

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE

MARCH 1ST

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

TWICE
A MONTH



HOT SPOT

A CARDIGAN STORY

by

FREDERICK NEBEL

ANSWERED IN BLOOD

by **CARROLL JOHN DALY**

FROM A FAT MAN...to a HE-MAN...in 10 MINUTES!

"I REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES"

WRITES
GEORGE BAILEY

"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for \$100" writes C. W. Higbee.

So many of our customers are delighted with the wonderful results obtained with the Weil Belt that we want you to—

TRY IT FOR 10 DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE!

We GUARANTEE to REDUCE your WAIST 3 INCHES IN TEN DAYS!



1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach... ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"

Actual Photos Show Immediate Improvement in YOUR Appearance!



2. "I was ashamed to undress in the locker room—my friends poked fun at me and I had no answer!"



3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt... a transformation took place... what a difference—pounds seemed to have fallen away!"

**NO EXERCISES
NO DIETS
NO DRUGS**

"REDUCED from 44 to 36 INCHES"

Gentlemen: I feel sure that you will be interested to know that I wore one of your belts for seven months and reduced from 44 to 36 inches. Yours very truly,
George Bailey
238-236 Eighth Ave., N. Y.

... or it won't cost you one cent.

If we had not done this for thousands of others... if we did not **KNOW** we could do the same for you, we would not dare make this unconditional guarantee!



4. "My friends were astonished!... I looked better—my clothes fitted me—and I felt like a million dollars!"

YES SIR: I too, promised myself that I would exercise but it was too much like work—and it's darn hard to diet when you like to eat. The Weil Belt was just the answer—no diets, no drugs—I feel like a new man and I lost 8 inches of fat in less than 6 months!

GREATLY IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE!

The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller—three inches of fat gone or it won't cost you one cent!

It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives an erect, athletic carriage.

Don't be embarrassed any longer with that "corporation" for in a short time, only the admiring comments of your friends will remind you that you once had a bulging waistline.

THE MESSAGE-LIKE ACTION THAT DOES IT!

You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its constant gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit... its massage-like action gently but persistently eliminating fat with every move you make.

Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place—that they are no longer fatigued—and that it greatly increases their endurance and vigor!

DON'T WAIT—FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

Send for our 10 day free trial offer. We repeat—either you take off 3 inches of fat in ten days, or it won't cost you one penny!

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, INC.
93 HILL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

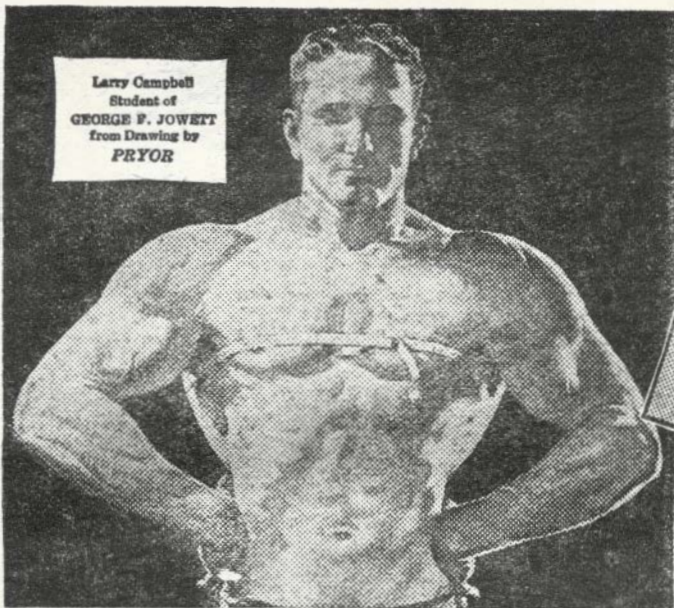
Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 day FREE trial offer and Unconditional Guarantee!

Name _____

Address _____

Use coupon or write your name and address on a penny post card.

Larry Campbell
Student of
GEORGE F. JOWETT
from Drawing by
PRYOR



Send for "Moulding a Mighty Chest"
A Special Course for ONLY 25c.

It will be a revelation to you. You can't make a mistake. The assurance of the strongest armed man in the world stands behind this course. I give you the secrets of strength illustrated and explained as you like them. I will not limit you to the chest. Try any one of my test courses listed in the coupon at 25c. Or, try all six of them for only \$1.00.

Rush the Coupon TODAY!

Mail your order now and I will include a FREE COPY of "NERVES OF STEEL, MUSCLES LIKE IRON." It is a priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. It describes my rise from a weak, puny boy to be one of the world's strongest athletes with a chest measurement of 49 inches and an 18 inch bicep. Full of pictures of marvellous bodied men who tell you decisively how you can build symmetry and strength the Jowett Way! Reach out — Grasp this special offer!

FORMER 110 POUND WEAKLING ...now wins strength contests!

I WISH you could see Larry in action today...a perfect example of my weight resistance method...the only method that gives the true weight lifting muscles. I've seen Larry lift more than 225 pounds overhead with one hand...and Larry is only one of hundreds of my pupils who have excelled as strength athletes.

I want to tell you fellows...there's something about this "strong man's business" that gets you...thrills you! You'll get a great kick out of it...you'll fairly feel your muscles grow!

* If YOU Do Not Add At Least . . .
3 INCHES TO YOUR CHEST **2 INCHES TO YOUR BICEPS**

. . . it won't cost you one cent! Signed: GEORGE F. JOWETT

All I want is a chance to prove to you that I can add 3 inches to YOUR chest and 2 inches to each of YOUR biceps. While my course is by no means infallible...so many of my pupils have gained tremendous physical development that I am willing to stake my reputation that I can do the same for you...remember...if I fail it will cost you nothing!

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Don't you feel the urge for real, genuine, invincible muscles that will make men respect you and women admire you?

Take my full course, if it does not do all I say...if you are not completely satisfied...and I will let you be the judge...then it won't cost you one penny, even the postage you have spent will be refunded to you.

**LET THE MAN WITH THE STRONGEST ARMS
IN THE WORLD SHOW YOU THE WAY!**



GEORGE F. JOWETT
by PRYOR

FREE BOOK WITH PHOTOS
OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN



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Muscles like Iron!"
SENT FREE!

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Scranton, Pa.

George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send, by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below for which I am enclosing

- Moulding a Mighty Arm, 25c
- Moulding a Mighty Back, 25c
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- Moulding a Mighty Chest, 25c
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- Strong Men Stunts Made Easy 25c
- All 6 Books for \$1.00.

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

10 DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 10

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With that big dick from Coosmo and watch him blast himself off in time to open a Frisco branch for his agency.

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That turned the hairs of Marvin Munstet to golden corpses, one by one.

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Heed The Reckoner's commands,

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EXCITING MIDNIGHT MURDER THRILLER

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And stories with half-way thrills don't go in DIME DETECTIVE. How about it?

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Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

Watch for the March 15th Issue

On the Newsstands March 1st

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Why struggle along in a dull job with low pay and no future? Start training now for the live-wire Radio field. I have doubled and tripled salaries. Hundreds of men now in Radio got their start through N. R. I. training.

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Almost at Once

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**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4CK7
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**



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The man who has directed the Home-Study Training of men for the Radio industry than any other man in America.



Read how these N. R. I. Graduates Succeeded



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"I am with R. C. A. Victor. I have been promoted several times. My salary has ranged from \$50 to \$70 a week." **Louis F. Lyet, 277 Harvey St., Philadelphia, Pa.**



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"I have no trouble getting Radio work. I have the reputation of being the best Radio man in town, and average \$15 to \$20 a week for spare time only." **G. Bernard Croy, 410 N. Douglas, Bronson, Michigan.**



Owes His Success to Radio Training
"I owe my last three jobs to N. R. I. I am now in the main control room of one of the large broadcasting chains." **Serge A. De Somov, 1518 Library Ave., New York City.**



**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4CK7,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare-time and full-time job opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts.
(Please print plainly)

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....

Page by Page

this

FREE BOOK

Tells YOU How to Get a

GOVERNMENT JOB



ARTHUR R. PATTERSON

GET ready for a government position in the future. Prepare yourself NOW! I have shown thousands of fellows like you the way to get the well-paid Civil Service Jobs. And the very FIRST step they took was to send for this FREE BOOK of mine. Get your copy! It tells you exactly what I would, if you came to see me here in Rochester.

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Page 11—How You Pick Your Job

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Page 20—How I Prepare You

For eight years I was Official Examiner of the Civil Service Commission, so I know the kind and class of questions that are asked. You can depend upon me to coach you to help you pass HIGH, and be offered one of the FIRST jobs open.

Page 27—About Raises Every Year

You don't have to take the boss's vague promise of a raise—and never get it. You can depend on getting whatever increase Uncle Sam provides for. The minute you start with him you have a definite future for yourself. Read all about this BIG ADVANTAGE in my FREE BOOK.

Page 7—About Vacations with Pay

In some branches of the Civil Service you get up to 30 days' vacation with full pay every year, and up to 30 days' sick leave (also with pay). Not like some other jobs—where you're lucky if you get a week off, and then have to take that at your own expense!

Page 12—About Civil Service Pensions

Uncle Sam doesn't chuck you out when you're "too old." He doesn't forget you when you've passed your prime—or make you shift for yourself, or fall back on relatives. He retires you on whatever generous pension is set aside for your branch of service—Independent, happy, contented. Get my book and read all about this.



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When openings in these branches are announced!

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Now Making \$2633 a Year

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Doubles Salary with Government

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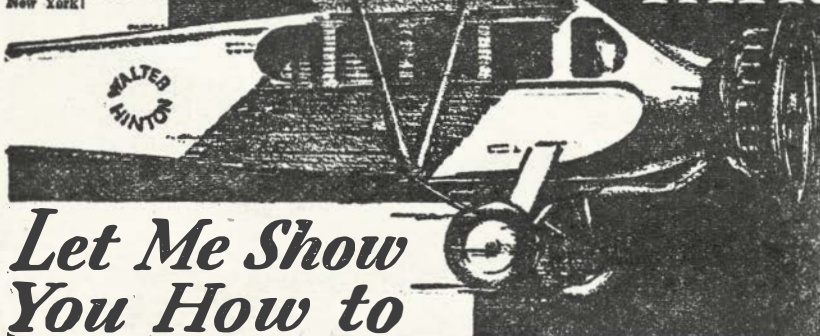
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 My graduate, E. N. Dobbins, got a job immediately after finishing my course. Now he's earning \$75 a week as Chief Instructor at a big Aviation School in New York!

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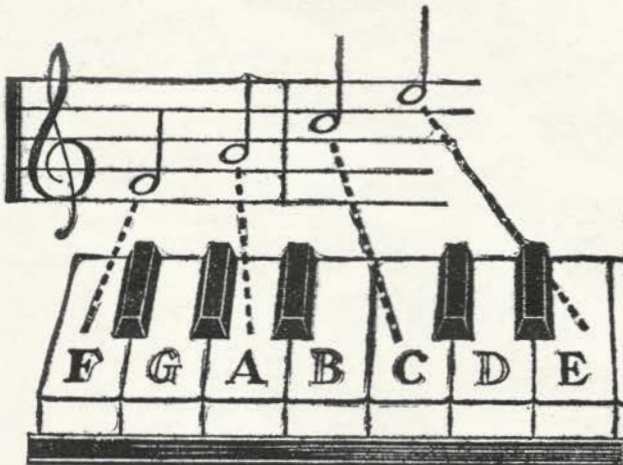
Name
 (Print clearly)

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(Must be 18 or over)

City State

To those who think Learning Music is hard-



PERHAPS you think that taking music lessons is like taking a dose of medicine. It isn't any longer!

As far as you're concerned, the old days of long practice hours with their horrid scales, hard-work exercises, and expensive personal teachers' fees are over and done with.

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If you're tired of doing the heavy looking-on at parties—if always listening to others play has almost spoiled the pleasure of music for you—if you've been

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| Piccolo | Mandolin |
| Guitar | Guitar |
| Hawaiian Steel Guitar | |
| Sight Singing | |
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Instr. _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____

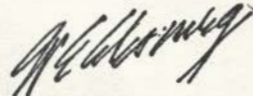
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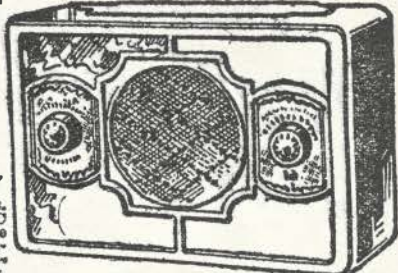


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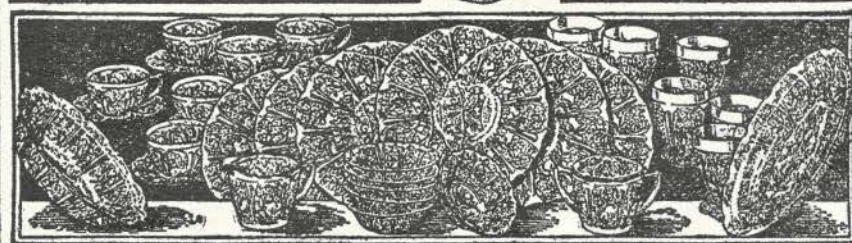
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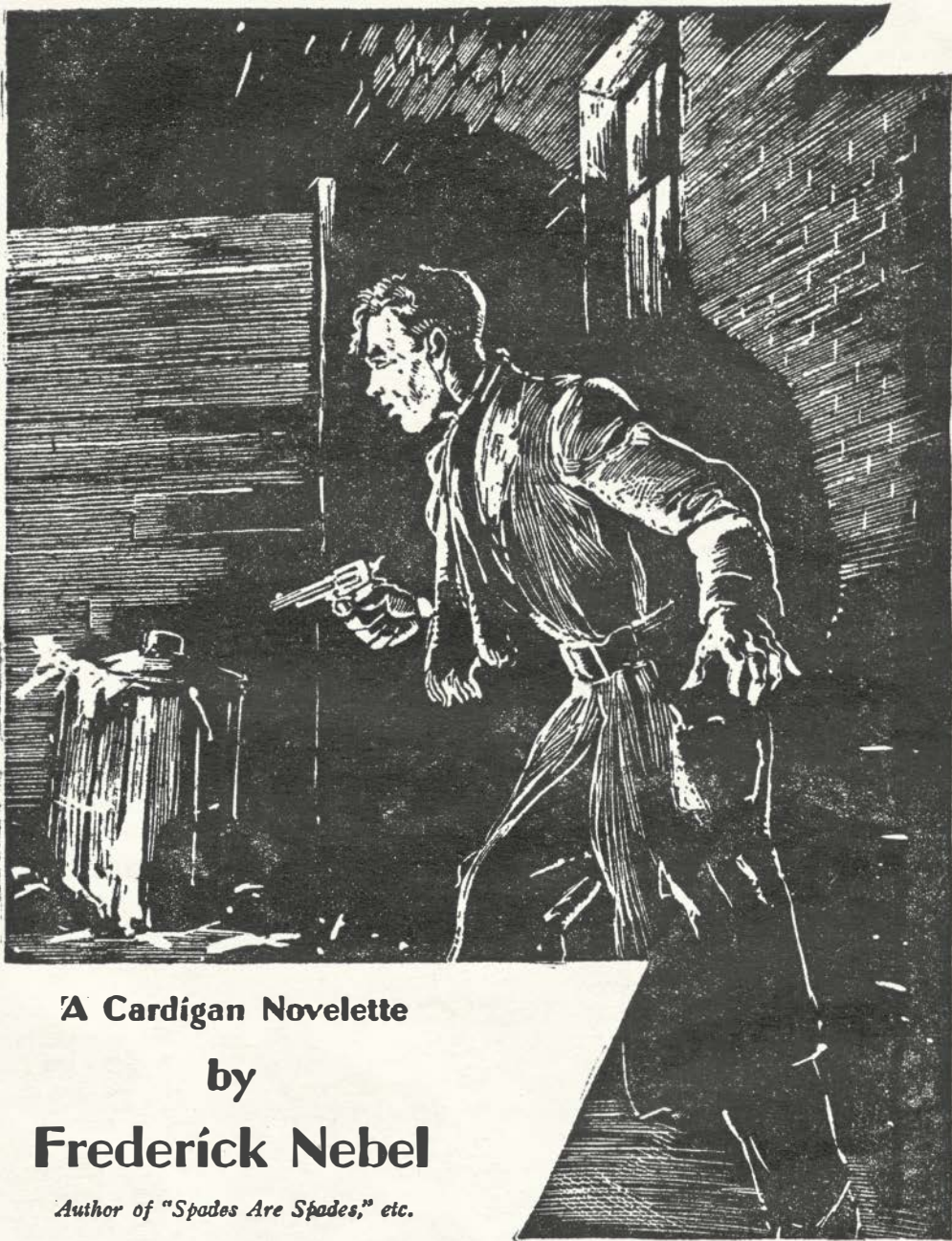
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HOT SPOT

He ripped the bag from Cardigan's hand.

That big dick from Cosmos had opened plenty of branches for his agency but he'd never found a tougher town than Frisco to get going in. The slickers didn't want him—neither did the cops. And he had a busted arm in a sling to boot. But even with one wing useless Cardigan had plenty of ice left to cool off the hot spot they had him on.



A Cardigan Novelette
by
Frederick Nebel

Author of "Spades Are Spades," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Apples and Nuts

THE address was down at the fag end of Kearny Street, but Cardigan got out of the taxi half a block away. He tossed a half dollar in the air, slapped it neatly shut in his palm and then planked it into the driver's palm.

"Play penny ante with the change," he said.

The driver had a cold and said through his nose, "I nedder gabble. Gad afford to gabble."

The cab slowed off and Cardigan stood beneath the street light in the wet San Francisco fog. The fog blurred the light, moved sluggishly about it, like wet oily smoke, and all sounds, near and far away,

had a resonant, bell-like clarity. The brim of Cardigan's lop-eared hat stopped the downstream of light, leaving his face mostly in shadow. His left overcoat sleeve dangled; his left arm was in a sling beneath the coat.

He could see the uniformed cop standing in front of the dun-colored brick house. The hall door was open and sufficient light streamed from it to raise a glitter on the cop's buttons whenever he turned about. There were some persons hanging around, and parked at the curb was a car Cardigan recognized as Sergeant McGovern's.

Cardigan moved presently, bulking in the illuminated fog. The cop in front of the house turned. He was big as Cardigan, but fat, with a rubicund face, and the fog had beaded his black visor and now it glittered there.

"O. K. if I go up?" Cardigan said.

"Why should it be?"

"Now we get to riddles, huh?" He lit a cigarette. "I'm Cardigan, copper. Do you read the papers?"

"I like the funny pictures. . . . O. K., g' on up."

THE stairway was narrow and hugged the wall. The hall was cold, damp, and as Cardigan reached the top of the staircase he saw a door open and a uniformed cop leaning in the doorway. There were voices beyond. The cop looked over his shoulder.

"Hanh?" he said.

Cardigan shook his head. "I didn't say anything. I want to see McGovern?"

"Who wants to see McGovern?" said a fog-horn voice within the room.

The cop stepped aside.

"Only little me," said Cardigan, entering, spitting smoke from his lips. He leaned against a radiator. "Thanks for every little thought, Mac. Once a boy scout, always a boy scout."

"What the hell are you doing out of the hospital?"

"I didn't like the food."

They looked at each other, talking with their eyes only. McGovern was a tall, lean man, tough-built, with grizzled hair, a bony granite-colored face, a jaw like the bow of a tugboat. He had a ferocious glare and used it on Cardigan for a full minute. Then he laughed like a fog-horn off-key and took a crack at his thigh. Cardigan grinned.

He said, "Who's the boss on, Mac?"

"Boy, you're a one, Cardigan; you're a one, all right!" He spun and jabbed a finger at Detective Hunerkopf. "Ain't he a one now, August? Ain't he, now?"

Hunerkopf was sitting on a chair, eating an apple which he pared with a penknife. He was a rolypoly man and, munching a sliver of apple, he chuckled silently, his fat body shaking, his fat head nodding.

Cardigan said, "What's the lay, Mac?"

McGovern looked suddenly very innocent and spread his palms. "Do you see anything?"

"I see an old bedroom with a single bed, a bureau, a chair, a rag rug on the floor, walls that haven't been papered in years; an open Gladstone, a few clothes, some shoes, and two men disguised as detectives."

McGovern tightened his mouth. "Soon as you get on your feet you begin making cracks, huh?"

Cardigan ignored this. He said, "What about Jagoe?"

McGovern shook his head. "Nothing. We been fanning the place for half an hour."

"What's this?" Cardigan said, picking up a sheet of paper.

"A letter," McGovern rasped. "But it don't mean a thing. No name signed."

It was a short note.

Dear Pete: I'll be back in town on Wednesday. Am verely lonely for you. Will be at the same place and hope verely much you'll come over Wednesday night.

Always yours.

"A jane," muttered Cardigan. "Dated a month ago."

"And signed 'Always Yours'," said McGovern irritably. "Ain't that a help?"

"Even if it were signed," Cardigan said, tossing the sheet of paper back to the bed, "you'd crab."

"You just wear yourself down being friendly, don't you?"

Cardigan kicked abstractedly at the open Gladstone. "You're a pretty smart cop, Mac—except when you get up against real competition. Hell, I'm not sore. Not much. It was damned smart of you, baby, to try to keep me in the hospital long enough for you to run around town with your nose to the ground. Only it didn't work. The nurse fell for me. Besides, I can use five thousand bucks as well as you."

HUNERKOPF lowered his apple and looked very hurt. "Look, Cardigan, we didn't even think of the five grand reward."

"Of course we didn't!" snapped McGovern, looking very indignant.

Cardigan chuckled deep in his throat. "Just thought of old alma mater, huh?" He chuckled again. "Dry-clean that baloney and pack it away. Listen, you two. I was guarding that bankroll. I was the guy walked down Market with Hamlin, who carried the satchel. We've just opened a branch agency here. I was getting it in shape. And right off the bat this happens. Hamlin's killed and I'm plugged and now I'm getting the razz from the home office. Pete Jagoe pulled a fast one, fast even for me. He's somewhere in this town lugging around thirty grand. As a matter of fact, Mac, I'm looking for no

reward. I wouldn't take it. But I hate the razz . . . And then you finaygle around and try to talk that crowd into keeping me in the hospital. I can stand a joke, Mac. I've pulled fast ones on you. But lay off the baloney. You slice it too thick to swallow. And stay from under my feet."

Hunerkopf looked very melancholy.

But McGovern could take it. He jammed his hands on his hips and lifted up his jaw. "O. K., Cardigan. It was a fast one. I'll stay from under your feet and you stay from under mine. Monkey around with my parade and you might get the other arm busted."

Cardigan said, "With both arms busted, kid, I'd still have my head, which would still leave you in a jam."

"Have an apple, Cardigan," Hunerkopf said.

"Nuts to you too."

"I don't like nuts," Hunerkopf said. "They always get stuck between my teeth."

McGovern roared. "Hey, that's a good one, August! That's a pip!"

Cardigan's face got red. He swiveled and went to the door. He turned to say, "Now I remember why that laugh of yours is so familiar, Mac. When I was a kid, I used to breed jackasses."

"Whoops!" exploded Hunerkopf, shaking all over. "That there one was a rich one!"

McGovern glared at him. Hunerkopf shut up and sat looking very guffy.

Cardigan drummed his big feet down the stairway and swung out into the cold fog.

CHAPTER TWO

In a Sting

PAT SEAWARD was having a late snack in the Coffee Shop of the Hotel Galaty, in Powell Street, when Cardigan

pushed past the cashier's desk and made his way among the glossy black tables. Pat laid down the corner of a sandwich and looked up round-eyed at him. Not bothering to remove his overcoat, he sat down, dropped his battered fedora to a spare chair and picked up the corner of the sandwich which Pat had laid down. He ate it, swallowed some water.

"Well!" said Pat, her eyes still round. "The last I saw of you, chief, you were in a hospital bed."

A grinning waiter swooped down, bowed and spread a large menu before Cardigan. Cardigan brushed it aside. "Take it away."

"I beg pardon, sir—"

"You needn't. Just take it away."

The waiter took it away.

Pat reached across the table, said anxiously, "Oh, chief, what are you doing out in a night like this in your condition? Your poor arm—"

"To hell with my arm," he muttered under his breath. "Those babies thought they were smart, keeping me in the hospital."

"Oh, but think, chief—"

"That's what I did in the hospital, chicken. I figured it all out. I was being kept there so our mutual friend and pal McGovern could get a running broad jump on me. I kicked that trick in the pants. McGovern's all right. I kind of like him. He kind of likes me. But business is business and I"—he made a fist and pressed it quietly but firmly against the table—"have got to wash the razz-berry off my face. Jagoe's in town. All the outbound arteries were blocked ten minutes after he killed Hamlin and wounded me in Market Street. I didn't come to this burg to set up a dime museum. I came here to set up a branch of the Cosmos Agency, and that was a swell recommendation to start on. I'm in a spot, Pat—a hot one. Nobody's going to keep

me in a hospital while Jagoe's on the loose."

"You look bad, chief. The blood you lost. Think of it. You look terrible—no color—circles under your eyes—"

"And I feel lousy. So what? So I should stay in bed and do crossword puzzles? Nix." He pounded the table twice, quietly but firmly. "Nix, chicken."

He picked up a newspaper, spread it before him, ran his eyes over the columns. He turned a page, looked at an ad, then frowned and turned back again, bent over the paper and peered hard. He drummed reflectively on the table. His eyes narrowed and his jaw hardened.

"I'll be right back," he said, getting up. "I want to phone."

Leaving his hat, he strode out into the lobby. There was a drawn look on his big face; his complexion was bad. His thick black hair was bunched haphazardly on his head; it curled round his ears and grew far down on his nape. He crushed into a telephone booth, filling it with his bulk, and called the number of the newspaper he held. When he was connected with the proper person, he said:

"I want this put in the Personals column, soon as you can get it in: 'Baby—Meet me corner Grant and Pacific five p. m.' And sign that 'Hon.' . . . Yeah. Charge it to the Cosmos Agency, per Cardigan. . . What edition will it make? . . . Swell."

HE HUNG up, stepped out into the lobby and used a pocket knife to cut a small rectangle from the newspaper. He returned to the Coffee Shop and found Pat finishing a cup of coffee. Sitting down, he said: "Tomorrow at about a quarter to four you go over to Grant and Pacific. Don't plant yourself right on the corner, but hang around near enough so that you get a clean sweep of the place. Watch for a jane. See when she gets

there. She'll hang around a while and when her date doesn't show up she'll probably leave. Follow her. See where she goes. Get her location and then ring me. That clear?"

"All except why the hocus-pocus?"

He slid the small rectangle of paper across the desk. "Read that over?"

She read aloud: "'Dear Hon—Very important you shouldn't see me—Baby.'"

"See anything funny?"

Pat squinted. "Nothing except a misspelled word."

"Very, huh?"

"Yes; very. She must have stopped in and written it out and the paper forgot to spell it right."

"Maybe she spelled it right and the paper didn't."

He nodded. "Maybe, Patsy. But I was just over at Jagoe's room. McGovern was fanning it. There was a note there, an old one, written by a dame to Jagoe. In that letter, the word 'very' was misspelled. . . O. K. Wipe the coffee off your chin and let's go, sugar. I'd go on this tail myself but I'm afraid McGovern will pull some more practical jokes. He might put a guy out to watch my moves. You just got in yesterday and you're not known by sight to McGovern."

As they walked from the Coffee Shop into the broad corridor leading to the lobby, Cardigan put a hand on Pat's arm. He said:

"Fede, Pats. I see McGovern's pal."

Pat ducked out of sight and Cardigan swung on. As he entered the lobby, Hunerkopf, turning, saw him and signaled. Cardigan went toward Hunerkopf. The fat detective was standing solidly back on his heels. He drew an apple from his pocket.

"Have an apple," he said.

"No," said Cardigan.

"Have a banana?" Hunerkopf said, producing one.

Cardigan shook his head.

"Well, well," Hunerkopf said. "I guess you don't know what's good for you. Fruit keeps me fit as a fiddle."

"And makes you look like a bassdrum with swollen glands. What's on your mind?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd kind of drop by. I hate like the Old Nick to see you and Mac all the time riding each other. Thought maybe I could patch things up so you and Mac—well, would kind of—you know—well, two heads is always better than one."

"That depends, August, on whose shoulders the heads are. Did Mac send you around to say this?"

Hunerkopf colored. He laughed. "Mac? Gee, no. If Mac thought I was—"

Cardigan laughed outright. "Great, August! Great! In fact, swell!"

Hunerkopf gaped. "Huh?"

"Take that story out for a walk, copper. It needs exercise." He turned on his heel and went long-legged across the lobby, into a waiting elevator. Pat had stepped into it a moment before. As it rose, Pat said:

"Well?"

"Hunerkopf," Cardigan said.

"Please speak English."

"That's a name, Pat, not a slogan. He's in his second childhood. Likes to tell fairy stories."

IT WAS clear, cold, when Pat walked up Grant Avenue next afternoon. She wore a three-quarter length lapin coat, lizard-skin oxfords and a small rimless hat that rode jauntily over one eye. Her bag matched her oxfords and contained a small-calibred Webley automatic. Chinatown's windows shone and Chinese youths, dapper, well-dressed, hurried. She was worried about Cardigan—worried about his wound, his general condition following the shooting. But there was no

talking with him when he was determined.

Nearing Pacific, which, coming down from Van Ness, crosses Grant and plunges toward the Embarcadero, she slowed down and stopped at last in front of a shop window. She was a little early and saw no one waiting on the corner, though many persons were in transit, mostly Orientals. But in a little while she turned from the shop window and saw a girl standing on the corner.

The girl was tall, rather well-dressed in dark clothes, a dark narrow-brimmed hat. Pat could see that she was anxious; the girl kept looking constantly about, shifting from foot to foot. Later, she began referring frequently to her wrist watch. Pat looked at her own and saw that it was half past four. Soon it was a quarter to five and then it was five. The girl waited until five-thirty and then started off in the dusk. Pat followed.

A few blocks farther on the girl boarded a taxi and Pat climbed into one a moment later and gave instructions to the driver. The girl alighted at the bottom of Filbert Street and Pat went on for half a block. She got out, paid hurriedly and walked back. When she reached the corner she could see the girl climbing Filbert. Two men had suddenly appeared on the corner also, and Pat, remembering that Cardigan had said McGovern might shoot out someone to shadow him, wondered if by chance her connection with Cardigan had become known. But she did not hesitate. She walked up the precipitous street, keeping the girl easily in sight. Near the top, the girl turned into a small house. As Pat came abreast of the house, she saw a light spring to life on the street floor, caught a glimpse of the girl pulling down a shade. Pat did not stop but continued on her way up. Looking about, she saw the two men standing diagonally across the way from the house the girl had entered. They

did not go in, however. They entered, she saw, a building across the street.

Pat went over the hump of Telegraph Hill. She climbed a wooden stairway, then went along a wooden walk built on stilts; from here she began a long descent by way of old wooden stairways, switchback walks. San Francisco Bay lay spread before her, darkening now, and with tiny lights beginning to wink. Reaching the bottom of the hill, she walked to the Embarcadero, walked on for a while until a cab came along. She took it and stopped at the first telephone pay station. She called Cardigan.

A CAB pulled up in front of the drug store outside which Pat stood and Cardigan stepped out and beckoned with his chin. She walked across the sidewalk and he handed her into the cab, followed and slammed the door shut.

"What's she look like?" he said.

"Tall, good-looking. She wears very smart clothes. She wears the kind of a hat I've been thinking of buying and—"

"How long did she wait on the corner?"

Pat told him.

The cab was speeding along the Embarcadero.

Pat said, "I may be overly suspicious, but two men cropped up on the corner of Filbert—out of the blue, so to speak—and when I reached the top of the hill they were standing looking at the house the woman entered."

"Then what?"

"Then they went in a place across the street. I thought they might be detectives."

"They might. . . Stop here, driver."

They got out, crossed the wide street and went on toward the base of the hill. Pat started up the wooden stairway first and Cardigan followed, his empty left sleeve dangling.

"Boy," he said, "I remember this neighborhood!"

"You ought. A college football team tossed you down this hill."

"Well," he said, "it took a team, anyhow."

She sighed. "You'll never learn, chief. You'll never learn."

They went up and up in the darkness, reached the top, left the wooden walks and started down the paved street. Here it was so steep that steps had been built into the cement. Lights sparkled in the cold air.

"That's the house," Pat said. "Ground floor. Now what?"

"I don't think she'd open the door for a man. You go in, knock. She may ask who you are. Say—oh, hell, say you're from the Visiting Nurses' Association."

"Gee, chief, I hate to trick people. She didn't look like such a bad person."

"What do you work for, a detective agency or a sob sheet? . . . Where's the other house?"

"Right over there."

"We'll have to take a chance."

Pat entered the hall door of the house the woman had gone in. She left the hall door open and Cardigan, pressing close to the building, listened. He heard Pat's knock, then her voice, then another voice, muffled. In a moment the second voice was not muffled. Cardigan took a long stride into the hall and saw a tall, black-haired woman standing in an inner doorway talking with Pat. The woman stopped talking, started back into the room. Cardigan went past Pat, through the doorway. Pat followed him in and closed the door.

Cardigan snapped, "What's your name?"

"Hazel—" She stopped short, her eyes springing wide. She cried, "Who are you? Get out!"

"Tone it down, Hazel," Cardigan mut-

tered. "This is no public performance."

She groaned, "A trick!"

"Call murder a trick too."

"Murder—"

"Where's Pete Jagoe?"

Hazel fell back, looking terrified.

"Pete—"

"You call him 'Hon,' 'Baby,' don't you?"

"Oh!" she choked.

"In the newspapers."

"Oh, my God, I see it now! Tricked! Trailed!"

Cardigan looked dangerous. He rapped out, "Call it what you want. See this bum arm? That's a trick too. Or maybe you call it the season's greetings." He took a long step toward her and she crouched against the wall, her lips shaking. His voice was low, deep in his throat somewhere: "Listen to me, Hazel. I want Jagoe. I was guarding that payroll and but for the luck of the Irish I'd be a prospective tenant for a cemetery."

"You're wrong, wrong! I don't know—I haven't—I don't know anything—"

"That's static to me, Hazel. You fell for the wheeze in today's paper like a ton of brick. Turn the dial to another program."

SHE started to cry back at him but suddenly closed her mouth instead. She moved, sat down on a divan and folded her hands between her knees. It seemed that it was with an effort she kept her mouth closed; her lips were pressed firmly together, her eyes stared fixedly at the floor. She was rather pretty, round about thirty, and the room looked comfortable, it was warm. There was no sound now but Hazel's breathing. Until Cardigan's low voice said: "Why were you so anxious he shouldn't come here?"

She got up and went to a far corner of the room, standing with her back to Cardigan. He went over and stood behind

her. She turned and moved to another corner and he followed her. Then she fled across the room and stood behind a large armchair. Her face was white, her lips taut.

Cardigan shrugged. "A guy'd think I meant to slap you down. Why play tag?"

"Get out! Get out!"

He looked bored. "Strong, silent woman, huh?"

"Get out!"

He snapped: "Where's Jagoe?"

"I don't know!" She ran her fingers desperately through her hair. "Leave me alone! Get out!"

His face darkened. "I told you not to yell. Cut out the noise. What I want to know is," he said, coming closer, "why you didn't want your honey-bun to come here."

