

10-STORY ALL DIFFERENT! DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

JANUARY



10¢

**DINE,
DANCE—
AND DIE!**

by Robert Turner



**SATAN HOLDS
A SÉANCE**

by Norman A. Daniels

THEY CALL ME THE "CHARLES ATLAS" OF PEORIA!

by H. W.

YES SIR! People call ME the "Charles Atlas of Peoria," which is my home town. They've named ME after the man who won the title "World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man!" And they are not kidding. They wouldn't DARE. Not with the fighting build, bulging muscles, smashing strength I've got now—the body that made me CHAMPION of the crowd!

But a short time ago I was a weakling—the "sissy" who took a back seat every time other fellows began showing their muscles. I had to sneak away whenever they did feats of strength. I *knew* what it meant to be the sorriest-looking specimen of the bunch. I wanted a real he-man build more than anything. I determined to get it. And I DID!

Here's How I Got My New Physique

Well, after a little while, my friends rubbed their eyes and looked at me twice. They couldn't believe I was the same person! Because I WAS a different person. And you can't blame me today for getting a

big kick out of seeing that "What-a-Man" look in their eyes whenever I strip for gym, beach, or around the swimming pool!

How did I do it? What *made* me "The Charles Atlas of Peoria"? The answer is *Charles Atlas HIMSELF!* His marvelous method of "Dynamic Tension" made a NEW MAN of me. And now read what Charles Atlas himself has to say to YOU:

I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN! And it only takes 15 minutes a day

Fellows, I know what it means to be skinny, flabby, half-alive. I myself was once a 97-lb. weakling. Ashamed of my body. Afraid to stand up against anyone else, knowing what a beating I'd take. Then I discovered "Dynamic Tension"—the amazing method that changed me from a frail nobody into winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now the secret that worked miracles for me has worked them for thousands of others.

In just 15 minutes of your spare time every day (right in your own home) my "Dynamic Tension" method can give YOU a new body. I can give you a solid armor of whipcord muscle. I can put smashing strength into your arms. Tireless stamina into your legs. Strong shoulders, deep chest, firmly-muscled abdomen that will make others exclaim, "There goes a HE-MAN!"

What 15 Minutes a Day Can Do for You

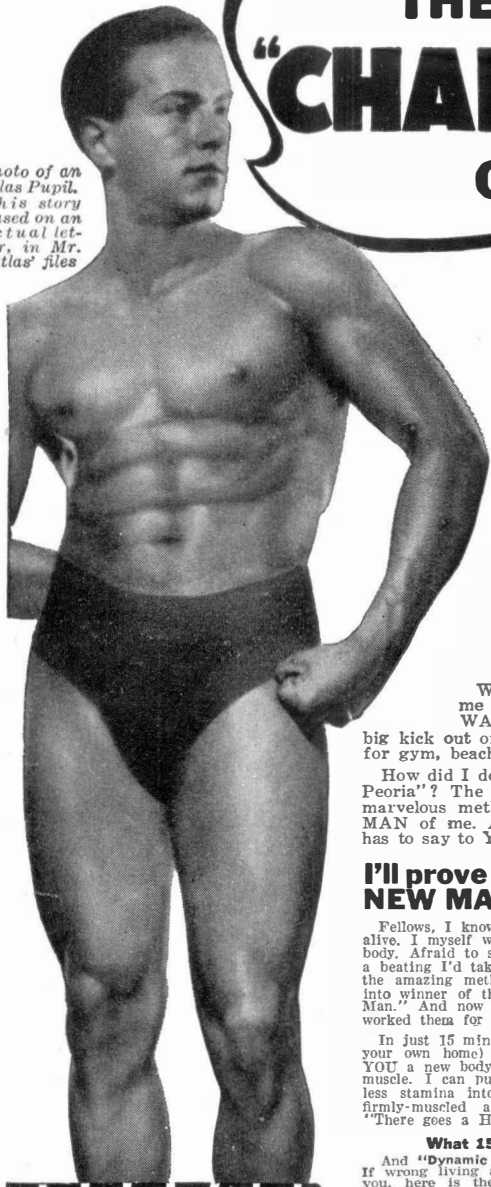
And "Dynamic Tension" digs down inside your body, too! If wrong living and lack of proper exercise have weakened you, here is the best natural "medicine" on earth. Just

give "Dynamic Tension" 15 minutes daily. I'm ready to PROVE every word I say about it. Prove it to you first with actual photographs and letters from men I have made over. Then prove it with an actual TRIAL that will OPEN YOUR EYES—a trial that costs you NOTHING unless it really works!

FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

My famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength," shows in actual photographs exactly why "Dynamic Tension" is your first step to new health, brimming strength, and the handsome build of a champion. This great book is my FREE GIFT to you. Rush this coupon NOW! Address me personally:—**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 49N, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.**

Photo of an Atlas Pupil. This story based on an actual letter, in Mr. Atlas' files



**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 49N
115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.**

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Name
(Please print or write plainly)

Address

City State



Photo of CHARLES ATLAS, holder of title: "World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man."



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 ticulars telling how to qualify for one of these jobs.
 Name _____ Address _____



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10-STORY DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

ALL STAR
ALL DIFFERENT

Vol. VI

JANUARY, 1942

No. 3

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He finds a body on his doorstep—which shackles him to doom.
- ★ **DINE, DANCE—AND DIE! (Novelette)** **Robert Turner** 48
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- ★ **GRAVEYARD GRATUITY** **H. Q. Masur** 61
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- ★ **THE MURDER OF SILAS CORD** **Harold F. Sorensen** 65
Because he does some amateur sleuthing, he sticks out his neck for a gallows garland.
- ★ **FLATFOOT SNARE** **Dennis Layton** 75
When he shoots a bluecoat, the Candy Kid bites off more than he can swallow.
- ★ **DEATH'S BLIND ALLEY (Novelette)** **Ralph Powers** 81
Even without his badge, Dan Carney hounds those mad-dog killers to their lair.
- ★ **CASTLE OF THE DOOMED** **David M. Norman** 100
This detective sergeant finds himself out on a limb when he attempts to solve the mystery of the hangtree harvest.

Cover by Norm Saunders

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Dept. 2AAS, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.



BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. FIXING RADIO SETS (lower illustration) pays many Radio Technicians \$20, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week extra in spare time.

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Bad enough in themselves but some of them may lead to other infections, such as:

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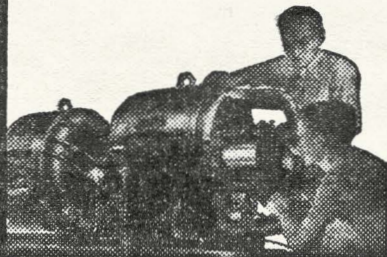
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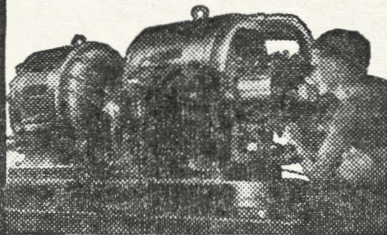


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Don't be fooled by a "mere job." Does your present job offer you a permanent job and a future in good times or bad times? If it doesn't... If it is just a "job" because conditions are good today... it may not be a job when conditions slacken up again.

You should take an inventory of your prospects now—

Ask yourself these 4 important questions—No. 1.—Does the field I'm in today offer me a permanent job and a future regardless of good or bad times?—No. 2.—Is the field I'm in a permanent one?—No. 3.—Is it growing and will it continue to grow in the years ahead?—No. 4.—Is it a field that will always exist?

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Satan Holds a Seance

By Norman A. Daniels



CHAPTER I

UNDERCOVER YOGI

THE Dorchester Arms was a ritzy place, equipped with swanky doormen and attendants. The doorman, at the moment, was gaping at an undertaker's utility truck which pulled up in front of the entrance. A man, somber in dress and

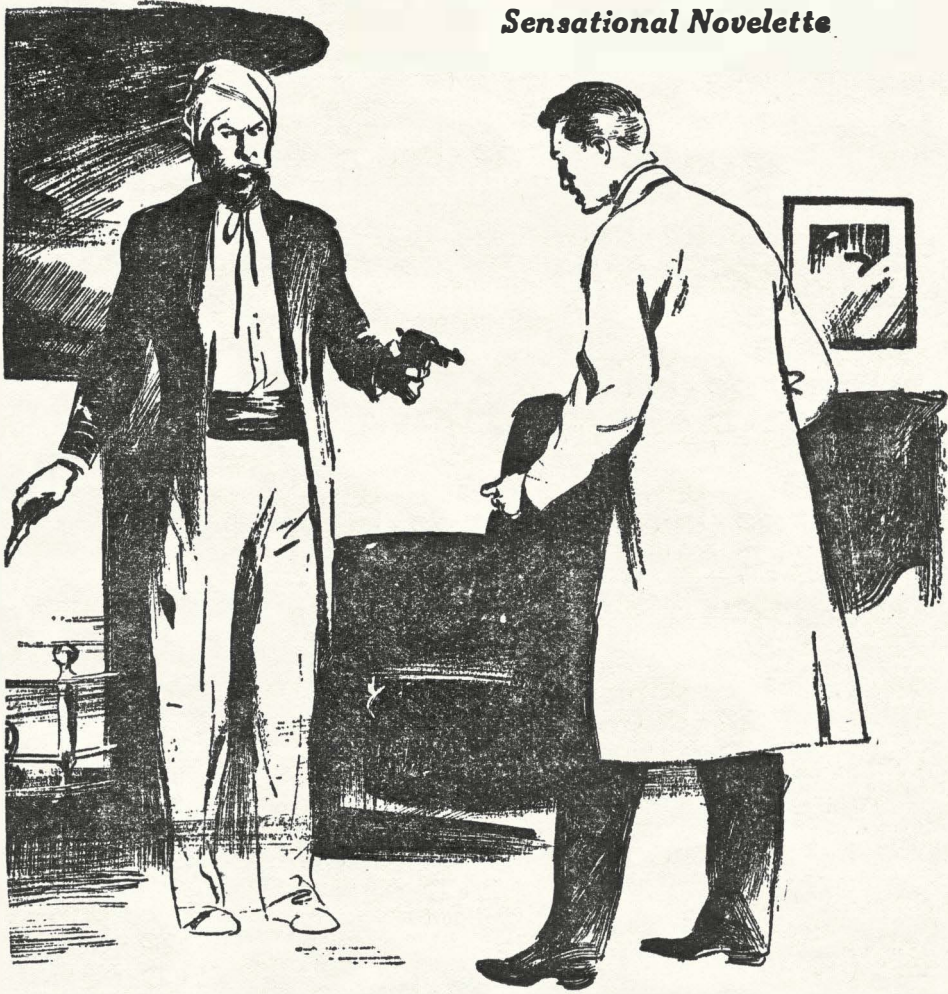
appearance, climbed out. So did two assistants. They walked sedately around to the back of the truck, opened the doors and pulled out a wicker basket.

"Hey! Hey—there," the doorman protested shrilly. "You gotta make deliveries at the rear entrance. I ain't allowed to—"

The undertaker had a prominent

Although Detective Jim Thayer had never been an actor, he was the only one on the force to play the role of the murderous mystic. But Thayer had plenty to learn about homicide hokum. For when he called a seance for a crime cult, he was spirited behind the crystal eight ball.

Sensational Novelette



Adam's apple that moved his wing collar and black bow tie up and down like a piston. He held up one hand and bowed slightly.

"This, my man, is not a delivery. We are—er—collecting at the moment. There is a man named Peter Travers living in apartment 4D—that is he *was* living. Our days are short, my friend. We never know when the sunset will come."

The undertaker's somber expression changed abruptly. "You—" he called out to his assistants. "Be a little more careful with that basket. They don't grow on trees, you know, and the Mortensen Funeral Service prides itself on using the very best of equipment."

The three men passed into the foyer of the building and the doorman removed his hat. There was nobody

living in 4D named Travers. Of all the apartments in the building, this one couldn't house such a man because the Yogi lived there. The black-bearded, long-haired guy who wore a turban, called himself Ram Omar and made ghosts materialize, lived there.

In apartment 4D the man with long black hair, heavy beard and turban, watched the arrival of the hearse from behind slightly parted curtains. The room itself was a weird place. A long table occupied one side. There were chairs enough to accommodate an audience of about thirty people. An altarlike structure set off one corner and there was a small organ beside it. The entire room was hung with deep purple drapes that gave it the perpetual appearance of a room in mourning.

THE man with the black beard turned away from the window, walked over to the table and sat down to finish his game of solitaire. This man wasn't the real Ram Omar. The mystic, at the moment, was occupying a cell in a police precinct on the outskirts of the city where nobody could get at him. A special court order held the man incommunicado.

His double was Detective Jim Thayer of the larceny squad. He had been selected for his present undercover job because he looked something like Ram Omar and if he raised a beard and let his hair grow very long, he'd be a spitting image of the mystic. Three weeks had passed and Jim Thayer moped around Omar's swanky suite and wondered if there was anything more boring than a policeman's life.

He picked up a pencil and added a few figures to a stupendous column, indicating that he owed the game of solitaire something like seven hundred and seventy-two thousand dollars.

A knock on the door startled him. He hastily swept cards and tally sheet into a drawer, glanced in the mirror to see if his turban looked halfway

presentable, and then he donned a frock coat. The door was provided with a pair of burglar chains. He slid these back, opened the door and stared at the undertaker, flanked by his two assistants who carried the wicker basket between them.

The undertaker bowed gallantly, pushed by Jim Thayer and with a wide motion of his hand indicated that the assistants were to follow. Then he took out a black-bordered card, a black pencil and poised them while he looked at Thayer with an open question in his eyes.

"In times such as these—distressing but necessary moments of one's life," he said sonorously, "all sympathy is extended to you by the Mortensen Funeral Service Incorporated. The name of the deceased is Peter Travers. I would like all the other details, if you please."

Jim Thayer glanced at the wicker basket, now resting on the rug. Then he took the undertaker's arm and piloted him into a small anteroom.

"Look, my friend," he said, "there is some mistake. Nobody named Peter Travers lives here. There is nobody dead in this apartment. You've been kidded—spoofer. Now will you and your two ghouls take that basket out of my place?"

The undertaker flushed slightly and consulted that black-edged card again. "There cannot be a mistake. People do not joke about such sacred things, my dear fellow. You are distraught, but we shall take care of all details and—"

"Look," Thayer snapped, "you can either take that damned basket out of here or travel out inside of it yourself. I don't like this kind of joke. They keep me from sleeping nights. Scram—beat it. And stop rubbing your hands as if you were already looking at the corpse."

The undertaker drew himself very erect. "I think," he said hotly, "I can take a hint. I also assure you that if I find out who has perpetrated this

unfunny joke he will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Good day, sir."

THEY went back to the reception hall. The undertaker motioned his two stolid looking aides. They picked up the basket and trotted out behind him. Jim Thayer replaced the burglar chains, walked back to the room which the real Ram Omar used for his seances, and sat down rather heavily.

Of course the arrival of that undertaker had been a joke—probably some of the boys at headquarters. Thayer damned the idea that there shouldn't even be a phone in the apartment. Being cut off from the world like this wasn't much fun.

Peter Travers, the undertaker had said. Thayer frowned and wondered if he could have meant the Peter Travers who operated one of the biggest gambling houses in the state. He shrugged, hauled out his cards and started to play again, but his soul wasn't in it now. The time was almost ripe for him to go into his main act—that of taking Ram Omar's place, conducting his seances, interviewing clients and sending Omar's particular brand of hokum around.

Behind all this was a strange situation. Ram Omar really was a native of India and had once belonged to the notorious band of killers known as Thuggee. Omar had started his ghost rousing business and done rather well for himself. However, he'd extended it a bit too far in that he not only caused ghosts to appear, but he actually was alleged to have manufactured a few spirits by murdering their earthly bodies.

Not that there was any proof. Omar was too clever for that, but four men had been found murdered—each one with a garotte made of a red silken band twisted around his throat. Each man had possessed a mortal enemy and these enemies were known to frequent Omar's apartment. Thayer's su-

periors had a theory that Omar did the actual murdering for pay and that his four clients were guilty of compounding murder. Jim Thayer was supposed to gather evidence enough to convict them by posing as Ram Omar.

He shivered at the memory of that undertaker and his wicker basket. Not that it was out of place in this suite because all the trappings of the seance room had to do with death. Jim Thayer flung down the cards again, got up and began to pace the floor.

The more he thought of that grisly joke, the more he worried. Who would have played a trick like that on Omar? Especially when the mystic was supposed to be out of town. Thayer glanced down the hallway. The last door—leading to a small study—was closed. He'd been pretty sure that door had been open an hour before.

Thayer walked briskly down the corridor, reached for the knob, and then began to grin. He was a fool! It must be the monotony of four weeks in one apartment that was getting him. He opened the door and stepped in, to freeze in his tracks.

A high, solid-backed chair stood facing the fireplace. Thayer couldn't see who occupied it, but a thin column of cigarette smoke drifted toward the ceiling. Thayer reached under his frock coat, fastened fingers around the butt of a shoulder holstered gun and snapped a question. The occupant of the chair didn't answer, didn't move.

Thayer edged around to the front of the chair. His hand fell from the gun butt, his jaw dropped a notch and his eyes bugged out a little.

The man who sat in the chair was dead. There was a red silk band drawn so tightly around his throat that it was barely visible. A cigarette burned right up to his fingers and the flesh was beginning to smell a bit. All this was horrible enough, but Jim Thayer realized the full measure

of horror when he looked at the dead man's face.

It was Peter Travers—the gambler whom that undertaker had come to claim.

CHAPTER II EMPTY COFFIN

THAYER approached the corpse and managed to free the cigarette from its hand. He touched the wrist and found it cold, the flesh soft. He frowned. Rigor mortis must have already left the body. Then how come that lighted cigarette? Was it somebody's idea of a big joke? And how had that corpse got into the apartment when Thayer kept the door locked so securely?

He remembered that the real Ram Omar was suspected of killing his victims with a red silk garotte. The same method that had choked the breath out of Travers. Had Ram Omar escaped from his cell then? Or obtained his freedom by some legal twist?

Thayer closed the study door quietly, as though he didn't wish to disturb the corpse. Then he turned and sprinted for the closet in the reception hall. He grabbed his own hat, jammed it on and then grimaced. A guy with a turban wasn't supposed to wear a hat. He threw the hat on the shelf again. Remembering that Ram Omar always carried a cane, Thayer selected one from the dozen or more stuck in a homemade rack. He hurried to the elevators, went down, crossed the lobby and bowed somewhat ceremoniously to the sa- lutes of attendants.

The doorman touched the peak of his cap. "Funny thing about them undertakers, wasn't it, Mr. Omar?" he chuckled. "Somebody must have played a joke on you. That little guy in the wing collar and frock coat was plenty mad."

"Yes—yes, of course," Thayer answered. "In a few moments some friends of mine will arrive. Please al-

low them to go at once to my apartment."

Thayer turned east and walked briskly for two blocks before he located a drug store with phone booths. He dialed headquarters and asked for Captain Dwyer.

"Thayer," he said crisply. "Sure I left the apartment. Yes, I know it is against orders, but listen, Skipper, there's a dead man in that apartment. A guy named Peter Travers and he was strangled to death with a piece of red silk. Are you sure Omar is still in the clink?"

"I know he is," Dwyer barked. "Talked to him three hours ago. I'll be right over."

"Make it fast," Thayer begged. "And Skipper, just bring a fingerprint guy with you. Don't use a police car—come in a cab."

Thayer half walked, half ran back to the apartment although to him it was the one place in the world he'd rather not be. All those ghost materializing implements of Omar, all his books on oriental magic and science had got under Thayer's skin. He'd learned plenty from them, but they gave him the creeps. Now, with a corpse that just materialized like a ghost, the thing was out of hand.

He let himself in, lit a cigarette and paced the floor with several side glances down the corridor at the study. Captain Dwyer—big, ruddy and efficient—arrived with a member of the identification division. Thayer led the way to the study, opened the door and pointed at the chair.

Dwyer walked around it, looked and then glanced up at Thayer with a strange light in his eyes.

"You feel okay?" he queried. "Nothing buzzing around inside your skull, Thayer? There is no corpse here. What's the gag?"

"No corpse?" Thayer sped to Dwyer's side. The chair was empty. Even the cigarette ashes and the butt itself were missing. Thayer sat down

weakly on the corner of a table and mopped his forehead.

“THERE was a corpse,” Thayer insisted. “I’m not bats although living in this joint for a month might make anybody go a little wacky. Listen, Skipper—about an hour ago an undertaker showed up and said he’d been told to pick up the body of Peter Travers. I told the guy off and sent him away. Then I found Peter Travers, dead—right in that chair.”

“Who was the undertaker?” Dwyer asked. “We’ll settle this business right now.”

“Mort—Mortensen,” Thayer said. “That was the name. Mortensen’s Funeral Service. I didn’t want to start things rolling because of the job I’ve got in hand. The less publicity Ram Omar gets right now, the better.”

Captain Dwyer scanned a phone book in Omar’s library. Then he sent the fingerprint man out to a phone.

“No such name in the book,” Dwyer sat down. “We’ll wait and see if O’Brien can dig ’em up. Say—you look pretty good, Thayer. I knew I’d picked the right man for this job. We’ll get busy at once because every day it gets harder and harder to keep the real Ram Omar under wraps. Know what you’re to do?”

“I should,” Thayer retorted. “That’s all I’ve had to think about for weeks. I pretend to reopen my seance business. Then I ask my old clients to show up and to each one of them I put a question that will get an answer if we’re right. You think Omar hired himself out as a killer; that for dough he garotted four or five men who stood in the way of his clients.”

“Right,” Dwyer nodded. “There’s Wythe Borell, George Payne, Roswell Kirk and Beany Scanlon. A fine quartet of gamblers, confidence men and wastrels. There may be others, too. Omar could have hidden the bodies of certain victims. I think that among

his clients, Omar numbers these four men. Their enemies all died, via the garotte.

“We suspected the four instantly because they profited by the murders, but each one had a cast iron alibi, so damned solid we know it was prepared. That’s all, Thayer. The rest is up to you—if you don’t go around seeing a lot of dead people that don’t exist.”

O’Brien, the fingerprint man, returned in a few minutes. There was no such undertaking firm as Mortensen’s.

“I checked with a couple of embalmers, with the medical examiner who knows ’em all, and with an undertaker’s association. Want me to go over that room anyhow, cap’n?”

“For what?” Dwyer exclaimed. “Fingerprints of ghosts? Come on. O’Brien, and good luck to you, Thayer. We’ll start the machinery moving tomorrow. Meanwhile stay put. Learn all you can about Omar from his books and records and stop worrying about bodies that just appear and vanish like spooks. You’ve been reading too many of these books, that’s what’s wrong.”

Dwyer waved an all inclusive hand to take in the three walls loaded with thick volumes. After they left, Thayer sat down slowly and tried to figure it out. He didn’t blame Dwyer much for his skepticism, but Thayer knew what his own eyes had seen. There had *been* a corpse—an undertaker *did* show up with all his trappings, too. Peter Travers *was* dead!

Thayer snapped his fingers. There was one way to find out—to be certain he wasn’t going wacky. Why not take a chance, dust out of here and go to Travers’ house? If he was missing—Captain Dwyer would have to eat his doubts before this was over.

Thayer grabbed the cane, looked for a hat once more until he recalled the turban and mentally cursed the cockeyed thing. Why men would want to wear a towel wrapped around their heads. . . .

He hailed a cab and gave Travers' address, but stopped the taxi a block from the gambler's home, paid off the driver and proceeded the rest of the way on foot.

TRAVERS didn't run his games for peanuts, which the mansion-like home indicated. There were tall trees and thick hedges masking most of the front of the place and beyond the gate was room enough to park a dozen cars. There were four parked there now—big, luxurious sedans. Thayer walked past them, started to climb the steps and stopped dead, halfway up to the porch.

There was a black funeral wreath tacked to the wall beside the door!

Thayer drew a sharp breath and wondered what Captain Dwyer would have to say about this. He tiptoed across the porch, moved softly over to a big window and peered through it. What he saw didn't remove the goose pimples that were popping out all over him.

Straddling one corner was a bronze casket, banked with flowers and ferns. Candles burned at the foot and head of the casket. The lid was down. Four men sat side by side before the bier, each one looking as though he wished he weren't there. In the faint, flickering candlelight, Thayer glanced at their faces and gasped with surprise.

Looking from left to right he recognized Wythe Borell, slim, gray-haired and narrow-eyed. A shrewd gambler if there ever was one. Then George Payne who looked like a small town parson with a benign expression that would fool anyone—for Payne was one of the slickest confidence men in the game. Third down the row sat Roswell Kirk, younger than the others and dissipated looking. A boy with too much money and too little character.

The last man was Beany Scanlon, an out-and-out crook without flourishes. He looked something like

an ape as he sat hunched in his chair. His arms were too long for his stubby body and he had a forehead that protruded out above his eyes. He could shave ten times a day and never get rid of that black outline of his whiskers. Scanlon was a bad egg with a thick, impervious shell.

"The four guys Dwyer thinks conspired with Omar to knock off their enemies," Thayer muttered to himself. "What a setup this is!"

He debated the idea of walking boldly into the place as Ram Omar, but rejected it quickly. The time wasn't quite ripe. Yet Thayer wanted to see who was in the coffin. He had a hollow feeling that he'd find the same corpse there that had occupied a chair in Omar's study.

The four mourners arose finally and slowly filed out of the room. Thayer vaulted the porch railing and crouched behind a bush until all four of them entered their cars and drove away. He was close enough to hear any incidental conversation, but to his disgust not one man uttered so much as a word. They seemed frightened, startled and raging mad at the same time.

When they were gone, Thayer returned to the porch. He tried the door, found it unlocked and stepped in. The sickening odor of funeral flowers assailed his nostrils and made them quiver. Nobody came forward to greet him. The house seemed filled with the complete silence of death.

He tiptoed closer to the coffin, tried to make out the engraving on the name plate and finally tilted a candle so that its light would shower down on the glittering gold plate. The words he read sent a chill running through his body. The plate stated that under the lid of that coffin reposed Peter Albert Travers. The date of his death was given as that of the day before.

With hands that shook slightly but were egged on by a determined brain, Thayer pushed the locking buttons

of the lid. He sucked in a long breath that was so sweet and heavy with perfume that it almost gagged him and then he raised the lid.

The coffin was open!

CHAPTER III

ROOM OF FALSE DEATH

THAYER'S hands grew paralyzed and the heavy casket lid dropped into place with a thud. Anybody in the house must have heard it. Thayer slithered to the hall and listened. Someone was moving about upstairs. Thayer looked around for a place to hide, darted to the casket and ducked behind it. He pulled two of the big palms close together so they'd form a shield.

From here on Thayer was prepared to witness about anything from ghosts with clanking chains and flowing robes, to smirking, hand-rubbing embalmers. Yet he was hardly set to encounter what walked into that room of false death.

First of all Thayer was sure his eyes were seeing things that didn't exist, then he blamed the phenomenon on the flickering candlelight. For the man who stalked up to the casket was—Peter Albert Travers, who should have been inside the coffin—whom Thayer had last seen sitting in the chair of Ram Omar's study—whose body had been very cold in death!

This was no ghostly essence that paraded before Thayer's bulging eyes. If he had any such ideas, they were dispelled because the man gave breath to a string of sour curses. He scooped up a china vase, filled with flowers, stepped back and hurled the vase, flowers and all straight at the casket.

Some of the water splashed into Thayer's face, two of the flowers lighted on his shoulders. Then the living dead man turned on his heel and stalked away. Thayer felt like collapsing in a nice fainting blackout. Instead, he forced himself to think clearly, to weigh his next steps. So

far he was utterly in the dark, his head as completely empty of facts as that coffin was of a corpse.

The obvious thing to do was question this living dead man named Travers, but Thayer was afraid that he might upset an appercart there. But he had four others he could talk to—Borell, Payne, Kirk or Scanlon. They might know what this was all about or, at least, have an inkling.

Yet circumstances made the job difficult. Thayer would much rather have gone to them as himself, a detective, but he couldn't shave off the beard or cut those flowing locks of raven black hair he'd grown over a period of a whole month. He might put Captain Dwyer onto the case and let him handle it, but Thayer was just stubborn enough to want to see the thing through for himself. Dwyer's open skepticism still rankled.

MOVING carefully, Thayer made his way to the door and escaped into the night. The fresh, clean air smelled good after that effusion of heavy scents in the house. The air cleared his wits and made him more determined than ever to handle the job alone.

He walked boldly through the gate, looked for a taxi, but saw only a black sedan parked across the street and about thirty feet north of Travers' house. This car suddenly pulled away with a squeal of tires, as though the driver had mysteriously found himself very eager to leave the vicinity. Thayer shrugged off that episode and started walking.

He checked the address of the four men in a drug store phone booth, glared back at some simpering girls who were intrigued by his beard, long hair and turban and hurried to the street. Sorting those four men to pick a gullible one to question wasn't hard. Borell was too clever and cool, Payne too smooth and Beany Scanlon too tough. Kirk was the man—whatever character and courage he possessed was well hidden. Properly han-

dled Kirk would talk fast and plenty.

Thayer felt almost cheerful as he settled back in a taxi and headed for Kirk's bachelor apartments. He gave up trying to align the angles of the case. It was like trying to make a circle out of a square without changing straight lines. But Kirk would talk—or have the truth belted out of him. Thayer wasn't going to be reasonable about this at all.

The cab stopped and he got out. His eyes flickered across the entrance of the apartment house. There were two men standing just outside the door and they seemed to be almost too engrossed in deep conversation. Thayer felt an urge to get away from this place before something happened. Then he derided himself. After all, who knew he was coming here? How could any trap be set?

He took half a dozen steps toward the entrance and then stopped. His arms moved slowly away from his body. There was a gun pressed with suggestive firmness into the small of his back. The two men at the entrance approached him and with the one who had slipped up from behind, Thayer was uncomfortably forced to surrender.

A car pulled up and he groaned. It was the same car that had darted away from in front of Peter Travers' house. He knew now that a trap had been set—that he'd probably been trailed here and this trio of uncompromising looking mugs had figured out his destination just as Thayer himself had planned it. Kirk was the most vulnerable of the four men involved.

"Get in, Rajah," one of the men said out of the corner of his mouth. "We don't want no trouble with you, understand? We know all about the tricks you can pull, but we got a few tricks ourselves. They're made of lead, see? Just sit down, fold your arms and keep quiet."

Thayer was relieved about one thing—they didn't know he was a cop and they took him at face value

as Ram Omar. The kidnaping had been performed so smoothly that nobody passing by saw anything out of the way. The car pulled from the curb, took the next corner and headed downtown.

Thayer started to say, "You have made a mistake," but the burliest of the trio slapped him across the mouth and warned him to keep quiet. These mugs meant business.

THE car shot across a sidewalk, down an alley. It stopped beside a long building that contained a series of private garages. Thayer was forced to get out and march between two of the men. The third unlocked one of the garage doors and Thayer went inside.

He realized there was a second floor to the place which wasn't evident from the outside of the building. A narrow, ladderlike set of stairs led up and he went first. At the top he found a familiar face peering at him. Beany Scanlon reminded Thayer of that undertaker, the way he kept smirking.

"Well, if it ain't the Rajah himself, come to pay little Beany a visit," the crook gloated. "Brother, both of us is gonna remember this a long time. Maybe I'll remember it longer than you though because maybe you won't be here after tonight. Just walk over there and sit down. Yeah—that big wooden chair. I can tie you up nice and tight. Not that I don't trust you—oh, no—but I seen some of them tricks you pull and I ain't takin' chances. Squat, you double-crosser, or I'll smear you one right now."

Thayer sat down. Beany gave some orders and ropes were quickly brought. Thayer stiffened every muscle in his body, making the sinews bulge as much as possible. It was a trick he'd read about in some of Omar's books. A good trick too—if it worked.

The ropes were fastened firmly. Even after they had been tied, Thayer had to sit just as erect and keep his

TSD

muscles expanded lest Beany notice the slack in the ropes once he relaxed.

Beany dragged over a chair, straddled it and regarded Thayer with a fishy eye. "Look, pal," he said, "you and me had a business deal. I didn't ask for it, but it happened anyhow, and I wasn't sorry. I paid off because it was worth the dough, but that ended the whole thing. Now you're trying to chisel some more outa me and it don't work—not with Beany Scanlon it don't. You shoulda known better."

Thayer closed his eyes and silently offered up a prayer that now he must adopt Ram Omar's identity, he'd do it without a hitch.

"So," he said blandly. "We made one deal, my friend. We could make another—eh?"

Beany licked his fat lips, but none of that cold-blooded murder light left his eyes.

"You talk big for a guy in a spot, pal. It's no dice. Y'see, I don't trust you much. Too many tricks up your sleeve for a dumb bozo like me. The way you polished off Mike Morgan, for instance. You made a little doll that looked just like him. Then you put a curse on the doll and stuck pins in it.

"Then you twisted a little piece of red silk around the doll's neck. You told me that when you did that, Mike Morgan was a goner. He was too—with a hunk of red silk chokin' him to death. Think I want to die like that? Not me!"

"Then what do you intend to do to me?" Thayer asked in a slightly accented voice, one he'd practiced for days from phonograph records made of the real Ram Omar's tones.

Beany waved his hand. "Sorry to say it, pal, but you're gonna go out—just like a light. Suppose the cops picked you up and you told 'em I paid you to knock off Mike Morgan? A guy with my rep wouldn't stand a chance. They'd send me to the chair, y'understand? That's why I gotta kill you to save my own neck."

"But I would never talk—because that would make me as amenable to the chair as yourself," Thayer objected.

Beany nodded. "Sure—that's how I figured it all the time until you started putting the screws down—askin' me for a hundred grand or you'll tip the cops. Who do you think I am—a big shot like Borell or something?"

THAYER was quietly testing the ropes. "Oh," he said softly, "so Borell and the others are in on it too, eh? Before you do anything rash, Mr. Scanlon, may I remind you that I am not an ordinary man? My little trick with the dolls might work here—and now—even without the use of the symbolic figure of a doll. You wouldn't like a red silken scarf around your neck, would you?"

Beany gulped and arose hastily. "No—and you won't put one there. That's why I sent my gorillas out of the room while we talked. They don't know what's going on, except you're supposed to be some kind of a crackpot. They'll do the job while I get far away from here and build myself up a nice strong alibi."

"Just a moment," Thayer snapped. "You forgot one thing, Mr. Scanlon. Think what happened to Peter Travers. You were at his home this afternoon—you and the others. Travers also refused to bargain and he died. Yet I did not come into contact with him."

Beany turned white. "Yeah—yeah, I know, but I still take my chances. Ten minutes you got, Rajah. I can't afford to give you any more time than that."

Beany slipped through the door and Thayer heard him slide down the ladder stairway in his haste to get clear. But Beany was impressed by the man he thought was Ram Omar. His two or three hoodlums wouldn't be under any such delusions. They'd have orders to shoot—or use a knife—and they'd do it quite callously. Thayer was on a bad spot.

He relaxed all his muscles and felt the ropes grow limp. He got one arm free and then he heard the killers coming. With his legs and his left wrist still strapped to the chair he was just about as helpless as before. Working hastily, he slipped his wrist beneath the loop of rope again, swelled his muscles and tightened it.

The three men who came in were the trio who'd kidnaped him from in front of Kirk's apartment. Two of them stood near the door while the third strolled over toward Thayer. He glanced at a wrist watch, sat down on the chair which Beany had vacated and calmly drew an automatic. He pulled back the magazine, pumping a slug into the firing chamber. Then he slowly moved down the safety and that gun was ready for action.

Nobody said a word. Speech was unnecessary, for everyone in that room knew what was to happen. Thayer began mentally checking off the seconds. With the three watching him he had no chance—none at all. He wished now that he'd conquered his vanity and called Captain Dwyer into the case.

Finally the killer arose, languidly, as if killing a man was one of the commonest things in his life. Thayer knew that three pairs of eyes were on him. Shrewd, calculating eyes watching for tricks.

CHAPTER IV

THE CORPSE RETURNS

THE killer deliberately turned his back on Thayer and for a moment or two blocked the vision of his two cohorts. Thayer's right hand slid from beneath the ropes. He tugged on his left and even started to use his free hand to work on the ropes, but the killer turned around again and Thayer hastily dropped his free hand to the chair.

"So you really are going to kill me," Thayer said slowly. "The ten minutes are up then. Beany gave you

a thankless task, my friend. If the police run down my killer, you are the only one who will die for the crime—not Beany."

"Yeah, we know that," the killer replied. "Because of it we get paid a lot of dough for the job. Here it comes, Mister. Personally I got no grudge against you, but orders are orders—when there's dough involved. Brace yourself."

"Very well," Thayer said. "I'm ready. All I ask is that you step close and do the job well. Place the gun against my heart and then—shoot."

