out. The kid left the door open, he says. There was a big truck comin' on fast, and it's wabblin' around like maybe the driver's drunk. So he was watchin' that crazy truck and feelin' around with one hand, aimin' to shut the door. Lord what a liar! I says to myself.

"Then the kid slammed the door shut, he says, and darn near tore his hand off. It looked fishy to *me*. You see, I couldn't understand, if he was setting at the wheel like he said—Well then, how the hell *did* he get that *left* hand caught in the door?"

"Not so bad, young man, not so bad!" the lieutenant smiled. "And now we'd better be moving. I'll need some of you fellows to—"

A second police car wheeled off the road. "Fine!" the officer cheered. "Now we can all go together."

THE newcomers stopped behind Dinny's flivver and stepped out. The lieutenant stepped forward to greet them, and after a snappy consultation the bed rolls were broken out and packed into the new arrivals' rear seat and the murdered officer's

body carefully laid out upon them.

The prisoner, lively enough now in his mind but still shaky on his legs, was elbowed to the lieutenant's car and placed upright on the front seat. The officer now searched the flivver and presently came back with Dinny's Tommy gun and forty four. These he passed to two of the workers, with orders to pile into the back seat and never take their eyes off the prisoner.

The lieutenant produced a pair of handcuffs: "Just in case" he grinned as he snapped the shackles around the Big Shot's wrists. The gangster complained bitterly, but the officer calmly ironed his ankles in the same manner. "Lovely!" he taunted, straightening up. "You'll sure stand hitched for a while, tough guy!"

McCulloch was now directed to drive the flivver, with two of the workers in the rear seat and one in front. The men climbed in; McCulloch ran over to douse the fire. The lieutenant, standing beside the flivver, glanced at the switch as Redhead came back.

"Where's your key, Dinny?" he demanded shortly, with a glance at the scowling gunman.

"How th' 'ell should I know?" rejoined the Big Shot impatiently. "That infernal key was what sunk me! If I could of found it I'd of been twenty miles from here right now, and hid out in a place where no damn bull ever *would* of found me! You can go bettin' on that."

Redhead grinned and produced the key from under his hatband. "I pinched it," he explained, "when I got back with that gas. The smart guy there," he added, laughing and pointing at Dinny, "he shore cussed a heap when he couldn't find it. I was afraid he might pull the gat and make trouble, but he never suspicioned a thing! Too busy thinkin' about how smart he was, I reckon."

The Big Shot tugged fiercely at his handcuffs: "Jeez!" he raged. "If I only had a gun, and one hand loose for a second! So that's the how about

that key, eh? If it hadn't of been for you—You lousy sneak!—I'd of got clean away."

Strangely enough the gangster's rage drove straight at McCulloch. It seemed that the idea of being out-smarted and brought to justice by an utterly despised "working stiff," drove him half crazy with humiliation and helpless anger. He cursed the man, spat at him, worked himself into a perfect fury. At last he fell silent from sheer lack of breath to proceed. And still the baffled gunman did not as yet know the worst.

McCulloch grinned prodigiously: "So you think you'd of got clean away, do you, smart guy?" he queried sarcastically. "Wait a minute!" He ran to the big log, dragged a sawed off shotgun from under it and came back.

"The Hull City police loaned me that," he explained, holding the gun up for Dinny to see. "I could of ripped the hide clean off'm you, smart guy, any time the last two hours. But I was pinin' to get you *alive*, understand? You don't have to be Solomon's brother to get what that means, I reckon? It cost a good man's life—It burns me up to think about it—but if I did wrong, it can't be helped now.

"I was lookin' for you quite a spell, over there in Hull City. I'd about give it up—for the time being—and was starting for home. But I brought the gun along on the off chance that I *might* happen to meet up with you somewhere, understand?"

"I knew yore voice the second you started talkin' here this mawnin'. I was standin' right close to this gun when you was gettin' ready to light out a while ago. It's got twelve lovely buckshot in each barrel, this gun has. If you'd found another key you'd have to drive right past me—understand?—and I'd of filled you so full of slug holes that yore murderin' hide wouldn't hold croquet balls!"

THE gangster stared in dazed amazement at McCulloch. It was positively incredible, but it seemed

That this despised yokel hadn't overlooked a single bet from the start to finish.

"Lovely!" exclaimed the lieutenant. "Perfectly lovely! And listen, young man; there's a standing reward of a thousand dollars for the capture—dead or alive—of any man who murders a highway policeman while on duty. You've earned it, my boy, and I propose to see that you get it."

McCulloch scratched thoughtfully at his fiery thatch: "Was yore pal married?" he asked, after a moment.

"Yes, he was. And in a way that's the worst of it. They've only been married a year or so, and they've been expecting—"

"Shucks!" the Redhead broke in. "I don't want all that reward, mister. Just my two hundred back, and the rest I'll divide with the widow. Maybe she wouldn't be a widow, if I hadn't been so keen to grab this smart guy alive, and she'll probably need the money a lot worse than I do. I've got a family to keep, all right, but I ain't aimin' to play the hog, at that."

The lieutenant stared. There was suspicious moisture in his eyes as he grasped Redhead by the shoulder.

"Young fellow," he said feelingly, "you're certainly all right! I've got a hunch that this bloody thug would have got clean away if it hadn't been for your clever stalling. And it's pretty near a sure thing that he would have killed me too, if you hadn't rapped him with that club. No question about it; he's the most dangerous man in the state—with a gun. You

saved my life, and I want you to know that I—"

The lieutenant broke short off to slap Redhead smartly on the back. "Wait a minute!" he smiled. "Say! There's a vacancy on the force now! I just thought about it. There's others ahead of you, but I happen to know that none of them are going to get the place. Not the right type, understand? So all you've got to do is to turn in your application, and the job is your's. I'll fix it for you, and here's my hand on it."

The Big Shot eyed the two men dully as they shook hands. This was the last straw; this police job for the man who had out-smarted him at every turn and left him staring straight at the Hot Chair. The fire went out of the beaten gangster; he wilted into a spineless heap of dejection; his chin settled down on his chest; he stared hopelessly at the floor.

"One thing more," the officer said to McCulloch. "Jimmy's widow will be getting a nice pension from the State, so there's no occasion to divide that reward. Your family can use it, I imagine. Moreover, you'll get your two hundred back, out of Dinny's fat roll. And listen, my boy: ten years from now you'll be at the top of this organization—or near it. You've got it in you; all you need is training. And good luck to you!"

Once more the lieutenant offered his hand to Redhead, then climbed into his car and led the little procession out of the highway.



EYE WITNESS

By GRANT LANE

Far From the Perfect Crime



SLIP LEIGHTON tip-toed cat-like down the long, green-carpeted hall; his shifting little eyes were watching the apartment numbers. Presently he stopped. His rat-like body remained rigid for a moment as his thin head twisted, looking one way, then the other. The hall was empty. Quietly, Slip inserted the pass key. He mumbled softly in delight as the lock eased open. This job was a cinch!

Watching that no one was in the hall, he opened the door. A chair blocked his immediate entrance. His long, talon-like fingers reached in and shoved it out of the way. He slipped in then, closing the door quietly behind him. Momentarily he looked about the room. It was rather large for an apartment. There were three long studio windows at the far side. Slip could see the full moon in the sky outside those windows. There was a small radio in one corner, and along the wall, a huge divan covered with cushions.

Looked as though Stan Fraser was doing pretty well with himself these days. Well—why not? Hadn't he and Lea given Slip the run-around and let him take the rap? Their first three-way job, and Slip's jail sentence had made the thing two-way again. Only now it was Stan and Lea, when before it had been Slip and Lea.

Through those long days and nights in San Quentin Slip had done a lot of thinking. A lot of planning. Lea had given him the jilt for Stan. Stan had allowed Slip to take the rap by himself. All very well, but now the two of them would pay for it. Slip had planned to kidnap and torture them before launching them into eternity.

But his slightly yellow streak had fought against that. There'd be too much chance of getting caught. And if there was anything Slip didn't want to do, it was burn.

So he'd murder them just plain. That'd be enough. His aching soul would be satisfied. And the way he planned it, no one could possibly blame Slip. They might suspect him but that was unlikely, because Slip was brainy. He had things all doped out right.

Presently Slip's puny body tensed and grew stiff. Then the noise that had frightened him made itself seen. It was a huge cat. The animal walked slowly across the floor, then leaned down and stretched, pulling its claws in the carpet.

SLIP knew immediately that the cat was a Manx. It was the cat Stan had had ever since Slip knew him. Manx, the big gray tomcat with the black stripes. It was a creature famous among underworld people. Manx, the cat who got a bath every Saturday night, with talcum powder afterwards. That was as important as the bath—the powdering. As a result, Manx always smelled like a chorus girl or a powder factory.

The cat continued its clawing. Slip could hear the quiet breathing of the sleeping Stan and Lea (who had married, after Slip went to San Quentin) coming from the bedroom. That damned cat with its clawing would wake them up. Slip reached his foot over and gave the animal a kick.

The feline misinterpreted Slip's action for affection. It rubbed its huge body against Slip's leg. Slip kicked again. Manx walked off in a sulk, stop-

ping presently to scratch its claws into the carpet again.

This time Slip couldn't be bothered. He crept into the small hallway and toward the bedroom. His hand dove into his coat pocket and brought forth a huge jackknife, the blade of which he sprung. Simple object, this. Everybody carried one. Every store sold them. No tracing of this weapon.

Manx suddenly leapt after him, then bounded past Slip and into the bedroom. Slip quickened his step. Presently he was looking down on the twin beds. A grim smile spread over his face as he saw Stan was lying on his back. Lea was on her side. Manx was standing on Stan's bed.

Almost gloatingly, Slip stood for a moment staring at the sleepers. They'd never know what happened. They'd never wake to continue their damnably happy lives as man and wife. Perhaps if they'd thought twice before using Slip as not only a fall guy for the prison rap, but as a fall guy for the girl—to get him out of the way, they would be able to continue, until the law caught up with them.

Slip edged to Stan's bed. He raised the weapon high. The cat looked up. Slip choked a muffled meow out of the animal and pushed him off the bed. Then his blade plunged square into Stan's heart. Slip felt the blood ooze out. He almost laughed at his cleverness as he became aware that the heart of Stan Frazer was stopped.

Then he turned quickly to the girl. He wouldn't waste any time on her either. He plunged the blade into her side. A slight moan broke from her lips. But that was all. Slip threw back the covers. The blood was running down her side, covering her blue pajamas. Being careful to keep the blood from his clothes, as much as possible, Slip picked the girl up and carried her into the front room, lamming her down on the divan.

Quickly he worked then, wiping his finger prints from the knife and placing it carefully in her hand. As he

finished he could almost read the headlines of the papers when the cold bodies were found:

**"JEALOUS WIFE KILLS HUSBY
THEN STABS HERSELF"**

It was simple. Too bad everybody didn't have brains like Slip. But then *everyone* couldn't be smart. Returning to the bathroom of the apartment he washed his hands carefully. She could have washed her hands there before killing herself, so the blood in the basin didn't matter.

WHEN he came back into the living room with the long studio windows he saw Manx looking up at him. He chuckled and said half aloud: "It'll be a long time before you get any more baths and powderings . . ."

The cat rubbed against his leg in response to the verbal attention. Slip reflected quickly. The cops knew he was in town. They'd be watching him pretty close at first. He'd make it a point in the morning to bump into Detective Smythe, and mention he was going to New York. It would be, perhaps, a matter of days before the bodies of Stan and Lea were found. And even then, if they bothered Slip in New York, they couldn't prove a thing. But the coroner, to protect police honor, might date the deaths one day later—the day Slip was on the train.

In former years, Slip had done a lot of thinking of the perfect crime. He congratulated himself now on having pulled one. It was such a cinch. In fact, the idea was so good and so safe that Slip might have pulled it even if he wasn't sore at Stan. Just to prove to himself how smart he was.

Slip opened the front door and peered out into the hall. No one was in sight. He squeezed his body out and then reaching in, pulled the chair back to where it had been before. He felt something whirr by his legs. His eyes saw the gray animal bounding playfully down the hall.

Slip closed and locked the door. He'd be damned if he'd chase that cat and have someone see him doing it.

Quietly he tiptoed back down the hallway. He mounted the stairs and bounced down to the first floor. He was passing across the street threshold of the apartment when he heard a "meow" from above him. Looking up he saw Manx, grinning it seemed, down from between the rungs of the stair rail of the second floor.

Slip opened the apartment house door to pass out when he bumped into an old lady. Looking closer he decided she wasn't so old, even though she had gray hair. She eyed him critically, expecting an apology. But Slip never apologized to anyone.

SAFE in his apartment and in bed, Slip lay awake, again congratulating himself on his cleverness. In a few hours he would get up and bathe and shave and run into Smythe. Then he'd head for New York.

But something shattered his peaceful reverie. There was a loud banging on the door. Slip tensed, sitting up in bed. Who could it be?

His mind whirled over many channels. They couldn't have found the bodies so soon. It wasn't even morning. And even if they had, they couldn't get anything on Slip. He'd covered all points very carefully.

With this reassurance in his mind he pulled out of the bed, donned his smoking robe and turning on the lights, opened the door.

Detective Smythe, huge and with a beety red face, steamed in. Behind him were two uniformed coppers. Slip was very nonchalant. Then his eyes almost popped out of his head. Still further behind was the gray-haired woman he'd run into.

Before he knew what it was all about Smythe had snapped handcuffs on his wrists. He heard the low voice of the detective mumble something. Then he heard the crisp voice of the woman:

"Yes, that's him."

Slip thought quickly. He wouldn't blab anything. Maybe the old girl had some petty charge on him. Even so, when the bodies were found it would go hard unless Slip could frame a quick alibi for being in the apartment house.

"I was seein' a friend"

"Uh huh," Smythe agreed, "your old friend Stan Fraser and your old girl Lea Turner. Quite a bloody get together you three had."

"What do you mean?" shot in Slip.

"I mean," Smythe said smoothly, "that you let Manx, the cat, out. This lady here, knowing how Stan treasured the beast, took him back, regardless of the fact that it was late. After recovering slightly from the shock she called the boys and myself out. She said she saw a man going out of the apartment as she came in and described you so perfectly that we came here first, bringing her to identify you"

"Yuh can't pin this on me—"

"No?" the detective walked over to a chair and picked up Slip's trousers. He brushed some of the powder off and into his cupped hand. "Then maybe when we have this analyzed to compare with the powder on Manx—"

Slip made a foolish break for the window. The sharp clip of a revolver stopped him in his tracks. He slumped down, oozing with blood.

Presently he was with Stan and Lea.



TOO MUCH ROPE

By **BOB Du SOE**

Beyond the Three-Mile Limit

CHAPTER I

THE reflections of a thousand lights shimmering in her wake; the crash and wail of her jazz band echoing across the quiet water of the bay, the gaming ship, *Idler*, headed past the breakwater on her nightly run and settled down to the easy swell of the Pacific. Big Jim Healey, the ship's bouncer and all-around special officer, turned his broad back to the fading shore line and descended the stairway midship to the saloon below. The games would open as soon as they had passed the three-mile limit and

whenever there was trouble it usually started around the tables or in the bar.

From the foot of the stairs he started across the saloon toward the cashier's cage just off the starboard passageway and there he was nearly bowled off his feet in a collision with the excited, sputtering owner and manager of the *Idler*, as the little man burst from his office adjoining the cage.

"Healey! Quick!" he cried. "The safe! Somebody's cut it open! They've slugged Eckart! They took every damn cent! We've got to catch them! We—"

The bouncer realized finally what he was saying. He shot a hasty glance at the passengers gathering around the tables and shoved his over-wrought little boss back into the office. "Quiet, Nick. Take it easy," he ordered. "Geez, you want to start a riot?"

"What of it?" Nick threw his arms despondently into the air. "We can't open the games! We can't go cruising around half the night with a dead man and a murderer! Look! Look what they done!"

Healey closed the door and looked, his startled glance darting swiftly about the littered office. Eckart, the cashier, lay motionless on the settee, the side of his head smeared with blood, his dark, sharp-featured countenance like chalk, now, his hands and feet tied with a length of hemp rope. A half-inch line hung out the open porthole; the air was thick with smoke, and a charred, ragged hole gaped from the forward bulkhead.

Healey hurriedly cut the ropes on Eckart's hands and feet and straightened him out on the settee. "You're crazy!" he declared. "He's not dead! Go see if you can find a doctor."

"He ain't dead!"

"No. Go ahead and scare up a doctor. Don't say anything about it to anybody else, though. We don't want everyone on board pesterin' us with a lot of fool questions."

NICK ceased clawing at his thatch of thick, gray hair and bolted from the office. It took a lot to upset the little man as a rule but there was just enough of old Athens in his blood to completely destroy his saner calm when an extreme occasion did arise, and, once he blew up there was no reasoning with him. Healey closed the door again when he had gone, his wide, homely face marked with a troubled frown. Nick was considerably more than just a boss to the big

bouncer and he felt somehow that he had failed him. It was entirely out of Healey's line, this thing that had happened to them. He was no detective, and yet he shouldered the responsibility without hesitation.

He examined Eckart again to see if there was any sign of returning consciousness then crossed to the open porthole and hauled in on the half-inch hemp line, one end of which was tied below to the radiator. There was no resistance to the end hanging out through the porthole. He judged its length at about thirty feet when he had coiled it up. The loose end was wet from having trailed outside in the water.

He turned to the forward bulkhead then where a hole had been cut through the heavy steel with an acetylene torch. The hole was actually in one side of the built-in safe opening into the cashier's cage the other side of the bulkhead. By cutting through from the office it had not been necessary for the thief to expose himself in the open cage in the saloon beyond.

The door flew open and Nick ushered in a fat, red-faced young man whom he announced as a doctor. The young man calmly examined Eckart and shook his head. "Can't tell much about it this way," he said. "It may be a concussion, and it may not. Do you intend returning to port?"

"I don't know," Nick was desperate. "We got two hundred passengers on board. I don't know what to do."

"It may mean saving his life," the doctor warned.

"Then we'll go back. To hell with everything else."

"Wait a minute," Healey interrupted. "He's coming out of it, ain't he? See, he moved."

"Yes, he did," the doctor agreed. "Possibly if I had something to work with I might—"

"What do you need?" Nick demanded. "Take him into my cabin

and put him to bed. I'll get anything you want if we've got it."

"All right," the doctor peeled off his coat. "I'll see what I can do for him."

Healey carried the cashier into Nick's cabin, just aft the little office, then called a steward to assist the doctor. Space was limited in the cabin so he went back to the office, Nick trailing after him. The little manager noticed the length of hemp line for the first time and pointed excitedly.

"The dirty crooks!" he cried. "They came in through the porthole!"

"Maybe," Healey conceded, "but it would take a blame small man to squeeze through there. You're sure nobody but you and Eckart had a key? You're sure the office was locked?"

"It was locked when I went up on deck and it was still locked when I came back and saw what they'd done."

A knock sounded at the door and without waiting for an answer in strode the captain, peering about him with a puzzled frown. Keating was his name. He was a big man, coarse-featured and with a voice like a fog horn. "What's goin' on here?" he demanded. "The steward just borrowed my first aid kit—said somebody's been rapped on the head."

"Yeh, Eckart. And look at that," Nick pointed to the hole in the bulkhead. "I've been robbed. Twenty thousand dollars!"

"The hell you say!" The captain gazed at the hole, the coil of rope, and pulled thoughtfully at his long, red mustache. "Who the devil could have done it?"

"That's something to ask me, ain't it?" Nick waved his arms in exasperation. "And ask me how I'm going to run a gambling ship without money? Ask me that, too."

Healey laid a firm hand on the

little man's shoulder and pushed him toward the door. "Forget it, Nick; we'll get by somehow. Get what money you can from the bar and the dining room. If there isn't enough silver let 'em use paper. There's no use lettin' the passengers know what's happened. Get somebody to take Eckart's place in the cage—and pull yourself together."

Nick did not go willingly. He was far from confident but the firm, quiet insistence of the big bouncer finally prevailed and he went out muttering to himself.

CHAPTER II

"**H**AVE we got one of those acetylene outfits on board, Captain?" Healey asked. "No. never heard of it if we have."

"Then they brought it with them. They didn't need much gas for that cut. They could have brought the whole outfit aboard in a suitcase and chucked it out the porthole when they were through with it."

"But how'd they get away with the money? Most of it was in silver, wasn't it?"

"Yeh, a half-dozen bags anyway. Do you suppose they could have lowered that through the porthole, too?"

"You mean into another boat?"