She was panting now, grimacing. She cried, "I—I thought the place was being covered by cops. I—I thought he might try to come here and they'd nab him. I didn't do anything. I don't know where he is. Why are you picking on me?"

"Didn't he phone?"

"No. I haven't got a phone."

"You're pretty soft on this mug, huh?"

She grimaced. "Please, please don't bother me. Just leave me alone—alone. I can't help you. I can't do anything."

Pat said, "Go easy on her, chief. After all—"

He silenced her with a look. Then he turned to Hazel. "O. K., Hazel. I don't believe you do know where he is." He turned and went to the door. "Come on, Pats."

Hazel did not move. She stood behind the chair, her face in her hands. She was crying softly.

Cardigan and Pat passed into the corridor, and Cardigan closed the door.

"Gee, chief, I feel sorry for her."

"Keep it up and you'll make a namby-pamby out of me too."

"She did what any woman would do. She just tried to warn her man—"

"All right, all right, chicken. You win. Uncle Cardigan is always in the wrong."

He pulled open the hall door and Pat went past him into the street. Closing the door, he followed, took hold of Pat's arm. Two men stepped from the shadows with guns drawn and held close to their bodies.

"Quiet does it, friends," one of them said.

Cardigan looked over his shoulder. Both men were short, the one thin, the other stocky but not fat. They wore dark overcoats, dark hats. It was the stocky man who had spoken. Now he said:

"Walk across the street."

"Getting on the bandwagon, huh?" Cardigan said.

"On you. Get going."

Cardigan kept a firm grip on Pat's arm as they strode across the street and reached the opposite sidewalk.

"Third door," the stocky man said.

They walked down the street a matter of several yards.

"Here," the stocky man said. "In."

"Listen," said Cardigan. "Let my girl friend go."

The stocky man chided in a low voice: "See any green on me?"

"We wasn't born yestiddy," the thin man croaked.

"In, in," the stocky man said.

CARDIGAN and Pat were hustled into a dim-lit hallway. The place was damp, cold, and there was about it an air of desertion, as though it had been long unused. Cardigan saw that a candle supplied the light in the hall; the candle stood on the lower banister post. The small thin man removed it and carried it to a door at the side. Here he turned, and holding the candle high, backed into a room. He was well-dressed and a dark silk muffler

billowed between the lapels of his smart overcoat. The stocky man followed Cardigan and Pat, covering them with his gun.

The thin man placed the candle on a bare, scarred table. The blinds had been drawn tight and there was an extra screen rigged up a few feet from the window, obviously to permit not the minutest glimmer of candlelight to be seen from the street. There were a few chairs, a cot with neither mattress nor blanket—nothing but its original spring.

The stocky man said, "We don't usually live like this. We just busted in and took possession for a while. . . Frisk the big lug, William."

"Stick 'em up," William said.

Cardigan raised one hand.

"The other!" William crackled.

"In a sling. You blind?"

William took away Cardigan's gun.

The stocky man said, "The lady too."

"O. K., sister," William said. "How's tuh?"

"Why, I have only this little purse." She drew a small change purse from her pocket.

William searched her pockets, found nothing.

"Sit down on the cot," the stocky man said. "You two, I mean."

Pat and Cardigan sat down and Cardigan said, "So this is how you pass the time away, huh?" He looked at the thin man. "Is that a mask you're wearing?"

The thin man looked at the stocky man, and the latter said, "Forget it, William. The boy is bright." He jerked his round hard chin toward the front of the house. "Keep a look-out."

William disappeared behind the improvised screen.

Pat sat white and quiet. She sat very close to Cardigan, close to his bigness, praying in her heart that he would not

begin to wisecrack. He leaned back, bracing his shoulders against the wall.

The stocky man moved to the table, picked up a sheet of paper on which there was some writing. Folding this, he tucked it away in his pocket. "I was beginning to write my mother," he said, "when you showed up over there." He nodded toward the street. Then he sat down, removed his hat and rested his gun and the hand that held it on his knee. His hair was thick, coarse but neatly combed, and his skin white, with rosy cheeks. His eyes looked like pale agates and seemed to have no pupils. His hands were plump, big, well-groomed.

"I suppose," said Cardigan, "your poor old mother is waiting at the end of the lane, keeping a light in the window for dear Sonny Boy."

"My mother's a wonderful woman. I'd die for her."

William croaked from behind the screen. "So'd I for mine, only she died when I was a kid."

Cardigan said, "Both you mugs'll likely die, but not for your mothers." He sat up straight and scowled at the stocky man. His voice rushed out, hard and caustic: "Cut out the comedy. What's the idea of dragging us in?"

"It was my idea," the stocky man said, his pale eyes dancing. "You want something that we want. Catch on?"

"Jagoe," Cardigan said, nodding somberly.

The stocky man grinned, showing a row of tiny teeth. "You mean—thirty grand."

"Same thing."

William said through the screen, "Gee, I hate cops, all kinds a cops, it don't matter."

"They'll be the death of you yet," Cardigan called out.

There was a scuffling sound and William jumped from behind the screen, his

face screwed up irritably. "I'm gettin' sick and tired of them cracks. First, am I wearin' a mask and then—"

"William," said the stocky man, raising a hand. "Keep an eye on the dame's house."

William disappeared behind the screen, muttering to himself.

"William," said the stocky man, "is a little headstrong but under it all, a nice boy."

"Yanh!" mocked William.

Somewhere in the old house there was a distinct thump. The stocky man came to his feet as if spring-driven and his lips and his eyelids came together at the same time. A sly but tense smile fastened on his lips.

"William," he called softly, almost affectionately.

"Hanh?"

"There is someone in the house."

CHAPTER THREE

The Satchel

WILLIAM'S face screwed up irritably again, his lower lip quivered and his eyes, big and bulging now, burned on the door. But the big gun he held was steady as a rock in his small, bony hand. His pale, emaciated face looked sinister above the dark silk muffler he wore.

The stocky man raised the fat fingers of his left hand very delicately. "Quiet now, William," he whispered. And to Cardigan and Pat, "Also you, my friends." The sly smile on his tightened lips never for an instant faded.

Silence crowded the old house again. William stood rooted to the floor, leaning backward a bit, his left hand in his overcoat pocket, his right holding the big gun low, with the wrist almost touching his hip. The candle guttered, its wan yellow light smearing the room. The stocky

man's eyes were now bright, alert, and his head was slightly on one side, in a listening attitude. His bright eyes danced from William to Cardigan, back and forth, continually.

He seemed amused when he whispered, "Doubtless some very intimate friends of mine have chosen to muscle in."

"What of it?" Cardigan said. "You're muscling in on Jagoe."

"I happened to plan Jagoe's job for him," said the stocky man. "Jagoe is a very thankless man. His instincts are not those of a gentleman."

"'S what I allus sez!" hissed William. "He ain't had no upbringing'."

"Sh!"

Three minutes went by.

"Maybe it was a rat," whispered William.

"Seeking its kind," observed Cardigan.

Pat nudged him anxiously.

The stocky man smiled sweetly but sinisterly at Cardigan.

After a few minutes William, at a sign from the stocky man, slithered to the door. He opened it quietly a matter of a foot, stood with his gun leveled at the dark opening. Then he opened it a little more. He stood there for two minutes, then shoved his head out. Instantly he was yanked through the doorway.

The stocky man struck the candle out. A low voice snarled in the hallway; feet rasped on the floor. Cardigan jumped up, pulling Pat with him, and dived with her toward the rear of the room, where he had spotted another door. He yanked this door open and rushed with Pat into a pitch-black room. From his vest pocket he drew a small, flat flashlight, kicked the door shut behind him. The small beam of light probed the darkness and Cardigan heaved against a heavy old bureau, shoved it against the door.

The sounds of fighting grew in the hallway.

"Oh, chief!" Pat cried in a whisper.

"Sh!" He listened, then muttered, "They're in the room now."

He pulled her toward another door, opened it as he switched off the flashlight.

"It's the hall," he whispered. And then, "If I only had a gun!"

She said rapidly, "When we came into the hall before—you remember it was pretty dim. My handbag was under my arm. They didn't see me do it, but I laid it on the radiator near the hall door and—"

"Come on."

CLOSE together, they pressed up the hallway. The fighting was going on in the front room. Wood was splintering. There were short, low cries, snarls, oaths. Cardigan stretched his legs, making Pat hurry on her toes. He found the wall, followed it to the front, passing the open door of the room where the men struggled. He found the radiator. Groping, he found Pat's bag. He opened it and thrust his hand inside; his hand closed on the small Webley automatic. Next moment they were in the street.

"Whew!" breathed Pat, with relief.

Cardigan's low voice snapped. "You go down the hill—go home to the hotel."

"But chief—"

"Papa's talking to you, precious."

"Chief, I'm not going to leave you here alone!"

"Pat, for two cents I'd fan you!"

"I won't go! Your poor arm and all—"

"You hear me? Scram!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

He sighed. "You're like all dames. You make me sick."

"Am I? Do I? Very well. I resign. I'll take the first train out in the morning!"

She turned and started off. He moved to stop her, but held himself in check. He thought he would rather have her resign than get tangled up in what he expected to happen tonight. He watched her small, trim figure go down the hill, saw it fade away in the darkness. It made him feel kind of low, for Pat had been his aide a long time. But he didn't want her to get hurt tonight. He knew William and the stocky man were dangerous birds.

He crept back to the house, listened at the hall door. The sounds of fighting were still going on, but he did not go in. He looked at the house across the way and knew that there lay one of his main objectives. These men were watching for Jagoe to come to the woman. He himself felt that Jagoe might come—that Jagoe might have seen the fake item in the newspaper and that that alone might prompt him, even against his better judgment, to come to the woman. He went up the hill, keeping close to the housewalls. Then he crossed the street and came down on the other sidewalk; reached the front of Hazel's house and crept into the hallway.

Here, he thought, he could hide, lay in wait for Jagoe if Jagoe should come tonight. The stair well was roomy, dark, and he crouched there. His arm began to pain him now. It was all this activity, he supposed.

After a little while he heard voices; they were muffled and indistinct, and at first he thought they were overhead, then somewhere behind him. He stepped from the well and listened intently. When he moved toward the rear of the hall, the sound of the voices faded. He went forward along the wall, and the sound grew. He came at last to Hazel's door and knew they were here. Hazel's—and a man's.

He pressed his ear to the panel. He could catch only broken bits of conversation:

"... did the other day ... went down ..."

"... and how could they know ... the coppers don't ... been laying low and ..."

"Why did you? I asked, begged ... you said ... how many times ... and you promised. ... " That was Hazel. "... so a plane to Tia Juana ... for four hundred ..."

There was silence then and Cardigan forgot the pain in the arm, the nausea that was swelling about him.

And then Hazel, "Go ... go now! I tell you they're hanging around! ..."

There was a low male muttering, and then a long silence. Then suddenly a lock clicked, the door was opened by Hazel. Cardigan jammed the Webloy against her and barked: "Out of the way! Up, Jagoe!"

JAGOE was a big, dark and handsome man. His left arm encircled Hazel's throat suddenly, he pressed her back against him and whipped backward across the room, drawing his gun.

"As you are, Cardigan!"

Cardigan, with one foot across the threshold, jammed to a halt. Jagoe, using the woman as a shield, had his back against the opposite wall. Cardigan's big face became very sullen, his shaggy brows came darkly together and his lip curled wolfishly.

He snarled in a low voice, "Jagoe the petticoat heel, huh? If I drilled her I could drill you too."

"I'll drill you first."

"Listen, you sweet son of a punk; there's a gang of heels across the street having a free-for-all right now. Cut loose with a gun and they'll forget petty squabbles and come down on this place like a flock of bricks."

Jagoe's eyes glittered. "Stay back, Cardigan! I crashed one of your arms and this time I'll bust open your belly. I mean it!"

There was a small satchel on the table. Cardigan smiled ruefully. He said, "I see you lugged the poke over here, huh? You are dumb all right. Don't you ever read the Personals?"

"I missed it. I didn't see it. Never mind talking. Back out of that door. Scram. Beat it. You hear me!"

Hazel stood drawn up to her full height, her face white with shock, her eyes wide with terror.

Cardigan was sarcastic. "Hell, Jagoe, you look funny hiding behind a woman. Boy, you sure look a joke!"

"Get out!" rasped Jagoe, his voice straining. "Get out or I'll open you wide!"

"I can fire as you fire, Jagoe. I can drill the woman clean as you drill me. I can fire three shots before yours would take effect. Go ahead, let her rip, honey-bunch."

Hazel said nothing. Her chin went up and she closed her eyes, as though waiting, ready for the death blow.

Suddenly there was a snapping crash of glass and the window shade billowed. Cardigan ducked instinctively and then Jagoe hurled the woman across the room. Crying out, she crashed into Cardigan and both went down. Jagoe grabbed the satchel and plunged through a doorway toward the rear of the house. Cardigan heaved the woman off, jumped up, crashed into a chair and went down again. The pain in his arm drained the color from his face, made him sink his teeth into his lip, but he got up and, his battered hat crushed low over his eyes, he lunged through the doorway.

A door slammed. He found it and whipped it open and saw he was in the hallway again. And he saw the tail of

Jagoe's coat as Jagoe went out through the hall doorway.

He skidded out into the street and heard a window crash across the street, saw a dark shape fall halfway out.

"Chief!"

He turned.

Pat was crouched against the house-wall. She said, "I—I crashed the window, to break up that tension. He would have killed you! So I—I threw a rock through the window."

"Thanks, Pats. Beat it now. For God's sake, beat it!"

He turned and climbed the steep grade. Ahead, quite a distance ahead now, Jagoe was lugging the satchel. Cardigan fought the upgrade grimly, and then Jagoe was at the top, making for the beginning of the wooden stairways and treacherous walks. As Cardigan reached the crest, he could hear Jagoe's feet pounding on the wooden boards.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Berries

THERE was the crack of a gun and the nearer disturbance of lead splintering the wooden handrail. Cardigan bounded sidewise from the splinters, dropped to one knee as a second shot banged and made the wooden rail jump. Then the rapping of heels began again, and Cardigan followed.

He could not clearly see Jagoe; sometimes he saw his fleeting image, more like a shadow, and so he held his fire, knowing that Jagoe had fired wildly, and close to him only by chance. House lights winked on the hill. Windows were flung open. And then back of him, above him, Cardigan heard other racing footsteps. That meant that the fighting at the stocky man's hide-up had broken up and that some of them or all of them, were now in on the chase.

By this time Cardigan was half-way down the long series of treacherous steps. The Bay was black beyond, with small lights moving across it. The wind was fresh, cold, and down below the long pier sheds bulked at the Bay's rim. The wind cleared up Cardigan's head a bit, made him feel less nauseated. But behind him footsteps were pounding. Reckless, he gained on Jagoe.

And again Jagoe tried a shot. And then instantly from up and behind Cardigan another gun cracked twice. The wooden step directly to the rear of Cardigan's flying heels was splintered. He cursed and ducked as he ran. Jagoe fired and Cardigan felt a tug at his flying, empty sleeve.

Jagoe reached the bottom and was away fleet-footed and Cardigan landed fifty yards behind him and a bullet from above smacked the ground alongside him. Jagoe made for Embarcadero. He was stretching his legs, his coat tails flying. The approach was dark. To shoot with even the smallest degree of accuracy was impossible. But then suddenly a truck swung round the corner and for a brief instant its headlights shone on Jagoe. He realized it and flung wildly to one side, but Cardigan fired. The truck speeded up, whanged out of sight.

Then it was dark again and Jagoe was running on, but not swiftly; his gait was something between a hop and skip and when Cardigan, pounding on, yelled, "Stop, Jagoe!" the man turned and desperately fired into the darkness. The shots were pretty wild; and then Cardigan, firing at the flash, heard Jagoe cry out, heard his body hit the pavement.

Cardigan ran up to him.

"I—I'm wounded, Cardigan," Jagoe panted.

"No! Are you?"

Cardigan reached down, yanked up the satchel. Footsteps were rapping toward

him and a shot crashed out and then Cardigan, gripping the satchel and the gun in his right hand, ran on. He came to an alley and ducked into it, plunged along in the darkness, hoping his pursuers would pass it up and go. But soon he came to a dead end—a high board fence, twice as tall as himself. He bumped against a large covered can and stepped up on it, but still the fence was too high and he had but one able arm.

A passing car momentarily illuminated the mouth of the alley, and he saw the silhouettes of two men there. He jumped from the top of the can, then turned on it, yanked off the cover. It was half full of old papers. Snapping open the satchel, he felt packet on packet of crisp bills. He drew a handful of papers from the can, then dumped into it the contents of the satchel. Into the satchel he shoved the papers, adding a few rocks which he found on the ground. He replaced the cover on the can.

Then he made his way up the alley and did not stop until he reached the mouth of it.

"I thought you went in there," said the stocky man politely. "You see, I know this neighborhood. Please hand over the bag."

Cardigan said, "You guys'll sweat for this."

"Him that laughs last laughs first," observed William. "You boin me up like I'd got nuts. You heard! Hand it over!"

Both William and the stocky man looked as though a cyclone had struck them. Their collars were torn, their clothing ripped, and there were welts and cuts on their faces.

Cardigan argued, "This is bloody money, muggs. It'll be the end of you. Use your heads. You can't get away with this—"

William hissed, "Here they come!"

THE stocky man struck Cardigan on the head, ripped the bag free of Cardigan's hand. Stunned, a little groggy, Cardigan staggered backward. There was no wall to stop him and he wobbled into the alley, shook his head, cleared it a bit, and then went forward again. Two men went racing past the mouth of the alley.

"Get him—now!" one shouted.

"Right!"

A gun cracked.

Cardigan walked out into the street, looked after the running men and called, "Hey!"

But they did not stop; they ran on, firing. Cardigan picked up his feet and followed.

"Mac!" he yelled.

One of them looked back.

"It's me—Cardigan!" Cardigan yelled. "Wait—"

"Hoss on-you. Cardigan!"

"But I want to tell you—"

"Hire a hall, pal!"

Cardigan shouted, "You big dope, you!"

At this instant there was a spattering of shots and Cardigan flattened himself against a housewall. He saw what had happened. William and the stocky man had run into uniformed policemen and now they were cutting back and trying to cross the street. McGovern and Hunerkopf were heading them off.

From three points the guns spoke—loud, harsh. The echoes ripped and tore down the street, clattered among the buildings. William went down headfirst, his legs flying, and the stocky man, cornered, came to a dead stop, dropped his bag and held up his hands.

Cardigan walked out in time to hear McGovern say, "Well, wise-guy," to the stocky man.

"I assure you," said the stocky man, "that I am beaten."

"Oh, yeah? Not yet, mister—not yet you ain't beaten."

"I'm afraid William is hurt very badly."

"You don't have to be afraid. Let him be."

The cops came up and sprayed their flashlights about and one snapped, "Hey, you—who are you?"

"Me?" said Cardigan.

"I said you, didn't I?"

"Oh, him," laughed McGovern, picking up the satchel. "Why, he's my old friendly enemy Cardigan. Just came to town and started a branch for a detective agency. Nice guy, Cardigan. Him and me spat around a lot, but he's a good egg, ain't he, August?"

"He is a egg—I mean a good egg," said Hunerkopf.

McGovern was tickled. "Only he thinks he's a hardboiled egg. He's really a fried egg, though, with a lot of ham thrown in. Boy, there's a good one for you! Hey August?"

Hunerkopf was shaking with silent laughter. "You're a one, Mac. You are a one, all right, yes."

Cardigan said, "Tell me, Mac. How'd you get in on this?"

McGovern was in the best of humor now. "Well, I'll tell you, Cardigan. I had a tail on you, see? I seen you meet that little dame, and then drive along the Embarcadero. Me and Hunerkopf followed you but kind of lost you on Telegraph Hill. But we were poking about when we seen you and the dame and two other guys in the street. We seen you go in the house with the guys.

"Well, we figured maybe you were tying up with some hoodlums in order to get a line on Jagoe. So we go around back and I get in with a pass key. Then William here pokes his head out of the room and I nab him. Before I know it there's a fight on my hands." He showed signs of the fight, with swollen jaw, a torn coat, and a dent in his derby. "In the

dark we lay into each other, and because these muggs know their ground, they got the best of it. I was afraid to shoot account of I figured the little dame was in that room too, keeping quiet. Then these guys get away and we tail 'em and we find they're tailing somebody else and up the street we find Jagoe on the sidewalk, who can't talk. But when I ask him about the dough he points, and I know these guys have it. And," he added, tapping the bag, "I got it. Sorry, Cardigan, old kid, old pal, old sock, but you're just too small-time to put one over on Mr. McGovern. See? I get the dough, and I also get Jagoe . . . August, go back there and take care of Jagoe and you"—to one of the cops—"call an ambulance."

Cardigan lit a cigarette. "Well, Mac, congratulations."

"Thanks, Cardigan. I always did like you, always will, and after this I guess you'll realize kind of that I'm a pretty good copper, up on my stuff."

"You're a lulu, Mac," Cardigan said, and walked off.

He entered the alley, went to the can in the rear, and using his small flashlight, emptied the can of the bills he had placed there. Then he pulled out a newspaper, laid it on the ground, stacked the bills evenly and wrapped them in the newspaper. Around this bundle he strapped his tie, knotted it, and went to the mouth of the alley. He heard heavy footsteps, running, and placed the bundle just inside the alley. Looking out, he saw Hunerkopf coming down the sidewalk.

Cardigan stepped out and pretended to be idling along.

"What's the rush, August?"

"Jagoe! Jagoe ain't there anymore! Mac'll lose the pinch!"

"That's tough," Cardigan said.

He was puzzled. Doubtless Jagoe had regained sufficient strength to get up and stagger off. Hunerkopf ran on.

Cardigan recovered his bundle and walked down the Embarcadero until a cab came along. He boarded and said, "Hotel Galaty." He felt very tired. His arm pained him again and his legs, his whole body ached. But when he thought of McGovern—good old friendly enemy McGovern—he laughed.

WALKING into the lobby of the Hotel Galaty, he saw Pat sitting in one of the big leather chairs. She saw him at the same instant and rose and there was a thankful light in her eyes; he saw rather than heard a long breath of relief flow from her lips.

His low voice was tired: "Well, Pats, I guess we've got the bacon and Mac is holding the bag."

"Oh, I'm just so glad you're back safe," she said. "You'll never learn—the way you go running about getting smashed up all the time." And then: "But I'm glad for your sake, chief, that you got the money back."

"When do you resign?" he said.

She flushed. "Oh—gosh—well, I guess I was just mad at the time. I didn't mean it."

"It was lucky you went home when I told you to, precious. It was a circus. Those guys were regular spendthrifts with their lead."

The red color on her face grew a little deeper. "B-but I didn't go home. I—well, I followed you up the hill. I saw

all those men after you, and so I went too. I was the last one and of course I couldn't make as good time, what with my high heels. But I went over and down Telegraph Hill, and then I found a man lying on the sidewalk, wounded—and then I recognized him as Jagoe. So I got a cab and took him to a hospital and then I called up the police station *and* the newspapers and said that the Cosmos Agency had brought in Jagoe. D-did I do right, chief?"

"Did you do right!" he exclaimed.

He dropped into a chair, let the bundle drop, let his arm dangle to the floor.

"Patsy," he said, "you're the nuts."

Then he began laughing. He laughed so hard that veins stood out on his forehead.

"Now what?" Pat said.

"McGovern! I'm just thinking of McGovern!"

"Oh, you're a big silly. Both you and he are big sillies."

"Yeah, I know," Cardigan said, getting up, his laughter ebbing away. "But look at the fun we get . . . Just wait a minute, Pat."

He went to a house telephone and called the head waiter. He said, "Have you any fresh razzberries? . . . Good. I'd appreciate it if you would send a box of fresh razzberries to Sergeant McGovern, police headquarters. And charge it to Cardigan."

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

RED ALIBI

by

T. T. FLYNN

Put on a pair of dead man's shoes and let a corpse front for you through page after thrill-packed page of mystery-action in this great new

NOVEL-LENGTH MASTER MURDER YARN IN

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE FOR MARCH 15th OUT MARCH 1st



The dead man was of shining gold.

The Midas Curse

by
Fred Allhoff

One by one they died—those heirs of Marvin Muniot. And as their murdered bodies were found, horror piled on horror, for each of them had turned to gleaming gold—become corpse-victims of the Midas Curse. And no man knew the reason for the gilded taint—or why the tea leaves told the terror tale in the doctor's cup.

FIFTY-TWO years ago, his parents had called in their neighbors—impoverished Iowa farmers like themselves—and had pointed proud, work-gnarled fingers at the crib in which he lay.

"Isn't he," they demanded with parental pride, "a fine-looking baby? Some day he will be a great man. A wealthy man. A power. You will see. He shall be known as Marvin Mason Muniot."

If his parents had not died early and painful deaths of cancer shortly after he came East, they would have been astounded by the accuracy of their own predictions.

He became a wealthy man, a power in the financial circles of New York. One single, driving ambition had commanded his life. To make money. And he had made

money—ruthlessly, blindly. If his ruthlessness was accepted as greatness, that didn't matter much. The world doesn't quibble over such hairline distinctions.

His prophetic parents, then, had been correct on every point but one—his name. The middle one didn't stick.

When Muniot was forty, an embittered banker whom he'd ruined wrote a note. In the note he said that Muniot's phenomenal ability to make money hung upon the man like a curse. He wrote, further, that everything Muniot touched turned to gold. Then he signed the note and blew his brains out. The newspapers conferred on Muniot the unfortunate banker's dying bequest.

From that day on, Marvin Mason Muniot became Marvin "Midas" Muniot.

CHAPTER ONE

The Golden Corpse

IT WAS shortly after midnight. Muniot sat in the bedroom of his home and read. Outside, a chill, late-winter wind wailed in the darkness, sougled among the naked, trembling trees on his estate. Inside, was quiet, warmth, peace. For all of that Muniot's mind was not on the book he was reading.

On sudden impulse, he put it aside. He got up from his chair and crossed the bedroom to a door that led into the adjoining bathroom. He swung the door open. There was a full-length mirror on the inside of the door. He switched on the lights and stood there looking thoughtfully into the mirror.

His fifty-two years rested lightly upon him. He saw a man tall, wide-shouldered, sturdily built. His clean-shaven face, broad and firm, was topped by light, sandy hair that lay in stubborn, curly profusion. The slightest hint of gray was just beginning to appear at the temples.

The jut of jaw, the straightness of nose, the pale blue of the alert eyes and the straight line of lips. All of these features might have made it an attractive face had they not in some way combined to suggest a relentlessness of purpose that verged on cruelty.

Only the yellowish cast of his skin suggested that something might be wrong. Something was wrong.

Marvin Midas Muniot was doomed to die within seven months.

Muniot shut the door, switched off every light in the room and returned to his chair. He sat there, in the darkness and quiet, thinking. His thoughts were not pleasant.

He recalled that day a month ago when he had gone to the famous German specialist, Doctor August Gross. He had gone because his stomach had pained him recently.

The white-haired specialist had made an examination, collected a thousand-dollar fee and asked Muniot bluntly if he wanted the truth. Muniot had replied that he did.

"Cancerous condition. Too far gone it is for surgery. Radium will not cure you. Eight months you have yet to live," Doctor Gross had pronounced sentence.

"I suppose," Muniot had said, "it will be painful toward the—the end."

"Quite so," Gross had remarked gently.

Muniot had left the specialist's office stunned. It wasn't that he was doomed to die soon and painfully. It wasn't that which had stunned him. It was just that, for the first time in his fifty-two years, he had found himself up against a problem which he couldn't do anything about, couldn't master. Two other specialists had confirmed Gross's diagnosis.

The same night that Muniot had received his death sentence at the hands of Doctor Gross, he was aware of a second thing which stunned him. He discovered,

for the first time in the half century that he had lived, that he possessed a conscience.

He had done very nicely without a conscience. And now, quite surprisingly, he had one.

Muniot, in amassing wealth, had broken many men. The banker who had committed suicide had been one of these. But Muniot wasn't concerned with most of them, for they would have broken him if he hadn't acted first.

But he was concerned about those who, twenty years ago, had been victimized by Penn Supreme. Penn Supreme had been a fraudulent oil stock which he and an associate had floated. The associate had dealt directly with the victims, had been sent to jail where he died.

Muniot, ever in the background, had escaped detection and pocketed the proceeds. This stock scheme—the only swindle of his career—had laid the foundation for his gigantic fortune. Unmolested by the law, busy with the other schemes that had pyramided his wealth, Muniot had forgotten Penn Supreme.

Then had come Doctor Gross, cancer and conscience.

MUNIOT sighed, got up once more from his chair and undressed swiftly in the dark. He got into bed, shut his eyes and prepared to sleep.

Minutes passed. His breathing took on a certain rhythmic regularity. He slipped toward sleep. He was not awake. Neither was he, yet, fully asleep. He was in that pleasant and somewhat terrible state that precedes full slumber by a split second. And it was in that split second that he heard it.

Tap!

He jerked up in bed instinctively, every muscle taut, every raw nerve suddenly awake. That noise had been in the house—and close by. He sat there in bed, listen-

ing. It was a moonless, drear night. His eyes fought to pierce the darkness of his bedroom, failed. Yet he did not switch on the bedlamp just above his head.

To be awake was, with Muniot, to be thinking, reasoning with cold, clear logic. And he was reasoning now. If some strange, unknown menace existed in that now quiet room, he would gain nothing by turning on a light. Rather, he told himself, he would merely be placing himself at a disadvantage.

And then it came again.

Tap!

Quite distinctly he heard it. It was not in the room. It came from somewhere just outside his bedroom door. It was a sharp, hollow, wooden sound. It sounded exactly as though someone had tapped with a single finger on the panels of the door to his room.

Yet he knew, too, that that was not it. He knew the entire household had retired. He had been the last person to go to bed. Outside his window, the wind sighed. There was quiet. Then, for the third time—

Tap!

Muniot threw back covers, swung his legs over the edge of the bed. In the darkness of the room he slipped into a dressing gown and slippers. On sure, quiet feet he crossed unerringly in the darkness to the bedroom door. He palmed the knob, turned it softly and opened the door.

The hall was black with the blackness and silence of a tomb. Muniot's bedroom was on the second floor. Immediately to his right was a carpeted stairway leading to the third floor. He paused for a moment, listening, waiting. Nothing stirred in the house. Then it came once more—a sharp, double noise this time.

Tap! Tap!

Guided by the weird noises, Muniot passed the foot of the stairway and turned

sharply to the right. His steps led him back into the deeper shadows of an alcove formed by the stair well.

A HUGE walnut chest, its dimensions not unlike those of a coffin, rested there against the wall. It was on the lid of that chest, used for the prosaic business of storing guns, tennis racquets and fishing tackle, that the tapping noise had been sounded. For one uneasy moment, Muniot wondered if someone could be imprisoned in that chest.

He reached out in the darkness, located the lid of the chest and gave it a tug. It was locked. Even as he discovered that, the tapping noise resounded twice more on the lid of the chest at his very elbow.

He ran swift hands over the lid of the chest, then tensed. His hands had come in contact with something that shouldn't be there. Something wet and sticky. Involuntarily, he jerked back his right hand.

His left hand, strangely trembling, plunged into the pocket of his dressing gown, found matches. He struck a match, held it close to his right hand.

And then the match fell from his nerveless fingers to expire on the floor. Horror swept him.

The fingers of his right hand were wet with the vivid, crimson stains of blood.

Quickly, Muniot recovered. He unlocked the chest. Groping fingers found a target pistol. He dove out of the alcove, plunged up the stairs. Halfway up, he stopped, froze. A white-clad, trousered figure, vague and noiseless as a ghost, was coming down those same stairs.

Simultaneously, the figure in white saw him, came to a halt six or seven steps above him.

"I have a gun," said Muniot quietly, "and I'll not mind using it. Stand perfectly still and put up your hands."

He felt a surge of triumph, a sense of mastery of the situation. Apparently, the

strange apparition had no gun. And he was at least two feet more than arm's length away from the unknown person on the stairs. Those shadowy arms could not reach him unless the figure on the stairs suddenly sprang. And he was alert for that.

Slowly he saw the white-clad arms lift. He could not distinguish facial features. Then the arms swung down. But Marvin Muniot did not step aside, did not flinch. He knew those arms could not reach him. Knew it with the logic of cold reason.

But, even as he tightened his grip on the gun in his hand, that logic failed him. Something hard and blunt and invisible in the darkness swished through the air and came crashing down on his head. He lost his gun, crumpled, slid noiselessly down the heavily carpeted stairway.

His last moment of muddled consciousness made him aware of the two white-trousered legs that stepped over his body and vanished somewhere in the blackness.

HE REGAINED consciousness shortly and sat on the bottom step cursing the throbbing pain that hurt his head. The drip of blood from somewhere up above was rapping out a steady tattoo, now, on the lid of the walnut chest in the alcove.

There was no other sound in the house.

Muniot switched on lights, retrieved his gun and went doggedly on upstairs. At the head of the stairs he stopped abruptly and his face went ashen.

A man lay in the hall, his body half off the carpet, huddled in the grotesque stillness of death against the vertical rails of the banister. He wore bedroom slippers and the lower part of a pair of pajamas. From the waist up, he was naked.

Blood welled from a small wound in his chest, formed a small, irregular pool beside him between the stairway rails. As the pool widened, drops of blood were

forced over the edge of the stair well. With a ghastly, increasing tempo, they dropped twenty feet through space to land with the hollow, tapping noise that had first wakened Muniot, on the lid of the chest below.

It was not the sight of death alone that brought clammy sweat and an ashen pallor to Marvin Muniot's face.

It was the color of the corpse. The dead man's face was a face of pure gold. His forehead was golden—and the shock of hair above it. Eyelids and lashes were pure gold. Nose, lips, ears and cheeks were golden-hued. So were the arms, hands, fingers and entire unclad torso. All were shining, glistening gold. Only the man's blue, vacant eyes had retained a natural color.

Face and body seemed to be of burnished metal. It was as though the man had submitted to some diabolical alchemy by which human flesh had been transmuted into pure, cold, but lifeless gold.

Marvin Muniot looked into that golden face. For a long moment his horror-tortured eyes were blank pools. Then it came—grudging, unbelieving recognition.

He turned away, walked on uncertain feet down the hallway of the third floor until he came to a room whose door was open. He went in. A lamp burned on a bedside table. There was a phone on the table beside the lamp. Muniot walked over to the table, picked up the phone. He sat down heavily upon the bed.

"Police headquarters," he said dully into the phone. There was a pause. "I want to speak to Inspector George Cody."

Another pause. Then Muniot became himself once more—the man whose power all Wall Street had learned to fear.

"All right," he barked. "Then find him, wherever he is. Tell him to come to my home at once. This is Marvin Muniot speaking."

A voice said respectfully: "Yes, Mr. Muniot. Right away."

"Just a minute," he snapped, "there's something else. I want you to connect me with Commissioner Langley at once. And see that it's a private line."

CHAPTER TWO

Weapon Unknown

INSPECTOR CODY reached Muniot's home at two thirty that morning. He had phoned first and with him, now, was his friend, Medical Examiner Herman Vault, a genial little cherub of a man.

They ascended porch steps and Inspector Cody's fingers moved toward a bell-button set in a panel beside the huge front door.

A light suddenly flashed on above. The door swung open wide.

A hoarse voice with an obvious trace of huskiness asked in a monotone: "Well?"