It was a risky business. The killer might not consider Thayer's plea or he might act so swiftly that there'd be no chance to resist. But the killer still maintained his languid pose and nodded as he walked forward. His gun came up and so did Thayer's right hand. It grasped the weapon by the barrel, deflected the aim and when one slug came hurtling through the muzzle, it just banged against the further wall.

With the same tugging motion, augmented by the element of surprise, Thayer ripped the weapon free. He only had one hand with which to act so he tossed the gun lightly into the air, caught it on the way down. He accomplished all this so fast that the two men near the door didn't have an opportunity to seize their own weapons.

The killer backed away, under the threat of his own gun in Thayer's hand. He raised his arms slightly and beads of sweat were already forming on his face.

"Stop—right there," Thayer snapped. "If you or your pals make a move, I'll drill the three of you. All right—you whose gun I have. What's your name?"

"Toomey, sir. Ed Toomey. You—you can't shoot. We were just foolin'. We—"

"All right, Toomey. Reach into your pocket very slowly and carefully. You carry a knife—all men of your breed do. Take it out of your pocket.

Then get down on your knees and crawl over here. Stay down so your friends will still be in my line of fire. Cut my feet loose first and then my left arm. Do a good job, without tricks, unless you'd prefer to die."

Toomey gulped, got out the knife and sank to his knees. He waddled forward on them. Two strokes of the blade severed the bonds around Thayer's legs. Then Toomey slowly raised his head. Thayer was watching the other pair and Toomey took a long shot. He suddenly started the knife in a jab toward Thayer's throat.

There was a single shot. Toomey was hurtled backward by the slug that crashed through his shoulder. He began howling for help. But his two friends didn't move, beyond a half-involuntary start, when Toomey went into his murder act.

"You're a fool," Thayer said. "Now pick up that knife again. I don't care if you are wounded. Cut my arm loose or I'll send a slug through your other shoulder."

A MINUTE later Thayer stood free. He herded the other two close to Toomey, backed toward a window, smashed it with his elbow and then fired three quick shots into the night. If the other shots hadn't been distinguished as such, those certainly would.

Two patrolmen responded and later on arrived in a radio car. Thayer led one of the officers aside and produced his badge. He gave orders that the prisoners were to be held without the privilege of seeing or talking to anyone, lawyers included. Then he descended the ladder, passed out of the garage and reached the street. He was still determined to see Kirk.

A cab driver, inspired by a five dollar bill, reached Kirk's apartment in eleven minutes flat. Thayer wondered if he'd rather face Toomey and his gun once more or take another of those rides. He handed over the five spot.

"Nice going, Mercury. Keep your

winged sandals on, hang around and we'll take another express flight in a few minutes."

The driver fervently kissed the five dollar bill, stared at Thayer's retreating back and the loose end of his turban that hung down gracefully.

The cabby muttered: "Screwball—but if they're all like that, I'll get me a stand in front of the nut house."

Kirk's apartment was every bit as exclusive as the one where Ram Omar lived, but Thayer's appearance commanded respect. It was funny what a beard, long hair, a turban and a frock coat could do. He went to Kirk's floor, walked down a corridor and pressed the doorbell above Kirk's name card.

There was no answer. Thayer felt the first pangs of apprehension creep up his spine. He banged on the door, listened again and then took keys from his pocket. In a minute and a half the door swung open. Thayer drew the gun he'd confiscated from Toomey and advanced with plenty of caution.

He turned into a large room and the gun sagged. Kirk wouldn't talk. Somebody else had recognized his inherent weakness and got to him first. Kirk had been shot through the back of the head, a particularly messy job of it, too.

Thayer went toward the phone, but hesitated. Hard heels were clicking along the marble corridor outside. He hastily stepped behind a portière and waited.

The man who walked breezily into the apartment was Wythe Borell. He saw Kirk and let out a cry of horror. It was cut off when Thayer stepped from behind the portière with his gun raised.

Borell said, "So you weren't content to murder Travers—now it's Kirk. You can't get away with it, Ram Omar. Not even if you do possess those powers you demonstrated to us. I'm going to call the police."

"But are you a complete fool?" Thayer asked softly. "The weapon in

my hand is not magic, but pure science. What makes you think I killed Kirk?"

"What makes me think so?" Borell gasped. "Who else would do it? Kirk refused to come through. So did Travers. I paid up. Payne did, too. You first murdered Travers and then casually asked all of us to go to his house. We did and found—a coffin. That was to impress those of us who didn't pay your confounded black-mail.

"Kirk nearly went mad and you know it. Probably you waited for his return here—and killed him. I don't care what happens to me. I'll expose you, Omar. I'll get on the witness stand and swear you into the electric chair."

Thayer shook his head. "You would hardly have paid up, my friend, if your intentions were in that direction. A mere murder would hardly have changed your mind. Now I am through fooling. Turn around. Turn—or I'll swivel you about with a bullet."

BORELL obeyed. Thayer stepped silently up to the man and slugged him on the head with the gun butt. Then he raced out of the apartment at top speed, calmed himself as he waited for the lift and walked sedately out of the place.

Mercury with his winged taxicab. was still hopefully waiting. Thayer got in.

"Drive up Mason Boulevard until you see a house with a crepe on the door. Step on it."

"As if dead guys should make anybody hurry," the driver muttered, but he gave Thayer another of those nerve-splitting rides.

"Want I should wait?" he asked as he pulled to the curb in front of Travers' home?

"I want," Thayer grinned. "Or if you wish, take a little jaunt to Singapore or maybe Salonika. Just get back here in about ten minutes. You could do that easy."

Thayer hurried up the path and this time he walked deliberately to the door and found it partially open. He didn't relish stepping into this house of empty caskets and roving dead men again, but he did. The flowers still gave off their heavy scents, the candles still flickered and the house was still shrouded by eerie silence.

Thayer stepped up to the coffin once more, rubbed his beard for half a minute and then raised the casket lid. It fell back with a thud. The coffin was no longer empty. That same man whom Thayer had seen in Ram Omar's suite and then again observed walking about this very house, lay inside the coffin. The dead had returned to its resting place!

Thayer backed away slowly, breathing rather hard and chilled by the horror of that surprise. He was certain the casket would be empty. He reached the hallway, glanced up the steps and then drew his gun. With firm, silent steps he began to ascend the stairs. What he'd find at the top might be a distinct new problem or it might be the answer to the entire case.

He reached the landing. A man stood there, trembling and ashen-faced. It was the undertaker from Mortensen's—the fake firm of funeral directors.

"You—you wanted someone, sir?" he asked in a voice hardly audible.

"Yes," Thayer asserted. "You!"

WYTHE BORELL resented the firm grip on his wrist, resented the police car and the two detectives who rode with him. He promised civil action, disciplinary steps and even violence. All of which left the detectives totally unimpressed.

"Just take it easy, Mister," one of them said. "We don't know what this is about any more than you, except it has something to do with a couple of murders. The Skipper sent us to your house to pick you up and you're going along either straight up and down

or stretched out end to end. Personally, I don't care which, because I'm sick of your jabber. Now shut up!"

Borell shut—instantly. When the police car stopped in front of the Dorchester Arms apartment, where Ram Omar's bronze professional sign glistened dully, Borell gasped. He gasped some more when he saw other cars pull up and disgorge George Payne and Beany Scanlon. The latter wore handcuffs and a belligerent expression that fooled nobody—not even himself.

CHAPTER V

SUICIDE SEANCE

ALL three of them were escorted to Ram Omar's suite. The bearded, turbaned man sat behind his big table, arms folded and impassive. A section of the purple drapes parted and Captain Dwyer stepped out. Ram Omar inclined his head respectfully, but the others in the room might not have been there for all the attention he gave them.

Captain Dwyer spoke briskly. "You three men probably wonder just why you were brought here. It's simple to explain. We police depend upon science to help solve crimes. Personally I do not believe in spirits—except the kind that comes in bottles. However, Ram Omar alleges that he has been made a victim of someone else's murders. Two men have been killed—Peter Travers and Roswell Kirk. In each instance it was murder, without question."

"But for heaven's sakes," George Payne cried out, "why drag us into the mess? I didn't kill anybody."

"That remains to be seen," Dwyer said. "First of all Ram Omar has fully confessed what has gone on before. He maintains that you men, with Travers and Kirk included, called upon him for professional advice. You wanted to know how you might harm certain men who were your enemies, from whose deaths you would derive

a great deal of profit. Kirk's uncle, for instance, left him a fortune. Payne, your business partner was strangled with a piece of red silk.

"You were insured, with one another as beneficiary, for a hundred thousand. When your partner died, you collected that sum. Beany Scanlon was in danger of being turned over to the police by a rival gangster who died—with a piece of red silk twisted around his throat. The same idea holds true for all of you."

Borell asked hotly, "Are you accusing us of those murders?"

"Not yet," Dwyer answered. "Ram Omar maintains he merely satisfied your egos by furnishing a doll, made to resemble the men you hated or whose deaths you'd profit by. He stuck pins into them, tied red silk around their throats and told you they were as good as dead. Unfortunately, they were. Ram Omar swears that each of you went out and really did the job. You probably insist he did it."

"Which means we are quite stalemated," Payne argued. "And what are you going to do about it? I admit everything you say is true—except for the murder. Personally, I have a very good alibi which has already been investigated."

"Ram Omar says there really is something to this business of raising the dead," Dwyer countered. "He's willing to risk everything on bringing back those murdered men and learning from them the whole truth."

Payne jumped up. "Now wait a minute. This is no way to administer justice. Ram Omar is a damned swindler. He blackmailed me for almost all the money I received at my partner's death. He'd have bled me for everything I had. He blackmailed the rest of us, too—including Kirk who wouldn't pay up. Travers didn't pay either. Ram Omar told us if we didn't shell out he'd tip the police. Naturally we were involved in those deaths—in a left-handed way. We did want the men killed, but we didn't kill them. Omar did!"

"Sit down," Dwyer thundered. "We'll go through with this just the same. Omar—you're ready?"

Omar nodded courteously. Dwyer walked over to a row of electric light switches and gradually the room was darkened. A pale blue halo hung over everyone, like an unholy shroud. Beany Scanlon began to mumble, but Dwyer rapped him smartly on his bald pate. Beany lapsed into shivering silence.

SUDDENLY the organ began to play—dismal hymns, dirges, offerings to the dead. The colored light changed slowly from blue to an odd reddish hue. All eyes were upon Ram Omar. He sat with bowed head, both hands outstretched on the table.

He began to murmur an incantation of some kind. This went on for several minutes. Then the vast table at which he sat began to jiggle. It moved and no human hand touched it other than Ram Omar who certainly couldn't have been doing the lifting. One end rose high up and banged on the floor. Beany gave a wild shriek and the others jumped nervously.

A trumpet, phosphorescent and gleaming, sailed through the air carried by invisible hands. It sounded a weird, flat note. A tambourine rattled like the dried bones of an ancient skeleton. It followed the trumpet through nothing but space and disappeared as mysteriously as it had come into being.

"It is a good omen," the Oriental said sonorously. "The spirits are very willing tonight. Peter Albert Travers was the first to die. Kirk is but recently departed and may not have learned how to come through yet. Travers died almost two days ago. I shall call on him first."

The deep, terrifying voice began calling Travers' name. The trumpet whizzed through the semi-darkness again. The table banged several times and then there was a period of intense silence broken only by Omar's incessant pleading with the dead.

Payne half arose. "I can't stand any more of this nonsense. It's sheer hokum, but I'm scared anyway. I want to get out of here."

"Park," Dwyer ordered. "I never believed in this stuff myself, but how do you explain those things passing through the air—or that big table rocking like that? Two men couldn't lift it—not living men anyhow."

"Silence," Omar said. "There must be no interference. I think he is coming through. Closer—louder. Peter Travers—we are waiting. Peter Travers—you can make it. Come through! Come through!"

The reddish light dimmed until the room was bathed in complete darkness. In a far-off corner appeared a wisp of what seemed to be fog. It floated forward very slowly, like something not sure of itself. Something from a strange world. It paused directly in front of Omar and it began to grow larger. Beany's hoarse breathing was the only sound to be heard.

"Yes—yes, Ram Omar," a voice said. It seemed to come from far away. "Yes, Ram Omar. You called me."

"There are unbelievers," Omar's voice said. "They must have absolute proof. You are not materialized completely. Show us your face. Prove that you have really come back. Peter Travers—prove to the unbelievers!"

That halo of white fog began to spin madly, like a miniature whirlpool. It seemed to take more definite shape. Gradually the spinning ceased and the outlines of a face could be seen. It assumed more definite proportions and it began to sway, like a man moving about, yet bereft of his body.

It required a full three or four minutes before the features could be distinguished. Then the face of Peter Travers, who was dead, yet alive, stood out with a ghastly whiteness.

OMAR'S voice broke the silence. "Peter Travers. We can see you very well now. Very well indeed. You

will name your murderer. Name the man who killed you."

A low moaning sound was the only answer. Omar spoke again.

"He cannot come all the way through yet, but he will. He has promised me to speak. He will speak. We must have patience."

More minutes crawled past. Then Omar suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Travers," he called in a loud voice. "Travers. Name the man! Who is he?"

A voice that thundered from every corner of the room, a voice magnified a hundredfold yelled one word.

"Borell!"

The accused man was on his feet too, shrieking at the ghostly white face that came closer and closer to him. He admitted his guilt. He screamed pleas to take the ghost away. Every word he uttered fastened him more and more securely in the electric chair.

Lights flashed on. Borell saw Omar sitting nonchalantly on the edge of his desk lighting a cigarette. Peter Travers, his features peculiarly colored, was smiling coldly. George Payne slumped in his chair, mouth hanging wide open, eyes like an owl's. Tough, gutter-raised Beany Scanlon was on the floor in a dead faint.

Borell looked around, uttered a piercing yelp of dismay and made a streaking dash for the door. Captain Dwyer jumped in front of him, and handcuffs closed around Borell's wrists. Dwyer flung him into a chair.

Ram Omar walked over to him. "Well, Borell, my amateur exhibit rather got under your skin, didn't it? Want to know how we worked the thing—how we were able to accuse you so flatly? Every moment you and the others sat here a movie camera was taking your pictures through infra red light. Sections of the film were developed and dried by a quick process. They were run off by detectives in a back room.

"This room was especially prepared by the real Ram Omar— Oh, no, I'm

not Omar. I'm Detective Jim Thayer, the man you knew took Omar's place. Anyway, the men in the back room could hear everything that went on here. They were able to transmit this dope to me without your hearing it. When the seance started, you were wholly at ease. In the darkness you kept smiling confidently, knowing it was just a trick. For even if the real Ram Omar could have produced spirits, you were safe, because the real Omar was locked up and you knew I must be an impostor.

"Then, when the face of Peter Travers appeared, you weren't so certain. When it actually materialized, you became frantic and the films showed this. I called for a denunciation of you, and one of the men in the back room spoke into a microphone, which amplified his voice here."

"But—but it is Travers," Borell moaned. "He's dead. I know he's dead. Make him go away! I can't stand this! I'll go mad!"

"THIS is the real Peter Travers," Thayer said. "The man you killed was a double. A man made up to resemble Travers, who was willing to risk his life for pay. You went to Travers and told him Ram Omar had blackmailed you and also demanded you collect from the others. They paid up—some of them—but Travers refused. You knew he might be an object lesson for the others so you killed his double, choosing the same means that the real Ram Omar used in the other murders.

"Travers really believed that Ram Omar did the job and he decided to throw a scare into him. He had his butler pretend he was an undertaker. A couple of crooks stole an undertaker's utility wagon and wicker basket. The body of the false Peter Travers was put inside. They took it to this apartment. I was here, posing as Omar. While the butler kept me busy, the two crooks put the corpse in the study. When I went out to phone they returned, probably hav-

ing fixed the lock on their first visit and removed the body.

"Meanwhile you, Borell, called the others together. You pretended you were Ram Omar over the phone and told them to go to Travers' house. They did and found a coffin. They believed that Travers was inside when the casket was really empty. Later Travers put the body of his double inside it. Travers is under arrest, but his helpfulness will assist him if there is a clear charge against him. Hiring a man to die for you seems to be quite legal so far as I know now."

Captain Dwyer said, "I get it. Borell was the mysterious man who tipped us off about Ram Omar. He knew we picked him up and that you took his place, Thayer. How he found out I'm not so sure."

Thayer walked over to a window, carrying a flashlight which he took from the desk drawer. He turned the ray of that light down an alley between the two buildings. An ordinary clothes line was strung from one window of the apartment next door, to the wall of the structure they were in now.

"That clothes line fascinated me," Thayer explained. "I couldn't see any reason for it. Now Ram Omar kept this room equipped with hidden microphones. They all led into one speaker in another room. Borell merely tapped that line and heard everything that went on. The clothes line hides a wire to the building next door where Borell rented a couple of rooms. He was the real blackmailer, although Ram Omar certainly is a killer. Omar probably had blackmail up his sleeve."

"We've got Borell for the murder of John Doe, Travers' double, and for the killing of Roswell Kirk. There was no time to use a piece of red silk and throttle him, so Borell used a gun. While he was here, detectives searched his house and found the gun hidden in a drain pipe on the roof. You can take him away, captain. I'm going to be busy for a little while."

"Busy?" Dwyer asked. "I thought the case was closed."

"It is." Thayer was peeling off the turban. "I'm going out for a haircut and a shave. I haven't seen myself in weeks."



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focused the stranger between the broad tips of his shoes, taking in the sharply creased striped trousers, the swallow-tail coat, the fawn-colored spats, and the yellow Malacca walking stick.

"Let's try it again," Hawke said. "Go out and knock first."

The fat little man laughed. "Ha! A prime sense of humor, my friend. That's what I like."

Business had been slow and the man might be a prospective client, so Sam Hawke dropped his feet to the floor, lifted inquiring eyebrows and waited.

The little man seated himself gingerly on the edge of a chair with his chin propped on the Malacca stick and aimed his blue eyes at Hawke.

"Would you like to make a hundred dollars?" he asked abruptly.

Hawke held out his hand. The man produced a single crisp century note from a well-heeled wallet and flipped it on to the desk.

"Good." He nodded vigorously. "That's fine. That's what I like. Not too many questions. Get your hat and your gun and let's go."

Hawke did not move. "Where?"

"The Miner's National Bank."

"What for?"

"I have to get some stuff out of a safe deposit box."

Hawke folded the bill and tucked it neatly into his vest pocket. "So heavy you need help?" he asked.

The fat little man made an impatient gesture. "Not at all, but it's valuable stuff and somebody may try to take it away from me."

"Ah," Sam Hawke breathed. "Then there may be a little shooting."

The stranger shrugged. "It's a possibility."

Again Hawke extended his hand. "That C note needs some companions. Four more of them. My skin is very valuable and I wouldn't want to get it punctured for a measly hundred dollars."

Bright spots of color flushed the chubby cheeks. The blue eyes frowned. The round figure popped off the chair.

"Give me back my money," he snapped angrily.

With a flip of his thumb Hawke shot him the wadded bill. The stranger hopped toward the door, stopped with his hand on the knob, then turned and faced the detective.

"The whole thing may take less than half an hour," he said. "Also there may not be any shooting. I'll give you two hundred dollars."

HAWKE recognized the signs. There was a flat finality to the man's voice. He nodded crisply, said: "It's a deal," and took the proffered money. He got up, planted his hat firmly on his head, got the .38 automatic from his drawer, examined the cartridge clip, then dropped the weapon into his holster sling.

The Miner's National Bank was three blocks away. They had covered one street and were halfway along the next when it happened. A taxi came roaring down from the corner, slewed with screaming brakes toward the curb. A hand was shoved out the window. The hand held a gun.

It all happened so fast neither Hawke nor the fat man could do one single thing about it. The gun barked and jerked back, and a lean tendril of smoke was immediately swept away by the backwash of wind.

Sam Hawke dropped like a third act curtain. He kneeled on one leg and hauled at the .38. But by the time he got it out the taxi was careening around the corner out of sight. He turned to look at the fat man.

His client was lying limply on the pavement, stubby legs out-spread. The color had drained from the flabby cheeks. His eyelids were squeezed tightly shut. Hawke felt the man's wrist. It was beating like a dollar watch. And then he saw the derby which had rolled over against the cornerstone of a building. A tailor could not have cut a neater hole than the one the bullet had made.

Two sharp slaps against the man's cheeks brought him around. People

were beginning to form a semicircle, watching in open-mouthed and morbid fascination.

"Scat!" Sam Hawke snarled. "Scat!" He heaved the fat little man to his feet and steered him through the crowd.

"W-what happened?"

"You fainted. Somebody took a shot at you."

The little man grasped Hawke's arm. Hawke was surprised at the strength in those short dimpled fingers. "Let's get away from here—quickly."

Hawke flagged a cab and they pulled away just as a panting, perspiring cop hove to and anchored nervously on the fringe of the milling throng. They sputtered away, but before the driver had time to slip into third gear, Hawke breathed a stop order against the back of his neck. The cab rocked to a stop in front of the Miner's National Bank.

Pasty-faced, the fat man craned a quick glance up and down the block. Then he darted across the sidewalk through the open portal like a spider after a fly caught in the center of its web. Hawke followed with dignity.

He had his own account here, and he waved at Nulty, the square-jawed, iron-haired guard. He followed his client down a flight of marble stairs terminating in a dead-end of gleaming steel bars. A tall, stoop-shouldered attendant with a paternal manner, known to Hawke as Pop Worden, looked out at them and smiled. Beyond him were the long rows of inch-thick steel compartments containing several hundred safe deposit boxes.

"You wanna open your box again, Mr. Hawke?" The attendant asked.

"No, Pop, just keeping a friend company."

WORDEN keyed open the gate, squinting puzzledly at the fat man. "Don't quite recollect—" he started to say.

The fat man interrupted with: "I

don't have a box here. I want Mr. Edward Aldrich's box."

Pop Worden frowned. "You got a power of attorney?"

"Yes. Here it is."

"You got Mr. Aldrich's key?"

The fat man produced that also.

Pop Worden pressed a button. In a moment a heavy-set, pompous man whom Hawke recognized as Robert Oakley, the branch manager, appeared. He clamped a pair of pince-nez glasses to the high bridge of his prominent nose, took the paper from Worden and examined it like a pawnbroker appraising a diamond.

He looked up. "Everything seems all right. The power of attorney is properly notarized. You may proceed, Worden."

The attendant moved down the aisle, stepped up on a squat ladder, inserted two keys into the small swinging door marked 4001, and drew forth a long brown metal box. He piloted the way to one of the tiny cubicles used by depositors to examine their valuables. He snapped on a light and hurried back to the front gate.

"Wait here," the fat man told Hawke, and yanked the door shut behind him.

Sam Hawke propped himself against the wall, fished out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. This promised to be an easy two hundred dollars. Obviously another attempt to polish off the fat man would not be made until he'd been delivered to his destination. Hawke took his second puff of the cigarette and that was the last. The next instant he was hit by a truck, lifted off the floor, and tossed five feet to the other end of the corridor.

All this was accompanied by the ear-splitting roar of a thunderous detonation. The door of the cubicle burst outward in splinters. A pall of thick, gray smoke blossomed into the passage. And then for a moment there was silence, the deep silence that always follows an explosion.

From a distance, and through the buzzing in his ears, Hawke heard the

thin cry of voices. He got to his feet, feeling as if a steam roller had run over his chest. His upper lip was moist, sticky, and when he touched it he saw that his nose was bleeding.

He hung against the wall, reeling, then slowly things came back into focus. People crowding around him. Pop Worden was white-faced, trembling. Oakley, in a state of high, nervous excitement, grabbed Hawke's arm, jabbering:

"What is it? What happened?"

Hawke swallowed, pointed a mute finger at the doorless cubicle, then suddenly plunged toward the opening. He came to a dead stop at the threshold and his stomach sickened and turned over. Behind him Oakley uttered a gurgling sound. A slender blond clerk fell to the floor in a faint.

Hawke turned away fast. One look had been enough. He was not a magician. He could do nothing for the fat man now. And in order to bury him they'd have to scrape him off the walls.

At the sound of heavy steps pounding down the corridor he looked up. At least three police cars must have disgorged such a load of cops. In the foreground, beefy, red-faced, hard-jawed, was Sergeant Hedrick. He snorted at sight of the private detective.

"I might've known you'd be here, Hawke. Wherever there's trouble there's you."

Hawke took the crimson handkerchief away from his nose, focused a cold look on the sergeant, and said nothing.

"All right," Hedrick snapped. "What happened?"

"In there," Pop Worden said pointing.

Hedrick craned his neck, spared a brief glance into the annihilated cubicle, brought his neck back quickly, and wet his lips.

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Hawke brought him here," Oakley volunteered. "He had a power

of attorney to open Edward Aldrich's box."

Hedrick's gaze swung back on Hawke. "Client of yours?"

Hawke nodded. "Yes."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know."

Hedrick's brows hiked up and his jaw jutted forward belligerently. "Don't be coy, Hawke. This is murder."

Hawke shrugged. "I'm serious, Hedrick. The guy came into my office, offered me two hundred bucks to protect him while he transferred some valuables. He didn't tell me his name and I didn't ask. He took Aldrich's box and walked into that cubicle. The box must have been loaded with nitro, fixed to go off when the lid was opened. He wasn't in there a full minute when the blast came.

"That's all I know about it. Except somebody took a pop at him with a gun out in the street a little while ago. The finger was on him and I guess he had to get it sooner or later."

ONE of the cops brought the tattered remnants of a wallet to Hedrick. The sergeant made a cursory examination of the contents.

"Timothy Priest," he said. "Bachelor, retired." He snapped an order to another of the harness bulls. "Get homicide. Call the medical examiner. And have the morgue send up the meat wagon."

By that time Sam Hawke had stemmed the flow from his nose. He reached over and appropriated the hand-rolled silk handkerchief from Oakley's breast pocket, patted his mouth with it.

"May I make a suggestion, Hedrick?" he asked, and continued: "Look up the records and see who was the last man at Aldrich's box. Obviously, that's who loaded it with explosive."

Hedrick snorted. "I know my business. Get me the files, Oakley."

The manager nodded to Pop Worden, and the stooped figure moved back toward the anteroom. He came

back with a startled look on his face.

"They're gone," he said hoarsely. "The cards are gone."

The pince-nez fell off Oakley's nose and broke on the tile floor. His jowls gave a convulsive twitch and he gasped: "Impossible!"

"They're gone," Worden repeated dumbly.

"Nothing like this ever happened before," Oakley groaned.

"Now wait a minute," Hedrick said harshly. "What's missing?"

Oakley blinked. "It's like this. You see, when the holder of a safe deposit box wants access to it, he must sign a card. In that way we cross-check signatures. It also gives us a permanent record of every visitor. It seems those cards have been stolen. I'll have to make a thorough investigation. Somebody's going to get fired. We can't have anything like this going on in—"

"Shut up!" Hedrick interrupted. "There'll be an investigation, but you won't make it. We're gonna— hold it, Hawke. Where the devil are you going?"

"Out," Sam Hawke said innocently. "You don't need me and I want some fresh air."

"You stay here, or I'll slap a pair of cuffs on you. You're under suspicion, too."

"Me?" Hawke's long face writhed into an amazed expression.

"You bet. How do I know you didn't wait till Priest opened the box, then conked him and planted a small bomb in the room?"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Hawke. "You don't mean that."

Hedrick grinned very unpleasantly. "Maybe not, but stick around."

Sam Hawke shrugged resignedly.

Like the snap of a rubber band Oakley erupted into excitement. "I have it. I have it." He was practically dancing. "A couple of weeks ago another stranger opened Mr. Aldrich's box with a power of attorney. A young chap. The paper is probably in my

desk." He rushed off as if a tornado were howling at his back.

Hawke exchanged glances with Sergeant Hedrick, then looked at Pop Worden. "Remember anything about that, Pop?"

Worden's seamed face was screwed up in thought. "Why, come to think of it, I do. I had Mr. Oakley check up and then I gave this young chap the box. He kept it in one of the cubicles about five minutes."

"How did he look when he came out?"

Worden seemed to be scraping back into his memory. "'Bout the same, I guess. He didn't seem nervous or anything."

"Remember if anybody else asked for Aldrich's box after that?"

The stoop-shouldered attendant hunched his shoulders. "You know how it is here, Mr. Hawke. Maybe a hundred people come in every day. I don't remember from week to week."

Hawke nodded, then looked up as Oakley came wheeling down the corridor, triumphantly waving a sheet of paper. Sergeant Hedrick snatched it out of his hand.

"Yep, this is it. Jerome Connel. He had a look into the box three weeks ago. We got to get a line on him and pick him up. He looks like our man."

But two seconds later Hedrick was shoved into the background. The homicide squad arrived and with them a staff print man and photographers. They took over like the Nazis took Poland. From the questions they asked Oakley, Sam Hawke learned that Edward Aldrich was an investment broker, highly successful at one time, but doing little business now, although he was reputed to have salted away a considerable pile of government lettuce.

LIEUTENANT NULTY of homicide was a tall, lean whippet of a man with searching gray eyes, prominent temples, and from having seen too much death in one lifetime, a bitter seam of a mouth. Since a num-

ber of Sam Hawke's cases had held their element of violence, the two men had often been thrown into contact.

And so it was not unusual that when Nulty finally stood before Edward Aldrich, Sam Hawke had a place at his side.

All that was visible of Mr. Edward Aldrich was a gaunt, bony face into which were set a pair of opaque eyes with no more expression than a professional gambler's. The rest of him was concealed by the heavy bed-clothes which were drawn up to his chin. The bed itself was shaded by an old-fashioned canopy. The little Jap man-servant who had admitted them had faded silently out of the room and closed the door behind him.

"Tashito said you were policeman."

Aldrich's voice was a dry monotone.

"That's right," Nulty said.

"What do you want?"

"To ask you some questions."

"Relevant to what?"

"The questions first," Nulty said.

"You have a safe deposit box at the Miner's National Bank?"

"I have."

"When was the last time you were there?"

The colorless lips twisted into the semblance of a smile. "Sorry, my dear sir, but I will not answer without benefit of counsel or at least until I know why you're asking."

Nulty gazed at Hawke. The latter shrugged. Aldrich was within his rights. If he desired not to answer that was his prerogative. This was not a courtroom and he could not be punished for failure to answer. It was clear, moreover, that Aldrich was not a man who could be easily bullied. Nulty started to speak, but Sam Hawke forestalled the question with one of his own.

"Did you know a man named Timothy Priest?"

The bony face screwed itself into an expression of rage. He half lifted himself out of the bed, and rasped through clenched teeth:

"So he went and blabbed, did he?"

"He did." Hawke nodded wisely.

"All right. Then indict me and get it over with."

Hawke wet his lips. He must tread carefully, feel his way, retain the impression that he knew far more than was actually the case. He smiled quizzically.

"Priest had plenty on you, didn't he?"

"Enough," snapped Aldrich.

"Blackmailing you?"

"You can put it that way, if you like."

Sensing the direction which Hawke's questions were taking, and not wanting to be left behind, Nulty entered the inquiry.

"You were tied down in bed, couldn't get up to procure money for the payoff, so you gave him a power of attorney to open your safe deposit box."

Aldrich shrugged against the white satin pillow.

"You knew," Nulty said, "what would happen when he opened the box."

"I most certainly did."

Nulty's eyebrows jumped up in a surprised arc and his eyes widened.

"You did?"

"Emphatically. He would find fifty thousand dollars in negotiable securities, and ten thousand dollars in cash. Enough to keep him quiet for the time being."

"Oh." Nulty's voice expressed disappointment.

Hawke said: "Several weeks ago you gave a power of attorney to a man named Jerome Connel. Who was he?"

"My confidential secretary."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. I fired him."

"Ah," breathed Hawke dreamily. "Had you been to the box after that?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because," cracked Nulty, losing his patience, "that box was loaded with nitroglycerin which exploded and murdered Priest."

FOR the space of several seconds absolutely no change came over Edward Aldrich's gaunt death's-head of a face, and then his mouth spread into a slow grin. He said, rolling the words over his tongue and relishing them with the approval of a wine taster:

"So Priest is dead. Good. Very good. In fact, splendid."

Nulty didn't like that. He didn't like it one bit. He could see nothing good or splendid in murder, and his lean jaw lengthened.

"Not so very, my friend," he said. "Because we're going to hold you under suspicion of murder."

"Me!" The word cracked out like a gunshot. "Get out. Get out. You haven't got a warrant. You haven't any proof. Tashito! Tashito, come here."

The door opened as if the little sloe-eyed Jap had been waiting for such a summons. He slid into the room, stepped to one side of the door and bowed politely from the waist. His smile showed teeth as white and even as piano keys. And when he spoke his voice was a soft, sibilant whisper.

"Thanking you to leave, gentlemen. Master not well."

Spotches of angry color heightened Nulty's cheekbones. "Wait a minute," he blustered. "You can't—"

The rest of it was lost between suddenly locked teeth. Exactly when the Jap reached for the gun neither investigator knew. But abruptly it was pointing at them from out of a tight brown fist, small, compact, utterly deadly. The brownish eyes held a cold, faraway look, but the smile remained as it had been.

"Not liking to shoot policemen," he said. "Exit, please."

Hawke moved fluidly forward and the gun wavered, picked a pin point directly over his heart.

"Get out, gentlemen," Aldrich growled.

Hawke had the usual instincts of

self-preservation. He did not know how far the Jap might go, and he never took chances unless vitally necessary. This was, after all, Nulty's affair. Hawke had his two hundred dollars, and considerably more time than a half hour had passed since he'd started on this thing. And that was all Priest had promised the matter would take.

He let his shoulders drop. "You can stay if you like, Nulty. I'm leaving."

And with as much dignity as he could muster under the circumstances he stalked out of the room. Nulty's breath was warm against the back of his neck.

"I'll be damned!" was all the lieutenant said.

Absently, Sam Hawke pressed the elevator button. When the car came up he followed Nulty inside and spoke to the operator.

"Did Mr. Aldrich go out today?"

The operator was a young kid with a ready tongue. "Yeah, early this afternoon. Came back about two hours ago."

Lieutenant Nulty inhaled deeply. Hawke was satisfied.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Got trouble with his legs. Don't know what, but the Jap almost has to carry him."

Hawke gave the kid a dollar. That would make a friend of him, and perhaps later sew up his testimony. Out in the street, he waved impatiently at Nulty's prodding questions, headed for a drug store, flipped the pages of a telephone book, then locked himself into a booth. In two minutes he emerged, flagged a cab and settled down beside the lieutenant.

"What's up?" Nulty demanded.

"This. Aldrich still maintains an office. I called there and asked for Jerome Connel's address."

"Aldrich's former confidential secretary?"

"Precisely. We're headed there now."

NULTY rubbed the tips of his fingers together. "You heard what the boy in the elevator said. Aldrich went out. That gave him an opportunity to try to head off Priest and put a bullet into him before he had a chance to go to the bank and clean out the safe deposit box. What do you think, Hawke?"

Hawke nodded. "Exactly what I had in mind. But first let's talk to Connel. Probably he knows enough about Aldrich's affairs to shed considerable light upon the trouble between Aldrich and Priest."

Jerome Connel was a rabbity specimen with a bald head, nervously darting eyes, and a habit of continually clicking his tongue against his upper plate. He answered the doorbell dressed in a flannel robe and dragging the crumpled remains of a newspaper at his side.

Ensnorced in a frowzily upholstered easy chair, he welcomed the opportunity to talk about and against his former employer. He was, in fact, eager to do so.

"You knew Timothy Priest?" Nulty asked.

"Of course," Connel nodded vigorously. "He was one of our principal clients, and—"

"Clients?"

"Yes. Priest was a rather wealthy man. He placed some very valuable securities into Aldrich's hands for investment."

"Did Aldrich invest it advantageously?"

"Ha!" Connel snorted. "And again—ha! He certainly did. Advantageously for himself." He let his plate slip, then snapped it back against his gums with his tongue. "Mind you, gentlemen, I have no proof that Aldrich was actually dishonest, but during the last year he kept making money while his clients kept losing it."

Hawke said: "Tell us about it."

"Well, I think Aldrich used to buy up worthless securities for a song. These he would credit to the accounts

of his clients. Their original securities he would appropriate for himself after some very shady paper manipulations."

"Besides Priest," Hawke inquired, "can you name any of his other clients?"

Connel shook his head, gave them a wily smile. "That is what I was trying to find out when Aldrich sacked me. He kept his files pretty secret and—wait a minute, yes, there was one man he gypped rather badly. I know because this man came to the house one day and threatened to get the district attorney to investigate Aldrich."

"His name?"

"Maybe you know him. Robert Oakley, manager of the Miner's National Bank."

Nulty stiffened and flashed Hawke a significant look. Hawke's lean-jawed face was blank and innocent.

"Tell me," he said softly, "when you opened Aldrich's safe deposit box under a power of attorney, did you see any cash in it?"