"Yeh, or maybe with a float to it so they could come along afterward and haul it up."

"They might have done that, but there wasn't any boat alongside or we'd seen it from the bridge. Have you searched the cabin?"

"Not yet, but there's no place in here where they could hide a half-dozen bags of silver. It must have gone out that porthole and the thief with it."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, the door was locked, and anyway if they'd come out through the passage somebody'd have seen them."

"Yeh, and maybe not. They had plenty of time. They didn't need to take any chances."

Nick entered, mopping the sweat from his wrinkled brow, and dropped into the nearest chair. "Well, I've started the games," he shrugged. "I don't know what we'll do if they get a streak of luck."

The captain grinned. "I wouldn't worry about that. The suckers don't have the luck as a rule."

"Suckers!" the little man exploded. "I'm the sucker! The games on this ship are straight. I haven't made a thousand dollars off them damn tables since we started."

The captain shrugged. "All right. Let it pass. How much time did these crooks have to work in here?"

"I don't know. I hadn't been in here for an hour. I didn't see Eckart come aboard and I don't know how long he was here 'fore I found him."

"There's no mistake about that door being locked?" Healey asked again.

"No, no! I told you before, I tried the door and it was locked—locked from the inside. When I put my key in the hole I heard the other key drop out here on the inside."

"Then the only way out was through that porthole."

"It's been done," the captain shifted a doubtful glance from Nick to the open port, "but I'd sooner think the thief was still on board."

"But nobody had a key except me and Eckart!" insisted Nick.

"And that makes it look sort of bad for you and Eckart," the captain replied. "Except that it wouldn't have been any trick for a good crook to have gotten ahold of another key."

"Me and Eckart!" Nick sprang from his chair. "You're crazy! Why would I be stealin' my own money? And Eckart with a cracked skull!"

The steward stuck his head in at the door and motioned toward the

adjoining cabin. "He's comin' around. The doctor says he can talk."

NICK forgot his sudden anger. He pushed the steward aside and bolted through the door. Healey left the captain and followed him. The doctor admitted them to the cabin with the same professional calm and nodded toward the berth.

"He can talk, now, but you'd better be brief," he advised. "He's received two very severe blows. One on the right side of the head toward the front and the other at the back."

Eckart, usually alert and active, looked indeed to be in a serious condition. Healey stepped over beside the berth and spoke to him. "Tough luck, Eckart," he said. "What can you tell us about it?"

The cashier glanced from Healey to Nick and shook his head. "I didn't even get a look at the swine. Something socked me the minute I opened the door."

Healey's wide brow puckered with disappointment. "You didn't even hear 'em talking—nothing at all?"

"Yes, I heard some talking, when I came out of it after the first time they rapped me, but my hands and feet were tied and they'd dumped me on the settees with my face to the bulkhead so it didn't mean anything."

"You don't remember what they said? You didn't recognize their voices?"

"Hell, no, I'd just been knocked cold. I wouldn't have recognized my own mother."

"I guess you're right. When did they hit you the second time?"

"It must have been as they were leaving—or maybe they saw me move, I don't know. I didn't even know it was coming."

"And you can't give us any idea about the money—no idea at all what they did with it?"

"No, nothing, except they seemed to be workin' most of the time near the porthole. Cripes, I'd tell you if I knew anything."

Healey nodded. "Yeh, sure."

"Better leave him, now," the doctor advised. "Give him a chance to think about it."

"Yeh," Nick agreed. "Geez, he sure got a rap."

CHAPTER III

THE big bouncer went thoughtfully back to the office. He had felt sure that when Eckart recovered sufficiently to talk he would be able to set them on the right track, but they were no better off now than at the start.

In spite of a firm conviction that the money was not in the office Healey made a thorough search. He dragged the mattress off the settee, examined the locker, pulled open the drawers in Nick's desk and sounded the ventilator conduit overhead but there was no trace of the money. He had assured Nick that they could operate the games on cash borrowed from the bar and the dining room but if luck favored the passengers to any extent he knew Nick would be caught short. And, if there wasn't money enough on hand to cash the chips when they began coming in there would undoubtedly be trouble.

There was something else that worried Healey, too. His confidence in Nick was unshaken and yet the captain had bluntly stated a fact. If the Federal agents took a hand in it there were certain things the little manager would have to explain whether they seemed ridiculous to him or not. The *Idler* had a reputation for square dealing but it would not take long to reverse that opinion if Nick's rivals and certain newspapers found anything on which they could base a rumor to the contrary.

The captain had been doubtful of anyone entering or leaving the office through the porthole but the possibility hovered at the back of Healey's brain, regardless. He planted himself in front of it, thought about it, and studied it from all angles. He was not gifted with a brilliant mind but once an idea settled inside that big, round skull of his it usually stuck there.

A shriek of feminine laughter drifted in through the open porthole. It came from the deck above and that reminded him that there was another row of portholes on the deck below. He dropped a few feet of the hemp line out the hole, made it fast to the radiator, and then locking the office he went below. At the end of a thwart-ship passage there he found the end of the rope dangling back and forth in front of another porthole. He stuck his head through the port to see how far he could get but the result was nil.

A man from the black gang stood in the passage staring at him when he withdrew his head and he felt a bit foolish. "Do you leave this port open as a rule?" he asked.

"We do on the run out," the man replied. "Get's hot as hell down here. Comin' back we're to windward and then we close it."

Healey nodded. "Didn't see anyone hangin' around here about the time we shoved off, did you?"

"Me? No, I was on watch."

"Have we got anybody in the crew small enough to get through that hole?"

"Oh, I guess there's a couple of 'em could make it. Never seen any of them tryin' it, though."

"If you do I wish you'd let me know. Somebody broke into the office about the time we left port this evening. I'd like to know how they did it."

"They did, eh? I'll be damned! Sure, I'll let you know."

HEALEY wondered if he had said too much. He decided it didn't make much difference and went above to find Nick. He met the young doctor in the passage and inquired about Eckhart.

"I think he'll be all right," the doctor replied. "I told him to take it easy. It wouldn't be a bad idea to put an X-ray on him, though, when you get back to port."

Nick joined them from the saloon. He was clawing his hair again in a new frenzy. Healey got him by the arm and led him down the passage away from the doctor before he got a chance to talk. "What's the matter now?" he demanded.

"Matter! Geez, wouldn't you know it! We're losing on every game on the ship. There's five thousand dollars worth of chips right now."

"Never mind," Healey quieted him. "I've got a hunch about something, Nick. Come down below and I'll show you."

Nick trailed reluctantly after him, grumbling about the various games, and Healey led him to the porthole at the end of the thwart-ship passage.

"Here, take this," the bouncer handed Nick his spotlight. "Stick your head out there as far as you can and see if there are any marks on the side of the ship."

"Me, climb out there?"

"Yes, you can do it. Take a turn around your arm with that rope and I'll hold your legs."

"Geez, if I fall! What do you want me to look for?"

"I want you to look for scratches or foot-marks between this porthole and the one above. They'll show easy enough on that white paint if there are any."

"You think they got in that way, eh? All right, I'll look."

Healey gave the little man a boost and watched him worm his head then his shoulders through the porthole with comparative ease. Nick

seized the rope and then leaning out as far as he could he turned the spot-light up against the side of the ship. In a very few minutes he was back in the passageway again sputtering with excitement.

"You're right!" he exclaimed. "There's foot-prints there—black—like somebody's walked up there with rubber soles."

"Then that's settled," Healey declared. "And the money's on board. It couldn't be anywhere else."

"Yeh, but how are we going to find it! Geez, there's two hundred passengers and the whole crew besides. We couldn't give a mob like that the third degree in six months."

"No, I know that," the bouncer conceded, "but it's here somewhere. Give me a chance, Nick; we'll find it."

"Give you a chance," Nick repeated with disgust. "All right, you've got until that crowd up there finds out we can't cash them chips, and that ain't long. They'll riot sure as hell."

"Let 'em riot. Just pay them as long as you can and maybe we'll get a change of luck. I'm going up and have another talk with Eckart."

CHAPTER IV

THE cashier, his head swathed in bandages, lay on Nick's bunk smoking a cigarette. "Hello, Healey," he spoke, "find anything yet?"

"Yes, I found out whoever did it came up through the porthole from the deck below. They must have beat it with the money the same way."

"Yeh, that's probably it. There wasn't any place where they could have hidden the stuff in the office. They were over near the porthole, too, when I heard 'em talking."

Healey mopped the sweat from his homely face and opened the door for a bit of air. "Geez, it's hot in here."

Eckart shrugged. "Been havin' chills myself."

"You're sure you can't remember anything they said?" Healey insisted.

"No, not a thing. I heard them but it's all a jumble now. The dirty swine, if I'd had a gun I might have done something."

"How could you have done anything with your hands tied?"

"Oh, I was just talking. One always thinks of what he might have done when it's too late."

"It was a gun they hit you with, wasn't it?"

"Yeh, the doctor seemed to think so anyway."

"Damn, I've got to find that money. If I don't those fools out there will be tearin' the ship apart."

"You mean the games are runnin'?"

"Sure, they're runnin'."

"And the suckers havin' all the luck, I suppose. God, they'll skin Nick alive."

"That's why I've got to find that dough. We don't want anything to happen to Nick."

"You got any ideas about it?"

Healey mopped his face again and shoved open the door. "Yeh, I've got a couple. I'll find it."

He went forward to the bar, then, ordered a drink and stood for a minute watching the tense, anxious crowd gathered around the tables. One of the game-keepers was in the cage acting as cashier. No one seemed aware yet of what had happened.

Healey went back to the office and unlocked the door. It was dark inside and he was positive he had left the light burning when he went out. He turned and felt along the bulkhead for the switch, and then suddenly something crashed down on the side of his head, glanced off and struck his shoulder. He turned and lashed out with all his strength but his big fist cut only the air. An-

other blow fell, and another. He threw up his arms to protect his head and lunged forward but his knees were already sagging beneath him. He went down and once more a vicious blow grazed his head. Half conscious, fighting desperately to clear his brain, he sensed the cautious opening and closing of the door and then he was left alone—no doubt for dead.

THE office seemed to spin like a top for a few minutes. A thousand lights danced up and down in front of Healey's eyes and then finally his head cleared and he got to his feet. He felt along the bulkhead again for the switch and this time he found it. He ran an exploring hand over his aching head and swore. There were three distinct lumps there, growing and spreading like mushrooms.

He stepped hastily out in the passage. There was no one in sight in either direction. Forward, in the saloon, Nick stood nervously watching the game, and glancing in a moment at the cabin aft the office Healey found the cashier still in bed. He closed the cabin door again immediately and went up on deck for a breath of cool air. He was still a bit dizzy. He wanted a few minutes to sit down and think.

At the rail directly above the office Healey gazed down at the swirling water, feeling gingerly of the bumps on his head while he stood there trying to answer a few of the questions that raced through his brain. He backed away from the rail finally and sat down on a bench against the bulkhead. The ship's bell struck but he lost count of the strokes and mechanically reached for his watch. However, that was as far as he got. A frantic shout, "man overboard!" shattered the stillness on deck and jumping up he dashed to the rail.

Down in the eddying water below he saw a dark, motionless object

dropping swiftly astern as the ship moved on. He raced aft along the deck shouting back toward the bridge as he ran. The first cry had come from one of the passengers and Healey saw the man jerk a life preserver from the rail and hurl it overboard.

Still running aft, he watched the life preserver as it sailed through the air; saw it hit a few feet from that fast sinking object in the water, and realized suddenly that the man there below them was making no effort to save himself. The next second Healey had torn off his coat, and balancing an instant on the rail, he leaped into the sea.

THE first shock of his plunge left him gasping for breath, but he struck out frantically and after a dozen powerful strokes he had a wad of the sinking man's clothing in his grasp. With a vigorous heave he lifted the limp head and shoulders out of the water and throwing himself over on his side, swam back-handed toward the life preserver. The flare attached to it was beginning to sputter and blaze, now, and glancing in the other direction he saw that the ship had stopped and was swinging about.

Healey could not have told why but his first thought when that cry rang out on deck had been of Nick. Clinging with one hand to the life preserver and the other to the limp form he had rescued he swung around to bring the man's face into the circle of light from the flare. With considerable relief he saw at once that it was not Nick, or anyone, in fact, he had ever seen before.

He spoke to the man but there was no response. The helplessness of the fellow made it difficult to keep his head out of water. Healey could not be sure whether he breathed or not. A light from the *Idler* suddenly illuminated the water around him and he felt better. They had picked him out with the search-

light. The sound of voices and the creak of oarlocks drifted down from the ship then, and he knew they had lowered a boat.

It seemed an hour after that before the life boat moved into the circle of light but it came finally and a pair of strong arms relieved the bouncer of his burden.

CHAPTER V

WITH a change of clothing on his back and a glass of brandy in his stomach Healey went at once to the cabin where they had taken the man he had rescued. He wanted to learn his identity and to see if he had regained consciousness.

The same fat, red-faced young doctor answered his knock and closed the door quietly when he had entered. Captain Keating was there, and Nick, too, clawing as usual at his rumpled hair.

"Nice bit of work you did, Healey," the captain declared. "But it looks like you took a ducking for nothing."

"Yeh—geez, what next?" groaned Nick.

"You mean he drowned anyway?" the bouncer demanded. "Hell, he couldn't have!"

"No, he didn't drown. He was dead 'fore he hit the water."

"Dead!" Healey stared at the doctor and then the still form on the settee.

"That's right," declared the doctor. "He was choked to death. See the marks there on his throat?"

"And there's something else that might interest you," the captain pointed. "Burns."

Healey took a step nearer the settee. The doctor had removed the dead man's shirt and quite plain on the fellow's thin, wiry forearm were a half-dozen burns ranging in size from a small, red dot to an area as large as a pea. The build of the man caught the bouncer's eye, also. He

was average in height and must have been fairly strong but his muscles were mostly cords and sinews and his shoulders were narrow and sloping. His weight must have been well under a hundred-and-fifty pounds.

"Choked to death!" repeated Healey. "Have you found out who he is?"

"Sure," the captain replied. "He was one of the seamen. Name's Backus."

The doctor put on his coat and mopped the sweat from his face. "Hot in here," he remarked. "Guess there's nothing more I can do now."

The remark brought another groan from Nick. - A few more nights like this and he wouldn't have any more hair left to claw at.

"What else do you know about this bird?" Healey asked when the doctor had gone.

"Nothing," the captain replied, "except that he had no business aft the fo'castle tonight in calm weather like this. Too bad we didn't get ahold of him sooner. We might have learned something."

"Do you know who it was saw him go overboard?"

"Yeh, the fellow who yelled. Said his name was Weaver."

"Does he know this man's dead?"

"No. Nobody knows it but us."

"And for God's sake don't tell it!" Pleaded Nick.

"Don't worry about that," Healey replied. "How are the games going now?"

"The same as they've gone all evening. Rotten."

"Well, hang on as long as you can. I think we're gettin' somewhere, Nick. See you later."

"Yeh, maybe," the little man muttered.

HEALEY left the cabin and hurried up on deck. He found the man, Weaver, the center of a group of curious passengers and called him to one side.

"Oh, you're the hero!" the man

exclaimed. "That was quite a dive you took. I can swim a little but I couldn't see jumpin' off a ship in the middle of the drink like you did."

Healey shrugged. "Guess I jumped first and thought about it afterward. But you did the shouting or I wouldn't have seen him. Where did he fall from, anyway?"

"From about the middle of the ship somewhere. I was standin' back here by the rail and happened to see him hit the water."

"You're sure it was from midship and not up forward?"

"No, I saw the splash. It was pretty well back from the bow or I wouldn't have noticed it."

"Probably not. He lay pretty still."

"Yeh, acted like he was hurt, or something."

Healey nodded. "He was one of the crew. The doctor says he's in a pretty hot spot right now."

"Too bad. Good thing you had a doctor on board."

The man would have talked on indefinitely but Healey had learned what he wanted to know and excusing himself he hurried forward to the bench where he had been sitting when he first heard the shout. The passenger had been right; if the seaman had hit the water farther forward it was more than likely that he would not have seen him. However, he couldn't have fallen from there on deck or Healey would surely have seen him, too. There was only one other way out of it, he had gone overboard through one of the portholes. And, if he had been choked to death, as the doctor seemed certain, he had been shoved through that porthole by the man who had murdered him.

CHAPTER VI

DOWN in the office again the big bouncer paced back and forth, raking his brain, and the longer he

paced the more uncomfortable he became. Sweat streamed down his wide, homely face; he was almost as desperate as Nick. On his way through the saloon he had seen a line of passengers at the cashier's window and he had heard some of their angry threats.

Nick burst into the office, flung up his arms and dropped into a chair. "You hear that?" he groaned. "You hear them? They want their money. We're cleaned—busted. I was a fool to listen to you."

Healey was on the verge of a retort but the distressed condition of the little manager turned his rising anger to sudden pity. "Go talk to them, Nick," he begged. "The money's on board. We'll find it if they'll just give us time."

"Talk to 'em, hell! They want their money. That's all they'll listen to. Suppose I tell them we'll get it and we don't? They'll mob us, that's what they'll do. They'll mob us!"

"They won't if you handle it right, Nick. Tell them the truth. Shut down the games and tell them just what happened. Talk to 'em, Nick. You've got to."

Nick rose wearily to his feet, straightened his tie and buttoned his coat. "I suppose I should try, but it won't do any good. You'll see."

Healey followed the little man into the passage and waited. The angry threats from the crowd in the saloon quieted down as he began reasoning with them, and as a last resort the bouncer decided to go below for a final search of the thwartship passage and the crew's quarters near-by. At the aft end of the passage, however, he met the man from the black gang with whom he had spoken earlier in the evening and the fireman was evidently looking for him.

"You said I was to tell you if I saw anybody down there," he declared. "Well, one of the seamen was there about half an hour ago—a skinny, hatchet-faced bird, and I

ran him out. I thought you ought to know about it 'cause there ain't no deckswab got any business foolin' around in our quarters."

Evidently the fireman had not heard that the man hauled out of the water had been one of the seamen, and Healey did not tell him.

"Which way did he go when he left down there?" the bouncer inquired.

"He went above where he belonged."

"Did he have anything with him?"

"No, I made damn sure of that."

"And he didn't come back?"

"No, you bet he didn't come back."

Healey thought a moment, then he thanked the fireman and headed slowly back the way he had come. The seaman had been alive when he came above. He hadn't come out on deck so he must have met his end in one of the cabins on that very deck. Anyone dressed as a seaman would surely be noticed on one of the passenger decks but Healey remembered then that the man he had pulled from the water had been dressed in coat and trousers like himself. He had probably worn overalls over his better clothes, discarding them when he came above.

THOUGHTFULLY the big bouncer continued along the passageway until he came to Nick's cabin and stopping there he opened the door.

The cashier glanced up at Healey as he entered and sent a cloud of cigarette smoke toward the top-side. It hung there motionless. "Cripes, fellah," Eckart said. "You look like somebody's bounced something off your head, too."

"They did," Healey replied.

"The hell you say! When? How'd that happen?"

Healey shook his head. "It wasn't anything. That's not what's bother-

in' me. There's been a killin' in one of these cabins, Eckart."

"A killing!"

"Yeh. You didn't hear anything?"

"Hell, no! Which cabin was it? Who did it?"

"I don't know. I wish I did, then I'd know where to look for that dough."

"Listen, Healey, you're letting this thing get your goat. You're no detective. Forget it. Let the police figure it out. And suppose the money is on board, it isn't in the office and that means you'd have to search the whole lousy ship. The best thing Nick can do is head for port 'fore we all get bumped off."

"Maybe you're right. It's going to be hell on Nick, though. I hoped—"

He lit a cigarette; blew a lungful of smoke toward the ceiling, and then abruptly he stood still and stared at it. The smoke flattened out and hung there motionless. He said nothing of the thought that suddenly struck him. He couldn't have spoken at the moment if he had wanted to, and shaking out the match he left the cabin.

CHAPTER VII

OUT in the passageway the big bouncer cast a hurried glance into the saloon and raced up the stairs to the upper deck, then the bridge. The captain met him there with an inquiring frown.

"I think I've got the straight of it, Captain," Healey declared. "I want you to come down to the office and give me a hand. If you've got a gun you'd better bring it."

"A gun! You've got 'em cornered?"

"No, but I don't want to take any chances. I want a man from the engine room, too. Ask the chief to send up one of his men."

"What the devil are you going to do?"

"I can't tell you now; we'll see if I'm right first. I want you to get Nick

and Eckart into the office with you and keep 'em there until I come."