The woman who opened the door was unattractive, ageless. From habit, Cody guessed her age to be about fifty. She was a tall, gaunt woman, big-boned. Dark eyes set in a flat, unintelligent face were, like the face, inscrutable. Her hair was jet black and untidy. Stray wisps of it straggled down to the high collar of the flannel nightgown she was wearing. A black shapeless coat was over the nightgown.

"Inspector Cody to see Mr. Muniot," the police official snapped gruffly.

Her dark, burning eyes held his for a moment. Then she stepped aside. "Come in," she said huskily. "Mr. Muniot is waiting in the study."

She led Cody and Vault swiftly, silently to the ground-floor study. When they were inside, she closed the door behind them and retired. Muniot came across the study to greet them.

Clearly, succinctly, he told them everything that had happened.

"Do you know the man who was murdered?" Cody asked.

Muniot nodded, said: "His name was Eugene Maynol. He was . . . er . . . a guest here. One of three guests. It is a rather involved story, but I'll be glad—"

"It can wait," Cody said. "We'd like to look at the body at once. Was anyone else in the house awakened by what happened here tonight?"

Muniot shook his head.

"Are you sure," asked Cody, "that it wasn't a shot which originally awakened you?"

"There was no shot," replied Muniot firmly.

"Who is the woman who let here?"

"Ella Kursh. She has been my housekeeper for years. After I called you, I went to her room and awakened her. She and my butler, Vincent Hobbs, are the only servants who live in the house. Maids, gardeners and a cook come in each day to perform their duties, but they do not sleep here."

"Why didn't you summon Hobbs, rather than your housekeeper?"

Muniot smiled wryly. "Hobbs is an excellent chap and a good servant. But he's excitable, superstitious. He'd have had the whole household aroused."

"I see," said Cody. "It won't be necessary to arouse anyone, yet. But no one is to leave the house."

CODY and Vault went up to the third-floor landing where the body of the dead man lay. Vault knelt beside the corpse, flexed its arms and right leg tentatively. He looked at his watch.

"Time of death checks," he said cheerily. "He died—as Muniot told us—shortly after midnight." He rolled the body over on its face. "Funny!" he exclaimed.

"What's funny?" demanded Cody.

Vault indicated a small wound on the left side of the corpse's back. A corresponding wound, they had already seen, occupied a similar position on the dead man's chest. Cody nodded.

"Shot through the heart, eh?" he said dully. "Small-calibered bullet. Yet it passed completely through the body."

"Apparently so," agreed Vault.

"There's something queer about this thing," Cody said softly. "No one in the house heard the shot. Muniot says he didn't hear it. And why did the killer, whoever he was, paint this guy gold after murdering him?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Vault answered. "Give me a hand, will you, George."

They carried the dead man's body into the room from which Muniot had first phoned them and stretched it out on the bed.

"You see what you can find, Doc," Cody instructed. "Scrape off a sample of that gold paint. Might be able to find out where it was purchased. I'm going out and find the bullet."

He spent an hour, most of it on hands and knees, going over every inch of the second- and third-floor halls. He didn't find anything that remotely resembled a bullet. At four o'clock he went down to the study to talk to Muniot.

"You were going to tell me," he reminded the multi-millionaire, "about your guests."

"Yes," Muniot agreed slowly. "The entire household, at present, consists of three guests, Miss Kursh, my housekeeper, who admitted you; Hobbs, the butler; my daughter, Mary, and myself."

"And the guests?" persisted Cody.

"This is in strictest confidence," began Muniot. "Twenty years ago, I was involved in a stock swindle. The stock was called Penn Supreme. Most of it was sold here in New York and in Jersey City.

"A month ago, I was told by specialists that I have less than a year to live. Seven months more, to be exact. That, too, is a secret. I've spent my time during the past month attempting to locate those who had been victimized by that fake stock. I think you can understand that, as a dying man, I wanted to get my house in order; wanted to make restitution. The three guests here at present are persons—all of whom had been living in comparative poverty—who are bequeathed fortunes in my will. They are the only persons I can locate who lost their money buying Penn Supreme twenty years ago. One of them was the man who was murdered here to-night—Eugene Maynol.

"He was the proprietor of a hole-in-the-wall tobacco shop on Ninth Avenue before I brought him here a week ago. Another is a widow, Wilma Kogut. She's a sharp-tongued, uneducated little lady nearing sixty. Ran a millinery store that was rather deeply in debt."

"And the third person?"

"Chap by the name of Samuel Self. My attorney located him through Civic Charities. We literally took him out of the breadline to bring him here."

"But why," asked Cody, "should you take these three strangers into your home?"

MUNIOT shrugged. "A whim, you might say, Inspector." He leaned forward. "But it was more than that. Remember—these three persons had purchased, with meager savings, worthless stock. That was twenty years ago. Worthless stock is still being sold. I wanted to know them at first hand. If, after observing them for a few weeks, I decide that they are capable of handling one hundred thousand dollars each, the money shall be turned over to them before my death. If not, the money will come to them in the form of a trust fund assuring them adequate protection."

"They understand that they are to receive one hundred thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"Do they know why?"

"No. I sold very little of the worthless stock myself. An associate dealt with these three directly. They have no way of knowing what my motive is—that it concerns their unfortunate purchases of Penn Supreme twenty years ago."

"Who were the witnesses of the will in which you set forth these bequests?"

"Hobbs and Miss Kursh."

"Your butler and housekeeper," Cody mused aloud. "Does Hobbs wear pajamas?" he asked suddenly.

Amazement crept into Muniot's face.

"Yes. But I don't understand . . ."

"When you were knocked out on the stairs," Cody said, "you saw a pair of legs. That's all you saw clearly?"

"Hobbs wouldn't murder anyone," Muniot protested. "Besides, he's been with me for years."

"And Miss Kursh?"

"The same goes for her. She's known business secrets that have meant financial life or death to me. She doesn't talk. Not," he admitted thoughtfully, "that she cares so much about me. She doesn't care about anything or anyone, except my daughter, Mary. She idolizes the child. Brought her up since she was five years old. And Miss Kursh doesn't wear anything so modern as pajamas," Muniot finished with a chuckle.

"I noticed that," Cody agreed drily. "Do Hobbs and Miss Kursh know that you . . . er . . . that your health . . ."

"That I have seven months to live," Muniot said sharply. "Yes. They know. The doctors know. You and I know. That is all. Not even my daughter suspects it."

"Eugene Maynol, the tobacconist, can't receive his money now," Cody said. "Where does that hundred thousand go?"

"According to the terms of my will," Muniot explained, "half of it goes to Mrs. Kogut, the other half to Mr. Self."

"And if one of them should die?"

"Then the remaining one would receive the entire three hundred thousand."

"And if the third guest died?" Cody pursued relentlessly. Muniot blanched. "My God, Inspector," he said hoarsely, "you don't think . . ."

Cody shrugged.

"I don't know what to think," he admitted. "The set-up—the arrangements, that is—are a trifle unusual. And these three persons in your house are comparative strangers. But you haven't answered my question yet."

"If all of them died," said Muniot shakily, "then the money would go to my daughter, who inherits practically all of my estate."

"Neither Hobbs nor Miss Kursh could possibly benefit by the deaths of any of your guests?"

"Not a penny," Muniot said flatly. "Both Miss Kursh and Hobbs are to receive one hundred thousand dollars each when I die."

WITHOUT being particularly aware of it, Cody had been staring at the door of the study as he talked. He was about to reply when he noticed something. The full meaning of it impinged upon his consciousness with shocking suddenness.

Out in the hall, a light had been burning. There was no key in the keyhole of the study door. And, from his chair in the softly lighted study, he had noticed vaguely the light which shone through the keyhole.

Quite suddenly, he could no longer see that light. Could no longer see the outline of the keyhole. The small hole was dark.

He jerked to his feet, sprang across the room unmindful of Muniot's puzzled,

questioning stare. And as he crossed the room, light filtered through the keyhole once more. He grasped the knob, yanked the door open.

To his right, down a long corridor, soft, padding feet carried a white-clad, trousered figure away. Cody pulled his police positive from its shoulder holster.

"Stop!" he cried.

The man ran on, reached a door and attempted to open it. The knob stuck and he fought with the door. Those few seconds were enough for Cody. He reached the man, grabbed him by both shoulders and whirled him around.

The man was tall, broad-shouldered. He had thinning, dark hair and a pair of close-set, crafty eyes that looked out of a big-featured, heavily lined face. He raised one huge hand, clenched, in a defensive, shielding motion.

Too late, Cody saw that the man's face and eyes held nothing, now, but guilt and panic. He had interpreted that raising of the hand as a prelude to active offense. And Cody acted.

Cody's left fist smashed the pajamaed figure squarely in the face. The man went down blubbing.

"Don't," he whined. "For God's sake, don't. I didn't mean any harm. I . . ." His nose began to bleed freely.

Cody scowled, jerked him erect and led him back into the study. Muniot, pale of face, said nothing. Cody pushed the man into a chair.

"You were listening outside the door," he snapped.

"Yes," the man admitted hoarsely. "Why?" barked Cody.

"Something's wrong in the house," he said in a voice that approached a husky wail. "It's after four in the morning. There are lights on. Miss Kursh is up. She won't tell me what is wrong. I wanted to know."

Cody turned to Muniot. "Who is this man?" he demanded.

"Vincent Hobbs," said Muniot, "my butler."

MEDICAL Examiner Vault came into the study. His round, chubby face wore its customary air of cheerfulness.

"Did you find the bullet that killed Eugene Maynol?"

"I did not," admitted Cody.

"I didn't think you would," Vault said tranquilly. "You may have noticed that the two wounds suffered by the dead man were clean, round, small holes. A bullet makes a clean hole going in but tears coming out."

"Well?" snapped Cody a trifle irritably.

"That means," continued Vault, "that the man upstairs wasn't struck by a bullet."

Cody frowned thoughtfully. "I've seen a stiletto make that kind of a wound."

"Yes."

"But a stiletto wouldn't pierce a man's body at its thickest point. Isn't long enough."

"No."

"Damn it," growled Cody, "can't you say words of more than one syllable? What did make the wound?"

"That," said Vault cheerfully, "is what you'll have to find out. I'm going now. I'll take along a sample of the gold paint. Good morning, gentlemen."

CHAPTER THREE

The Mysterious Doctor Tell

CODY'S mind came back to the business at hand. He turned, glowered at the eavesdropping butler. "Do you make a practice," he inquired harshly, "of listening outside doors?"

The butler flinched under Cody's hard gaze. "No, sir," he said. He tried to pull his eyes from the slate-gray ones of Inspector Cody, failed miserably. "I—"

Cody, turning to Muniot, interrupted. "I'd like," he said, "to see the others—Wilma Kogut and Samuel Self—here in the study. We can't keep what's happened here tonight a secret forever. They might as well know."

Muniot nodded thoughtfully. "They're entitled to know," he agreed. "Perhaps they'll not wish to remain here longer."

"Exactly," snapped Cody.

"Hobbs," ordered Muniot, "awaken Mr. Self and tell him to come here at once. Tell him that it's—it's urgent. And have Miss Kursh bring Mrs. Kogut to the study, too."

"How about your daughter?" asked Cody sharply. Muniot frowned. "If you don't mind, Inspector Cody, I'd rather that Mary wouldn't be brought into direct contact with this. Not, that is, just yet. Later, of course, she'll have to know, but I'd rather have her made aware of it less bluntly. There isn't anything that she can . . ." He halted, seemed to grope for words.

Cody fixed gray eyes on the millionaire in a quizzical, puzzled stare. Muniot flushed under the directness of that glance. Finally, Cody shrugged. "O. K." He turned to Hobbs. "Fast about it, now. Get Samuel Self and Wilma Kogut down here at once."

"Yes, sir," said Hobbs and went out.

Wilma Kogut—ushered into the study by the housekeeper, Ella Kursh—was the first to arrive.

"This is Inspector Cody, Mrs. Kogut. Please be seated, both of you."

Ella Kursh, now dressed in a drab, brown dress of severe lines, sat down quietly. Mrs. Kogut did not.

She was a sharp-featured little woman with a hair-trigger temper and a tongue to match. And, just now, she was filled with suspicion, resentment and curiosity.

"I never saw such a thing," she snapped petulantly. "Waking a body in the mid-

dle of the night to meet a policeman. What does it mean? Why is everybody up? If you asked me, I'd say there was something funny going on. The idea." Her voice rose in a whining crescendo of indignation.

Very quietly, very patiently, Muniot said "Please be seated, Mrs. Kogut."

The gentle, soft-spoken words robbed her of her shell of bluster. She sat down. She looked, suddenly, very frightened and very old.

CODY studied her. Her face was lined—the powder and rouge that had been pushed into its myriad crows-feet didn't make it any more attractive. Only her hair, which was pure white, gave her a touch of beauty. She wore a pink negligee profusely adorned with white ostrich feathers. A black lace nightgown peeped out from beneath it.

Samuel Self proved to be a bald giant of sixty with a weather-beaten leathery face on which there was a slight reddish stubble and a pair of huge hands that he had not yet, apparently, been able to wash entirely clean. His shoulders were slightly stooped, his teeth were bad and his eyes were watery, blue and evasive.

He came into the study wearing a dressing gown that was too short over pajamas that did not fit well and asked uneasily: "Did you send for me, Mr. Muniot?"

"Yes," said Muniot. "Please sit down. This is Inspector Cody."

Self's eyes flicked suspiciously for a moment upon Cody. He chose a chair, sat nervously, almost timidly, upon its edge.

Cody began without preamble of any sort. "A man was murdered here tonight," he announced.

Mrs. Kogut gasped. "Murdered!"

"Please," Cody said sharply. His eyes shot around the room, sought other eyes. He looked at all of them, read nothing in their faces that would help him.

"The man who was murdered," he con-

tinued, "was Eugene Maynol. Like you, Mrs. Kogut and you, Self, Maynol was to receive one hundred thousand dollars from Mr. Muniot. We don't know who murdered him or why he was murdered. But we want you to know that he was. You are here as guests. If you have any scruples about remaining here, Mr. Muniot wishes you to feel perfectly free to leave at any time. Is that clear?"

Samuel Self nodded. Mrs. Kogut, however, sprang from her chair.

"I certainly don't propose," she announced shrilly, "to spend another moment in this place. I have my millinery store. I'm going back to it. I knew something awful would happen when I came here. I don't want your money. I'll leave here as soon as I can get packed." She looked at Cody dubiously. "Can I go now?"

"Of course," said Cody. She hurried to the door, opened it and disappeared. Cody turned to Samuel Self. "And you?" he asked.

Samuel Self's Adam's apple bobbed in his gaunt throat as he swallowed rapidly. He shrugged, got to his feet. "I reckon," he drawled casually, "I'll stay. I'd ruther get murdered in a comfortable bed than freeze to death standing up in a bread-line. I'll git along back to bed now."

At the door, Self bumped into Mrs. Kogut who was on her way back into the study. The little, white-haired woman looked at Muniot with pathetically eager eyes.

"Won't I get none of that money if I leave, Mr. Muniot?" she asked hopefully.

Muniot smiled. "Of course, Mrs. Kogut," he assured her. "And you and Mr. Self will share that which Mr. Maynol didn't live to receive. You deserve it—and all the happiness it can bring you—after tonight's unpleasantness."

Wilma Kogut was her sharp-tongued self again. "Well I should certainly think

so," she snapped acidly and slammed the door behind her.

Somewhere, deep in the house, a bell jangled. Hobbs, the butler, looked up.

"That's the front door, sir," he told Muniot. "Shall I answer it, sir?"

Muniot looked at Cody. Cody nodded. Hobbs went quietly out of the room. Muniot looked from a clock on the wall to Cody.

"Who in the name of heaven," he asked, "would ring the bell at four thirty in the morning? I hope it's not the reporters already."

Cody shook his head. "Couldn't be," he said tersely. "Until I report to headquarters, no news of the murder will be given out. No one knows of it yet."

The study door opened and Vincent Hobbs came into the room again. The butler was obviously badly shaken. His deeply lined face was contorted with fear.

"What's wrong with you?" Cody barked.

Hobbs shot frightened eyes from Muniot to Cody and back again.

"There's a gentleman in the vestibule. A gentleman dressed all in black. He never called here before, sir. He says his name is Doctor Howard Tell."

"Never heard of him," snapped Muniot. "What does he want?"

Hobbs gulped. His next words brought stark incredulity into the faces of Marvin Muniot and Inspector Cody.

"He wants to know, sir," Hobbs blurted, "if there was a death in this house tonight."

Muniot's face went white and he half rose from his chair. Cody, gnawing his lower lip, was the first to recover.

"Send him in," he snapped.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood in the Teacup

MUNIOT, still pale of face, crossed the study wordlessly to a table in

one corner. He took three glasses from a rack, sloped whisky into them nervously from a crystal decanter.

Ella Kursh, the housekeeper, who had been sitting silently nearby, rose.

"Shall I go, sir?" she inquired.

"Perhaps you'd better, Ella," Muniot said. But before she could leave the room the study door opened and Hobbs' voice said: "Doctor Tell."

A little man in a black suit came into the study. Muniot came forward with a tray on which were three glasses of whisky.

"I am Mr. Muniot, Doctor Tell," he said. "This is Inspector Cody. Will you join us in a drink?"

Doctor Tell said, "How do you do?" in a brittle voice and added, "I would like a cup of tea, if I might have it."

"A cup of tea, please, Ella," Muniot instructed. The housekeeper nodded, went silently out of the room. To Hobbs, who stood just outside, Muniot said: "Please go to your room, Vincent. Stay there until you are called."

Hobbs flushed, closed the door of the study behind him. Muniot indicated a comfortable chair. "Won't you sit down, Doctor."

"This will do." Tell disregarded the proffered chair, walked to a flat-topped table in the center of the room and took a straight-backed chair beside it.

Cody put his glass to his lips once, took it away empty. He studied the stranger. There was something vital about the little man that Cody sensed at once. Personality. Animal magnetism. There were dozens of names for it.

His outward appearance, casually observed, was not imposing. His features were regular, his skin slightly olive, his hair dark and thick and straight. He did not look directly at either Cody or Muniot, but seemed to be studying the room indifferently. There was something fasci-

nating about the man—fascinating and repellent. Silence, tenseness descended suddenly upon the room. Cody was the one who broke it.

"How did you know, Doctor Tell," he inquired with characteristic abruptness, "that someone died in this house tonight?"

Doctor Tell's eyes were large, so black, that they seemed to be entirely without pupils. They raised suddenly, to meet those of Cody's squarely.

Doctor Tell's brittle voice said: "I did not know that someone died here. I merely felt that such was the case. I felt it so strongly that I could not resist coming here to find out for myself."

Cody ignored the even challenge of those piercing, hypnotic eyes. "And what made you feel that someone had died in this house?" he demanded.

The brittle voice held gently ironic reproof. "You would not understand or believe it, should I tell you, Inspector. I have never found the police eager to accept psychic aid."

THAT, Cody admitted to himself, was true enough. He'd worked on other murder cases where various cranks, fortune tellers, spirit mediums and other professed psychics had promised to help him to a solution. None of them had amounted to a damn.

This chap, Cody assured himself, would be as big a washout as the rest. But Cody felt willing to sit silently by for a while and let the fellow rave on. Sooner or later, he'd found, these chaps overplayed their hands.

Tell's next spoken words were directed at Muniot.

"This is not the first time we have met, Mr. Muniot," he said. "Do you remember me?"

"I can't say that I do," Muniot replied.

Doctor Tell's black eyes looked at neither of them as he spoke.

"It was twenty years ago. My name was Tellingmaier. I've shortened it since. I bought fifty shares of Penn Supreme from you for five hundred dollars. That was every cent I had. The stock was worthless."

Cody saw Muniot stiffen in his chair; saw recognition come into Muniot's eyes, to be followed by genuine elation.

"No," contradicted Muniot gently, "that stock was not worthless, Doctor Tell. You paid five hundred dollars for it twenty years ago. Right now it is worth one hundred thousand dollars to you in cash. You can have the money at any . . ."

Doctor Tell, still looking at neither of them, said in a flat, expressionless voice: "I want no money from you."

"But . . ." Muniot began a protest.

"I want no money from you," Doctor Tell repeated. He did not emphasize the remark, did not lift his soft voice. He uttered the words in a purely matter-of-fact fashion. "And," concluded Doctor Tell softly, "I prefer tea without cream or sugar."

Oblivious of Muniot's amazed stare and of Cody's quizzical glance, the little man in black took from one pocket of his coat a deck of cards. He riffled the cards then laid them upon the table face down in separate little stacks. He seemed absorbed in what he was doing to the exclusion of everything else.

He put down the last card. There were seven piles. He turned up one from each pile. The ace of spades was there and four other black cards and two red ones. "I don't like this," he said.

Ella Kursh came in at that moment with the cup of tea. She put it on the study table and went out.

"If you don't mind," Muniot said stiffly, angered at being kept mystified, being kept on the defensive, "may I ask if your sole reason for coming here was to learn whether or not someone had died?"

"Not entirely," said Doctor Tell. "I had another reason. But tell me. What was the name of the man who died?"

Cody snapped out a question. "How did you know it was a man, Doctor Tell?"

"Because it is written that the first to die will be a man."

Cody gave a snort of disgust. Muniot paled visibly.

"Do you mean, Doctor Tell," Muniot demanded, "that others will die?"

"Of course," said Doctor Tell in his brittle, soft voice. "But that is unimportant. You asked me what other reason I had for coming here. I shall tell you. I came here because I am interested in your destiny, Muniot. For long I have wanted to be closer to you, to learn more of it. It is a most amazing thing. There is much gold and much cruelty and much pain here."

"Here?" asked Muniot.

Tell's right hand waved to the outspread cards.

"Yes," said Doctor Tell. "Here. It is in the cards, in the stars, in the leaves that I find in my teacup. Yours, Muniot, is a destiny such as the world has not known since the Dark Ages."

MUNIOT lost patience. "Must you," he demanded, "come here and waste our time at a moment like this with your damned childish nonsense? Your silly fortune-telling with cards, with tea leaves? Your crazy prattle about my destiny?"

Doctor Tell sat very quietly for a full moment, staring somberly at the cards on the table. Suddenly he was on his feet. His right hand came down swiftly, palm flat. It cracked against the table. His deep, hypnotic eyes fastened with a shivering intensity upon those of Muniot.

"So it is nonsense," he rasped. "I tell you, Muniot—and you, Cody—that when the world had its beginning, men studied the stars and read their fates there. Ire-

land was young when gnarled old women who have been dead many centuries, read weird prophecies in the leaves of a cup of tea."

He walked over to Muniot, his black eyes flashing.

Muniot was muttering: "I am sorry, Doctor. I fear I've been a most impolite host."

Doctor Tell ignored the apology, grasped Muniot's hand. He turned it palm up, studied it for a moment, dropped it. "It is there, too," he said, "just as I expected."

"What is there?" asked Muniot.

"You have seven months to live."

Doctor Tell's eyes darted away. He walked back to his chair by the table and sat down.

Cody, watching Muniot, saw the millionaire go limp from amazement. And Cody was too honest to deny, to himself, that he was amazed as well. How had Tell come by this jealously guarded secret?

Tell drank his tea hurriedly, inverted the cup and placed it on his saucer. His black eyes swept to Muniot. "You don't believe me, of course," he said.

"No," said Muniot. "I don't believe you."

"It doesn't matter," said Tell. "Few men believe their destinies. Yours is a horrible one. There is much death in it."

"I am ready to die," said Muniot.

"And to kill others?"

Muniot's breath hissed with a sharp intake between his teeth. "What do you mean?"

"The man that died here tonight. Do you realize that you murdered him?"

"What in the devil are you driving at?" Muniot got to his feet swiftly and his voice was angry. Angry and tinged with fear.

"There is nothing to become excited about, Mr. Muniot," Tell said in his brit-

tle voice. "Nor is there anything to be done about it. It is part of your destiny to kill before you die."

"Nonsense," barked Muniot. "Rank, stifling nonsense."

Doctor Tell, unperturbed, then picked up his inverted tea cup, set it aright on his plate, peered into it. Muniot's mouth made a sarcastic grimace.

"Perhaps," he said, "you can see in your tea leaves now the person that I shall murder next."

Doctor Tell ignored the sarcasm.

"I see gold. Piles of it. It is your gold," he said. "The leaves have arranged themselves in this cup almost exactly as they did in a cup at my home earlier tonight." He looked up. "When I looked then," he said, "I saw a man. His face gleamed like your gold. He lay on his side and there was a round wound in his back that extended through to his chest. The initial of his first name was 'E'. Is that correct?"

Cody was the one who spoke. "What do you see now?" he demanded.

"Gold again," Doctor Tell continued softly. "Marvin Muniot's gold. It is piled high. Always, the gold. But there is something else. It is a woman. Her hair is white. She is small. She is in a bedroom. She is lying on the floor. She is dead. And her face—and the hair that was so white—is gleaming, is the color of gold. The light in the bedroom shines on that dead face that is golden—as golden as the wealth for which you, Muniot, sold your soul."

"In God's name . . ." Muniot was on his feet. Abruptly he strangled whatever he had been about to say. But Cody knew what he was thinking. Wilma Kogut was small, had white hair. Cody saw Muniot press a button on the table, saw him raise pain-haunted eyes to those of Doctor Tell.

"This is absurd, utterly ridiculous,"

Muniot charged. But his words, hoarsely spoken, lacked conviction.

"You know the fable of King Midas, of course," Tell said. "You should. You are called Midas. King Midas, too, was cursed. Everything he touched turned to gold. Everything you touch turns to gold. The man, the woman. You tried to help them. And the touch of your wealth turned their faces to gold, killed them. It is all here in the tea leaves. Nor will the woman's death end it. No! There is gold in the teacup, but there is also blood in the teacup—more blood."

THE study door opened. Vincent Hobbs, dressed now in his butler's uniform, stood there looking at Muniot. "Did you ring, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," said Muniot. "I want you to go up to Mrs. Kogut's room on the third floor. See if she has left yet. If she has not gone, ask her if you can be of any service to her. Then report back to me immediately."

Hobbs said, "Yes, sir," and shut the door. Muniot seemed to have a grip on himself.

"You were saying, Doctor Tell, that you saw much blood in the teacup—that others would die. May I ask how many persons this curse—this curse of my wealth—will bring death to?"

Tell's dark eyes flashed. "As many as are touched by it," he said in his brittle voice. "To be exact, four. May I remind you that King Midas, whether you accept him purely as a legendary figure or otherwise, was similarly cursed. And that he touched his daughter. And that she died, turned to cold, inanimate gold. Now, countless centuries later, that same awful curse is upon you. The Midas Curse."

Muniot, white-faced, thundered at Tell: "You threaten my daughter?"

"My dear man," said Tell evenly, "I

threaten no one. It is something beyond our control. It is in the cards, in the stars, the tea leaves."

"It's damned nonsense," Muniot cried.

The study door opened. Hobbs stood there. "I'm sorry, Mr. Muniot, but I seem unable to get any word from Mrs. Kogut."

"You mean that she has left?"

"No, sir. Neither Miss Kursh nor myself saw her leave. She can't be gone. But the door to her room is locked and though I rapped on it and called to her several times, there is no answer."

Cody and Muniot, paralyzed by the single, awful thought that Hobbs' words set aswirl in their minds, stood still for a moment in the silence that filled the room. Then Cody was running across the room and up the stairway, dimly aware that Muniot and Hobbs were following in his wake.

He reached the third floor, waited until they were at his side.

"Which room?" he demanded.

"Third one, right side," panted Muniot.

Inspector Cody reached the closed door Muniot had indicated. He grabbed the knob, tried to turn it. The door was locked. A thin sliver of light showed beneath it. He pounded on the door and the echoes of his vigorous hammering resounded loudly in the silent corridor.

"Mrs. Kogut!" he called. There was no answer.

He stepped back, measured the door as a man measures an antagonist. He lurched forward, shoulders hunched, muscular legs pushing. On the third try, with Muniot and Hobbs lending their weight, the door crashed in.

The little old lady with the white hair and the shriveled, heavily powdered face, lay sprawled grotesquely on her back near the bed. Two suitcases—one half-packed—were nearby. Clothing was scattered untidily about the room.

Her face, Cody saw, no longer showed

its pathetic layers of caked powder and paint. There was gold, even in the deep wrinkles of that face, and her whole countenance gleamed like yellow ore in the brilliance of the room light.

The golden color covered her face completely and mingled with the shining silver of her hair. It looked as though it had been poured on.

Cody knelt down, put an arm about her waist and lifted her. He touched her cheeks and his fingers came away tipped with gold. He shoved ostrich feathers and sheer pink silk and flimsy black lace away and felt her withered flesh. It was still warm.

He opened, in front, the nightclothing she had not had a chance to change. Her flesh, below the scrawny neck, was untouched by that hideous, golden hue. But, just beneath her breast on the left side was a blotch of crimson where the flesh had been pierced by something sharp, round. He turned her limp body over, located what he had expected to find. A hole, in every way the counterpart of that under her breast, existed in an almost corresponding left-side position in her back. He drew her clothing together and up over her once more.

Then, suddenly, he was on his feet. His strong arms shoved the white-faced Muniot and the trembling butler, Hobbs, out of his way. His feet pounded out a hollow, rapid tattoo as he thudded down the two flights of carpeted stairway. He cursed softly, uninterruptedly all the way down. He turned, plunged into the ground-floor study.

It was empty. Doctor Howard Tell was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man Under the Tree

INSPECTOR CODY stood there quietly for a moment. Then he crossed the study to a telephone table. He picked up

a city telephone directory, thumbed through it hastily. There were less than half a dozen Tells and the one heading the short list brought a grunt of satisfaction from him.

"Tell Howard F Dr 33 Avon Pl"

Avon Place was in the Thirty-second Precinct. Inspector Cody took up the phone, got in touch with the Thirty-second. When a gruff voice had answered, he said: "This is Inspector Cody, Muldoon. I want you to pick up a man for me as quickly as possible, Lieutenant. He's Doctor Howard F. Tell, Thirty-three Avon Place. Little guy, swarthy complexion, about one-forty pounds, black eyes, black clothes. Have a couple of boys fan out to his house. He may not be in yet.

"When he comes in nab him at once. Put him in a cell by himself at your station. He's to see no one, talk to no one. Keep a guard over him and make a note of anything he says. Got all that?"

Lieutenant Muldoon's voice assured the inspector that he had it all.

"Good," said Cody. "And if he asks for tea, let him have it. Yeah, that's what I said—tea. And get a dead wagon out here." He told the lieutenant where he was, gave Muniot's phone number. "Call me back when you've picked up Tell. That's all."

He pronged the receiver, went slowly back upstairs. He was on the second landing, his hand on the newel post, when he saw a door down the hallway open quickly. A girl—Cody had not seen her before—came out of the room.

She was tall and young and pretty in a dark, cool way. The pajamas that sheathed her slender, curved body, were white satin. She wore a negligee, also of satin.

Her features, Cody thought, had some of the handsome lines that made Muniot's face so striking. There was none of the

indomitable hardness, however, that marked his expression.

Her lips were full and warm, her eyes dark. Her hair, unlike Muniot's sandy locks, was glistening black. Her face held a frightened look and Cody, waiting at the foot of the stairs, could hear her sharp breathing.

Then she saw Cody. Instinctively, one small, white hand, clenched, rose to her mouth to stifle a low, half-shriek. Color receded from her cheeks, her eyes gleamed with an almost unnatural brilliance and she spoke in a trembling, uncertain voice.

"Who are you?"

Cody made his voice gentle. "I am a friend of your father, Inspector Cody. You are Mary Muniot, of course."

She nodded and light glinted on her raven-black hair. "What is it?" she asked nervously. "What is wrong? I was awakened by the most awful noises. Is it father? Is anything . . ."

Cody shook his head. "Your father is quite all right," he assured her.

A figure, quite suddenly, was at Cody's elbow, wedging itself in between him and the girl. Someone who had, noiselessly, come up the stairs from the first floor of the house. Ella Kursh, the housekeeper, pushed him aside, put a protective arm about the girl and turned to glower at Cody.

"Do you have to frighten the poor child?" she rasped.

In the back of Cody's mind, something that had been puzzling him suddenly became clear as he looked into the angry face and indignant eyes of Ella Kursh. Cody had wondered how Marvin Muniot had ever come to accept this gaunt, unattractive, rude woman for a housekeeper. Now he knew.

Ella Kursh was stroking, with infinite tenderness, the head of the girl she held in her arms. The older woman's harshness of face and voice were gone now.

With maternal tenderness she was mumbling soft, comforting words to the girl.

"Poor darling. Everything is all right, child. You must go back to bed now, dear."

Mary Muniot pushed out of the other woman's arms. "No," she said firmly. Her dark eyes flashed and again Cody was aware of the steely, glinting brilliance of them. "No. Something is wrong upstairs. I want to know what it is."

She moved so quickly that she caught Cody flat-footed. She swung out of the arms of Ella Kursh, squeezed between Cody and the newel post and started up the steps toward the third floor taking short, rapid little steps. Ella Kursh made a moaning, frightened sound and tried to pass Cody. Cody was quicker. Taking two steps at a time, he followed the girl. Halfway up, Cody came to a quick halt.

Marvin Muniot stood at the head of the stairs on the third-floor landing blocking the girl's way. In the rapid events of that night, Cody had watched the unpleasant spectacle of a strong-willed man disintegrating under the chain of ghastly, inexplicable events. It had not been pleasant to see horror stamped on the face of a man of Marvin Muniot's powerful character. But what he saw now was infinitely more unpleasant.

Muniot's face was a contorted, greenish countenance twisted by mingled terror and anguish. His mouth twitched, his eyes bulged as he blocked his daughter's progress up the stairs. He put out trembling, restraining hands.

"No, Mary! No!"

Mary Muniot, striving to pass him on the landing, spoke in a sharp, scared voice. "Let me by, Father. Something's wrong. I've got to know. You've no right to treat me like a child."

"Nothing is wrong, Mary," Muniot lied. His voice, an anguished, whimpering thing, stuck in his throat.

"Something *is* wrong," the girl said shrilly. She struggled with him briefly, tried to look down the corridor. She saw the broken door of Mrs. Kogut's room. "It's Mrs. Kogut. She's . . . Is she dead?"

Ella Kursh pushed past Cody, put her arms about the girl, "Come to bed, darling," she said softly.

"Why won't you tell me? Why won't any of you tell me?" the girl sobbed.

CODY stepped aside, watched them pass him, turn in the corridor and disappear together into the room from which the girl had emerged. Cody went on up the steps. He saw Hobbs lingering dumbly in the hallway behind Muniot. Cody looked at Muniot.

The terror was gone from the financier's eyes now. But evidence of it—a circlet of sweat beads—rested like the brim of a crown about his forehead.

Cody said softly: "She might as well know."

Again, panic, terror, pain crowded into Muniot's eyes. "No," he rasped vehemently. "She must never know."

Cody said nothing. One thought occupied his mind. This was the second time that Muniot had insisted upon taking extreme precautions to keep from his daughter the hideous events of that night. Cody could readily understand how any father might wish to shield a young daughter against an unpleasant sight. But to carry it to the extremes to which Muniot carried it did not make sense.

They went back into the room in which Wilma Kogut had died—Cody and Muniot and Hobbs.

Muniot looked at the gleaming corpse upon the floor, shuddered. "Will there be no end to this horrible business?" he asked.