The lids blinked rapidly over Connel's nervous eyes. He was silent a shade too long, then his tongue darted out and moistened his lips. Some of the color fled from his face and he came up out of the easy chair, shaking.

"Money?" he said. "Cash? I should say not. If Aldrich is trying to imply that I stole the money from his box he is a liar. A double-barreled liar—and I will push the words down his throat."

Hawke pursed his lips. "Easy, Connel, take it easy. One more question. Do you know for certain whether Aldrich visited his box after you were there?"

"He certainly did. Two days later. I know because I was with him. If any money was missing, why didn't he complain then? Why didn't he, I ask you?"

Hawke shrugged and his eyes were half closed with a dreamy look in them. "I'm not sure, but we're going to investigate a little further along

TSD

those lines. Get dressed, Connel."

The bald man spluttered like a dud firecracker, but when Lieutenant Nulty suddenly produced his service special and cracked an order, he jumped toward the bedroom, dropping his upper plate on the frayed carpet and scooping it up as he went.

ROBERT OAKLEY'S office in the Miner's National Bank contained a number of hostile figures. The tension in the room was drawn as tight as a violin string. Seated in a corner, with a pair of crutches propped against the chair, sat Edward Aldrich, lips tucked inward at the corners of his gaunt face. His opaque eyes disdained even to favor the others with a look.

Two pairs of eyes glared at him hatefully. Connel was fumbling nervously with his hat. And Oakley, much of his pomposity shattered by the recent catastrophe in the bank, stood opening and shutting his fists.

Sergeant Hedrick, still on duty at the bank, was guarding the door with his mountainous body. Lieutenant Nulty sat on the edge of the desk, waiting for Hawke. And five minutes later Hawke entered the room, the sleepy look still in his eyes.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he drawled, "but I was going over several of the accounts in the bank." He turned to Aldrich. "Your Jap brought you here. Where is he now?"

"In the lobby, waiting."

Hawke nodded to Nulty and the latter ordered Hedrick to fetch Tashito. Hawke did not wait before commencing. He waved an admonishing finger at Aldrich.

"You were not at all co-operative," he said. "You refused to budge and so Nulty had to book you for murder in order to get you here. You may live to regret that, Aldrich. And then again, you may not. It is my belief that Connel stole some money from your safe deposit box. Was there any in it when you foolishly permitted him to open it?"

"There certainly was. Several thousand dollars. And it was not foolish because all of my employees are bonded."

Hedrick opened the door and ushered Tashito into the room. The little brown man was still wearing the same indomitable smile, all his teeth showing ivory-white. Hawke jerked his thumb at a chair.

"Thanking you so much," the Jap said, "but prefer standing."

Hawke nodded. "Now let's get down to cases. Priest was murdered by the very novel method of planting an explosive in your safe deposit box, Aldrich. Did you open the box after Connel?"

Aldrich's thin seam of a mouth pulled into a mocking smile. "Do you expect me to answer that?"

"No, but we have a way of finding out. Hedrick, tell Pop Worden to come in here with the requisition cards." Hedrick left, scowling. He didn't like taking orders from Hawke, but Nulty had made it very clear that the private detective was running the show.

Pop Worden must have been waiting outside, because his stooped figure appeared almost immediately. He extended a white card to Hawke, who took it, glanced at it, then passed it over to Aldrich.

"That is your signature, isn't it?"

ALDRICH frowned at the card and then looked up through narrow-lidded eyes. "Yes, and unless it is a very clever forgery, I would say you are trying to frame me for murder. I did not visit the bank on that date."

Hawke smiled disparagingly. He knew damn well that Aldrich had not visited the bank on that date. The card was an old one, perhaps a year old. All that had been cleverly changed was the date.

"Framed?" he questioned softly. "If so, somebody here in the bank is trying to do it. Didn't you invest some of Oakley's money for him, and didn't you give him a raw deal?"

Aldrich did not answer immediate-

ly. Hawke knew exactly what was running through his mind, that it would be better to accept punishment for fraud than for murder.

"Yes," Aldrich admitted quietly. "I did give him a raw deal."

As if he were suddenly seized with an attack of palsy, Oakley's body began to shake. "No," he cried. "No. You can't put the blame on me. You can't—" He stopped short, a wild light entering his eyes. "How about Connel? Maybe he stole the money and put the bomb in the box so that when Aldrich would open it it would kill him and he'd never be accused of the theft.

"Maybe Aldrich himself planted it and deliberately sent Priest to the bank, expecting him to be killed. He could bribe Worden to steal the cards so we'd never know he'd been here. That's it, he bribed Worden." Oakley spun on the stooped attendant. "He gave you money, didn't he—didn't he—" And lunging forward he curled his hands around Worden's slender neck, shaking the attendant like a cat with a ball of wool.

One of Hedrick's big paws knocked him off. Pop Worden's face was very pale and he ran his fingers around the inside of his collar, loosening it.

Hawke didn't particularly like what he had to do now. He shook his head and said softly: "No, he didn't have to bribe Worden. Because Worden stole the cards of his own accord, to protect himself. Didn't you, Pop?"

The nostrils spread flat against the seamed face and the dull glaze of hatred glowed in Worden's eyes. They darted for an avenue of escape. Finding none, he threw himself against Hedrick who was guarding the door. With the heel of a beefy hand, Hedrick sent him reeling against the far wall.

Nulty's mouth was open. "I'll be damned," he said.

HAWKE shook his head sadly. "It hit me only a little while ago. I suppose there'd been a nibble of suspicion back of my mind all the time,

but it only crystallized while I was arranging with Worden to fix the requisition cards. Then I suddenly recalled that he'd neglected to make Priest sign a card for Aldrich's box. Why? That should have been automatic with him, almost a reflex. It was because he was badly rattled when Priest appeared. He hadn't meant to kill Priest. The explosive had been for Aldrich."

"Motive?" Nulty asked. "What was his motive?"

"Well, I looked up his account here in the bank. Two thousand dollars had been withdrawn in one lump. That's a lot of money for a man making only thirty-five a week. I concluded he had asked Aldrich to invest it for him. You did, didn't you, Aldrich?"

The gaunt man nodded.

"And lost it. So Worden decided to get his money back simply by taking it out of your safe deposit box. Who had a better opportunity? While you were examining your valuables he was in possession of both keys. Simple to make a wax impression of yours, then on some quiet day, get the box, open it, clean it out, and plant the explosive.

"It was better for you to be killed. Otherwise you might find the box empty and accuse him. He stole the cards. He knew Connel had been there and that your secretary would be traced through the power of attorney in Oakley's possession. That would indicate Connel. But as I say, his plan backfired when Priest appeared instead of you."

Aldrich got the crutches under his arm and heaved his bony frame upright. "Well, gentlemen, I don't suppose you'll need me any longer."

"On the contrary," Hawke murmured. "We need you badly. There's that little matter of the shot somebody took at Priest in the street. You left your apartment this afternoon at about the time. Where did you go?"

Aldrich's nostrils pinched together. "To my doctor for diathermy treatment on my legs."

"But not Tashito. You sent him aft-

er Priest. The bullet was found imbedded in a wall near the shooting. Right now a couple of cops are searching for the gun in your apartment. If it checks with the bullet—"

The Jap whistled through his nose and his face distorted into an expression of fear. For the first time Hawke saw it without the smile. And as Tashito stepped back cowering against the wall, Hedrick pounced on him with a pair of handcuffs.

"Attempted murder," Nulty said. "I get it. When we visited you today you probably thought the Jap had only wounded Priest and that was why Priest had told his story. What story, Aldrich?"

Hawke supplied the answer. "Priest had proof of Aldrich's fraud and

threatened to go to the D. A. unless he made good. So Aldrich promised him everything he owned, although he probably has another fortune elsewhere, and even offered to let Priest go to the safe deposit box himself. Sending the Jap to waylay him was an afterthought."

Nulty nodded shortly. "Well, that about ties up the loose ends."

"Not altogether. I imagine Connel swiped a few thousand dollars from the box when he opened it. We won't try to prove that if he turns state's evidence."

"I will," Connel's head bobbed eagerly. "I will."

Nulty stared at Pop Worden and shook his head. "You never can tell," he said.



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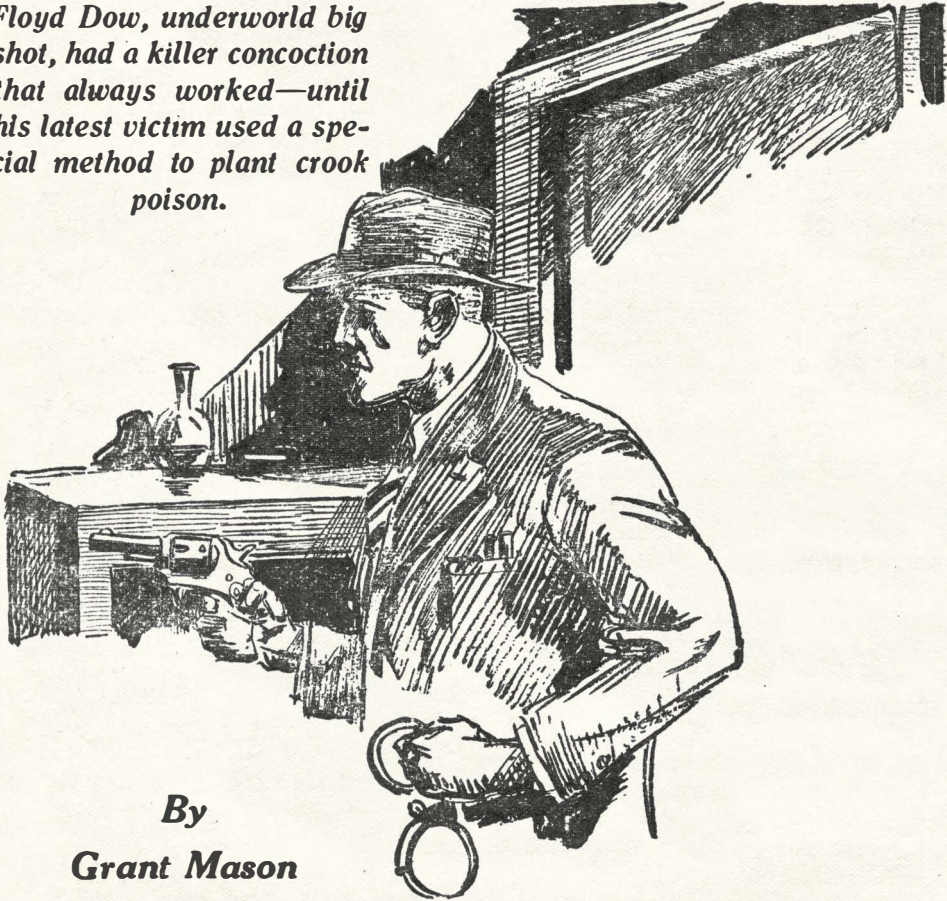
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Memo from the Corpse

Floyd Dow, underworld big shot, had a killer concoction that always worked—until his latest victim used a special method to plant crook poison.



By
Grant Mason

FLOYD DOW slid across the lawn, lost himself in the thick shadows hugging the house. He clawed along the scraggly wall for a foothold, then lifted himself noiselessly, carefully, until his fists wrapped around the iron rails of the balcony.

Swinging up, he clambered over the rail, peered through the French windows. The old guy was in, sure enough. That was his squat, balloon-shaped figure over there in the corner.

It was now or never. The mayor's "Crime Committee" was getting too hot. They'd put the finger on Floyd Dow, warned him to clear town. He

had no intention of doing that with half of the town's storekeepers kicking in to him each week.

But this old man, Seth Morton, the chairman, wouldn't budge. A judicious mixture of threats and bribes made most of the Crime Committee listen to reason. Morton was just plain poison for crooks.

Dow jerked a long stiletto from his inside pocket, tried the knob of the big glass door. It turned without a squeak. He squeezed into the room. A mad hate stripped all caution from his seething brain, pushed him across the thick carpet toward the pudgy form.

"Good evening, Dow," came Morton's soft voice. "You might have knocked." The gray-haired clubman, millionaire, and civic worker hadn't even turned his head. He continued to dab lightly at a mounted canvas near the wall.

For a moment Dow's breath stuck in his throat. That guy must have eyes in the side of his— No, it was a small wall mirror next to the painting. That was it.

"Drop that brush, you monkey!" Dow ordered, padding closer, his eyes narrowed to thin slits.

Morton turned, dropped the long thin brush. His face turned a chalky white when he saw the steel blade in the gangster's hand.

"Think you can get away with it?" he asked quietly, without fear.

"That's my business!" rasped Dow, darting to the door, listening intently. "All alone?"

"All alone. But a dear friend of yours is expected in a few minutes. Police Commissioner Farrel—" Morton swung his gaze to the splash of vivid color on the easel. "Just a little social call. You see, we're both interested in the same things, outside of ridding the town of rats like you. We both paint—"

"Yeah? Well, that's one painting you'll never finish!" Dow snarled viciously, stepping in closer, tensing his muscles.

The other smiled wanly. "It is finished. I just put my *nom de plume* in the corner of the canvas when you came in. Now be sensible, Dow, put down that—"

The words froze on his lips. Like a panther, the swarthy crook sprang at him, whipped the dagger through space with lightning speed. It felt like sticking a pig.

THE blade ploughed clean through the old man's throat, threw up founts of red, foamy blood. Dow yanked the steel sliver from the gushing wound. He held it poised in mid-air, took careful aim. Then, as the

gasping hulk went into its death plunge, he dug the knife into the left side.

Seth Morton toppled to the floor with a dull thud. He writhed, squirmed like a speared eel, then suddenly stretched out and lay lifeless. Crimson jets spewed from the two wounds, discolored the carpet in ugly, owlsh patterns.

Floyd Dow pulled the stiletto from the body, wiped the blade along the sleeve of the blood-splattered jacket. He placed it in his inside pocket.

Only one more thing before he skipped.

He fumbled in the old man's clothing, found a bulging wallet. He pulled out a wad of bills, shoved them in his pocket. Then he opened a few drawers in a large desk in the corner, scattered papers, envelopes over the carpet.

Dow stepped back, glanced carefully at the setting. Perfect. Just a small-time burglar dumb enough to bust in on one of the town's leading figures.

There were no fingerprints, of course. The gloves on his hands took care of that.

For the first time, Dow noticed the richly colored painting. A thin, silvery brook that flowed between snow-banked hedges. This guy sure could paint.

Dow chuckled softly, clicked off the light. He slithered across the room, out to the balcony. Luckily, a row of Chinese elms bordering the sidewalk shut off the house from pedestrian view. Dow scrambled over the rail, dropped to the lawn.

In a few seconds he was back in his car parked around the corner. After he'd driven a safe distance, Dow stopped near a deserted lot. He threw the stiletto into a clump of matted weeds, then drove a short distance, peeled off the gloves. These he flicked into an ashcan. Farther up the road, he hurled the wad of bills into a squalid tenement hallway. Best to play safe all around.

Dow now turned his car about, headed straight for home. He'd just

returned from Lugi's Tavern—no less than six people would swear to that.

He pulled up in front of the Fairhaven Apartments, strode boldly through the ornate lobby. Then as the car shot upwards, he looked at his hands, clothes. No blood spots. Nothing to show he was just returning from a murder.

Now it would be child's play to handle that crime committee. With Morton out of the way, the other members would string along with him, take their regular cut, and keep their mouths shut. Who'd dare say the "Dow Protective Service" wasn't rendering a useful public service?

The smirk on Dow's thick-jowled face spread into a broad grin of complacent satisfaction. He ambled into his swanky apartment, pressed the light button.

A sickly terror ripped his throat, riveted him in his tracks like a wooden image. The smile fused into a stare of blank incredulity.

"What's the matter, big shot? You look frightened." Detective Sergeant McLaughlin rose from the big chair facing the door. He motioned to two grim-faced policemen near the wall. They closed in on Dow.

He tried to inject the usual bluster in his voice, but it rattled tinnily. "Look here, copper! I'm sick and tired of being hounded! What they tryin' to pin on me this time?"

"Don't know," the officer replied. "Got a radio call while cruisin' around here. Seems they want you over at Seth Morton's house. Commissioner Farrel—he's waitin'—"

THE patrol car slid through city traffic with siren jammed down tight. Streets, houses, vehicles, were a jumbled blur to the crook squeezed between two officers.

It was all a bluff. They had nothing on him. Sure he hated Morton's guts, wasn't even sorry somebody slipped him the works. He'd admit that. Everybody knew it. But as for mur-

dering him—well, Dow wasn't that dumb.

"The commissioner's slippin', gettin' lazy," he piped amiably. "I'm the fall guy for anything that breaks in this lousy town. Why don't he—"

A policeman stationed at the door jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "They're waiting upstairs," he said.

They filed up a winding stairway, into a room that Dow recognized only too well. The bloated body lay where it had fallen.

"You're sunk this time, Dow," said Commissioner Farrell, standing next to the body. Dow squirmed uneasily. The room was full of officers, all looking at him as if he were just caught red-handed.

"Quit the kiddin', chief," he croaked hoarsely. "You can't frame anything on me." His eyes rolled like those of a trapped rat. Of course it was just a bluff, a stab in the dark.

"You were smart, Dow—" the commissioner led him by the arm until he stood directly in front of the canvas—"but not smart enough!"

Floyd Dow's gaze followed the gnarled finger of the police official, saw it point to the lower left-hand corner of the painting.

"See that?" drawled Farrell. "Read it. It's your death warrant!"

Death warrant? What insane gibberish was this? The finger was pointing to a hastily scrawled legend. Why that was the guy's moniker—his *nom de plume*, he called it.

Dow stared dumbly. "What's this, a joke?" he pushed the words through chattering teeth. "What's it got to do with me?"

"Plenty!" snapped the commissioner, as his fingers darted to the small mirror alongside. Dow's bulging orbs followed greedily, fastened on the reflection of the innocent looking phrase. His knees buckled like paper props, refused to hold his swaying body.

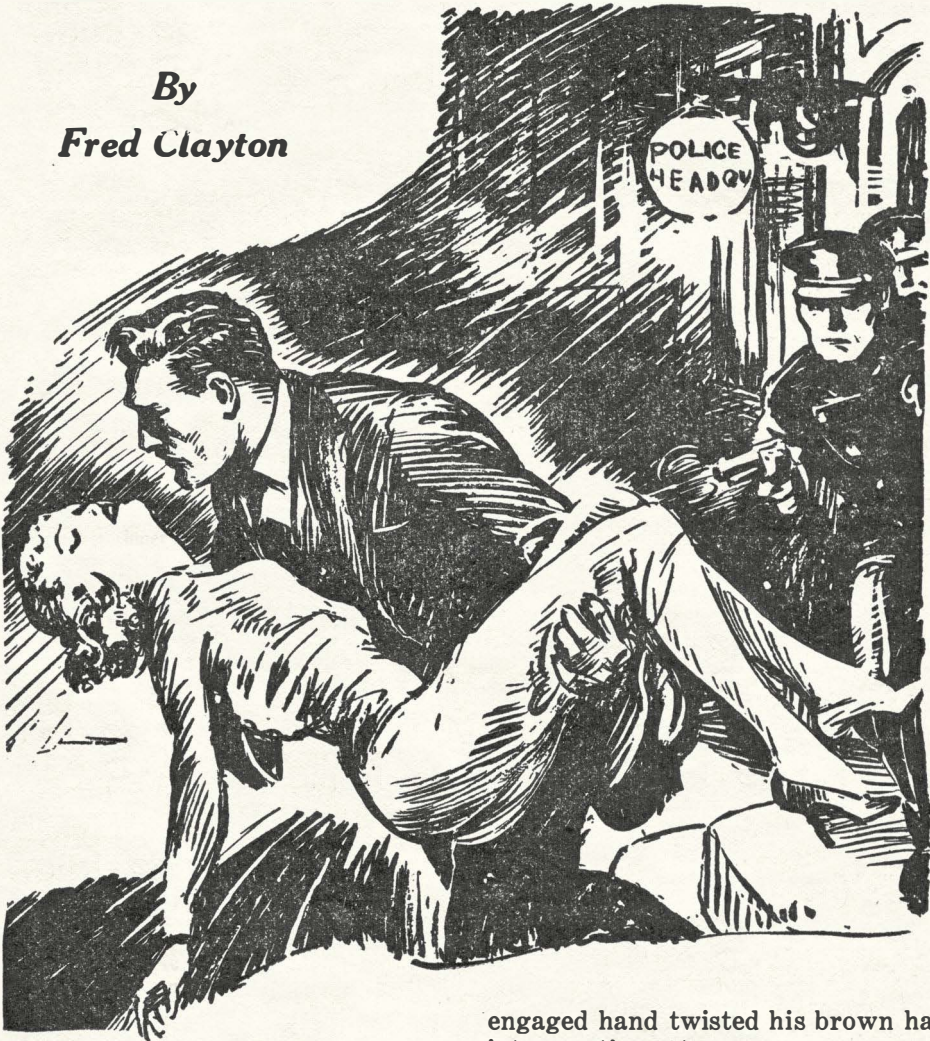
In the mirror the letters took different form, spelled out their grisly message of doom:

FLOYD DOW

Before Poole even had a chance to open up his detective agency, he discovered a corpse on his doorstep. And instead of putting shackles on another man, Poole himself was

Handcuffed to Homicide

By
Fred Clayton



BURROWING his hips into the couch till he was more comfortably settled, Poole puffed his first cigarette of the day and blew smoke up at the papered ceiling. His I'll-take-it-as-it-comes face was soberly thoughtful, while slowly his dis-

engaged hand twisted his brown hair into a rat's nest.

The job ahead was big, even though he'd been told competition in this town was not tough. Opening an agency in a strange city, getting the right introduction to the cops, building up a clientele, that was work. The necessity of making good before

limited funds were exhausted made it tougher.

Even so, he was glad he'd socked that actor in the nose, out on the celluloid coast. His chief, and a delegation of actors, a few directors and even a couple of producers all confidentially told Poole they'd remember him forever, for punching that bum's nose. But the ham did have a big contract, and they all agreed it was better for Poole to go.

So, to hell with the lot of them, he had some dough. He'd open an agency. They'd hear about it all the way back to the coast, and wonder if the western United States couldn't better have lost one more ham, than *the* one George Poole. He snuffed the cigarette into the tray on the windowsill, and decided he'd better get up now, and right then he heard the noise in the hall.

Poole was up off the couch instantly. Any guy that's guarded movie stars gets in the habit of not waiting for news flashes to tell him what that noise was.

From the door of his small apartment, he ran towards the front of the house along a ten-foot narrow hallway. He came out onto a wide landing, at the foot of a short flight of stairs, which was at the head of a long flight. Below, the light was not so good. Hurrying down, he found a girl, crumpled, her skirts twisted, showing the white of her slip.

Poole carried her up to the wide landing. Down the narrow hall his door stood open. There was another door, right at hand, but the landlord had told him that was only a storage closet. Poole held the girl lightly and went up the short flight of stairs, and banged on the door of an apartment at the front of the house.

The woman who answered looked odd enough, so he said, "Your daughter fell down the stairs. She's stunned."

The woman gibbered, "She's not my daughter," and her eyes rounded with fear. Gingerly she thrust a stiff-

fingered hand forward and brushed the veil off the girl's face. The woman fell back into her apartment, holding her trembling hands out.

"The girl's dead!" she gasped, and slammed the door.

POOLE went cold, and gulped a mouthful of air that went lead-heavy to the pit of his stomach. Ah, the woman was just so upset at the idea that it might have been her daughter, that she was jumping to conclusions. He lifted the girl high in his arms and listened for her heart.

How could he hear it, with his own hammering?

Poole put his foot on the stairs to the floor above, braced her with his knee, and felt for pulse at her wrist and throat. He listened for her breathing.

The girl *was* dead!

He turned round, caught in one of those maelstrom-like periods of idiotic indecision, looking for a place to put her. He kicked the woman's door.

"Telephone the police!"

She must have been standing just inside. "What do you think I did?" she cried instantly through the door.

Realizing that he was a fool, Poole carried the body down the short flight, along the narrow hall, and set it on the couch in his apartment.

At first it was cops, then it was dicks. One of them, Detective Sergeant Midas, was muscular and not very tall, just Poole's size. They eyed each other, and Poole saw a mar. with the tenacity of a bulldog, the cold fury of a killer-hater.

Poole fired answers back at questions. Midas switched abruptly to the medical examiner. After a whispered conference, Midas bent over the girl's body, then whirled.

"So you don't know anything!"

Midas came out of his crouch, smashing a savage blow to the jaw. Poole banged against the wall. Cops

jumped him, and Midas snapped a cuff on his wrist, yanked.

"You guys take care of this," Midas ordered. "I'm taking this mugg down where he can be questioned."

Poole got a whirlwind ride in the police car. In less time than it would seem possible, he was seated in the lone chair of a small room, with Midas and three other dicks standing over him.

"I told you," Poole repeated, "I arrived yesterday and moved into that furnished apartment in the afternoon. I don't know anyone in that house. I worked out at a big West Coast agency. I came East to try my luck."

"You're not a private dick in this state," Midas retorted. "And you have no gun permit here either, remember that too. Why'd you kill that girl?"

Midas answered a rap on the door, and returned with something behind his back. He snapped a hand forward, thrust a shiny pistol under Poole's nose.

"Well?"

"Everyone's seen an air pistol. That's an especially expensive and powerful one," Poole remarked.

"Be sensible!" Midas demanded. "That girl is dead from a dart, and we found this air gun in your rooms."

"I wouldn't be dumb enough to carry her around trying to find out where she belonged, if I had killed her. I had no reason to kill her. And I wouldn't say she fell down the stairs if I knew a dart had killed her. What the hell, I'm not *that* simple."

MIDAS stamped out of the room. Poole sat, thinking heavily of the sort of story this would make in the newspapers. Once it was released, slanted as it would be because of Midas' angle, he'd be finished here and everywhere else. Poole winced. Only an hour ago he'd been thinking he'd make them hear about him all the way back to the Coast. Well, they'd hear!

The door banged. Midas had re-

turned. "When did that girl leave her apartment, Poole? How long was she in the hall?"

"I've been thinking about it," Poole admitted. "I know I heard her, but I can't say for sure. My impression is that she came out of her apartment, and was killed half a minute later as she went down the stairs."

"So you know she had the apartment over yours!"

"It figures. That house is built funny. The front is three stories high. The back is no higher, but it contains four floors. That puts back apartments on a different level from front ones. Anyway, that apartment I knocked at was the top floor of the front of the house. But, at the back, there was another apartment just over mine. The girl had to come from there."

Midas scowled. "We've checked on you, and the cops out there give you a good name. Get out, but don't go far."

Poole could scarcely believe it. It was reasonable, but it was *too* good. He walked out on air. As he passed the desk and headed for the street, he saw that it wasn't eleven o'clock yet. All this, in a little over two hours!

He hurried back to the house, gulping the air as if it were wine, and looking up as if Midas' features might becloud the fair blue sky at any moment.

The letterbox gave the murdered girl's name as Nancy Lemoyne. Poole located the janitor in the cellar. Taking one wild look at him, the Negro grabbed up a shovel.

Poole laughed, in spite of his troubles. "Take it easy! The police let me go. For the time being anyway. I had nothing to do with that girl. How's about answering some questions?"

"Man," the Negro dropped the shovel, and shuffled forward to accept a cigarette, "the cops done asked. And I don't know from nothing. I tell them she lives here 'bout a year. How I know where she comes from,

who's her boy friend, where at's she work?

"Sure, five, six months ago she has some gal living with her. Mister, I got myself sick trying to remember what is that gal's name. I can't do it nohow." He shook his big head. "No, sir, not even with cops a-pulling and a-hauling and a-shouting at me, I can't remember."

Poole sat on an up-ended box, and drew on his cigarette. The cellar, though crowded with heaped furniture, papers, magazines and other junk, was clean and orderly.

"On the level with my apartment," Poole reminded, "that storage closet door—is that locked?"

"Nassuh, that ain't never locked."

Well, that cleared up one item. The killer had shot Nancy Lemoyne from that closet, then had had no time to escape. He'd ducked into Poole's, rid himself of the air gun, hidden again in the closet while Poole was half a flight higher. While Poole took the body into his apartment, the killer ducked downstairs.

Poole tried, but there just wasn't any information in the janitor about Nancy Lemoyne's former apartment-mate.

GRINDING the cigarette under his heel, Poole stood at the stack of magazines. A good few were subscription copies, with address labels. He lifted armloads off the pile, turned the bottom stack upside down, and looked at the one that had been on the floor. It was discolored and warped from having once been wet. Brushing dust away, Poole took it to the light. Bertha Dunstan. That name was not in the vestibule! Racing out into the yard, he caught the Negro just entering the house with a broom.

Poole waved the magazine. "Bertha Dunstan, that her name?"

"Glory be! I ain't saying it is, I ain't saying it ain't. Peace, brother. Love thy neighbor." He shuffled away.

Poole threw the magazine into the cellar.

As his legs pumped up a steep street to the public library, pointed out by a passer-by, the air was limpid, the heavens sunnily resplendent. Every piston stroke of Poole's legs was a race against the time when Midas would release a story to the newspapers. Poole sweated.

He consulted the library telephone book. No Bertha Dunstan. Strike one! City directory— He almost cursed aloud. She was there, but listed as of her occupancy in Nancy Lemoyne's. Strike two! For fifteen minutes Poole argued that he ought to be allowed to learn if Bertha Dunstan had a borrower's card, and if the library had her new address. The librarian doggedly refused. Strike three!

Growling to himself, Poole hurried out into the sunshine.

Two men grabbed an arm each, skated him out to a car at the curbing. Poole started to fight, then relaxed as he discerned Midas on the back seat.

Midas scowled a question, and when Poole didn't begin talking at once, Midas thundered, "The tough guy whose fists get him into trouble! Well, your gun's got you in a mess now. A thirty-eight in your luggage, and no local permit! Damn you, talk if you want to stay out in the sun."

Want to? He *had* to stay out, to get anywhere. It hurt, and how it hurt, but he told Midas everything he knew.

They thrust him out, and Poole's blood boiled as he watched the police car reach the crest of the high-topped street and then disappear over the horizon.

Poole took a cab to City Hall. He hurried to the Bureau of Vital Statistics. It cost him a ten spot, but he came out with the information that Bertha Dunstan had married Thomas Finney about six months ago.

Poole's hands shook as he investigated a telephone book, only to find it listed no Thomas Finney! Not till he turned to the yellow pages at the back, and discovered that Finney lived in a hinterland called Dundalk.

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later, Poole stood at a small house, one of a big development of countless two-story dwellings, built in blocks of a dozen, the whole bunch forming a big G. He was ringing the bell with fervor, when a young woman stopped at the foot of the stoop, her arms full of brown paper sacks of groceries.

"I'm looking for Mrs. Finney," Poole volunteered.

"I am Mrs. Finney," the woman told him.

Poole jumped down the stoop, and took her bundles. She led him round back and into the kitchen.

He had quite a little session with Mrs. Finney. The news of Nancy Lemoyne's murder broke her up badly. Sobbing, Mrs. Finney admitted she'd lost contact with Nancy because Tom Finney hadn't cared much about Nancy. But Mrs. Finney cared a lot about her.

Poole questioned her gently.

"All right." She raised her head from the breakfast nook table, pressing her handkerchief against each nostril in turn. "But please keep me out of this. Nan worked for Albert Harpon. He was her boy friend, but he wouldn't marry her. I told Nan to quit, that Harpon was probably married. But she wouldn't listen."

Poole ascertained Harpon's address, thanked Mrs. Finney from the bottom of his heart, and got out.

Thirty-two Oak Street was a huge, dirty old building. On the second floor, against the door bearing Harpon's name, and the word *Private*, leaned a mop, a pail of water close by. The next door also bore Harpon's name, and didn't say *Private*. Poole went in.

The communicating door to the private office stood open, and a man paced the floor in there, wringing his hands. He was a big man, bald except for the coal-black hair about the rim of his skull, and wearing a black Vandyke. He darted out at sight of Poole.

Poole asked, "Albert Harpon?"

"Yes, yes. Are you— What do you want?"

Harpon curtly gestured him into the private office.

Poole told him the plain facts. He admitted, when Harpon asked, that he was not a city detective. Harpon was quite upset about the murder. Poole startled him with a question.

"What part did Nancy Lemoyne play in your life?"

Harpon's eyes widened and changed from brown to reddish.

"Why do you say in my life? My affairs had nothing to do with her murder. Her private life is surely where the trouble came from. Why should—"

Poole glanced at the doors of a huge vault. "What business are you in, Harpon?"

"What business is anyone in this district in? Precious stones, of course. I deal in the very best. Surely there is nothing about my business that—"

"Were you and Nancy Lemoyne the only ones working here?"

"I have a very important engagement, Poole. I can't understand why the man doesn't come. Please, return later—"

"Nancy Lemoyne was *murdered*. Didn't you hear me?"

Harpon shuddered. "There was another employee. Edward Caraban. He kept bad company. I couldn't trust that sort of man in my office. I had to fire him. Nancy Lemoyne had nothing to do with it."

THE door of the outer office closed. Harpon dashed out, Poole right with him. The man in the outer office stared at them.

"Mr. Harpon?" His eyes went from Harpon to Poole.

Poole jerked a thumb, as Harpon sputtered, "I'm Harpon. Mr. Robert Swain? I expected you at nine this morning."

"I missed a train," said Swain shortly.

He was a short, plump, officious

man, and he pointedly kept his clear gray eyes trained on Poole.

"This is George Poole," Harpon explained hurriedly. "A private detective, working for me."

"Oh!" Swain relaxed like an elevator descending jerkily. "So long as he's not this Ed Caraban. Since I got your letter, I've been careful. I thought maybe Caraban would meet me at the station, and try to lead me off somewhere with a story that he was still in your employ."

"I'm glad you took precautions. Now, Poole—" Harpon forced him across the outer office— "take a seat. Mr. Swain and I will have this business over in a minute."

Grabbing Swain's arm, Harpon pulled him into the private office, gestured Poole to stay put, and shut the door.

Poole stepped quietly to the door leading outside, and glanced up and down the corridor. The mop and pail were still at the door of Harpon's private office where Harpon and Swain now were. Poole went down to the phone booth in the lobby.

He dropped his nickel and got headquarters. Then he got Midas.

"Where the hell are you?" Midas roared into the phone. "You think you're smart, I suppose, losing my man in City Hall. I'll give you just fifteen minutes to report here before I put out a general alarm for you."

"Aw, calm down!" Poole ordered disgustedly. "You cry around like a wet hen."

"Don't tell me to calm down!" Midas howled. "That magazine lead was no good. The magazine went to the Lemoyne address till the subscription expired, and there was no renewal. You had something better than that, you louse. You kept it under your hat. You get down here and open up, or I'll stick you away for a couple of years. I'm not kidding, Poole, I been pretty soft and easy with you—"

Poole interrupted, "Trace a guy named Edward Caraban. He worked

for a precious stone merchant, Albert Harpon, who fired him for mixing with the town's bad element. Maybe Caraban has a criminal record. I don't know what he looks like."

"Nuts to that!" Midas geysered. "How do you expect me to find a man on his name? Where are you? You get down—"

Poole hung up.

Well, Swain had not come down the stairs nor out of the elevator. Poole had watched. Going upstairs, Poole decided that Bertha Finney was incorrect or untruthful. Nancy had been quite a number. Despite the dumb things Poole had known the prettiest girls to do, he could not see Nancy throwing her arms around the repulsive Harpon's neck.

POOLE sat stretching his legs in Harpon's reception room. The communicating door opened and Harpon came out of his private office. Harpon was getting into his coat. Poole craned his head and looked into the private office.

"Where did Swain go?" he asked.

"Out the door directly into the hall." Harpon gestured excitedly. "Perhaps we should go to my house. Yes, we'll do that, and I'll tell you everything I can to help you. I'll drive you out there, Poole. I'm so terribly upset. I can't think, especially not here. I feel terribly about Nancy, awful. Perhaps if we go home, and have quiet, I may get my wits together."

Poole didn't care where they went, so long as they went together. If he and Harpon hung around, and Midas traced that phone call— Poole had a vivid understanding of what arrest would mean this time, and of the story that newspapers and radios would spread nationwide.

Poole hastened out into the hall after Harpon.

"There's just one thing!" said Poole. "What you and Nancy were to each other *was* your business. Now it's mine, until I'm positive that your

relations with her had nothing to do with her murder. I'll respect any confidences—" Poole's voice chopped off. He grabbed Harpon and yanked him back into the reception office.

"Did you sell Swain a lot of stones?"

"Yes," Harpon nodded quickly, "I sold him all I had."

"And you have the money?"

"Yes, yes." Harpon took a flying leap away, and pulled a gun out of his pocket. "A holdup! Stand where you are, Poole, or I'll kill you. So Ed Caraban put you up to this, did he? I expected it! He knew I was selling my entire stock to Swain. Stand still, or I'll kill you before you can take your first step!"