"Okey. And where'll you be?"

"I won't be far away. Come on, Captain, that crowd's getting mean down there. We've got to hurry."

"I'll be with you in a minute."

The captain got his revolver; shouted down the speaking tube to the engine room, and then followed Healey below to the saloon. The bouncer hung back until he had seen him maneuver Nick out of the crowd, then hurried aft. From the far end of the passage he saw the captain enter the cabin occupied by Eckart, and then he saw him come out again and the two of them entered the office with Nick.

Healey waited impatiently and finally a man in dungarees came up the stairs from below. "You the fellow wanted somebody from the engine room?" the man inquired.

"Yes, I'm the guy," Healey replied. "Didn't you bring any tools with you?"

"How was I going to bring any tools when I didn't know what you wanted done?"

"All right. Come on and I'll show you."

Healey hurried back to Nick's cabin adjoining the office and immediately began a systematic thumping of the ventilator conduit running fore and aft across the cabin up against the deck beams above. He started aft and worked forward, and abruptly he stopped.

"Try it," he nodded to the engineer. The man looked puzzled but he thumped the conduit as Healey had done. Part way across the cabin the thumping sounded hollow, as it should have, and then abruptly the square, hollow tube appeared to be as solid as the deck beams it hung from.

"What do you make of it?" Healey demanded.

The engineer stared up at the conduit with a frown. "Why, I'd say

there was something 'in there," he replied.

"I know damn well there is," the bouncer declared. "That's what I wanted you for—to get it out."

"A wrench will do it," the engineer nodded.

"Then hurry up and get it," Healey urged. "If there's any doubt about the wrench get a bar or a sledge."

HE followed the engineer out into the passage and waited there while the man went for his tools. A dozen angry men and women were milling around the cage cabin again demanding money for their chips. One of the men climbed up on the edge of the counter in an attempt to get his hands on the helpless cashier. All they needed was someone to lead them.

"Okay, I've got it," the engineer arrived with his wrench, and he also carried a pinch bar as Healey had suggested. "What's going on up there," he asked, "a riot?"

Healey shoved him into the cabin. "There will be if you don't get a move on."

"All right, but what's this vent got to do with it? What's in there?"

"Twenty thousand bucks, I hope. Hurry up."

"Twenty thousand bucks! How come?"

"Never mind. Get it out."

The engineer dropped his wrench and went to work with the bar. "No wonder it's so damn hot in here. The conduit is plugged solid. No ventilation."

"Yeh," Healey agreed, "and I've been three hours finding it out—three hours moppin' sweat and choking with smoke 'fore I tumbled."

In a few minutes the engineer had one of the joints pried apart and taking another bite he pried still farther until Healey could thrust an arm through the opening. When his hand came out again it clutched a heavy bag of silver dollars. The next

grab he brought out a stack of bills and another bag.

"Drag out the rest of it," he ordered. "I'll be back in a minute."

With a bag in each hand and the stack of bills in his pocket Healey hastened from the cabin and started forward toward the saloon. Half way he met a drunken rowdy with a mob at his back headed for the office. There were three men up on the counter, now, reaching over the cage and one of them had the innocent cashier by the collar.

The leader of the mob in the passage spied the money bags in Healey's hands and made a grab for them. The bouncer brought one of the bags down on the fellow's head, planted his foot in another's stomach, and gained the cage. He shoved the money through the little window.

"There's your money!" he shouted. "You act like a lot of damn cattle. You've never been jipped on this boat and you never will be! What's got into you?"

No one had anything to say. A bit sheepishly those with chips to cash lined up at the cage to get their money and the others edged back toward the tables. Healey gave the game-keepers word to start playing again and then hurried back to the cabin. The engineer had cleared out the conduit and he stood there scratching his head, staring at the pile of money on the settee.

CHAPTER VIII

HEALEY took two more bags to the cage and then with the engineer to help him he carried the rest to the office. The captain opened the door; one hand gripped his gun and across the office on the settee sat Nick and Eckart.

"Geez, you found it!" the little man cried.

Healey closed the door on the heels of the engineer and stood there a second gazing up the shutter and screen on the bottom of the conduit

there in the office: It was the same conduit that passed through Nick's cabin and the rest of the cabins along that side of the ship.

"Yeh, I found it," he said. "I knew it couldn't have gotten very far away."

"Where was it? Where'd you find it?" Nick demanded.

"In the ventilator in your cabin," Healey replied.

"Judas priest!" the captain exclaimed.

"My cabin!" the little manager exclaimed. "What are you talkin' about? It couldn't—"

"Wait a minute," Healey silenced him. "I'm not sayin' yet how it got there. I'm tellin' you where I found it."

"But in my cabin! There ain't anybody been in there! How did it—"

"Keep still a minute an' I'll tell you," Healey ordered. "We agreed from the start that there was two men on this job, didn't we?"

"Yeh, two," Nick agreed.

"Well, we were right, but the funny part of it is that only one of 'em left the office here when the job was finished."

"Only one? Impossible!" Nick declared. "I'll swear there was nobody in this office when I unlocked that door."

"What about Eckart?"

"Sure, he was here—knocked cold, but there was nobody else."

"Right," the bouncer agreed. "And I know now that the man who tried to kill him was the man I pulled out of the water."

Eckart sat up with a start. "You pulled him out of the water! Is that the killin' you were talking about?"

"Yeh, that's it," Healey replied. "You didn't know about the rest of it, did you? Well, I'll tell you something else, Eckart; we know he was dead before he fell in."

"Meanin' what?" the cashier inquired. "You're talkin' Dutch to me."

"Well, I'll give it to you so you'll be sure to get it. The man I pulled out of the water was the man that climbed in through this porthole, cut that hole in Nick's safe, and crawled out again the same way."

"How'd you discover that?" the captain demanded.

"We found the marks on the white paint, outside the hull. They're there yet if you want to look at 'em."

"I'll take your word for it. I can understand how he might have let himself out but how did the rope get in here in the first place?"

A lot of Healey's deductions were guess work but he was confident there were enough facts sprinkled through it to tie it together. "That rope," he declared, "was tied there by Eckart."

THE cashier jumped to his feet, then sat down again with a snort of disgust. "You're a hell of a detective, you are. What would I be doing lettin' some bird in here to rob us and try to kill me on top of it? You're nuts."

"I'd be nuts all right if I did a stunt like that. You ought to have better sense yourself."

"Healey, it's impossible," Nick declared.

"Oh, yeah? Well, you wait 'til I'm through. He did the job all right and it worked fine. The trouble was it worked too good."

"Rot!" Eckart scoffed.

Healey ignored the interruption. "When the money'd been hidden," he went on, "he let this other bird tie him up and then he took a nice little tap on the head so's it would look like he'd been slugged. What he didn't figure on, though, was gettin' double-crossed by the guy he'd picked for a partner. He gave him too much rope. The second rap was really meant to kill him and then this other bird would have gotten the dough for himself. That's why Eckart here choked him to death

and chucked him out of the porthole."

"That's a lie! A damn lie!" Eckart cried. "You can't prove a word of it!"

"You think I can't, eh? Well, one of the firemen saw this fellow come up to Nick's cabin while you were in there and one of the passengers saw him go overboard through one of the portholes. You'll have to tell us what he came up here for; I ain't figured that out yet, but that's what he did. And that wasn't long after you'd tried to brain me here in this office. I know it was you because I saw Nick give you back the key you left here in the door and nobody but you and him had those keys."

"Cripes, and you're going to try and nail that onto me, too!" Eckart cried.

"Right. If it had been that seaman that jumped me he'd have gone out through the porthole again. All you had to do was duck out the door and get back to bed again in the next cabin."

"When was all this?" Nick demanded. "You didn't tell me."

"No," Healey shrugged. "I figured you had enough to stew about."

"But why would he have wanted to kill you then?"

"Because I'd just told him I had some good ideas about that money."

Eckart gave another exasperated snort. "You're crazy. I never left Nick's cabin. I wasn't out of that bunk until the captain brought me in here a minute ago."

"You've got it figured out so's it fits like a glove, Healey," the captain declared. "Only I don't see how they got the money into Nick's cabin."

THE bouncer pointed to the shutter on the bottom of the ventilator conduit. "That was the easiest part of it, Captain. They took that shutter off—you can see where the paint's been scratched if you'll take

a look—they put the bags up in there and then shoved them along through the conduit as far as they could with a stick or something."

"I'll be damned!" the captain swore. "Well, that settles it."

Eckart jumped up from the settee, his sharp features twisted in rage. "You fool, are you going to believe that pack of lies with no more proof than that?"

"It's up to you to do the proving, young fellow," the captain declared.

Eckart did not wait for him to finish. He leaped forward and seized the gun dangling in the captain's hand. For a brief second they struggled in a mad fight for possession of the weapon and then the little office was filled with the roar of a shot. The captain let go and staggered back, his hand groping at his side.

Eckart whirled about to send the next bullet at Healey but the bouncer was too quick for him. With a blow that traveled but a few inches he caught the enraged cashier with one of those big fists just under the ear and lifted him clear of the floor.

"Geez, you've killed him!" the little manager gasped.

"If I did it served him right," the big bouncer rubbed his knuckles with satisfaction.

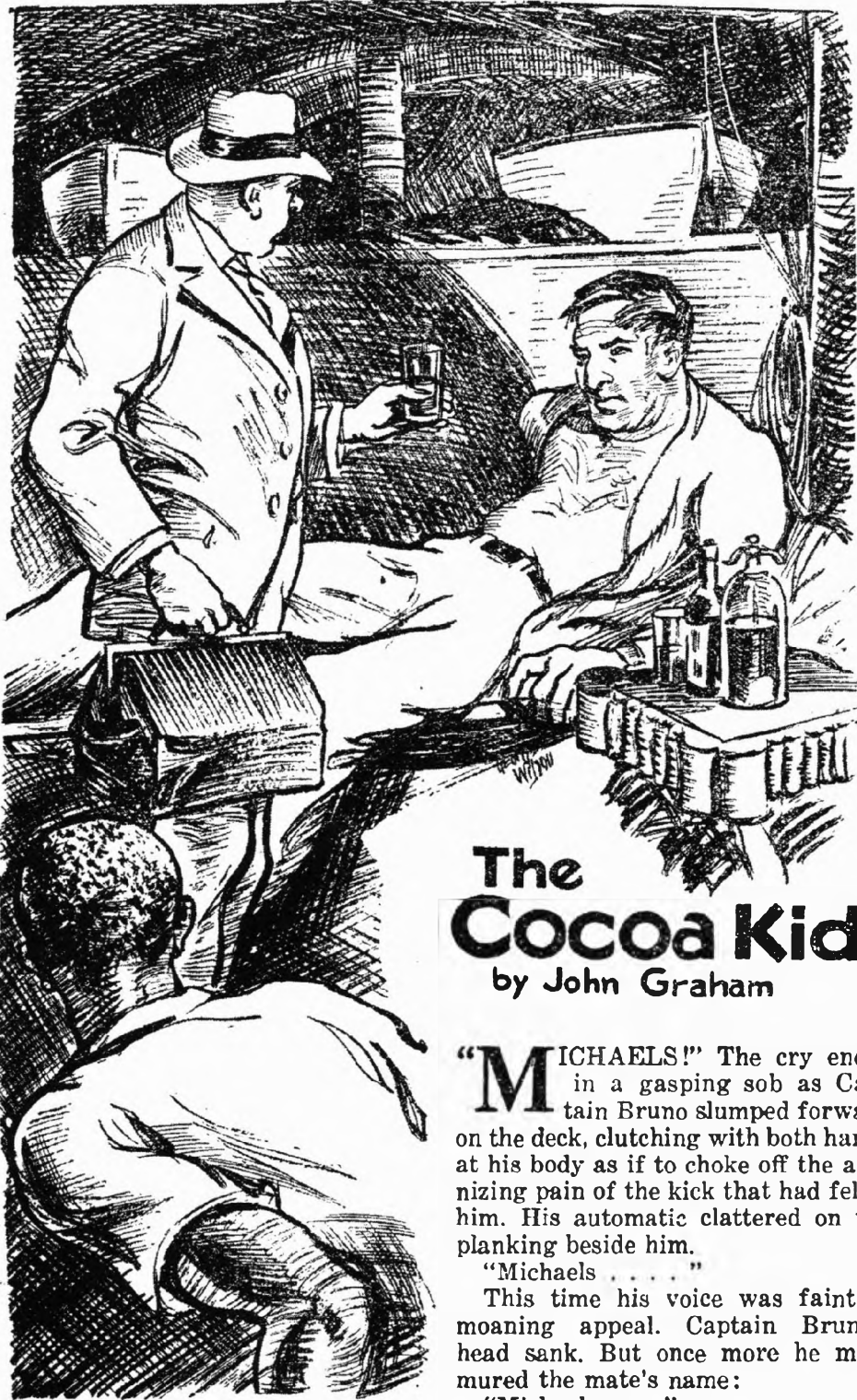
"The dirty, sneakin' hound!" the captain swore.

Eckart groaned and rolled over on his back.

"I'll take care of him." Healey picked up one end of the hemp line. "You'd better get that doctor again, Nick, and have him look at the captain. Bet he ain't had so many calls in one night in his life."

"I'll get him," Nick answered. "Geez, what a night! But you saved the *Idler*, Healey. You've got a job here with me 'til the damn ship sinks."

The bouncer grinned. "That suits me, Nick. I was afraid there for a while we were sunk already."



The Cocoa Kid

by John Graham

"MICHAELS!" The cry ended in a gasping sob as Captain Bruno slumped forward on the deck, clutching with both hands at his body as if to choke off the agonizing pain of the kick that had felled him. His automatic clattered on the planking beside him.

"Michaels"

This time his voice was faint, a moaning appeal. Captain Bruno's head sank. But once more he murmured the mate's name:

"Michaels"

Then there was silence, save for the rhythmic slap of waves against the schooner *Myrna's* prow.

The three shadowy figures ranged before the fallen captain were motionless. Henri Deyong, the French passenger who had embarked at Saigon for Manila, was in the foreground with Diminez and Parga, Portuguese members of the crew, crouched tensely behind him. Perhaps the gigantic Captain Bruno still was an object of terror to them, prostrate and sprawling though he lay. Perhaps a fear of the imminent arrival of Michaels, the *Myrna's* broad-shouldered, bullet-headed mate, deterred them. In any event, they hesitated.

A light flashed in the companionway before their eyes. There was a step on the stairs.

"The gun!" Deyong whispered fiercely.

A shadowy figure slunk forward. A hand groped along the deck beside the captain's body. It was withdrawn hastily, and empty, as the head and shoulders of a man appeared in the companionway.

A SIGH of relief, a nervous laugh, quickly muffled, escaped from the waiting trio as the newcomer was recognized.

"Get below, you!" Deyong snarled at him.

"It's Lope, the cook," Diminez explained hastily. "He's brainless. Don't mind him!"

"He stays below!" the first speaker snapped. "He'll be in the way here!"

"Get below, Lope! Do you hear?"

The sight of the figure in the companionway moved uncertainly. His dark eyes stared sleepily at the men confronting him, then down upon the unconscious Captain Bruno. He betrayed not the slightest sign of surprise or understanding. Lope smiled.

"I hear a noise, eh?" he said, nodding. "Maybe I better look . . ."

"Everything's all right here, Lope! You stay below!" advised Parga.

Lope did not move. His smile per-

sisted. Standing in the light from the companionway, the swarthy little Filipino cook looked drolly boyish, almost elfin, despite his battered, oddly misshapen face.

"Ho!" he said, as if suddenly comprehending. "Cap'n Bruno is very drunk, eh?" Lope bent over the fallen man, his short arms encircling the captain's waist. "I fix him," he added.

"Stand away, Lope!" Parga ordered.

"Eh?" The cook straightened, glancing from the speaker to his own hands that had become warm and sticky. A streak of blood stained the front of his tattered shirt where he dried his palms.

"How it this . . . ?" he began.

Lope's shoulders turned with a movement so quick as to be almost imperceptible. A knife sang past his ear and imbedded itself in the wood behind him, its blade glittering in the light.

"I warned you!" Parga cried harshly.

The Filipino sprang as the words were uttered. Brown fists lashed out to send the seaman flat on his back across a hatchtop.

A snarl of oaths and the hasty scuffling of feet behind him brought Lope whirling to face the remaining two men. He pulled away from a spike that Diminez aimed at his head, ducked a fist swung from the darkness. Once more he struck. Lope laughed as the Portuguese before him sank to his knees, a stricken, stupid look on his face.

THE report of an automatic tore at Lope's ear drums. He stumbled. White hot pain seared his shoulder. Then another report . . . this time farther away, as if an echo. Lope kicked and struggled as someone toppled on him—someone who flopped limply and then lay strangely quiet.

Michaels, the mate, came running up, a smoking pistol in his hand. He knelt beside the captain, tugging at his shoulder.

"Be careful," cautioned Lope, wriggling to a sitting posture. "Cap'n Bruno's got a knife in him."

"What the bloody . . . !" The mate started, then leaned forward to peer at the Filipino. "Lope!" He lowered his weapon. "D'they get you, too?"

"This one shot me," said Lope, indicating Deyong. "I have a sore shoulder. That is all."

"How about them?" The mate poked a thumb toward the Portuguese seamen.

"Ho!" Lope's teeth gleamed in a broad smile. "I give them both a good sock!"

"You . . . !" Michaels blinked in astonishment. "You took on the three of them?"

"I fixed them," Lope nodded. "Right on the button." He rubbed his knuckles gingerly and winced from the pain of the torn shoulder. Turning to look at Deyong, he added:

"Too bad this one is dead. I would like to punch him also!"

One of the Portuguese stirred on the deck, moaning.

"Quick!" the mate called. "He's coming to, Lope!"

"No hurry," was the casual response. "I have the gun." He wrested the automatic from the Frenchman's rigid fingers. "See!" he continued, holding out the weapon. "The passenger from Saigon stole it from Cap'n Bruno."

Michaels glanced at the pearl-handled automatic. He bent low to study the upturned face between him and the Filipino.

"Deyong!" he muttered. "I might have known! But Parga and Diminez . . . ?"

"Scum!" Lope spat the word. "They were on watch, eh? This one, this Frenchman, makes friends with them. I know he gives them money—also promises. For what? They think for mutiny, perhaps, but not Lope! This Frenchman wants more than mutiny! He wants . . ."

Lope paused with another shrug. He watched the mate with eager interest.

"You're not as goofy as I first thought, Lope," Michaels said. "You've done the captain a good turn. I'll take the trouble to see that he hears of it. Only don't keep that automatic pointed in my direction."

"Watch your own gun," said Lope softly.

"Right." After a second's hesitancy, Michaels jammed the weapon into his pocket. "And now," he said bitterly, "whatever it was that Deyong wanted, I'll show you what he's going to get!"

The husky mate dragged the Frenchman's body to the rail and hoisted it.

There was a quick splash and Deyong's body slipped from view beneath the surface of the South China sea.

Lope perched on a hatchtop, the captain's automatic between his knees, while Michaels trussed the still groggy Portuguese together, bundled them into a storeroom behind the galley.

The cook assisted the mate in lifting Captain Bruno and bearing him gently forward to his cabin. A superficial examination revealed that the knife-thrust in the captain's side was not an unduly serious wound.

"Deyong," observed the mate, "was an artist at *savate*."

"So?" queried Lope.

"So it would seem," Michaels said hastily. With a bitter laugh he added: "Let him try kicking a shark below the belt, eh, Lope?"

TWO nights later the *Myrna* was tied up at a dingy wharf on the Manila waterfront. A canvas cot on deck sagged with the weight of Captain Bruno.

Shortly after the schooner's arrival late that afternoon, Lope had gone into the city in search of a doctor to attend Captain Bruno. During

his absence, the *Myrna* was unloaded hastily, her bales of cargo literally strewn on the dock. Following that, Diminez and Parga, in irons, were escorted to the lockup by Michaels and the balance of the crew.

Lope returned to find Captain Bruno alone and fuming with impatience. The skipper's rage increased when the Filipino reported that the doctor he had found was unable to come at once, but would be along as soon as possible.

Lope retired below deck as the captain continued to fume irritably. Captain Bruno, the cook noted, was suffering as severely from nerves as from any physical torment. At frequent intervals he would paw beneath the cot for a bottle of cognac.

Some time later, Lope scurried up the companionway stairs at Captain Bruno's startled roar. The approach of a paunchy, red-faced little man in flapping panama and slightly soiled linen suit had roused the skipper from an alcoholic doze.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" The captain bellowed his challenge.