Cody paid the question scant attention. He was suddenly aware of something that he had not noticed in the room before.

A wave of cold air struck him, brushed against him. He felt it on hands and face. He stepped over the two suitcases on the floor and walked to one corner of the room. A silk stand screen of the folding variety stood near the head of the bed. He went over, looked behind it.

There was a window behind the screen. The window was open wide. Chill air came in the room through the window, bellied the thin curtains.

"Was this window open when we first came into the room?" he demanded.

Hobbs, the butler, answered. "Y-y-yes, sir," he stammered timidly.

Cody turned to the window, leaned out and looked down. The ground, three floors below, looked far away. His eyes ranged across the vast Muniot estate, saw the shadowy silhouettes of trees, the gleaming whiteness of a fountain that was at present dry and the swelling, even roll of the dark, smooth lawn.

He looked directly beneath him at the side of the house. Muniot's house was made entirely of stone. Huge, jutting, irregular stones formed its sides. Thick, climbing vines—sturdy vines that, now leafless, clambered from ground to roof over the entire east side of the house—went past the window.

Cody became suddenly aware of the fact that a normally active man would find it very simple to climb the side of the house anywhere, from ground to roof. Those jutting stones and ropelike vines would make the task an easy one.

Was that, then, the explanation of the open window? Had the killer of Eugene Maynol and Wilma Kogut come from the outside, up the wall of the house? It was entirely possible. Yet, the person Marvin Muniot had seen on the steps had had white-clad legs. That suggested pajamas. Suggested that someone inside the house had committed the two murders.

ON the other hand, those pajamas could have been used for the very purpose of suggesting that. A person who, normally, would not be wearing pajamas might have put them on—over outer clothing, perhaps—to throw suspicion on someone in the household.

The front door bell rang for the second time that night. Cody pulled his head in from the window, went downstairs. Two patrolmen, carrying a stretcher, came in. They greeted Cody respectfully and followed him upstairs. He took them into the room where Eugene Maynol's body lay on the bed. They repressed amazement at the sight of the gold-stained corpse and strapped the body to a stretcher, covered it.

"There's another one here just like it," Cody said bitterly. "You'll have to come back later, when the medical examiner has had a look."

Just then Hobbs, the butler, rushed breathlessly into the room. "Inspector," he said, "I was looking out of the window—that window you were looking out of in Mrs. Kogut's room and I saw—I saw—"

"What did you see?" snapped Cody.

"A man," he exclaimed. "A man out there on the edge of the lawn beneath the oak tree."

Cody and the two patrolmen followed the excited Hobbs back to Wilma Kogut's room. Cody looked out the window. "I see nothing," he said irritably.

"But I saw him," insisted Hobbs. "He lit a cigarette and I saw his face quite distinctly for a moment. He was a young chap wearing a gray hat and a dark tie."

Cody located the huge oak tree, ranged sharp eyes about it without seeing anything else. Then he saw it. An orange pin-point glowed briefly. The tip of a cigarette!

The four men, led by Cody, sprinted down the stairs and out of the house.

Cody, his gun in his right hand as they rounded the house and headed for the tree, shouted a command. "Spread out!"

He went straight toward the tree himself. His feet pounded on the hard ground. He reached the tree, stared about in the lifting darkness. No one was there. He uttered an exclamation and reached down. The fingers of his left hand came up with a lighted cigarette, half-smoked. The unlighted tip of the cigarette was still moist. Cody punched the glowing end against the tree, knocking live ashes from it. He stuffed the cigarette into his pocket.

A bushy, tall hedge lay ahead of him, between him and the estate wall. He found an opening, plunged through it and looked about. Gray dawn streaked the horizon on ahead. But he saw no sign of anyone. The bushes rustled slightly to his left. He half wheeled. A hand clamped on his right wrist, pushed his gun hand down and away. A balled fist came up swiftly, heavily. Cody had a fleeting glimpse of a gray hat, a young, pleasant face and a black necktie with red, diagonal stripes.

Then the fist cracked sharply against the right side of his jaw. It was a clean, expert blow that brought no pain but carried unconsciousness. Cody slumped to the ground.

CHAPTER SIX

The Midas Curse

CODY heard a voice with a brogue say: "Hey, Joe, he's comin' around." He shook his head, realized that he was sitting on the ground and that a sturdy arm was propping him up.

The voice added a tone of respect to the brogue and asked: "You all right, Inspector?"

Cody pushed to his feet with the help of the uniformed figure beside him. He grinned at the burly cop.

"Thanks. I'm all right. Sorry I scented out on you like that, but I came through these bushes and some guy popped out and clipped me one."

"We didn't get the guy, sir. None of us so much as saw him. When we couldn't find anybody we noticed you'd turned up missing. We spent a couple minutes looking for you and just now found you. You sure you're all right, sir?"

"Quite all right," said Cody. "Where's Hobbs?"

"I guess he didn't come out with us."

Muniot's voice cut through the dawn-streaked darkness. There was a tinge of contempt in it. "It wouldn't be like Hobbs to take a chance like that."

Cody turned to the Irish patrolman. "The lad that hit me was a young fellow, well built, nearly six feet. Gray hat, regular features and a black tie with red stripes. Phone in an alarm on him when we get back in the house."

Hobbs admitted them at the front door.

"Where were you?" Cody demanded.

The frightened eyes in Hobbs' timid face were unequal to the task of meeting Cody's hard gray ones. "I thought, sir," he explained inadequately, "that one of us should stay in the house, sir."

"You mean you were afraid to stir out of the house," Cody challenged.

Hobbs looked at the hostile faces about him, looked away again nervously. "Yes, sir," he admitted throatily. "I was afraid."

They went into the study. Muniot, looking more worried than ever, said to Cody, "I've got to get Mary away from here," and Cody said nothing. The patrolman with the Irish brogue phoned in a description of the man who had attacked Inspector Cody.

"Anything else to be added, sir?" he asked.

Cody said: "He wasn't over nineteen years old."

The patrolman repeated this informa-

tion into the telephone, put down the receiver. The phone immediately rang.

"I'll take it," said Cody. He carried on a brief conversation with Lieutenant Muldoon of the Thirty-second Precinct. Then he hung up, turned to Muniot.

"We've got Doctor Tell in a cell by himself. The boys from the Thirty-second picked him up. They'll give his house a complete search and find out everything they can about the doctor. We may get a lead there."

"I hope so," said Muniot fervently.

Inspector Cody eyed the financier steadily. "There's one thing I want clear, Mr. Muniot," he said. "Your request—and orders given to me by higher-ups in the police department—brought me out here tonight to handle this thing alone. I was told to do it, taking into regard your wishes and disregarding all form or departmental red tape."

"Well?" asked Muniot, frowning.

"It's gone beyond the point where it's a one-man job," Cody said quietly. "More men are needed out here. Men to guard the place, men to work on angles inside this house."

Muniot's frown deepened. He nodded. "You have my permission to send for them," he agreed with obvious reluctance.

"There are things in this house that need clearing up. You'll be protected from unfavorable publicity in every way possible. But I must have assistance. And I must be given a free hand in questioning every person in the house. Ella Kursh, Samuel Self, Hobbs—even yourself."

"All right," said Muniot.

"And your daughter," Cody added.

"No!"

Once more, Cody saw mingled fear and anger leap into Muniot's eyes. Cody shrugged.

"All right," he said easily. "Let it drop."

CODY issued orders for the removal of Eugene Maynol's body from the house. The two patrolmen went on upstairs. Fifteen minutes later they drove away with the first of the gold-painted victims and Cody and Marvin Muniot sat alone in the study.

They sat there silently, each occupied with his own thoughts. Finally Cody fumbled in his pocket, found the half-smoked cigarette he had come across beneath the oak tree. He examined it.

It was a plain-tipped *Melachrino*.

He juggled it in his right hand for a moment, then dropped it back into his pocket. He began to talk.

"Suppose," he began thoughtfully, "we leave Doctor Tell and the young fellow who was out on the lawn out of consideration and try to figure the angles on everyone in the house."

Muniot, his sharp mind instantly eager to wrestle with any problem, nodded assent. "Which person do you wish to discuss first?" he asked.

"Ella Kursh," said Cody. "Tell me about her."

Muniot laughed. "Ella came here sixteen years ago in answer to an ad I placed in a newspaper asking for a woman who could care for my house and Mary, my child, who was then five years old. I wasn't at all impressed with her. She arrived while I was in the city, spent the afternoon here. When I returned home, she and Mary were the most inseparable of friends. Gruff, unfriendly to everyone else, she lives for Mary alone. She's been a mother to her."

Cody nodded. "She seems to get a clean bill of health. And she is to receive one hundred thousand dollars when you die. The deaths of Eugene Maynol and Wilma Kogut scarcely would enrich her. Unless, then, she murdered them out of sheer jealousy, she hardly could have a sane motive for wishing them dead."

"Such petty jealousy would scarcely be a motive," Muniot said.

"Right," agreed Cody truthfully. "It would not constitute a motive. Then we have Hobbs."

"Almost the same things apply to Hobbs. He has only been in my service for five years. He came highly recommended. He is more of a timid automaton than a human being."

"But he listens at keyholes and his timidity may be entirely assumed."

Muniot shrugged. "I have been too busy making money to pay close attention to my own household," Muniot admitted. "Perhaps Hobbs is curious. At least, so far as I know, he has never divulged anything that he has overheard. I believe he is loyal to me. And I believe his timidity is genuine. Nor would he profit by the two murders which took place here tonight."

"Then," said Cody slowly, "that leaves Hobbs in the clear, too, without a sane reason."

"Who is next?"

"You," said Cody.

Muniot looked startled, then laughed softly. "You are thorough. Well, what about me? I was in the library with you when Mrs. Kogut was murdered. And what would be my motive?"

"I don't know," said Cody. "You'd swindled these people. But since you have only seven months to live, it doesn't seem likely that you'd invite them to your house and kill them lest, after twenty years, they suddenly attempt to bring evidence and undesirable publicity against you. Pretty thin motive, though."

"Quite thin," agreed Muniot laughing. "I might have developed a sadistic streak, however."

"Yes," agreed Cody, "but we're discussing sane motives, now. How about your daughter?"

Muniot's face clouded, then he laugh-

ed. "She's twenty-one, a student at Columbia University, single and the heir to ten million dollars. And she would have no motive."

"Unless," said Cody, "all three of your guests had been murdered. Then she would be heir to ten million, three hundred thousand. And that brings us to Samuel Self. What do you know about him?"

"Nothing," said Muniot. "He came out of a downtown breadline. He claims to have been a laborer in Jersey City during the past three years. My lawyers are checking the Civic Charities' records on him."

"For all you know," said Cody, "he may have a criminal record."

"Yes," Muniot admitted, frowning.

"And he has a sane motive," Cody mused. "Yesterday, Samuel Self was potentially heir to one hundred thousand dollars. At this moment, he is potentially heir to three times that much due to the deaths of Mrs. Kogut and Maynol."

"That's true."

"Suppose," said Cody rising, "we go upstairs and have a little talk with the bald-headed laborer."

THEY went up to the third floor, rapped on the door of Samuel Self's room. There was no response.

"These working men are sound sleepers," Muniot said. The lightness he tried to put in his voice wasn't there. His face was white.

"There's no use trying to kid ourselves," Cody said grimly. "You know what we'll find in that room, I know."

Muniot rasped: "God, another one?"

"Is there a key to this door somewhere in the house?" Cody asked. "There's no point to breaking down every door in the place."

"There's a board with duplicate keys to every room in the kitchen. I'll get it for you."

Muniot went down the stairs, returned shortly. He walked slowly, painfully, like a man who has put on age in the incredible space of a few hours. His hand trembled as he tried to insert the key in the lock. Cody took the key away from him, opened the door. The room was dark. Cody found the wall switch, turned on lights.

Samuel Self, the giant laborer who had told them a few hours ago that he preferred dying in a comfortable bed to freezing to death in a breadline, had been given his choice.

He lay on the bed, covers thrown back from his body, quite dead. Blood was on his pajama coat over the heart. His face was placid, untroubled and painted a horrible, gleaming gold. His bald head gleamed like some monstrous, gilded Easter egg. Fog drifted in a widely opened window of the bedroom.

A raucous, throaty noise brought Cody wheeling sharply around from his contemplation of corpse and window.

Marvin Midas Muniot had gone to pieces. His face was a sickly, ashen gray. His teeth chattered and the words he forced out between them were shrill, cackling.

"Three of them dead," he wailed. "And Tell said four would die."

Cody grabbed Muniot by both shoulders, shook him until the words jumbled incoherently in his throat. Muniot jerked away, backed toward the open window.

"Cut it out," Cody rasped.

Muniot's eyes glistened with a wild, unreasoning light. "It's the curse," he shouted. "The Midas Curse! Tell was right. Three of them are dead. And one more will die. King Midas killed his own daughter. Mary will be the next. Mary . . ."

His frantic, crazy words were filling the room as Cody reached him, grabbed his

right lapel, bunched it roughly in his fingers. Cody swung.

The blow caught Muniot squarely on the point of the chin. Muniot's legs buckled, he went down. He sat there silently, wagging his head from one side to another. After a while he rubbed his chin, looked up at Cody with eyes from which the wild sparkle was gone. His voice was soft, sane.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's better," Cody observed, helping Muniot to his feet. "Losing our heads won't get us anywhere. They're dropping off like flies in this house."

Muniot asked hopefully: "Do you think you'll find—"

"The person responsible for this string of murders?" Cody's voice and face were bitter. "That should be simple. At the rate they are being killed, all I'll have to do will be sit tight until just one person is left. And then arrest whoever that is."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Madness for Motive

CODY looked at Muniot's pale face and the bitterness was gone from his next words. "Forget it," he suggested. "This case is giving me the jitters too, I guess. We're not getting anywhere. We don't know what the motive is. We don't know who the killer is, or whether that killer is finished with his butchery. We don't even know what kind of weapon was used."

"But we do know," pointed out Muniot, "that the persons who died all were persons to whom I'd left modest fortunes. Doctor Tell was right. It was the touch of my gold—"

"I know," snapped Muniot a trifle impatiently, "the Midas Curse. Suppose we forget it for a moment. I'm inclined to feel that behind all of this bloody business is someone with a motive. Someone anx-

ious to lay hands on your entire fortune. About ten million, isn't it?"

"But who—"

Cody shrugged. "That still leaves us as far from the solution as ever, apparently. Leaving you and I out of it for a moment, there are five persons who might, possibly, be involved. Hobbs, Miss Kursh, your daughter, Doctor Tell and the young man who escaped from the grounds tonight.

"Doctor Tell fits in the pattern somewhere. We don't know where nor how. He couldn't have committed this last murder, for he was in jail. He has a swell alibi.

"The open windows in the rooms where the murders took place may or may not mean something. Either they are camouflage employed to deceive us by the actual killer, or they are very important. The extent to which the young stranger out on the lawn is involved depends entirely on the true significance of those opened windows.

"Your daughter is three hundred thousand dollars richer since this last murder. A lot of persons would readily commit murder for less than that, but not if they were already heir to ten million dollars.

"Miss Kursh has no apparent motive. In no way does she stand to profit by the murders of Maynol, Mrs. Kogut and Self. She will receive one hundred thousand—more than sufficient, I judge, for her needs—when you die. Why should she murder anyone?"

"The same applies to Hobbs. His pointing out the man on the lawn tonight got us out of the house. While we were out, this last murder was committed. That doesn't look good. The man outside might have been a confederate of Hobbs. But again—where is the motive? Hobbs may have been too genuinely frightened to leave the house. And he may have been tricking us.

"Nor can we forget Doctor Tell and the young man on the lawn. Somewhere, somehow, they fit into this picture. But again—no motive."

They were silent for a while and Muniot, Cody observed, seemed to be weighing something. He spoke at last. "Suppose we go downstairs, Inspector." He eyed the golden corpse of Samuel Self distastefully. "There is something I think I had better tell you."

"All right," Cody agreed. They locked the room in which the dead man lay and went downstairs. When they were seated in the study, with the door closed, Muniot frowned, began to speak.

"I hardly know how to tell you this, Inspector," he said. "It's a rather rotten story and I'm not proud of it. It had its beginning twenty-two years ago, when I came East from Iowa. I was young and ambitious and entirely without a conscience in those days.

"I had come to New York to conquer the big city." Muniot smiled ruefully. "It was the other way around. New York gave me a licking. I had one good suit of clothes—on my back—and a fairly smooth manner. I left New York, went to Middletown, New York, to see about a selling job. I didn't get the job and I was broke.

"I met a girl there. Her name was Norma Christianson. She fell in love with me. We were both young, reckless. Perhaps it was the usual, casual affair. I prefer to think, even now, that I really loved her. She gave me two hundred dollars. We were to get married in New York. I was to use part of that money to buy tickets for our honeymoon trip to New York. I bought only one ticket."

Cody said nothing.

"I went to New York by myself," Muniot continued, "after having known her but two days. With what I had left of her money, I had bought stock certificates

printed. Penn Supreme. I sold them, cleaned up. That money—her money—was the foundation for the fortune I now have.

"Later, I learned what happened. Norma had a child. She took the baby, when it came, to a foundlings' home. Then she returned to her home and committed suicide.

"When the child was five years old, I took it from the orphanage. Adopted my own baby. That child is my daughter, Mary. I paid heavily, of course, to have this true story suppressed. To the world in general, Mary is my adopted child. Actually, she is my own daughter."

Cody was silent, thoughtful for a full moment. "On at least three occasions tonight, Mr. Muniot," he said gently, "you denied me the right to question your daughter or to let me apprise her of what has happened here. Why should you?"

Muniot paled, seemed to be pondering the advisability of answering. At last he spoke. "I might as well tell you. I've scarcely been a model father," he admitted. "I love my daughter. But I've spent little time with her. I know, really, little about her. I've been far too busy amassing fortunes to learn to live simply, placidly.

"When I first brought her into my home as a child, I had difficulty obtaining a nurse who could manage her. She cut the hands of two of her nurses with a small pocket knife. Another, she scratched on the face with a pin. Perhaps the nurses were partly to blame. Perhaps it was just childish cruelty. Specialists were undecided whether—at the age of five—Mary was perfectly normal or not.

"Then Miss Kursh came. Her love for the child was so deep, so unselfish, that nothing like that ever happened again.

"Mary is twenty-one now. When she was fifteen, I had her examined by alien-

ists who pronounced her well balanced, sane in every respect."

Cody nodded.

"Yet," continued Muniot, "there has been one unspoken rule in this house. Mary is to have her own way in things that are not definitely harmful. She has always had her own way. She cares nothing about social events. I rather wanted her to go to an exclusive girls' school. She's had her way, instead. She is going to Columbia.

"A few months ago, I had plans for her Christmas holidays. I gave them up when I found she wanted to go, alone, to South Carolina. I have never attempted to cross her wishes in any way."

"Why?" asked Cody.

"Because," replied Muniot dully, "I have been afraid. Afraid, despite everything specialists told me, that any argument, any scene, any emotional disturbance might throw her mind off balance."

"Why should it?" demanded Cody.

"Her mother committed suicide," Muniot reminded him. "Her grandparents—Norma Christianson's parents—were quite normal. Norma's father repaired umbrellas. But his parents—Norma Christianson's grandparents, Mary's great-grandparents, both died insane."

Cody nodded. "Business of skipping every other generation, eh?"

"Perhaps. Besides, there was the sister of the girl I treated so badly. Her name was Elizabeth Christianson. I never met her in the brief time that I knew Norma. When I adopted Mary, I learned that Norma's sister, Elizabeth, who was also unmarried, had come home the day Norma committed suicide. Elizabeth went mad. She ran amuck that afternoon in the streets. Slashed three men with a knife. Almost killed one of them. They were entirely blameless, of course. And Elizabeth, you'll remember, was Mary's aunt—the sister of Mary's mother."

Cody nodded again. His face was somber, thoughtful. Muniot's face was white.

"So you see," said Muniot, "Doctor Tell was right. My destiny has been associated with blood and violence and death. It's been an unhappy one. And Doctor Tell said that still a fourth person would die. Frankly, that frightens me. I love Mary enough not to want to see her dead."

He paused, went on with difficulty. "But I'd prefer her dead," he concluded hoarsely, "rather than to think that all the things that have happened here tonight were. . . ."

MUNIOT got out of his chair, paced up and down, unable to put into words the awful thought that tormented him. And Cody, watching the pain that lined his face, felt deeply, truly sorry for the man. For he knew what Marvin Muniot was thinking.

It was—that the lovely Mary Muniot, whose relatives had had the insidious germ of madness in their blood, was herself the killer of Eugene Maynol and Wilma Kogut and Samuel Self.

It was a ghastly situation. A father tortured by the hideous half-suspicion that his own daughter might, possibly, be a murderess.

Cody considered the depressing angle of madness. The gold-painted bodies of the victims. These, certainly, were not the work of a person fully sane. Those golden corpses had some mighty significance. What, he did not know.

Someone, with a queer, hidden kink in his or her mind, had murdered the three guests. That gold paint had some significance. If he only knew what, he would know where to look for the killer. Specialists had, despite her family history, pronounced Mary Muniot sane. Yet, Cody believed, madness entered the picture somewhere as at least a contributory motive. It made the apprehension of the guilty person that much more difficult.

A sudden suspicion grew in Cody's mind. "What," he asked Muniot, "became of Elizabeth Christianson?"

Muniot stopped pacing, turned his worried face to Cody. "She was sent, of course, to an institution.

"They had her there from Nineteen Twelve until Nineteen Seventeen. She was discharged as cured. She disappeared that same week. I've tried to locate her, with no success. As far as I know she's never been seen since."

Cody scowled, said: "It would be a devil of a job trying to locate her now. No one knows what she looks like, now. That was careless."

"What was careless?" asked Muniot.

"Ever letting Elizabeth Christianson get out of your sight. Don't you see it? She was the sister of the girl you wronged. Potentially, then, Elizabeth Christianson might have been the strongest enemy you could have made in your life. Doubly dangerous, since she had the subtle germ of insanity in her blood."

Muniot, white-faced, agreed. "Yes, you are right." He paused, frowned. "But," he protested, "Elizabeth Christianson has been missing for fifteen, sixteen years. In all that time she has not, apparently, tried to harm me in any way. Why, then, would she be involved in the murders that have just taken place here.

"For that matter," Muniot concluded, "why would she murder three persons who were guests? Why, if she sought revenge, wouldn't she murder me?"

Cody sighed. "All of that," he admitted, "is quite reasonable. I don't know the answers to those questions. It doesn't make much sense anyway we figure it."

The phone in the study rang and Cody answered it at once. The precinct detectives were calling to report the results of their search of Doctor Howard Tell's home.

Cody talked to them at length, alternating crisp questions with periods of long silence. He showed obvious tenseness as he neared the end of his conversation.

"Spell that name," he demanded.

Then he ordered sharply: "Release him at once. Put a twenty-four hour tail on him. Anyone can go in the house, understand, but no one is to leave. Notify me here the minute anyone goes there."

CODY hung up and there was triumph in the eyes he turned upon Muniot. "Doctor Tell, from his cell in the Thirty-second's lock-up, prophesied the death of Samuel Self over a cup of tea."

"It's fantastic," Muniot exclaimed. "Isn't there anything that can be done about the man?"

Cody shrugged. "He was in jail when Samuel Self was murdered. He couldn't have murdered Self. I've ordered Doctor Tell released."

"But—" Muniot framed a protest.

"Don't worry," said Cody, "there'll be policemen watching every move he makes. Watching him, his home. Incidentally, they unearthed something at his home. Everything seemed perfectly legitimate there. They found a crystal ball—the kind fortune tellers use. We can hardly arrest him for having such a thing in his possession unless it can be proved he charged money for his crystal-gazing seances.

"But they found something that, to us, is vastly more important. In looking over his records, they found some notations about a woman patient Doctor Tell has been treating for tuberculosis laryngitis. She's been visiting him, according to his records, almost every day."

The door bell rang. Muniot half rose, sat down again when Cody snapped, "Let Hobbs answer it." Muniot put a show of interest in his face.

"Who," he asked politely, "is the woman who has been coming to see Doctor Tell?"

Cody grinned. His eyes were bright, elated. "Elizabeth Christianson," he said.

Muniot sat forward in his chair. He was tense, excited. "Then, if he knows where she is, can't you make him tell us?"

"Doctor Tell isn't the sort who tells things readily. Unless he sees them in his tea leaves first. But Elizabeth Christianson may visit his office again. My men will have his home surrounded. She can get in—but she won't be able to get out."

"Splendid," said Muniot. "Then perhaps . . ."

Muniot never finished what he was about to say. The study door swung open and a policeman pushed a man into the room.

"Hello, Inspector," said the patrolman. "Hello, Mr. Muniot. I found this young fellow trying to climb over the wall, so I thought I'd better bring him around and let you have a look."

He gave his prisoner another sharp shove. Cody got to his feet jubilantly.

"Maybe," he muttered, "we *are* getting some place." He turned to the young man who had stumbled sullenly toward the middle of the room. "All right, you," Cody snapped. "Start talking."

The young man was handsome, dark. He wore a gray hat and a black necktie with diagonal red stripes. He was the man they had failed to catch earlier in the morning outside Muniot's home; the man who had lurked beneath the oak tree; the man who had knocked Inspector Cody out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

College Boy

THE youth's face was flushed. It wasn't a bad face. Mouth and lips were good. The nose was straight. The eyes, a trifle sullen now, were dark and well-spaced. It made a handsome ensemble.

Beneath the rather collegiate cut of the dark suit he wore, were the contours of a nicely shaped, athletic body. Broad shoulders, full chest, flat hips and, below them, tapering, muscular legs.

The dark eyes flashed curiously at Marvin Muniot, came to rest blankly on Inspector Cody.

"I said you'd better start talking," Cody barked.

The young man said nothing.

Cody stepped close to the youth, began to frisk him with quick, efficient thoroughness. From a side coat pocket Cody took a flat, cardboard box. It was half filled with cigarettes. They were *Melachrinos*. They had plain tips. Cody grunted his satisfaction, continued to search the youth's pockets.

He found some letters in an inside pocket. They were mimeographed form letters beginning: "Dear Friend." The envelopes were gone and there was still no clue to the youth's identity. One of the letters was on Columbia University stationery.

"College boy, eh?" asked Cody.

The dark-haired youth didn't answer.

Cody completed his search without finding anything of importance. There was no weapon.

"How old are you, son?" he asked.

Still no answer.

Cody grinned, turned away and suddenly whirled. For the second time that night he used his fists. The blow, unexpected and backed by all the strength of Cody's wide shoulders, cracked against the youngster's jaw. The young man went glassy-eyed, thudded to the floor. Cody turned to the patrolman.

"Put him in a chair." Without looking at Muniot, he added: "Get some whiskey. We'll bring him out of it and he'll talk."

Cody was right. Five minutes later, the youth opened his eyes, stared vacantly

at all of them for a long moment and then recognized the inspector. He forced a smile at Cody.

"I guess I had that coming," he said softly. "Now we're even."

The smile was friendly, the sense of sportsmanship was there and Cody couldn't keep his voice hard or his face straight.

"Glad you feel that way about it. You knocked me out, I knocked you out. Now, suppose you tell me your name."

"Jim," came the reply.

"All right, Jim," said Cody. "And the last name?"

The youth shook his head, smiled wanly.

"Just Jim."

"O. K.," agreed Cody. "We'll let that pass for a minute. How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"College boy? Columbia?"

"Maybe."

Cody rubbed the point of his chin reminiscently. "Do a little boxing at college?"

The youth grinned. "Maybe."

CODY'S voice got rough. "All right, son," he barked. "I've given you a chance to tell me things. Stall around just a little bit more and see what it gets you," he promised. "Now! You were the lad that was loafing outside under the tree, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"And the one that clipped me on the chin."

The youth smiled. "Yes. I'm sorry about that. Really sorry. But four of you were after me. And you had a gun."

"What were you doing out there?"

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"I can't tell you."

Cody lost his temper. "You can't tell us," he snarled. "I suppose the spot you're in doesn't mean anything to you."

The youth shrugged. "You found me

trespassing on private property tonight. Twice. It's against the law, but I doubt if it's serious enough to get me anything in court but a fine."

"So you doubt if it's serious," Cody mimicked sarcastically. "I suppose it doesn't mean anything to you that three persons have been murdered in this house; two men and a woman."

Color seeped out of the young man's face. He looked into Cody's hard, gray eyes with the expression of a man who feels he is the victim of some outlandish joke. He read truth there and the last vestige of color fled from his face. He grasped Cody's arm. His voice, when he found it, was hoarse, eager.

"Murder?" he gasped. "And a woman? Is she . . . Is Mary all right?"

"So you know Mary Muniot, do you?" Cody asked softly.

The youth's strong fingers bit into Cody's arm. "Answer me!" he shouted. "Is she all right?"

Cody's face was hard as he pressed his advantage. "Quit shouting," he snapped. "I'll answer you when you tell me your last name."

The youth's voice thundered in the room. He whirled Cody about to face him.

"Is she all right?" he demanded. "Is she all right?"

The door of the study was flung open suddenly. It swung wide, cracked against the wall. Mary Muniot ran into the room. Ella Kursh trailed after her. There was solicitude in the housekeeper's usually inscrutable face. Mary Muniot ran directly to the dark, handsome youth. His arms went about her.

"What is it, Jim?" she asked. "What are they doing to you?"

Marvin Muniot was suddenly beside them, his hand on his daughter's arm. His voice was soft, pleading. "Mary,"

he asked, "what does it mean? Who is he?"

The young man holding her said: "Don't tell them, Mary."

"They might as well know," she said. She pushed out of his arms, stood facing her father. "Dad," she began, "two months ago when I went to South Carolina for a vacation, I didn't go alone. I went with Jim, here. Jim is only nineteen. We went to South Carolina because we learned that the age laws would permit us to be married there."

Incredulity, then anger, found their way into Muniot's face. "Mary," he said, "you mean that you're married to this boy?"

"Yes," she replied.

"It's unthinkable," he said bitterly. "You haven't finished college yet. And he's nineteen. You're wrecking your lives over an immature infatuation." His voice rose angrily. "I'll have it annulled. Why did you keep it a secret from me?"

THE girl smiled. There was little mirth in the smile. "That's why we kept it a secret," she replied. "We were afraid you could, would have it annulled. But it isn't . . ."

Cody interrupted. He looked at Mary Muniot. Her chin was high, her eyes sparkling. He looked at the blank-faced housekeeper, Ella Kursh, and was amused to see that even her granite countenance was not always inscrutable. She was looking at the young man and amazement, unbelief and bewilderment were stamped in her face and dark eyes. And Cody spoke to Mary Muniot.

"You go to your room, with Miss Kursh," he suggested in a soft, paternal voice. "Your father and I will speak to your husband. He seems a clean-cut, decent chap." Cody smiled at her. "If he is everything he seems and both of you care for each other, I think we should be

able to bring your father around to your way of looking at things."

Mary Muniot smiled at Cody, flashed him a grateful glance. "Thank you," she said. With Miss Kursh, she left the room.

When the door of the study had closed behind them, Cody turned to the youth. "Perhaps you'll tell us your name, now," he said gently.

The dark-haired youth smiled, nodded. "My name," he said, "is Tell. James Tell. Is something wrong?"

Cody, unable to keep amazement out of his face, had recoiled two steps as though the young man's words had carried actual physical impetus. Muniot had made an unintelligible exclamation.

"Your father," snapped Cody. "What does he do? What is his name?"

The youth looked puzzled for a moment, before answering in a matter-of-fact tone.

"My father's a doctor," he replied. "His name is Howard F. Tell."

For nearly sixty seconds there was quiet in the study. Tension accumulated in that brooding silence. Cody sucked in breath, started to speak. His words strangled in his throat.

High in that quiet house, sounded a piercing scream—a woman's scream. Its prolonged shrillness split the silence, reverberated for a moment, seemed to hang in air. Then it died out. There was the thud of a falling body. Then silence.

CHAPTER NINE

33 Avon Place

MUNIOT made a low, moaning noise in his throat, took two staggering steps forward speechlessly. James Tell went white, started toward the study door. The patrolman, blank-faced, grabbed the youth, looked at Cody inquiringly.

Cody rasped: "Stay here, all of you. I'll see."

James Tell struggled wildly to break away from the patrolman. "Let me go," he pleaded and turned his dark eyes to Cody. "That was Mary. Let me go or I'll—"

Cody stepped close to the youth, riveted cold gray eyes on him. "You be good, son," he said with soft firmness. "I said I'd see."

Something in those piercing gray eyes took the strength out of the youth's frantic resistance. He subsided. Cody sprinted across the study, yanked open the door and plunged out into the hall. He took the stairs two at a time to the second floor. He looked up and down the hallway.

Outside a back room, near an open door, he saw two figures on the floor. He hurried back there.

Mary Muniot lay there. She was very still, very quiet. The housekeeper sat beside the limp body of the girl, cradled that young body in her arms.

She clucked the girl tenderly in thin arms, hugging her to her flat chest, crooning unintelligible words to her, rocking her slightly back and forth as a mother might rock a child.

"What's wrong?" demanded Cody.

Ella Kursh stared at him dumbly for a moment.

"Mary went in there to ask Hobbs something," she replied, jerking her head in the direction of the open door. "She fainted, the poor child." She began to rock the girl in her arms once more.

Cody went into the room. It was a bedroom. Lights were on. He did not see Vincent Hobbs at once. Then he saw him.

The butler lay to the right of the doorway near the wall. His clothes, at the left side of his chest, were stained with blood. One hand was clenched; the other lay hidden beneath him. His dead face stared

up at Cody with a weird, fixed expression of amazement. Vincent Hobbs' face and hair were gleaming gold.

Cody knelt beside the murdered man and turned him over. He found what he had expected to find. The death blow had been a stab wound that had pierced Hobbs' body. Blood had seeped into his coat near the left shoulder blade.

He went back out into the hall. He stooped down, got his arms about the girl.

"Let me have her," he said brusquely.

Ella Kursh looked up at him defiantly, tightened her thin arms about the girl.

"No," she said.

Cody curbed his impatience, spoke softly.

"We must get her to bed. Don't you see? It's been a bad shock. She'll need medical attention."

THE gaunt housekeeper nodded dumbly, let Cody lift the girl out of her arms. She got up and walked ahead, opened the door of the girl's room. Cody put Mary Muniot on the bed.

"Miss Kursh," he said, "get Mary's clothes together. Get the things she needs. I think she had better go to a hospital—get away from here."

Ella Kursh nodded.

"I'll get everything ready," she promised. Her eyes were pleading. "The child will be all right, won't she?"

"I hope so," said Cody.

Mary Muniot stirred, at that moment, on the bed. For a moment, as she regained consciousness, terror burned in her eyes. Then, suddenly, she was calm. She looked up at Ella Kursh, smiled.

"Poor Ella," she said softly. "You didn't think I'd keep any secrets from you, did you? And I got married and didn't let you know. That hurt you, didn't it, Ella?"

Ella Kursh said, huskily: "Yes. That hurt me."

Cody thought he saw tears in the housekeeper's dark eyes.

"But you'll like my husband, Ella. You'll like Jimmy. That's his name. Jimmy. Jimmy Tell. His father's a doctor. Doctor Howard Tell."

Ella Kursh turned away.

"I'll get the things ready," she said.

Mary Muniot's puzzled eyes went to Cody's. Cody said: "We're moving you to the hospital for a rest, young lady."