"Don't be dumb," Poole clipped. "I'm not after your money. I want to look into that vault. That's what. Any objection?"

"Really? Honestly?" Harpon lowered the gun. "Is that all?" He wiped his face, and dropped the gun into his pocket. At Poole's inclination of his head, he walked into the private office. "You frightened me, Poole. This money is everything I have in the world, everything. If you want to look into that vault, go ahead. It isn't locked. Why would it be? There's nothing in it."

Poole massaged his hands, and watched Harpon's dark face. "No? Why isn't there?"

"I told you! I sold Swain everything." Harpon's lips swelled out, showing themselves full and red within the thicket of his whiskers.

"I begin to understand." Poole drifted close to him. "You were finished with Nancy Lemoyne. You had a good chance to sell all your stock, and then you were finished with this business as well as with Nancy. Either you're married to some other woman, or you didn't care enough about Nancy to marry her.

"But Nancy wasn't the sort that's easily disposed of. She made trouble. You killed her, Harpon. You murdered her, and you thought Swain

would get here so early that you could be out of the city before Nancy was traced to your office."

HARPON stood his ground, though Poole loomed over him, and shook his head. He pulled so hard on his black Vandyke that his lower yellow teeth and pale gums showed.

"No, you are mistaken. There was no quarrel between us. If we were to each other what you think, would I have no better opportunity to murder her, than to wait in her hall and shoot her? Couldn't I have taken her anywhere, and provided against being suspected this readily? My friend, you give me no credit at all for intelligence. No, you misunderstand entirely, Poole. And I am going away only because of my health."

Poole reluctantly nodded. He had played his strongest card, and lost the hand. Harpon had a gun in his pocket. Surely in any of these charges worried him, Harpon would have pulled that gun and made a fight.

"Still and all," Poole persisted, a trifle sick at the thought of the time he had wasted, and the still unbreached mystery of Nancy's death, "I'm going to look into that vault."

Poole strode to the vault. As he grasped the handle, he realized instantly that the vault was locked. Quickly as he turned his head, he was too late. Harpon smashed the gun down on his skull, again and again, till Poole's legs turned to rubber. His knees buckled, cracked hard against the vault door and he was thrown over backwards, unable to help himself.

Harpon grunted, leaned over him, and quickly spun the combination of the vault.

Poole managed to roll over on his stomach. He rubbed his cheek on the linoleum, tried to put his hand to his head. He felt that if only his head wasn't so terribly hot, if he could just put it against something cold, it would clear, and his strength would return.

Harpon grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled him aside, and dropped him heavily. The handle of the vault turned. Harpon had pulled Poole out of the way that he might swing the door open.

Immediately, Harpon grasped his ankles and hauled him into the vault. Poole relaxed, closed his eyes, and let himself be dragged along. Harpon dropped his feet. The back of Poole's heels hit hard and quivers went up his legs as if a funnybone had been rapped.

Harpon lifted the legs again, dragged him farther in, and let go of his feet. They hit something soft this time, but Poole kept his eyes closed. He thought he knew what his feet had hit.

Harpon's breathing came close, as he leaned over Poole, looking into his face. Poole knew if he gave the least sign of consciousness, he would get another gun-butt treatment. And a very little more of that would suffice, for all time.

SNOTTING, Harpon straightened up, and started out. Poole snaked an arm up, wrapped it about Harpon's legs, and pulled.

Harpon came down, flailing desperately with the gun. Poole got a weak grip on Harpon's arm up near the elbow. He exerted all his strength, but the grip was not one he could use to force the gun away. He loosed his hold on Harpon's legs, tried to slide forward and pin Harpon down. Harpon kicked him in the chest. They were both flat, half out of the vault, and between Harpon's burning eyes, Poole saw the big bore of the revolver pointing into his face.

Harpon cursed, his lips furling back from his pointed, ivory teeth. Poole forced the gun out of line with his head. But he had a tremendous job doing it. Harpon was bringing the gun to bear again. Everything, leverage, position, were in Harpon's favor. And Harpon hadn't been beaten over the head with a gun.

Poole gritted his teeth, and called up all his reserves.

Harpon swooped out of his arms. Poole felt about bewilderedly, groped desperately in the semi-light of the vault to find him, and moaned. Despite the ache at the back of his head and neck, he managed to look up, as someone swirled him to his feet.

Poole blinked, managed a grin.

"What the hell have you been up to?" Midas demanded. "If I hadn't traced that call and come here, where would you be now? Damn it, what goes on here? Don't you know you need the police for anything like this?"

Poole retorted, "I wasn't licked. I was still in there, slugging."

Midas grunted.

"This man attacked me," Harpon screamed. "He tried to rob me of a large sum of money. He—"

"Shut him up," ordered Poole as he held his aching head.

Harpon's voice stopped.

Midas barked impatiently, "Well, well?"

"This fellow—" Poole lay back in a chair—"says he's Albert Harpon, occupant of these offices, and owner of a precious stones business. A man named Swain came in here to buy gems from him. Harpon says Swain paid him, and went away. Take a look in the vault, Midas."

Midas gestured to a cop. Two of them went in, and brought out the limp body of Swain. His head was bloody, but he wasn't dead, just unconscious.

POOLE nodded. Pains shot up the back of his neck, stirring up a dull, leaden headache. "That does it, Midas. I was leaving here with Harpon when I discovered that Swain had never gone out of here at all. You'll find that Harpon has not only Swain's money, but the Harpon gems as well. And for another thing, I have a terrific hunch his name is not Harpon. I think he's Ed Caraban.

Ask him. Ask him what happened to Harpon."

Midas roared, grabbed Caraban, and promised threateningly, "We'll ask him plenty!"

"All right, all right!" Caraban shrieked. "I did it. I killed Harpon last night. Why shouldn't I have? Me, his own brother-in-law—"

"Then Harpon was married!" Poole exclaimed, remembering Bertha Dunstan Finney's suspicions.

"Sure, and where did he get the dough that put him in business? From *my* sister! Yeah! And ever since she died a year ago, it's been guff, nothing but guff from Harpon. Crying about every dollar he gave me. Then he fires me. And on account of nothing but because I made a play for the Lemoyne dame. Think I don't know he wanted her for himself? Going to sell out to Swain, and him and her beat it. Huh! I took care of them. And only for you, damn you, Poole—"

"Shut up!" Midas yelled, not liking that part of it.

"That was a dumb time and place you picked to murder Nancy," Poole observed.

"Could I let her come to the office?" Caraban panted. "I had to be here alone, and if anyone that knew Harpon came in, I didn't want anyone arguing with the excuses I'd make. I would have killed her last night, but there was no chance. And I was afraid if I did, it might start the investigation too soon. But I had to kill her before she could get to this office. And what do I care? Damn her! I wasn't good enough for her, the—"

"Take him out!" Midas bellowed. "Get an ambulance for Swain. Poole, a tough nut like you doesn't need anything." Midas grasped the chair arms and bent over. "How'd you know Swain hadn't left here?"

Caraban fought the efforts of two cops who wanted to take him out.

"There's a mop leaning against the door," Poole answered. "I hadn't heard it fall, though Caraban said Swain went out that door. And it was standing exactly as it had been. If Swain had gone out, I'm sure Caraban or Swain would have moved the mop aside, or altered its position somewhat."

The cops hauled Caraban out. Caraban didn't care any more.

Midas extended his hand. He was shamefaced, but he acted as if he didn't know it.

"Well, I been thinking things over. If you want to settle here, Poole, well—" Midas rubbed his chin hard and fought with himself—"well, okay, what the hell! Nice spot. You won't have much competition, and—"

Poole laughed. "I know now why there aren't many private dicks in business here. You make it tough for them."

"I figure—" Midas hooked thumbs in vestpockets, and rolled his eyes away—"maybe you ought to settle in a city where the cops will cooperate with you."

Poole guffawed. "I'm Civic Virtue, in person. Sure, I'll stay awhile. I don't know what I need, Midas, but I know a detective here who can sure use some help."



Dine, Dance—and Die!

By
**Robert
Turner**

*When Luke Martin attempted
to crack the case of the mur-
dered mermaid, he plunged
over his depth into a lethal
lake.*



*The body lay
sprawled on the
dock.*

Gripping Detective Nov^olette

CHAPTER I

DEATH GOES SWIMMING

SHE came into the glare of the headlights, running ghostlike in her white gown, with the dank fog wreathing all around her. She stumbled, almost fell, but staggered

on, arms outstretched, like a mother running to a falling child.

In his old coupé, Luke Martin's wiry, thin body stiffened straight. He slipped his foot from gas to brake and blinked. He was crazy, he told himself. It was just like every two A. M., and he was going to take his girl home



from the roadhouse where she sang with a band. He was tired and his eyes were strained from peering through the mists. He was seeing things.

But the girl was still there when he stopped blinking. He jammed the brakes and the roaring motor sputtered into a stall. He leaped out, saw the great blobby smears over the white simplicity of her evening dress, red as strawberry jam. But before he could say anything she had swayed through the brightness of the car lights and into his arms, sobbing out his name.

"You're hurt, Lana," he said, holding her tightly, feeling her trembling in his arms. "You've got blood all over your gown. Tell me, Lana."

She wrenched away, uttering a cracked, unreal laugh, half choked with sobs. "It's all over you, too, Luke. Now they'll think you had something to do with it."

"With what, honey?" He tried to be calm. She looked so small, standing there, and so young. The soft dark curls piled high on her head only emphasized her youthfulness. "You've got to stop it, Lana, and tell me."

She just kept shaking her head, her eyes big and brown and wild. Luke put his hands on her shoulders and shook her until her head rocked. Some of the madness left her finally, and she spoke breathlessly:

"It's so crazy, Luke, and he looked so horrible. It's late November and Lake Granite is like ice water. No one's been swimming for months, yet he was down there on the dock, in back of the Lantern, dead, with his head all smashed in. He was in bathing trunks, Luke."

He assimilated that. The roadhouse where Lana sang backed onto a lake. She had found a corpse there, dressed for swimming, though the season was long gone.

THE girl flung herself into his arms again. He said, massaging the back of her head, quieting her nerves: "Start at the beginning, Lana,

first tell me whom you found dead, then the whole thing."

With her face pressed against his shoulder, she went on in that same headlong fashion, as though her voice was trying to run away from the memories.

"It was Harry Jones, my boss, the bandleader. Someone killed him, beat him over the head with a stump of oar. He turned the band over to Buster, the trumpet player, after the last intermission and went out. I finished my last number and went looking for him. Somebody told me he went down toward the lake and I followed.

"When I saw him I couldn't believe it. I stood there, petrified, then something hit the back of my head. When I came to my head was spinning. I had that awful bloody stump of oar in my hand, and was lying there sprawled across his dead body."

Lana broke down again. Through the sobs she related how she had dropped the bludgeon, then ran up the road. She had hidden in the bushes until she heard the clattering roar of a motor without its cutout, which she knew was Luke's car.

She grabbed his arms then, her slim fingers gripping so tightly they hurt. "They'll say I did it, Luke. You're the deputy sheriff. They'll make you arrest me."

Luke Martin got mad, then. He seethed with his fury against fate and because of the futility of that, took it out on Lana. His slightly protuberant lower lip quivered angrily.

"I didn't want you to work at that dump," he said. "The Lantern is the dirtiest dine and dance dive in the country. It's owned by Joe Dixie, Lake County's rottenest racketeer. But you had to sing with Harry Jones' bunch of reefer puffers. You couldn't marry me—you had to have a career. You wanted excitement, thrills. You've got 'em, now."

"Luke! Luke!" she cried.

They stood there, while he shivered with the cold of the foggy night and

she fought to control her sobs. And he relented.

"You had no reason to kill him, Lana. Your story's straight."

Her head flung back. Crazy lights were in her eyes again. "I did," she choked out. "Upstairs by the dressing rooms, Harry Jones got fresh, got rough, showing off in front of the boys. I slapped him, Luke, and told him off. They all saw and heard"

"But it's just a job, Lana. That isn't motive enough for—"

"No, Luke. Harry had got the manager, Barney Coxell, to arrange for a wire. We were going on a national hookup. It might have meant fame and fortune for me if I'd have clicked."

NEITHER of them spoke for a moment. There was no sound save the dripping of moisture from the trees. The fog was thick and clammy around them.

Finally Luke said: "We can't just stand here, Lana. Get in. We'll go back to the Lantern. It may all be very simple."

In the car she said over the airplane roar of the old motor: "I can't go back there, Luke. With my dress like this, they'll all stare at me. I couldn't stand it."

"You can stay in the car. I'll go in."

Speeding the half mile to the roadhouse, Luke mulled it over, and the more he thought about Lana's story, the more he became convinced of one thing. There could only be one reason for Harry Jones' being in a bathing suit. The bandleader must have been looking for something either hidden under the dock or sunk in the water. That object, whatever it was, might well be a clue to clear up the whole affair.

Luke swung off the road into the big parking space outside the roadhouse. He told Lana what he had been thinking and sent her to canvass near-by farms for ropes and some of the big hooks used to lift hay bales to lofts, so they could grapple around the lake

bottom near the dock. Lana then drove off and Luke went inside.

The Lantern was a big, rambling old farmhouse, set well back from the road. The first floor walls had been knocked down to make room for tables, dance floor and bandstand. The second floor was used for dressing rooms and offices and living quarters for Joe Dixie, the owner, and Barney Coxell, the manager.

Striding through the place, Luke noticed that although the band was through for the night, the musicians were still there, hanging over the bar. There were still a dozen customers scattered at tables. Barney Coxell was in a corner, going over books.

He had seen Luke enter, but he didn't look up. He sucked a glow into his cigar and said: "You know I've got no use for you, Martin. Hereafter meet that canary girl friend of yours outside."

Luke balled his fists and stuck out his lower lip, but he spoke quietly. "I should be here to close you up again for staying open after hours and having slot machines and plenty of other lawbreaks. But you'd be open again tomorrow night, like it happened before. I'm looking for a murderer, this time."

Barney Coxell stood up. He was tall and heavy across the shoulders and around the waist. But not enough to glow him up, just enough to make him a damned tough tenpin to knock over.

"You dumb square, you've blown your top," he said. Coxell had done time for forgery. He liked to use prison lingo. "I don't run no hideout."

Then Luke gave it to him straight and fast. He left out Lana's trouble with Jones, but Barney Coxell didn't. He mentioned it to Luke, at the same time looking at the blood on the deputy's clothes.

"That don't look like ketchup on your suit, Martin," remarked Coxell.

They went through the kitchen and out the back of the big roadhouse, and down a path past a pile of scrap iron

to the small dock. It was good Coxell grabbed a flashlight before they left. Here by the water the fog hung in thick soupy layers, billowing about them like giant tufts of dirty cotton.

The men reached the end of the long ramplike dock before they realized it. They stood by the diving tower and boards, and looked all around. There was no corpse in a bathing suit. There was no corpse at all.

"Lana must have fallen and cracked her conk, and run off her trolley," Coxell sneered.

But Luke Martin wasn't listening. He had grabbed the light, moved back toward the shore end of the dock. Bending over, he sprayed the light from the flash over the rough boards.

"It was right here," he said softly.

CHAPTER II

MURDER MERMAID

COXELL stepped up and looked down at the dull red smear on the dock. Someone had mopped up the blood, but hadn't done too good a job.

A heavy tread sounded on the dock. Through the cottony mists a big, vague figure lumbered toward them. Luke threw the flash glare right into the newcomer's face. The light shone on puffy cheeks, heavy jowls and massive forehead. Buried in all the flesh were tiny eyes, nose and mouth. They were unimportant. The barely noticeable slot of mouth said:

"Switch that light out of my eye or I'll smooth the splinters out of this dock with your face. And I don't care who you are."

"It's me, Joe," Coxell said. "It's Barney. Something bad's happened."

The big, slow-moving, spongy-looking figure of Joe Dixie joined them. He explained how he'd just arrived at the roadhouse. Seeing the light flashing around, he came down. Luke told him about Lana and the murdered bandleader. Joe Dixie tugged at a couple of inches of the

loose, fat meat of his jowls and said:

"By thunder, I can't stand murder around this place." He dug a fat roll of bills from his pocket, pushed them toward Luke. "You take the kid home, burn that dress, and forget about all this. Me and my men will take care of it. Nothing'll ever get out."

Luke spat perilously close to the fat hand holding the bills. He said: "You couldn't buy me, so now you try to get me into a jam. Lana didn't have anything to do with this, so why should we run out and leave you holding a sword over our heads? I'm going up to the Lantern and find that stiff. If it's not there, I'll have every inch of the lake bottom dragged. And hell help you if I find you or any of your boys had something to do with it."

He shouldn't have said that. Joe Dixie had been running the county for years. The Lantern was just one of his grifts. He was *the* power in the county and he was used to having people take his advice and suggestions. His pumpkin face became an unhealthy red and veins wrinkled and bulged in his forehead. Grabbing Luke's jacket he raised his fist, then slowly dropped it again.

The color flowed from Dixie's features, leaving them yellow. His fingers slipped from Luke's coat and he clutched at his heart and his legs gave way. He would have fallen if Barney Coxell hadn't grabbed him.

"Damned ticker," he said weakly. "It—it's all right now, Barney, boy. By thunder, I thought it got me that time."

In the light of the flash Luke watched them. Concern was all over Barney Coxell's face, but his eyes glittered with a peculiar excitement. He knew what Coxell was thinking, that it wouldn't be long now before Joe Dixie would put too hard a strain on his bad heart and kick the traces. That would be nice for Barney Coxell. The Lantern's manager would suddenly become the owner, and the head of all the other Dixie rackets.

SINCE Joe Dixie had picked Coxell up off the road, fresh out of the pen, he had slated the younger man for his successor. Coxell looked like a dead, beloved brother of Joe Dixie's. He had kissed the big shot's feet, done all his dirty little jobs for him, and made the thing dead set for himself. He had even had Joe make a will, naming him sole heir.

On the way back up to the roadhouse, Luke said: "You'd better get Flo Lawrence back, Joe. You're minus a singer again. Even though Harry Jones is dead, and his firing her doesn't hold now, I wouldn't let Lana work in your dump any longer."

They were passing the pile of scrap iron, old cook stoves and radiators, thrown out after the Lantern's renovation a year before. Suddenly Joe Dixie sidestepped and picked up two feet of lead gas pipe. His blood pressure was rising all over again.

He said: "If you mention that dame's name again to me, by thunder, I'll bend this pipe over your head."

Luke shrugged and kept on walking. Joe Dixie tossed the piping back on the pile. Luke couldn't understand Joe's touchiness about Flo. She had been the vocalist with Harry Jones' band and Joe's fiancée. But a week ago she had left suddenly and that was when Lana Lewis took her place. Now Luke knew why he hadn't heard any details about Flo's sudden leaving. Apparently it wasn't the thing to talk about.

They started the search in the logical place, in Harry Jones' dressing room on the second floor of the big roadhouse. They didn't have to go any farther. The bandleader was there, but he wasn't wearing a bathing suit. He was still dead though, his head looking like a crushed melon. But now he was fully dressed in his bandleader's outfit.

"Your girl friend got her story mixed," Barney Coxell said. "She didn't kill him down at the dock. She did it up here."

"She didn't kill him," Luke said

tightly. "And it *was* done down at the dock. The murderer carried him up here afterward and dressed him."

Barney Coxell's big, hard-lined face sneered. He shrugged. "All right, so she carried him up here. But she was in a fog and couldn't remember it. Kill-crazy dames get that way."

"Lana Lewis isn't big enough to tote a corpse. Especially up those winding, narrow back stairs which must have been used to make sure nobody saw the act."

"The two of you could have managed, all right" Joe Dixie argued. He was looking at the bloodstains on Luke's clothing.

Luke had no answer to that, so he said: "Where's a phone? I've got to call the state police and the county coroner."

TWO state cops, the coroner, photographers and fingerprint men from the county center fifteen miles away, cleared up a lot of routine details. They found the oar which had killed Harry Jones, a little over an hour before.

The fingerprints on the oar checked with prints of Lana's found in her dressing room. When Luke told them that he had sent Lana on an errand for him, they didn't like that. Lonergan, one of the state patrolmen, said:

"For my money, all the evidence points to the girl being guilty. If she is, she won't be back, Luke Martin. And you've left yourself wide open for plenty of trouble. She's your girl. It will look like you realized her guilt, gave her a chance to lam."

"She'll be back," Luke said. "I wouldn't leave myself open for anything like that unless I was certain. Did you check the alibis of the boys in the band?"

"All the musicians except one are covered," Lonergan said. "They were all together at the bar during the intermission, and on the bandstand before and afterward."

"What do you mean, all except one?" Luke put in hastily, grabbing

at anything that might look like a trail away from Lana's guilt.

"A guitar player named Al Gainey didn't show up for work tonight. He phoned that he was sick."

"Oh," Luke said, disappointed. "How about Coxell and Joe Dixie? They out?"

Lonergan snorted. "Naturally. Every waiter in the place swears Coxell never left the corner table where he always sits. Dixie was down at his pinball machine warehouse all night. He has six witnesses."

"Naturally," Luke said drily.

"And besides," Lonergan persisted, "what would those guys bump a band-leader for? The only person who has any motive is the Lewis kid. Didn't she even run out on you?"

Luke Martin's thin cheeks flamed. "Now you tell me, why was Harry Jones in a bathing suit after midnight in November? Why, after he was killed, was he removed and dressed?"

"That's just the girl's story," Lonergan said. "You're a good guy, Luke, but you're refusing to see a simple bump-off, because your girl is the goat. Why don't you—"

"Never mind answering those questions, Lonergan," Luke interrupted. He was staring off into space. He swung away from the cop toward the stairs. "I got the answers long ago. I'm going to make sure of them, now."

He went down the stairs fast, passing Barney Coxell who was coming up.

"Listen, Martin—" Coxell tried to stop him, but Luke plunged on.

"Later," he said. "I've got some business to tend to right now."

LUKE MARTIN had suddenly decided not to wait for the make-shift grappling irons he'd sent Lana for. He was going to learn right now what Harry Jones, in a bathing suit, had been going after.

He still had the flashlight. Outside, he stumbled behind its beam down the long path toward the lake, and out onto the dock. Stopping by the blood-stains, Luke set down the light. He

swiftly unlaced his shoes and stripped to his shorts, shivering in the foggy night air that was as cold and clammy as that in a mausoleum.

But the atmosphere just chilled his flesh. The thought he'd suddenly had sent icicles plunging right through his heart. He was standing here now just as Harry Jones had stood a short while before. Now Jones was a corpse.

Luke, quaking, gooseflesh all over, stared behind him into the gray clouds of mist. It was like a wall around him, shutting out sight and sound of the rest of the world.

He stepped to the edge of the dock, swung himself over the edge. Drawing a deep breath, he dropped into the icy water. He reached for the flashlight and, holding to the edge with one hand, shot the light around under the wooden structure. There was nothing there but spider webs.

Still holding the light, Luke plunged completely under water, twisting into a fetch-dive position. Granite Lake was entirely rock-walled and rock-bottomed. With his eyes open and the flash lighting up the crystal clear water, Luke was able to see fairly well.

A few fish swam in and out of the range of the light. He reached the bottom and swam through the freezing effervescence of a spring bubbling through a rock crevice, turning the light in different directions.

Luke, his lungs straining, was just about to shoot to the surface for air when he saw it—a girl lying on the rocky lake bottom. She was wearing a red evening gown and she looked as though she were sleeping. Only great chunks of iron stove were roped around her waist and her neck and her feet, and she was horribly bloated.

While his ears roared from the strain on his lungs, Luke swam once around the corpse, then lunged with all his might toward the surface. He was holding the flashlight at arm's length when he broke surface, gasping for air. That was all that saved him. There was the heavily muffled crack

of a gun, the tinkle of glass and the flashlight went out and spun from his hand.

Luke Martin sank back down under the water, struck out for the dock and came up very slowly in the pitch blackness underneath it, careful not to make the slightest disturbance. He waited for long moments.

Footsteps finally pounded over his head, moved off toward shore. Luke waited for another interval, then eased out from under the dock. Shrouded by the night and the fog, he climbed up onto the dock. He got hurriedly into his clothes and ran back up to the roadhouse.

In the light of the back stairs, he looked his clothes over. There was a big scorched place with a neat round hole through one side of his trousers, where the killer had muffled the gun.

CHAPTER III

LETTERS, LIARS AND LEAD

NO ONE was around the second floor so Luke went straight to Joe Dixie's office. He twisted the knob and the door opened readily. He fumbled for the wall switch, snicked it. But no light went on. Instantly, Luke leaped back out through the door, stood in the hall, peering into the darkness of the room. A big dark blob suddenly came between him and the slight light from the window. Then it filled the whole aperture.

Luke leaped into and across the room. His hands clutched at the foot of the man climbing out, but the leg wrenched violently away, kicked. A heavy heel caught Luke flush on the chin, jarring his head violently backwards. Dazed he staggered against a desk, almost fell. He clung hard to the piece of furniture. The world whirled around his head as he waited for the jelly in his legs to become muscle once again.

The dizziness cleared and Luke swayed back toward the window in time to see the vague shadowy figure

fade completely out of sight in the fog and the bushes like a trick movie shot. He thought about dropping the one story to the ground and giving pursuit. Then, realizing the folly of trying to find the person in the darkness and the fog, he turned back into the room.

By the light of a match, Luke found the safe in the corner near the desk. The door was slightly open. The other man must have been at the safe. Luke's match burned out. He dropped it, stood up and reached for the light overhanging the desk, twisted the bulb. It suddenly went on. The snooper, whoever he was, had made certain that even if he were caught, the darkness would hide his identity.

In the bright glare from the cone light, Luke saw a piece of cloth sticking out from under the safe. He stooped and pulled out a pair of wet bathing trunks. They were a pale blue, except in the places where great drops of blood had been smeared. Obviously, they were the trunks Harry Jones had been wearing when he was murdered.

Luke set them gingerly on the floor and opened the safe door all the way. He pulled out a pile of letters, neatly tied with cord. One had been set on top of the pile, loose. This letter tumbled to the floor, but Luke ignored it, glanced at the envelope topping the package. It was addressed to Joe Dixie, at the Lantern. In the upper left-hand corner was neatly written: *Mr Lawrence, 24 Leighton St., Clayton, N. J.*

Luke picked up the letter from the floor. This one had not come through the mail. It was not postmarked, nor fully addressed, just marked *Joe Dixie* on the front, in the same small neat hand as the others. Luke opened it and read:

Dear Joe:

When you read this I'll be gone. You'll never see me again. I had to do it this way, Joe. I wouldn't have had the courage to tell you in person. Especially since I'm leaving tonight, on the eve of our wedding. Our marriage could never be, Joe, and this is the only way out.

The letter was signed, *Flo*. On the bottom, in a slightly different shade of ink was penned a brief postscript. It said:

You see, Joe, I'm in love with somebody else.

LUKE started to read the letter a second time, but a hand reached around from behind him and snatched it and the package of other letters from him. He wheeled around to face a small, hollow-cheeked man with eyes like little black marbles. He had a gun in his hand.

"They just told me Flo had left," he said. "No one seemed to know where. I checked everywhere, her home, her friends. No one had seen her, so I knew they had lied, that she hadn't run away. Something has happened to her."

Luke looked at the small automatic. The man's skinny fingers were white around the knuckles with the tautness of his grip.

"You're quite right if you mean Flo Lawrence," Luke said.

The little man's eyes flamed red under their blackness. "You know," he cried. "You know what's happened to Flo. Tell me!"

"Who are you?" Luke asked, his glance staying on the gun. If those knuckles became much whiter the bone would burst through the skin or the gun would go off.

"Me, I'm Al Gainey, Flo Lawrence's ex-husband. I play the guitar with Harry Jones' band, but I took off tonight pleading sick. I've been having a few drinks and a few weeds to get myself up nerve enough to kill Joe Dixie."

"But why, and why do you want those letters?"

The little man poked out the hollow of one cheek with his tongue. "When I couldn't find any trace of Flo, I figured Joe Dixie had found out she had been double-crossing him and killed her." He sucked in a gasping breath and went on: "Even though Flo had divorced me, I still loved her.

I couldn't stand the thought of her being dead, gone from me forever. If Joe Dixie had killed her, I was going to get him."

"But the letters?" Luke persisted.

"This summer Flo took a week off. She went home to be with her sick mother in a small New Jersey town, and I followed her. You see Flo really loved me, but she wanted Joe Dixie for a husband because he could give her everything she'd always wanted, while I'd never be anything but a small-time hepcat.

"In order to keep Joe happy she wrote him two or three times every day while she was away. These are the letters. I'm taking them, making sure she didn't inadvertently put in something that might give the police a clue to our former relationship."

"I see," Luke said. Then he added abruptly: "You were right about someone doing Flo in. Her weighted body is at the bottom of the lake."

The little man must have known he was going to hear something like this, but the sudden finality was too much for him.

THE gun sagged in Al Gainey's hand and his thin, emaciated face twisted in anguish. Luke kicked out straight and hard, his toe catching the gun-wrist perfectly. The weapon skittered half across the room. Dropping the bundle of letters, the little man leaped after the gun. Luke's foot twined between his legs and the other fellow tripped, sprawled flat on his face. Luke leaped upon him, neatly got a full nelson and dragged the smaller man, fighting vainly, to his feet.

Just then Lonergan and the other state cop came lumbering into the room, with Lana Lewis.

"What's going on here, Martin?" Lonergan bellowed. "Who's this bird?"

Luke told them about Al Gainey, then said: "So Lana was going to skip out on me, eh?"

"You were right, Luke," Lonergan

admitted. "Lana came back all right. She's got your car filled with rope and big crane hooks, and has been ranting about you wanting to drag the lake bottom. What's it all about? You been holding information on us?"

"Not at all," Luke said. "I arrived at some conclusions and went ahead and proved them. I believe I've got things pretty well lined up now, and it's a better case than you'd ever get against Lana."

He read aloud Flo Lawrence's farewell note to Joe Dixie. "Exhibit one," he said, "the motive for both murders."

"Both murders?" Lonergan repeated, dumbfounded.

"Of course," Luke went on hurriedly. "Flo Lawrence's week old corpse is in the bottom of Granite Lake near the diving boards, weighted down with chunks of iron from the scrap heap outside. Joe Dixie got her note and in a fit of jealous rage, went after her, killed her and brought her back and disposed of her body. No one would be diving into that part of the lake for nearly a year."

While they all listened, stunned, Luke walked toward the safe. He gingerly picked up the blood-spattered bathing trunks.

He said: "Exhibit two—the trunks Harry Jones was wearing when he was killed, hidden here, in Joe Dixie's office. Jones must have spotted Joe tossing the corpse into the lake. He might not have been sure just what it was that made the big splash, but it made him suspicious and he was going to find out. He didn't get a chance to investigate until tonight.

"Maybe Joe Dixie had an idea Jones was wise and kept an eye on him. Anyhow, tonight Harry Jones slipped down, dived into the water and found the corpse. But Joe Dixie meanwhile had discovered his absence and come down to the dock. He saw Jones coming out of the water, realized his job was discovered and was forced to kill the bandleader to keep him quiet."

"But—but what about this singer,

here?" Lonergan said dubiously, ducking his head toward Lana.

"That fits, too," Luke said. "Lana had a fight with Jones, earlier in the evening and he fired her. After her last number she wanted to get her pay and leave the joint. She couldn't find Jones, anywhere, so she looked down by the lake. She found him dead, right after the kill. The murderer was still there, and in his guilty panic saw a good chance to put the murder off on Lana. He socked her, put the stump of oar in her hand and beat it."

Luke then explained about Jones' having his bathing suit in his room from the summer, that the boys in the band made use of the lake in warm weather. Lana had recovered and left the scene of the crime, it seemed; then the killer, realizing that the circumstances of this latest murder might give away the first one, had removed and dressed the body.

"It sounds like you've got something," Lonergan admitted. "Let's go down and use Miss Lewis' grappling hooks to drag around the lake dock."

"While you're doing that," Luke said, "I'll go find Joe Dixie and arrest him on suspicion for the time being."

But Lonergan was peering into Al Gainey's hollowed face. "What do we do with this muggle-puffer?" he said, and moved his hands suddenly in a quick frisk of the musician's pockets. He pulled forth several brown-papered cigarettes. "Just like I thought, Marijuana."

Lonergan and the other cop left, then, taking the hopped-up musician with them. "You'd better stick with them, Lana," Luke told her. "I've a few more things to clear up. You'll be safer."

As soon as they left, Luke ran to another door down the hall. He entered the bedroom of Joe Dixie and Barney Coxell, then grabbed up a magnifying glass from Dixie's desk.

There were two clothes closets in the bedroom. Luke pulled the half-dozen suits from each, went over them carefully one by one, with the mag-

nifying glass. On a dark blue and green plaid sport jacket, with the aid of the glass, he found several minute reddish-brown specks. Then, putting the clothing carefully back in the closet, Luke Martin went downstairs.

CHAPTER IV

SUICIDE SNARE

BARNEY COXELL was sitting in his usual corner. But no one had seen Joe Dixie around for quite a while. Luke went outside. Joe's big, twelve cylindered sedan was still in the yard and Luke started back to look inside once more, then he stopped.

The faint put-put of an idling motor came to him from the direction of the big sedan. He ran through the thinning fog toward the car. All the windows were rolled up tightly, but there was no one visible in the driver's seat.

Luke opened the door and saw why. Joe Dixie was slumped down low under the wheel, his fat chin resting on the lower part of it. Carbon monoxide fumed out at Luke. After opening a couple of windows, he put his hand over the heavy flesh covering Joe's heart. There was a faintly perceptible beat. Joe Dixie was still alive.

Looking back toward the roadhouse, Luke saw one of the musicians standing on the wide veranda smoking a cigaret. But out here in the shadows and the darkness, Luke was pretty certain the musician couldn't see him. He climbed into the car, laboriously managed to lift Joe Dixie's unconscious form out from under the wheel and to the other side of the seat.

Then Luke got behind the wheel, gunned the motor and drove around the driveway past the front porch. As he passed, Luke yelled across the unconscious man at the musician in his best imitation of Joe Dixie's heavy voice:

"Tell Barney Coxell I'm leaving—but, by thunder, I'll be back to get him."

The musician stared at the figure of

Joe Dixie at the window of the car, and dropped his cigaret as Luke zoomed away.

Luke turned out onto the road, cruised along at moderate speed for several miles, until he saw the glare of headlights in the rear view mirror. He gradually pressed down on the accelerator until the speedometer needle hovered around seventy.

The lights behind came closer very slowly. Luke could have gunned more out of the roaring sedan engine, but he didn't want to. He slowed for a bad curve. Just around it, the pursuing car caught up and swung alongside. Luke hunched down in his seat and gripped the wheel.

The other car was a small sport roadster. It suddenly sloughed past, cutting Luke off sharply, the rear fender of the roadster ripping against the sedan's front one. Luke twisted the wheel. The sedan swayed off onto the shoulder, skidded, careened with an awful, tearing crash, into the ditch.

If Luke hadn't had a death grip on the wheel the crash might have been fatal. As it was, the wheel rammed deep into his stomach, knocking all the wind out of him. Flying splinters of glass dug into his face and hands.

GASPING for breath, weak and shaken, Luke forced open the door, climbed out onto the side of the ditch. Barney Coxell—a massive terrible figure in the mist—was waiting there for him, a gun in his fist.

"You made a bad mistake, Barney," Luke said tightly, "leaving Joe Dixie in the car, still alive. But you were wrong when you figured that the carbon monoxide would kill him and it would look like suicide."

"It would have worked," Coxell said, his voice shrill with excitement, "if you hadn't stuck your nose into it. I was going to strangle him, but when I wrestled with him and his heart gave way and he passed out, I got that other idea. It would have only taken a few minutes for the gas to get him."

"That's right," Luke said. Slowly

he inched around so that his back was to the curve they had just come around. "You had framed plenty of evidence against poor Joe, and his pulling a suicide would have clinched it. But I discovered Joe in the car before the carbon monoxide had time to finish him off.

"When that musician ran in and told you Joe Dixie just drove off, yelling a message for you, you figured Joe had snapped to before the gas got too bad. You couldn't let him live. You had to come after him and finish him off. I never would have got wise to you, Barney Coxell, if it hadn't been for Joe's bad heart."

"What do you mean?"

"Joe Dixie might have killed Harry Jones," Luke said, talking fast, "but he could never have lugged the corpse up those steep stairs of the roadhouse. His heart wouldn't have let him. Even though all the evidence pointed to him as the murderer, thanks to your clever planting, I found out that Dixie was innocent.

"If it hadn't been for his bum ticker all your neat plans would have worked. There wouldn't have been any

close examination of your phony evidence, but now that there will be, it won't stand up. You're going to swing for those murders, Barney."

"Maybe," Barney said coldly, quietly, "if you were going to be around. But you ain't."