Smiling, Lope watched the little man hustle forward importantly, plant his kit bag on the foot of the canvas cot, and mop his shiny face with a huge handkerchief.

"The name is Littlehale, sir," the newcomer piped. "Archer Littlehale, M.D., in case that's what you wanted to know. I'm here because a native boy of yours was fortunate enough to catch me at my office, although Lord knows a lot of folks in this town probably need me worse than you. What happens to be the matter with you, anyway?"

The captain's roar had subsided to an apologetic grumble under the little man's disparaging glare and his officious bedside manner.

"I've got a stab wound," he explained, "from a spic knife. I'm afraid that gangrene . . ."

"Nonsense! A giant of a man like

you shouldn't mind a cut or two," the doctor commented. "Of course, if you want me to look . . ." He flipped back the captain's shirt and bent over the wound.

"Hmm!" he observed. "Quite a slice out of you at that, isn't there? But it looks clean as a whistle." Dr. Littlehale laid aside his panama, opened the kit bag, and produced a jar of salve. This isn't really necessary," he said. "I've an idea you could lick a freight car full of ordinary germs. Still, there's no use taking chances."

He rubbed the salve gently into the torn flesh and applied a clean gauze bandage and tape. In moving from one side of the cot to the other during this procedure, Dr. Littlehale's foot came in contact with the cognac bottle. Once the tape was secured, he stooped to lift the bottle and hold it to the light.

"Hmm!" he muttered, approvingly. "You don't need a doctor. You can prescribe for yourself. Is this as genuine as the label would indicate?"

Captain Bruno nodded.

"Boy!" shouted Dr. Littlehale. "Fetch me some cups!"

Lope retreated down the stairs.

"Not that I doubt your word, captain," the doctor said. "I simply can't pass up an opportunity of this kind." He smacked his lips in anticipation of the drink. "Done all this damage by yourself, I suppose," he commented, still looking at the half empty bottle. "Well, a couple more with me won't hurt you."

"**P**ICKED up quite a few bruises along with that knife wound, didn't you?" queried Dr. Littlehale. "I can see that it hurts you to smile." He nodded sympathetically. "After we've had a nip or two, you can tell me your troubles."

"You're a strange one, doctor," the captain commented.

"Not at all," was the reply. "I simply perform no mystic rites in

the practice of my profession. Everything's open and above board with me. Therefore, I urge you to talk of your troubles in order to help you get over them. Immediately on my arrival here I saw that you're not as badly hurt as you are worried."

Dr. Littlehale paused to take the cups proffered by Lope. Pouring out liberal quantities of the cognac, he passed one cup to Captain Bruno, clicked his own against it and drained it at a gulp.

"Now," he said, seating himself on the end of the cot, "let's hear the cause of the worry."

"I don't know why I should tell you"

"Because it'll make you feel better," the doctor interrupted to explain. "That's the reason you sent for me, isn't it? Do as I advise. You'll see I'm right."

Captain Bruno thought it over for a moment.

"Maybe you are right," he admitted finally. "Maybe you can throw some light on an unusual situation. What I'm going to tell you isn't much of a story, but I wouldn't want it to become public"

"My dear sir," said the doctor tartly, "you must know that the confidence of physicians is inviolate. Wild horses could not drag"

"Of course not," the captain apologized. "Only what I'm going to tell you might involve me with the officials. As master of one schooner or another in these waters, my record won't bear well, you understand."

"Perfectly," the doctor said. "But such things are no concern of mine."

Captain Bruno laid aside his cup and hitched himself into a more comfortable position on the cot.

"**T**O begin with," he said, "it was a legitimate venture that took me to Saigon a few weeks ago. Once there, with the crew paid and a few dollars clinking in my own pocket, I could find nothing to take me

away. Times were slack; there was little trade. Rather than sail the *Myrna* out under ballast, and with nothing particularly in view in case I did, I decided to wait. So in Saigon we stayed.

"The crew was ashore every night, and it wasn't long before I heard from them of the circus. Yes, doctor, a real, old-fashioned circus, the like of which only a few ever get this far into the East. A French-American troupe this was, quartered on the outskirts of Saigon and doing a pretty fair business. A regular tent show they were running, so the men told me, with a menagerie of trained animals, dancing girls, acrobats, clowns and athletic carnival. The feature of the whole program was a high-diver, who plunged from the top of a sixty-foot ladder into a shallow canvas tank. Incidentally, this diving fellow was also owner and manager of the circus. He was an American named Frank Bisbee, married to a French woman. My mate had become acquainted with some of the circus folks, as had others of the crew. Visited cafes with them after the show at night, swapped lies, and made up to those dancing girls.

"In due course, I went to the circus myself. Not a bad show they gave. Later I met some of the folks in it. For instance, Bisbee and his French wife. He was a good sort, that diving fellow, temperate of necessity, and a pleasant, sociable chap. But although he may have been the owner of that circus, it didn't take me long to see that he was manager in name only.

"No, sir, there wasn't much doubt about Madame Bisbee's being the actual boss of the outfit. She was one of these flashy, sharp-speaking French women, who could fly into a rage between puffs of a cigarette. She was smart, too. Plenty of brains in her head. She ruled Bisbee and the whole circus. And if I'm not mistaken, it's that woman who more or

less directly led me into my present difficulties.

"Here's the way it happened. About a week after I'd known them, Bisbee approached me on the proposition of transporting the circus—all of it—to Singapore. It was a rush job, he said. They were anxious to get out of Saigon in a hurry, and would pay me well to help them.

"I was a bit puzzled about what to do, doctor. In the first place, I'd only just completed arrangements with another party to bring a cargo of baled goods to Manila. I was to load it the following day and sail on the evening tide. It wasn't much of a cargo and didn't mean the money the circus folks would probably pay. But I couldn't figure out the Bisbees' game. They were doing a good business and were in no trouble as far as I had heard. So why the hurry to get out of Saigon? I told Bisbee of my plan to sail for Manila, but promised to think it over and let him know definitely the next morning.

"Bright and early the following day he boarded the *Myrna*, accompanied by Madame Bisbee. They got down to business right away. If I wouldn't sail for Singapore, they wanted to know if I'd do them a favor by carrying a package for them to a Chinese merchant in Manila. The merchant would call for it, they said. I had to do nothing but store the package in my safe, and collect \$500 in American money in Manila when this yellow party came for it.

"**B**EFORE I could say one way or another, Madame Bisbee drew out the package and handed it to me. It was a small box, not over eight inches long, but heavy. Naturally, I wanted to know what was in it. Madame Bisbee volunteered to inform me.

"The package, she said, contained a bar of solid gold. A countryman of hers had stolen it from the fittings

of a Cambodian temple somewhere up the Meykong River. The theft, it seems, had stirred up a hornet's nest. The Frenchman had managed to get back to Sagon with the bar, she explained, but he'd been trailed and his life was in constant danger. He'd left it with them and fled for safety. As a consequence, some of the unknown agencies seeking either the recovery or further theft of the gold bar had transferred their attentions to the Bisbees. Twice recently their trunks had been broken into and ransacked during the night. Both Bisbee and his wife felt they were being followed wherever they went. In short, they were badly frightened and wanted to get rid of the gold bar. But at the same time they were anxious to get whatever money could be derived from the sale of it. They had thought of the Chinese merchant in Manila, with whom they'd had previous dealings, and already had cabled him to watch for the arrival of the *Myrna* and get the box from me.

"I agreed to bring the stolen bar to Manila for them. If the Chinaman appeared according to schedule I would be at least \$500 richer. If he didn't appear—well, needless to state, half a dozen ideas for the disposal of the bar had occurred to me. Not that it was so extraordinarily valuable, understand. But I couldn't see that I had anything to fear. Remember, I was sailing in a few hours. I said goodbye to the Bisbees, and a short while later was busy supervising the loading of the *Myrna's* cargo.

"During the afternoon, a man came aboard the schooner, said he'd heard I was sailing for Manila, and asked to ship as a passenger. He was a Frenchman named Henri Deyong, a prosperous looking man of middle age. I often pick up a passenger here and there—usually someone who doesn't want to wait for the regular steamer—and at the time we were talking I could think

of no reason why I shouldn't take him. A day out of Saigon, however, Michaels told me he knew Deyong for a renegade and scoundrel. It seems that the Frenchman had an unsavory reputation from one end of the Coast to the other. But it was too late then for me to do anything about it.

"There was also another new face on the *Myrna* when she left Saigon. A short time after Deyong had completed arrangements to sail with us, a battered little Filipino came aboard and asked to work his passage to Manila. He looked familiar, and, sure enough, a few questions revealed that he was one of the circus crowd. I recalled him then as a member of the athletic troupe—a boxer. Right handy with the gloves, too, despite his small size and a sort of dazed look in his eyes. I presumed he'd fought so long that he was punch-drunk. Besides, I had no need of him aboard the schooner.

"But apparently he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Twice that afternoon he came around, begging me to take him on in any capacity. And twice I refused. The third time he came back we were about ready to sail. I discovered the cook was missing. He'd made a late trip ashore for additional supplies and failed to return. I asked the Filipino if he could cook. When he said he could, I told him to go to work. A few minutes later we left Saigon.

"Well, doctor, I don't mind telling you that the bad job I'd made of selecting a passenger was more than counteracted by my choice of a cook. That little fellow, Lope, is a fighting devil! He saved my life!"

DR. LITTLEHALE helped himself to another drink at this point in Captain Bruno's narrative that had to do with the fight at sea. When he had heard the details of the attack perpetrated by Deyong and the two Portuguese, and of

Lope's timely arrival on the deck, the doctor interrupted to inquire:

"By any chance, is this Filipino you're speaking of the same one you sent to fetch me?"

Captain Bruno nodded.

"Funny," the doctor mused, "but that boy looked familiar to me, too. What'd you say was his name?"

"Lope."

"Hmm! And a boxer, too. Would you mind calling him up here? I'll use that wound in his shoulder as a pretext for looking him over."

In response to Captain Bruno's summons, Lope appeared on deck and crossed to the cot.

"Let's see that sore shoulder of yours," the doctor said.

"It's nothing," Lope replied. "All well."

"Let me look," the doctor insisted.

Lope smiled resignedly and pulled off his shirt. Stripped to the waist, the Filipino was seen to be a marvel of physical development.

The doctor studied him intently.

"Nothing the matter with that shoulder," he agreed. "It's healing perfectly. Now let me see your hands."

Lope extended his hands, palms upward, with a bewildered glance at the captain. Dr. Littlehale turned over the Filipino's hands to examine the backs of them. He placed his thumb along the knuckles of Lope's left hand and squeezed gently.

"D'you remember me, Lope?" he asked.

The Filipino gave an embarrassed shrug, his eyes averted. Then he turned his head to meet the doctor's gaze.

"Sure," he said. "I remember."

"Hmm! Perhaps you'd rather I didn't." The doctor paused. "Well, run along, my boy. If there's anything I can ever do for you, don't hesitate to let me know. I'd like a talk with you some time."

Lope smiled, nodded, and disappeared down the companionway.

When he had gone, the doctor turned to Captain Bruno.

"I'll say you've got a cook!" he asserted. "That boy is no less a personage than Lope Canseco, known throughout these islands, and the United States as well, as 'The Cocoa Kid.' Does the name mean anything to you?"

"No? Well, let me tell you, he was lightweight champion of the Philippines six years ago, and one of the greatest fighters of his weight in the world. Once upon a time, he broke his hand in a bout here, and I fixed it for him. Apparently he hasn't forgotten me.

"DO you realize that little fellow used to be a hero in Manila? Crowds followed him wherever he went. Then he decided to campaign in The States—you know, new worlds to conquer. For months we heard of his prowess there; 'The Cocoa Kid' seemed unbeatable. Then the inevitable happened: he was defeated. After that he won another fight or two, and then was whipped again. It was plain he was slipping.

"Things like that are too bad aren't they? I doubt if I've thought of Lope more than once or twice in the last four years. From the idol of thousands to a cook in your galley—it's a long fall he's had, captain. And yet you yourself know that he's still a courageous, honorable and resourceful youngster. After all, he is a youngster to us. I doubt if Lope's thirty.

"Oh, well," the doctor sighed, "I don't suppose he wants my sympathy. But I'd certainly like to have him for a houseman in case he ever leaves your service."

Dr. Littlehale rose to gather up his kit and panama.

"By the way, that's an interesting story of yours," he said. "But I don't think you told me quite all of it. For instance, you neglected to mention that since your mate, Michaels, has learned of the presence of the

stolen gold bar on board, you've feared that he's going to attempt its theft."

"How the devil—?" the captain stared, astonished.

"It's fairly obvious," the doctor replied. "Who else is there to mistrust? By the way, have you found out where Michaels was when Deyong and the Portuguese attacked you?"

"I've tried. Of course, they set upon me very suddenly. Still—"

"Yes?" the doctor pressed.

"There's no use denying that I've suspected Michaels. Remember, he's the one who knew all about Deyong. And Lope has told me of his strange behavior that night."

"And well you might suspect him! But there's no doubt that you've got Lope on your side. That should be a lot of satisfaction to you." Dr. Littlehale donned his panama. "Good night, Captain! Pleasant dreams!" he called, as he started for the gangway.

Captain Bruno gulped down the last drink in the cognac bottle and pondered several minutes over what his visitor had said before summoning Lope to assist him to his cabin. Once inside, he bade the Filipino wait while he opened the safe near his bunk and drew out a small paper-wrapped package.

"I've been hearing some fine things about you, Lope," the captain said, "and I've had a sample of your bravery." He paused to let the words sink in. "Now," he resumed, "I'm going to let you in on a secret, and explain what's expected of you in the future."

He crossed the cabin to his desk, and held out the package for the Filipino's inspection.

"See this?" he inquired. "It contains a bar of solid gold, Lope! It's supposed to go to a Chinese merchant here in Manila, but I don't mind telling you that particular Chink is never going to see it. It's mine, do you understand?"

"Michaels is after this little box. He wants it, too—wants it for himself. But he's not going to get it! And I'll tell you why. From now until further orders, you're going to share this cabin with me. When I'm not standing guard over this safe, you are, d'you see? Once this box is disposed of, I'll pay you for your trouble—and pay you well! How does that strike you?"

"Fine," the Filipino replied.

"**A** NOTHER thing!" the captain rasped: "Michaels is not to set foot in this cabin! You're to stop him! Shoot if necessary! We're sailing tonight—as soon as the crew returns. And we're sailing without Michaels! If he starts anything, let him have it! Understand?"

Lope nodded.

"Mind what I've told you! You're to watch the safe, and watch for Michaels! Moreover, if you see any Chink coming aboard, you're to warn—"

Captain Bruno's jaw snapped shut at the sound of footsteps on the deck. He leaned across the desk to listen, clutching the package in both hands.

"See who that is!" he whispered hoarsely.

Lope opened the door of the cabin and glanced across the deck. He slammed the door quickly.

"Michaels, eh?" The captain's eyes glittered with hate. "Here! Put this in the safe!"

Lope caught at the package, fumbled it awkwardly, and went down on his knees to gather up the box that rolled from its wrapping. Captain Bruno rummaged hastily in a desk drawer to withdraw his pearl-handled automatic. He turned to thrust the gun upon the Filipino, who was still in front of the safe. There was a crackle of wrapping paper as Lope gave a last shove at the interior of the safe before swinging shut the heavy door and spinning the combination.

Lope took the automatic and, without a word, bounded across the

cabin to throw open the door. He stepped quickly outside, pulling the door shut behind him.

Captain Bruno, clenching and unclenching his fists, strained for the report of a gun from the deck. Minutes passed in silence. Once he believed he heard the murmur of voices outside. He wasn't sure. Next came a thud as if a body had fallen to the deck. Still the captain waited. The ticking of the cabin clock hammered at his ears. Then he heard the patter of swiftly running feet.

Captain Bruno moved to open the cabin door. He paused, his hand on the knob, as a voice cried out suddenly from the warf. There was an answering shout, followed by the smashing report of the automatic. Flinging open the door, Captain Bruno stepped out only to stumble over a chinese who lay sprawling in the shadow of the cabin!

Another shot! Michaels bounded up the gangway and crouched behind the rail. As the captain struggled to his feet, the mate frantically signalled him to cover.

Once more the running feet sounded, this time along the planking of the warf. As they died away, Michaels peered warily above the shelter of the rail.

"He's run amok, the devil!" the mate shouted. "Just as well we're rid of him, captain. I hurried back to warn you!"

"Warn me?" The captain's voice trembled.

"What have you heard?" he gasped.

"It's about Lope," Michaels reported breathlessly. "During the questioning by the police, some of the crew and I spoke of the Filipino. When we described him, the officials were convinced that he's Lope Canseco, 'The Cocoa Kid'."

"I know that?" Captain Bruno sighed his relief. "He's former lightweight champion of the—"

"Where'd you get that?" Michaels demanded. "'The Cocoa Kid' is the most notorious brown-

skinned devil this side of hell! He's a number one confidence man, gem thief, and smuggler! That punch-drunk fighter pose is a favorite of his, the police say!"

Captain Bruno wiped a hand across his perspiring forehead. He glanced at the Chinese crumpled on the deck to note for the first time a red welt forming on the side of the stricken man's jaw. On the deck nearby, a white strip of paper stirred in a faint breeze from across the harbor. Captain Bruno snatched up the paper and unfolded it to read:

"GET PACKAGE ARRIVING ON
SCHOONER MYRNA DUE IN MANILA
THURSDAY. PAY CAPTAIN 500 DOL-
LARS.

"BISBEE"

Captain Bruno's pallor was ghost-like as he tottered into his cabin and approached the safe. With trembling hands he clawed at the combination and tugged on the handle to the heavy door. Groping frantically inside, his fingers closed upon the empty wrapping paper!

"What's up?" Michaels stepped close as the captain sank to the bunk, shivering as if from tropic fever, and staring at the cabin wall with glazed, unseeing eyes.

Captain Bruno's lips moved, but his answer was an incoherent mumble.

"THE nice part about it, Lope," the little red-faced man said, "is that it really isn't stealing in a case like this. It's just outsmarting other crooks. And a very nice job you've done."

"You too." The Filipino smiled. "I laugh to see the way you drink with him and get him to talk. I cry to hear the sad story you tell of poor Lope. You act a very fine doctor."

The two men were exchanging compliments behind bolted doors of an unpretentious dwelling in the native section of Manila. A small box lay between them on the table.

"Pull off the end," he suggested.

The little man twisted obligingly at the cylinder. An end loosened, fell away in his grip. Thirty jewels spilled out on a blotting pad to glitter in the lamplight. Diamonds. Rubies. Emeralds. Pearls.

"Whew!" said the astonished little man.

"Solid gold!" Lope snorted disdainfully. "As if Henri Deyong would go to such trouble for a bar of gold! He knew what the box held, because he stole these from the temple on the Meykong, at Pnom Penh!" Lope pointed to the jewels. "And after stealing them, he brought them to Saigon, where, like a fool, he boasted — at least to Madame Bisbee."

"I wasn't aware that you knew Deyong," said the little man.

"I didn't know him," Lope replied. "I had never seen him before the night in Saigon when he was pointed out to me in a cafe. He was sitting with Madame Bisbee, drinking."

"Hmm! She knew him pretty well. What about her story to Captain Bruno?"

"All lies! Deyong was waylaid in a dark street in Saigon later on the same night that I first saw him. He was given a bad beating and robbed. I know because I watched from a doorway. Three of the circus men were responsible, and Madame Bisbee was waiting just around the corner. That's how she got the little box!"

"And now I understand why you joined the circus!"

"Sure! The next day I became the punch-drunk fighter and showed my act. I was anxious to see this loot that caused so much trouble."

"So you're the one who ransacked the Bisbees' trunks?"

"The first time," Lope admitted. "Afterwards it was Deyong. He did not believe Madame Bisbee's denials of the robbery. He was sure she had the jewels. And although he couldn't

find them, he frightened her into trying to dispose of them."

"But how'd he learn that she'd turned them over to Captain Bruno?"

"It was simple. He bribed someone to let him read the cablegram she sent to Manila. An hour later he was on board the *Myrna*."

"And you followed."

"First I had to knock out the cook," Lope explained. "After that it was easy. I had only to wait for Deyong's next move. He was hasty and made another bad mistake: he picked out the Portuguese seamen to do his dirty work. He probably planned to get the jewels and put the schooner into the closest port."

"Meanwhile, Cap'n Bruno had found out what the box contained. His worried look told that better than words. He began to suspect that Michaels also knew about the jewels."

"And you fed his suspicion." The little man nodded approval.