Remembrance seemed to flood back, then. Mary Muniot's face became filled with horror.

"Poor Vincent," she said throatily. "I'll never forget how he lay there. That hideous gold all over his face. The blood—"

"You'll have to forget it," Cody told her firmly. "Don't let yourself think of it."

"I'll try," she promised. "I'll try not to think of it. And you'll convince Dad that he shouldn't smash Jimmy's happiness and mine. You will, won't you?"

Cody's eyes could not hold hers.

"I'll try," he said gruffly and went out of the room. He went back to the study, told the others what had happened.

"I want your permission, Mr. Muniot," he said, "to send Mary to a hospital. Miss Kursh may go along with her. The girl could stand a change of scene."

"That will be quite all right," Muniot assented.

"May I go too?" James Tell inquired eagerly.

Cody shook his head, grinned.

"No," he said gently. "You must remember that we know nothing about you." He grinned. "Until we do find out about you, I'm going to keep you on ice. I can make you do it whether you like it or not, but I'm going to ask you first whether you want to do it of your own free will."

"Do what?" Young Tell was puzzled.

"Go to jail," said Cody. "Have a nice,

quiet, safe cell until you're needed again."

For a moment resentment flamed in Tell's eyes. Then the sporting angle of the thing struck him and he smiled.

"All right," he said.

AT eight o'clock that morning, Cody and Muniot sat alone in the study. The patrolman had taken James Tell to the precinct station. Mary Muniot, accompanied by the zealously faithful Ella Kursh, had gone in an ambulance to the hospital. Cody had left detailed instructions with a police guard that he had ordered placed outside the door of Mary Muniot's hospital room. And a squad of detectives were prying into the history of James Tell in the meanwhile.

"What now?" Muniot inquired of Cody.

"Nothing," said Cody, shrugging broad shoulders. "There's nothing for us to do but wait. The next move is the murderer's."

"But," protested Muniot, "we don't know who the murderer is."

"I think I do," said Cody evenly.

Muniot leaned forward. His bearing was tense. "What do you mean?"

The strident jangling of the telephone cut in, suddenly, upon their conversation. Cody said, "Yes," three times and slapped the receiver back on its prong.

"Come along," he snapped at Muniot. "A woman's just gone in Doctor Tell's house. It may be Elizabeth Christianson."

There was a fast police car outside. Cody climbed in behind the wheel, pulled it away from the house. He left the siren open and the accelerator near the floor most of the way to Avon Place. He pulled up before the combined office and living quarters of Doctor Howard Tell and a detective came over to him from a building across the street.

"She's still in there, Inspector," he reported.

Cody nodded, motioned to Muniot and went up the steps of the building and through the vestibule. He stopped at the door of the office, palmed the knob and pushed it open. He had his gun out of its shoulder holster as he burst into the room, followed by Muniot.

Doctor Tell lay on the floor of the office. He lay on his back. His dark little face was contorted, but not colored by golden paint.

A steel shaft, round and slender and gleaming in the sunlight, protruded from his chest. Almost two feet of it was visible. The rest, Cody guessed, was buried in the man's body. At the end of the thin shaft was a carved, ebony handle. Doctor Tell was dead.

Someone moaned somewhere in the room.

Cody crossed the room to a place where thick green drapes hung. He parted the drapes, revealed an alcove in which was a washstand and a case built into the wall that held rows of medicine bottles. On the floor of the alcove a woman lay. She moaned once. Cody knelt down beside her.

"Are you Elizabeth Christianson?" he asked.

Ella Krush, Marvin Muniot's gaunt housekeeper, nodded, groaned, forced a single word out.

"Yes."

"You killed Tell and you know you're dying?"

"Yes."

MARVIN MUNIOT stood at the entrance of the alcove aghast. Cody half lifted the woman and a small bottle rolled to one corner of the alcove. The conventional druggist's label with its red skull and crossbones was on the bottle.

"You killed the others, too, didn't you?"

She did not reply, did not look at Cody. Her dark eyes fastened on Muniot.

"All of your money," she gasped, "all of it, must go to Mary. All of it. It is Mary's money. The money had the Midas Curse on it. Doctor Tell . . ."

The woman's voice trailed off. She shuddered and her body went limp. Cody got up.

Muniot asked: "Is she . . ."

Cody nodded.

"It was a weird plot," he told Muniot, "whereby Tell hoped to obtain your entire fortune."

"I still don't quite understand all of it," Muniot said.

Cody continued thoughtfully.

"I think, roughly, it worked like this: Tell learned that his son and your daughter were in love. He aided the romance. When they were married, he was within striking distance of your fortune.

"He was a throat specialist. He treated your housekeeper for tuberculous laryngitis. I should have realized that that disease accounted for the huskiness of her voice. From Ella Kursh—or Elizabeth Christianson, to use her correct name—he learned details of your household, of your life. He learned all the facts of your affair with Mary's mother. And he learned what was more important to him—that Ella Kursh was not mentally normal."

Muniot nodded.

"You saw tonight," Cody resumed, "the fiendish ingenuity of the man. He was a master in the art of suggestion. He had us—and we're sane men—half convinced of his mystic powers, of his ability to read strange things in stars, in tea leaves. He could make a slave of a woman like Ella Kursh. He did, in fact.

"Subtly, without making himself a direct accessory, he hinted at murder. He convinced this woman, whose brain was none too strong, that your money had a

golden curse. The Midas Curse. To anyone but its rightful owner—Mary Muniot—that money would bring death. And the persons who died would turn to gold. Doctor Tell hoped, of course, that enough of that talk would put in the mind of Ella Kursh a single thought. That you must die.

"When you were dead Tell planned to use your daughter's love for his son and his son's love for a father to obtain your money."

Cody paused.

"Then came an ironic twist. Doctors condemned you to die. Your murder no longer was necessary, for the marriage could have been kept secret for another seven months. But Doctor Tell had planted a fantastic murder germ in a mind that was not normal. So, when you willed the money to Eugene Maynol and the others, Ella Kursh's mad hatred centered on them. Instead of murdering you—as Tell originally had intended—the unbalanced woman murdered your guests."

"But," objected Muniot, "why didn't she murder me?"

"I think there's another ironic twist there," said Cody. "There can be little doubt but that she fully intended to murder you that day sixteen years ago when she first came to your home. But she fell in love with your daughter and stayed on as your housekeeper. And, loving your daughter with such a mad, worshipping affection, she couldn't bring herself to murder you, even though she hated you and fully believed herself—as Tell had subtly suggested—to be the divine instrument of The Midas Curse. Your guests—and even Hobbs, for whom she had no dislike—she was quite willing to kill so that Mary could have the money you left to them."

"But what of the gold paint?" asked Muniot.

"That was the result of Tell's impres-

sive hocus-pocus about the Midas Curse. He convinced her that it was foretold that the visitation of death would likewise leave a gold-stained corpse. That the person to die would turn to gold. Feeling herself to be the instrument of the curse, she probably spent many worried hours over that point. Death was simple. But a golden corpse—as the Midas Curse specified—was something else again. Taking every one of Tell's suggestions literally, I suppose she finally hit upon the idea of painting those she killed with gold paint. And here's the weapon she used."

CODY stepped out into the office, followed by Muniot. From a desk he took an umbrella. Rather, part of an umbrella. The handle was missing. The center rod from which the ribs projected was a hollow, sheath-like tube. Was, in fact, a scabbard.

Cody went over to the dead man. Gently he extricated the slim, steel, rounded blade. It came to a point at the end. He put the end into the tube, pushed it down inside. Near the handle were threads. He twisted the handle until it was quite tight and held it up for Muniot's inspection.

"Ingenious, eh?" he asked. "Her father repaired them once, you've told me. He probably made this."

"But why did she kill Doctor Tell?"

"Until today," Cody said, "she didn't know that your daughter had married his son. Her twisted mind, ever suspicious,

leaped immediately to the correct conclusion. Doctor Tell was trying to get the money that one day would belong to Mary. Incidentally, I locked up young Tell to prevent something like this overtaking him."

Cody hesitated. He wasn't much good at this Cupid business. But he'd given Mary Muniot his promise.

"I don't think though," he continued carefully, "anything would have happened to him when Ella Kursh saw how much he loved your daughter and how much she loved him. Anyone with two eyes could see that."

Muniot shot Cody a suspicious glance and Cody's face got red.

"You really think so?" demanded Muniot. "You really think it's that? That young Tell had nothing to do with this? That he isn't after Mary's money?"

"I think he's all right," Cody replied gravely. "In any case my men will find out for you. And if he gets a good report, y'know, Mr. Muniot I don't think I'd step down too hard on those two kids."

Cody felt somehow better when Muniot answered.

"I'll not," promised the man who had seven months to live. "If they can get any happiness out of life, then they deserve that happiness."

Muniot chuckled dryly.

"I spent fifty-two years trying—and all I could get was ten million dollars."

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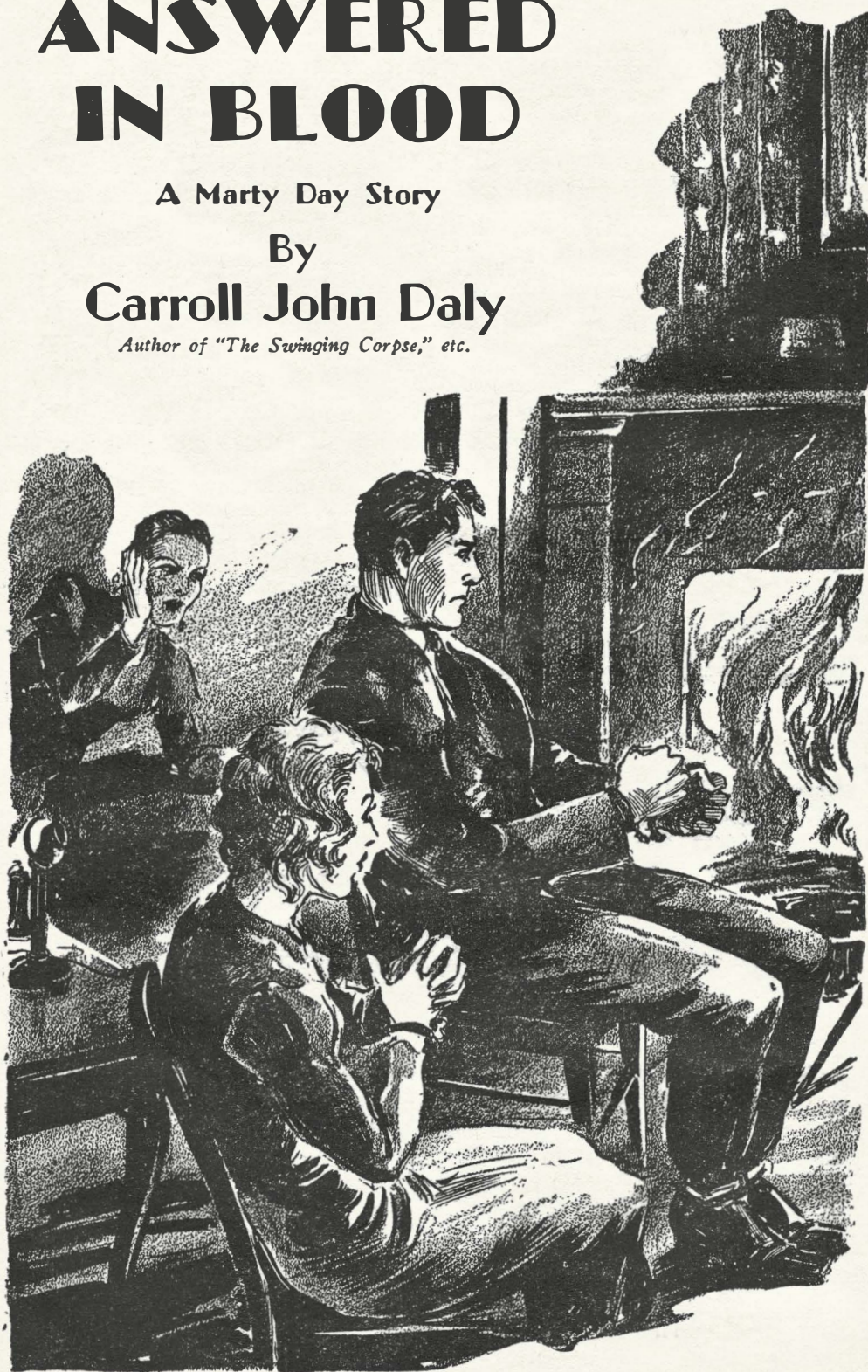
ANSWERED IN BLOOD

A Marty Day Story

By

Carroll John Daly

Author of "The Swinging Corpse," etc.





"You'd give your life to see the Reckoner? . . . Well, look!"

Garbed in black—a sinister, shielding hood over his head—he stood there—The Reckoner! And in that terrible, metallic voice he issued his death commands. Who was this master of mystery? Why did men heed his orders blindly, walk into the murder traps he set knowing escape was impossible as they went?

CHAPTER ONE

The Death Threat

MARTY Day paced the upper level of the Grand Central Terminal. His black eyes flashed back and forth from the clock to the train gates,

where the Boston express would leave in ten minutes. His tall erect figure stood out in the crowd. Across his arm was draped his ever present cane—the cobra cane, whose hidden springs could move strong thin steel with the rapidity of a rifle bullet.

There was a hum on his lips and a lightness in his heart; yet, a lightness that occasionally was lost in the sudden lump in his stomach that crept up into his throat. He wished Tania would come, so they could jump that damn train, make the ship at Boston and put water between themselves and the Reckoner.

He didn't know if he were in danger or not. He hardly thought so. Yet, he had disobeyed the summons of the Reckoner. The Reckoner! The unknown man; the hidden voice that had declared war on crime, and especially—war on Joseph E. Rierson, political leader, briber of officials, protector of criminals, and himself a cold-blooded murderer who stood above the law he controlled.

There had been excitement, money, adventure, and sometimes the feeling of a benefactor of mankind in Marty's joining forces with this Reckoner; taking his orders; accepting his money for carrying out those orders. And there was romance too—Tania Cordet.

And now he and Tania had decided to chuck it all, get married in Boston and sail for Europe where crime and hate and greed would be behind him.

MARTY snapped around. A hand was laid on his shoulder. He was looking straight into those unemotional eyes of Lieutenant Frank Bradley, the detective who had so steadily stuck to the business of tracing down the Reckoner.

"I don't think she'll come," said Bradley. "I think you waited too long."

"You know who I'm waiting for?"

"Sure!" Bradley nodded, half turned toward the gates, watched the guard slowly closing them. "You're waiting for the girl, Tania—and she's not coming. What are you going to do now?"

Marty hesitated, looked over the moving mass of people, bit his lip, fitted the steel handle of the cane tighter onto his

arm and finally said: "I don't know. I don't know. What could—what could have happened to her?"

"I can hazard a guess on that."

"You think the—this Reckoner has her?"

"Well—no, I don't." Bradley stroked his chin. "And if he did I don't think it would be police business; that is, I don't think the girl is being held against her will." And suddenly, "Mr. Day, I advised you to quit this racket. You were going to take that advice."

"But Tania. If—if—"

Marty paused. His eyes widened. He grasped the tiny slip of wrinkled paper from Bradley's hand, smoothed it out, read the message on it.

Tania—

If you meet Marty Day he will never reach Boston. Either the police will remove him from the train or the Reckoner will remove him from—life.

The Reckoner.

"No, no!" Marty snapped the words. "He wouldn't dare. He wouldn't— If he did that I—I—" He looked at Bradley; stopped. After all, even though Bradley had proven himself a friend he was the law, and Marty Day had broken that law.

Bradley nodded.

"You were thinking, Mr. Marty Day," he said, "that if the Reckoner tossed you into jail; sent out information to the police of the activities he mixed you up in, why—you'd talk."

"Talk!" Marty tried to laugh. "Why, I don't even know who he is. I—" He looked at the detective. "You know, Bradley, I don't even admit there is such a man. I couldn't help the police any."

"You wouldn't you mean."

"Bradley," Marty said suddenly, "you're a hard man to understand. You're honest; fearless. You've done me many a good trick. Now, you're spending your

entire time trying to get the Reckoner—the Reckoner, who is on your side; whose single purpose is to eliminate crime.”

“And a single criminal, maybe?”

“And a single criminal. The most dangerous in the city—Joseph E. Rierson. You’re not a fool, and you must know that by arresting the Reckoner you arrest the greatest menace to Joseph E. Rierson’s control in this city.”

“Sure!” said Bradley. “I know that; Rierson knows that. That’s why he has used all his influence to get the Reckoner; that’s why he has urged the police on in this hunt; that’s why he has always advised me of what he learned concerning you. Rierson wants the Reckoner because he fears him; fears what he knows, what he’ll do.”

“And the Reckoner wants Rierson because he’s a danger to society.”

BRADLEY grinned. “Don’t you believe that, Mr. Day. I’m not sure of the reason but I’m sure it isn’t all altruistic. It may be money, it may be vengeance. My guess is that this unknown Reckoner is, in fact, a well known criminal. Someone whom Rierson has double-crossed; who hates him. Do you know what would happen if I went straight after Rierson? If I didn’t get a bullet in my back I’d lose my job, and either way I wouldn’t be much help to my family. You’ve got to take politics out of the Department and—” Bradley stopped; his eyes narrowed. “I’m on the trail of the Reckoner because he’ll lead me straight to evidence against Rierson.”

“Why”—Marty opened his eyes—“the Reckoner has given evidence to the police against Rierson. He’s piling up information against crooked judges, racketeers, common gunmen—that Rierson protects. He’s slowly undermining Rierson’s power, giving Rierson’s friends their first suspicion that maybe the Big Boss can’t pro-

tect them after all. Then he’ll get Rierson.”

“And that’s the vengeance.” Bradley nodded. “He’s letting Rierson know fear. But he has the evidence, now, that will convict Rierson. Why doesn’t he use it?”

“How do you know he has it?”

“Because Rierson told me. Not in so many words,” Bradley ran on, “but Rierson let me know in a round-about way that I would become an inspector shortly after the Reckoner is discovered—alive or dead.”

“I see,” said Marty.

“No, you don’t,” said Bradley. “I’m after Rierson; I hope to get him. He suspects it; and when that suspicion becomes a certainty I won’t be working for the city.”

“You, Bradley—you’d take a chance on Rierson! Why?”

“Maybe,” said Bradley, “I’m just a guy who wants to be an inspector without crooked strings on him.”

He turned away, but Marty gripped his arm. “That note to Tania!” he said. “Where did you get it?”

“Oh—that!” Bradley shrugged as he shoved it in a vest pocket. “I found it in Tania’s apartment.”

“And what,” said Marty, “were you doing in Tania’s apartment?”

“Checking up on a few things,” Bradley told him. “We’re coming to the show-down, Mr. Day.”

“And why tell me all this?”

“Perhaps I rather like you and want to see you get from under before the fireworks start. Or—”

“Or—” said Marty.

“Or perhaps you can lead me to the Reckoner.”

Marty laughed; at least he tried to laugh. “You’ve told me I’m a gentleman who’s been swept into crime; now you want me to become a common criminal. A stool-pigeon. A squealer.”

"Hell!" said Bradley. "You're talking like a book now. As you stand, you're just a sucker—a sucker for the Reckoner's schemes; and you're sticking because of the girl. Show me the Reckoner and I'll show you and Tania—an out. Don't you see, Mr. Day? Rierson wants to know who the Reckoner is. He's in a fair way to find out. If he discovers it before I do—*blooey*, things bust like that."

"It's your job," said Marty. "After all, I'm not a cop."

"But it's your life," said Bradley. "If the Reckoner has to close up shop he won't want his past coming back at him. He won't let Tania and you go now—alive, and he won't then. Another thing, Mr. Day. Max Arnold is your lawyer. Maybe the Reckoner saw that, maybe he didn't." Bradley stroked his chin. "But it might interest you to know that Max Arnold used to be Rierson's lawyer some years ago. Rierson was just coming along then; just beginning to realize that the racket was the royal road to wealth and influence. They had some trouble. After Max Arnold's partner died—shot to death, by the way—their business relation ceased."

"And—" said Marty.

"Well, Max is your lawyer. Rierson is your enemy."

"So—what?"

"Max is a good lawyer. He'll work for anyone who pays him big money. Rierson likes good lawyers, and he can pay big money." And as Marty started to ask a question, "If you're thinking of a good place to eat dinner, try the Tavern Restaurant. Nice private rooms upstairs—but try it fast. You might be surprised and alarmed."

TEN minutes later Marty Day drove up to the Tavern Restaurant. Business was good, and several cars blocked his cab from moving to a position before the

door. But Marty didn't encourage his driver to follow those cars as they moved in line. On the contrary, he ordered him to wait there by the curb. Joseph E. Rierson had stepped from the restaurant door and climbed into a taxi.

Marty could not believe it, at least after what Bradley had told him, that it was simply a coincidence that three minutes later the tall slim figure of Max Arnold also left the restaurant. And Marty could not be mistaken. Plainly, as the man turned and walked down the street, directly past his cab, Marty caught a good view of that sharp face; especially the beak-like nose.

Now—what? And Marty thought simply: Rierson had money. Max Arnold was a good lawyer. But also Max Arnold was close—very close to the Reckoner.

CHAPTER TWO

A Price for Silence

K NIGHT, Marty's servant, swung open the door before he could get his key in the lock. There was a warning in his eyes, barely audible words through lips that did not move.

"She's in there." Knight jerked his thumb back over his shoulder toward the living room.

"Who? Tania—Miss Tania?"

"No." Knight's voice was louder this time as feet crossed the floor behind him. "Mrs. Clarke. Mrs. Zee Clarke." And Marty thought that Knight's lips added, but silently, "The she-devil."

Zee Clarke, the girl with the amber eyes, stood almost in the center of that room when Marty went in. She was beautiful, of course; in that sinister way, Marty thought. And he didn't know. There was nothing in her face now to remind Marty of that night she had suggested that he kill a man.

"Marty," she said, "you're a fool.

Twice now you've refused to answer the summons; the command of the Reckoner. I'm here to take you to him."

Marty stiffened. "I'm through with the Reckoner; through with Max Arnold; through with—with it all."

"Through with me too, eh? You know that I love you, Marty."

Marty stared down at her. He remembered the last time she had said that; remembered the look in her eyes, the closeness of her lips, the brush of hair across his cheek as she put her arms about him. Now she just stood there looking up at him, waiting for him to answer.

"You— Yes, Zee; you told me that."

"That's right." She nodded. "And you believe it?"

"Yes," Marty finally said. "And I believe that you believe it."

"Like that, eh?" She flipped a cigarette from her case with one hand and set fire to it before Marty could offer her a light. "I've come to take you to the Reckoner. It's your last chance. Don't be a fool, Marty. Go talk with him. I can't really believe you intended to run out—run out with Tania."

"I did," said Marty. "And it's not running out. I told the Reckoner when he called me on the phone. I was straight and honest with him when I might have—yes, should have just slipped away. And how did he repay me? By threatening my life; by telling Tania that I would die. Maybe the Reckoner can send me to jail; frame me with the police by distorting and falsifying the work I did for him. But suppose I talked and—"

"You can't, Marty. That would strike at everyone but the Reckoner. At yourself; at Tania and—"

"If we left the country and—"

"But I would still be here. You must remember, Marty, that I killed a man here in your apartment; killed him that you

might live; that Tania might live to take you from me. You can't talk."

"No, maybe not." Marty shook his head. "But neither can he deliver me to the police without bringing others into it. He wove his web too tight, Zee, for a single strand to be cut. But he could kill me."

"No," she said. "He can't kill you while I live."

"Zee"—Marty took both her hands—"you're a strange woman. Where do you fit? What power have you over the Reckoner? Why—" And dropping her hands, "Get out too, Zee. Things are boiling inside. Max Arnold! He—" And biting his lip, "Does the Reckoner thoroughly trust him?"

"More so, even, than he does me. He has to." She smiled slightly. "It's a mess, of course; as you say, Marty. A mess simply because I happen to believe that I love you. Otherwise— Well, there was the night that Max Arnold thought, perhaps, of putting a slug in your chest." She smiled sadly at him. "I know! It pains you to hear me talk so lightly of death; of killing. But remember—I am from another world. I have lived close to death; it can't make me shudder."

"Where is Tania?" Marty asked.

Zee Clarke smiled. "Tania is all right."

"What did he do with her?"

"Nothing." Her eyes went up. "Why should he? Besides, Max Arnold is in love with her. He's older than you, Marty, and when love hits a man at that age it hits him hard."

"Tania and I," said Marty, "are going to be married. Nothing can stop that."

"Not even Tania!" Slender, expressive shoulders shrugged. "Why not talk to the Reckoner, Marty? It's your last chance." And before he could answer, "If the Reckoner can prevent Tania from running away with you by threatening your life, he could just as well force her into mar-

riage by the same threat. You wouldn't want that; I wouldn't want that."

"You—you wouldn't!"

"Of course not," she said. "If I must recognize her as the reason you don't—" She left that sentence unfinished and tried, "Well, the real Tania may prove quite enough without the imaginary allurements with which you would adorn her were she the wife of another. Anyway, you must see and talk with the Reckoner if you would hope at all for Tania."

Marty set his lips tightly. "I'll see and talk with him," he said. "The same place; back of the little pawn shop?"

"No. That's out! Bradley suspects it. The Reckoner is at my house. Come!"

THIS time they entered Zee Clarke's house by the big front door. A butler admitted them; another servant took Marty's hat and coat. Zee smiled at him when he retained his stick.

"I know the cane trick," she told him, "and I know your standing alibi for always carrying it; an old wound in your leg that is apt to let you down at any moment. I shan't give it away. But here, you need not even fear the Reckoner."

"What power do you hold over him?" Marty asked.

She laughed softly.

"Perhaps the same power I hold over all men." The laugh died and she bit her lip. For a long time she stood by a curtained door to a room on the left. "Should I say 'most men?' No—all men. It is simply that I won't use that power on you. Funny, but I don't want you that way. Wait in there!" She flung open the curtains. "I'll tell the Reckoner that you are here; prepare him."

She turned and crossed the floor as Marty entered the library. The curtains closed behind him. Marty jarred erect.

Max Arnold swung from a bookcase, faced him; smiled, nodded.

"Good evening." Arnold moved across the floor, pointed to a chair; to the cigars in the humidior on the polished table. "We haven't met in a few days. You should trust your lawyer, Mr. Day. I might have advised you against an elopement. Now" —close-set eyes came even closer together; fastened on Marty off the end of that beaklike nose—"it seems Mrs. Clarke has more influence with you. If I were a younger man I might envy you, Mr. Day; wanted by two such charming women. You will, of course, marry Mrs. Clarke."

"I will," said Marty, grasping his cane in both hands, "marry Tania."

"I see," said Max Arnold. "But if you continue in your present methods, you will, Mr. Day, be in no position to marry anyone."

"You mean—I will be dead?"

"Dead," said Max Arnold, "Quite dead. Why do you watch my hands like that?"

"The last time we met," said Marty, "I believe your intentions were to kill me—yourself."

"Orders!" Max Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "At that time you were wanted by the police for murder; a murder that time proved you didn't commit. But you were wanted by the police, and you might have talked."

"I had," said Marty, "nothing to talk about. I did not know and do not know who the Reckoner is. Your idea of eliminating me that night, Mr. Arnold, was purely personal. You are in love with Tania, so you warn the Reckoner against me; falsify my position and—"

"Tush, tush." Max Arnold made clicking sounds in his throat. "We mustn't quarrel; especially about the women—any woman. The Reckoner will not approve."

"Nor would the Reckoner approve of your—your associations."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Marty very slowly, "your associate at dinner tonight—at the Tavern Restaurant."

MAX ARNOLD spun suddenly. His face turned a quick red, then a sudden white. He leaned for a moment on the desk; went quickly to the curtains, flung them open, looked into the hall beyond and came back into the room again. He stood now very close to Marty. His breath came in quick, short gasps.

"If you breathe that to a soul I'll kill you."

Marty grinned. He took his words now from the words of Max Arnold.

"If I breathe that to a certain soul; the man who is waiting to receive me now, you will, Mr. Arnold, be in no position to kill anyone."

"I see." Max Arnold nodded slowly. "The price of your silence is the girl, Tania—eh?"

"Good God!" It was with an effort that Marty restrained himself from striking the man. "Tania is to decide her own life; her own marriage."

"And Zee Clarke?"

"Zee Clarke means nothing to me."

"But you mean something to her. I don't think you know the woman, Mr. Day. To you she's cold, hard, taking what she wants as her right. But inside—" small eyes centered to twin bright points; held Marty's. "Why, you'd think no more of Tania and her doll-like—"

"I'm not here to discuss either Tania or Zee Clarke with you," Marty said.

"But you are here to discuss with me the possibility of your telling the Reckoner that I was with Joseph E. Rierson. You can't understand that it might be a very harmless bit of law work, perhaps even a coincidence that I met him there, or that you were mistaken in your belief that you saw me."

"It's not what I believe." Marty

shrugged huge shoulders. "Rierson is the Reckoner's enemy. It's what the Reckoner might believe that should interest you."

"It never entered your head that perhaps the Reckoner sent me to him."

Again Marty's shoulders moved, but he watched those penetrating eyes.

"Then, of course, you would have no need of alarm and the Reckoner would not be interested in my little gossip."

"Only to the extent that I was indiscreet," Max Arnold started, stopped and said, "I'm a man who likes straight talking. What is the price of your silence?"

"The price of my silence, is Tania's happiness," Marty said, "the right of Tania to choose her own life; her own marriage."

"Very well." Max Arnold left the table and walked quickly down the length of the room, unlocked a door at the end and jarred it open. "Tania!" he called.

Tania came into the room. Small, erect, her steady brown eyes rested on Marty. For a moment she seemed to sway forward; about to run to him.

"Tania!" Marty stepped toward her—stopped. Max Arnold was between them.

"We are not, I imagine, to plead our separate merits and offerings for the lady's hand." Max smiled, and turning to the girl, "Mr. Day is rather a persistent suitor. He does not remember or does not understand a woman's right to change her mind. Will you tell him, Tania, that the elopement is off?"

TANIA opened her mouth twice before she spoke. "He knows that. You know that, Marty. That's why I didn't meet you."

"Yes. And I know more." Marty brushed Max Arnold aside and took Tania by both shoulders. "I know of the note; the threat you received."

"And I know too"—Tania faced him—"Zee Clarke, who—"

Marty laughed, a little wildly perhaps. "They've been telling you that, eh? About her! Why, she—"

"She takes what she wants." Tania jerked herself free and crossed the room, behind the table. "She—" And suddenly, "You were a fool to come here. Why didn't you go alone? Boston, London, Paris."

She stopped. Max Arnold had crossed to the curtains, flung them open. Zee Clarke stood there.

"Come in." Max Arnold bowed; his voice was mocking. "It's a long time since you have seen two men quarreling over a woman; over another woman. But the stage was set for it." Arnold laid a hand on her shoulder. "It must come to all women. You have spoken of my age without recognizing your own. You're cleverer, brighter, far superior in worldly ways to Tania. That she chooses me instead of Mr. Day leaves him free. Resentful, perhaps, but susceptible to all the many charms the years have taught you. Five years ago, perhaps—" Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "The truth hurts, doesn't it? But youth has slipped from you—"

"You beast!" Zee Clarke fairly snapped the words.

Marty took a step forward and caught her by the arm. Her whole body was trembling. "Don't believe him, Zee; don't pay any attention to him. You've got youth and beauty. It is just that— Well, Tania, to me—"

And Marty got no further. The woman turned, raised her right hand and with the open palm slapped him across the cheek. A bell buzzed in the library. She stood quietly a moment; then, as the bell buzzed again, her body trembled; her head shook as if she had just swallowed some particularly sour medicine. At length she spoke.

"You're rotten, Maxie," she said. "Plain rotten. But you're right—right, as you're always right. You can have the woman you want, and I—" She fastened those somber eyes on him suddenly. "You haven't forgotten our purpose here tonight."

"No." Max Arnold bent slightly. "And I haven't forgotten that, if you lack much in the charm of youth, your head contains brains that brilliant men—and only brilliant men could worship. Tonight the Reckoner speaks, perhaps, for the last time. You'll take Mr. Day above."

"Come!" Zee turned to Marty. There was nothing in her eyes to indicate love or hate.

"I'll want to see Tania before I go—and alone." Marty paused as Zee held open the curtains.

Zee Clarke laughed. "Your life," she said, "is in my hands tonight; yet you make a request like that." She let the curtains fall back, stood looking at him in the more brilliantly lighted hall. "Love and hate are very close—" She paused. "Very close tonight."

She led him up the broad stairs, turned onto the narrow ones to the right, passed along a corridor and paused before a door. Fitting a key in the lock she turned it; stood aside for Marty to enter. He would have spoken to her, but she shook her head.

CHAPTER THREE

\$100,000 for Murder

MARTY went inside, heard the doors close behind him; then paused, to take in the room under the dim light. Although the room was a beautifully furnished sitting room the arrangements for the interview with the Reckoner were much the same as those of the little pawn shop. In the pawn shop, a steel partition had reached down, shutting off the end

of the room; here, heavy curtains were hung. In the pawn shop, a lamp had rested on a counter so it might shine directly in Marty's face; here, a similar lamp rested on a table where the two folds of the heavy drapes met.

Marty stepped forward and dropped into the chair close to the table. His cane was still held tightly in his hand. As if making himself at ease he poked the cane once or twice against the thick drapes. Just drapes, he thought. For just softness met the ferrule of the cane. And Marty had a wild idea.

Joseph E. Rierison was bending every effort, even to torture and murder, to discover the real identity of the Reckoner. Now—if he, Marty, could discover that identity, he was free and Tania was free. No more orders; no more commands; no more threats. The Reckoner went to great length to keep his identity a secret. Knowledge of his identity meant power—and power, to Marty, meant Tania. If she were giving him up, it was simply to save his life; nothing else.

But he'd see. He'd watch for the break; a chance perhaps to rip those curtains apart and look on the face of the man—

The soft glow of the shaded lamps went out and the hard glare of the lamp on the table shot suddenly into his face. Almost simultaneously with the sudden brightness came the voice that Marty knew so well; the grating mechanical words that might have been spoken by a man, a woman or a child. Nothing natural about that voice; nothing meant to be natural about it. Marty knew it wasn't a machine because it answered questions—questions it couldn't know he was going to ask.

"So, Mr. Day, you come at last. You have forgotten that I never make requests. They are all commands, and those who break those commands become enemies; and enemies are dangerous."

"I've been on the level with you," Marty said. "I told you flatly I didn't like your methods; the mess you were involving Tania and myself in; that I'd keep whatever confidences I had; that I felt I had earned the money you paid me and that I was through. Could anything be fairer than that?"

There was a hollow sound; it might have been a chuckle. Marty didn't know.

"But you came tonight."

"I came because of Tania."

"You want your reward, then."

"I want nothing," said Marty. "You brought Tania back by your threat to— to harm me; maybe your threat to expose her as you could expose me. Why not forget us, as we'll forget you? I want no reward."

"No? But I promised you such a reward. I promised you Tania. There, don't become so noble! Women; men; hate; love; greed. Such intrigues are going on now among my very closest associates. You love and hate and bicker, and what of my plans? Don't deny it! Even in this house tonight, trouble—trouble over a woman. Very well, Mr. Day, I forgive you everything. I offer you your big chance; I offer you Tania."