Headlights suddenly flared around the curve. Luke saw Barney Coxell squint, momentarily blinded, and he leaped, swinging his fist savagely down against Barney's gun. He closed in, working short hooks from both fists pounding against the big man's kidneys.

Coxell winced, grunted and pulled free. In the bright lights from the car squealing to a halt behind them, Luke measured the roadhouse manager carefully. He brought up an uppercut that had all the weight of his slim, wiry body behind it.

Coxell staggered backward, caught himself, shook his head and made a staggering, desperate lunge forward. His legs held him, but his arms came up too slowly. Luke sent a lashing left hook to his head, then drove a smashing right to his jaw. Coxell hit the ground. He wouldn't get up for a while.



Out of the car behind him piled Lonergan, the other cop and Lana Lewis. Lana rushed into Luke's arms.

Luke told her: "It's all over, honey." And then he said to Lonergan: "Put some cuffs on Coxell before he snaps out, and take him away."

"But—but Joe Dixie—" Lonergan stammered. "What's Coxell got to do with—"

"Coxell knew Joe had a bad heart, wouldn't be long on this earth. That meant Coxell, as his heir, would soon be rolling in plenty of clover. Then Barney learned that Joe and Flo Lawrence were planning a quick marriage. He couldn't let a little thing like love keep him from all that dough and power. In this state, a wife takes preference over any heirs named in a will. So Barney Coxell killed Flo Lawrence."

WHILE Lonergan concentrated with a puzzled frown, Luke Martin repeated the story from there on as to how the crime was committed. He explained how Harry Jones had become involved and also killed. Only this time, he named Coxell as the killer instead of Joe Dixie.

"But that letter and the bloody bathing trunks in Joe's office," Lonergan persisted.

"Coxell caught me down at the lake when I discovered the girl's corpse. He tried to kill me. In the darkness, Coxell hadn't been sure he succeeded. He decided to cover his tracks, in case he had failed or even if someone else could make the same discovery.

"He did this by going up to Joe's office and planting Harry Jones' bloody bathing trunks there where they would be easily found. Coxell forged that letter from Flo to Joe Dixie, to cover her absence to Joe.

"Don't forget Barney did time as a professional forger. When he was up there planting the bathing trunks he decided to add the postscript to the letter. He wanted to make it look like Joe had a jealous motive for kill-

ing Flo. It was easy for him to do this. As Joe's right-hand man, he had the combination to the safe. I came in just as he finished planting the evidence. I almost grabbed him, but he got away. Of course at the time I wasn't sure who it was."

Barney Coxell moaned then and Lonergan leaped toward him. He snapped handcuffs on Coxell's wrists, then bounced back.

"That sounds logical," Lonergan said. "We can easily check that farewell note of Flo's against her other letters, with handwriting experts. But where is Joe Dixie, now?"

Luke took them over to the wrecked sedan. Dixie was still slumped in the seat, unconscious, but still alive.

"We'd better get him to a hospital," Luke said, dabbing blood from the small cuts on his face. "We'll need his testimony against Coxell. You see, Coxell must have overheard us when we were putting together all that evidence against Joe Dixie. He thought the thing was in the bag, and to cinch Joe's guilt he fixed up the suicide that I busted in on."

"But, Luke." Lana spoke up for the first time, "you shouldn't have taken this awful chance. Suppose Barney Coxell had killed you out here?"

Luke put his arm around her and pulled her close. "I had to take that chance, honey. I had already assured myself that Barney was the guilty party by finding pieces of rust on the suit he was wearing the night he killed Flo. The rust came from the old scrap iron he used to weight her body with.

"But I didn't want to leave a single loophole for Barney to squirm through. The way he tore after me in Joe's car, thinking I was Joe—still alive—piles up the evidence against him to where any jury will give him a hot-squat sentence."

"On the way back to the roadhouse," Lana said softly, "I decided that I don't want a career after all, Luke. I think I—I'll just want to sing for you, from now on."

Sidney Perrin had a deadly gift for his wife, but he was unaware that his poison present would bring him a . . .

Graveyard Gratuity

By H. Q. Masur



SEATED at the scarred dressing table, behind the locked door of his bedroom, Sidney Perrin considered the two objects lying side by side before him. They were both instruments of destruction, violent and deadly. The first was a tiny glass vial containing strychnine. The second was a small twenty-two caliber, pearl-handled revolver, an ancient but none the less effective weapon that had been a family heirloom for years.

He sat there with his handsome cleft chin propped against clasped fingers, staring through dark eyes veined red from a sleepless night, intent upon making his selection. The compression of his usually flaccid mouth marked the determination with which he had, after endless wavering, abandoned himself to an irrevocable course of murder.

Boldness and resolve were alien traits of Sidney Perrin's character. But in this one matter, the most important upon which he had ever embarked, they had taken firm lodging, and he had braced himself for its execution that very afternoon.

Through the open window he heard the explosive sputtering of his wife's eight year old sedan. He rose, stalked to the window and pulled aside the frayed curtains. Laura was emerging from her battered wreck, and a wave of revulsion swept through him.

Peering down into the bright sunlight, he could see the threadbare cloth

of the coat that sheathed her more than ample figure, and the jaunty angle of the broken feather that stuck like a mast out of last year's bonnet.

With a swift economy of movement he hid both the vial and the pearl-handled revolver beneath some shirts in his bureau drawer. Then he unlocked the door.

Laura came waddling up the stairs on creaking boards and stopped in the doorway to greet him with a warm smile.

"Sid, darling, do you feel better?"

His claim of illness the night before had been a subtle veil to screen the irritability attendant upon his resolution to murder her.

"Why, yes," he said. "I'm much better, Laura."

She planted a firm kiss against his cheek to which he stoically submitted with no trace of ardor, not even making a pretense. It had been thus for almost six months. That was when his patience had begun to crack.

Despite an attempt to be casual, the hurt leaped to supremacy in Laura's eyes. She took off the coat and sank to the edge of the bed. A twisted smile broke through trembling lips. Inwardly Perrin prayed that she would not make another scene.

"Sid," she said. "Sid. What's the matter with us? Things aren't the same any more. You've been acting so strange lately."

"Matter?" he echoed. "I thought we'd been through all that a week ago. Just a few hundred dollars I wanted, that's all. A loan, Laura, nothing else.

But you'd sooner part with your soul than a few measly dollars."

PERRIN subdued a resentment so strong it wanted to burst from his lips in a maelstrom of bitter words. When he'd first married Laura she'd been slender enough, attractive even in a simple way. A widow of one year, her first husband had left her this house and a substantial bank account. He hadn't known then with what nig-gardliness she would cling to the purse strings.

The house was in good repair and the car fairly new. There was no outward evidence of a character so miser-ly it almost exceeded belief. Nor had the chins begun to appear, those blobs of jello that seemed to wiggle in derision at his wasted years.

Years he meant to make up for now in a great prodigal abandon of spend-ing.

Laura looked at him pleadingly, as if she could reach out and recapture the lost bonds of affection. That last argument over money had left her miserable and sniveling for a week.

"I'm changing, Sid, really I am. You'll see."

"Yes," he said, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Are you going to break your heart and get a new hat? Are you going to buy two or three gallons of gas for that old wreck so that I can take a short drive sometime?"

Laura swallowed. "Not—not right now, Sid." She leaned eagerly forward. "You can have twenty-five."

Perrin could scarcely credit his ears. He stood there and stared at her with his mouth open. "Well," he thought, "my attraction for her is stronger than I had imagined. She really is afraid of losing me."

Aloud he said: "You have changed my dear. Twenty-five dollars. Well, well." He shook his head admiringly. "This calls for a celebration. A drink. I have a fifth of Scotch that I've been nursing for a month. Let me get it."

He went to his bureau drawer and rummaged for the liquor. At the same time he palmed the vial of strychnine. In that brief moment he had made up his mind which method to use. If he wanted this thing to look like a suicide, the gun would not be feasible. A woman would be far more apt to use poison. A gun seemed to violate their sense of neatness. It created a mess that somebody would have to clean up.

And so he went into the bathroom, poured two tumblers of Scotch and in one he let fall a generous dose of the poison. This he held in his left hand and presented with a little bow to Laura. Her face was alight now, like a child who has been rebuked and then forgiven.

She laughed lightly. "Everything's all right now, isn't it, Sid?"

He tossed a smile, a gratuity he had not extended in some time. On the brink of man's most serious crime against God and humanity, it was not easy to relax his mouth in the gesture. He had credited her with being wit-less, even naive, but not to the extent where she might believe she could purchase his affections and restore herself into his grace for the sum of twenty-five dollars. Did she really believe that?

Perrin clinked his glass against the one in Laura's eagerly outstretched hand. It surprised him a little he was sticking so purposefully to his plan. He lifted his drink, and watched her over the rim with a sort of morbid fascination.

LAURA sipped her drink slowly, her eyebrows lifted archly, as if they had some rare and wonderful secret between them.

Perrin wondered if the poison had altered the taste of the liquor. He tossed off his own drink in a single draught; and then in another moment, Laura's glass was also empty. It was done! There was no going back now. Laura giggled jerkily as the unaccus-tomed warmth of the alcohol lightened her brain.

Perrin stood quite still, impaled to the floor, his eyes pinned on her face, waiting for the change that would transport her from this life to the next; but what she did was totally unexpected. She rose unsteadily to her feet and weaved toward him, her chubby arms outstretched. Appalled, Perrin forestalled the caress by a precipitous retreat. Kissing her now would be too monstrous an irony. And besides, what if she should die in his arms? He was nauseated by the thought.

His throat was as dry as sun-baked tinder and the skin gathered in little pleats at the base of his neck. His palms were moist and sticky. How long, how long would it take? There was enough strychnine in the drink to kill three people.

And then it happened and it was a sight so horrible that Perrin was often to wish he could erase it from his memory.

Her fingers unhooked from the glass and it clattered to the floor. A shudder ran through her body and she called out his name in a thin pitiful voice that was choked short in her throat. Her features contorted hideously and between her twisted lips there bubbled a red-flecked froth.

Bloodshot eyes sought Perrin's in a mute appeal for help, a help that would never be forthcoming. Her fingers curled toward his legs as if she would drag him with her into the frightful abyss she knew was waiting. A final spasmodic jerk and she stiffened into immobility, her face drenched under the naked glare of slanting sunlight.

The shock left Perrin limp. His shirt clung soggily to his back. With an effort he tore his gaze from the thing at his feet and moved trancelike to the bathroom. He rinsed his own glass thoroughly and put it aside.

Downstairs, from between the leaves of a book where he had carefully hidden it, Perrin now brought forth the note Laura had written to



him three days before. The note which had planted the germinating seed of murder in his mind.

Dearest Sid:

I can't stand it any longer. I'm so miserable. Please forgive me.

LAURA.

She had penned it after he let four days pass without speaking to her, staring at her unseeingly, as if she did not exist. She had put a brave face on it, but at night he could hear her weeping. It was just after they had argued about the money and he had called her all sorts of horrible names.

It made, he thought, a perfect suicide note. There was no mistaking the scrawled childish handwriting. He would say that she had been complaining lately about her health, that her close-fistedness had kept her from spending the few dollars on a doctor's fee.

He placed the note on the bureau, let the vial fall carelessly to the floor in the manner a distraught woman

about to take her life might do. He contemplated calling the sheriff immediately. It would take at least twenty minutes to get out from the village. But his mouth was still too dry and he was afraid the unsteadiness of his voice might betray him.

And so Perrin left the house and walked across the fields, letting the stiff breeze cake the sweat against his brow. He reviewed dispassionately everything that had taken place, critically examining every angle, and he could find no flaws. One hour later, feeling perfectly composed, he returned to the house.

He picked up the phone and got Sheriff Newbold on the wire. He laced his voice with anguish and broken emotion.

"Sheriff—sheriff—better come over here right away. This is Sid Perrin. Laura—she's killed herself." And then he carefully replaced the receiver, not waiting for a reply.

SHERIFF NEWBOLD was a big hard-bitten man with a beard-stubbed face and intelligent gray eyes. He stood beside his deputy and examined the suicide note Perrin had indicated. The body was upstairs in the bedroom and he had already called the coroner.

"You say she's been sick lately, eh?"

The strain of acting out this play which he had authored had drained Perrin of color, and his face was a leaden hue.

"Why, yes," he said. "I don't know what it was. I asked her to go to a doctor, but you know how she was about such things. It sort of made her depressed. She'd been that way all day. But I never thought she—she'd do. . ." He let the frayed ends of his sentence die away.

Newbold shook his head. "Yep, it's tough, Perrin. Tough to lose a good woman like Laura."

There was singing triumph in Perrin's breast. Everything had worked out fine so far. This country sheriff, this lout, this inexperienced investi-

gator had swallowed the plant—hook, line and sinker. He was dabbing his handkerchief at the corners of his mouth, when he suddenly jerked his head up in an attitude of attention.

Four differently pitched blasts of an automobile horn sounded dissonantly just outside the front door. In that house of death it was like some devilish, mocking laughter. The blasts were repeated twice more, bursting raucously through the silence. Sheriff Newbold strode to the door and opened it, with Perrin staring over his shoulder.

Outside on the dirt road stood a shiny new car, a glaring, gleaming red, glistening brightly in the sunlight. Coming toward them, grinning widely, was the salesman from the local showroom.

"Here she is, folks, here she is. The smartest little boat on the market. Mrs. Perrin bought it at noon today. Happy as a kid with a new bike. Wanted to surprise you with it, Perrin. Said you were sore at her somethin' terrible. Say! What's the matter with you guys? Where is she?"

Perrin felt the sharp impact of Newbold's hard eyes, and his heart set up a wild pounding against his ribs. He licked dry lips and sought frantically for words that would not come.

"Suicide!" Newbold cracked. "She was depressed? eh? Let's see if we can't get your prints off the poison glass, Perrin, and off the vial too?"

The recent elation poured swiftly out of Perrin and he felt his knees grow weak. He could not hold back the whimper that rose and swelled in his throat. He could see the entire fabric of his scheme ripping apart by the love his wife had borne him, a love so powerful that she'd wanted to disprove the things of which he'd accused her by one great gesture—the purchase of a new car.

He remembered her words: "*I'm changing, Sid. You'll see.*"

He was seeing all right—he was seeing a hempen noose dangling loosely from an unpainted gallows. . . .

The Murder of Silas Cord



By

Harold F. Sorensen

Someone had snuffed out the life of Harry Bligh's eccentric old boss. And when Bligh tried a little amateur sleuthing, he stuck out his own neck for a gallows garland.

AFTER the emotions and tumult aroused by the murder of Silas Cord had subsided, there remained the mystery. No one knew the murderer, none was more anxious than Cord's secretary, Harry Bligh, to discover him. Any suspect of so determined a detective as Lieutenant Ware would have wanted to gain the truth to save himself. But Bligh was haunted by a fear far worse than that

of execution for the murder of his employer.

The trouble began when Bligh learned that Mr. Cord was threatened with blackmail. Cord would not tell more than that. Bligh defiantly called in the law. But when the police arrived at the fine old house, Cord told them the entire matter was Bligh's mistake, there was no blackmailer.

Murder came the night of the second day thereafter.

The police credited the blackmail story then. Only they could not discover any reason why Cord might have been blackmailed. If ever a man had prospered and lived long without doing wrong or incurring hatred, it was Silas Cord. His life was confined to his home, his interests to his nephew and two wards who lived with him.

Harry Bligh was unquestionably the hardest hit. In hopes of gleaning some clue, his mind dwelt continually on that last day that Silas Cord had lived.

It was September, the weather characteristically erratic. Cord's last day was coldish; alternately bright and dark as the sun escaped, then again to be engulfed by clouds, at which overcast times the wind blew furtively, whipping the leaves about the extensive grounds surrounding the house. They were in the study, Cord in the big chair, the tartan plaid rug over his knees, Bligh working at the desk.

"Harry," Cord called quietly. And when Bligh looked up, Cord went on, "I want you to go downtown for me."

"Yes, sir."

Silas Cord smiled and winked his eyes behind his glasses. He had a round, creamy-skinned face with a rosy tint; fine, silver hair; a small mouth and large, blue, jovial eyes. A short rotund man, he was in the aggregate harmless and even angelic appearing. His air was that of impeccable benignness which confidence men strive to simulate. Bligh had nev-

er known any man to look so honest and not be a crook.

BLIGH had rescued Cord from a bandit-minded tramp one morning in the park. Silas Cord offered Bligh a job. Bligh laughed; he had rescued Cord because of the disparity in his size and that of his attacker, and despite his appraisal of Cord's character.

Bligh wanted a job. A migrant orphan, he had no relatives. Wherever he went, he sought work, and though he got it often, he never obtained the lasting sort of job. But while he worked, he attended school and studied. At thirty he was tall, hardy, strong. He'd had enough fights so that he didn't care for any that had no sensible basis. His face was long and somewhat wide, with startlingly gray eyes under straight black brows.

To humor the old fellow, Bligh went home with him.

Whereupon Bligh received the surprise of his life. He learned that Silas Cord really owned this fine old house with its lawns and groves, on the city's far outskirts. Silas Cord had long been the city's outstanding realtor, so that even now, retired as he was, Cord was a wealthy man.

Bligh took the job with grateful humility. In a few months he was a good stenographer, displayed a good head for figures and a fine spirit for imposing discipline on Mr. Cord's household.

On this September day, Bligh had thought they would work on Mr. Cord's book, which was to be about real estate values in relation to taxes. There was nothing unusual in it when Cord sat with the rug over his knees while Bligh worked at the desk, and Cord said he wanted Bligh to go to the city. Bligh leaned his elbows on the desk and waited for the silver-haired, rotund little man to tell him what errand he was to do.

"I wish you to stay in the city all evening." Cord smiled gently. "I'm

having everyone go. I want to be here alone."

Bligh shuddered. A cloud obscured the sun at that moment, throwing the room into gloom. Bligh dropped his pen and spread his strong brown hand flat on the desk.

"The blackmailer! He's coming here tonight for money. I won't have it. You can fire me, but—"

"Harry," Cord broke in, "you must not tell the police."

"I have to!" Bligh retorted. "You're starting something that will never end. You've got to fight, not submit—"

"You mustn't." Cord's round, rosy face was a trifle stiff. "For your sake. You were a hobo. It doesn't matter that you were always seeking work. The police do not like your background."

"I know that." Bligh's eyes clouded.

"But you don't know that they think you the blackmailer."

"How can they be that dumb," Bligh demanded disgustedly, "when I'm the one that brought them into this?"

"That, in their opinion, is the beauty of it." Cord smiled at Bligh's perplexity. "The police think you discovered some secret and demanded money. I refused to pay and threatened to have you arrested. You called my bluff by sending for the police. You defied me to tell them the truth and have my secret come out." Cord cocked his head. "The police worked on me a long time, Harry, trying to convince me to tell the truth about you and rely on them."

Bligh loosed a string of heartfelt curse words.

"But I still don't care! I'm not sitting by while you are bled white for something that happened in the past."

CORD'S blue eyes dwelt on Bligh. The sun broke out and poured into the room, lighting up Cord's face. His eyes had filled, he closed them quickly.

"Mr. Cord!" Bligh cried out. "What have I done?"

"You do me little credit, Harry," Cord sighed.

"I think you're the greatest guy that ever lived," Bligh gasped. "That's why neither fear of losing my job nor of the police is going to get me out from between you and this blackmailer."

"Harry, I have been informed that the extortion was a momentary madness, something never intended to be consummated. I have given my word that this person can reveal himself and tell me all. You will not inform the police. You protected me before from what you thought my weakness. But now you must respect my pledged word."

Tom Grayson burst into the study. He shot Bligh a disgusted look and addressed his uncle.

"What's this about you wanting the house quiet tonight?" Grayson yelled. "I've invited my friends here. I got a stack of new phonograph records and a lot of other stuff, and now you want me to call the party off." Grayson never remembered that the preparations he made for his friends were paid for with Cord's money. "Fine dope it would make me. I won't do it."

Cord indulged this boy far too much. The bad feeling between Bligh and Grayson was the result of Bligh's interference. Gray was an exhibitionist, insane in his efforts to impress his importance on those about him. He drove the fastest cars over the worst roads, while drunk. He was the big noise and the big spender at the parties he gave his cronies.

Yet he suffered a fear that he had not made himself important enough even in their eyes. He courted catastrophe, as if he would give limb or life if only it would make him the imperishable hero of a moment no one would forget.

The light in which Bligh saw this young fool opened Cord's eyes, too. Bligh could not keep Grayson from being a fool, but he saw to it that

Grayson had less money to be a fool with. Besides, Grayson had been involved in a few scrapes, and Bligh had prevented Cord from helping. Having extricated himself from his predicaments, Grayson had less appetite for them. He hated Bligh.

"There will always be tomorrow, Tom—"

"You can put off whatever it is you want quiet for," Grayson shouted. "You take tomorrow, I want tonight."

"Your uncle wants to have an old friend here tonight." Bligh took a slow step toward Grayson. "That's enough for you."

Grayson shook with anger, but kept his mouth shut. He had gone too far with Bligh once, he wouldn't again. With a cry of rage, Grayson flung out of the study, slamming the door behind him.

Bligh made one last appeal to Cord.

"I don't see why I can't be here tonight."

"Please do not be difficult," Cord pleaded.

"I won't," Bligh swallowed. "I am only an employee. It would do me good to remember that more often."

"Harry!"

"I'm as spoiled as Grayson."

"Take care of everything, won't you, Harry?"

"Of course I will."

Bligh had no trouble with Cord's two wards.

LOUISE ENVERS was twenty-two. Her mother and Mrs. Cord had been lifelong friends until their deaths, at nearly the same time. Cord took Louise in made her one of the family.

Maurice Rooper was the son of a man now dead who'd been Cord's partner in the early days. Cord had taken Rooper in, too. Whereupon Maurice Rooper settled down to a life of ease. He was a nut on hobbies. And Bligh suspected that Maurice's friends enticed him into one hobby after another, knowing he would buy

superb equipment, tire of it, and give it to the one who wanted it.

Dinner was early that evening Bligh told the servants to take the family car and go where they wished. Louise Envers said she was going out, and went. Tom Grayson loaded his booze and phonograph records into a sporty roadster and departed sulkily. Maurice Rooper had been gone since midday, and was not likely to return. He was in the throes of a passion for chemistry and had gone to a friend's laboratory.

Bligh informed Cord that the house was empty. Cord did not invite him to remain. Bligh drove off in his second-hand coupé.

He drove away, but he couldn't stay away. He tried, he fought himself, but it was no use. He parked off the road and walked back through the darkness. The only light was in the study. Taking every precaution, Bligh gained the side of the house. Bushes grew in a long row here, and he hid crouched between them and the wall.

The study window was large, with a low sill and commonly used as an entrance and exit. The curtains were drawn, the light streamed out. But the bushes ended short of the window. Bligh could not approach to look in without being boldly silhouetted to anyone watching the house.

The colder Bligh became the more he worried for Mr. Cord. With no heat and the window open, Mr. Cord must be freezing. Maybe the blackmailer had lost his nerve and would not come, and Mr. Cord would get pneumonia.

The clock within the house chimed nine. At the last stroke, the bright study light went out.

Bligh sprang up. He thought he heard a door close. He broke through the bushes into the open. He restrained an impulse to dash through the window into the study. The closing of that door was an indication that someone had left the study and gone into the hall, and would be coming out by the front.

Bligh rushed round to the front

door, unlocked it and ran down the hall. He fumbled and fumbled for the study door knob, till he thought he was in a nightmare, and then he discovered the door was not closed at all. He reached in and snapped on the ceiling lights, not the lamp that had been burning.

Bligh's tan face turned greenish. His knees knocked. He clutched his shirtfront. His stomach rolled. He tottered into the study, breathing laboriously through his nose with his mouth clamped shut to control nausea.

The bust of Plato that always stood on the marble column just within the study door was what had been used. There was no question about Silas Cord's death. One solid blow with that bust would crush any head.

Bligh recovered, and dashed out by the window. As before, he neither saw nor heard anything. Still, he ran. He turned the corner at the back of the house, his foot caught in something solid, and he fell heavily. Bligh leapt up, expecting to have to fight for his life, but there was no such necessity. He had tripped over Tom Grayson, who sprawled insensibly, foully drunk. Bligh dragged Grayson into the house and phoned the police.

AFTER the emotions, hysteria and general tumult aroused by the murder of Silas Cord had subsided, there still remained the mystery. And Harry Bligh's anxiety to know the murderer.

The servants were not suspected. They had all been together the entire evening.

Louise Envers and Maurice Rooper lacked alibis, yet their activities had been normal. Louise had gone to the theater, been bored and gone out. She dropped into a surrealist friend's studio later, but even under grilling it was obvious that his knowledge of time was limited to the fact that it was A. D., and the police could do no better with him.

Maurice Rooper was even worse off. He had left his friend's laboratory at

eight o'clock. Rooper admitted that he had driven home, but declared he felt restless, went past the house and for a long ride.

Tom Grayson came in for the worst grilling. The police had three hooks in him. He had been at the scene of the crime. His car was found up the road, as if he'd approached the house stealthily. Third, he was the important heir. Louise Envers and Maurice Rooper were left substantial amounts under Silas Cord's will and permission to make lifelong homes in the house. But Tom Grayson got the bulk of the considerable estate.

The three hooks pulled loose. Though Grayson had been at the scene of the crime, the doctor testified that he was far too drunk to have struck the blow that killed Cord, especially in the dark. The car was up the road not far from the house, but that looked legitimate too, for it was out of gas. And though Grayson inherited so much, still he had never lacked money while Cord lived and therefore had little motive for the crime in that respect.

What was more, the police favored Bligh as the killer. His blackmail talk ruined any case they might work up against Grayson, Louise or Rooper. The police considered the five thousand dollars Bligh inherited, as considerable to him as all the thousands were to Grayson.

The new theory was that Bligh had known he was going to murder Cord, so he had prepared for it by starting this blackmail fuss. Bligh stayed on at the house as the will gave him the right to; besides, the police would never have permitted him to leave.

The electric clock in the study developed into a piece of evidence. Mr. Cord never could remember when to turn on the radio so this automatic clock had been bought. It could be set and it would turn on the radio at any appointed time. Someone had unplugged the radio and connected the lamp to the clock. Just as the clock could turn appliances on, it could turn

them off too. And it was the clock that had turned out the lamp just when Bligh had heard the large hall clock chime nine.

There was a strong presumption that the murderer had set the clock, for Cord had been killed in the dark. Only a killer who expected darkness at that moment, could have been prepared to act. Bligh had heard the blow struck after the light had gone out. Only Bligh had thought it was a door closing.

Whoever struck the blow had been waiting just outside the study door. With Cord's position in the chair charted, the killer grasped the bust of Plato the instant the clock put the light out, took swift strides to Cord and murdered him before he could move.

BLIGH was sitting on the bench atop a knoll some distance from the house, in corduroys and sweat-shirt. He felt warm, for the Indian Summer sun was hot, and he was thinking about these things. Yet, for all his superficial warmth, there was an iciness in his heart and his stomach that he believed would never thaw. The iciness had been there since the moment when he had realized the responsibility for Silas Cord's death might be his.

Bligh hunched over, chin in hands, his almost closed eyes turned down to the brown earth. And so he meditated, until suddenly a pair of tan shoes intruded upon his vision. Bligh snapped his head up. Lieutenant Ware stood over him. Except for Ware's efforts, all police work on the murder had come to a standstill. Ware alone was on the case, and he would not quit. Bligh gripped the edge of the bench.

"We're sick of that blackmail angle," Ware hurled at him. "We've checked and checked it, and there's nothing to it, I tell you." Ware grasped him roughly and hauled him up off the bench. "You're not telling everything. You're holding back."

Bligh nodded. Ware was a man as

big as Bligh, wider at the shoulders, much thicker at the waist. His face was frozen into a scowl, his eyes always narrowed. Bligh liked one thing about Ware: Ware would not give up; the man was fretting himself into a state where soon he would smash this case regardless how.

"You low-down tramp," Ware shouted, shaking him. "Five thousand is a fortune to a bum. You couldn't wait to get it. Your feet itched—you wanted to be on the go, but not without that money. I've known from the beginning that you're holding back."

Effortlessly, Bligh pushed Ware away, breaking his grip.

"I'm holding back." Bligh touched his forehead. "There are thoughts in here that won't focus. Let's go to the house."

Ware fell in step beside him, grumbling, "All right, what is this all about? Who are we going to see?"

Bligh led him into the house and up the stairs. Bligh tapped on a door, waited, then turned the knob and pushed the door.

Following him in over the threshold, Ware gasped. The large room was more exotic than feminine. One wall, covered with cloth-of-gold, furnished a backdrop for a large, squat porcelain Chinese idol, five or six feet high and as broad at the base. Its whole bald head, enormous grinning face and thick neck were leprous white; its blue robe, slipping from its fat shoulders, revealed that the entire body to the waist was the same dead white.

The head was tilted over on the right shoulder, the shapeless mouth open in a smile. Bligh had thought him a Buddha, but Louise had explained that he was not. She told Bligh his name, but Bligh could not remember, except that he was the god of joy or smiles or something like that. The room was done in lacquers and gold, the whole in keeping with the idol and the cloth-of-gold backdrop.

Louise Envers sat on a white chaise longue, wearing a simple black dress.

Her hands were together in her lap, the back of one in the palm of that beneath, and though she was only sitting she gave the impression of having been disturbed.

"Louise, maybe you can help us." Bligh shut the door and pulled a stool over to the lounge. "Lieutenant Ware—" Bligh nodded to the big detective who remained standing, his eyes fixed on Louise's slim face, tightly drawn hair and the jade pendants hanging motionless from her ears—"doesn't think Mr. Cord was killed over blackmail. Ware thinks I killed him. But that doesn't count."

LOUISE rolled her big dark eyes up to Ware, holding her head still, as if her neck were stiff. She smiled to Ware, her lips a strange dark red against her white teeth.

"What does count?" she asked softly.

"That I feel responsible for the murder," Bligh replied. "I swear Cord told me someone wanted to extort money from him. Yet I constantly recall that when I said I would not let him be robbed for something in his past, he said: 'You do me little credit.' Why did he say that? And, someone in this house killed him. The clock that was set to turn out the light at nine o'clock proves that. You see, there are hazy thoughts way at the back of my mind. You will have thought these things out by this time."

"I haven't." She continued smiling up to Ware, and Bligh thought it was almost wicked, the way she mocked him to Ware.

Bligh rose stiffly. He and Ware nodded to Louise, and left the room. They walked toward the stairs.

Bligh said, "That's odd!" in a tone hushed by its fervidness.

"What?" Ware snapped.

"Didn't you see how she sat when we went in? She often sits like that, thinking. She can think the way you or I can read. You can't sit and think

unless you're intelligent. Yet she has nothing to say."

"Maybe," Ware gave him a sharp look, "she doesn't think about the kind of things you suppose she does."

They whirled at the sound of, "Psst! Psst!"

Maurice Rooper beckoned from down the hall. They hurried to him. In a voice constrained because of Rooper's mysterious manner, Ware demanded, "What is it?"

"I've been thinking," Rooper announced, goggle-eyed.

Plump and only of medium height, Maurice Rooper had a head of wild black hair and a profuse mustache. Because of these, his eyeglasses and dark skin, he looked much older than he was, although his immaturity was stark.

"You've been thinking!" Ware fumed disgustedly.

"What about?" Bligh dropped a hand to Rooper's shoulder. He glanced into Rooper's room. It was always weird, but an unusual conglomeration of junk cluttered it now. "Ye gods! Wait! Let me guess! I know, it's a criminal laboratory!"

"Right!" Rooper exclaimed ecstatically. "I've found my field at last. Criminology." He drew Bligh into the room, not seeming to know Ware came in too, eyes popping. "Bligh, I have every room wired. I heard you and Ware in Louise's room."

"You got no right!" Ware bawled. "You learn anything?"

"No," Rooper admitted. "Except that I've been thinking of what Bligh said to Louise."

Rooper branched off, telling them about the 'bugs' he had hidden in every room. He had a switchboard rigged on the table. Money being no object, as was always the case with Maurice, there were several stages of amplification, so that there was no need for headphones. Rooper brought everything in on a speaker.

He demonstrated. There was an argument in progress between the maid and cook in the kitchen, and in

the pantry the butler mumbled figures, every so often calling out for the maid and cook to shut up. The rest of the house was silent.

Rooper proudly shut off the sound pickup system.

"All right, smart head," Ware grouched. "Go ahead, talk."

Rooper lit a pungently Turkish cigarette.

"Uncle Silas was hurt because Harry Bligh thought he had done something he could be blackmailed about." Rooper laid a finger alongside his flat nose. "Ergo, there was no blackmailer."

Bligh asked simply, "You mean I'm a liar?"

"Don't you see?" Rooper pleaded. "Uncle Silas was being asked for money, but it was one of us that the blackmailer was threatening. We had only our allowances. But if the blackmailer went to Uncle Silas and said he could send Grayson or me or Louise to prison, Uncle Silas would pay to save us.

"Then why—" Ware smacked fist into palm—"the murder?"

BLIGH had an answer to that. The blackmailer had murdered because he had feared prison. Bligh had frightened him by calling the police. A blackmailer who wanted only money, had been turned into a killer by Bligh's interference. Which made Bligh morally responsible—the haunting thought that left Bligh careless whether or not the police arrested him, since if he were morally responsible he would feel as guilty as if he had struck the death blow.

It was not the identity of the killer that concerned Bligh so much. It was the killer's motive. If a blackmailer, threatened by the fear of arrest, had become desperate enough to murder Cord through Bligh's calling in the police, then Bligh had no taste left for life.

"Why was Cord killed?" Ware demanded louder.

"Something just went wrong," Rooper supposed.

"That leaves us where we were," Ware griped.

"No, this is the link I've been trying to think out," Bligh insisted. "Ware, the blackmailer didn't murder Cord. His victim did. Cord was easy-going, but he had his scruples. Suppose he had learned something from the blackmailer that he could not forgive? It would have been the end of someone who had a comfortable home here and a sizable inheritance in prospect. That must be it!"

"Then you have a sulky blackmailer somewhere," Ware snarled. "He must know that the one he had the goods on murdered Cord. So why doesn't the blackmailer tip us off?"

"That is what blocked my thinking," Bligh admitted. "But I see now that the blackmailer can't speak. The moment he confessed he had tried extortion, you'd accuse him of murder. No one has a good enough alibi for that night to take a chance at flinging accusations about. Besides, how would he tip us off? With modern police scientific methods, it is hard to convey information without leaving a trail to yourself."

"There's one way he could tip us off." Ware's face was terrible, and Rooper cringed. "He could tell us he was Sherlock Holmes. He could tell us he doped it out of his head." Ware grabbed Rooper as if he would kill him on the spot. "You little hand-fed louse! Spill it! Who'd you have the goods on?"

"No, no!" Rooper begged. "I swear! Bligh!"

"Don't treat him like that," Bligh protested.

Ware dragged Rooper out of the room. Bligh followed them downstairs and out of the house. Ware flung Rooper into his car and got in too. Then he turned a face livid with rage to Bligh, saying fiercely:

"You better hope hard as prayers I get something out of him. Because don't ever forget that if I don't get

someone else, you're the patsy, and always were."

Ware's car shot away, a thick cloud pouring from the exhaust.

Bligh snuffed the gasoline stench out of his nose. He strode aimlessly from the house. He felt real pity for Rooper. Yet he realized the justness of Ware's suspicions. It could be Rooper. That hobby-minded young man was poorly fitted to face the world, if someone told Silas Cord something that would cause Cord to turn Rooper out of doors.

A car careened to the house, braked violently. Tom Grayson leapt out and dashed into the house.

Bligh ran into the house. Grayson was at the head of the stairs. Bligh bounded up. He was about to call when Grayson rushed into Louise's room and slammed the door.

Bligh put his hand on the knob. He snatched it away and raced down the hall to Rooper's room. Dropping into a chair at the table, Bligh threw switches, heard voices, from some room or other—Rooper had the switches identified with hieroglyphics.

THEN Grayson's voice burst from the speaker:

"I can't stand it another minute! I'll go mad, do you hear, mad!" He sounded as if he'd been drinking heavily.

"Get out!" Louise's normally languid voice crackled. "You spineless sot, get out of this room and never enter it again, or I will tell them you did it."

"You wouldn't dare!" Grayson gasped.

"I wouldn't dare?" Louise's voice dripped scorn, and it sounded as though she'd risen. "You think I wouldn't have, if there'd been any reason? I've made up my mind about you, worm. I don't want you at any price. I'll tell them! Wouldn't dare! No one ever said I wouldn't dare anything, I'll tell you—"

"You put that phone down!" Gray-

son screeched. "You won't tell. But I will. I'll tell them I've killed you!"

Bligh heard her sharp intake of breath.

"You?" she forced a laugh,

Then she screamed.

Bligh got out of Rooper's room and down the hall faster than light. He flung open the door and burst in upon them.