"As much as possible," said Lope, "but I had to be careful. That is how I happened to think of the 'doctor' idea. You played the part as I dreamed it. After you had gone, Cap'n Bruno felt sure that I was the man to help him—and he was ready to have Michaels shot. The jewels must be unlucky. Whoever has them seems to lose his sense."

"FOR instance," Lope continued, "tonight when he heard a noise on deck, the cap'n got so excited he didn't wait to find out who was there. He thought it was Michaels, but it was only a Chinese. I didn't bother to tell him, because just then he was handing me the box. I dropped it, picked it up, stuck it inside my shirt, and pushed the wrapping paper into the safe. A second later he handed me a gun and let me walk out with the jewels."

"And I was just in time. Michaels returned while I was trying to get the Chinaman to go away. I hit the Chinese, fired a shot over the mate's head, and ran."

"And here you are!" The little man chuckled. "What could be nicer?"

"The money," Lope replied promptly.

The two men laughed again.

"I'll let you have \$5,000 tonight, Lope," the little man told him. "It's all the cash I have on hand. As I dispose of these jewels, I'll deposit half of the money to your account in the Shanghai bank. Satisfactory?"

"Sure," said the Filipino. "We split a fortune this trip, eh?" He laughed. "Probably, when you are in Shanghai, Cap'n Bruno will still be looking here for Dr. Littlehale, who failed to make a second visit to the schooner. And I—I will be in Singapore with my \$5,000."

"On business, Lope?"

"Combined with pleasure. I am rejoining the circus when it arrives there."

"What! Are you crazy?"

"Very smart," Lope contradicted. "The Bisbee's suspect nothing. They think I have gone to visit a sick relative. It's an old American excuse—but instead of going to a ball game, I have taken a little hunting trip, eh? Besides, that circus is the safest place for me. Never fear, Cap'n Bruno will not show his face to Madame Bisbee again. Also, I have another reason for going back—"

"Ah!"

"Sure, my friend. She is one of the dancing girls. She is very young, very pretty, and ho! What a figure! I think she will be glad to see that dazed look gone from Lope's eyes. I know she will be glad to see him with so much money."



WALLFLOWERS

By VAL McNAMARA

Brains Beat Brawn

BILL SHANNON prodded viciously with his index finger at the X on his typewriter and obliterated the line he had written.

Literature lost nothing by the erasure, for Mr. Shannon's last recorded thought had been: "I'd like to bust his lousy neck!"

As the neck in question was the exclusive property of Sam Wilson, 200-pound All-American tackle and

No. 1 in the Harvard varsity eight, it would seem that the realization of Mr. Shannon's pet ambition was indeed a distant prospect.

Having exed out the line to his satisfaction, Mr. Shannon ran a brown hand through his fiery thatch of hair and fixed smouldering blue eyes on the frosted glass door behind which lurked the managing editor of the "Searchlight."

Not that Mr. Shannon was interested in the M. E. The carrot-topped reporter could take his M. E.'s or leave them alone. Generally he preferred to follow the latter course. His close interest in the editorial sanctum sanctorum in the present instance was inspired by the presence therein of Jill Trevelyan and the Carnerian Mr. Wilson.

Whenever Jill came into the immediate vicinity of Bill Shannon, invariably there was born within him the urge to do either of two things, depending on the circumstances of her presence. Most of the time Bill felt the lash of his muse, driving him to write poetry instead of what the Mayor said to the President of the Board of Aldermen; but in the present instance Bill was in the throes of a savage desire to break things—foremost among which would be the isthmus that connected the Adonisque head of Mr. Sam Wilson with his Herculean torso.

Not that Bill held anything personal against Sam, mind you. He had felt just the same about Prince D'Harcourt and the Hon. Algernon Southcliffe, scions of European journalistic empires, when they had squired Jill about. Strange how these visitors who came here to "study American journalism" preferred to do their suveying under the wing of the beauteous Miss Trevelyan, thought Bill. Oh, he didn't blame them. He'd be—

"Murphe-e-e! Where the hell's Murphy?" The stentorian bellow of "Big George" himself derailed Bill's train of thought with a jar.

"Big George" was Jill's father, owner of the "Searchlight" and a score of other newspapers strung across the continent. A big, genial sportsman who usually radiated goodwill, "Big George" was not himself this morning. He stood at the door of his private office giving a passable impersonation of the Bull of Bashan as he howled for Murphy, the city editor.

"Yes, Chief, what is it?" Murphy, a paper cup in his hand, made his leisurely way from the water cooler.

"OH, there you are, Murphy. Take a look at this—" holding out a sheet of paper—"threatening me—me, George Trevelyan—damn their hides. Do they think they can scare me, Murphy? I'll show 'em. Give me a front page editorial on the building racket for the 6 a. m. edition. Assign two more men to work on the story—and they're to stay with it until we have that bunch of grafters in jail. I'll show 'em what it means to shake a fist at George Trevelyan. That's all, Murphy—go to it!"

With a bang that shook the office and placed the glass door in extreme jeopardy, "Big George" retired to his sanctum, leaving City Editor Murphy staring at the paper in his hand and scratching his head in wonder.

"Hey, Shannon!" Murphy's voice jerked Bill erect as he was on the point of returning to his musings of Jill and Sam Wilson.

"You know where they're building that new bughouse out on Long Island? Get out there and have a talk with some of the workmen. Find out if they have to pay a rake-off for holding their jobs. Also to whom it is paid and how much. They won't want to talk, but that's up to you. Work that sympathetic manner of yours. Do anything—but get the dope. The Old Man's been threatened, so we must be getting hot. Here's the note that drove him up in the air just now."

Bill took the single sheet of cheap note paper. It was unsigned. Crudely printed characters informed Mr. George Trevelyan that if his paper persisted in continuing the series of articles on the so-called building racket the House of Trevelyan was due to have "a nice bunch of crepe on its front door."

"I think it's just a bluff, Murph. They wouldn't dare—"

"'Dare' is a word that our Mr. Shannon should avoid like poison ivy." Jill, escorted by the grinning Sam Wilson, had come up, unseen and unheard, behind Bill and Murphy. She smiled provocatively at the reporter.

Bill blushed until his face and neck matched the color of his hair. Jill, he knew, was alluding to certain past incidents. Particularly to one "dare" from which he had shied away—the dare of moonlight, a canoe on the private lake of the Trevelyan estate and the lure of lips upturned to his. But what could a \$60-a-week reporter do? She was the boss's daughter, heiress to millions.

Bill managed to stammer a greeting, while he scowled murderously at Sam Wilson. Jill looked lovelier than ever, he thought. Her cool, grey eyes surveyed him impersonally from under the brim of a big sun hat and made his thoughts revert to his mental drama of mayhem, in which the muscular neck of the grinning Wilson played the leading role.

"What was dad screaming about a moment ago?" Jill asked Murphy. "Has someone been tampering with his cigars again?"

"No, Miss—er—just a little snarl in office routine." Murphy stammered. "Well, go ahead, Red, what are you waiting for?"—to Bill.

"We have a car below, Mr. Shannon. Maybe we can give you a lift," Jill offered sweetly. "There's plenty of room. Isn't there, Sam?"

"Always room for one more," cackled Mr. Wilson, "especially when one likes to hide in corners."

BILL's eyes fairly smoked as he glared at Jill's escort. But he choked back his rage. His voice was icy as he replied: "Thanks a lot, Miss Trevelyan, but you're not going my way. Of necessity you must travel in the limelight—" with a sar-

donic glare at Wilson—"and it hurts my eyes."

"I'll remember that!" Wilson grated.

"Sure, you will," Bill smiled, "an elephant never forgets!" With that he bowed mockingly, swept his hat from the desk and ran for the elevator, shouting "going do-own!"

An hour later Bill brought his battered roadster to a wheezing halt on the bustling scene where the State was erecting its bigger and better institution for the insane in the midst of a Long Island wood.

Locking the ignition, Bill was about to leave the car when a passable double for the late Rudolph Valentino appeared from nowhere and placed an elegant, patent leather-shod foot on the running board of the roadster.

"Anything I can do for you, Mister?" The exquisite asked, speaking around a long, slim cigar.

Bill looked him over and decided upon caution. "Maybe you can help me, Mr.—er—?"

"Pandelli is the name—Gino Pandelli," the other offered, raising a delicate eyebrow. "What's on your mind?"

"Well, you see," Bill prevaricated, "I'm a writer. A magazine has commissioned me to do an article on our State mental institutions, and as this is to be the biggest and most elaborate of all I thought I might include something about it in the story. You see—"

"Well, Mister, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. This here job is only just started an' there's nothing you could write about it. Come back in six months and you'll be able to get a better idea of the set-up."

"Oh, but this is just what I need," Bill argued. "Getting in on the ground floor, so to speak, don't you see, Mr. Pan—er—"

"Pandelli is the name; and it's no use hanging around here. No visitors are allowed on the construction site,

so you'd better scam. Besides, I think I've seen you before. If I'm not mistaken you're a reporter for some city rag."

Bill smothered an inclination to heave a fist at the sneering mouth. He had an assignment to cover and must play the game the hard way.

"I think you're mistaken, Mister —er—Pandora," he said, "but it is obvious I am not welcome, so I'll bid you good afternoon."

"Pandelli is the name, smart aleck," the other grated, "and the sooner you get that boiler out of here the better for you. And don't let me see you nosing around here again!" he flung over his shoulder as he strolled away.

AS Bill backed his car to head back the way he had come, he cast a furtive glance to where the too-good-looking Mr. Pandelli was in earnest conversation with another man who had come out of a shanty that apparently served as a time-keeper's office. After much hand-waving and head-nodding this man hurried away along a footpath through the woods.

Pensively Bill threw the car in gear and sped down the dirt road towards the highway. It might mean nothing, but, on the other hand, the man who had taken to the woods so hurriedly might be bearing a message from Pandelli to someone else. It ought be worth the trouble if he could find out whither the man was bound.

Half a mile down the road Bill drove the roadster into a narrow clearing among the fern and bracken, and, after locking the transmission, headed off through the woods on a course that he judged would cut across the path taken by Pandelli's messenger.

Five minutes later Bill was nestling in the undergrowth, listening to the strains of "O Sole Mio," whistled off-key. Cautiously raising his head, he was gratified to note that the

whistler was his quarry. Slick and almost as well-dressed as Pandelli, the man sauntered along, unconscious that he was being spied upon. Bill took grim notice of the bulge under the man's left arm—a gun. Maybe he was on the right track at that. Harmless construction work attaches do not carry guns.

Giving his man a good head start, Bill pussy-footed along in his wake, his heart hammering as he combed his memory for all the wood lore he had absorbed in his adolescence from "Deerslayer" and the "Scalp Hunters" to aid him in gliding noiselessly through the bracken.

Apparently he did well, for his quarry never glanced behind. After playing follow-the-leader for about half a mile, a sharp curve in the path brought Bill and the man he was stalking almost slap up against a house. "Ha, the goal," Bill murmured to himself.

Sure enough, it was. After a cursory glance around, Bill's quarry turned into the neglected, weed-covered path that led to the front door of what had been a pretentious mansion, but had now fallen into ruin and decay. Weather-beaten green shutters hung from rusty hinges, and great flakes of white paint peeled in strips from the wooden pillars that supported the porte cochere. Grass sprouted between the tiles of the porch flooring.

Keeping well hidden in a fern clump, Bill watched his man unlock the front door, enter and close it behind him.

Now what? He must find out what was going on in there. Suiting action to the thought, Bill snaked off on a detour that would bring him to a blind spot, uncommanded by the windows of the house. He made it safely, with utter disregard for the knees of his trousers, and crouched amid the tall weeds under a window from which glass long since had vanished.

Just as he was about to risk taking a look inside, the sound of footsteps hammering on an uncarpeted floor within the room sent him bobbing back to earth. Then came a voice, and Bill caught the last part of a number. He threw a quick glance upward. Yes, there was a wire. The man inside was telephoning. Bill listened.

"Yeah, Chief a reporter sure, Gino gave him the bum's rush naw, Boss he was just a nosey sap he won't come back Yeah, Boss, I'm listenin' what, bringin' her here? oh, sure, Boss I'll tell Pandelli we can get a flock of eats from the village Okay, Chief S'long!"

WHILE Bill was trying to extract some significance from the fragments of conversation that filtered from the window, he heard the click of the receiver as the man inside hung up the instrument. A moment later came the sound of receding footsteps, followed by the bang of the front door and the resumption of "O Sole Mio."

Bill waited until the unmusical whistling had died away in the distance. Then he reached up and pulled himself through the broken window.

He found himself in a spacious room, damp and smelling with the mustiness of inoccupancy. In several places the wall paper, a hideous design of red roses, hung from the sweating wall in scroll-like strips. A big, open fireplace, done in cobble stones, was at one end of the room; a few packing cases and battered pails occupied a corner. A large table, on which stood a telephone, and an ancient horse-hair couch were the only articles of furniture in the room.

Silently as a cat Bill glided across the rotting floor, listening intently the while. But apparently he had the

house to himself. Not a sound broke the morgue-like stillness. To make sure, however, he explored the entire building, ten rooms in all. Each was papered with the red rose atrocity, and with the exception of one, which had a few chairs and a table, none contained anything but cobwebs and dust.

Having concluded his inspection, Bill returned to the room he first entered and used the phone to call the "Searchlight" office. He told Murphy of his experience with Pandelli and of how the incident had been reported promptly by the latter.

No he hadn't been able to get the telephone number the man had called, and it was no use returning to the construction site. It was past five now and the men had left for the day. He'd try a different tack, not so direct, tomorrow.

Leaving Murphy in the midst of a grumbling disquisition on the merits of the good old days when reporters were real newspapermen, Bill hung up and headed back to where he had left his car. It hadn't been molested during his absence. Still pondering on the strange behavior of Mr. Gino Pandelli and the fragmentary telephone conversation he had overheard, Bill bowled along the highway, citywards, calling it a day wasted.

FOLLOWING Bill Shannon's precipitate departure from the "Searchlight" office, Sam Wilson treated himself to a delighted chuckle. "Our red-headed scribe is certainly a glutton for punishment. Isn't he, Jill?" he chortled. "You know, I believe the fellow actually has a crush on you—not that I blame him for that," he added hurriedly. Then, patting himself on the chest, "it is patent that friend Red does not like competition. 'Fraid he'll always be a wallflower."

Jill stared appraisingly at the athletic hero. "I wonder, Sam," she murmured pensively, "whether

you'd have the courage to swallow a dare rather than your pride."

"I don't see what—" Wilson began.

"It doesn't matter, Sam. My heavens! Do you realize we are to play tennis in Westchester this evening? We'd better start!"

Speeding along the north-bound lane of traffic uptown in Jill's expensive roadster, Sam reverted to the subject of Bill Shannon. "Say, Jill, you're not soft on that reporter, are you?" he asked jokingly. "He's not your type, you know . . . lacks zip. I think he's yellow—just plain yellow. Don't you remember—"

Jill cut around a dawdling coupe in front, missing the fenders of a taxi by an eyelash. "Yes, Sam, I know what you were about to say. Don't I remember the night Bill endured the laughs of a whole party on Long Island because he refused your challenge to race three miles out to the buoy in the Sound at midnight. He admitted he was an indifferent swimmer, but pointed out that even if he were a second Johnny Weissmuller he wouldn't risk his life just to provide a thrill for a 'jaded bunch of drones,' I think he called us, who didn't have the guts to tackle the job themselves—or any other job, for that matter."

"So you're defending him, Jill?" Sam grumbled.

Jill slammed on the brake viciously as the traffic light at 181st Street changed to red. "No," she denied, "I'm not defending him—merely trying to see from his viewpoint."

While Jill and Sam had been engaged in their debate, a maroon sedan had slid up beside them at the traffic line. The occupants of this car cast appraising eyes over the pair in the roadster and nodded to each other—satisfied. When the light flashed green the sedan hung back.

Out of the heavy traffic, and with the comparatively clear highways of Van Cortlandt Park before her, Jill opened up the roadster and sped

along at sixty. Neither she nor Sam took any notice of the car that matched their speed, keeping a steady gap between the two autos.

Not until the maroon sedan pulled up level with them on a lonely stretch of the Sawmill River Road did the pair in the roadster think of anything out of the ordinary.

The man sitting beside the driver of the sedan gestured for Jill to stop.

"Looks like we're pinched for speeding," Sam muttered. "Better pull up, Jill."

"THEY'RE not police," Jill grated between set teeth as she held the bucking wheel of the roadster and trod harder on the accelerator. "It looks like some kind of hold-up."

The cars were now racing hood to hood along the narrow road, the sedan gradually nosing over in front of the roadster's radiator, forcing Jill to edge closer and closer to the soft shoulders of the road.

Desperately she stamped on the gas. But the accelerator was touching the floor. The speedometer read seventy-five. The roaring engine was giving its last ounce of power.

Slowly the sedan drew ahead until its rear window was level with Jill. Then a hand, holding a blue automatic, was thrust towards the roadster and waved menacingly.

"Stop, Jill! For Heaven's sake, stop! They're going to shoot," Sam Wilson gasped, grabbing at the wheel.

Jill knocked his hand away, contemptuously. "So you called Bill Shannon yellow a while ago." She sneered. But she slowly released pressure on the accelerator, applied the brakes and brought the roadster to a stop. The maroon sedan came to a grinding halt a scant ten yards in front.

Two of the three men who climbed out of the sedan and strolled back to the roadster looked like ordinary business men, except that they were

a shade too flashily dressed. The third had the earmarks of a retired pugilist who had spent more time at the receiving than the giving end of the game. All held guns.

"What's the meaning of the movie show?" Jill demanded coolly, as the first of the trio jerked the door of the roadster open.

"Get out, sister!" The man ordered in a flat voice. "You, too, Big Boy," waving the gun at Sam.

"I refuse to get out," Jill stormed. "You can't—"

"Oh, I can't, eh!" The man muttered. "Haul her out, Spike!"

Spike turned out to be the pug-like member of the trio. He grabbed Jill by the arm and jerked her from behind the wheel. Sam made a half-hearted gesture in her direction. But a glance at the gun in the hand of the other man cowed him.

"All right. Take your filthy hands off me. I'll do what you want, but you'll pay for it later," Jill cried, her voice choked with rage.

"That's the spirit, sister. Just get into that car ahead. Behave yourself and you won't be harmed—that is, if your old man will listen to reason," the well-dressed thug murmured softly. "C'mon, Tarzan, you too," to Sam.

Inside the sedan, Jill and Sam were given each a pair of goggles and ordered to put them on. The glass was covered with adhesive tape and although Jill tried her hardest to see out of the corners she found she was as efficiently blind-folded as if her eyes themselves had been taped.

"Now, sister, and you, Tarzan," the voice of their captor warned, "your safety depends upon yourselves. You're going for a little ride."

"Why don't you go to Hollywood?" Jill mocked. "You'd be a sensation."

The man chuckled: "You can take it, sister. Awright, Tony, you drive. You, Spike, look after the roadster. Better go by Washington Bridge."

Jill heard an "okay, Boss!" from Spike. Then they were in motion.

FROM the movements of the car Jill sensed they had turned about and were headed back the way they had come. Her theory was borne out twenty minutes later when she heard the roar of an elevated train overhead. Then came the buzz of city traffic. During one brief halt, for traffic lights, she guessed, Jill toyed with the thought of making a bid for freedom. But, as if he had read her thoughts, the gunman, who sat between her and Sam, quietly warned: "No tricks, sister, or you and the boy friend will be twanging harps before you know it."

Gradually the sound of traffic diminished, and Jill guessed they were out in the country again.

Once the gunman offered the prisoners cigarettes. Jill accepted gratefully. She had left her own in the roadster. But Sam uttered a shaky "no thanks!"

It was two hours by Jill's rough reckoning before the sedan came to a stop and they were ordered out. They still wore the taped goggles, but Jill could tell it was dark by the absence of the glow that should have penetrated the sides of the blinders.

Guided by a hand on her arm, the girl walked shakily along a path that scrunched underfoot. Then a voice told her "up three steps, sister," and she was led through a door, along an uncarpeted corridor and into a room.

Here the goggles were whipped off. Jill stared around in a vain effort to pierce the gloom. The room in which she found herself with Sam and her captors was vast. Illuminated only by one dim electric bulb on the high ceiling, the room had a depressing atmosphere that made her shiver. What caught and held her attention most was the camera that stood on a tripod in the center of the room.

Jill wasn't given much time to

study her surroundings, however. Taken by the arm, she was led to a seat at the wall. Sam Wilson was plumped down beside her, without protest, a moment later, while the voice of the chief thug spoke to an unseen member of the gang, asking if the camera were ready.