"For what?"

"You love her very much?"

Marty hesitated a long moment, and then, "Yes. You must know that."

"I do know that. Do you love her enough to kill a man?"

"Kill a man! Kill a man saving her?"

"Yes. Saving her from Max Arnold."

"By God!" said Marty, "if he harms her I'll strangle—"

"There, there! It's much simpler than that. We don't want Max killed." A moment's pause. "The time has come for the death of the greatest menace to society; the force behind all crime. I am giving you an opportunity of ridding the city of this man—Joseph E. Rierison."

"You're suggesting that I murder him?"

"The death of Rierson could not be called murder; simply justice and—"

"Vengeance!" echoed Marty.

"Vengeance?" There was a question in the voice. "Who put that idea into your head? Was it the police?"

"It was Bradley," Marty nodded. "And he hinted too, that your purpose is not entirely to aid society; that you fooled me; you played upon my stupid ideas of righting wrongs, protecting the weak. Well, maybe you have; but in so doing you've filled your own pocket and—"

"Where did you think the money came from that also filled your pocket?" the Reckoner snapped. "I have spent thousands; yes, hundreds of thousands. Isn't it right that these people who have preyed on society, now be taxed to protect that same society? But what of my proposition? In return for Rierson's death I give you Tania."

"Tania is not for sale, nor could she be bought through murder. If you have the evidence against Rierson—"

"There is no time for evidence. His death is necessary and imperative. Do you know what he is planning? The death of Tania; your death; the death of Max Arnold, and by God! I believe, the death of Zee Clarke. Don't you see?"

"He is going to send through the underworld the names of those who aid the Reckoner; those who make secret war on criminals. And each one in that underworld; each public enemy who thinks he may be my next victim will strike. You understand now. Rierson must die that you people may live. It is to protect you that I send you on this mission tonight."

Marty's eyes narrowed. "You will send me on no mission of murder tonight."

"No?" The mechanical voice took on an edge; like a knife along a grindstone. "Rierson is turning your name and the

names of others over to hired killers in the city tomorrow morning. So much money is offered for each one of you. I have planned things well; I have made it easy for you. There is little danger."

"If there is so little danger, why send me? Why not—"

The Reckoner laughed. "Because I trust you. Because I wish to reward you. But perhaps most of all, because the death of Rierson by your hand will allow me to set you and Tania free. With the death of Rierson, you will hardly be in a position to harm me later; you would hardly wish to be accused of murder. Your mission will be over; my mission will be over. Both of us will sleep contentedly, with the knowledge that the other cannot talk."

"Your single purpose, then, was vengeance on Rierson."

A long moment of silence, and then, "Correct. My single purpose—vengeance on Rierson."

"I should think you would want to be in at Rierson's death."

"Yes, yes. I will be in at Rierson's death."

Marty jarred slightly erect. For the moment the voice seemed human; at least, less grating. It— And then the feeling was gone. The Reckoner was talking again. Quickly, rasping once more.

"So, you have freedom and Tania. You will take her abroad. Not on the few dollars you planned to flee with, but with a fortune. One hundred thousand dollars in cash. Look!"

MARTY did look. The curtains parted, much as the steel partition at the pawn shop used to part. A white hand came through; a whitish yellow hand that always surprised Marty. It was so smooth, so shining; as if there were no lines in it, no veins in it; the skin drawn tightly, even smoothly across the knuckles.

"Twenty-five thousand tonight—here, in cash. The rest tomorrow."

Marty blinked in the light. Was it the light in his eyes that made that hand look so queer, so—but the money was real. He could see the green of the bills, the figures on the top bill. Five hundred. The money was dropped with a thud upon the table—and Marty acted.

He shot forward in the chair as the hand started back. His right hand, long trained to move quickly with that cane, moved as quickly without it. He caught the shining hand, gripped it tightly just as it slipped back through the curtains. And that was where he made his mistake. He had expected to follow that hand through the curtains, grip the body it belonged to, crush that body close to his before it could protect itself, and see the face of the man behind the curtains.

Marty did knock aside the curtains, hurling the lamp from the table. And he did follow that hand beyond the curtains, but only a few inches beyond it. Then his body pounded against something hard; something that gave slightly and sprang back. And the hand! It was slipping from his grasp. Frantically Marty tried to hold it; dug his nails into the skin—or was it skin?—and something gave. There was a rip and a snap. The hand was gone, slipping through a network of steel.

The lamp lay on the floor where it had fallen. The bulb was unbroken and its light now shone straight upon that lattice of steel. Two thin steel doors were locked together with a heavy brass padlock. And behind that lattice Marty saw the Reckoner, caught there in the full glare of the lamp.

Marty knew that what he saw would do him no good. The man was dressed in a long black robe such as a judge wears on the bench. There was a hood covering his head, or at least Marty saw only heavy black where the man's head should be. As to his size or general carriage! Well, the Reckoner took good care of

that. His body was bent far backward and away from Marty; his knees seemed to give when he walked. Just a slouching, even slinking, figure.

The Reckoner half turned that lurching body sideways; a flash of white for a moment in the darkness beyond the reach of the lamp, that might have been a face; the wave of a hand that now seemed a very real hand—and the Reckoner was gone, passing through a door.

Marty straightened, stepped back and let the curtains fall, to hide again the network of steel. Bending, he lifted the lamp and placed it back on the table. It was then for the first time that he saw what he held in his hand. It was a torn bit of rubber glove; a finger and a thumb were missing. But the explanation of that peculiar hand, which had bothered Marty from the very first day he had seen it, was at least clear to him. The rubber glove had given the hand its shininess.

He had been a fool. He admitted that as he tucked his cane back over his arm and turned toward the door.

Many things had been left undone. He hadn't told the Reckoner about Max Arnold. Had he intended to tell him? He didn't know; he wasn't sure about that. Wasn't sure if he had made a promise to Arnold about that or not. But it was better so. He had something with which to threaten Arnold. That was true but it gave him little satisfaction. Max Arnold now knew something that would give him further reason to fear Marty.

MARTY would watch out for that. He'd go below, talk alone with Tania, get her to leave the house. Yes, he had been a fool. He might at least have pretended to concede to, or promise to think over, the Reckoner's proposition.

Rierson deserved to die. He recalled now Rierson's attempt to disfigure Tania for life by throwing acid in her face. For

life? Probably for a few minutes of life. After that he would have killed both of them.

Marty reached the door, spun the knob. A moment of doubt, and the door opened. He was surprised at that. He thought that he might be locked in the room. Now he turned along the hall, reached the stairs, passed down them and stood on the landing looking at the large, well lighted reception hall below.

All quiet there. Just the butler standing at the foot of the stairs. Waiting there, very straight, very pompous, very dignified. And in his hands he held Marty's hat and coat.

"I'm sure, sir," the butler said when Marty reached the last step, "that Mrs. Clarke didn't expect you down so soon, or she would have waited."

"She left?" Mechanically Marty let the man help him into his coat.

"Yes, sir. She said she expected you'd follow them along to the theatre."

"What theatre?"

The man seemed surprised, genuinely surprised. "I don't know, sir. I understood you would know. But—really, Madame seemed to think you might be hours with the paintings. They're very valuable, as you know. That's why the steel doors are there."

"So that's why they are there." Marty looked at the man shrewdly. By no stretch of his imagination could he connect this overfed, overpompous, yet undoubtedly well trained butler with the intrigues of the Reckoner. He thought too that the steel grating was cleverly accounted for to other visitors. In a vague way he did remember paintings behind that steel.

"They have all gone?" Marty asked as he crossed to the front door.

"All three, sir. Mrs. Clarke, Miss Cor-det and Mr. Arnold."

"And the other—other gentleman?" Marty put the question lightly.

"There was no other gentleman." The butler's eyes raised slightly, and then perhaps in a knowing way, as if he thought Marty might resent Mrs. Clarke's departure with a rival, "She took one of our cars, sir; no one called for the party. Shall I call a car for you?"

"No," said Marty, "I'll walk." He did think of going into the little library; even searching the house. But that would be stupid; ungrateful too, to Zee Clarke. It was a cinch that the servants, at least this particular one, had no suspicions of his mistress' activities. If the Reckoner had left the house, and Marty had no doubt that he had, then it was by some means unknown to the butler.

Marty was out the door when the butler stepped quickly forward. "This letter! Mrs. Clarke wished me to give it to you."

"Yes?" Marty took the square of white envelope. "You forgot it, eh?"

"Forgot it!" The man straightened. His stomach protruded as if he thought he were throwing out his chest. "Hardly, sir. I gave it to you exactly as directed. Good night, sir."

The butler disappeared and the door closed. Marty turned once, stopped, swung again, and going down the steps walked up the street. For the first time he remembered that in that room with the steel curtain was twenty-five thousand dollars in cash.

CHAPTER FOUR

Max Arnold Pays a Visit

THE big Rolls pulled up just beyond the Biltmore Hotel and Max Arnold climbed out. He stretched in a hand and helped Tania to the sidewalk. "I guess," he said gruffly to the remaining occupant of the car, "that'll be all tonight. You'll be home if the Reckoner wants you, Zee."

Zee Clarke leaned from the car, beck-

oned to Arnold, and when he came closer, "Let me look at you, Max." She stretched up both her hands; her slender fingers went to either side of his face. "The devil's in you tonight. I've known you too long not to recognize the symptoms. What are you going to do?"

"I'm human," said Max Arnold. "The girl has thrown over Marty Day. We'll have an evening together."

"Max," she held his eyes, "you can't be in love with that chit, not—not after—"

"No?" Max Arnold spoke low so that the chauffeur heard nothing. "You've got the man you love. I've taken the competition off your hands. If you can't make good now—Well—"

"And those things you said to me!" Zee's voice was soft. "You meant them, Max? Age and—" She hesitated when he did not answer. "You admired me, Max—my brains, but you always laughed at love. I knew when it got you it would strike terribly. Be careful, Max. Be careful that you don't let anything happen to Marty Day."

"I think," said Max, "that Rierson will take that out of my hands." He hesitated a long moment, lifted his hands and drew the woman's fingers from his face, held them in a viselike grip. "I told you once I wouldn't let the man live who stood between me and the—the woman I loved."

"Yes—if you ever loved." Zee Clarke looked over Arnold's shoulder. "It's hard to believe—very hard to believe—that she'd be the one. There were times—"

"That's your pride," said Max Arnold.

"I don't know that I wish you to marry Tania. You—"

"Perhaps you'll get your wish." He started to close the door.

Zee Clarke spoke quickly. "You'll remember the Reckoner, Max, and you'll remember what the death of Marty Day will mean to him. You called me a serpent once. Remember that I can still strike

like a serpent if Marty—Yes, and anticipate the Reckoner and act before he does. Don't make me strike at you, Max. I haven't withdrawn my protection. Don't forget that. Don't make a mistake, Max. Your hate and greed and passion and self-exaltation are stupendous and vital things when your reason guides them. Now don't let emotion kill that reason."

"No," Max Arnold said very slowly and very thoughtfully, "I hope not." And he slammed the door of the car so viciously that the chauffeur on the far side, behind the wheel, jerked in his seat. Zee Clarke was talking into the speaking tube. The car pulled slowly from the curb.

MAX ARNOLD turned and walked to Tania, who stood by the side of the building. "Well," he said, "you would marry me to save Marty Day?"

She didn't answer him.

He spoke to her again harshly. "Go to my apartment. Wait for me there. Johnson, my servant, will let you in." And when she started to move away he clutched her by the arm. "Don't ring Day up. Don't try to communicate with him in any way. You understand? You know what will happen to him."

"Yes." She spoke at length. "The Reckoner knows, understands—"

"The Reckoner spoke to you tonight before Marty Day came. My orders are his orders. He told you that."

"I brought Marty into it," Tania said slowly. "I'll get him out of it." And suddenly, "If anything should happen to Marty, I'll kill you."

"So, so—" Max Arnold pulled at her arm. Strong fingers tightened so that she winced with the pain, but she did not cry out. Then his fingers loosened, a hand slipped to her chin, tilted it up slightly. "You're very beautiful," he said, turned suddenly, and walking quickly down the block entered the hotel.

Max Arnold stood patiently by the desk while the room of Jacob Levine, Akron, Ohio, on the hotel register was called.

The clerk smiled. "You're to go right up, Mr. Arnold. Mr. Levine is expecting you."

The man who opened the door of 910 of the suite 910-912 was tall and thin.

"You're the lawyer man," he said, nodded, rubbed his chin. "That's right. I know you."

"That's right!" Max walked to the window. "Don't stand there like a fool. I want to see Joe; want to see him now."

"Keep your socks up." The man hummed softly, walked to another door and passed through it. Less than a minute later Joseph Ellison Rierson walked into the sitting room of the suite.

Max Arnold looked steadily at him.

"Well"—Rierson tapped his thick stubby fingers together before he raised his right hand to his flabby chin—"you've come to talk business?"

"I've come to do business, not talk it."

"Humph!" Little shoe-button eyes snapped into life. "Tonight?"

"Tonight," said Max Arnold. "I'll deliver the girl for you within the hour. The man later."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

JOSEPH E. RIERSON'S thick-set body moved slowly up and down the large room. Twice he turned and stood before Max Arnold, studying him. At length his thick lips moved and the blue lines in his face broke into ripples.

"The Reckoner is a very clever man; a very shrewd man. Aren't you afraid?" And without waiting for an answer, "Why do you do it?"

Max Arnold grinned. He said: "The same thing that dominates your life dominates mine. Money. I want it now."

"In advance, eh?"

"That's right," Arnold grinned. "You know what I promised you."

"Yes," Rierson nodded. "And I know how to handle you later if you fail."

"That's what has been bothering me," Arnold said. "You have never been slow about getting rid of people. Why now? This woman, Tania! She robbed you. She delivered the information that put you in the hands of the Reckoner. Why have you let her live? And the man, Day! Personally responsible for your dangerous position now."

"I've been in the hospital." Rierson spoke very slowly. "I wanted to wait—wait for something like this. I want to have them myself. I want to see them. I want them to know."

"But they've got to die," said Arnold. "It would—I've got to be sure of that."

"My friend," said Rierson, "you could not be more sure of anything. They don't know this man—this Reckoner?"

"No," said Max. "No one does."

"I thought—" Rierson hesitated. "This Clarke woman— Why, what's the matter?"

Max Arnold was on his feet. "You must not bother her," he said. And more slowly, "Don't make the game too dangerous for yourself, Joe. Some day, I promise you; maybe sooner than you think, I'll deliver the Reckoner to you."

Rierson's little eyes snapped. "I'd make you a wealthy man; I'd make you a millionaire. God Max, it's terrible! Who is he? A city official; a friend I meet on the street; one of my closest associates? You're close to this Reckoner, Max. You must—must suspect something. He's convicting and killing my men. I can't trust anyone. I should have stuck to you, Max—long ago. Now he's got the stuff on me, why don't he strike? I'll give you anything, Max. Anything. Any amount. I hate him. I hate this man, Marty Day. This woman. You're just a

machine, Max. Just business—just money. With me—you wouldn't understand. I want vengeance."

"I understand," Max Arnold said very slowly. "Vengeance!"

For a long time the two men talked in a low voice, leaning forward, their heads close together. Finally Arnold came to his feet.

"You may see the Reckoner sooner than you think, Joe. Much sooner."

At the door he paused, looked back once at Rierson rubbing his hands. Then Arnold spoke again. "Watch this Marty Day," he said. "He's a fool, Joe, but a fool for courage."

There was a peculiar glint to his eyes; a twist to his lips, and Rierson noticing it said: "Maybe there's something more than money in it for you, eh, Max? Maybe vengeance, too."

"Maybe. For once in my life I wasn't quite careful enough, Joe. The Reckoner knows me but I don't know him. Marty Day and the girl know me. If they were all dead—all silent, things would be cleaned up for me."

"There's the Clarke woman," Rierson mused. "She'd know. She'd be alive."

"Yes," Max Arnold said very seriously. "But she's too beautiful to die, Joe—too beautiful."

"And me, too. I'd know." There was a laugh in Rierson's voice. "I'm not too beautiful to die, eh?"

Max Arnold grinned. At least, his teeth showed. "You won't talk, Joe."

"Hardly," said Rierson, "after tonight."

"Hardly," repeated Max Arnold. "after tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE

Tania Learns the Truth

TANIA CORDET stood up when Max Arnold let himself into his apart-

ment. There was a peculiar light in her eyes now as she crossed to Arnold; stood squarely in front of him.

"Max," she said, "what is it? You've changed. You're not so sure of yourself; not so certain. And, Max—I know the truth. You don't love me; don't even—"

He grabbed at her shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a woman," she said. "You don't love me and I don't care for you. You talk of marriage. At first I didn't know, but now I do. It's not love. It's hate. You hate Marty Day. You hate him and hope to make him suffer through me."

"Don't talk like a fool!" Arnold snapped. "Why would I hate him?"

And Tania knew. Suddenly she knew why Max hated Marty. Her brown eyes grew wide. "Because you're in love with Zee Clarke," she told him. "That's it. I've been blind and she's been blind. And—"

"And I've been blind." Max Arnold fairly snarled the words. "Do you think for a moment that I could care for you when she—she— But she never knew. She—" He stopped, looked at the girl.

"No, she doesn't know." Tania nodded as if in understanding. "I thought that you hated her tonight, when you spoke to her like that. But now I know. It was the hurt love in you. It was— Max, Max don't do it. Marty doesn't love her—"

"But she loves him. I know. And all that stands between that love of hers for Marty is you, and her pride. When that pride goes, then only you. She'll sweep you aside. She'll—"

"Max—Max!" The girl pleaded with him again. "Don't do it. Don't do it!"

"Do it! Do what?"

"You intend to kill Marty Day. Don't Max. Don't!"

Max Arnold stood looking down at her. Then he shook his head, rubbed a hand across his eyes, back through his hair, turned from her and reaching into a

curtained recess lifted a decanter with fingers that trembled. He had difficulty in pouring the liquid into the glass. He spoke, half to himself. "She was right," he said. "She is always right. Not emotion; reason, reason."

He set the glass down on the table, shivered slightly, stretched his hand out before him and watched the fingers; saw that they were steady. When he spoke again his voice was calm.

"God! Tania," he said without turning his head, "what an imagination you've got. I'll show you how different it is from the truth. Get your coat! I'm taking you away."

"Where?"

"I'm taking you to Marty Day." He turned now and walked to her. His voice was soft and gentle. There was a slight catch in his throat; a catch that he had used often before a jury when he pleaded with them to send back that 'poor unfortunate to his mother.' "You guessed my secret, Tania. I'm sending you and Marty away. Don't thank me. It's not for you or for him. It's for myself. He's got youth and birth and courage. I've got nothing but what I've dragged up from the East Side streets with me. I'm giving him to you, Tania; giving him to you so that Zee Clarke may not have him."

"And the Reckoner? His threat to me about Marty."

"Leave that to me. I will take care of the Reckoner."

"But Rierson—"

"Rierson," said Max Arnold very slowly, "will be dead before morning." The girl looked at him. "Day is going to kill him tonight."

"No, no. I don't believe you."

"Maybe not." Max Arnold shrugged his shoulders as he walked to the door and opened it. "Come! We are going to meet Marty Day. It's up to you to con-

vince him that the best interests of both of you rest on the death of Rierson."

THE girl didn't speak on the way down in the elevator. She didn't speak as they crossed the long hall of the apartment, to the street. She was silent, too, when they climbed into Max's car, which he drove himself. She had been wrong before; she'd be right this time. Flight was the only thing. She wouldn't hesitate about flight with Marty now. She had brought him back to save his life, and they wanted to make him a murderer.

She saw it all now. Excitement. Adventure. Romance! No. Just crime—sordid crime. That was what she was in. That was what she had dragged Marty into with her. And they would make him a murderer! She laughed at that thought, a little hysterically, and Max Arnold looked down at her. But she didn't talk. She wouldn't let him know the truth. So he thought he was taking her with him so that she would plead with Marty to kill a man! She shuddered slightly. Maybe her life had been such that Max would believe that; would believe that she would let the man she loved commit murder to save her. Well, she—

The car turned across to Riverside Drive, rolled slowly through the early evening traffic. Lights twinkled on the Hudson; distant, blurred flashes across the river. They passed the George Washington Bridge and continued to the end of the Drive.

Broadway. The Seventh Avenue subway became an elevated road. Then Kingsbridge, and they swung to the left and over to Riverdale Avenue. Up the hill almost opposite Van Cortlandt Park, until they reached a side road.

Tania would always remember the location of that side road. There was a manhole in the street; a railing around it; a lantern, as if workmen had just left it.

She turned to Max Arnold to ask a question. The car suddenly stopped beside a torn, twisted wooden gate. There was a tiny flashlight in Arnold's hand; it slipped awkwardly and he juggled it. For a moment the light flashed upon his face; just for a single split second it held there. But in that split second the girl knew the truth. She read it in his face, in his burning eyes. She was going to her death.

Tania had known fear before, but never the same stark terror that gripped her then. She clutched at the handle of that door and screamed. Her piercing shriek cut into the silence of the country night.

One cry, that was all. Then the handle of the door slipped back; a hand tore her evening wrap from her shoulders, and she stumbled out onto the road, tripping over her long dress. But she didn't fall. Clutching up her dress she went dashing down that road toward the main highway—

MAX ARNOLD cursed, half stumbled from the car, looked at the running figure. Other men were there now. Two who ran quickly through the dilapidated gate and another, just a blurred figure, who stood for a moment on the steps of the house back among the trees.

"Get her, you fool!" Max Arnold fairly snarled as one of the men started questioning him. Then the figure came from the darkness; ran down the steps, was giving quick orders. The two men went in pursuit of the fleeing girl.

Rierson spoke to Arnold. "What happened? God, what a shriek! Lucky this place is so far from—"

"You were to be ready." Max cut in on him. "You didn't expect I'd drag her screaming from the car into the house!"

"I thought," said Rierson, "she'd be—well, in no condition to scream like that."

Max Arnold said simply: "This is no moving picture. You didn't expect me to knock her unconscious, tie her up and

carry her from my apartment! Will they get her?"

"If she sticks to the road, unless some motorist picks her up," said Rierson.

"Get in the car," Arnold told him. "We'll drive along Riverdale Avenue. If she gets away now, everything is shot. She'll get in touch with Day and—"

He turned the car now; joggled over the rough road. "These men of yours, Joe—they know these woods?"

"Hell, no!" said Rierson. "They've never been here before tonight, but the girl hasn't either. If she sticks to the woods we can't—"

"She won't." Max nodded. "She's in a panic. And if she isn't she'll want to find a phone and warn Day. She'll hit the main road sure, and flag a passing car."

The car reached Riverdale Avenue. Max Arnold pulled to a stop close to the open man-hole, the light and the railing around it. A car hitting fifty came over the top of the hill, going toward Yonkers. Max switched off the lights of his car; watched the other shoot by. For a moment its headlight flashed on the bank across the road. A figure—the figure of a man pushed itself quickly behind a tree.

Joseph E. Rierson whistled. The figure came from the tree, ran down the bank, across the road and reached the car.

"Well, Fred." Rierson waited.

"It looked like a cinch." The man nodded his head. "Me and Rawley seen her plainly all along. Then the turn in the road, and we hit Riverdale Avenue. Like *that*"—the man snapped his fingers—"she was gone, and a car roaring by too. I don't see how she got across the road. There was only—"

Max Arnold grinned. "She didn't," he said, climbed from the car and walked over to the man-hole.

"Cripes!" said Fred, "you don't think she had time to climb down there and—"

"She didn't have time to do anything

else." Max leaned over the iron railing around the hole and looked down. Then with a chuckle, "Look! She didn't climb; she jumped. She's unconscious and—" He broke off suddenly and clutched Rier-son by the arm. "We've got to act quick—bind her and gag her. She's coming around."

"Here's Rawley," Fred said as a man slipped up on them. Then he threw a foot over the rail; threw it over just as the girl staggered to her feet, looked up. Looked straight into the round beady eyes of Rier-son.

"You—you too? I knew it." The words were forced from her lips. "You're going to—to kill me?"

"And how!" smiled Rier-son as he stared down into those wide brown eyes.

CHAPTER SIX

Last Adventure

MARTY DAY waited until he was in his own apartment before he opened the long envelope the butler had thrust into his hand. Inside was another sealed envelope and clipped to that one was a note to him.

Dear Marty:—

I can trust to that misguided honor of yours not to open this sealed envelope and to only let it be opened in the event of your sure death.

To read it now would do you no good. To keep it always on your person, no matter what danger it may seem to be to others, is absolutely necessary. Do not put it in a safe. Do not hide it. Always keep it in your pocket no matter what your mission, nor how foolhardy you think such instructions are.

This envelope may contain your life and Tania's.

Zee Clarke.

Marty read the note through half a dozen times. Then he looked at the sealed envelope he held in his hand. Clearly printed on it were the words—

THE IDENTITY OF THE RECK-ONER CAN BE FOUND INSIDE THIS ENVELOPE IF OPENED ONLY BY THE PARTY IT IS INTENDED FOR.

Queer, that. Marty juggled the envelope in his hand. Of course he ought to open it. But he didn't; he just stood looking down at it. Zee Clarke. Strange woman! He hesitated for some time, then thrust the envelope into his jacket pocket. Knight had walked into the room.

"There was a telephone call." Knight's voice showed disapproval. "The Reck-oner, sir. He said you're not to go out. There will be a message for you."

Marty nodded. "Anything else?"

"Only—that I'd chuck it, sir. It ain't the fun it started out to be. The cops are getting close. There's Rier-son, who is only waiting to kill you comfortable like—and now the Reckoner himself who ain't so friendly. Just let us hop a boat, sir."

"And Tania?"

"Miss Tania's a woman, sir, and isn't rightly responsible for what she does."

"You'd leave Tania behind, eh?"

"No. I'd take her with us."

"But she won't go. That's to protect me, Knight."

"And quite right, from her point of view; that is, the woman's point of view. But I'd take her with us. If you would leave it to me, sir, I'd settle things for you."

"Just how?"

"Well, there's money in the bank. I'd invite Miss Tania over here and give her a bit of a drink; a drink that would surprise her. When she woke up later and wanted to sacrifice her life to save you—why, I'd simply tell her that the captain couldn't turn the ship back. You went to all the trouble to get them passports, it's sensible to use them!"

Marty tried to smile. "We'd leave a mess behind us, Knight."

"You and me, sir, have often left messes behind us. And if you'll pardon my saying so, that's the place to leave a mess. Right smack behind you."

Marty looked across the room; looked down at his cane, pressed it suddenly down on the floor, released his hand from the rounded top and watched the cane jump suddenly into the air and make almost a perfect arc, to settle down across Knight's arm.

"Perfect, sir." Knight beamed. "Nerves all right, anyway."

"Yes." Marty nodded. "But the cane served no purpose tonight. A gun would have served me better."

"The trouble with the cane, sir, is—you've used it over and over on the same crowd or in the same circle. It's a weapon of offense or defense. A gun, now. Well, that's a weapon of elimination."

MARTY crossed to Knight and lifted the cane from his arm, adjusted his fingers carefully just below the curved handle. There was a tiny click, and from the inside of that rounded curve a razor-like blade appeared.

Knight was startled. "I never— You never even showed me that." Knight paled slightly. "What a horrible death that would be about a man's throat!"

"I know." Marty nodded. "I'd never use it; not even carry it—but it's the cane of all my canes that has the perfect balance. The maker put the blade there without my instructions. Just the slightest movement of the fingers and it would cut a man's throat. Too horrible to think of, of course, Knight. But it's there just the same and—" The phone rang sharply; rang again. Marty lifted it. Would it be the Reckoner or Tania?

It was the Reckoner.

"Don't talk. Listen!" said the mechanical voice. "Perhaps you are right, and murder—unless it be legal murder, will

not end the Reckoner's career, nor will it end the career of Joseph Ellison Rierson. I have completed a case against him; evidence that will burn him to death in the electric chair, I was sure of that evidence, expected to have it in the hands of Lieutenant Bradley in the morning. Things went wrong; very wrong. Tonight you were listening to a disappointed man; a man who thought only of vengeance and forgot justice. Now a man is talking to you who is thinking of both. The slow suffering, the days and nights of waiting to go to the chair will satisfy my hatred. Are you listening?"

"I am listening. What has become of Tania?"

"Tania is quite safe. The man who was to sell me this final piece of evidence has sold me out; sold out his partner too. But this partner has heard the whole scheme and he was not a fool. He did not accuse his friend in blind rage. He came right to me and offered me the opportunity to right his partner's wrong, at a price. The partner, for the time being, has disappeared; but he had this evidence and will deliver it to Rierson tonight. But, there! You are not interested in the details. Will you go; be at the meeting of these two men and get this evidence?"

"It seems like dangerous work."

"Of course it's dangerous work," the Reckoner sneered. "Have I ever paid you large sums of money to do things that any common thug might do? You must be at their meeting, judge the proper time to strike, wait until the transaction has been made so that you will have only one man to face, and bring me that evidence. One hundred thousand dollars and—"

"I want no money from you; I will take no money from you. I simply want—"

"The girl, Tania, eh? Well, you shall have her, and—"

"I simply want her to be free to do as

she pleases. No threats; no Max Arnold to control Tania's actions."

And when the mechanical voice chuckled, Marty said: "You're on the level with me in this? You'll keep your promise? This is the last thing you'll ever ask of me?"

"Success or failure; if you go alone and do your best, follow my instructions, this will be the last thing I will ever ask of you and Tania. I promise you that."

After that, instructions; minute details. Marty hung up the receiver.

"Knight," he said, "I will carry a gun with me tonight. You can't stick a cane in a man's stomach and make him hand over; at least, hand over documents that will roast him to death."

To himself he repeated his directions for finding the place where Rierson was to meet, alone, the man with the evidence.

"Riverdale Avenue. The road to the left, by the man-hole that is being fixed. Two hundred yards down toward the river, and the old house back behind a broken gate."

And the time! Well, Marty had a full hour yet.

A half hour later Marty snapped open the gun Knight gave him, examined it carefully and stuck it in his jacket pocket.

"If I might suggest a shoulder holster, that—"

"I don't intend to use it, Knight. Only play with it. It's different from a cane in that you don't have to know any tricks to use it."

"And you're not taking your cane tonight?"

"No." Marty shook his head, then suddenly leaned over grabbed up his cane from behind the costumer. "I'd feel like a nudist without it, Knight. I'll take it along tonight as an ornament."

Knight watched that cane and shook his head. He knew that it was a trick, all done by those expert hands; even the

moving muscles of Marty's arms. Yet, it seemed to Knight as if that cane moved itself; crept like a living thing down from Marty's wrist, to fit itself firmly, snugly, perhaps even affectionately in the crotch of his arm.

MARTY drove leisurely through the streets. His face was a little grim, his hands that grasped the wheel a little rigid. This was his last adventure. He was through with the Reckoner. He didn't exactly hate the man nor did he actually fear him. But he didn't admire him any more. And he hadn't told him about Max Arnold! Marty frowned. Up until lately he had always trusted Arnold. Yet, Arnold was a leader; not a man to be led. Why then had he bowed so long to the will of the Reckoner? It couldn't have been in the spirit of adventure; Arnold wouldn't fit into that kind of picture at all. It might have been money and it might have been fear.

Fear! That would be it.

The Reckoner could have discovered a wrong of Arnold's; forced Arnold to work with him on the threat of disclosing that wrong. It was so with Tania; it was so with Marty now. Once in, the ties were almost impossible to break. The Reckoner could lay his finger on each of his workers. None of those workers—at least, none that Marty knew—could lay a finger on the Reckoner.

Zee Clarke! Did she know? Or did she just suspect? The Reckoner had been there at her house.

No more thoughts. Marty had long since left the Drive behind, was across the draw-bridge at Kingsbridge, had swung left, then right, and was mounting the hill.

The directions were good; easy to follow. He might have passed that little side road if it wasn't for the man-hole and the lantern that hung upon a rail. Two hun-

dred yards down that road Marty switched out his lights, drove slowly; his expensive motor just a purr in the stillness, his eyes piercing the darkness ahead as he picked out his way in the occasional splashes of moonlight through the trees.

And there was the house all right, not so far back from the broken gate. Dull; black; ominous.

Finding a grassy spot beneath the trees he carefully backed the car off the road to be sure of a quick get-away.

As Marty climbed from the car and stood peering through the trees at the blur of blackness that was the house, he felt the old thrill. Yes, he was through with the Reckoner, but he liked this sort of work. The happiness, the homes, the interests of many citizens would depend on him tonight. It was given to him to eliminate from the world's greatest city that city's greatest enemy. Joseph E. Rierson!

IT was such a feeling as this that had first driven him in with the Reckoner. Then Tania, of course, kept him there, even after he realized the danger to himself; the danger to others in the fast-growing power of the Reckoner, if that power should suddenly be turned to evil instead of good.

Where the Reckoner got all this information Marty didn't know, and he had quit trying to figure it out. In the beginning he had been doubtful of the explicit details of the Reckoner. Lately—well, the Reckoner's information had always been correct. Tonight the Reckoner had been more explicit even than usual. Every movement, to the smallest detail, had been carefully laid out for him by this encyclopedic mind of criminal activity. Well, he could trust him implicitly tonight, as he always had before. This was the big night; the final night. The Reckoner hated Rierson.

Marty studied the distance to the

house; the spots of moonlight; the thick bush or a huge tree here and there. With quick, noiseless steps Marty ran from shadow to shadow until he reached that house, planted his body firmly against the worn boards, stood silently listening in the darkness.

Rierson hadn't come yet. The man who was to meet him hadn't come. But that was right, according to the Reckoner's instructions. Marty moved along the side of that house, noted boards before the cellar windows; rotten boards. Then he found a loose one; felt of it with his cane. It gave slightly as that educated curved handle hooked under one edge.

There was the slightest sound of rotten wood crumbling and the squeak of a rusty nail being torn from that wood. Marty crouched low, swung his cane over his arm again and gripped the old board, made as little noise as possible.

The board came free. He dropped it against the house, ran a hand across the pane. Glass in some places; just torn ragged edges in others. The window gave beneath his pressure; swung back and upward.

There was room for Marty's six feet of well trained muscle, but just room. Little to spare as he stuck his feet through that window, turned his body and let himself slowly down into the cellar; his stomach, then his chest sliding through the opening.

No noise now. He braced his hands, held himself, lowered his body cautiously, his feet feeling for the cement floor.

Simple! Marty's toes touched the floor. He turned and faced utter blackness. Then the blackness was gone, suddenly pierced by blinding light; a light that shone directly into his eyes. A man laughed, a voice spoke, and two round hard objects were driven into Marty's sides.

"Don't move, Mr. Day," the voice said.

Then, as the ceiling light flashed on, the man spoke the very thought Marty had just had. "Simple, very simple. You're a fool for courage, Mr. Day—but a fool just the same."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Torture and Death

MARTY didn't speak. A man stood on either side of him. One dug a hand into Marty's pocket; found his gun. The other still kept a gun against his side. But it was Rierson whom Marty watched and it was Rierson who did the talking.

"No fear in your face yet!" His beady eyes popped. "Just stunned stupidity, eh? Well, we'll take you above and perhaps show you just a few things that will cause you a little emotion. I have a surprise for you, Mr. Day."

Marty's lips set grimly. His one thought was not a pleasant one. The Reckoner was through with him and had sent him to—to his death.