Louise held a gun. Grayson crouched, advancing upon her. Her back was to the wall, her hand tightened over the gun, death like a black fascination in her eyes.

"Stop!" Bligh shouted.

Grayson sprang at her.

She fired and Grayson lost his impetus. Bligh leapt at her. She snapped the gun at him. It was Bligh's life or her face. Bligh struck her down.

Bligh took the gun, then put her unconscious form on the lounge. He lifted Grayson to a chair. Grayson had been shot in the shoulder, but he didn't seem to notice the wound. He sat sobbing his heart out. Bligh phoned the doctor, then Ware.

"All right—" Bligh held a towel to Grayson's bleeding shoulder—"you tried to blackmail your uncle. So she killed him."

"You know?" Grayson's face was as white as the huge idol's.

"Yes—now. You knew the house was to be empty that night before anyone else knew. You pretended you'd asked friends in and that you were angry. You were allaying suspicion."

"Understand this," Grayson said emphatically, "I never meant to blackmail my uncle. I was only trying to scare Louise. You see, though I never liked her, she tantalized me and I couldn't stand it. She wouldn't have anything to do with me. So I told her if she didn't go out with me I would tell uncle lies about her. He could be terrible if women disgraced themselves by the sort of men they mixed with.

"I told Louise I'd invent stories about her and uncle would kick her

out. I didn't mean it. But she mocked me. Before I knew it, I'd done it. Uncle didn't know who I was—I phoned him and said only that I knew something disgraceful about one of his wards and would reveal it if I didn't get money. Louise was with me when I phoned. Uncle said he would pay. Then you got wind of it and sent for the police. I was scared sick."

AFTER a moment Bligh said, "But you made an appointment with your uncle on the night he was murdered. You were out with your friends and crazy drunk, but you remembered the appointment and tried to keep it. Your car ran out of gas and you even managed to walk."

"I intended to tell uncle the whole thing was a joke in bad taste. But I had to get drunk before. I could face him," Grayson moaned. "Bligh, I didn't want him or you to discover the real truth. Here is the truth—I threatened Louise that I would tell uncle lies about her. Then I began to wonder what she did do with herself. I began spying; following her."

"Bligh, she's the basest woman who ever lived. I could never have told a lie about her that would have been half bad enough. But I didn't want uncle to know. I intended to tell him the whole blackmail scheme was a joke I'd been playing on Roper."

Bligh grunted. "How about the night of the murder?"

"I don't remember anything," Grayson confessed, "until I was standing in the hall. The study door was open a bit and I saw Louise. I knew she meant to do something terrible. She thought, you see, that I would tell uncle about her. I tried to tell her I wouldn't. But she kicked me in the stomach. Then the light went out. A minute later she ran out the back of the house and I went after her. But I fell and couldn't rise."

"I think I knew what she had done; and what danger I was in. I had a bottle of whisky in my pocket. I drank

it all. With what I had already had, it made me so drunk that I had sort of an alibi. Next day she told me if the police ever found out I was the one blackmailing uncle, they would think I was also the one who murdered him. I've tried to keep my mouth shut. But I know she killed him and I had to tell. I can't go on."

"It's going to be tough proving it," Bligh growled. "The fact that you were drunk isn't going to make your testimony gilt-edged. She'll have your uncle's money to fight us with."

"I don't care—" Grayson threw his shoulders back—"even if I'm arrested for attempted extortion. I can prove what places she's gone to, what kind of people she's been with and what she's been doing. A lot of that is on film, and I have friends to testify to the rest. So I can prove she had reason to fear uncle might learn unpleasant truths about her. She can't beat this case."

Louise sat on the chaise longue, her hands in her lap, her face calm.

"You can't yogi yourself out of this," Bligh warned. "You're in a jam. You have things to worry about, lady."

"Have I?" she asked languidly. She stuck out her tongue, a capsule on the end of it. Then she took in tongue and capsule and chewed. She swallowed before Bligh could get to her.

Lieutenant Ware burst into the room. "What is this?"

"I murdered my uncle," Louise said.

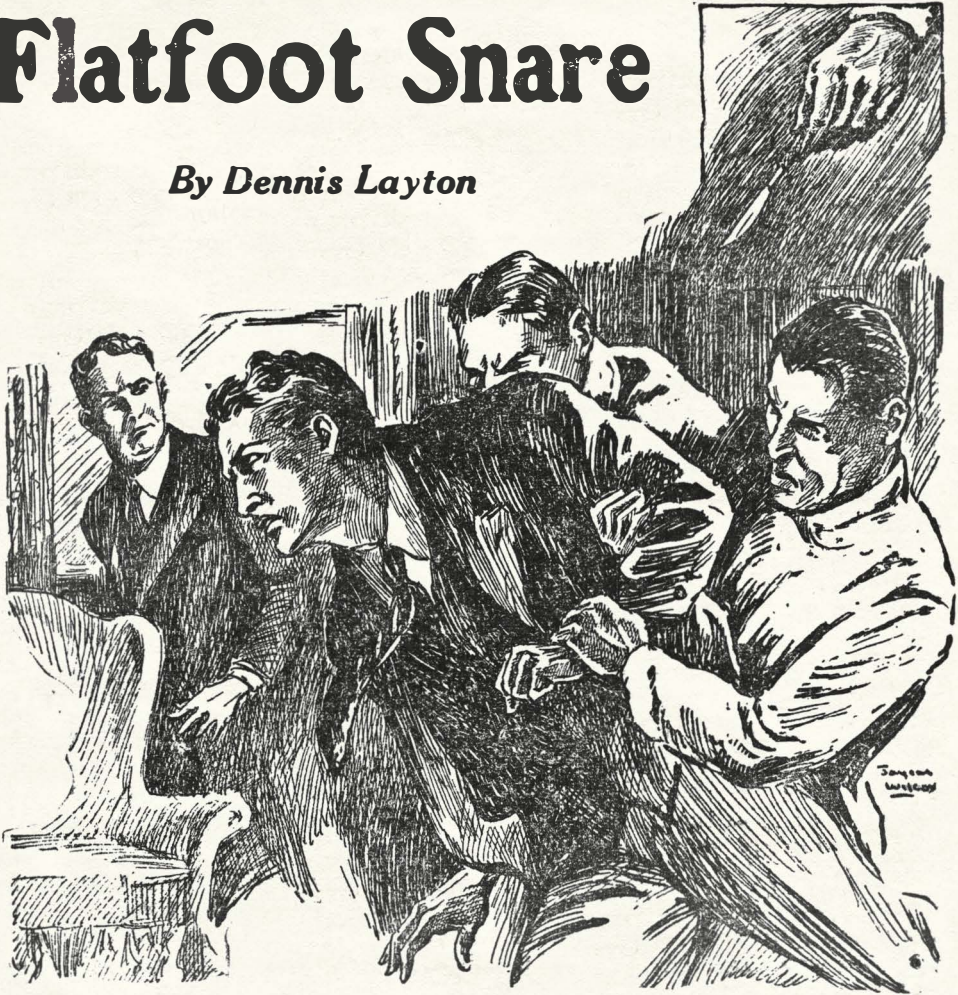
"What?" Ware thundered. "Why?"

She said nothing, only gazed at Bligh. The doctor had entered and was at work on Grayson, who also looked to Bligh.

"We don't know why she did it," Bligh snapped. "Temporary insanity; I suppose. All Grayson and I know is that she took poison and then confessed. Leave her alone! Can't you see—well, you might figure she wouldn't confess a thing like that if she couldn't have depended on her poison to work fast."

Flatfoot Snare

By Dennis Layton



He was a dangerous gunman who mixed candy with killing—and he taunted the cops with clues. But when he shot a blue-coat, the Candy Kid bit off more than he could chew and found himself holding a different kind of bag.

OFFICER BRIAN sat down at the table in the rear of the restaurant. For a brief moment he contemplated the steak before him. Then, cutting off a small piece, he turned his attention to the evening paper that lay folded beside his plate.

Blatant headlines screamed the news of the day. Large black letters blazoned out momentous happenings. But Marty Brian, though interested, refused to become excited. He read slowly, casually—so slowly, in fact,

that he had almost finished his dinner before he turned over to the second page. Then, for the first time since he sat down at the table, Brian tensed.

The item that caught his eye was not as large as others on the first page, but to Brian its import was larger.

**STOREKEEPER KILLED IN HOLDUP
CANDY KID SUSPECTED**

Brian's dinner was forgotten while he read the account. The storekeeper had been ruthlessly shot down while

defending a few paltry hard-earned dollars from a pair of dapper, masked robbers. A lone passerby had seen the holdup; had seen the leader of the two killers in the act of transferring a marshmallow from the pocket of his tight-fitting blue suit to his thin-lipped mouth. And by that egotistical and deliberate gesture alone the Candy Kid had been identified.

Any further details regarding the cold-blooded murderer and his partner were few indeed. The two always wore masks; always wore gloves. Newcomers to crime they were, undoubtedly, for not a stoolie had yet come forth with their true identity. A couple of small-time criminals, but dangerous—with the killing complex. The police force could do nothing but shrug its shoulders and pray for a break.

That break seemed remote. The Candy Kid and his cohort chose their jobs with care. There was never a jam of pedestrians to thwart their getaway. Always they had slipped into the safe obscurity of the city.

And the papers, naturally, were raising hell.

All this flashed quickly through Marty Brian's mind as he finished the item. There was a faraway look in his pale blue eyes as he sipped meditatively at his coffee.

What a catch that would be for some cop! There'd be an editorial for praise; perhaps a promotion, more money. If only the gods of chance would toss that break in his lap. If only—

Then it happened.

Brian was at first unaware of the entrance of the two men. He sat with his back toward the front of the small restaurant, and so was not watching the door to the street. A tall screen just as effectively concealed him from the doorway—his blue shirt, his Sam Browne belt, and the uniform cap lay on another chair.

Brian's first intimation of anything wrong came when a low, gritty voice seeped into his consciousness.

"This is a stick-up, mister!"

For a brief moment Brian thought that his imagination was playing a trick on him. He turned, half expecting to see old Jim Hogan puttering around at the cashier's desk with some task or other, entirely alone. But what he did see brought Brian to his feet; sent his tough, bronzed hand down toward the holster on his hip.

Two men stood facing Jim Hogan at the desk—thin, dapper men, with large silk masks covering the entire upper half of their faces. Each held a gun, and each gun was pointed unerringly at old Jim Hogan's heart.

For a tense split second, Brian took in the scene. His heart raced faster, as he saw the taller of the two men reach in his side pocket and bring out a white coated marshmallow, indifferently lifting it to his mouth.

Then Brian let out a bellow and ran forward, his gun streaking up.

But as quick as Brian was, the Candy Kid was quicker. And even as Brian's finger constricted on the trigger, the Kid's gun roared.

Brian felt the hungry lead bite into his hand; felt his police positive slip from his nerveless fingers. Hot rage consumed him, blotting out all the instinctive laws of self-preservation. Before him stood a masked, cold-blooded killer. Scum of society. Forgotten was the smoking gun held in the murderer's gloved hand, a gun that might at any second blast him into eternity. He was a cop, a defender of the public. Brian dove forward.

He hurled himself through the air toward the blue-clad legs of the killer.

The Kid's gun spewed lead. Another gun roared, and Jim Hogan grabbed at his shoulder. All this Brian saw, as the two stick-ups started to beat a surprised, hasty retreat for the door. Then Brian felt his hands close securely about the ankle of the Candy Kid. Brian then realized, this rat wore spats!

There was a tense struggle. Brian, gritting his teeth, clung on while the Kid fought to gain his balance; fought

to free his leg from the grasp of the cop.

His hold weakening because of his wounded hand, Brian raised his good hand and grasped at the Kid. Clutching fingers caught the killer's coat pocket—ripped it down, wide open. Then a fourth shot rocketed through the small restaurant, and something burned along the crown of Brian's head. For a second or two consciousness remained with him. Then blackness, like an ebon curtain, slowly dropped over him.

WHEN Marty Brian came to, he was soaked in a welter of perspiration. He sat up slowly, blinking his eyes in the sudden brightness. A terrific pain sliced through his head; jolted like the thud of a blackjack. For a few moments he was conscious only of his own existence. Then a voice by his side said slowly:

"Feelin' okay, copper?"

Brian looked up to see Joe Devlin, a radio cop, by his side. He smiled thinly, ran his uninjured hand over his head, and replied:

"I will be. Did you get 'em?"

Devlin's face was set. He shook his head slowly, sighed.

"Nope. We got the call, but they'd beat it when we got here. Maybe they'll be picked up, though; the whole town's bein' watched. Too bad you—" He stopped, coughed suddenly, then smiled.

But Brian had got the inference Devlin had tried to cover up. "I know. I was a chump. I had them, and let 'em get away. I'm probably in for it, all right, when Sergeant Hollis gets here."

Brian looked up, saw the crowd of people outside the restaurant held back by a couple of the nearby beat cops. He turned back to Devlin again.

"Hogan hurt badly? I saw him get it just before I passed out."

Devlin's face seemed to grow even longer. He glanced quickly at the cashier's counter. Brian followed his movement and saw, for the first time,

Devlin's prowling partner, Fogarty. Fogarty was standing at the end of the counter, looking down at the floor. As Brian glanced up, Fogarty's deep voice boomed out:

"He's dead!"

Brian started to say something, stopped and just stared into space. Jim Hogan dead. Killed in cold blood right before his eyes. And that death could have been prevented, too; if only he'd drawn quicker; if only—

Those thoughts throbbed in Brian's tortured brain as he sat there, staring blankly. From off in the distance came the banshee wail of the homicide squad car. Intermingled with it was the insistent clanging of an ambulance bell.

Suddenly Brian leaned forward, picking up a crumpled paper bag that lay on the floor by his feet. Small white flakes of powdered sugar clung to it.

He examined it closely, his forehead furrowed. It seemed to be a perfectly plain bag that had once held marshmallows. Then suddenly, with a start, Brian remembered that it had dropped to the floor when he had torn the Kid's pocket. Excitedly Brian carefully stretched the container out flat.

For almost half a minute, he went over the paper bag. Instead of calling Devlin's attention to something he discovered, he stuffed the paper in the breast pocket of his shirt. He rose slowly, staggered across the room and got his gun.

Brian had almost reached the door when Devlin caught him by the arm.

"Hey, what's the rush? Wait'll the ambulance—"

Brian paused, took a deep breath.

"Can't." He glanced down at his blood-caked hand, clenched his fist. "It don't hurt much, and I've got to do something."

"But Sergeant Hollis will—"

"Listen, Joe. I've botched this thing already. I've got a slim chance to square things, but I've got to act fast! If I'm right—"

He left the sentence unfinished, started forward.

Devlin's grip tightened. The whin-

ing of the sirens came closer; snapped an urgent message to Brian's brain.

He loosened Devlin's grasp.

"I've got to hurry!"

He opened the door, stepped into the noisy crowd.

LESS than an hour after the shooting had occurred, Brian was standing in the dark recesses of a tenement doorway. Directly across the street, the hazy yellow light of a small candy and stationery store tried feebly to thwart the dismal gloom of the night.

Brian was not in uniform. He had made a hurried stop at his small bachelor apartment and changed into dark civilian clothes. But his service gun still hung on his hip, and his coat was unbuttoned.

Brian was working on a hunch, and he was playing that hunch to the hilt. He kept thinking only of vindicating himself for what he considered a failure in his duty.

Time passed slowly, aggravatingly. Occasionally Brian felt that he had blundered. He realized, full well, that he should not have taken the initiative; that he should have turned his clue over to the homicide squad. But he knew what would happen if he had. They would have listened, nodded their heads, and eventually get around to what Brian was already doing. By then it might be too late.

So Brian had taken the chance. And now, if it proved that he was wrong, well— He shrugged his shoulders. No harm would have been done—except to himself. And that—

Suddenly Brian realized that he wasn't wrong. The two figures who appeared so abruptly across the street were all too familiar. Though Brian couldn't see their faces, he knew that the slim, dapper men who entered that stationery store were the killers. It was their carriage, their manner, as much as anything else.

He glanced up and down the street, adjusted his gunbelt, and stepped out of the shadows. He crossed the gloomy

thoroughfare slowly, keeping his eye on the yellow splash of light that filtered through the dirty window of the store. Reaching the opposite sidewalk, he didn't hesitate, but walked boldly in.

The little bell over the frame tinked as Brian opened the door. The two men spun about as though motivated by the same spring. In the silence that followed the last echoes of the bell—a silence that seemed to hang heavily over the small store—Brian's gaze locked with that of the dapper men.

No one spoke. Speech wasn't necessary. Brian knew he had been recognized. The face of the taller man—the Kid—had become a hard mask, thin-lipped, cruel. His small black eyes glittered. Then his glance dropped and he started forward, as if to pass.

Brian backed to the door, easing his hand toward his holster.

"Take it easy, Kid. I've been looking for you."

As he spoke, Brian's fingers closed over the butt of his gun. The man before him tensed, made a move toward his coat lapel, then hesitated.

"Lookin' for me? For what?"

Brian's blue-barreled gun glinted in the pale light as he brought it out.

"Are you comin' peacefully, spats and all, or—"

There was a sudden movement in the rear of the store. Something flashed through the air.

Brian ducked, felt a hard thud on the side of his head, heard the sound of breaking glass. Then he saw himself, for the second time that night, looking down the black tunnel of a nickel-plated .32.

The roar of a gun sounded immediately after the crash of glass. Flame licked out to lap hungrily at Brian's face. But in ducking the thrown object, he had also ducked the bullet. Now he went into action.

He felt the trigger of his positive give beneath the pressure of his finger. A dull boom caromed off the walls of the small store. The shorter man—the one in back who had fired both

bottle and bullet at Brian—screamed, then slipped to his knees.

The Kid had his gun out now; had it out and was bringing it to bear directly on Brian's forehead. Brian fired. At the same moment, he threw himself forward.

The two shots sounded as one. The whine of a bullet lived in the receding noise of the guns as it spanged into a car out in the street.

Before the Kid could bring his gun down, Brian crashed into him. Once more he found the Kid's legs in his grasp. Together the two rolled to the floor. A third shot blasted like a charge of dynamite in Brian's ear. But the bullet, fired in haste, went wild.

Brian checked his fire. He wanted to take the Kid and his cohort alive if possible; wanted them to go through the tortures of the damned as they waited for the charge of electricity that would end their existence; wanted them to suffer the full penalty for their cold-blooded killings.

He twisted about, slashed out with his gun. It grazed the thin-faced killer's scalp, deflecting the aim of the fourth shot as the Kid blasted away. Burning powder stung Brian's eyes, singed his brows. Gritting his teeth, he raised his gun once again, brought it crashing down on the Candy Kid's head. The form under him went limp.

For a moment Brian waited, alert for a ruse. Then, satisfied, he glanced over to where the shorter man lay, blood spewing from a wound in his shoulder, a vacant look on his unconscious features.

Once again Brian heard the distant whine of sirens. A pair of prowl cars tore to the scene.

Brian sat up, glanced idly at the bottle of soda water that the Kid's partner had hurled at him, and which crashed through the glass of the door. He turned as the owner of the store came up from behind the counter.

"What's going on?"

The man—short, fat, wide-eyed—was panting. He stared hard at Brian,

then at the two men on the floor. Brian, breathing deeply, watched him.

"And why," the storekeeper went on, "do you come into my store and—"

Brian glanced from the man to the packages of marshmallows displayed in the dirty showcase. He dabbed for a moment at his perspiring forehead, then saw the bottle of soda on the floor. He picked it up.

"Here—take this cap off. I'm thirsty."

BRIAN was sitting on the Candy Kid—now manacled to his partner—and sipping the soda through a straw when the first of the prowl cops barged into the store. He sucked in the last drop of soda, set the bottle down and grinned.

"Late again—as usual."

But Brian was not in a bantering mood when, after he had locked the prisoners up, he was on the carpet in Sergeant Hollis's office. The sergeant, big, beefy, red-faced, a recruit of the old school, pointed a stubby finger menacingly at Brian.

"This better be good," he thundered. "Those mugs have got a shyster mouthpiece already and he's squawking like hell. He claims they thought you were holding them up and that they were only protecting themselves. We can hold 'em on a Sullivan charge for the guns maybe, but there'll be plenty of trouble if we can't prove more."

Brian licked his dry lips; mopped nervously at his perspiring forehead.

"We can, all right," he said slowly. "You see, when I found that marshmallow bag in Hogan's restaurant, I figured how it might be a good lead on the Candy Kid. For on the bag, you see"—he held out the paper container for Hollis to look at—"is the name of the store where they were bought—where the Kid bought 'em. It's stamped on pretty faintly, but if you look close, you can read it."

Hollis adjusted his glasses, squinted at the almost obliterated red markings on the bag. The name had been

stamped there with a cheap home-printing outfit. The sergeant's thick lips moved as he read:

MAX BERSON
230 THIRD AVENUE

Brian went on as Hollis put the bag down:

"So I figured that if he bought some marshmallows there once, he might buy them there some more. In fact, if he happened to live around there, he might buy them there all the time. So, as I knew he was out of marshmallows, it was a good bet that he'd buy some more there tonight.

"It was just a hunch, but it worked out."

Hollis's face became very grim. He shook his head slowly, stared hard at Brian.

"Brian," he said softly, "you're a good cop. I appreciate your zeal. I have no doubt you meant well, and I can readily understand why you took the initiative instead of turning your evidence over to the detectives. I can understand, because I was a cop once myself."

He paused as the door swung open. A clerk stepped in.

"There's a habeas corpus downstairs for them two crooks that were just booked."

Hollis groaned, swung about and faced Brian.

"You know what that means?"

Brian nodded. "Sure—a hearing before the magistrate in night court."

"Exactly." Hollis's voice became deeper. "And at that hearing, their

lawyer will rip hell out of that marshmallow bag evidence. We can hold them on a Sullivan charge, yes; but right now they're booked for murder. The papers'll raise—"

Brian smiled. He tossed onto the table a package he had been holding.

"Take that along. It oughta do."

Hollis glanced at the package, a police department tag on it, picked it up, opened it. Inside was a pair of spats. He glanced at them for a moment, then at Brian.

"Well?"

His voice was menacing, but Brian smiled.

"That's another reason I didn't wait for the detectives. You see, in Hogan's restaurant I caught the Kid by the legs. Well, when I remembered that, I remembered seeing spats on him.

"You see, he took a shot at me in the restaurant, hit my hand. Well, my hand bled and when I caught him about the ankles, naturally some of the blood got on his spats. Now if you'll look closely, you'll see what I'm getting at—a swell set of Officer Brian's fingerprints."

Hollis looked over the spats carefully. He found the red-smudged prints.

"So you see," Brian went on, "I had to get him before he might take them off. I took them when the desk sergeant booked him."

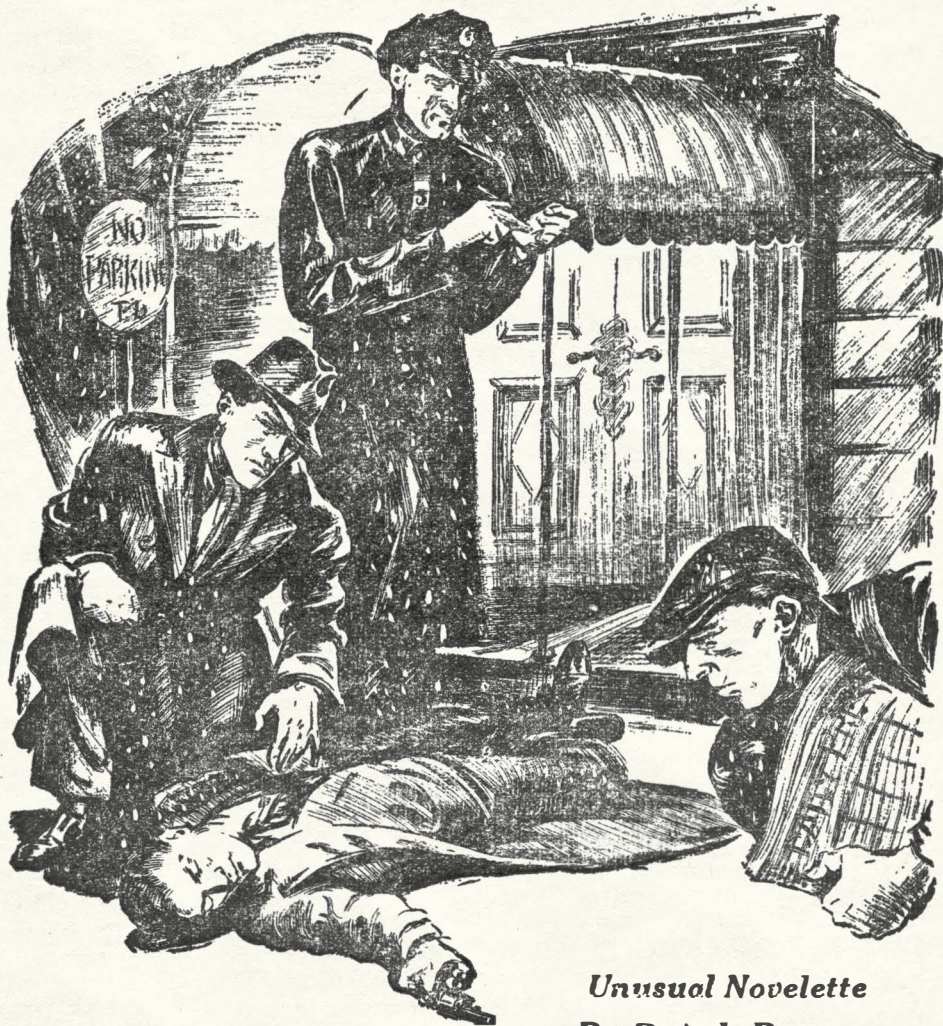
Hollis looked up.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

"That's the first time I've ever heard of a cop's fingerprints convicting a killer."



Death's Blind Alley



*Unusual Novelette
By Ralph Powers*

★ ★ ★

Patrolman Dan Carney was always on the carpet for violating police regulations. And now his badge had been taken away from him—he was off the cops. But Carney, even without a badge, hounded those mad-dog killers where the only law was the law of gun grit.

★ ★ ★

CHAPTER I

ON the fourth floor of a brick apartment looking out on 224th Street, two men waited for twelve o'clock noon. Their very appearance told they did not belong in the Bronx, but were five miles north of the Broadway they aped. Their snap-brim hats were the latest cut; their suits had the cheap smartness one sees around Times Square.

They were polished and manicured, too thin by far, and their faces had a hard, vicious flatness. Their eyes had a cunning, marble-round coldness that regarded all out of their ken with sneering suspicion. This sameness of clothing and expression made them similar in a fashion, although they did not in any way resemble each other physically.

The man called the Goose stood near the window, staring down through wind-ruffled curtains at the sunny street below. He had brown hair, a wizened, pointed face, and he was full of cocaine, which reflected itself in his glittering eyes.

He was staring with a snarling smile at a policeman standing near the next corner. "There he is," he sneered, "Dan Carney, the killing cop." The Goose's eyes turned to where a Thompson sub-machine gun rested on a chair. "I could knock him off so quick, he'd never know what hit him. And how I'd love to do it. There's one cop I'd like to bump and spit in his face afterward."

"Lay off," said the man known as the Chief. "Every time you sniff that junk, you want to kill somebody. Geez, we're gonna pull this job without killin' anybody. That's the smart way."

The Goose stared down at the warm street, at the blue-uniformed man. "Sure, I want to knock him off," he said. "Damn him, he chased me and Sooky Martin from Sutton Place to Thoid Avenue that night. And he killed Sooky. Shot him down like a dog. He'd have shot me, too, if I hadn't got away. A cop ain't got no right to kill that way. What the hell's the use of having a mouthpiece and all the tricks of gettin' sprung, if a cop can catch you on a stickup and kill you without even trying to make a pinch?"

"Aw, quit beefing! We've fixed him, ain't we? Later, if you want to bump him and burn for a cop killer, go ahead. But I'm running this show. So get away from that window."

The Goose drew back. "Sure, Chief,

but I'll get him. He'll never draw foist on me."

The Chief glanced at a gaudy wrist watch. "Two minutes now and we go to town. Get yourself set, kid."

In the street below, Patrolman Dan Carney waited for twelve o'clock to make his hourly call to precinct headquarters. He said gravely to his companion: "Do you eat spinach and cauliflower?"

Steve O'Connor, eight years old and tall and skinny for his age, twisted his countenance into an expression of loathing. "Gee, Mister Carney, do you have to eat that stuff to get on the cops?"

Patrolman Carney, twenty-eight years old, and big and husky for his age, nodded. "Certainly you do."

"Is that how you got so strong?" Steve wavered.

"Sure. Don't you read Pop-eye? Look what spinach does for him."

"Aw, Pop-eye's all right, only I like Dick Dunn, the secret oper'tive. That's the best funny in the paper. And I should t'ink meat 'n' potatoes would make you husky, too." He stared up wistfully at Patrolman Carney, openly admiring the trimly fitting blue uniform, the gleaming brass buttons, the silver shield and cap badge glittering in the warm sunshine. The same sun had already imparted a bronze to Carney's clean-cut face.

"When I grow up, Mister Carney, will you help me get on the cops?"

"I expect I will. But what's the matter with your father helping?"

"Aw, the old man thinks all cops is crooks. He don't like you, Mister Carney. He says you've killed nine men. Have you?"

"Yes." Carney's face grew grim, flat, where a second before it had been kindly and gentle. "And I expect to kill a lot more. They're rats, Steve, and yellow and cowardly. A friend of mine, Jim Haines—"

"I remember about that," cut in Steve excitedly. "The ban'it who held up Mose Epstein's jewelry store. And he had a gun your friend Haines did-

n't find an' he jerked it and shot Haines through the back."

DAN CARNEY nodded soberly. He was remembering that he had trailed that same bandit for six months off and on, and finally found him. They shot it out in a rooming house and the bandit lost. You could have covered the three bullet holes in his chest with a half dollar.

"Suppose, Steve, it had been you, instead of Haines, making that arrest?"

"Me?" Steve felt the bulge on Patrolman Carney's hip where the holstered Police Regulation reposed. "Me, I'd have shot foist—"

"Don't say foist. Say first, and stop using ain't," said Carney, to change the subject. "And run along now before your mother has a fit. It's time for lunch—and stow away the spinach."

"Well," said Steve, "if you say so. Good-by, Mister Carney. See you tomorrow."

Patrolman Carney watched the boy run swiftly around the corner and into one of the enormous square brick blocks of apartment houses that fill the side streets of the Bronx. He reached into his tunic, got out a cigarette and with masked hands lit it. One of the six hundred regulations that govern the New York Police Department specifies strictly that no patrolman shall smoke on duty. Carney thought most of the regulations were nonsense, and the one about smoking was particularly crazy.

He leaned his powerful body against the pole and stared indulgently along the sun-swept street. People were on fire escapes getting the first loveliness of spring. Many eyes were on him, some friendly, some indifferent; many, like the two crooks watching him, absolutely hostile. But even if Dan Carney had known what was in their hearts, he would not have cared.

He liked being a cop. He looked on his job now as he had for five years,

as a public trust. He was guardian of these people, the confidant of their troubles and joys. And he was a good cop, too. His superior, Sergeant McLacey, always pointed him out to the higher-ups when Carney was on the carpet for violating some of the six hundred violations.

"He's honest and he's brave," McLacey would say, "and he does his duty. And if you tried to enforce all the six hundred regulations, you'd have no cops left."

So here was Patrolman Carney as Mose Epstein's street clock pointed to two minutes to twelve. He inhaled deeply on the cigarette, flicked the butt into the gutter and turned leisurely toward the call box.

A slim young girl who was already pretty and would one day be beautiful, strode briskly past him. She wore a little pan-cake hat with a touch of veil that hid her dark eyes and made them more alluring. Her curly blond hair hung in ringlets around her neck. Her eyes were blue, and she wore too much rouge and lipstick.

"Hello, Joan," said Carney. "Nice day, isn't it?"

She glared at him, hot hate in her eyes. Her red lips curled; she did not speak, but her step increased so that spike heels beat a swift tattoo on the sidewalk.

Dan Carney gazed at the slim, elfin figure. He had, he supposed, earned her hate and that of her family when he had caught her twin brother, Carl Muller, in a holdup and arrested him. Carney had shot the other bandit, the one who led young Carl astray, "Two-finger" Haas. And young Muller had done two years in the Elmira Reformatory. He was out now, so the parole bureau had announced.

"You'd be a lot prettier, Joan," Carney said, "if you'd stop using that paint. And stay out of that Absalom dance hall! It's no place for nice girls to go."

"What you think is of no interest to me." Joan's voice was hoarse with anger. She flung on, and turned into

another square brick apartment house.

Dan Carney sighed. He liked Joan; and the thing that always got him down was seeing those youngsters he had known in pigtails and short pants taking the easy way and winding up behind the eight ball. But what could he do? Nothing. The police came in after the horse was stolen, not before.

He sighed again and glanced over at Mose Epstein's street clock. He reached into his pockets, got out his key, and unlocked the call box. He started to take the receiver off the hook.

At that precise instant it was twelve o'clock. From the brick apartment house, a head was thrust out the window.

"Fire!" screamed a voice. "Fire. Quick, officer, fire!"

CHAPTER II

SMOKE gushed from the same window and the two on either side. Patrolman Carney perceived that the person who was yelling was Joan Muller, and her voice died away as a quick puff of smoke hid her from view. On the next light pole was a red box. Carney's nightstick broke the glass with a quick tinkle of sound. He reached in, pulled the key, and then, without stopping to report to precinct headquarters, raced toward the apartment building.

It was a walk-up apartment and he took the steel-and-concrete steps three at a time, panting with the effort. The fourth floor corridor was filled with smoke. Screams and yells and confusion prevailed. Women were dashing down the steps, holding children and canaries, dogs and the first article of furniture that panic permitted them to see. Carney thrust his way through this mob, yelling there was no danger, and went to the Muller apartment.

It was a railroad apartment—the living room faced on the street, and

two bedrooms were strung behind this, and bringing up the rear on the airshaft was the kitchen. You could enter either by the kitchen or the living room door. Carney chose the kitchen entrance.

A thick cloud of smoke greeted him as he threw open the door. He went in, holding his breath, saw no one. He groped his way to the sink, soaked his handkerchief in water, and putting this over his mouth and nostrils, forged through the bedrooms. It was dark in here even in the daytime, and he had out his flashlight. But the beds were unoccupied. More smoke but no flame.

In the living room, he came upon flames. The carpet burned furiously and so did a number of cheap chairs. The hangings on the windows, fanning to the draft, blazed brightly. Beyond the bonfire of a davenport, he saw the prone body of Joan Muller.

Smoke was gagging him now, but above the crackle of the flames, he heard the thin wail of the fire sirens, the roar of powerful motors. Despite the dizziness that attacked him, he forged through the flames toward the girl.

He took two steps. The dizziness increased. Despite the wet cloth, the smoke had him coughing, gagging. The floor seemed to rise up. It struck him in the face. He put his hands on it, but could not feel it. He took his face away from the floor, trying to crawl forward. Then the floor hit his nose again and he could not get up. Finally, coughing, gasping, he remembered nothing at all.

Outside, swarming in 224th Street, were chemical pumpers, ladder and pumper trucks. Coils of hose were swiftly laid. The pneumatic ladder raised swiftly, and a fireman climbed it and turned a burst of water through the windows of the room where Patrolman Dan Carney lay.

Other firemen, armed with hatchets and portable chemicals, ran up the stairs. Crowds of people came as if by magic, until the street was alive

with people. Motor cars blocked the road. If Carney had been outside, it would have been his job to keep such blocks from forming.

At five minutes past twelve, a man with blood streaming down his face raced out of the offices of the Acme Novelty Company, manufacturers of imitation jewelry. He was holding his side, running with difficulty.

"Police!" he gasped. "Robbery! They—"

He pitched forward on his face. The crowd shrank back from him. A fireman felt of his chest and said: "The guy's dead!"

The Acme Novelty Company had a special police alarm, and this must have been pulled, because scarcely had the man fallen down when a police prowler car, with siren shrieking indignantly, tried to force its way through the mob of people and cars that blocked off the street. Policemen with drawn weapons cursed and shouted. But the way was hard to clear even when fenders were bent and bumpers clanged as the cars were shuffled to make way.

On the other side of the block, a black car started to draw away from the curbing. There was nothing to stop its escape. Except a young boy ran yelling after it, crying aloud the car's license number in a singsong voice as if by rote trying to impress it on his mind so he would not forget. A black muzzle jutted from the car. A brief spray of sound rattled above the rest of the uproar. The boy tripped and sprawled face forward on the sidewalk.

EIGHT minutes later the police prowler car, with cops hanging to the running board, bumped and jerked over the water-swollen hose lines and went on to pick up the trail. A taxicab with a cop chased them. Twelve minutes later, two radio cars and the sergeant's prowler car, with Sergeant McLacey on the running board, pulled up.