"Yeah, Boss. I focused it on that seat while the light was good. I've only got to shoot," answered a stocky individual who materialized out of the gloom.

"We are going to take your picture before we feed you," the gangster explained to his prisoners. "You can smile if you like—that is, if you feel like smiling. Okay, Goniff—shoot!"

Almost immediately there was a blinding flash, followed by a grunt of satisfaction from the photographer. "That's got 'em, Chief!" He chortled. "I'll have a print for you in ten minutes."

"Okay, Goniff, go to it. The snapper the better." Approved the other. "Tell one of the boys to bring in some grub for the guests when you go out there."

AT midnight Bill Shannon was in his modest lodgings, pecking at his typewriter on the ignis fatuus of every newspaper man—the "great American novel"—when the harsh cackle of the phone brought a grunt of annoyance.

His aggrieved "hello" brought the excited voice of City Editor Murphy over the wire. Stunned, Bill listened to the torrent of words. "Jill abducted . . . roadster found in Jersey . . . must not notify police yet."

"Wilson . . . what about Wilson . . . wasn't he with her?" Bill roared into the transmitter.

"Sure, he was with her . . . He's gone, too!" came Murphy's tinny voice. "For God's sake get down here, Bill. Every available man is needed. The Old Man's going crazy."

Not waiting to don a necktie, Bill grabbed coat and hat on the fly and hurled himself down the stairs. He broke every traffic law in the rule book on the fastest trip he had ever made to the office.

Murphy didn't have much to tell. Jill had left the office with her football hero to play tennis in Westchester. The next thing was a call from New Jersey State Police. They'd found Jill's abandoned roadster outside Englewood. The car license in the door pocket identified it. Jill's father had called the place in Westchester, but she hadn't showed up there. Now every man on the "Searchlight" staff was combing the city for a clue.

Did Bill think it was an elopement?

Bill emphatically and profanely announced that Jill wouldn't marry "that ape" on a bet.

Murphy glanced towards "Big George's" private office. "He's in there," he whispered hoarsely, "all broken up. He believes it's a snatch and won't make a move except to curse and groan . . . says they're sure to contact him any minute about ransom."

EVEN as Murphy spoke, Limpy Gates, one of the "Searchlight" doormen, shuffled into the city room and laid a package on the mail desk. "Just came, Mr. Murphy," he husked. "Fellah in a car gave it to me at the front door."

Murphy dived for the package, a flat oblong wrapped in brown paper. His nervous fingers tore it open and his eyes bulged as a wet photographic print came to light. It was a flashlight picture, unmistakably of Jill and Wilson, both looking somewhat bewildered.

"It's them!" Murphy howled ungrammatically. "Get the Old Man, Bill!"

"Wait a minute, Murph. Here's a note!" Bill muttered, picking up a sheet of notepaper from the wrap-

pings. Familiar printed characters leaped out at him from the sheet.

"To Big George Trevelyan," it read. "We've got your kid and her B. F. Pictures don't lie. If you want them back a la Frank Buck you will print a bit on the front page of your morning rag saying you've been mistaken about the building union. We don't care how you do it, so long as you do it and it satisfies us that your rag is going to lay off. If your morning edition does not contain the bit we want or if you squawk to the cops it's curtains for the dame and her Tarzan."

The note was unsigned.

"Big George" was a pathetic figure as he read the note and looked at the picture. He cursed feelingly. But even his profanity lacked its customary zip. "We're licked, Murphy!" he groaned. "We must do as they order. If they—they harmed Jill—I'd—" His mighty shoulders sagged. Ten years seemed to have been added to his life.

"Better get a box story written for the front page of the 6 a. m. edition, Murphy," he sighed. "Word it any way you like. But meet their demands in full. Bring it here for my approval before you set it up."

Back in the city room, Bill, clutching the damp picture, turned on Murphy. "Listen, Murph," he begged, "there's nearly three hours before we go to press for the 6 a. m. edition. If you don't hear from me by 3.30 go ahead. But—"

"Say, whatinell do you think you're going to do?" Murphy gasped. "We can't take a chance on the kid's life. These birds mean business."

"This is just a hunch, Murph. It won't do any harm to play it. I may be all wet. But there's something about this picture that gave me an idea. We may not have to eat our words after all."

"But, Bill, can't you tell me—"

Murphy spoke to the wind, for Bill was gone on the run. A moment

later Murphy heard the roar of his engine as he drove his decrepit roadster full open down the street.

IT seemed to Jill that she had been years in the gloomy prison with the gloomier Sam Wilson, now thoroughly deflated and nervously plucking at the crease of his trousers, playing mummy beside her on the couch.

Only one of the gang, Spike, the ex-pug, was in the room with them. He sat by the only window on an overturned pail, his gun beside him on the floor. His companions apparently were engaged in a card game in another room. Now and then a cackle of hoarse laughter and bursts of conversation penetrated the thin walls.

Jill glanced at her wrist watch. Two o'clock.

"What do you think they're going to do with us?" For the twentieth time Sam Wilson put the question.

"If I had my crystal here I might be able to relieve your anxiety," Jill sneered. "However, I don't think you need have any cause for alarm. Dad will pay. Poor dad! He must be terribly worried." Then, lowering her voice to the faintest whisper, "Do you realize that there is only one man over there and that he is about half your size?"

"But, Jill—he's got a gun I believe you wouldn't care if I was murdered."

Jill smiled pityingly. "Poor Sam," she said. "I think I understand. Without the crowded grandstands, cheering thousands and newsreel cameras you're out of your depth. You poor—you hero! I'm glad I—"

Jill stopped and stiffened as the front door crashed open and feet hammered along the uncarpeted corridor outside. Voices were raised in excitement. Snatches of the shouting filtered into the room. "Blazing like mad get down there every cop in the county will be around." Then the door of the

room banged open and the boss gunman hurried in.

"Spike, you stick here and keep an eye on this pair," he ordered crisply. "Some sap started a fire down there in the woods. If we don't put it out every hick cop in the country will be nosin' around. Guess it's just brush, so we shouldn't be long."

"I hope the lot of them get cooked nice and brown," Jill murmured spitefully. "Do you think there is any chance of the fire blowing this way, Mr.—er—Spike?" she asked their jailer.

"Naw," that worthy spat. "The boys'll have it out in a minute."

SUDDENLY her heart skipped a beat and she almost screamed. The black shadow of a head had risen above the window sill behind the unsuspecting Spike. Jill watched breathlessly as the shoulders came into view. Then she cried out as Spike, apparently sensing the presence behind him, sprang about like a cat, sweeping up the gun from the floor as he turned. But in the interval it had taken Spike to about face, the intruder had heaved himself through the window and the gangster was tackled before he had a chance to use his gun.

Locked in a snarling, cursing heap, Spike and his attacker crashed to the floor, punching, gouging and kicking as they rolled into a dark corner, while Jill vainly strained her eyes through the gloom in an effort to see how the battle was going.

The sickening thud of a fist pounding into flesh and bone, followed by a groan, sounded the grand finale of the battle. Wide-eyed, Jill stood as one of the combatants detached himself from the indistinct heap and stood up, dusting himself off.

Then realization sent the blood pounding to her head. "Bill!" She shrieked. "Oh, Bill," and flung herself into the arms of the bedraggled

red-headed demon with the bloody face who stalked slowly out of the gloom.

"You all right, Honey?" Bill demanded, holding her at arms length. But all Jill could sob was "Oh, Bill!"

"Chin up, Jill. We'll have to get out of here before the other gorillas get back," Bill ordered. "Come on, Wilson. Get unstuck from that sofa and let's breeze out of here."

"Well, well, if it isn't the magazine writer!" The voice, laden with menace, came from the doorway.

The three occupants of the room spun around. The man Bill had met as Gino Pandelli stood there, a blue automatic held in his shapely hand.

"I had a hunch that fire might not be accidental, so I came back," he announced softly. "Now we have three birds in the cage. Make yourself at home, Coppertop!"

Resignedly Bill shrugged his shoulders as if to walk towards the sofa. But as he passed the menacing figure at the door he heaved his body in a desperate side leap at Pandelli.

The roar of the automatic almost burst Bill's ear drums and the burning powder scorched the hair at his temple. But he got to his man and grabbed the gun before Pandelli could fire again. Faced with a hand to hand scrap and unable to use his weapon, the thug was easy prey for the raging reporter. A right to the jaw sent him to the floor. Bill was on top of him like a puma, his fists going like trip hammers. Pandelli made an effort to bring up his gun, but Bill wrenched it from him and brought the barrel down on his skull with a bone-crushing smack. The thug went limp as a dish rag.

Bill jumped to his feet panting, grabbed Jill by the hand and rushed out of the room, Wilson bringing up the rear.

The front door was wide open and the trio bounded outside, only to be brought to a startled halt by the

blaze of a flashlight lancing right in their eyes.

Bill gathered his muscles for another fracas, but a leaping flame from the fire in the woods brought a big sigh of relief. The man who held the flash was a huge State Trooper. Behind him were several men in the uniform of the C. C. C.

"Forest Army to the rescue," grinned Bill. "We're safe, Jill."

"**S**AY, what is all this?" The trooper demanded. "We heard a shot up here. And there's a roadster burning down there in the woods. Damn near set the whole countryside afire. When we came to investigate, a bunch of guys tried to beat it. But we've got 'em all. Now you'd better tell your story and make it good."

"Better hold tight to the birds you've caught, General." Bill told him. "There are two more in the house you'd better put the bracelets on too. They're bad medicine—all kidnapers."

When Spike and Pandelli, still out to the world, had been secured, Bill introduced Jill and Sam Wilson.

"They were snatched with the idea of bludgeoning the "Searchlight" into calling off its expose on the building racket." Bill told the trooper. "Suffering Hanna! That reminds me. What time is it, General?"

The trooper looked at his watch. "Just three o'clock!"

Bill dived for the phone in the room that had been Jill's prison. He got the "Searchlight." "Hey, Murph . . . Shannon speaking. Ji—Miss Trevelyan and Wilson are okay. Tell the Old Man he can go right ahead with that series. There's been a roundup and we've got most of the gang—at least the strong-arm squad. Some of these boys will be only too glad to squeal on the higher-ups now that they're faced with a kidnaping charge."

"Well," the trooper said after

everything had been explained, "I don't see why you can't take that maroon sedan out there if you want to get back to the city."

"General, you're a prince!" Bill told him. "Come on, Jill—but first—" and the red-head tore a strip from the crazy wallpaper, which he folded and placed in an inside pocket. "Now let's go!"

Driving back towards the lights of the city with Jill cuddled close beside him on the front seat—a chastened Jill with the light of hero-worship in her eyes—Bill told of his breakneck drive down to the Long Island woods.

"I didn't dare risk your life, Jill," he said.

"Don't ever mention the word 'dare' again, Bill, if you love me—and, by the way, you do—don't you?"

"Well, as I was saying," Bill went on, ignoring the question. "I had to try strategy. I went back and set fire to the old roadster. She was almost through anyway" he said regretfully. "That brought the gang out on the run, and it was easy to slip in and tackle that big gorilla who was guarding you."

"But, Bill what I can't understand is how you found out where they were holding us in the first place.

"That was a break, Honey," Bill said. "You see, the picture they took of you to scare your dad showed a little bit of background. It was a design of awful red roses. I played a hunch that there couldn't be such monstrous wall paper in two places in America and—"

"It was a great day for wall-flowers," Jill murmured.

"What was that?" Bill asked.

"Oh I was just saying how clever of you, dear," Jill giggled.

"Well, when we're married—we're going to be. Aren't we?" Jill just snuggled closer. "The bridal bouquet is going to be of plain red roses. Now what do you think of that?"

Five Fatal Minutes

by Westmoreland Gray



CHAPTER I

JIMMY WHITTIER whistled as he unlocked the door of the Charles City bank that morning and admitted himself. Jimmy was twenty-three and he whistled most of the time. He liked his job—he was assistant cashier. He liked his immediate boss, George Killeen, who was cashier. He liked Charles City, the small town in which he had been reared.

Jimmy pushed the outer door to behind him. It was fifteen minutes till opening time, George would arrive in ten minutes. Meanwhile

it was Jimmy's job to open the vault and safe, set out the books and papers; then to take the counter cash from the safe and arrange it in the tills at the teller's window.

Jimmy put out the book—ledgers and cards and statement files. He looked at his watch. Eight-twenty. Time to the minute for the safe to open. George Killeen, who locked up the money when the bank closed each day always set the timeclock accurately. Jimmy hadn't known the time to vary in the three years he had worked there.

But when Jimmy tried the safe lock, it refused to open. Considerably puzzled, he tried it several times at half-minute intervals, but it was eight-twenty five before the safe door responded to his pull. Jimmy took out the counter cash at once. He left the reserve cash intact in the safe. This reserve was seldom touched by Jimmy—then only when a day's business made inroads on it. George made a ceremony of examining it at closing time every day before locking the safe.

The telephone rang and Jimmy answered it. An excited voice came over the wire. It was the Killeens' negro cook. Jimmy listened, horrified, momentarily unable to break in on the old colored woman's moaning and incoherent words.

"Mistah Gawge daid! Oh, Good Lawd! Good Lawd! He done kill he'self!"

Gilford Moss, the bank president, had come in. He was a gaunt and cadaverous man of sixty, with a lean shrewd face, thin lips and calculating eyes. He noted Jimmy's wild eyed excitement.

"What's the matter, boy?" he demanded.

"It's George!" Jimmy gave a tormented cry and dived for his hat. "Liza just phoned—phoned that George had shot himself!"

Moss caught Jimmy's shoulder. "Hold on!" he said sternly. "You

can't run off and leave the bank. I'll go!"

"You'd better stay," Jimmy half-snarled, "if you don't want the bank left to itself. I'm going—with Doc Sammons. Maybe—maybe it isn't too late."

CHAPTER II

BUT it was too late. Ten minutes after Jimmy left the bank, he stood—with old Doctor Sammons, the local coroner; Deputy Sheriff Walt Berger and frightened old Liza—and stared at the thing that had been his good friend and kindly superior.

The scene told its own story. In his pajamas George Killeen lay sprawled half out of bed, as if he had fallen from a sitting position at its edge. One arm was flung wide. Near its nerveless fingers lay a .32 calibre automatic pistol.

Jimmy was revolted. George a suicide! Good old George, whom he had never known to be moody, downcast or cynical! George, who had been going fishing with him after closing time that very afternoon! It was impossible!

Walt Berger was speaking. "This means there must be something wrong at the bank, doc," he said. "I'll run in and have a talk with Mr. Moss—see what he says. You stay here and get all the dope you want. Plain suicide, ain't it?"

"Plain as the freckles on your face," Doctor Sammons said. "But we'll have to have an inquest, of course."

Jimmy walked dazedly back to the bank. At the door he turned fiercely to the deputy sheriff.

"George didn't kill himself," he cried. "Somebody murdered him. The dirty—"

"Hush, boy," Walt admonished. "Don't come undone like that!"

Gilford Moss met them in the lobby. Rapidly, briefly, Berger told him what they knew.

"George's wife's on a trip somewhere north," Berger said. "George was home by himself last night."

"That means something wrong here," Moss said dispassionately. "Close the door, Berger, and don't let anybody in except on matters of important business. We can tell in a few minutes if there's a big shortage."

Sorrowfully Jimmy Whittier worded a wire to Mrs. Killeen who was vacationing in the Thousand Lakes country.

THE bookkeeper had come in during Jimmy's absence, and now the three of them set to work. They were not long in finding the shortage. They checked the cash first, and there they found the trouble. Forty thousand dollars was missing. The reserve bags and bundles in the bottom of the safe contained not gold and currency—but iron washers and pads of newspapers cut the size of currency.

Gilford Moss sat down and sank his chin in the palm of his hand. "I was worried about George when I learned he was in the stock market. It's plain what he's done. He's taken the cash all along to meet his margins, and put the junk in there in its place. I don't doubt he intended to put the money back—if he ever got it, but when he kept on losing he knew he was sunk. We've been expecting an examiner any day now. So last night, I guess, George just time-locked his slugs and newspaper clippings—and took the easiest way out. Thank goodness the loss is covered with insurance."

Jimmy whirled on the old man with bitter words on his lips. But he turned away resignedly, with one glance of contempt. George was dead and Moss could only think of the money involved!

"Maybe George didn't get the money, Mr. Moss. Maybe—somebody else—"

"Who?" Moss demanded. "You were here when he locked it up, weren't you? You opened the safe this morning, didn't you? And you know that once that time-lock goes on, nobody on God's green earth can get in there, don't you?"

Jimmy nodded miserably. Still—Jimmy groped for some other explanation.

There was a disturbance at the entrance and the door opened to admit William S. Key, a director of the bank.

"Just heard the news," he said. "Tell me, Moss, what does it mean?"

Moss sketched rapidly what he knew. Key listened attentively and shook his head. Key was a business man entirely different from Moss. He was a chunky, affable man of forty. He was worldly, and had many friends and believed in pleasant living. He had made his money in real estate.

Deputy Sheriff Berger was called from the doorway and the cash shortage explained to him. Berger said: "Killeen's death looks like suicide. Just the same, I'll take all this junk—" he indicated the iron discs and pads of newspaper clippings—"and turn it into the sheriff's office. They'll want it for evidence. You know, they can learn lots from stuff like that—from fingerprints and such like."

Jimmy Whittier had picked up one of the pads and was studying the clippings. Suddenly his face lit up.

"Walt!" he explained. "Look at these clippings. They're from the *Chicago Tribune*. George Killeen didn't take that paper and neither did the bank. George takes the *St. Louis Dispatch*! Where would he get so many clippings?"

"Probably don't mean a thing," Berger said shortly.

Jimmy's gaze swung around to Gilford Moss' face. The banker's cold eyes seemed to narrow on Jimmy.

Jimmy felt a thrill of revelation and of revulsion. He knew that Moss subscribed to the *Tribune*. In fact, he was probably the *Tribune's* only subscriber in Charles City!

"Do you mind if I slip one of these clippings out of this pad, Berger? It might be a clue—might mean something. I want to try and find out the date of the paper it came from."

BERGER grunted and shrugged. Jimmy slipped a rectangle of paper from the pad and placed it in his vest pocket. Berger scooped all the evidence into a canvas bag, tied and labeled it. Moss had gone back into the vault and stood near the safe. Jimmy saw him emerge as Berger finished his task.

Moss said: "Berger, you examined the safe a few minutes ago. Was the clock key in its place in the time-lock key-hole?"

"Sure was!" Berger answered readily enough. "And that reminds me. I'd better take it up to the sheriff's office too. Might be fingerprints on it."

"Then it's too bad if there were," Moss said. "The key's gone."

Berger wheeled on him. "What's that you're saying?"

"See for yourself," Moss said shortly.

Moss was right. A glance told Berger that. The safe door was open and no key was now in the triple-faced clock.

"It was there twenty minutes ago." The deputy glared suspiciously around at the four men in the bank—from Moss, the president and Key, a director, to Jimmy and the bookkeeper.

"Berger," Jimmy said quietly, "every man here should be searched. That key must be a dangerous clue or it wouldn't have been stolen."

"That," said Moss, "is a sensible suggestion, Whittier."

Berger went at the task thorough-

ly. But his reward was nil. Though he lined the men against the wall and explored their pockets, felt the seams of their clothing and made them take off their shoes, the key was not forthcoming. Berger continued his search. He turned the vault, the entire part of the bank back of the grill, wrong side out. He found the spare key, dusty and obviously unused for months, in its place on a little shelf in the vault. But the used key remained missing.

Berger left for the county seat and for a conference with the sheriff. The bank opened at eleven. There was a mild run, just a flurry which soon played out. The loss was fully covered by insurance, and Moss had wired a correspondent bank for currency. It arrived on the noon northbound train and was ample to carry the bank through.

Jimmy Whittier went through six hours of hell. Forced to stay at the teller's window, to count money, to answer patrons' questions, to carry on the interminable routine, his mind was tortured with thoughts of George Killeen and the blight against his name. If George hadn't taken the money and committed suicide, how in heaven's name had some other person got into the safe after George had time-locked it for the night? Were there fingerprints on the clock-key, and who had stolen it and where was it hidden?

Jimmy gritted his teeth. He meant to find out. For the moment nothing else mattered. And the minute the bank closed, Jimmy meant to start his own investigation—with vengeance.