A man grabbed him roughly by the arm, hurled him forward, sent him stumbling toward the stairs. Another man was behind him, the gun against his back, and he was following Rierson up those steps; following the flash that was held in Rierson's hand.

But across Marty's arm he still held his cane, and in the handle of the cane was the deadly razorlike blade. For the first time in his life Marty was tempted to use it. There was no question that Rierson would kill him. He knew that. Now, a single movement of his fingers; a single jerk of his trained hand, and that curved handle would encircle Rierson's neck.

The man behind him would shoot, of course. Marty couldn't prevent that. But Rierson would be dead, his throat torn open in a single jerk; a single second. Marty's right hand crossed his chest,

reached the handle of the cane—and stopped. For Rierson spoke, and in those few words saved his life.

"I am taking you to Tania," he said simply.

Tania! Marty's hand fell to his side.

Through the kitchen, along a musty-smelling hall they went. Stairs were there. A banister that showed dust; dust that was wet and caked. And up those stairs Marty followed Rierson.

They entered the room at the top. A button clicked, dull light flashed up; light that could not be seen from outside, for heavy dark cloth was nailed against the window; cloth that was lately put there, for it was clean and free from dust.

Across the room was a heavy curtain, musty and damp with age. It brushed Marty's face as he followed Rierson into the room beyond. And there Marty stopped dead. Every detail of that room was stamped upon his brain; accentuated rather than dimmed by the dullness of the single lamp and the glare of a crackling wood fire in an open grate.

Two windows, also covered with the new black cloth. A door to the left, which evidently led to the hall they had just come from; another door, slightly open; a single shelf and hooks along the wall for hanging clothes could be dimly seen. Just a closet, that. The worn furniture, the flat table with thick damp dust upon it; dust which was already beginning to dry from the warmth from the fire. The couch to the side of the mantel. The two chairs; one empty, the other—the other occupied.

Although Marty mentally digested every detail of that room, it was the occupant of that chair who held his eyes; sent the cold chill of horror in a single electric shock through his entire body.

Tania, bound hand and foot! Her gorgeous hair, shaggy; hanging down over her forehead. A cut upon her lips;

blood that had dried upon her chin; wide brown eyes that dulled rather than brightened when she saw Marty.

THE two men acted quickly. Marty was swung around, his cane taken away. The fat hand of Rierson was holding the cane and he seemed to be examining it closely. Then Marty was thrust into the other chair, rope holding his body rigid; rope about his ankles, a heavy strip of it leading up and binding his hands tightly at the wrists. It was a good job; a thorough job.

Rierson spoke to the two men, followed them through the curtain as they departed. Dull whispers came from the room beyond. And Marty spoke.

"The Reckoner, Tania. He double-crossed me; you too. He's—well, he told me once that he had only friends and enemies. Enemies die. He trapped you, too?"

Tania shook her head. "The Reckoner didn't bring me here. It was Max Arnold. I nearly got away, in that instant that I knew the truth; saw death in his face. But, no—Marty. Max Arnold is close to the Reckoner. He knew of the Reckoner's plans for tonight and no doubt arranged with Rierson to wait for you here. He hates you, of course."

"Of course." Marty nodded. "Because of you—because he loves you and—"

"No." She shook her head. "Because he loves Zee Clarke. That's true, Marty. He admitted it to me. I was simply his dupe; partly to make her jealous, perhaps—but mostly, I think, to put her off her guard in protecting you. I—"

And she stopped. Rierson had come into the room. A man followed him. It was Max Arnold. Marty silently cursed himself for not telling the Reckoner his suspicions of Max Arnold.

"What a rotten beast you are," Marty started, and stopped. That was useless now.

"Tush, tush." Rierson shook the steel cane at Marty. "Max is simply disproving the old adage that a man can't serve two masters."

Max Arnold made a funny sound in his throat. If it was meant for a laugh, it died at once. "Just one master, Rierson," he said. "Myself!" And with an impatient wave of his hand, "Come on! Why all this talk. Get the—the business over with."

"But it's not business." Rierson shook his head. "The death of the Reckoner's hirelings for a while came under the head of business. The little lady started all the trouble. She worked as my secretary; learned of my connections; my friends; their secrets. And then she made it possible for our young hero, Mr. Day, to steal that information from my safe. In the Reckoner I see only the brain that conceived my ruin; in these two, the bodies of that brain. I am going to work upon those bodies, Max. I am going to draw a cry of agony for each of my friends. I am going to—"

"Bigger men than you have talked too much," Max cut in. "Bigger men than you have talked themselves even to death."

Rierson laughed, looked at Arnold. "If you haven't got the stomach for it, wait below. You have your money. The only stipulation was that they both must die; the means by which they die is left to me. A peculiar cane, this." Rierson turned his head and looked at Marty, then he threw the cane into the fire.

The cane struck the burning logs; the sizzling wood hid from all but Marty the sudden hum of the hidden springs. The cane twisted once, seemed to rise against the blaze like a curling rattlesnake, hung so a moment, and balancing on the end of the grate finally settled, the curved handle in the fire; the ferrule resting upon the stones before the open fireplace. And Marty felt a sinking in his stomach.

The cane was not near; at least, not near enough to his bound feet.

"You're impatient, Max." Rierson half spun Arnold around, pushed him toward the hall. "Wait downstairs, with Fred and Rawley. I'm not entirely bent on vengeance; there's business in it, too. The Reckoner is in a fair way to ruin me now. But perhaps he will hesitate to go on with his persecution; perhaps the psychology of his name—of the fear he has inspired will backfire on him after tonight. I don't think that any living man—even the Reckoner—will be able to look on these two bodies and not fear the man who prepared them for him."

"You'd torture them then?"

Rierson laughed. He went to the fireplace, grasped the heavy tongs, thrust them deep into the blazing logs. "You see, Max, pain is both physical and mental. The physical to the girl will be the mental to the man. But, there! Leave a man who is growing old to his simple pleasures." And Rierson's laugh was natural as Max Arnold, with a single look back over his shoulders at the fireplace, passed through the door into the hall.

RIERSON crossed the room and stood before Tania and Marty. "I would not have believed it." He bobbed his head up and down so that his thick jowls rolled. "But I don't know when I have experienced such satisfaction." He leaned down, felt of the cords about Marty's wrists, then slipped the gun that dangled in his right hand into a jacket pocket. "The boys made a good job of you. You can see Tania well from your position there. You can see the brown of her eyes. And I presume too, Mr. Day, you can see the fire tongs with their two ends; the twin points that are coincidentally just the same distance apart as those two—" He

stopped, bent forward, flipped Marty's jacket back further.

"They searched you, of course, but only for weapons. Now, what—" Fat fingers moved with swift and surprising dexterity into Marty's pocket and brought out the square white envelope. Until that moment Marty had forgotten it. Now he saw Rierson reading carefully the printed words. Rierson repeated them aloud.

"The identity of the Reckoner can be found inside this envelope if opened only by the party it is intended for.' The party it is intended for!" Rierson repeated. "Surely not you, Mr. Day. It's not opened; not—"

Rierson turned the envelope over, examined it carefully. Then breaking the seal, extracted a single sheet of paper. Marty could see plainly the small clear handwriting on that sheet. Twice Rierson read through that note, looked at the back of it. Then: "What does this mean?" he demanded of Marty.

Marty started to shake his head, and Rierson cut in.

"To be sure, it wasn't open. Now read it. Don't lie to me! What does it mean?"

He held the letter close to Marty's eyes, watched his face, too, as Marty read it. And he saw surprise there; genuine surprise.

Dear Mr. Rierson:—

If this letter should fall into your hands, Marty Day is in trouble. In plain words, one who should protect him has betrayed him. Do not harm Marty Day.

If you will telephone the number on the top of this sheet the person who answers that phone will disclose to you the name of the Reckoner for the life of Marty Day.

The Reckoner has enough evidence to convict you now. The name of the Reckoner would produce that evidence and put it in your hands. Do not let anyone but Marty Day know the contents of this letter. That is very important to your life. Better make the call.

The letter was unsigned.

"Well"—Rierson's face was very close to Marty Day—"who gave you that and why do you carry it?"

Marty hesitated. Then: "The letter came to me sealed, like that—with instructions to carry it with me always. I don't know who sent it."

"The Reckoner?"

"I don't know," Marty lied.

Rierson jerked up Marty's head violently. Then with his open palm he smacked him across the face. "The police! It's a trap?"

"You know I don't work with the police. I don't know."

Rierson hesitated. "You would advise me to call that number?"

"What do you think?" Marty said, but there was hope in his voice; and seeing the crafty look in Rierson's eyes, "It's my life—and Tania's."

"Police or not; trap or not, it does not matter." Rierson leaned over to the table, opened a box upon it and jerked out a phone, almost touching Marty's head. "You see, this phone is only for temporary use; tapped in on the wire—outside wire. I want you to hear the conversation."

RIERSON slid around the table, lifted the receiver, called the number, waited. He was so close that Marty could feel his hot breath upon his cheek. And Marty watched the fire. Then his head suddenly raised. Clearly he heard the voice on the phone; he recognized it too. It was Zee Clarke.

"Your name, please," Rierson said. "I—I got your note."

"Oh! This is Zee Clarke. It was a trap then. Marty is there?"

"That is correct. He is here. Who—Let me have the name you were to give me."

Zee Clarke laughed.

"I'm not a fool," she said. "First I will have to talk to Marty Day and know that he is alive and well. Max Arnold, of course, sold him out to you. There! Don't tell me about it. Let me tell you just what you are to do to get from me the name of the Reckoner. I won't betray this Reckoner to his death, if that's what you think. But I will let you know who he is, have him meet you, and in exchange for Marty Day's life he will turn over to you all the evidence he has collected. Here's your chance to escape the hot seat, Mr. Rierson. There will be victory for neither you or the Reckoner; just a draw."

"The Reckoner must be very fond of this Marty Day if you can make him do all this."

"It is not the Reckoner who is fond of Marty Day," the woman said. "Do you agree? I will come to talk with you."

"You expect me to tell you where I am; where I have this Marty Day?"

"Hell, man! I have only to call the Reckoner, tell him that Marty Day is a prisoner of yours. He will, of course, know where he sent him."

"If you did—if I—Day would be dead before any help could come."

"And that's why"—Zee Clarke's voice was smooth as glass—"I want to come and see you; want you and not the Reckoner to tell me where you are. It will be while I am with you that I will telephone the Reckoner; tell him that my life rests in his hands; that he must send the evidence he holds against you to you or I will disclose his identity."

"Yes?" Rierson was thinking.

"You know what you could do with the knowledge of that identity unless you and the Reckoner reached an agreement. The Reckoner is hated and feared in the entire city. His identity would mean his death by a hundred bullets before morning."

"God! It would—it would." Rierson nodded his agreement. Thick lips smacked; beady eyes sparkled.

"And," said Zee Clarke, "you wouldn't roast to death."

The sparkle left Rierson's eyes, his lips closed tight. He was silent so long that the woman spoke again.

"It's a chance, of course. But if I didn't come alone or if I—"

"I know," said Rierson. "It takes only a second to kill a man; just a second. You understand that."

"Yes." And after a pause, "If the man is there—Max Arnold, who betrayed the Reckoner's friend, I can arrange to save him from the wrath of the Reckoner too."

Rierson hesitated, finally said: "That doesn't interest me—only him. All right. Drive up Broadway, and turn after you cross the bridge at Kingsbridge. Then go up Riverdale Avenue. Watch the side roads to the left. Stop when you see a man-hole with a light over it. A man of mine will meet you there. God help you if you don't mean what you say."

"And I have your word that no harm will come to me?"

"My word, lady. If you disclose to me the name of the Reckoner, you have my word; my fortune; and my everlasting protection."

"Good! Now put Marty Day on."

Rierson nodded, held the phone close to Marty's lips.

Marty spoke quickly. "Don't come, Zee. He intends to kill us. And you, with your knowledge; he'd torture you until—"

"Sure!" said the voice of Zee Clarke. "That's in the mind of Rierson, all right. But he never could make me talk unless I wanted to talk. I'll be there."

THE receiver clicked. Rierson laid the phone back in the box. "So she won't talk." Rierson looked down at the now glowing tongs. "All women talk," he said,

and walked to the curtained room, looked carefully into it and finally entered. Marty heard his feet across the floor, then he heard him call, "Rawley!"

Crooks, thieves, murderers. Romance! But Marty couldn't laugh. Max Arnold had betrayed him. Now Rierson didn't care what happened to Max Arnold. But Rierson didn't return immediately to that room. Once he heard Rierson say: "Stick below, Max. I've got a private word for Rawley about guarding the outside of the house. No, no; I have done nothing about them yet. Things are delayed for a moment."

Marty Day tried to cheer Tania. He told her that Zee Clarke would get in touch with the Reckoner; maybe the police. She knew that Max Arnold had trapped them.

Tania shook her head. "No, Marty," she said. "The Reckoner will not like Zee Clarke interfering in this. The Reckoner would not dare use the police. They are as dangerous to him as they would be to Rierson. We can't lie to ourselves any longer, Marty. Many of the Reckoner's acts have been good acts; but men have died; men, maybe who deserved death. But the law will look on it as murder. No. You defied the Reckoner; I would have left him. He will not raise his hand to save us tonight."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Reckoner

IT SEEMED a long time before Zee Clarke came. Then that hall door opened and she just slid into the room. Rierson closed the door behind her. She barely looked at Tania, smiled and nodded at Marty and went directly to the fire.

She poked at Marty's cane with her foot, knocking it further from the grate, so that the paint that covered the steel and made it appear an ordinary walking stick dripped upon the stones. Then she

clasped her hands behind her back and spoke to Rierson.

"Your man," she said, "was just a bit rough in his search." Her amber eyes flashed, her thin lips curved. "He is not a man to handle women; at least, in the way of business."

Rierson nodded, said: "Sit down."

"I prefer to do my business standing. I am here to produce the Reckoner and make a deal with you. You understand that."

"No." Rierson shook his head. "You understand that, but I don't. You are here to tell me who the Reckoner is." He looked long and earnestly at her. "You are a very beautiful woman, Mrs. Clarke; far too beautiful to die. Far too beautiful to remain silent."

She laughed. "Don't be a fool, Rierson," she said. "I wouldn't have come unless I was sure."

"You weren't followed," said Rierson. "At least, after you reached the side road. We have a friend of yours here. Yes. Max Arnold. He knows you are here now, but he doesn't know why. Max!" Rierson turned to the curtained room.

Max Arnold came into the room. He stood looking at Zee Clarke. At length he said: "You were a fool to come, Zee. You loved him that much?" He nodded his head at Marty.

"Max"—Zee Clarke spoke slowly—"I couldn't let you do this. Everything you ever obtained was through reason. Now I'm not going to let you ruin it all by emotion. Do you know why I'm here?"

"Yes." Max Arnold looked at her steadily. "You are here to betray the Reckoner for the man you love—Marty Day, and you speak to me of emotion overcoming reason! I am afraid, Zee, you have walked to your own death."

"Sensible, Max." Rierson nodded.

"You don't understand, Max." Zee shook her head. "I explained it all to

Rierson. I'm afraid he doesn't intend to keep his word to me. I want you to suggest that he does; insist that he does."

"Yes!" Max Arnold sneered.

"Yes." Zee nodded very seriously. There was no fear in her eyes, no trembling in her voice; her words were very clear. "I am going to the telephone and call the Reckoner, Max. I am going to tell him that he is to make a deal with Rierson, all that evidence he has against Rierson for our freedom. If he won't make good I will disclose to Rierson the name of the Reckoner. So you see, Max, the Reckoner must come here tonight."

"I see," said Max. "Rierson gets the name of the Reckoner. What's to prevent him later from giving that name to the underworld?"

"The Reckoner must make that deal with him." Zee nodded. "Must arrange that the evidence against him is squashed so long as Rierson does not divulge the Reckoner's real identity. You see, I have come prepared."

"Except for one thing," Rierson snapped in. "This evidence against me will not be made public before morning, certainly. And before morning, Mrs. Clarke, you will have watched the two you came to save die slowly, and will have decided to talk. You will understand exactly what they suffered before they died."

"You—you don't want to go through with the bargain?"

"Hardly!" said Rierson.

"God, Max!" Zee Clarke turned suddenly on Arnold. "How could you have done this? What made you destroy everything; everything I had built up in you? How could—"

AND Tania spoke. The words just shot from her mouth. For the moment she had forgotten that the thing was real. It was as if she watched a

play. As if— But her words rang through the room.

"Max Arnold did all this because he loved—loved you, Zee Clarke."

"Me?" Zee Clarke laughed as she looked at Tania. Then she turned and looked at Arnold. Her eyes were bright; her lips still parted, and the laugh died in her throat. She bent closer. Her eyes burnt into Max Arnold's eyes. Her words were just a spoken thought.

"It's true, Max. It's true."

She was swaying forward when Rierson raised an arm and knocked her back:

"Go below, Max," he said, and there was no lightness in his voice. "Don't be a fool about women. Remember—I have two men watching downstairs." And as he pushed Max Arnold back toward the curtain, "If you want the woman, and she'll talk—you'll have her later." And Rierson looked at Zee Clarke now. "Well, well— Max, look at her. I guess, after all, it's you—not Day. Look at her!" And pushing Max through the door that led to the hall and locking it after him, "She'll have a double reason to talk now."

Zee Clarke, seemingly stunned, was saying: "He loved me enough; wanted me enough to kill—kill them both, and make it look as if Rierson did—"

"Get back there." Rierson held a gun in his right hand. With his left he struck Zee Clarke brutally across the mouth, knocking her onto the long couch. "If you make a fuss I'll call the two men from downstairs to tie you up too." He half turned, keeping his eyes on the woman as he gripped the tongs; lifted them from the fire.

"Well," Rierson stood close to Marty but spoke to the woman, "do you talk?"

"And you won't make the deal?" Zee Clarke brushed a hand across his mouth.

"No. And you're not going to tell the Reckoner anything."

"The Reckoner," she said, "has already received my message."

"His name?"

And Marty jerked his head back. The red hot tongs were close to his face; to his eyes. Another thrust and blindness; agonizing blindness.

"If the Reckoner doesn't act on my message at once I will give you his name." Zee Clarke almost shouted the words, yet Marty thought there was not exactly panic in her voice.

Rierson's little eyes snapped. To him the woman was breaking up, as all must break up—all had broken up—who faced Rierson. His voice was almost as loud as the woman's.

"His name?" he cried out.

"His name—" A voice suddenly echoed the words of Rierson. It was a mechanical voice, a rasping voice. Like the dull scraping voice on a phonograph played with a worn needle.

MARTY jerked so suddenly that for a moment the tongs touched his cheek, but for a moment only. Rierson's stubby fingers opened and the tongs slipped from them, struck Marty's knee, fell to the floor. For that voice was the voice of the Reckoner, and the body that owned that voice suddenly parted the curtains and stood in the room.

The black robe; the black hood over the head; the two slits that were eyes; even the peculiar, shiny hands which Marty knew now were gloves. And in the right hand was a gun; a heavy automatic that was directed straight at the body of Joseph E. Rierson.

The black figure moved slowly, ominously, until its back was to Marty Day and Tania. But his right hand could still be partly seen and the black gun was plainly visible as it covered unwaveringly the bulky form of Rierson.

Rierson suddenly came to life; at least

he found speech. "Fred! Rawley! Max!" he cried out loudly and wildly.

The Reckoner laughed. "You want my name? You want to find me? Don't cry out for Fred, Rawley and Max. They can not hear you."

"You—you— They are dead?"

"No, not dead. Only men who must die, die; and men who know me. Step forward, Rierson. Keep your hands visible. There! That's right." This as Rierson took two steps forward; mechanical movements; maybe unconscious movements. "Now, Rierson"— the metallic voice ground out the words— "you wanted to know me. Raise your right hand— so. Lift the hood. You would give your life even to see the face of the Reckoner. Well, look!"

Rierson's breath came in fast, uneven gasps. His right hand jerked up as if it were lifted by an invisible force. For a moment it hovered about the blackness of the Reckoner's hood, then it thrust that hood up and back over the Reckoner's head.

Marty could see that; could see the black hood flop over and rest on top of the Reckoner's head. He couldn't see the man's face but Rierson could. Plainly came Rierson's startled cry; plainly came his words.

"You—you! I never thought; never—"

Rierson's hand shot beneath his jacket with a quickness that must have been carried over from his earlier days as a gunman and a killer.

A shot rang out. Rierson's left hand clutched at his chest and he staggered back. Plainly Marty saw his face; the livid blue veins, the horrible, malignant, little shoe-button eyes. Then Rierson's gun crashed, yellow-blue flame spurted. The Reckoner's body shook. Then another shot.

Rierson's hand dropped to his side, his fingers seemed to relax, open, almost

gently, slowly. A great hole, with rough, powder-smear-ed edges appeared just above the bridge of his nose. His eyes popped; his mouth hung open. The black-robed figure raised a hand and jerked the hood back over his face. Then he turned as Rierson crashed face downward on the floor.

A dead silence in that room. Marty and Tania could not move. Zee Clarke seemed to be frozen there on the couch. Death had been sudden; sure, since the Reckoner had entered that room. Now Tania was safe; he was safe. They—

The breath sucked back into Marty's throat. The Reckoner moved suddenly, menacingly; the black hood hiding his face. But the menace was not in that hood. It was in that right hand; the shining right hand that suddenly raised the revolver and clapped it hard against Marty's temple.

Zee Clarke came to life. She bounded from the couch; flung herself against the hooded figure, knocking his arm aside, driving him from before the fireplace.

"No. Not now. You can't—you can't!"

"They know. They know." The rasping voice had a human note; perhaps a natural note now.

"No." Zee Clarke clung to his arm. "They don't know; they can't be sure—ever sure. Rierson is dead and— Then you'll have to kill me too; kill me first."

"You—you!" The gun suddenly disappeared some place in the folds of that black judicial robe. Both the Reckoner's hands shot out and fastened on the girl's throat.

Distinctly Marty heard her say: "Very well, if you can. I'd rather be dead than know you were simply a murderer, after—"

AND through it all Marty sat strapped in the chair and did nothing—nothing but listen to others plan his death and Tania's death, and now Zee Clarke's

death. For Zee Clarke had either lost her strength or didn't care, or— But she lay passive, still, while those rubber-gloved fingers closed about her throat; tightened there. The Reckoner was going to leave no loose ends behind him.

It was at that moment that Marty's eyes fastened upon his cane; the cane that had been out of his reach, even if—if— And the cane was no longer out of his reach. It had dropped further from the grate, so that only its curved handle was clinging to the edge now. Had the heat moved it; had a fallen log moved it? And Marty suddenly remembered. Zee Clarke had moved it. Zee Clarke, who knew the use he could make of that cane.

The Reckoner cried out sharply: "I can't—can't kill you, Zee; not now. But they must—"

And Marty and the Reckoner acted almost in the same few seconds. The Reckoner threw the girl from him; hurled her across the room and back onto the couch again.

As for Marty! His bound feet shot out; one foot touched that cane. The curved handle turned, hidden springs hissed under the sudden pressure of his foot and the cane bounded straight up and into his tied hands.

Hot! The steel burnt into his flesh. He set his teeth grimly. But the pain did not stop him; it only made his deft, sure, long-practiced movements the quicker. A single pressure of his fingers and a prayer that the heat had not harmed delicate mechanism. Then the click of the blade jumping into place; a blade that cut the rope that held his wrists as if it were mere thread. After that Marty's movements were all seemingly a single motion, as the hooded figure peered through the slits in the mask and watched, stunned for a moment, while Marty's hand twirled.

Marty simply reversed the cane, let his

fingers slip down close to the ferrule which was not so hot, and with a quick upward jerk tore that blade through the rope that had held his ankles.

And Marty was free; free and out of the chair, flinging his body toward the Reckoner as the Reckoner's gun jumped into his hand again. But this time the Reckoner's finger did not close upon the trigger. The cane slipped forward; wrenched the gun from his hand, the sharp blade which still protruded from the curved handle drawing blood from his wrist.

The Reckoner backed suddenly away. Marty jerked the cobra cane back over his arm. The heat did not at once penetrate the sleeve of his jacket.

"At last," Marty could not keep the gloating out of his voice, "I'm going to get a look at the face of the man—"

Marty stopped. The Reckoner's crouching body straightened; moved backward, close to the open closet door.

Footsteps on the stairs outside; heavy, running feet; the shouting of men. Why hadn't Marty thought of it before? The men below! Rierson's friends were coming. And in Marty's moment of hesitation, indecision, the Reckoner backed quickly into the closet and jerked the door closed behind him. A lock clicked.

Pounding on the door; a body hurled against it, and Marty had bent quickly and lifted Rierson's gun from the floor; that was the nearer to his hand. Zee Clarke was getting slowly from the couch when Marty swung, gun raised, and the door to the hall burst open.

A gun cracked, plaster crashed from the wall above the fireplace. Men were in the room; men who were strangers to Marty. Then a voice spoke behind him. Marty's gun dropped to his side. The fight for life was over; his life, Tania's life. Marty turned and faced the man who had come through the curtains; the same

curtains that the Reckoner had come through. It was Lieutenant Frank Bradley.

TANIA was quickly freed, but she could not stand at once. It was necessary to restore the circulation to her aching feet. Bradley had just risen from the side of Rierson.

He looked at Marty; at the gun still dangling in his hand.

"So you plugged him, eh? Finally got him. Well, he kidnaped the girl. There, don't tell me! I guess you can make out a pretty good case. I wouldn't have found the house if it wasn't for the shots and perhaps the car I saw turn out of the road."

"I didn't kill him," Marty said. "You wanted the Reckoner. Well, maybe it was self-defense, but the Reckoner killed Rierson tonight. I guess it's—it's—"

Zee Clarke laughed. "Don't be a fool, Marty," she cut in quickly. "Bradley must know the truth. You trusted him enough tonight; at least, enough to insist that I telephone him your message that Tania was held a prisoner here and that you were coming to make a deal with Rierson."

"Sure!" Bradley smiled over at Marty. "All the breaks will be your way tonight, Mr. Day. Of course, if Mrs. Clarke could have told me exactly where the house was—why, I might have made it in time to prevent the shooting."

"But the Reckoner—" Marty started and stopped. Zee Clarke's amber eyes were on him; warning eyes. He tried to piece things together. Zee Clarke had telephoned Bradley in his name. Why? To be sure! To protect herself if things went wrong. No, not exactly that. To protect all of them, of course. Now her eyes said, as plain as if she spoke the words, "Protect the Reckoner and he will protect you. Disclose him and he will—"

Well, if the Reckoner talked, he could make it very unpleasant for him—for Tania. In plain English Zee's eyes said, "We are all saved together or we all sink together." But the closet! Surely the police would— And Zee Clarke spoke.

"Marty—as you know—Lieutenant, has an exaggerated sense of honor." She shrugged her shoulders. "I knew my way just as far as I told you. The repaired man-hole was my sign post too. But I had luck in locating the house. I sneaked in." She raised her head, exposed her slender white throat. "Rierson's fingers were on my throat when I shot him. I had to—"

A detective spoke from across the room.

"The closet door is locked and the key gone." The man paused and leaned down; then straightening, said in a low voice, "I can hear someone breathing heavily inside there, like—like—"

"Hell!" said Bradley, drawing his gun again and pointing to the closet door. "Quit the brain work and pull that damn door off its hinges. I brought you along for beef, not brains, Haviland. Let's see the beef work."

Every pair of eyes turned toward that door. Detective Haviland grasped the knob, pulled once and only once. The lock came from the rotten wood almost at the first effort. Haviland jarred back. For a moment, darkness; then a figure.

Marty's eyes fairly popped. Things were to be cleared up now. Just as soon as Bradley tore the black hood from—

But no black-clad figure came from that closet. The hood was gone, the black robe was gone. The man was dressed in a plain blue business suit. No mask covered his face, no rubber gloves disguised his hands. He just took two steps forward, then his knees gave. Bradley stretched out a hand and supported him; helped him to the couch.

Marty stared for a long time at the

man upon the couch. The blood was dripping slowly through the fingers of a hand he held close against his chest. At length Marty spoke.

"You—you!" He fairly gasped the words. "Max Arnold! You were—are—"

Zee Clarke snapped in quickly. "Where did you think Max went after Rierson shot him? Did you think the door led to another room? Poor Max. He did everything he could to—to—"

And for the first time Zee Clarke broke down. She threw herself down beside Max Arnold; her arms were about his neck.

"Max—Max! Not now! You can't die now, when I—when we—when we just found out. Max, don't. Max!"

CHAPTER NINE

Not so Dumb

IT WAS close to two hours later when the doctor left Zee Clarke's house. Before he left he spoke to Zee and Marty.

"Just a flesh wound." He smiled encouragingly. "Two inches closer, maybe, and then— But he'll be around in a week. Nothing but loss of blood. I'll drop in tomorrow. Don't move Mr. Arnold to his own home yet."

Alone in the sitting room, with the door closed to the little bedroom where Max Arnold was, Zee gripped Marty by the arm.

"I'm not asking you to believe that Max is telling the truth when he says he never really intended to harm you and Tania. But I saved your life tonight; saved Tania's life tonight, and discovered something I never dreamed was possible. He loves me, Marty—and I guess I always loved him but never realized it, because it wasn't—didn't seem even a remote hope. Max and love didn't fit at all. His purpose was vengeance, maybe;

the downfall of Rierson. No, it wasn't all for society, of course. But, even so, it served society well."

"Max Arnold was the Reckoner," Marty mused.

"Yes." She nodded. "He'll be around in a week and defend me at the trial, if there is a trial. But, here!" She shoved a thick envelope into his hand. "There's the evidence against Rierson; it involves many others. It will make Bradley the envy of every man on the force; make him an inspector. He's a smart man—Bradley; a bright man. Too bright to stir up a lot of trouble for himself. Go and talk to him now."

Marty turned to the hall and stopped. "The two men in that house; Rierson's friends. What became of them?"

"Max told me. He had prepared everything. He had another car out back; two men in it. He just got Rierson's men, Fred and Rawley, together in the kitchen. It was easy for Max to put a gun on them; they thought he was Rierson's friend, of course. Then Max turned them over to his men. They were driven to the city and let go. Rierson is dead. Dead men have no friends. No, they won't talk.

"Don't be too hard on Max, Marty. He can't harm you now. Rierson killed his partner; only Max knew that. And that partner was the only living thing Max ever cared for until—" She stopped, grasped Marty by both shoulders. "I guess I told you the truth, Marty, when I said I get anything; any man I want." She threw her arms suddenly about Marty and kissed him. "After all, it was Max I really wanted."

Downstairs Lieutenant Frank Bradley paced back and forth. He led Marty to a distant corner, far from the uniformed men who stood at the door.

"You got all that evidence, eh?" He stroked his chin, whistled as he ran his

eyes over the documents that envelope contained. "I wonder if I'm a fool to go through with it. But, hell, you're a good skate, and I'd like to be an inspector."

"Rierson is dead," Marty said. "There is information that will clean up the worst of the crooked politicians, lawyers, judges and such like in the city. It's a big thing, Bradley. And in return, you simply make it easy for us. After all, you've got proof of nothing, and—" Marty straightened. "I'll promise you this, Bradley. The Reckoner is through. If he ever enters into criminal life again—why, I'll tell you who he is."

"Will you?" Bradley grinned from ear to ear; his voice was sarcastic. "Well, now— Mr. Day, that's mighty white of you; mighty decent of you." And the grin disappearing and his mouth grim and hard, he pounded a finger against Marty's chest. "It isn't so much slipping from my duty that bothers me; the evidence you gave me is worth that and the stripes of an inspector can soothe the most festering conscience. But I do hate to be considered dumb; just plain dumb." The finger against Marty's chest pounded harder now. "By the way, I wrapped that robe and hood in a newspaper and gave it to Tania. Better burn them."

MARTY didn't know just what to say and he didn't know for certain if Bradley knew who the Reckoner was; simply suspected who he was or just knew that he had actually been at the house up at Riverdale. So Marty only said: "The killing of Rierson was self-defense. I'll take the blame for it if you think—"

"Hell, no!" Bradley said. "That's all arranged. I'll keep the cops here until the D. A. shows up. But let Zee Clarke take the blame. Now mind you—I don't think there will be an arrest. But if there *should*

be a trial—why, that Mrs. Clarke's got the eyes and—yes, the legs—for it. But—"

Bradley stopped. Tania had opened the door that led to the library.

"There you are!" nodded Bradley as with some difficulty he thrust the large envelope into his pocket. "I'll make this evidence public slowly, as a hard-working cop should. Don't forget to burn the outfit. People are queer and might get to thinking that a lad who called himself the Reckoner shed ~~them~~ in that closet."

But Lieutenant Bradley was smiling as Marty crossed the huge reception hall and entered the library.

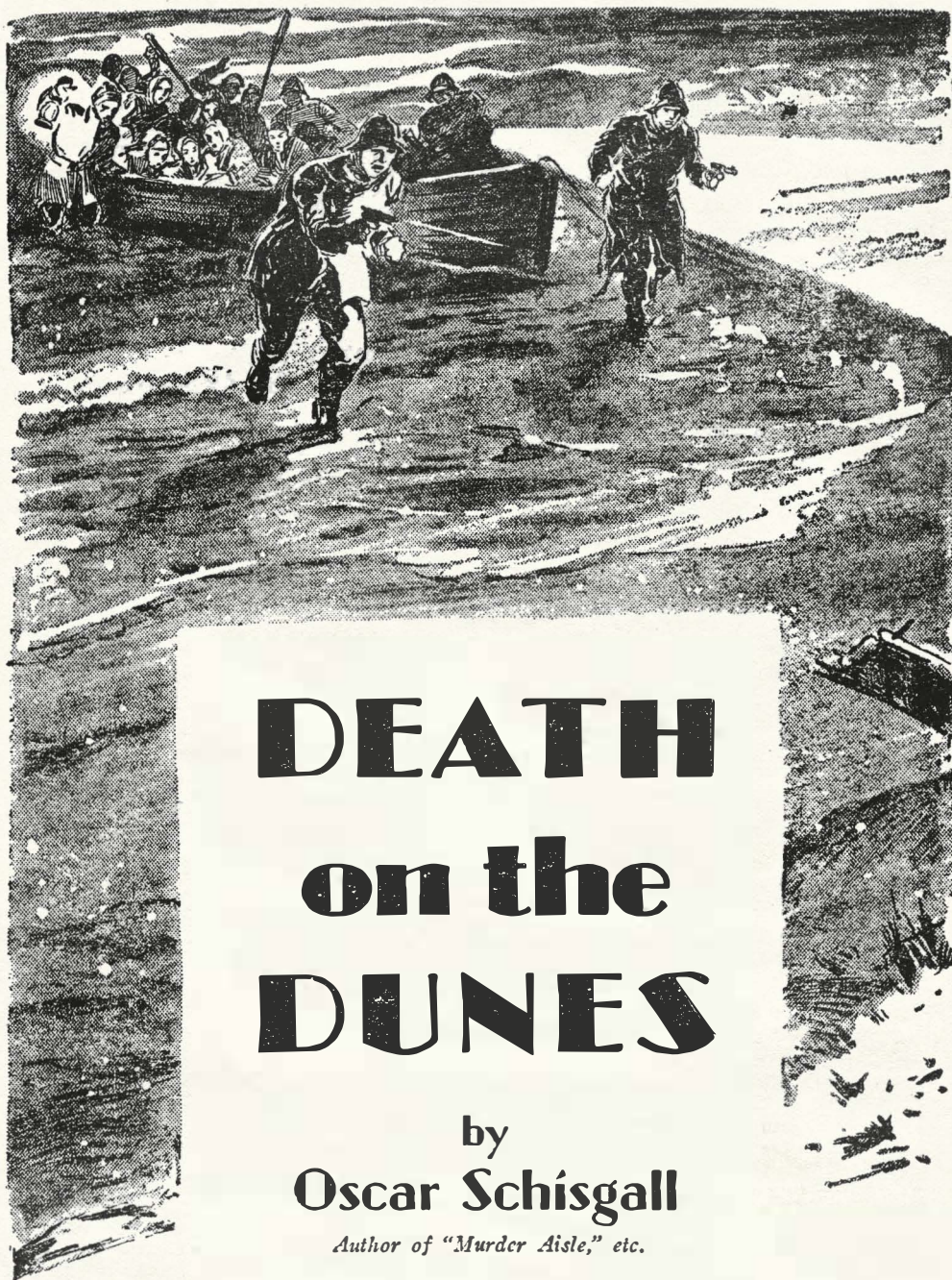
TANIA'S eyes were radiant; bright; alive. She followed Marty's eyes to Knight, who sat upon the floor, a can of paint and a thin brush still upon a sheet of paper. He was admiring a bit of painting he had been doing. The result of his efforts stood against the flat desk.