McLacey jumped down when he

saw Patrolman Dan Carney stretched out on the sidewalk. Dan was sneezing and coughing, but the purple, strangled color was slowly receding from his face.

The fire battalion chief was standing near-by, cursing furiously. "It was only in the one apartment and if you was to ask me, the place was touched off."

A great many things happened immediately thereafter, but Carney had no part in them. A physician treated him for smoke and shock, despite the fact that Dan felt no shock. This point even aroused the physician's curiosity.

"You act more as if you'd been under an anesthetic," he remarked.

Dan paid no attention. He called to the battalion chief. "Did you get the girl out?"

"What girl?"

"Joan Muller. She was in the front room. It was she I went after."

The battalion chief stared at him. "There wasn't anybody in the apartment except you, so far as I know. Hey, McLarnin, did you find anybody but this cop in the place?"

"Nobody. The woman next door said the Mullers had gone away for the day, early this mornin'."

Carney heard. "They couldn't have," he said. "I saw Joan Muller go into that apartment at two minutes to twelve."

McLacey came rushing up. "Then I'm putting the blast out for her, Dan. This whole thing is a frame. The Acme Novelty Company treasurer was bumped off and a satchel with seventy grand taken."

He cursed. "I wish I knew who turned in that alarm. The fire department was deliberately called to block off the street and stop pursuit. Them babies got fifteen minutes' start on us. And they killed Henry Olsen, the treasurer, and shot some kid that must have seen 'em."

Carney listened to this. "I turned in the alarm, just at twelve," he said. "Joan Muller called 'Fire' out of the

window. There was a lot of smoke. Instead of reporting, I pulled the fire key and went in after her."

McLacey swore. "You poor sap! She was in on the deal. They wanted to get you out of the way."

"She wasn't in on any deal," said Dan. "I'm the cop on this beat, and I'm betting she had nothing to do with it."

"You mean you were the cop on the beat," snapped a new voice, Lieutenant Allen's. He had cold eyes, a flat, stern mouth, and he knew the regulations backwards.

"You should have reported. You shouldn't have gone in there until you had investigated more thoroughly. I've a report you were smoking at the time the alarm came. I'm suspending you here and now, Carney, and this time I'm going to see they take your uniform for good."

"Have a heart, lieutenant," protested McLacey. "The bird was on police business. You can't make those charges stick."

"The hell I can't. Falling like a sap for an old trick, and letting a seventy grand stickup come off under his nose."

ALLEN gestured for McLacey to follow him while they made further investigations. Carney took a deep breath. Since he had regained consciousness, things had happened quick and fast. But his instinct took hold and he walked to the dead body of Henry Olsen, the treasurer. There was nothing here to see except a corpse with six bullets through the stomach and a slash across the scalp. The body was being left for the medical examiner.

Down past the Acme Novelty Company's entrance, a small crowd had gathered around the body of the boy. Carney forced his way through and stood looking at the corpse of Steve O'Connor, who had wanted to be a cop. The grayness of death made the freckles stand out like burnished bits of copper. The boy's eyes were wide

open, as if he were now appealing for the aid of the cop he had called a friend.

Dan Carney's face remained impassive, except for a slight twitch to his lips. He was remembering the daily meetings with the boy, the little confidences, the stories of games, the repeated hopes that some day he could go on the cops and be a good officer like Dan Carney. The lad's mother came screaming frantically across the street and would have thrown herself on the corpse, but Dan held her.

"He can't be touched, Mrs. O'Connor, until the medical examiner sees him," Dan said gently. "I'm sorry for your trouble."

He held her until another cop relieved him and said that Lieutenant Allen wanted to talk to him.

He found Allen with a notebook, face hard, mouth snarling. "A clean getaway. We found the car on upper Fifth Avenue, but nobody seen the guys. Did you?"

"No."

"You wouldn't. Well, the negligence-on-duty charge stands, Carney. So give me your shield."

Dan stared at him. "So I've got to take the rap for the stickup. Is that it?"

"Give me your shield and stop talking."

Carney unpinned the shield, rubbed the numbers 31975, and held it out. Allen snatched it and put it in his pocket. "Go to the precinct and make your report," he said, "and give us a full description of the girl, Joan Muller."

CHAPTER III

CARNEY, wearing neat blue serge civilians, came up to 224th Street and turned in at the apartment shared by the elder Mullers and Joan. Ten days had passed since the clever stickup. He was still suspended and wouldn't be tried until the end of the month. He was en route to talk to Joan Muller.

She had been released that day from the Tombs where she had been held on suspicion of larceny. She had been found within a few hours of the stick-up on Fordham Road with her mother and father. And she had told the police that, confused and hysterical from fright and smoke, she had staggered out through the rear area and gone straight to her mother and father. She knew nothing about the robbery or how the fire had started. This story she stuck to, and the police finally, for lack of evidence, had to let her go on a habeas corpus writ.

As Dan Carney trudged up the stairs, he was aware that the situation was very bad for him. The stick-up had been perfectly done. Not a clue had been left. The police now had no suspect. And even the stool pigeons turned up nothing. They claimed no local New York mob had engineered the job.

But Dan didn't believe that. The job had been handled by someone who had known thoroughly the habits of Henry Olsen, the slain treasurer; had known his own habits and those of the block. Otherwise such perfect timing could not have been achieved.

He rapped on the door of the Muller home. Old John Muller, an honest, forthright carpenter, opened the door and stiffened at sight of his visitor.

"Haven't we had enough of the trouble, yes, without you coming?" he demanded.

"I want to talk to Joan for just a few minutes," said Dan. "It's for her own good."

"Nothing connected with you is good," said the old man, but he opened the door wide and stepped back. An instinctive fear of the law and its officers could make him hate Dan but not deny him entrance, although he had the right to do so.

The apartment had been refurnished with cheap chairs and rugs. Joan, pale and luminous eyed, sat near the window where a current of hot street air disturbed her blond

curls. She gave a start as she saw Dan Carney.

"I don't want to talk to you," she cried in a shrill voice.

Dan thought of his unenviable position. If he didn't get a line on this stickup, it was quite likely that the commissioner, to soothe the newspapers and others for a lack of a conviction, would dismiss him from the force.

He said, sitting down carefully: "I know, Joan, but you will."

"I've told all I know. Over and over again. While they turned hot lights on me and wouldn't let me sleep. And pounded me with questions until I fainted. I don't know anything more."

"That's the way they do," admitted Carney. "Now, listen, Joan, you didn't tell them why you came back to the apartment at noon."

She quivered. "I did. I told them I wanted to get a new lipstick I had forgotten."

"You're not wearing lipstick now, and you were wearing plenty when I saw you."

"I know. I just started to wear it."

Dan said: "Joan, do you know ethylchloride and what it is?"

"No."

"How did you get through the flames of the davenport?"

"I don't remember."

DAN compressed his lips. "Joan, I'm your friend. You know I like you a lot. And I'm trying to save you from a lot of future trouble. Where was Carl that day?"

"I don't know. He doesn't come home any more—since you sent him to prison."

A growing conviction of something wrong in her attitude grew on Carney. Looking at her now, knowing her character, he felt that all of this was haywire. He pretended to get ready to go. He stood up.

"Do you remember passing me that noon, Joan?" he asked.

She nodded without speaking. He stared down at his spatulate fingers.

"Why did you tell me you didn't hate me any more since Carl had got a job?"

She gave a little start. Her eyes widened and then quickly lidded as she glanced down. "Well, I didn't hate you then. I didn't think they'd put me in jail for something I—oh, I don't know."

"I see," said Dan gently. "Well, if you don't know anything, I guess I can't help you."

"Nor wouldn't," she flashed. "I see you're suspended. I hope they fire you off the cops forever and ever."

Amidst a hostile silence, Carney went to the door and down to the street. His sudden hunch had been vindicated.

"It wasn't Joan Muller who passed me at noon," he told himself, as he took station in an alleyway across the street. "It was her twin brother Carl, and she's trying to cover him up. That's the only explanation that fits. So she's been in touch with him and is fronting for him now."

This was definitely so much gained; and Dan knew now he had only to find young Carl Muller, and he was on the right track. He put down his desire for a smoke and stood there for nearly an hour before he saw a slight, slim figure dart out of the Muller apartment house and head west. He had no trouble in following her, for she never looked back once.

He followed her aboard a downtown Flatbush Avenue subway express. She got off at Times Square. Here she cut across Broadway's traffic and backtracked as far as 47th Street. Dan knew this district, once called by a certain police chief the Tenderloin, because it was the fattest grafting spot in town. Once filled with honkytonks, it was still the hideout for smart guys and grafters, chiselers and racketeers.

Joan walked swiftly toward Sixth Avenue, and Dan was forced to increase his gait to keep her in sight. As she neared a corner, a man stepped

out in front of Dan and said: "Gotta match, Jack?"

Dan, still keeping his eyes on Joan Muller, fished in his pocket. Thus he was a sucker for the right hook the man threw at him. A better puncher would have knocked him silly. As it was, Dan took the blow glancingly and tumbled into the gutter. He came up with a speed remarkable in one so big.

"That'll teach you to call me names," growled the man loudly. "Keep back or I'll let you have it."

HIS hand appeared with a homemade slug shot composed of leather under a silk-stocking piece and holding a sizable chunk of lead.

"You're under arrest," said Carney, closing in.

"And who says so, you punk?" jeered the man. "Where's your badge?"

Dan saw that the girl was getting away from him, that to save her from being followed was why he had been hit.

"Right," he said grimly, and turned to trot after her.

The man pounced after him. "Can't take it, eh?" he yelled. "Calling a guy all the names you called me, and then running for it. Stand still, lug, and—"

He aimed the sling shot. Carney dodged. This had to be done quickly, if at all. He turned and deliberately invited the man to swing the sling shot again. He came swiftly inside the blow, and as he did so, his body turned and all of its weight came behind a right hook that caught the interloper behind the ear. The man went down like a pole-axed pig.

Dan jerked at him, lifted his face to the light. "I'll know you again, fellow," he muttered.

To the crowd, which had gathered as if by magic, he said: "Just a little personal thing. Get out of the way."

When they didn't, he strode through them, tossing bodies right and left. A howl of rage went up, someone yelled, "Police!" and down the street a whis-

tle blew. Carney heard the clatter of horse's hoofs on pavement. A mounted traffic man.

He broke loose and ran up the street. Joan Muller was nowhere in sight.

Again Dan Carney was faced with a decision. He could go back and have the traffic mountie make a pinch. But there was always the risk that such a move was precisely what was sought. The worst the interfeerer could be held for was disorderly conduct, and arrangements were doubtless already made to spring him. Those things were done quickly in night court if the right influence was present, and seventy grand could buy plenty of that. Furthermore, the lug might have been hired just for this job—to keep followers off Joan's trail. Possibly he would know nothing conclusive.

On the other hand, there was a chance of finding Joan—and he could make her talk. He ran on, then, and did not slow his pace until he neared Sixth Avenue. He turned the corner.

And here luck gave him a break. Looking into a drug store, he saw Joan Muller just emerging from a telephone booth. Dan shrank back into the shadows, and when she emerged and continued north on Sixth, he was close behind.

JOAN turned into a cheap hotel that advertised rooms with bath for a dollar and a quarter a day. Dan waited until she had vanished into the elevator. He came in at a stroll and said to the night clerk:

"Did my sister go up to four-twenty?"

The clerk, barely glancing up from a gaudily covered magazine, said: "Who? The blonde? No, she went to two-sixteen."

"Oh," said Dan. "Must have gone to see George."

The clerk looked up quickly. "What the hell do you want—trying to get some info? They ain't no George in this hotel. Scram!"

"My mistake," said Carney, leering wickedly. "The girl looked good, that's all."

He went outside, aware that if he had tried to go up, the clerk would have called the room. He wondered whom Joan had come to see. But there was no way to find out. He could only wait. This occupied a half hour which he passed patiently over three cigarettes.

Joan Muller came out alone. Dan played a hunch and let her go. "I can always find her," he told himself.

As soon as she was out of sight, he turned up his coat collar, jerked down the brim of his hat and faded around the corner to a smelly, cobbled alley that backed the shabby hotel. As he had guessed, the hotel was equipped with the outside steel-lattice fire escapes.

After some search, he found an old canned-goods box, mounted it and his weight pulled the lower ladder down. He climbed it and went upward steadily to the second floor. Through one opened window came the voices of a man and a woman quarreling.

But the escape led to a hall door which he forced open. He went in, the floor creaking under his weight, and found Room 216.

The door stood ajar. A woman was talking. "Sure, I'm scamming right away, honey. . . . I'll leave that to you. . . . I get it plenty, and don't worry."

Dan Carney strode in. The girl had on a negligée. She was a blonde, but her hair was dry and bristly from too many treatments. Her eyes were mascaraed. Her mouth was a red slash against a pink-enameled face.

She turned as if sensing another's presence. Carney had clicked and locked the door. The girl was not abashed by his presence.

She said: "Well, punk, what in hell are you doing here?"

As she spoke, her hand came from behind her, and Dan looked into the muzzle of a tiny automatic hardly bigger than her hand.

CHAPTER IV

"I'M looking at an unusually pretty girl," rejoined Dan calmly.

"Can that line," she snapped. "Do you know I could kill you, and the cops couldn't do a thing about it—you breaking in this way?"

"I expect you could," assented Dan. "The point is—you won't."

Her guard didn't lower, but her voice lost some of its sharpness. "Why?"

"I happen to be a cop—even if I am suspended. The name is Dan Carney. And the cops have a way of doing things to anybody who bumps off even a suspended one."

Her eyes widened. "I get it, you're the cop they—" She broke off sharply.

"Tricked out of the way," filled in Dan. "I followed Joan Muller here. She just left. She can and will tell me who you are, so you might as well."

This girl didn't scare worth a cent. The gun didn't lower, and Dan didn't like the way she had her finger on the trigger.

"Sure, you can have my name. It's on the register downstairs. I'm Bella Borcy—Mae Harkins, to you—and what the hell of it?"

"A lot. Why did Joan Muller come to see you?"

"Keep on asking, flat-foot," laughed Bella Borcy. "You're violating the law in here and if I did right, I'd give a beef and have you turned in for assault and all the trimmings."

"Joan doesn't hang out with your kind, sister," said Dan. "And she probably gave you a warning. For whom?"

As he spoke, he edged insensibly nearer to her, his eyes never leaving the gun. She merely looked at him.

"I hate that little she-cat," she muttered. "She thinks she's too good for me. Thinks I'm too good for—" She gestured with the gun. "Come on, flat-foot, out the door."

That gesture was what Dan was waiting for. It removed the muzzle and her strict attention to him. His

body flowed rather than moved, and before the girl could tighten her flexed muscles, his fingers closed on her wrist and forced the muzzle down. A brutal wrench, and she gave an exclamation of pain and the gun struck on the snout on the floor and lay there.

Dan stooped and picked it up, pocketed it, and straightened.

"Now, listen, sister," he said patiently, "I don't want to be hard with you. But you're going to talk."

"Try and make me," she challenged.

Carney took a step, his hand flew out and gripped her wrist. She was pale beneath the enamel. She cried out and shrank. Dan released her.

"There's a lot more where that came from," said Dan. "Do you talk?"

"You'll get yours," she cried shrilly. "There's a guy that'll take positive pleasure in bumping you. And I'd like to be there when he does."

"Skip that," said Dan. "Why did Joan Muller come here?"

DAN raised his hand. The girl shrank against the edge of the table and doubt tinged her hatred. For a space, she was silent and Carney knew her cunning brain was working.

"Okay," she said at last, "you'll get it. She brought word that you had been around to the house questioning her. She was afraid and wanted to warn a guy."

"Who? Her brother Carl?"

"Sure. Who else?"

"Then he was mixed up in this robbery?"

"Ask him that."

Dan didn't press the point. Instead he said: "Where is Carl now?"

"I don't know."

Carney twisted her wrist and the tears streaked down her cheeks, blackened with mascara.

"Stop lying," he said. "Where is Carl?"

Suddenly she laughed through her tears, a harsh, mirthless sound. "Okay, I'll tell you that, too. He was at the Hotel Wells on Second Avenue.

But he ain't there now. I gave him the tip."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know," she cried triumphantly. "They pulled out when I tipped them, and since Joan might have been followed here—as she was—they didn't say where they were going."

Carney knew the ring of truth when he heard it. He did not press further, for Bella knew nothing more of importance, and all he would get would be lies that wouldn't help.

"All right, sister," he said. "That's all I wanted to know. You can tell your boy friends that Carl is hot and we'll get him. And I know ways of breaking him."

She smiled scornfully, but did not reply. Dan went to the door. "I'll be going home now. Good night."

He closed the door and went down the rickety elevator. The clerk happened to glance up from his gaudy magazine and an amazed look crossed his face.

"How the hell did you get in?" he gasped.

"I'm Thurston, the magician," retorted Dan.

He went through the door, around the hotel and took station in the alley. Again he denied himself a smoke to watch the fire escape which loomed skeleton black against the building's side. He did not have long to wait.

Less than fifteen minutes later, feet echoed on the steel. A shadow moved down the wall and the lower ladder creaked as the additional weight of the woman tipped it to the ground. She paused here, adjusted her skirts with a silken sound, gave those feminine touches to her appearance that all women use when about to make a public appearance.

Then she moved casually out of the alley to 45th Street. Dan followed unobtrusively, but this was different quarry from Joan Muller. True, Bella Borcy went to the subway, but for a purpose. She rode to the Pennsylvania

Station where the express trains are on a different level from the locals.

Moving to the upper level, she timed herself so that an express was just closing its door. Dan perceived the trick and raced for the train. He almost managed to get his fingers in the rubber padding. But not quite. Bella Borcy saw him through the window as the train moved out.

She laughed widely, the hatred in her eyes contrasting with the mirth on her red lips.

CARNEY shrugged. He had one more place to go that night and went there at once. The Wells Hotel was another cheap place, so cheap that the mere mention that Dan was a policeman reduced the clerk to fearful compliance.

"Sure, there was a blond kid here, registered under the name of Phaltz. He had two other guys with him. They all checked out about an hour ago. Didn't leave no forwarding address, neither."

Dan took this information with an impassive face. He went out to the curb and lit a cigarette and stood there thinking, summing up the evening's developments. He figured he had broken about even.

He knew definitely now that Carl Muller was among the stickup men. And Dan, with a cold-blooded shrewdness, had told Bella Borcy that. In telling her, he knew he probably was condemning Carl Muller to death, for the chief thieves would not hesitate to murder the lad, so that he could not be arrested and betray them. Dan had done this deliberately. If he could force another crime, the thieves would betray themselves.

Against this he had to admit the fact that he was momentarily stymied. The Joan Muller lead had run out; so had the Bella Borcy one, because he realized that the thieves would stay away from her, knowing that she would probably be shadowed.

He shrugged philosophically.

"Home and to bed now," he told himself.

Dan Carney lived in a rooming house on West 125th Street, handy to the subway that could take him to his post. It was a fair rooming house, for being single and without dependents, his eighteen hundred a year enabled him to live comfortably, even save money.

He thought of this as he came up the stairs. His mind went back again and again to Joan Muller. He knew he loved that girl, and all this discontent with the rooming house, all this saving only indicated he wanted to get married. He was tired of living alone.

He sighed heavily, unlatched the door, and went in. To his surprise, the landlady, Mrs. Ferguson, was up.

"Oh, Officer Carney," she cried breathlessly, "I had to stay up to tell you that the police searched your room tonight."

"The police?" repeated Dan.

"Yes, detectives. They came with a warrant, too. Said something about wanting evidence to show you were grafting." She drew herself up. "And I told them plenty, Officer Carney. I told them that in all your five years here, you had been a model tenant. Decent and sober and thoughtful, I told them, and a gentleman if ever I met one."

She paused in her excitement. "But I couldn't keep them out. And they wouldn't let me go up. They were very mean and rough."

CARNEY put out his cigarette butt. "That was right, of course, Mrs. Ferguson," he said. "Always obey the law. Did they take anything away?"

"Nothing that I saw," she replied. "Oh, Officer Carney, I do hope you're not in trouble. I've admired you for so long. Just like a son to me, as I often told Mrs. Hatrick."

Dan smiled at her. "Don't worry, Mrs. Ferguson. I'll be all right."

"Oh, I do hope so. I was reading about your suspension, and how you

had been reprimanded so often for breaking regulations—and please believe I sympathize with you."

Dan patted her shoulder. "I know you do. Well, no use to worry any more tonight. You go to bed. That's where I'm going."

She smiled at him. "Let sleeping dogs lie, I say." She paused near him, her lips quivering. "But I'll pray for you tonight, Officer Carney. They can't tell me you're not a good man, one of the best."

Dan saw her off to the far end of the apartment where she slept, and then turned toward his own room. He was thinking about this invasion of his privacy. He stood for a space, lips flat, eyes out of focus, staring at the door. A minute passed.

Finally he took a step forward, leaned almost double, and very delicately, indeed, started to turn the door knob.

He never really heard the explosion. It seemed to him that the whole wall suddenly bulged toward him and broke into fragments. A gigantic invisible hand seized him, wafted him backward away from the red-hot flame that spouted from the door itself. He had no sensation of pain in falling, and was surprised to find himself on the floor with fragments cascading about him.

He started to get up. But a rafter beam falling heavily laced him across the head. He slumped back, stunned.

CHAPTER V

SERGEANT MCLACEY came about five the next afternoon and woke up Carney. Dan had spent the rest of that night and all day on the davenport, administered to by Mrs. Ferguson. Save for a hump on his head, he felt perfectly well and told her so. But her motherly instinct wouldn't be denied, and he sipped hot broths and loafed and relaxed generally.

McLacey put a stop to that.

"Well, young feller me lad," he said,

"I did as you said. I tipped all the newspapermen, and the story is in this aft's papers." He held them out that Dan might see. The story was there, all about the attempt to murder him by fastening a pineapple to his door. But in even blacker type was the motive.

"Officer Carney, though suspended, has been working on the Acme holdup case, and is understood to have definite clues to the identity of the bandits."

McLacey said: "That's a lie, isn't it?"

"Sure," said Dan.

"Then what's the idea?"

Dan sat up and straightened a crumpled cigarette. He lit it and inhaled reflectively.

"Mac, that pineapple was a honey. It was fixed with a string to the door-knob, so that just by turning the knob, I loosed the trigger. Whoever fixed it wanted to kill me. Now why?"

He paused, answered his own question. "I had a lead on this—Joan Muller. But it folded up. The Bella Borcy thing was a flop; you've got her in the can now, and it won't do any good. She doesn't know anything. So as the case stands right now, we're stuck. We don't have a clue or a lead."

"Are you telling me?" said McLacey.

"Then why try to kill me?" persisted Dan. "Either somebody wants to bump me, out of sheer devilry or—" he paused, spat out a tobacco crumb—"somebody thinks I know more than I do."

"All right. Suppose that's so. Where does this phony story get you?"

"They make another bid to knock me off. I'm wise and I grab somebody in the know."

"Sounds lousy," said McLacey. "Those lads have lammed long ago. And if they tried again to bump you, the chances are they'd succeed."

"Well, it was the only idea I had," said Dan. "And if—"

He stopped speaking, for Mrs. Ferguson had come into the room.

"Someone wants you on the telephone, Officer Carney. Said it was urgent, although I said you were positively too ill to answer."

"But I'm not, Mrs. Ferguson." Dan nodded to McLacey to wait and went to the telephone. He tensed suddenly as he heard Joan Muller's voice.

"Dan Carney?"

"Yes," said Dan.

"Can you come to the house right away?"

"I can, but why?"

DAN felt the emotional strain in Joan's voice, a sobbing quality that wrenched him more than her words did. Why was she sending for him? Playing her brother's game to the end?

"I can't tell you over the phone," she said, "but I ask you please to come."

"I'll be there in a half hour," he said, and hung up.

His face was a little gray and haggard when he went back to McLacey. "The idea's working," he said briefly. "That was Joan Muller calling. She wants to see me."

McLacey looked doubtful. "Say, you were soft on her, I hear. Maybe you ought to lay off this and let somebody else play the game."

"I'm playing it, Mac, and in my own way. I told myself I'd make Allen eat his words—and believe me, I will."

It was nearly seven o'clock when Carney turned into the square brick apartment house where Joan lived. She answered his knock, and he saw, looking around, that her parents were out. He sat down heavily.

"What was it you wanted, Joan?" he asked.

She sat down nervously opposite him, her slender fingers intertwined, and her eyes bright, almost feverish. She looked bad, Dan thought, and remembered the time when he had sat in this same seat and seen her bright and gay and witty.

"You know, I suppose," she said,

"that Carl was mixed up in that hold-up?"

"Yes," said Dan.

Her nerves got the best of her. "It was you made him that way," she cried. "Sending him to that prison where he met nothing but crooks and heels, and he learned to be a crook and a heel himself. You've ruined him."

Dan sat silent, his face registering no emotion. She stared. "You're hard," she said, "callous and brutal. You put boys in prison, and when they become crooks, you shoot them. Shoot them like dogs."

"I don't put boys in prison," said Dan, "but I shoot rats. I'll shoot more. Get to the point, Joan. Why did you want to see me?"

She tensed, her mouth quivering. "We're honest folk, my family, Dan Carney. I've thought and thought, and I've got to tell you. I know where Carl is."

Dan said: "Yes?"

She nodded. "The others—those that led him into temptation—they're there, too. I could take you straight to them."

"And you will?" he asked.

A short silence fell. Then Joan said: "I can do it—I will do it—if you'll promise me to let Carl go. We've put together our savings. We'll send him away where he can make a new start. You'll have the other two—the ones who are rotten and bad. Isn't that enough for your old law?"

Her emotion had crimsoned her cheeks, brought sparkle to her eyes. She was very pretty.

Slowly Dan shook his head. "Listen, Joan," he spoke quietly, "you and I haven't got much to do with this. The law was violated. Worse, little Steve O'Connor—you remember him—he died, shot down as brutally as one would a spider. Those rats never gave Olsen a chance. Shot him before he could put his hands up."

He paused. "No matter how he got mixed up with them, Carl is in it up to his neck. I can't let him go. If you

take me to him and the others I'll pinch him, too, and he'll have to take his chances."

She stared aghast. "You realize he is my twin brother? That I love him?"

"Yes," said Dan.

"You're a brute," she flamed. "I won't give him away. I can't."

CARNEY felt the strain of his own decision. Realized that she'd never speak to him again. That he and she were finished.

"But you will," he said gently. "You're on the level. You know those two who died. You can't let those rats get away with it."

She got up and paced the room in long, clean strides. She was pale now, and seemed charged with a suppressed emotion that would burst her asunder. Dan waited. If Joan Muller was the girl he thought her, he did not doubt her decision.

Finally she ran abruptly to the closet, got out her hat and coat. "Then let's go," she cried through compressed lips. "And never speak to me again, Dan Carney. Never!"

Dan put on his hat and followed her silently downstairs to the corner. She asked him curtly to get a cab. Which he did. When they got in, she gave a number on Amsterdam Avenue near 116th Street. They drove on to Broadway, and here Dan ordered the driver to pull up at a corner drug store. She looked askance at this.

"Got to make a telephone call," Dan said.

She seized his arm. "You can't," she cried. "You're going to tell the police."

Dan said nothing.

"You are," she cried, "you are! And I won't have it. I'll not go."

Dan said: "I'm not going to call the police."

She relaxed and believed him. He went in and telephoned McLacey. "It's an apartment house, sergeant," Dan said. "Give me about twenty minutes and then surround the place."

They're rats, so bring the riot guns and the gas."

He got back into the car and it proceeded. Joan said: "Whom did you call?"

"My landlady," Dan said.

The cab drew up in front of the number, an apartment house with the old-fashioned shabbiness of a good place run to heel. Joan led the way in.

"The other two may not be here," she said. "But Carl will. He telephoned just before I called you." She seized Carney's arm. "Be easy on him, please, for old time's sake."

Dan shook her hand off. She went on silently up the staircase to the fifth floor where she rapped on the door of a front apartment. A voice said: "Who's there?"

"It's me," cried Joan.

"Alone?"

"Yes, Carl."

There came the sounds of a chain being unloosened. Then the knob turned and the door opened. Joan walked in. Just as the door was to be closed, Dan, his pistol in his right hand, shoved forcibly on the door and thrust it in. He put the pistol snout against Carl Muller's chest.

"Reach 'em," he said.

Carl Muller staggered back, but he did not cry out. He did not scream imprecations at his sister who had betrayed him. Carney took a step forward. He felt rather than saw the movement of someone on the right, and dodged. But not enough.

The blow struck him glancingly across the head, but the force sent him to the floor. The gun in his hand roared, but there was nothing in the way of the bullet against the wall.

Another blow fell. Dan turned and twisted to bring the gun to bear. A weapon crashed against his wrist and his hand was numbed. Into his face was poked the snout of an automatic. The face behind it was demoniac in its glee.

"Lemme let him have it, Chief," he

begged. "Now lemme blow his heart out."

Another man whom Dan Carney did not see, grabbed the automatic. "Cut it, you fool. We got him here, didn't we? Now, we can take care of him right. Don't be in such a damned hurry."

CHAPTER VI

DAN CARNEY didn't have a chance. His hands and legs were tied securely and he was placed on a davenport with all eyes watching him. He could see all who were there then. He recognized the Goose—right name Steve Porodias—and knew the man was coked to the eyebrows. The Goose doubtless would be the executioner. The other man, Nick Devillio—called the Chief—Carney had never seen in the flesh. But he had seen the crook's picture in the rogues' gallery, and knew him for the smartest crook in New York.

Here, Dan knew, was the brains of the outfit; the man who planned the robbery, and worked on the others to trap Carney. Dan cast one glance at Carl Muller. The youngster was flushed with drink; his eyes were reckless. He was probably doped, too.

It was Joan Muller who held Dan's final steady gaze. She was staring at Carl with supreme astonishment. Realization seemed long in coming.

Finally she said: "Carl, you lied to me."

"What do you mean?" her brother said.

"You told me where you were and that you wanted to see me. But what you wanted was to have me bring Officer Dan Carney here so you could—"

"Kill him," said Nick Devillio soothingly. "Sure, honey, we got to get him out of the way. He was too close after us. He'd send your brother and us to the hot seat."

"You tricked me," Joan said to Carl, ignoring the dark, lean Nick.

"Aw!" the boy burst out. "What the devil, kid? I'm in this up to my

ears. We gotta get out of the country. And Carney here had a line on me. It's a case of my hide or his—and I'm going to make sure it's his."

"That a boy, Carl," said Nick.

The crook went to the telephone. "I'll get the car around, and we'll take this punk for a short, one-way tour."

Joan came part way across the room under the watchful eyes of the Goose. She stared at Dan.

"You don't believe I had anything to do with this, do you?" she asked.

Carney regarded her calmly, his mind churning swiftly.

"Sure I do," he said. "Blood's thicker than water. You'd see me dead to save the hide of that no-good brother of yours."

He pulled his mouth into a sneer. "You're all alike. But you won't hear any beef out of me."

The blood had drained from her face. Her hands wound in and out; and her eyes seemed to lay at the depths of suddenly formed caverns. She transfixed Carney with one look, and then went over to stand near Carl.

The Goose sat down on the edge of the davenport. "Remember the night you fanned my heels with slugs? When you knocked off my pal?" His voice was as vicious as a saw rasp. "Well, remember it, punk, I'm leveling all that off now for good."

He laughed mirthlessly. "I'll make you beef before I'm done. And beef loud!"

"Nuts!" said Dan Carney, and turned his eyes away.

He was never one to lose his head in a crisis, and he saw all the potentialities of the situation now. He had offered himself as human bait; he had been accepted. And if these rats got him away before McLacey arrived, then it was finished. If McLacey trapped them here, Dan might still die; they'd turn their guns in hate upon him as their betrayer.

THIS was the worst. There was still a chance that one single thread he had just spun might hold.

He could do nothing but wait and see. A silence lay upon the room, for Nick had finished talking on the telephone and had gone to a closet for his hat and topcoat. The Goose sat there, hand in pocket, eyes bright with cocaine.

Carl and Joan looked startingly alike, standing there together. Dan watched this unemotionally. He had an idea that the kid had been roped into this deal as a decoy to get Dan off his beat, but the fact wouldn't save young Muller from the chair.

"The car will come up the alley behind," said Nick. "Carl, you lead the way and see that nobody is watching. Me and the Goose will carry this flat-foot."

Carl stood sullenly. Joan Muller said: "I want to leave this place."

"Sure, sister," soothed Nick. "As soon as we're gone, beat it. But not now."

"I won't have my sister mixed up in this thing," cried Carl furiously.

The Goose bounded off the davenport. "What you got to say about what's done?" he snarled. "The Chief's running this. Shut up."

Dan had tested his bonds and found that he only nicked the skin off his wrists for his efforts. He now banked on the last string.

A tenseness gripped the room. "You ain't taking a runout, are you, Carl?" asked Nick softly.

"No, but I don't want my sister in this. Let her go, now, before we take him—" He pointed to Dan.

Carney saw Nick and the Goose exchange glances. "Sure," said Nick softly. "Anything to please a pal. Only not this door. The bedroom door—in there."

He pointed. Carl hesitated, then took Joan's hand. "Come on," he growled, "out of this." He led the way to the door. Nick followed, looked back at the Goose and nodded. The Goose grinned viciously, and his right hand tensed in his pocket. He, too, went into the next room.

Carney did not flex a muscle. Sud-

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denly he heard an angry shout. A scream! A sudden vicious rumble of voices. There came a shot. Into the room sped Joan Muller. She paused, locked the connecting door behind her, and almost fell in her haste to reach Dan.

"I wasn't involved!" she exclaimed. "I couldn't have you believe that." Her fingers fumbled, lost precious seconds over the knots. She was sobbing deep inside her. "I couldn't. I got you into this. I'll get you out. Carl is lost. Lost."

The knots fell away. Dan leaped to his feet, rubbing his hands and wrists, stooping to rub his ankles. He had no weapon. Already there was a thumping crash on the connecting door. He saw to it the chain was over the door to the corridor from this room, so that they couldn't force an entrance from the hall.

He took a chair, smashed it against the floor with a quick movement.

He was wondering what delayed McLacey. He turned to Joan. "Listen, Joan"—his voice grew suddenly soft—"I want you to know I never believed you tricked me knowingly into coming here. I'm too crazy about you ever to believe that."

He went to the door whose paneling was giving under the crashing blows. "I'm telling you," he went on, "in case we don't get lucky coming out of this."

As he walked to the connecting door, he suddenly turned swiftly, and swooped toward the window ledge that gave off to the street. Two weapons here. Two automatics! One wasn't loaded; the other had half a clip.

Suddenly a rattle of sound came from the connecting door. The string of shots blew away the lock. The door pushed open and a Tommy-gun cut loose.

BUT Carney wasn't there. At that first chatter, he had seized Joan's arm and dragged her to the corner where the two killers would have to enter the room to shoot at them. The

two bandits did not enter the room.

From the corridor outside came the sharp thud of many feet. A pounding on both doors. The cry: "Open in the name of the law!"

More rappings. Heavy poundings. "Police! Open up!"

Another call: "Dan? Dan? Are you all right?"

"Okay," shouted Dan from his corner. "Watch out, they've got Tommy-guns."

His quick glance shot past Joan who cowered next to him toward the chain-latched door. If he could open that, McLacey and his gang could come in, and it would be all over. Dan edged slightly along the wall.

With a ripping snarl, the Tommy-gun cut loose and stitched a weird design of bullet holes in the wall not a foot from where Dan stood.

"We're watching that door, Carney," called the Chief, "and we're killing you when you open it."

"You ain't—I am!" cried the Goose. "We're shooting it out. Toss a pineapple in there and blow them all to hell."

"Where are you, Dan?" came the yell from outside.

"In the living room. They're in the bedroom, and I got the door covered. Blow their door in."

The thunderous explosions of pistols echoed and whanged through the apartment house. From the next room came the vicious chatter of the Tommy-gun. Out in the hall sounded the high-pitched scream of a man in mortal agony. There was a sudden skelter of feet. The Goose's shrill laughter hit on Dan's ears.

"Got him! Got him!" yelled the Goose. "We'll kill them all. They can't burn you but once."

There was silence then. The police had been beaten back. Not for good. It was a siege. Dan knew the next move was up to him. His mind swiftly fathomed the situation. In the interim there was a small plop of sound from the next room.

"Tear gas!" screamed the Goose.

Swiftly Dan took off his coat. "Put this on," he whispered to Joan. "Edge over there within a foot of those bullet holes. Don't get any closer."

Blindly, her face a gray mask, she put on the coat, eased along the wall. Dan dropped to his hands and knees and crawled toward the door to the next room. He could hear the two men sneezing and gargling. And a second later he caught fumes of tear gas.