Occasionally he stared across the mahogany partition at the lean, hawk-like profile of Gilford Moss, busy at his desk running through the notes receivable. Was there something of smug satisfaction, almost of evil, in Moss' features? Involuntarily Jimmy's soul was filled with resentment against the bank president.

CHAPTER III

THE four o'clock fast passenger train halted long enough to disgorge a trio of auditors from the nearest large city, in response from a wire from Moss. They trooped into the bank and took charge of its books. Jimmy and the book-keeper, under Moss' direction, had to work with the men until nearly midnight. It was a quarter to twelve when Jimmy Whittier finally locked the bank door and started for the modest bungalow home where he lived with his mother.

The night was dark and still. No moon. The million dim stars relieved the gloom but little. Jimmy walked in a moody silence, absently. Then suddenly he was smitten with an acute sense of danger. Somewhere in the shadows, unseen, lurked an enemy force. Jimmy felt it. The short hair on the back of his neck prickled.

Spaced hackberry trees bordered the sidewalk along the curb. Tall, bushy hedge hemmed the yards beside him. Jimmy moved stiffly, rapidly, tense from apprehension. His eyes peered left and right, trying to pierce the shadows. His fists were clenched and his elbows hooked.

A stealthy, half-heard step came behind him. A swift step. Instantly Jimmy writhed aside and whirled about, spinning on his heel.

Jimmy dodged too late. He caught but a glimpse of a form hulking there, and a fast descending arm, swung high. Something struck his head with a muffled thud. Darkness, abrupt, black abysmal, washed over his consciousness . . .

He regained his senses with a feeling of acute discomfort. One leg was gone! Then he realized that he lay on his back and one leg was drawn up under him in such a way that it was almost paralyzed from strictured circulation. He moved,

lay a moment gritting his teeth with pain, then rolled over.

Finally, he could stand. There was a painful knot on his head. He leaned weakly against the nearest hackberry, and with returning faculties, took stock.

His pockets had been searched, one had been turned wrongside out. Money and articles he had carried in his right trousers pocket were now in his left. Nothing was gone . . . but wait . . . ? His fingers probed his vest pocket. The rectangular newspaper clipping was gone!

Jimmy was a little bewildered. What was the importance of that ordinary slip of paper, that he should be followed and slugged for it? And what salvation was there for the slugger in taking that one slip, when pads of similar ones were in the possession of Walt Berger?

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE KILLEEN hadn't committed suicide, Jimmy told himself over and over. He had been murdered. Someone else had looted the bank, had murdered George to throw the guilt on him. And that simple piece of trimmed newspaper was a vital clue. But how could anyone have gotten that money, when George had examined it that afternoon before and locked the safe himself?

Then suddenly, almost blindly, light came to him. He stood there a moment dumbfounded with his realization. What an ugly, treacherous scheme! And one that necessarily had to be perpetrated by someone George Killeen had trusted implicitly—some one within the bank.

There rose before Jimmy the lean, angular countenance of Gilford Moss. Jimmy could again see the man's eyes bore into him as he asked Berger for the slip of paper. Moss! Moss keeping him late at the bank, working furiously, so that Moss

could stalk him tonight and recover the paper, Moss looting his own bank, then throwing the guilt on George Killeen, yet losing nothing because the loss was covered by insurance.

Jimmy swore gruffly, feelingly. He turned sharply and went toward Gilford Moss' residence.

It was a ten-block walk. Jimmy came up on the large two-story house from the east. At first it appeared entirely dark, wrapped in a somber, almost sepulchral quiet. Jimmy walked around the place, skirting the grounds, staring at the windows. Then in one of the upstairs rear windows he detected a faint glimmer of light.

Jimmy's senses quickened. He looked about. Directly back of the room with the light was a rear wing of the house which was only one-story in height. Jimmy moved to the rear yard, crept along a fence that was the front boundary of a small orchard. Luck was with him. Leaning against the fence was a pruning ladder.

Jimmy hefted the ladder, balanced it on his shoulder. He carried it to the rear wing of the house. He set the ladder against the wall there. He paused, held his breath, listened. He mounted the ladder and came on to the roof. Then he climbed to the ridge, inched along it to the wall of the higher portion of the house.

A narrow ledge projected below the windows of the second story. Jimmy planted his feet on this, and fingers clinging desperately to the weather-boarding, he groped along. At last, he was directly beneath the faintly outlined rectangle of murky light.

Cautiously, he raised his eyes to the window level. He clung there. At first he could discern nothing. Gradually objects formed and he could see what was within.

The light came from a small shaded desk-lamp directly over a

table against the far wall, a study table littered with books and papers. At the table, turned half-toward Jimmy, sat Gilford Moss. Jimmy could see his skinny, predatory face, as Moss stared down at the papers on his desk.

Presently, Moss stirred, turning half away. He reached across and picked up something from the table. When he turned back, the light shone full on his face—and on the small bright object he held in his hand.

Jimmy saw the man's features take on a look of smug, almost cruel satisfaction. His mouth twisted in a hard, triumphant grin as he looked at the thing in his hand. Jimmy almost cried out. It was the key to the time-lock of the bank safe!

CHAPTER V

SOMEHOW Jimmy Whittier got away from the Moss place. He headed on the run for town and took steps up to the telephone central office three at a bound. The sleepy-eyed operator plugged in Walt Berger's number and rang steadily for five minutes.

Finally Mrs. Berger answered the ring. Jimmy talked to her. Walt was still at the county-seat. She didn't know when he'd be back. Jimmy hung up the receiver, his disappointment plain in his young face.

Back down on the sidewalk he stopped to ponder. There was no sub-officer, save the old night watchman, who would be only excess baggage in this case. A worried frown creased Jimmy's brow. He hesitated to confront Moss by himself. He was a hireling of the banker. He felt insecure in his position, even with the evidence he now had.

Someone of authority should go with him when he accused Moss. Then Jimmy thought of William S. Key, a director of the bank, and

known as a man of courage and dependability. He would go to Key. But first he went by his own home and got his small automatic pistol. Ten minutes later he stood on the steps of Key's home. He pressed his finger on the door-bell and held it there.

Key appeared in a dressing robe drawn over his pajamas. He was surprised to see Jimmy. In the library just off the hallway, Jimmy told Key his story. About his slugging and his missing the newspaper clipping. And about seeing Moss with the safe-clock key that night.

Key listened. "It's a grave accusation, my boy. I hope you realized that, didn't you?"

Jimmy argued earnestly. Key got up and paced the floor. Finally he came back, sat down and faced the younger man squarely.

"I'm with you, Jimmy," he announced. "Something must be done."

Jimmy was exultant. "What's our move?"

After a moment of thought, Key said: "I'll call Moss on the phone. Tell him there's a new development. Ask him to come over at once. Drop just enough to arouse curiosity and not suspicion."

"But," Jimmy exclaimed, "he may not come! He'll bolt."

Key smiled assuringly. "I know Gilford Moss, Jimmy. That skinny face is a bluffer's face. He'll come."

KEY went to the telephone. Jimmy heard him call the number. After some parley, Moss was on the line and Key talked. Then the receiver clicked and Key turned toward Jimmy.

"My God!" he finally said, and dropped into a chair. He passed his hand across his forehead and groaned.

"What's the matter?" Jimmy demanded.

Key looked up. "I said too much. He knows I know! He's coming. Jimmy. Be here in ten minutes. But

he's coming to kill me—I sensed it in his voice! It was awful! He thinks I am alone."

Jimmy put his hand on Key's shoulder, gripped it. "Brace up! We're two to one—and I've got a gun!"

Key pulled himself together. He grinned at Jimmy. "We'll be set for him."

They talked over a plan. They would light up the hall and Jimmy would wait there to admit Moss, greet him, then accuse him. Key would wait, also armed, hidden in the library in the dark where he could command the hallway, to surprise Moss at the first sign of violence.

Plans completed, they waited.

The place became hushed—ominously hushed. Ears were painfully attuned, listening for the first sound of steps on the sidewalk outside, hearing them from a distance. Jimmy's watch and Key's were lying there on the table ticking together in an odd, animated rhythm. *Tickety-tick, tickety-tick!*

In fascination, Jimmy's eyes went to his watch. Almost exactly, Moss would be on time. Jimmy's gaze went on to Key's watch. Fastened there!

A thought struck him like a blinding flash of lightning. Key's watch was *five minutes slow!* Jimmy stared up at Key's face. The man was rigidly tense—still as a graven image, staring toward the hallway. Outside, Moss' footsteps turned from the street into the long walk that led up to Key's house.

And in that second's glimpse of the man Key, Jimmy Whittier saw a different man, a man changed. His was not now the affable face Jimmy knew. Jimmy Whittier knew that he was staring at the face of a murderer!

Jimmy went to his feet. His chair scraped raucously and toppled backward.

"You!" he cried out. "It wasn't Moss who looted the bank and mur-

dered poor old George Killeen! It was you!"

JIMMY'S hand was in his coat pocket. But it stopped, stiffly and abruptly there. The bore of Key's gun gaped at him. It was a blunt, cumbersome looking gun. Key grinned horribly!

Jimmy advanced a step. Wrath and resentment controlled him entirely. He was an automaton in its grip, oblivious to stark menace.

"I see through your scheming!" Jimmy thundered. "I know how you duped George. What a fool I've been! I can even figure now the story you hatched for George. You made out to him you had a big bunch of currency coming on the midnight train, money to pay your note. You asked him to set the safe so it could be opened then, and put the money safely away till morning. Poor old George! He trusted you. You killed him, went to the bank and opened the safe. You took the money, put in the dummy stuff you'd prepared. You set the time and locked the safe again, so everybody would suspect George. But your watch was five minutes slow! Those were five fatal minutes for you, Key!"

"Not for me," Key gritted. "Fatal for *you*. This gun's got a silencer! I'll drop you with it, then drop Moss—with your gun—the minute he steps in the hall! Walt Berger'll guess you two killed each other in a quarrel over George Killeen's affairs. I'll help h'im!"

A door swung open behind Key. "No," said the voice of Gilford Moss. "I don't think you'll do all that, Key."

Key twisted around, eyes darting to the newcomer. His gun came up.

Jimmy's hand gripped the automatic in his coat pocket. He squeezed the trigger. Flame and smoke spat out from the cloth there at his side. Key's arm jerked and

then went limp. The gun slipped from his fingers and thudded to the floor. He turned a pain-crazed face to Jimmy and dropped into a chair.

"I decided at the last moment on an inconspicuous entrance," Moss said, coming into the room. "Good work, Jimmy."

Jimmy sat weakly in a chair. "I see it now," he said. "I certainly owe you an apology, Mr. Moss I thought—"

"I thought you thought that, Jimmy. And even I couldn't believe George Killeen stole money and killed himself. I just couldn't see how it could be otherwise, and don't yet."

Jimmy explained how Key had worked the plan. Moss turned to Key and Key nodded.

"I was desperate," he said, groaning with his wounded arm. "I had lost on everything I touched. I owed the limit in several banks and my collateral was largely false. I hatched up the plan—and it worked. But I forgot to wipe my finger prints off the clock-key. I'd taken care of everything else. I thought Jimmy had taken the key the next morning—he seemed the one who was aggressive in the investigation."

"So you slugged me tonight?"

"Yes—and not finding the key, I took the clipping to throw you off scent."

Jimmy turned to Moss and held out his hand. "I'm sorry I suspected you," he said. "But why did you swipe the key?"

Moss grinned rather sheepishly. "Amateur fingerprinting is a hobby of mine," he said. "I got a hunch that key would have prints on it, so I sneaked it. I developed my photographs tonight and the prints were there—Key's. I knew when he talked to me over the phone he had committed the crime. But I couldn't understand how, until you told me, Jimmy."

DRACO'S CADAVER

By WILLIAM MAHONEY

There is Always a Clue



FIRST GRADE Detective Steve Creedon of the New York City police department felt anything but at ease. He was about to see a man done to death, a sudden, terrible death.

Steve Creedon wasn't squeamish. During his ten years in police work he had seen men die violent deaths. But watching a helpless fellow human go to his maker via the electric chair in a state execution chamber—well, he had witnessed two such repulsive scenes before in the line of duty. This was to be his third, and already he was feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

The execution chamber at the Ohio state prison in Columbus was small, hot, stuffy. Creedon mopped his perspiring lean, square-jawed face with a handkerchief, the while his glance strayed from face to face in the small group of men about him. All were his fellow spectators. Mostly newspaper men, with a scattering of police officers in civilian attire.

Creedon rested a hand lightly on the frail railing bisecting the small room and preventing over-curious spectators from approach to the fateful chair, which stood just beyond the railing on a low platform. His gaze avoided the chair, riveted itself upon a closed, green painted door to the right of the chair.

Presently there was a stirring among the spectators. The green door was opening. The warden briskly entered the execution chamber, grim of face and carrying a cane. Behind him came his chief deputy. A brief moment passed, then came slowly but with firm step a swart, thin man of average height. His hatchet-like face

was pallid but composed. At his side walked a priest, crucifix in clasped hands and lips moving in silent prayer. Behind these two, a pair of stalwart khaki-clad guards.

THE swart, hatchet-faced man seated himself in the chair on the platform. The two guards quickly strapped him securely in the chair, adjusted the electrodes. As one of the guards prepared to slip the death mask over the features of the doomed man, the warden spoke.

"Is there anything you wish to say before"

"No!" snapped the doomed man. His black eyes gleamed in silent triumph as they sought and clung to those of Steve Creedon. "No!" he repeated. "Do you hear that?"

Creedon's face remained impassive but he sighed wearily.

"May God have mercy on your soul," murmured the warden as the guard dropped the death-mask over the doomed man's features. The next instant the warden signaled with his cane. There sounded a loud humming

Forty seconds later the prison chief physician applied his stethoscope to the chest of the still form in the chair, shortly pronounced the execution accomplished. Immediately the spectators began filing out of the death chamber. Creedon found the cool night air of the prison yard indescribably refreshing.

On the way out of the prison he stepped into the warden's office. The warden had not yet returned from the execution chamber, but his wait was brief. The warden appeared shortly, greeted Creedon cordially.

"Disappointed, eh?" said the warden.

Creedon nodded. "Figured Tony Draco couldn't take it without breaking down. But he fooled me. Are you sure no one got to him before he went to the chair?"

"Quite certain," replied the warden. "His only visitor was his attorney while quartered in the prison, and their conversations were held only in the presence of my secretary."

Creedon frowned. "Looks very much like Draco carried the secret of his million dollar jewel cache with him to the grave. That news is going to give one prominent New York jeweler a whopping headache, to say nothing of a lot of bad publicity for the police. Umm, and I was told to break the case, or get broke."

The warden grimaced wryly. "Tough luck, that. But say, why are you so dead sure that Draco cached those jewels—so certain that he ever had them?"

CREEDON smiled bleakly. "I've several reasons. You know, when Draco and four of his mob pulled that jewel robbery, we almost nabbed them on the spot. We'd gotten a tipoff at headquarters—but just a bit too late to trap them. Yet we were so close to nailing them that the mob split. Draco was carrying the swag, so we centered pursuit on him. He lammed it alone. We lost him—or rather the state police did—near Albany.

"Perhaps we'd lost track of him for good if he hadn't been kill-crazy. Twenty-four hours after we lost him, he had a brush with police in Buffalo—killed a police sergeant. He had the jewelers' black case with him at that time. Then he stole a large blue roadster, lammed it into Ohio. That blue roadster brought about his downfall. The Cleveland police, forewarned, were on the lookout for the car. They got Draco as he drove into East Cleveland, but he sent two more policemen to their graves before they cuffed him.

The courts made short shrift of him, as you well know. But what the Cleveland police didn't get was that jewelers' case. Draco didn't have it with him when he was caught. It's quite logical to suppose that he cached it somewhere between Buffalo and Cleveland, knowing that he was the object of hot pursuit."

"Quite logical, I agree," said the warden. "However, I feel quite certain that Draco did not divulge the secret of his supposed cache to anyone while in this prison. I've helped you to the best of my ability in that respect."

"I thank you for that," said Creedon, and he prepared to take his leave.

"Are you sure that Draco didn't get information out of the Cleveland police station, or the Cuyahoga county jail?" asked the warden.

"Yes," replied Creedon. "I saw to it that he was closely watched immediately upon arrest. No, Warden, I'm convinced that Draco carried the secret of his cache of jewels with him to the chair."

Creedon moved toward the office exit, saying:

"Guess I might as well be moping along to my hotel. Good evening." Then he paused abruptly, turned toward the warden and added: "By the way, is the state going to bury Draco?"

"No," was the reply. "Early this afternoon word came from a local undertaking firm that relatives in New York City would have the body shipped there for burial."

Creedon whistled. "Funny, that. Draco has no relatives. At least, none on record at New York City police headquarters. Must be some of his buddies wishing to give him something better than a burial in potter's field. Well, good evening."

OUTSIDE the prison, Creedon paused on the curbing and lighted a cigarette. An instant later a loud creaking drew his attention down street. The gate leading to the prison vehicle stockade was opening. Pres-

ently there came rolling slowly through the opening a hearse. Creedon's face reflected comprehension. The hearse contained the remains of the recently executed kill-crazy desperado, Tony Draco.

As the hearse turned into the street before the prison and passed him on its way downtown, Creedon's gaze was suddenly drawn to a near-by high-powered black sedan parked with motor running. The hearse passed the parked sedan. Instantly the latter car moved off in the hearse's wake.

For a fleeting moment Creedon saw the profile of the sedan's driver. It was that of a pug-nosed, lantern-jawed man in his late thirties. There were three other men in the car, but he was unable to get a glimpse of their faces as the car sped on.

Creedon swore, flipped his cigarette into the street. He'd have recognized that profile anywhere. It belonged to Spud Jenkins, known chief henchman of the late Tony Draco. And the three other men in the car? Creedon was certain that they were the other three remaining members of the Draco mob—Yancy Coulter, Bing Traynor, and Mike Dashiell.

Creedon whirled on heel, raced to the nearest of several taxicabs waiting for possible passengers among the spectators at the recent execution. Leaping into the taxi, he said:

"After that hearse that just passed—and don't lose it. Police business."

The driver slammed the car door shut, slid behind the wheel. The taxi sped at a fast clip after the hearse and the black sedan trailing closely in its wake.

The chase led into the business district of the city, through it, and into the semi-residential section beyond. There Creedon noted the hearse swing to the curb before a small undertaking establishment, and park. He halted his taxi, paid its driver and sprang to the walk. He began strolling toward the parked hearse, some fifty

yards distant. The black sedan containing the late Draco's henchmen was nowhere in sight.

Then, within a scant twenty-five yards of the parked hearse, Creedon was startled to note the black sedan moving slowly past him in the street. His right hand strayed to the butt of his service pistol in its holster beneath his left armpit—and stayed there. The black sedan rolled easily to a point opposite the hearse and halted.

Three men, one armed with a sub-machine gun sprang from the black sedan, threatening the hearse driver and his assistant who were in the act of removing the casket containing Draco's remains from the hearse interior.

Creedon went into action. Dropping to the pavement, he drew his service pistol and opened fire upon the three desperadoes, carefully directing his shots to avoid hitting the hearse driver and his assistant.

HIS first shot took effect. One of the three desperadoes staggered, but quickly righted himself. Disconcerted by this sudden, unexpected onslaught, the trio backed hastily toward their waiting car. As they retreated they sent a stream of gun fire toward where Creedon lay prone on the sidewalk. But their aim was hasty, poor. The sub-machine gun gave one short burst of fire, then fell silent. Jammed, thought Creedon, and was thankful. You didn't need to be much of a marksman with that sort of weapon.

Creedon had emptied his gun when the desperadoes had reached their car. There came the whining roar of a racing motor, then a clashing of gears as the powerful car sped its occupants into the safety of the night.

Creedon got to his feet, smiling grimly. Reloading his gun and holstering it, he approached the hearse. A uniformed patrolman came running toward him, pistol ready in hand. It took him but a moment to apprise the patrolman of his status

and the reason for the gun-play. While thus occupied there came a uniformed police sergeant. Him also Creedon quickly satisfied, abetted by the still somewhat frightened hearse driver and his assistant. The sergeant suggested that Creedon go to headquarters with him to make a report, but Creedon demurred.

"I'll stick around this undertaking establishment the rest of the night," he informed the sergeant. "Those red-hots are apt to bust back here. Better have a couple of your men hanging about the rest of the night, too. If those mugs do come back, we'll want to give them the works. Anyway, if headquarters wants me, I'll be found here."

That arrangement satisfied the police sergeant, who promised to have several of his detail in the vicinity the night through. As the officer departed, Creedon entered the undertaking establishment. The remains of Draco had preceded him, and the body was at the moment being prepared for its trip to New York in the morning. Creedon learned from the embalmer that the body was due to leave from Union Station at eight o'clock the following morning.