He knew McLacey had held off on the bombs as long as possible, but was now willing to sacrifice Carney or anybody else to rout the two bandits.

Tears came into Dan's stinging eyes. He went the faster. A gray cloud was floating easily out of the doorway. Dan was hugging the door. When the machine gun roared, it seemed almost in his face. The voice that spoke hurt his ear.

"Back, Carney. Don't open that door." Dan wondered how close the burst was to Joan. Then he ceased to wonder. Gun up, he suddenly raised. The machine gun snout was right by his face. He was firing before it did.

Dan held the trigger for four shots, leaving him but one. The hot flames from the muzzle of the Tommy-gun set fire to his shirt. Powder bits stung his face. He was standing face to face with the Goose.

The gun vibrated in his hand. A grunt came from the Goose, followed by a spurt of blood from his mouth. Dan wondered in that split second how his hand could have shaken so much that the bullets started hitting the Goose in the stomach, and the last one tore away one side of his face. The Tommy-gun ceased to buzz, and fell with a crash to the floor.

Through his tears Dan saw the Goose go down to his knees, clasping his hands at his stomach.

He hiccupped and fell on his face. But not on the Tommy-gun. Dan had grabbed that. It still had a half pan left. He jerked back around the corner of the doorway.

Dan, from his shelter, said: "You

can't make it, Nick. Better come out with them up. I'll get you next time."

Nick was cursing the dead Goose. "I've got to fry," he said. "I'll take it here."

"Okay," said Dan.

A momentary silence. Then outside, McLacey's voice: "What's up, Dan?"

Before Dan could reply, Nick's nerve broke. "Listen, cops! Gimme a break. I know plenty. I'll tell everything. I don't want to die."

Dan heard Nick move toward the other door from whence McLacey's voice had come.

Dan Carney's lips flattened. He edged to the corner of the doorway. Deliberately, calmly he took his life in his hands and walked through the door toward the Chief.

Nick saw him, started. The man had a Tommy-gun. He didn't say a word. He simply stared.

Anyone seeing Dan might have thought, from his relaxed attitude, that he could never whip his gun up in time. The Chief's gaze met his.

"I got the drop, Carney," he muttered. "Do I get a break?"

Dan smiled. He shook his head.

The Chief stared. "You mean—"

"If you're going to shoot"—Dan's voice barely carried—"better start."

"You mean I'll fry?"

"You'll fry," said Dan coldly.

It was as if his words had pulled the cocked trigger of the Chief's desperation. His cowardice, his broken nerves made him hysterical. "Then we'll all go out together!" he screamed. He whipped up the gun.

CARNEY smiled. If he said anything it was lost in the swift, eager chuckle of the Tommy-gun in his hand. As the rain of slugs hit the Chief, it was as if he were being pounded back by the swift jabs of an invisible-fighter.

Chunks of flesh and cloth flew from the edges of his body where the vibration of the gun sent wild slugs biting. The impact sent him staggering back against the wall and there

the slugs pinned him, held him, arms down, body wilting.

Dan Carney ceased to fire. Shouts and yells came from outside, but he ignored them. He walked to where, by some remarkable feat of balance, the dying Chief was still propped, rubber-kneed, against the wall.

"You—tricked—me—into firing—" his mouth was barely moving. "You—wanted—to kill—me."

As the words slid out, he toppled to the floor.

"Stevey," Dan said softly. "Stevey O'Connor, little fella, if you can see anything, take a look at this."

He went to the door and unlatched it, called out: "Okay, sarge."

McLacey came in. Saw the Goose's dead body. Saw Carl Muller, dead from the Goose's bullet. Saw the crimson remains of the Chief.

"Don't you believe in prisoners?"

"No," said Dan. "Joan Muller's in the next room. She can tell all you want to know about this. And the Chief has the dough on him."

"But why didn't you take Nick prisoner?" yelled McLacey. "He wanted to give up. I heard him say so."

"So did I," said Dan. "I came in to get him to surrender. He got scared and started to shoot. I beat him to it."

McLacey pulled at his lower lip, frowned. "I think you're a liar."

Carney shrugged. Going to Joan Muller, he passed her brother Carl, dead, his hands still clasping at a stomach wound. Dan was glad he had not pulled the trigger. He found Joan and carried her to a taxicab and cradled her in his arms all the way home.

He did not see her again until nearly a month later. The charges of neglect of duty and the violation of sundry of the six hundred police regulations had been dismissed by the commissioner. This was an odd ceremony.

The commissioner said: "I believe in promotion for bravery and cleverness—the reward of merit. But your superior, Lieutenant Allen, informs me that it is the belief that you chose

to shoot Nick Devillio instead of taking him prisoner and sweating him for valuable information."

Daniel Carney stood straightly at attention and made no sign.

The commissioner's face grew grim. "I believe in shooting first in case of necessity, Patrolman Carney. But in this case, unsolved crimes remain mysteries because of your personal—er—idiosyncrasy and refusal to obey certain common-sense injunctions."

"So," continued the commissioner with an odd look, "I am awarding to you the Police Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry. But you'll remain a patrolman."

Dan went back to his beat the next day. And just before noon when he had to make his regular precinct call, he dropped in to the Muller apartment. The old man mumbled as he opened the door, but Dan saw Joan seated by the window and went to her.

Dan sat down on the edge of a chair—a new chair since the fire—and for a while merely stared at her.

Finally he said: "Joan, I've come around to tell you I've turned the Acme Company's reward into the police pension fund."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because it was you who did most of the helping and since you wouldn't take any of it, neither will I."

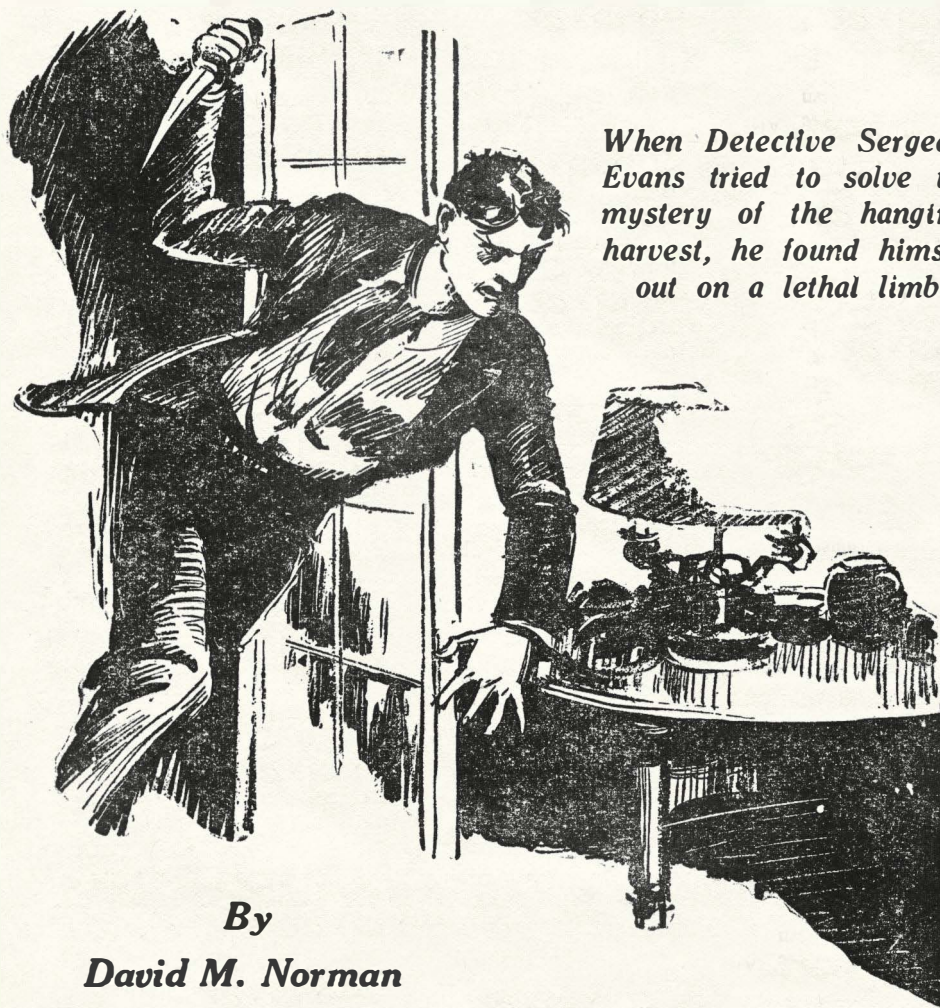
She did not speak. Dan looked at his watch. He stood up. "I've got to make my call, Joan," he said "and I just came around to say that I hope you don't hate me for what happened."

"I don't hate anyone," she said.

"I couldn't help what happened to Carl," he went on, oblivious to her remark. "What happened to him was in the cards. I won't say I'd have spared or saved him. I'm only glad it wasn't my bullet that killed him."

She sat quite rigid for a time, and then, presently, her small cool hand came out and vanished inside his big one. Dan sighed, took her into his arms.

Castle of the Doomed



When Detective Sergeant Evans tried to solve the mystery of the hangtree harvest, he found himself out on a lethal limb.

By

David M. Norman

JEFF EVANS, detective sergeant, brought the car to a sudden stop. There was a big iron gate barring the drive. He looked at his companion, middle-aged Ralph Usher, broker and rich man's general representative.

"Think nothing of it," Usher smiled. "This is only the beginning, sergeant. About three miles beyond this gate, over land owned by Jarvis, is his house. Or castle, you might call it. He's a peculiar duck."

"Heck of a place for a rich man to live—like a hermit," Evans grunted. "What do we do now—crash the gate?"

Usher shook his head, opened the car door and climbed out. Evans saw a metal box attached to the gate and Usher walked directly up to it, pulled back the door and pressed a small button. Instantly a voice seemed to come directly out of the air.

"Who is it?"

"Ralph Usher, Mr. Jarvis. I'm here with that police detective you asked me to bring so urgently."

"I must be sure," the voice said. "If you really are Ralph Usher, what was the last deal we consummated?"

Usher looked back to Sergeant Evans and spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness to cope with such a situation.

"I sold five thousand shares of Interstate Mining. The figure ran just short of a hundred thousand."

"Good. You may come in, Mr. Usher. I am greatly relieved."

Usher returned to the car and before he climbed in beside Evans, the big iron gate began to open automatically.

"See what we're up against?" Usher shrugged. "He trusts no one. Never did. There's an amplifier hidden in the trees somewhere and a microphone in that box attached to the gate. It opens electrically only when Jarvis is certain he wants to see his visitor. I'll give you odds that we're the first people to get in for a month—the last time I paid him a visit.

"Groceries, supplies and fuel are left outside the gate and Jarvis sends his servants to carry them to the house. Few people have ever seen Jarvis since he retired to this kind of life. And the place he lives in—I wouldn't stay there for a thousand dollars a night."

"Why?" Evans guided the car around a sharp bend.

"Because the house has a history—and what a history. Blood, sudden death and hard luck. I'll wager something happened to frighten Jarvis. That's why he wants a cop."

EVANS gave all his attention to driving then. They climbed steadily for a few moments and then the road dipped down into a deep, black valley. In the distance, atop a knoll, he could see the lights of Jarvis' place. Evans shivered. The atmosphere was enough to give even a homicide squad cop the creeps.

The car picked up speed rolling down the steep incline and Evans kept one foot on the brake for quick action. Then, suddenly, there was a blur directly in front of his windshield. At the same instant the car hit something with the horrible dull thud of an impact between metal and a human body. There was a confusion of arms and legs. Evans braked hard, but he was traveling pretty fast and couldn't stop until he was a hundred yards beyond the spot where he'd hit that man.

He got out and so did Usher. Evans drew a flash, sent its searching ray across the road and Usher suddenly gave a hoarse cry of horror and sprinted back. He reached the corpse first. Evans kept shining his flash around the underbrush.

"He's dead," Usher said slowly. "It's Cavanaugh, the caretaker of the estate. Been here for years and years. What the devil happened, sergeant? I didn't see him along the road."

"Neither did I." Evans knelt and examined the body. The neck was twisted awkwardly and Evans knew why this man had died so quickly. The neck was broken.

"He wasn't walking beside the road," Evans went on. "This man was either thrown in front of the car or he dropped in front of it. I didn't see him until the impact. Usher, it looks as if Jarvis was right in asking for a detective. This is murder."

"Yes." Usher looked around nervously. "You must be right. I've known Cavanaugh for years. He'd never have committed suicide. Say, what about Jarvis? What if something happened to him?"

"Take the dead man's legs," Evans ordered. "Help me move him to the side of the road. Hurry—you might be right about Jarvis."

Two minutes later they were rolling at a fast clip along the winding road. Evans stopped in front of the house. The porch light snapped on and a bent-shouldered, white-haired man came out of the door. Usher heaved a sigh of relief.

"That's Jarvis. He's going to take Cavanugh's death hard. Better let me tell him."

Jarvis shook hands with Evans, a limp, fishy grasp of fingers that made Evans shiver. Then Usher told the old man, as gently as possible, about the death of his caretaker.

The effect on Jarvis was strange. Instead of showing sorrow, his eyes grew wide in terror and he began to tremble. With a quick, suspicious look around the darkness, he signaled them to follow him inside. They sat down in a massive living room which might have easily been turned into a skating rink.

"I'm afraid," Jarvis explained. "I'm afraid to remain in this damned house and I'm afraid to leave. Don't ask me why—about leaving I mean—but I'll tell you why I no longer want to live here."

"Go on," Evans said. "When you're through, I'll call headquarters and have them send down for Cavanugh."

"I have no phone," Jarvis put in quickly. "Never had one, but we'll arrange to send somebody. About this house—I've lived here more than ten years now. Nothing ever happened and then, a week ago, one of the ancient books in the library—they came with the house—fell from its shelf. Naturally, I looked at it, and it contained a complete history of this house. It's a place of horrors, gentlemen. I don't believe in curses nor the supernatural, but something hangs over this house and it is ready to strike at me any moment. Wait—I'll show you."

JARVIS got up and left the room for a few seconds. Usher rotated a finger alongside his temple to indicate that he thought Jarvis' wheels revolved in the wrong direction. Then Jarvis came back with a musty, dog-eared volume. Its pages were yellow with age and if handled roughly, cracked like thin ice. Jarvis carefully opened the book and pointed.

"There is a concise history of the

place. A digest of what the rest of the book contains. I've wondered why certain trees, more than a hundred years old, carried ancient, weather-beaten wooden signs with a man's name barely discernible on them. I did know that those names were duplicated on tombstones in a private graveyard a mile behind the house, but I never did get the connection between the two. Now—I know."

Evans read the handwriting swiftly. He whistled and beckoned to Usher. "Have a look. Four different people were murdered on this estate, years ago. In each case they were hung from one of the trees. Seems that the occupants were peculiar people. Two were executed because they were suspected of witchcraft. One was proven a murderer and died on a gallows tree on this estate. The fourth was just found hanging and nobody ever did find out who killed him or why."

Usher licked his lips. "I think I'll go back to the city," he said. "Suppose I notify the police, eh, sergeant?"

"You'll remain here," Jarvis snapped. "If you don't, you've seen the last bit of business from me, Usher. The detective will be busy trying to find out who killed Cavanugh and I want someone I can trust to stand beside me every moment. About Cavanugh—you suggested perhaps it was suicide. Nonsense! Cavanugh was going to be retired at the first of the year. I promised to pay him a pension. He was murdered—murdered, I tell you, and I'm going to be next."

"Wait a minute," Evans interjected. "Mr. Jarvis, just why are you so certain you're slated for murder? Why are you so afraid?"

Jarvis got up and headed for the front door. "Follow—I'll show you. And stay close."

He led the way across the porch, down the steps and into the estate proper. There was a winding path which he followed for ten minutes and then he pointed to a tree. Evans' flashlight centered on a small piece of

wood, bearing letters that were hardly readable.

JONATHAN GREER HUNG HERE 1840

Jarvis went to another tree and another until he'd covered four of them. Each bore a similar sign. Then, almost triumphantly, he led them to still another tree. The sign nailed to it was fresh, bright and clear. Evans read it and gulped.

PAUL JARVIS HUNG HERE 1941

"See?" Jarvis grabbed Evans' arm tightly, like a frightened child. "That's why I'm afraid. Someone intends to hang me from that tree."

"Look," Evans said, "I'm convinced there's plenty of trouble brewing around here. Who lives with you, Jarvis? How many servants?"

"Three. No—two now, because Cavanaugh is dead. There's Dodson, he's my butler and all around helper. Then there's the cook—a Swiss named Hausworth who has been with me for five years. Dodson is like a friend. He's served me for almost a quarter of a century. Neither of them can be suspected of plotting against my life."

"Okay," Evans grunted, "but there must be a reason. Have you any enemies?"

"None that would want to murder me." Jarvis shuddered. "I'm sure of that. I—we'd better go back to the house. I don't like the darkness and that—that piece of wood bearing my name. I can't stand looking at it."

Evans walked beside the old man and he kept one hand on a gun which he'd transferred to his side pocket. Usher brought up the rear. Evans kept spraying the night with his flash and was ready for trouble.

Suddenly Usher stopped and gave a strangled cry. "Sergeant! Mr. Jarvis! Look here! I saw this in the gleam of your flash, Evans."

THEY gathered around another age-old tree. There was a piece of wood nailed to it. Its legend was similar to the one they'd just looked at—

except that the name of the victim was different. This one read:

STEPHEN DODSON HUNG HERE 1941

"Dodson — my servant," Jarvis gasped. "Hurry—we've got to see if he's all right. I couldn't let anything happen to Dodson."

They started to run and put about a hundred yards between themselves and the gallows tree. Suddenly all three of them were brought to a halt by a strange swishing sound, a thud and a horrible cracking noise. Evans spun around, his flash stabbing the darkness until it centered on a man's body, dangling from the end of a rope and spinning like a top.

Evans had his gun out as he rushed back to the figure, but he exchanged the gun for a pocket knife and cut the man down less than a minute after he'd been seen. But he was dead, his neck broken just as Cavanaugh's had been. His eyes were wide open and staring in the most indescribable horror that Evans had ever seen.

"It's Dodson," Jarvis screamed. "Dodson—he's dead! He was hung from that tree as the sign said he would be. And I'm next. I'm next, I tell you."

Usher stepped close to Evans. "I think the old boy is right, sergeant. This smacks of something connived in Hades. What'll we do?"

"Watch Jarvis—never let him out of our sight. One of us must be at his side every instant." Evans shot his flash upwards and studied the branches of the great tree. "What I'd like to know is how Dodson was dropped. Nobody up there now and unless we've got a Tarzan present, I don't see how anybody could jump from one tree to another and make good his escape."

"I don't know the answer to that one," Usher grunted, "but I'll swear there was no corpse hanging there when we passed by. Couldn't possibly have been. Sergeant, why not take the cook and Jarvis off this place? Make

'em go to the city tonight—right now."

"Maybe you're on the proper track," Evans agreed. "Yet I doubt Jarvis would leave on such short notice. I wonder why he insists on living in a place like this anyhow? Never sees anyone, never goes anywhere. It's almost as though he's hiding from the whole world. We'll go back to the house now. And remember—never let him out of your sight."

Evans spent half an hour studying the ancient volume. It was dated 1761 and looked its age. Then he stepped over beside Usher and spoke softly.

"I'm going outside. Jarvis' safety is in your hands. If anything happens, start yelling."

Jarvis watched him leave and half arose as if to call the detective back. Hausworth, the cook, was huddled in a big chair. His slight, wispy form was crouched in terror.

Evans hurried to the spot where Dodson lay dead and made a more careful examination of the corpse. He noticed that the dead man's fingernails were almost torn off and that slivers of bark were forced beneath them as if Dodson had clawed at the tree to save himself from that lethal drop. Evans looked around, stuffed his gun into his belt and then proceeded to climb the tree.

It was tough going, but he made it, and finally straddled a thick branch from which the rope dangled. The bark showed signs where Dodson had clawed at it. Side branches were unusually thick, but some of them were bowed down as if considerable weight had been pressed against them over a period of time. Two of the smaller ones were half broken off.

"**D**ODSON," Evans said half aloud, "was supported by these branches—or his murderer was. But how the devil could the killer have dragged a healthy man like Dodson up here and then tossed him off? And where did the killer go after his deed was committed? We were

beneath the tree sixty seconds after it happened."

There was no answer to that so Evans clambered down again. He studied the sign nailed to the tree and shivered. No wonder Jarvis was so scared. Evans himself began to know what terror of the unknown was like.

He went to the other trees, bearing the very old signs. He grasped one and gently worried it loose. His eyes narrowed slightly and he made the rounds of the others. The only one he didn't disturb was that which bore the name of Paul Jarvis.

It was a long hike to the spot where Cavanaugh, the caretaker, lay in death, but Evans walked it. He didn't want to use the car and attract attention. Cavanaugh's death was still unexplained, and Evans hated to think he'd run into the man and killed him.

The corpse was still there, exactly as they'd left it. Evans searched the pockets and found nothing of interest. Then he looked searchingly at the dead man's throat. It had a welt completely around it. Evans set his jaw grimly and approached the tree.

Up among its branches he found no sign of a rope, but the bark was burned slightly as though a rope had been there. Evans frowned. Cavanaugh had died just as Dodson had and yet there was no placard on the tree announcing he'd be hung at this spot. Why was his death different from Dodson's, and why had the rope been so carefully removed? What happened to the part which must have been around the dead man's neck?

Evans snapped on his flash to light the way down. Almost simultaneously, a gun cracked and the bullet ripped through leaves around Evans' head. He turned the light off and jerked the gun out of his belt. There were no more shots, but the would-be assassin must have known he'd missed, because if he hadn't Evans would have been sprawled on the ground by now. Once Evans heard underbrush snap, but he had no target to shoot at. The darkness was intense.

Then he carefully raised the flashlight high above his head and propped it into a spot where branch and tree trunk were joined. It stayed there, wedged hard in place. He lowered himself a bit until his feet hit another substantial branch. Then he turned on the flash, ducked down and grabbed at the branch on which he was balanced.

The killer fired straight at the flash. Evans saw the lurid flare of his gun and his own service pistol went into action. But shooting at an elusive target in thick forest growths like this was hardly successful. All it did was send the killer running madly away. Evans dropped to the ground and started in pursuit. He gave up ten minutes later and headed back to the house.

Usher was pacing the living room floor and he was alone. He hurried up to Evans.

"Something got into the old fool. He insisted I remain here while he went upstairs. Refused to allow me to come with him. Said what he had to do was important, but he wanted no one to see him. He also said something about leaving this place tonight."

"Stay here," Evans said. "I'll find him."

He hurried upstairs and after a ten-minute prowling into almost twenty different rooms, he found one door which was locked.

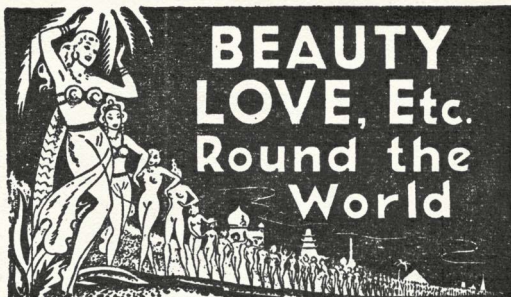
"Who is it?" a querulous, frightened voice asked.

"Sergeant Evans. Open up, Mr. Jarvis. I've got to see you."

BUT Jarvis didn't unlock the door for several minutes and when he backed into the room away from Evans, he was shaking like a leaf. A window across the room was wide open and tree branches were close enough so that anyone could have entered or left the room by that exit.

"I—just wanted to be alone. To—think," Jarvis explained lamely.

"Tell me," Evans asked, "how long



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have those signs been nailed to the trees? The old ones, I mean."

"Why for—for ages," Jarvis gasped. "Each one is dated, isn't it?"

"But did you ever notice them before?" Evans insisted.

"No—no, I didn't, but I never wandered around the estate very much until lately. Dodson discovered them first and from then on my life here has been a hell on earth. Officer, I'm going back to the city, to a hotel suite where there are people and talking and lights. I can't stand living here any longer. If I go away, perhaps that curse won't follow me. I'll cheat that gallows tree."

"I think it's a good idea," Evans said. "We'll talk about it later on. Meantime you can pack your bags if you wish. When will you be ready to go?"

"In about half an hour. I must be alone now. Please, sergeant. I promise to call out if anything happens. I've a decision to make and I can't think unless I'm by myself."

Evans shrugged and walked out. He heard the lock click immediately after the door closed. Usher was at the bottom of the stairs, anxiously waiting.

"He wants to leave," Evans said. "Darned soon too. Says he has packing to do and some brain work as well. Must be left alone. Tell me, Usher, how long after I left the house, did Jarvis go upstairs?"

"Almost immediately and I thought it was rather odd because he'd just said he was afraid to be left alone. The man contradicts himself every time he talks. What do you think of all this, sergeant?"

"I don't know what to think," Evans grunted. "I'm sure though, that we haven't seen the last of murder tonight. Trouble is, there's only you, I, Jarvis and the cook for victims. I don't like the way Jarvis is acting."

"Holy smokes," Usher cried, "you don't think he asked me to bring you up here so he could commit murder and be alibied at the same time? If so, he must have help. How could any

of us have dropped Dodson from that tree unless — Sergeant — the cook. Maybe he's in with Jarvis. Maybe Cavanugh and Dodson knew something that meant trouble for Jarvis."

"You might be right," Evans said. "I'm going to find out. Stay here and keep your eyes and ears open. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Evans went out the front door, circled the big house which required fully five minutes and finally stood just below Jarvis' lighted window. Expert at this method of climbing now, he pulled himself well up into the tree. He was almost opposite the illuminated window when every light in the house winked out.

Half a second later a gun blared from the window and bark flew against Evans' cheek from the bullet. Two more shots were fired and both came dangerously close. Evans grabbed the branch on which he was standing, swung himself down and dropped to the ground. He fell heavily, but was up in a moment and rushing to the front of the place again.

Usher had the door open and was dancing around excitedly. "Shots," he jabbered. "Shooting—yells. Somebody must be killing Jarvis."

"Where is the cook?" Evans barked.

"I don't know. Haven't seen him. Oh, here he comes. At least it's somebody from the back of the house."

THE cook stumbled through the darkness toward them. He was livid with terror in the white ray of Evans' torch. But he swore he knew nothing of what had happened.

"I'm going upstairs," Evans said. "Stay here."

He took about four steps upward and stopped. A groan reached him and then tottering footsteps headed his way. It was Jarvis, so terror-stricken that he could hardly walk. There was a big revolver in his hand and—dangling from around his neck was a short nose. Evans ran up the stairs to help him descend.

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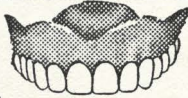


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only light came from Evans' flash and it cast weird shadows all around the huge living room. Jarvis finally found his voice.

"I was—upstairs—in the room. The door was locked. I heard something make a clicking sound, as if the key was being turned from outside. Then, a few moments later, the lights went out. Someone came into the room and struck me. I fell down. The noose was placed around my neck and pulled tight. I was being strangled."

Evans took the big gun out of Jarvis' hand, broke the breech and grunted. No shots had been fired from this weapon.

"I got the gun after—after I was able to get up," Jarvis explained. "Just as the noose was pulled tight, the murderer suddenly let go and then there was a lot of shooting. That's all I know. I guess I fainted. Officer, we're leaving this house at once."

"You're right," Evans agreed. "Get ready as quickly as you can. I'll see you safely into town and return here with enough men to search the place properly. I'll go upstairs with you, Jarvis, and I won't take no for an answer either. Here—my arm."

"If you promise not to come into the room with me," Jarvis hedged. "I can't permit that. But I would like to know you were outside."

"Okay, but let's get started. Cook, you go out front and get the car ready. Motor running and all. You might work the switch that opens the main gate, too."

"How?" the cook quavered. "With our power plant not working?"

"Then we'll crash through," Evans said sharply. "Come on, Jarvis."

He helped the old man up the steps, using his flash sparingly because the battery was none too good. Jarvis went to the same room, the noose which had been around his throat dragging from one hand now. He suddenly seemed to realize what he was holding and dropped it with a grimace of distaste.

The door closed and Jarvis turned

the key. Evans knelt outside the door and looked at the lock. There were scratches indicating that someone, armed with a fine pair of pliers had successfully twisted the key from outside. That seemed to place Jarvis in the clear. Evans shut off the flash, straightened up. Something exploded against his skull.

Evans slumped to his knees. Another blow sent him sprawling on his face and he lay very still, expecting to feel a noose draped around his throat at any second. He wasn't unconscious, but his arms and legs felt as though they were separated from the rest of his body.

SOMEONE grasped Evans' ankles and pulled him gently down the hall, making hardly any noise. He was left there. Evans slowly fought to recover some co-ordination between nerves and muscles. He sat up slowly. His flash and gun were missing, but he didn't care much about that.

Without making a sound, he pulled himself erect and reeled down the hall toward Jarvis' room. The door opened unexpectedly and Evans acted with the speed of an attacking panther.

Usher, at the foot of the high staircase, saw Jarvis' stooped figure coming down. There were two small valises tucked under each arm and he clutched suitcases in both hands too. He stumbled several times in the darkness and as he took the last step to reach the hallway, Usher suddenly gave a forward leap.

One hand was upraised and it held a knife. The blade came down in a swishing arc, but Jarvis' figure moved agilely to one side and the knife missed its mark. Usher gave a curse and tried again. This time strong fingers closed around his wrist, twisted savagely and the knife fell to the floor with a clatter.

Usher raised one leg and kicked. The other man grunted in pain and let go. Usher ran back a few steps, drawing a gun as he did so. He fired at the

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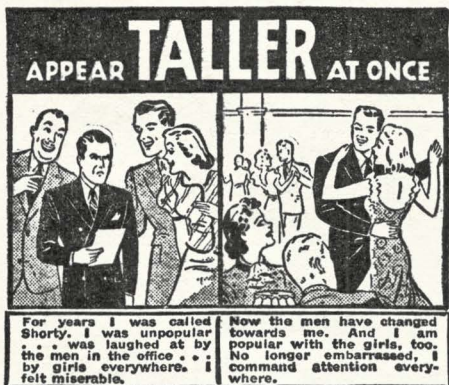
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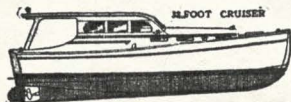
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figure, but missed and then Usher felt a fist crack against his jaw. He fired again, but the gun was knocked aside and the bullet just plowed into the wall. Usher managed to get the gun raised and smashed it toward the head of his enemy. It connected and the man staggered back. Usher moved like lightning then. His gun prodded the other man's chest. Usher spoke in a cold, murderous voice.

"So I didn't knock you out up there, Evans? Well, you should have pretended I did because now I'm going to blow a hole in you. Tried to trick me, acting like Jarvis, eh? Where is the old skinflint?"

"Upstairs—in his room. I had to knock him out. Usher, you're a rat. You've got me. I know I'm going to die, but I'd be willing to go through that if I could just get my hands around your throat and strangle you, as you killed Cavanugh and Dodson."

Usher laughed. "So you guessed that too, eh? Sure I killed them. You don't know how though."

"Don't I? Both were drugged, propped up in trees so that when they awakened, their movements would send them toppling off with a rope around their necks, Cavanugh recovered consciousness a little too soon and dropped directly in front of my car. I hit him so hard the rope broke. You ran back, removed it from his neck and later on removed the rest of it from the tree branch. That was just before I showed up and you tried to gun me out too.

"You wanted it to look as though Cavanugh had just mysteriously been thrown in front of the car. Otherwise, you were afraid I'd insist on calling in a dozen men and so ruin your plan for scaring Jarvis so badly he'd clear out and take what's in these bags with him. Dodson fell at exactly the right time."

"**T**HAT'S enough talk," Usher snarled. "I'm going to kill you—dispose of the old man and tell the cook he shot you and then killed him-

self. Everybody will believe he was crazy. Then I'll take those four bags he packed so thoughtfully. Know what's in them, sergeant?"

"Thousands of dollars in cash," Evans answered quietly. "Money you brought here personally after selling Jarvis' securities. He got burned in the bank run back in 1929 and never trusted banks after that. He kept all the cash here and you wanted it. But Jarvis had the stuff pretty well hidden. He'd have died before he told where it was so you tried to scare him into taking the stuff out of its hiding place.

"You planted that book in the house—you nailed up those supposedly century old signs on the trees. The whole thing was faked, even to the book which was treated with dilute acid to make it look old. But it was written with a steel pen and they weren't invented at the time it was supposed to have been inscribed.

"The century-old signs were fakes too—cleverly done. But they were nailed up with machine-made nails, something else that wasn't in existence at the time those signs were supposed to have been created. Now go ahead and shoot. That's my gun you're holding, isn't it?"

"Yes—and I won't miss." Usher's finger tightened against the trigger. There was a click, but no explosion. Then two hands pinned his arms and forced him back against the wall. Fingers closed around his throat, holding him there, and a big fist was waved in front of his nose.

"You fired the last bullet before," Evans laughed. "I knew how many were left because I had no extra ammunition and had to conserve."

Handcuffs snapped around Usher's wrists. He reeled over and sat down heavily. Evans yelled for the cook and had him fix the lights. They came on ten minutes later. Jarvis was downstairs by then.

"I'm sorry I had to knock you out, Jarvis," Evans said. "But I knew what Usher was up to so I wanted to take

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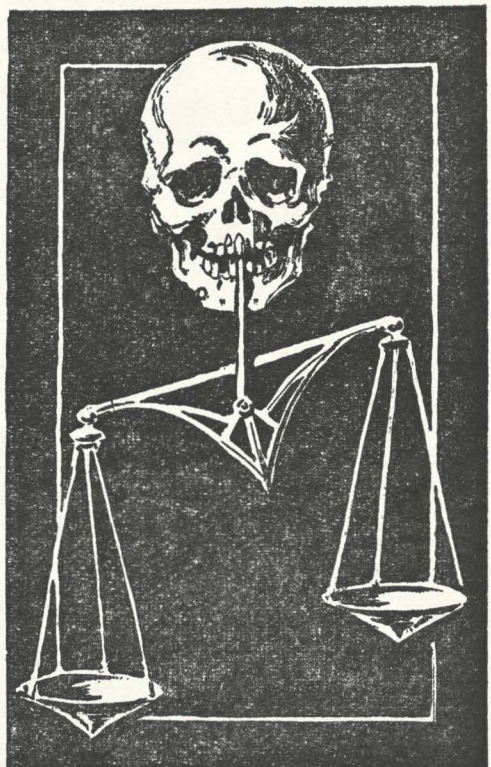
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your place. I had evidence enough on him, but he confessed when he attacked me. Usher was one of the few men who knew you kept money in this house. He was one of the very, very few who ever came to see you. And he had the opportunity of planting that fake book so it looked as though it fell off the shelf and would attract your attention."

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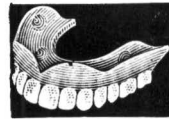
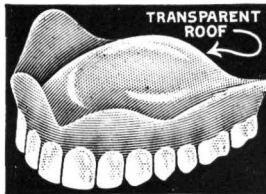
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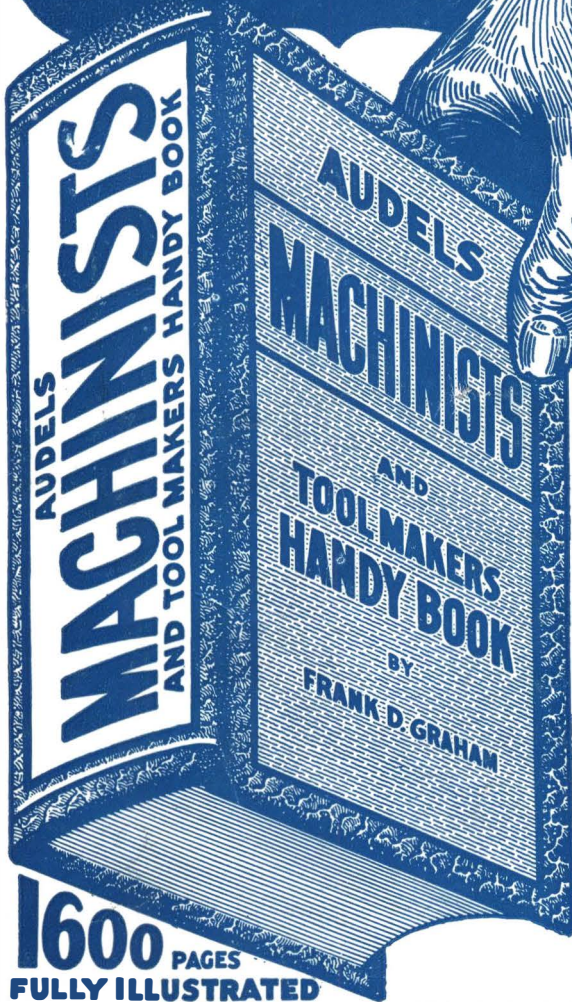
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