Creedon then went into the undertaking establishment's small office, darkened the lights and sprawled out on a couch. From his reclining position he could view the street without through a large bay window. He lay thus, fighting off sleep, till morning. At seven o'clock he decided to chance a bite to eat in a near-by restaurant. Twenty minutes later he was riding beside the driver of the hearse carrying Draco's remains to the railroad station.

On seeing the plain pine box holding all that remained of the once dreaded desperado safe aboard a baggage car of the New York City-bound train, Creedon sought out the conductor. Producing his credentials and informing the conductor of his wish to ride in the baggage car with its gruesome cargo, Creedon won ready

permission. He promptly retreated to the baggage car, locked its door behind him.

THE car held only several large packing cases and the pine box holding Draco's body. Creedon investigated and discovered that the other end door of the car was also locked, and could only be opened by the baggageman who was working in the next car. Satisfied, he then spread a handkerchief on the floor of the car and seated himself, using the side of the pine box as a prop for his back.

He lighted a cigarette. The erratic flaming of the match caused grotesque shadows to play about the walls of the car, which was almost pitch dark. There were lights, but Creedon scorned their use for the present.

Soon the train began moving. Creedon extinguished his cigarette, turned up the collar of his topcoat and shoved his hands deep into coat pockets. It was a chill spring day outside, but the temperature within the baggage car was seemingly a good ten degrees lower.

Creedon gave himself to thought, speculating as to the reason Draco's former henchmen should make an apparent attempt to gain possession by force of the body of their deceased leader. Whatever the reason, Creedon was certain it was a most compelling one. Suddenly he became acutely conscious of the pine box and its grim contents against which he was leaning. Could the corpse of Draco hold the secret of the million dollar cache of stolen jewels that he, Creedon, was certain the late bandit chieftain had made somewhere between the cities of Buffalo and Cleveland during his desperate cross-country flight from the police? The thought sent a curious tingling racing along Creedon's spine.

But a moment later he dismissed the idea as too bizarre, too far-fetched. Those things happened only in fiction, never in real life. However, the idea wouldn't down; wouldn't be

entirely dismissed. When Cleveland was reached it was still clinging tenaciously to Creedon's mind. The very tenacity of the improbable idea irritated him as he dined hurriedly in the dining car just attached, then had the conductor once again let him into the uninviting interior of the baggage car.

When the speeding train was within a half-hour's distance of Buffalo a brisk knocking sounded on the rear door of the car, which adjoined the smoking car in that direction. Probably the conductor or the brakeman, thought Creedon as he rose to feet, cautiously heralding entrance into the car.

Creedon approached the door calling: "Come in!"

There was a faint clicking of a key in the door lock. The door swung open, the opening framing the train conductor, a portly gray-haired man. Creedon smiled. His hand fell from the butt of his service pistol in its shoulder holster, and he stepped toward the man.

Too late he saw the plain warning of peril written on the conductor's face. The man was suddenly bowled to one side, and two figures rushed at Creedon. They struck him simultaneously, hurling him to the floor of the car.

Creedon hit the car floor hard. Half stunned, he nevertheless fought his assailants savagely hand and foot. But the struggle was cut short when a gun butt dealt Creedon a glancing blow at the base of his skull. He relaxed with a groan, fighting with every ounce of strength the black pall which began settling over his senses.

Dimly he heard a husky voice grate: "Snap into it! That flattie is out for a long time. I belted him hard, the louse! . . . Got that flash handy?"

PRESENTLY Creedon heard a creaking of hinges. With great effort he opened his eyes, focused them in the direction of the creaking sound. He saw two men standing over the

pine box. One held a flashlight, its beam directed into the box.

"That's him; all right," said one of the pair whom Creedon recognized instantly as Spud Jenkins, chief lieutenant of the late Tony Draco. "Damn, but he don't look pretty! Ugh! That hot squat don't help your looks."

His companion spat lustily. "Naw, but we're needin' him." Creedon knew the speaker as one Yancey Coulter, former Draco mobster.

"Need him is right," growled Spud Jenkins. "And now we gotta work fast . . . Hey, Bing—Mike!"

From the far end of the car came two answering, "Yeahs." Bing Traynor and Mike Dashiell, decided Creedon, the other members of the quartet of Draco mobsters.

"Bring that con over here," ordered Spud Jenkins. "I want to talk to him."

Creedon saw three shadowy forms approach from the far end of the car, pause before the pair of desperadoes standing beside the open pine box containing the remains of Tony Draco. The desperado with the flashlight played its beam upon the face of one of the newcomers. Creedon saw plainly the white, strained features of the train conductor.

"Turn around you!" snarled Spud Jenkins.

The train conductor obeyed. The next instant Creedon heard a dull thud, saw the train conductor topple soundlessly to the car floor.

"That puts him out of the way," harshly commented Spud Jenkins. "Now listen, Bing—and close. Yancey, Mike and me are going back into the smoker. We're only ten minutes from the Buffalo station, which means we're just a matter of a couple of minutes from the town's outskirts. Yancey and me will stop the train—pull the emergency cord—no sooner than we hit them outskirts, and you gotta be ready to dump this box outa that door behind you. And jump after the box. If Marcia got my wire from Columbus—and I'm sure she did—she'll be thereabouts in a car on the

lookout for us. Then we pile into the car, taking him—" Spud jerked a thumb toward the pine box—"along to Marcia's apartment where we can look him over good. Understand?"

Bing Traynor acknowledged understanding with a grunt. "I'll take care of my end of things, but when it comes to looking a corpse over like we got to look *that* over—whooc! My guts is turnin' now."

Spud Jenkins laughed harshly, and without further word he, Mike Dashiell and Yancey Coulter cautiously left the baggage car.

CREEDON stirred slightly, and was rewarded with a sharp stabbing of pain centered about the base of his skull. His temples were throbbing painfully. He moved slightly again, and despite himself he groaned softly.

Bing Traynor, the lone desperado left in the baggage car, apparently had keen hearing. He turned abruptly from his opening of a side door of the baggage car and approached the prone Creedon. He stared down at the detective for several seconds, then drew back a foot.

Creedon winced, and with almost superhuman effort stifled a cry of pain as the toe of the man's shoe thudded into his ribs. He was exceedingly thankful for the gloom of the car's interior, for could the desperado have seen his face as he had delivered the kick—well, Creedon was sure his fate would have been far worse than it was.

Traynor, seemingly satisfied that Creedon was still unconscious, turned with a curse to complete his opening of the baggage car door. On opening the door he approached the pine box and began pulling it toward the opened door.

Creedon decided it was time to act. They couldn't be more than a minute or two from the outskirts of Buffalo. He simply had to foil the desperadoes' plan to stop the train and hi-jack the Draco cadaver.

Creedon tautened his muscles. Bing Traynor's back was to him, drawing the pine box toward the opened side door of the car. When less than five feet separated them, Creedon leaped to his feet and hurled himself upon the desperado. Caught unawares, Bing Traynor was sent crashing heavily upon the pine box top. Two swift, hard, well-placed punches put the desperado totally out of things for the moment.

Quickly Creedon frisked the man, found a Colt .45 automatic. With the gun ready in hand, he leaped for the rear end of the baggage car.

Flinging the door open, he glanced into the car beyond, the smoker. There was no sign of the three other desperadoes, Spud Jenkins, Mike Dashiell and Yancey Coulter. Creedon stepped forward and opened the smoker door, entered the car.

At that precise instant he noted a jerking of the emergency cord overhead. Immediately there sounded a screeching of brakes suddenly applied. Creedon swore and his hand darted to the emergency cord. He pulled on it twice. Two short blasts of the engine's whistle sounded plainly, and promptly the screeching of brakes ceased. The train was continuing.

Creedon swiftly reached into his pocket, produced a pocket knife. In a twinkling he had severed the emergency cord. And in the nick of time, he noted, for almost immediately thereafter the down-train portion of the emergency cord jerked violently—and uselessly.

Grimly smiling and oblivious to the amazed and fearful looks of the smoker's occupants, Creedon ran warily down the car aisle toward the next car, a day coach. As he neared the rear door of the smoker he saw a hate-contorted face pressing itself against the door window. The face belonged to Spud Jenkins. A gun in the bandit's hand barked. There was a muffled report, a tingling of glass and Creedon stopped short, a stinging sen-

sation in the muscles of his left shoulder. Nicked!

Creedon's automatic spoke once, twice. There was more tingling of shattered glass. The face of Spud Jenkins, now twisted in terrible pain, slowly sank out of sight. Creedon leaped toward the door, flung it open.

Three shots in rapid succession met him. Something struck his left hand with terrific, numbing force. Creedon's automatic chattered ear-dinneringly. Two figures huddled in a corner of the vestibule squirmed convulsively for a moment, then subsided into an ominous stillness.

IT was ten o'clock the following morning that Creedon appeared at New York City police headquarters in Centre Street. Except for his left hand, bandaged and carried in a sling, he looked his usual cheerful, hale and hearty self. Detective Inspector Mose Larkins greeted him cordially.

"Have a chair, Creedon," said Inspector Larkins gruffly, his slate-gray eyes twinkling with good humor. "That was a sweet job you did yesterday—finishing the Draco mob. Yancey Coulter, Mike Dashiell and Spud Jenkins died from their wounds last night. Bing Traynor is hard and fast in the Tombs, with plenty of time staring him in the face. A good job, all right—except for one thing. We haven't hide nor hair of those jewels that mob made away with. We've grilled Bing Traynor to a frazzle, but he maintains that Draco had the swag with him when he lammed it down country."

Creedon grinned. "Bing told you truth. Draco had that million in jewelry when he split out of his mob. He cached the jewels just before he was nailed in Ohio."

Inspector Mose Larkins grimaced in disgust. "He would! We got a fat chance finding where he cached the jewels—now. Sure he carried the secret of that cache with him to the grave?"

Creedon's grin widened. "Positive."

Larkins eyed him narrowly. Creedon's manner, it was plain, was irritating to the detective inspector.

"What the devil is there to grin about?" barked Larkins angrily. "Think because you've cleaned up the mob that the case is broke? Well, let me set you straight. You've done well a half a job, but the other half is getting those jewels back. You get them back inside of sixty days—or back pounding a beat you go. Grin at that, you monkey!"

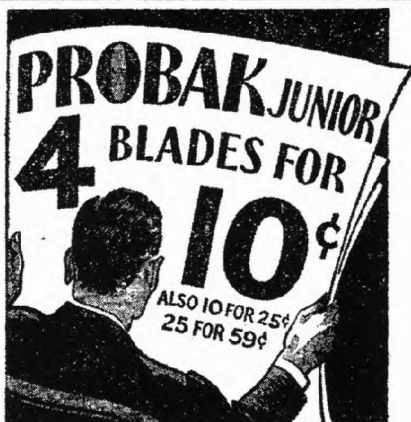
Creedon's grin stayed. Reaching into a suit coat pocket he withdrew a folded yellow sheet of paper, a telegram. He handed the telegram to the detective inspector, saying: "Read—and weep."

Scowling, Larkins took the telegram. His scowl disappeared, and his blunt leathery features assumed an expression of astonishment. The telegram, addressed to Creedon, was from the chief of Ashtabula, Ohio, police. It read:

HAVE FOUND JEWELS STOP WERE CACHED AS YOU SAID UNDER APPLE TREE NEAR HIGHWAY AT RAABS CORNERS SIX MILES SOUTH HERE STOP AM COMPLETING ARRANGEMENTS TO FORWARD JEWELS TO NEW YORK UNDER GUARD STOP PROVIDING YOU GUARANTEE EXPENSES REPAID.

Inspector Larkins glanced shrewdly at Creedon. "How come?" he demanded.

"DRACO'S plans went awry, that's all," said Creedon. "After he planted the jewels and was caught in Cleveland, he kept the secret of the cache strictly to himself. He probably figured he could beat the hot seat, and then could keep the swag to himself. Turning the jewels over to his pals while he was behind bars didn't appeal to him. Most likely he figured they would take the jewels—and let him whistle until he burned. So he kept the secret of the cache until he was right on top of the hot seat.



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"Not so dumb, that Draco," interposed Larkins. "But why did he go to all that trouble?"

"He had to," replied Creedon. "He couldn't get word out to his pals by mouth relating to the exact whereabouts of the cache. However, he certainly must have gotten word to his pals that they would get such word after he had been executed. For no sooner was he executed and on his way to the undertakers, than his pals were trying to get hold of his corpse. They would have, too, but they were too anxious and let me catch sight of them. That proved their downfall."

Creedon paused, pursed his lips thoughtfully, then continued:

"You know, I had a hunch as to the true lay of things just as I was pulling out of Columbus on that train. Frankly, the hunch seemed too ghastly and improbable to me at the moment, yet when Spud Jenkins and his crew crashed that baggage car—well, I just knew that hunch was correct.

"So I had the medical examiner take Draco's remains in hand when we arrived in the city yesterday. Told him my suspicions. An hour later he gave me the message. I promptly checked it—the results being that telegram."

Creedon rose to feet, grinning slyly. "The case is broken—into fine pieces. I'm going to take a trip up into Maine to give this hand a chance to heal."

"Did I say you couldn't?" was Larkins' rejoinder in a well-modulated growl.

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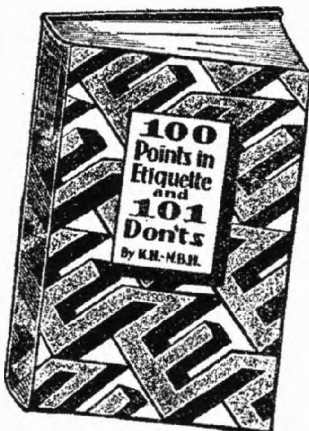
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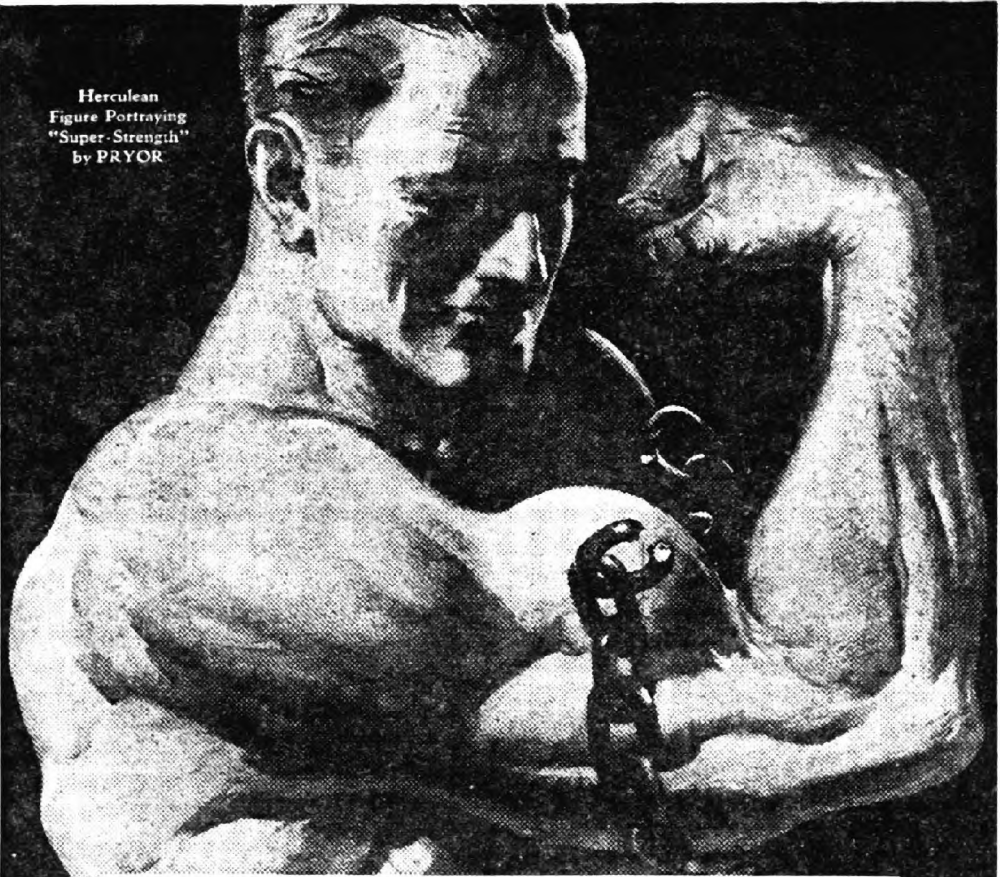
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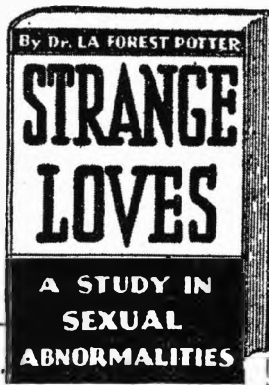
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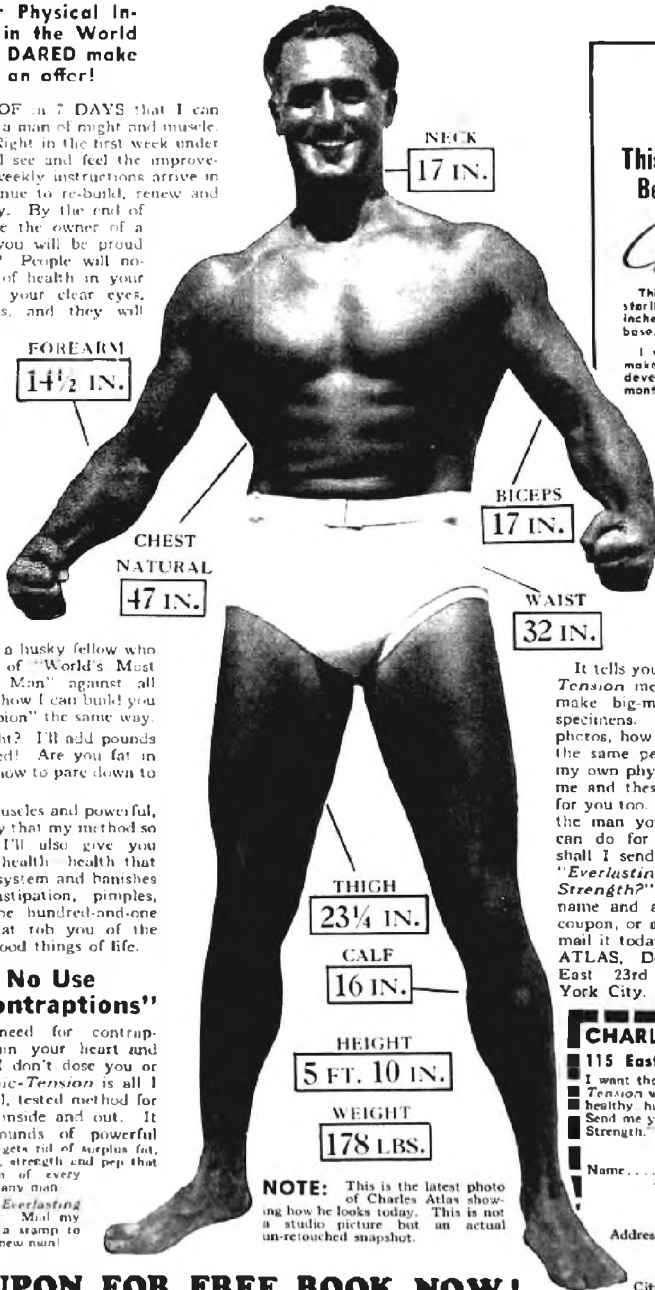
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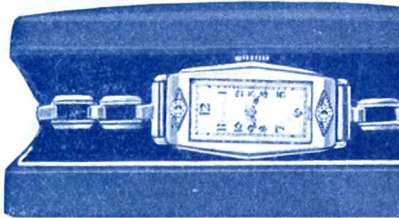


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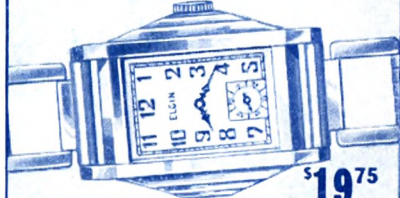
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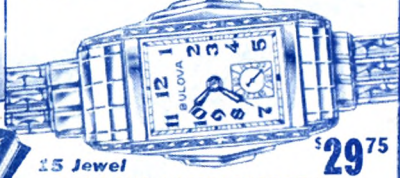


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