"Knight brought your things over," Tania explained. "Zee thought the police might keep us here all night. But finding the paint was his own idea. I told him about the cane and that you were through with adventure—romance."

Marty looked at Knight. Knight spoke.

"I told her, sir," Knight said, "that you never will be through with romance as long as you have her. As for adventure! Well, sir; that's in your blood—in your cane. There!" He held the cane up by the ferrule. "It's as good as ever, if you should find it necessary to stick it behind the district attorney's ears to-night."

Marty and Tania looked at each other. The girl took two steps forward and met Marty. For a moment she hesitated, looked toward the spot where Knight had been. A door closed softly. They were alone.



DEATH on the DUNES

by
Oscar Schisgall

Author of "Murder Aisle," etc.

In his lonesome cottage on the desolate Cape Cod sands O'Fallon lay dying—stabbed by a Florentine dagger. And as his life blood ebbed away the silver beam of High Point Light shot its intermittent flash across the storm-swept beach to point the way to horror—and a ghost killer who roamed the shore.



He raised his gun and blazed away.

CHAPTER ONE

Open Air Job

THE case caught me without warning. Late that afternoon my feet were comfortably crossed on the desk; a pipe jutting from my mouth; and I was gazing through the window into the falling snow—dreaming of winters

I'd known during my few years with the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police. Somehow this New York blizzard, viewed against a background of gray skyscrapers, had little in common with the snow-storms I'd seen north of civilization. That time, for instance, when I'd trekked eighty miles over ice, trailing Francois Renoir who had butchered his wife with an ax—

"Cort!"

The chief's sharp voice slashed through my reverie like a sword. In a single violent motion I swung my legs off the desk, whirled in the swivel chair, and blinked up at him. He filled the door of the cubbyhole which was my office and glared at me. He was a huge, florid man, with a mass of white hair that bristled like an angry cat's. As he advanced, he rattled a sheet of paper at me.

"What the devil's the idea?" he demanded. "Do I pay you to go to sleep in this office? Maybe you'd like me to buy you a *chaise-longue*?"

Somewhat abashed, I stammered, "Sorry, chief. I—"

"As far as I know, this is still an active detective agency. If you want to park your heels on the desk and waste your time and mine—"

As he went on, gathering momentum, my initial embarrassment gave way to a wave of indignation. I rose, scowling, to interrupt: "Never mind the serum, chief. I was wrong, and I admit it. I got the dreaming habit over campfires up in the wilds. Seeing that snow out there made me remember."

"Remember what?"

"Canadian winters."

At that Brackett laughed; it struck me as a peculiarly nasty crack of laughter. He came forward to the desk and tossed the paper in front of me. There was more than anger in his manner now; a hint of sarcasm.

"Glad to hear you're hankering for open-air winters again," he snapped. "Because I'm assigning you to a job that'll keep you shivering outdoors. Tomorrow morning you start for the sand dunes of Cape Cod—on a ghost hunt."

I stared at him. "Wha-at?"

"Cape Cod!" he repeated, still scowling; and spelled it unctuously, "C-a-p-e C-o-d."

"But what's the ghost—"

"We've been handed a case that'll keep one of our operatives freezing on the dunes, with ocean gales cutting through his clothes. He'll have to hang around with a gun and do a bit of patient watching. It may take days. I decided that you, with your Canadian training, would be just the right man for the job—if you can stop dreaming of the Mounties long enough to work. Pack tonight and get going in the morning. There's a train at seven fifty."

Mechanically I nodded. My glance had already dropped to the paper on the desk.

"This the low-down?" I asked.

"As much as we have, yes," Brackett flung out. "It's a letter from Brian O'Fallon."

I JERKED up my head in surprise. Though I didn't know the man personally, I knew the name. O'Fallon had achieved a remarkable reputation as a dramatist. Two of his plays were drawing record crowds on Broadway, and I recalled reading that critics were labeling him "another Eugene O'Neill—gloomy, powerful, stirring, and heroic." I couldn't help asking: "The O'Fallon?"

"In person," Brackett rapped out. "You'd better read that ghost story he writes us. Then go home and get your duds."

I picked up the typewritten letter with a slight frown. Its first few lines merely engaged the services of the Apex Detective Agency, asking us to send an operative at once to the playwright's Cape Cod home near Truro. Then he went on to explain—

I came here, to the dunes, two weeks ago with the idea of burying myself away from people until my new play is written. My wife accompanied me. We had been here only a few days, however, when I re-

ceived an anonymous letter, posted in Provincetown, which advised me—or, more accurately, warned me—to return to New York at once. Of course, I ignored the letter; and I continued to ignore the warning even when a second unsigned note arrived. But last night, as we were going to sleep, a bullet was shot through our bedroom window; it shattered a lamp at my shoulder.

Though I ran out, I could see nobody in the darkness. There was no repetition of the attack. This morning I learned that the two other people who live here on the dunes in winter—Captain Waldo Richardson, an old sailor; and Charles Norval, an artist who came up ten days ago to paint winter scenes—also received notes warning them to leave the dunes.

Chief Batson of the local police, whom I consulted, hasn't made any great progress in the case. On the insistence of my wife, I am therefore asking you to send an operative here. If your man leaves the train at Truro and takes a cab to the High Point Lighthouse, he can walk to my cottage. The Tower keeper, a Portuguese-American named Michael Colona, will be glad to direct him and to give him any information about these dunes he may desire. I am hoping your operative will be able to discover who is threatening us, and why, before any further shots are fired.

Sincerely yours,
Brian O'Fallon.

The letter sounded somewhat bewildering, and I said so as I looked up at Brackett.

"Never mind what it sounds like!" he barked, turning to the door. With his hand on the knob, he frowned back at me. "Make that seven-fifty in the morning. I'll wire him you'll be on that train. When you get to the dunes, see O'Fallon, then use your own judgment. Your job will be to nab the bird who's taking pot-shots at the O'Fallon cottage."

AT four thirty the next afternoon I found Cape Cod in a hostile mood. I'd imagined myself accustomed to loneliness. But the kind of solitude I en-

countered on the dunes—so somber, drab, and coldly depressing—was wholly beyond my experience. For one thing when I stepped out of a dilapidated taxi beside the High Point Lighthouse, an icy wind instantly swept against me. It tore at my clothes, at my temper. It was a wet wind, and I shivered violently.

The road came to a dead end on a bluff overlooking the sea. Ahead, the Atlantic surged in cold gray anger, without even a whitecap to break its sullen mood. At my right the lighthouse tower seemed as stark and surly as a Roman ruin. And everywhere about me rolled the monotonous dunes—a wasteland that now appeared to be a perfect setting for what Brackett had termed a ghost hunt.

Then, of a sudden, the tower's tiny door opened, and a man came toward me.

He advanced without hurry—a short, thick-set, powerful figure in a belted leather jacket not unlike a parka. A cap with ear-laps framed a swarthy middle-aged face. I guessed him to be Mike Colona, the keeper, and moved toward him with some relief.

He called out, "You the man for O'Fallon?"

"That's right." The heavy wind whipped the words out of my mouth.

"O'Fallon was over this mornin'. Said he was expectin' a man from New York." Colona nodded northward across the dunes. "His place is up yonder. Too bad you didn't get here half an hour earlier. My helper, Steve Crane, just went over to O'Fallon's with water. Reckon you'll meet him on the way."

I peered uncertainly across the rolling wastes of sand. "Is the place very far?"

"A mile or so," Colona answered. "Better start out if you want to make it before dark. Second cottage you come to. The first is Cap Richardson's." He peered down dubiously at my shoes.

"Y'oughta have boots, though, for this kind o' walkin'."

"I'll get along," I assured him, buttoning the collar of my ulster. "Unless I freeze first."

Walking across those dunes, however, proved to be a trying job. My feet sank deep into the sand. I had to drag them out for every stride; and what with the wind beating me sideways and my ox-fords filling with sand, progress was slow.

PERHAPS it was because I kept my head bent against the wet gale that I didn't immediately see the man who was crossing the dunes in my direction.

When I spied him in the deepening twilight, he was scarcely a hundred yards away—and running hard. A young fellow, small and wiry, wearing the same sort of jacket I'd seen on Colona. As he drew nearer, I saw that he was inordinately excited. There was a feverish brilliance in his black, deep-set eyes; and his lean face, despite the cold bite of the wind, was pallid. Ten feet from me he halted, breathless.

"Wh-where *you* heading, mister?" he gasped.

His agitation stirred echoes in me, and I snapped tersely, "O'Fallon's. Why?"

"You the city feller he was expecting?"

"Yes."

"Well"—his lips crawled back from clenched yellow teeth, and he grated savagely—"you'd better get there damn fast, then! O'Fallon's dying!"

His words came like blows. I stood momentarily staggered; and repeated, "Dying?"

"Somebody jabbed a knife into him! I'm going over to the tower to phone a doctor—an' the police!"

He would have dashed on at once, but I seized his arm in a detaining grasp. "Just a second!" I flung out. "Are you Steve Crane?"

"Yes!"

"And you found him—"

"Spread over the floor in a regular ocean o' blood!" bitterly. "With not a soul around!"

"Did he talk?"

"No—he's unconscious."

"Where's his wife?"

"God knows! Prob'ly running around with that artist feller, Norval. . . . Or maybe she stabbed him herself and beat it! They're all crazy, this crowd!"

I released Crane then and watched him race on toward the gloomy tower a quarter of a mile away. At that instant its light blazed through the dusk—a burst of dazzling gold that was to flash intermittently through the night. But I gave it scant attention. With a low-voiced oath, I swung around and plunged on toward Brian O'Fallon's cottage.

It seemed hours before I finally spied the neat, white New England cottage of the dramatist, Brian O'Fallon. It stood sheltered in a miniature valley facing the somber sea. In its windows glowed a yellow light—the lamp having been lit, I later learned, by Steve Crane. I ran downhill toward that light, feeling as though I'd reached the end of a Marathon.

CHAPTER TWO

Terror on the Dunes

THE door swung open to my push. Breathing hard, I stepped into a small living room—a pleasant chamber curtained in gay chintz and crowded with books; warmed by embers in a fireplace. Abruptly I halted.

Crane hadn't exaggerated. The floor, a rug, the cushions of a chair—all were hideously splashed with blood. The place seemed a veritable shambles.

Brian O'Fallon himself lay stretched on a couch where, presumably, Steve

Crane had placed him. One long arm dangled limply to the floor. An instant I stared at him—a tall, bony man in his late forties, his hair graying at the temples; a man with large, bold features and extraordinarily heavy eyelids. Those eyes were fiercely shut in pain now, and between them lay a deep cleft. His chest and abdomen were one horrible crimson stain, still wet. His lips, I saw, were stirring; and as I stepped to his side, I heard him mutter vaguely.

"Stay away—from him—Ruth . . . He's no—good. I don't trust—him—never did. . . . Ruth—Ruth. . . . Don't let him—touch you—Don't. . . . He—didn't come—to paint. . . . No, Ruth. I know. . . . He came because—you are here—"

Delirious? No doubt. I was to remember those words that tumbled from Brian O'Fallon's lips.

While I listened to his maunderings, I dragged off my hat, coat, and jacket and flung them into a corner chair. Rolled up my sleeves. I was more or less accustomed to this sort of job. Up in the wilds of Canada, if a man is hurt you've got to play nurse and doctor; there's no choice; and I'd done it often. Now, as I glanced about the room, I saw two glass demijohns filled with water.

That, I realized, must be the supply Steve Crane had brought. Many of these dune dwellings, having no water of their own, were dependent upon the generosity of lighthouse keepers and Coast Guard stations.

Well, I spent fifteen terrible minutes working over Brian O'Fallon. My desperate hope was that he'd recover consciousness long enough to tell me who had stabbed him—for it was a vicious knife wound I found in his chest. Fatal, I feared. I bathed it, bandaged it with a towel. His mutterings had ceased. Yet there was no definite indication of returning senses.

Then, suddenly, I heard voices outside. I whirled around quickly—for one of those voices was a woman's. Mrs. O'Fallon? No doubt. My first impulse was to head her off at the door; to warn her of what she would encounter. But I was too late.

Just as I started across the room, the door opened—and there she was. . . . A young woman in her early twenties; a really beautiful woman, lovely of face, possessed of golden hair that looked glamorous even when windblown. And behind her stood a tall, black-haired young man.

Mrs. O'Fallon first saw me, then the blood on the floor, and finally her husband.

At the beginning not a sound escaped her. She stiffened with a jerk, recoiled against the dark-complexioned man. Her countenance went ghastly white, the eyes widening in wild, incredulous horror. She raised one hand in little spurts of motion, as if to point. Her mouth opened. And then—without uttering a word save a stifled "Brian!" Mrs. Ruth O'Fallon closed her eyes, moaned, and sank to the floor in a dead faint. . . .

"Holy heaven!" hoarsely whispered the dark-skinned man. He had tried and failed to catch Ruth O'Fallon as she collapsed. Now he knelt beside her, supporting her golden head in his arm. But his stare, as if hypnotized, was fastened on the figure on the couch. And his countenance—a handsome face adorned by a tiny black mustache—was yellow. He gasped, "Is—is he dead?"

"No," I said thickly. "But close to it."
"Who did—"

"I don't know who did it! Steve Crane found him like this half an hour ago. He's gone for a doctor—and the police." As I spoke, I wiped my hands briskly on a towel. Then I stepped forward and bent to Mrs. O'Fallon. "Come on!" I urged

grimly. "We've got to get her out of here."

WE PICKED the insensate woman up between us; carried her toward a bedroom door. I snapped, on a guess: "Are you Norval, the artist?"

"Y-yes! Who are you?"

I told him, then asked, "How long have you and Mrs. O'Fallon been out together?"

"All—all afternoon!" His eyes were still fixed mesmerically on Brian O'Fallon. It seemed he hardly realized he was talking to me. And suddenly, because of his dazedness, we had an exasperating accident.

I had already exhausted the water of one demijohn in laving O'Fallon's wound, and I'd opened the other. The bottle stood on the floor—and Norval inadvertently stumbled over it. It rolled over. Neither of us could instantly drop the woman; and with a groan of dismay I saw most of the water spill out!

"Hell!" gasped Norval. "I—I'm sorry! Didn't see—"

"My fault," I interrupted harshly. "Shouldn't have let it stand there. But, damn the luck, we've got to get some more before the doctor comes! He'll need it. Any place nearer than the tower to go?"

Norval stammered, "You—you might try Captain Richardson's house!"

I nodded. When we had placed Mrs. O'Fallon on her bed, I left her to the care of the artist. I returned to the living room for another frowning examination of the playwright. There was still no hint of returning consciousness in the man. He was breathing rapidly now, his brows contracted. I realized that his only hope of life might lie in some quick ministrations from a physician—help more efficient and expert than my own amateur efforts. And

again I told myself the doctor would need water.

So I went to the bedroom door. Norval, still colorless, stood nervously rubbing Mrs. O'Fallon's hands.

"Will you go for water?" I snapped.

"Oh, please!" He swung toward me miserably, waving one eloquent hand at the woman. "If—if she comes to, she'll need me—she'll need somebody she knows! I don't want to leave now! This'll be awful for her!"

My lips twisted slightly; yet I felt he might be right. The job of reconciling the woman to her husband's condition was certainly not to my taste. With a shrug I turned away and started drawing on my coat and hat.

"I'll leave the place to you, then," I called to Norval. "We've got to have boiling water ready for the doctor."

Buttoning my overcoat, I saw two nickel-plated electric flashlights in a recess of a bookcase. One of them I slipped into my pocket. I'd need it on the dunes. It was now quite dark outside—a wet darkness that proved black and blinding as soon as I stepped into it. I had to bend low against a penetrating wind which felt colder and more violent than ever.

While I climbed out of the valley that sheltered O'Fallon's cottage, I couldn't see the High Point Lighthouse. Intermittently, however, I could watch its golden beam swing over my head. It served me, as well as ships at sea, as a beacon. I pushed on in the direction of the tower, that being also the way to Captain Richardson's shack.

At my left the Atlantic was infinite blackness. Squinting against the gale, I could see nothing out there. No lights. The breakers roared angrily in my ears. And as I stared about in that desolate night, I had a sudden overwhelming sense of my own solitude—a feeling inexplicably accompanied by a pang of fear. . . .

THE flashlight illuminated a path for me. Emerging from the valley, I could distinctly see the blaze of the High Point Light, a mile away. This, at intervals, weirdly revealed the whole stark landscape. And it wasn't long before I discerned in the blackness ahead the dimly glowing window of Captain Richardson's shack.

Somehow that light—a sign of human proximity—made me feel easier. I quickened my steps.

What it was that prompted me to peer into the window before I knocked at the door, I don't know. Simply, perhaps, that any speck of light on those dunes served as a magnet for one's glance. At any rate, I had to pass the window to reach the door. I looked in. . . .

And sustained a shock.

Illuminated by a candle that guttered on a rickety table, a gaunt old man kneeled on the floor. His white-bearded head lay in an attitude of sheer exhaustion on the edge of a cot, the eyes closed. It was as if he were praying. Or sleeping. But—I saw that a trickle of blood was running from his mouth down into the stubby white beard.

A gasp broke from me, and I leaped forward to smash my way into the door.

That was my introduction to Captain Waldo Richardson, retired master of the *Hyannis Queen*.

As I burst into his house, he jerked up his head with a violent start. Fear seized his withered old features, and he struggled up to his feet—only to collapse helplessly on the edge of the cot. He sat there gaping at me, with that trickle of red still running from his lips into his beard; gaping and trembling and bewildered, while his scrawny hand groped toward a broken chair as if it were a weapon.

"What—what d'you want here?" he flung out hoarsely. Eyes that had once been keen blazed a challenge at me. I

felt as if I were staring into the face of an enraged Biblical prophet. His voice was cracked, strident, blending eerily with the atmosphere of that shabby candle-lit room. He cried a shrill: "Who be ye?"

I said with forced quietness: "I'm a friend of Brian O'Fallon's."

At that there was a swift change in the old seaman. His hand fell away from the chair. He leaned forward, almost eagerly, as though at once relieved and unbelieving. "Are—are you the city feller he was waitin' for?"

"Yes. Cort's the name. . . . What happened to your mouth, Captain?"

"Lord, never mind *me* now! I'm all right! Have—have ye been over to O'Fallon's yet?"

"Yes."

"What happened to *him*?"

I peered at the old sailor keenly, in surprise. How could he know anything had occurred at the dramatist's cottage? . . . Aloud I said, "He's been stabbed."

"Stabbed!" in horror.

"I'm afraid he's done for."

"God!" At last, then, Captain Richardson managed to push himself shakily to his feet—and astounded me by revealing a gaunt figure at least two inches taller than my own. He caught the chair again, but this time it was for support. "O'Fallon!" he croaked desperately. "Stabbed!"

"Do you know who did it?" I shot out.

"It—it musta been the fat feller!"

"What fat 'feller'?" quickly.

"I dunno his name—never even saw him before!" Captain Richardson paused, his eyes momentarily shut. He sent bony fingers crawling back through his white hair, spider-like, and a shudder wrenched his whole figure. Then he looked at me haggardly, his inflamed eyes eloquent of pain. The blood was no longer running from his lips, I saw.

"Go on, Captain," I urged tensely. "Tell

me what happened! About this fat man—”

“I was just comin’ up from the beach when I saw him come runnin’ out of O’Fallon’s cottage! He was a stranger, an’ we—we been kind o’ careful about strangers lately, ever since we got them crazy letters. This feller looked all excited. He was wipin’ his hand on a handkerchief—an’ the handkerchief was red! Red as sin, mister! I saw him headin’ away over the dunes; I didn’t hardly realize I was yellin’ to him. Then he turned around fast, laid eyes on me, an’ came runnin’ right back. I didn’t like the looks o’ him at all. He—he had a devil in his dirty little eyes. An’ his teeth was showin’ like a wolf’s. So I yanked out that!”

THE Captain pointed to a small table in the shadows. I glanced at it to discover an ancient and very ponderous pistol—a weapon so old and rusty that it seemed beyond all ability to shoot.

“It’s the gun I used to keep in my cabin on the *Hyannis Queen*,” the Captain declared, with a hint of pride. “Ever since somebody took a shot at O’Fallon’s window t’other night, I been carryin’ it around with me. Well, I started to pull it on this fat feller. But reckon I—I’m gettin’ to be a mite old an’ mebbe slow lately. Fore I could get her out properly, he hauled off an’ slammed his fist into my mouth square! I—I ain’t got many teeth left, but he knocked one of ’em clean out. An’ he sent me tumblin’ down a slope into a—a hollow. Reckon I sort o’ lost my senses for a spell—just lay there—”

The captain paused to pass his shaky hand over his eyes. He looked at me wretchedly.

“When I come to, I felt all busted up. Dragged myself over here an’—an’ just kind o’ rested till you came along. Didn’t

see nothing more o’ that damned fat devil at all! He must ‘a’ skeepadled mighty fast. . . . Ye say O’Fallon’s hurt bad, mister?”

“Very. . . . I’ve come for water, if you can spare any. We’ll need it.”

“Water? Just help yerself, mister, just help yerself.” He waved unsteadily to an alignment of eight quart-size bottles, all corked, that stood on the floor in a shadowy corner.

As I moved toward them, I suggested: “Can I do anything for your mouth, Captain?”

“Lord, no! I—I’ll be all right, thank ye. I’m just a bit tired.” He groaned, settling back on the cot with the pain of a rheumatic. “Just a bit tired. . . . Reckon I’ll feel better after a spell. If I do, I’ll come over to the O’Fallon place an’ lend a hand.”

I determined to ask the doctor to have a glance at this old hermit of the dunes. Meanwhile I put two bottles of water into my coat pockets, took two more in my arms; and thus, loaded with a full gallon, paused for a final word with the captain.

“About this fat fellow,” I said. “You’re sure you never saw him around here before?”

“Never saw him in my life!”

“And you’ve been on these dunes a long time—”

“Five years, come Easter.”

“What did he look like?”

Captain Richardson momentarily hesitated, frowning, rubbing his knees, and looking at the floor. It was clear enough that descriptive rhetoric was not his forte.

“Well,” he said finally, raising his head, “he wasn’t big—just about the size o’ Mike Colona, who runs the Light, I’d say. But he had a neck like a bull’s, so help me! It was so thick he looked sort o’ swollen. An’ he had brows black as coal. All shaggy, they was. . . . Reckon

that's about all I had time to notice, though."

"Good clothes?"

"Good? By thunder, mister, they was the kind o' duds ye see in them newspaper pitchers—fittin' like the skin of an eel! They looked brand new, too. He was dressed mostly in black, come to think of it—black coat an' black felt hat, like if he was in mourning."

"Well," I said with a grim little nod, "your description is pretty good. Better take it easy now, Captain. I'll try to run in again later. Meanwhile I've got to get back with this water."

I left him nursing his bruised mouth—a weird, bony, yet patriarchal old figure uncannily vivid even in the dim glow of candlelight.

CHAPTER THREE

The Florentine Dagger

TRUDGING back with the water, I found my mind crowded. I stumbled on mechanically, bending my head against the wind and scarcely noticing the blackness about me now. My arms were so laden that I couldn't use the flashlight; but the repeated flares from the High Point Light helped me pick my course, easily enough.

"The fat feller."

It was a vision of this unknown figure that accompanied me as I swished through the sand. A stocky man with bushy brows and a bull-neck; clad in black. . . . Who was he? Why had he brought terror and violence to these dunes? Where could he be found?

These questions were whirling through my mind when I reached the crest of the dune which formed one wall of the O'Fallon valley. Below me I could see the illuminated windows of the cottage. And I was just starting down hill toward it when—

Abruptly I stopped.

I stared, and the rigidity of new tension seized my muscles.

Twenty yards from the house, near the brink of the bluffs that fell almost a hundred feet to the beach, I saw a man crouching! I saw him clearly because a flashlight which he had set down beside him luridly revealed his lean, handsome, young face.

The man was the artist, Charles Norval.

He knelt there, oblivious to the gale, and furiously covered something with sand. His hands worked with feverish speed. When he finished, he straightened, extinguishing his light. With his torch switched off, I could no longer distinguish him in that thick blackness. Neither, however, could he see me. . . . I stood motionless, amazed and puzzled, until I saw Norval's lithe figure slip back into the cottage.

Without hesitation I ran down the hill. I didn't go directly to the house; instead I went to the spot where Norval had knelt, digging. It was quite accurately fixed in my memory.

Near the edge of the bluffs I set down the water bottles, carefully, and sent a quick look back toward the cottage. No one was in sight. I brought out my flashlight and shot its beam at the ground. It swept about in a swift, darting search. To locate the spot at which Norval had been busy wasn't difficult at all. The wind hadn't yet had sufficient opportunity to blow smooth the tiny mound he had left.

Another sharp glance at the house; then I knelt and dug rapidly with my hands. Of what I might find here, I hadn't the faintest notion. But I felt I owed it to myself and the law to make a search. My heart was hammering. I couldn't have been more eager if I'd been digging for gold. For the time I completely forgot the punitive drive of the cold, wet wind.

Suddenly my fingers touched something hard.

An instant I stopped, surprised by the contact. Then, checking my breath, I dug all the faster; and at last, like a dog triumphantly retrieving a buried bone, I snatched my prize out of the sand. I held it in the beam of the flashlight, stared at the thing, and whispered a slow, astounded, "I'll-be-damned!"

For what Charles Norval had concealed in the sand was an ornate, jewel-hilted dagger!

I gaped at the thing. On its blade lay a long, significant discoloration. I turned it in my palm—and had an overpowering conviction that this was the weapon with which Brian O'Fallon had been stabbed. This very knife—

And Charles Norval had concealed it.

WHILE I stared at the thing, kneeling in the sand, Brian O'Fallon's delirious mutterings recurred to me. With a start I remembered his unconscious plea to his wife: "Don't let him touch you, Ruth! I don't trust him—never did! He didn't come here to paint—he came because you're here. . . ."

Suddenly O'Fallon's words took on new significance. The whole affair, in truth, appeared in a new guise—a guise that had no visible connection with "the fat feller."

But I was in no mood to guess at solutions now; nor had I the time. Grimly I slipped the dagger into my coat pocket; picked up the bottles, and proceeded to the house. When I entered the living room, I found Norval standing over the figure on the couch. He was pale, tight-lipped, frowning. In a chair near him sat Ruth O'Fallon, quite recovered from her faint. Her face was buried in her hands. She was sobbing bitterly, almost hysterically. Her golden hair tumbled down over her fingers, unheeded.

As I set down the water bottle, I asked

sharply of Norval, "How's he coming along?"

The artist turned his head just far enough to stab a black glance at me over his shoulder. He flung out bitterly: "He's dead! Died five minutes ago!"

I put down the water bottles with quick, spasmodic gestures; stepped to the side of the couch. O'Fallon's long arm still dangled to the floor. Lifting it, I sought for a pulse in its bony wrist.

"No use," Norval tightly assured me; he was right. When at last I lowered the arm, my whole body felt stiff. I'd expected this, of course; knew nobody could survive so terrible a wound; yet the actual occurrence came as a distinct jolt.

I glanced from Mrs. O'Fallon, weakly crumpled and sobbing in her chair, to the artist. "Did he speak before he died?" I whispered.

"Not a word."

"Not even a delirious cry?"

"No. I was watching him, and suddenly I realized he'd stopped breathing. That was all."

For a while, then, I frowned down at the dramatist's body. In the morning, when I'd report this to the agency, Brackett would promptly wire back, I knew, orders to: "Come home. It's now a case for the police, not for us. Don't meddle." And he'd be right. Our agency never attempted to supplant the authorities. Tonight, however, I was under no instructions, save those of my impulses. I felt an irresistible desire to know who had stabbed Brian O'Fallon; to "get my man". . . .

Norval was leaning over Ruth O'Fallon now. He had taken her hands into his own, almost caressingly, and was whispering some sort of condolences. She kept shaking her disheveled golden head wretchedly, her agonized eyes fastened on the couch. I moved to them and said grimly:

"Mrs. O'Fallon, I know it's going to be a tough job for you to talk calmly now. But—you do want to see your husband's murderer caught, don't you?"

"Caught?" She jerked up her head, and suddenly her inflamed eyes blazed into mine almost malevolently. "Of course I do!" hoarsely. "He's got to be found!"

"Have you any idea," I asked softly, "of who might have done this, Mrs. O'Fallon?"

She said he vily, "No."

"Wasn't there anyone your husband feared?"

"No!"

"Except, of course," Norval corrected, "the unknown man who wrote us all those threatening letters and took a shot at this window the other night." He nodded to a pane that had since been replaced. "I don't think O'Fallon had any real enemies."

I pressed on: "Do either of you happen to know a man who's short, fat, powerful of build—with a bull-neck? A man with bushy black brows?"

Startled, both of them stared at me. Yet both at once shook their heads negatively. Norval asked a quick, "Why?"

I told them, then, of my interview with Captain Richardson. When I finished, they gaped at each other and at me in amazement.

Then, despite the delicate spot I suspected I was touching, I inquired: "Were both of you out on the dunes this afternoon—particularly an hour or so ago?"

Norval answered without hesitation: "Mrs. O'Fallon and I were down on the beach, yes. Below my cottage. She was sitting on some rocks, and I sketched her."

"In this weather?"

"Well, I—I was anxious to get a wind-blown figure. And she was good enough to pose—"

"The point is," I cut in, "you were out

of sight of this cottage. And you couldn't see anyone who might have entered or left. Is that right?"

"Ye-es," Mrs. O'Fallon admitted. "We were almost a mile up the beach."

For a few moments I frowned in silence at the lamp. Outside the wind whistled and breakers crashed uproariously on the sands. Here, however, there were no sounds at all. I decided it was futile to delay the climax longer.

Without saying a word I took the jewel-hilted dagger from my pocket and tossed it on the table before them.

A live rattlesnake, suddenly thrown to the blankets, could have produced no more dramatic effect. Ruth O'Fallon caught her breath wildly; recoiled with a little cry. If she had been pale before, she turned deathly white now. She could not speak. She stared at the weapon in horrified hypnosis.

But I was really watching Charles Norval.

At the sight of the dagger, he had convulsively seized upon the edge of the table. He squeezed it until his knuckles stood out like yellow knobs. His face became as ghastly as the woman's. Slightly he swayed. But he didn't lose his voice. Snapping his burning eyes up to mine, he demanded huskily: "Wh-where did you get that thing?"

"In the sand out there," I said quietly. "Where you buried it a few moments ago."

"What!" explosively, from Mrs. O'Fallon. She looked from me to Norval in something like panic. Yet there was unbelief in her eyes and fear. "Charles!" she gasped.

He swallowed hard. "I—I don't get this, Mr. Cort—"

"Let's not beat around the bush," I rapped out softly. "You didn't see me as I came over the dunes, because I wasn't showing a light. But I saw you.

I watched you bury this thing. . . . Now suppose you do some talking!"

THIS much must be said to Charles Norval's enduring credit: Though Ruth O'Fallon was watching him in despair and I was peering at him with narrow-eyed, challenging accusation, the man recovered his composure with remarkable speed. He drew a swift breath; stroked a hand back through his black hair. He glanced from her to me, and then a bitter little smile twisted his lips.

"All right," he said softly. "I guess I've been a damned idiot about it."

"Charles! You—you didn't—"

"Of course I didn't stab Brian!" he flung back almost angrily. "You know I didn't—couldn't have! Wasn't I with you? Besides, why should I—"

"About this knife," I reminded him tersely.

"Eh?" He scowled at me, then displaced the scowl with a grimace of self-contempt. "Oh, about that: It was just a fool thing to do. I won't deny it."

"But why?" cried Mrs. O'Fallon, in a whisper.

"I'll tell you exactly what happened," snapped Norval. "Mr. Cort here had gone off to Captain Richardson's place. You were just recovering consciousness, Ruth. I ran into the living room to get you what little water remained in the demijohn. As I bent to pick up the bottle, I chanced to look under the couch—and there I saw this damned Florentine dagger, covered with blood!"

He paused, but neither of us offered a sound. We were watching him intently.

"Well," he rasped with a jerky motion of his hand, "the sight of it hit me like a bullet! It's my dagger, of course. I won't deny it. Ruth has seen it over at my place a dozen times—and she'd have identified it. I used the thing as a paper cutter. Other people have been over there

and seen it, too. Police Chief Batson, for one. And Steve Crane, when he brought me water and mail. Steve even commented upon its jewels. In fact, everybody on the dunes has paid me a call at one time or another. So, when I saw that dagger under the couch, I realized it might make things look black for me. It would be a hard thing to explain; and I—well I didn't want to be implicated in this. I—I hardly knew I did it. But I seized the thing and pushed it into my pocket. After a while I told Ruth I'd run out to see what had detained you. That—well, that was when I buried it."

There was a brief hush; then I repeated slowly, "So the dagger is yours, Norval."

"Yes."

"How it got here is a question which we—"

"Don't ask me!" he grated. "I haven't the faintest idea!"

"When did you last notice it at your place?"

"This morning. Why, I used it when I opened the morning mail! And put it back on a table."

I asked, "Has anybody been over to your house since?"

"No!" And then, on sudden recollection, he corrected himself: "Wait! Steve Crane did come back."

"When?" I demanded quickly. "What for?"

"A few minutes later. Just to ask if I'd need water this afternoon. O'Fallon and I each paid him a couple of dollars a week to keep us supplied."

"Did he have an opportunity to be near the knife, alone?"

"Why—" Frowning at the floor, Norval considered. Then he mumbled: "I don't know. . . . When he came into the room, I was writing a letter. I hardly glanced at him; just told him over my shoulder

to bring water in the morning. He left immediately."

Ruth O'Fallon whispered, "Did—did you see the knife around after that, Charles?"

"I really didn't notice."

I grunted and observed, "Well, it's lucky you and Mrs. O'Fallon were together all afternoon. That, of course, establishes your alibi. If you hadn't—"

But I checked the words. My glance had darted out through the window. On the slope of the dune and moving toward us was a cluster of lights; two red lanterns and the beams of two white flashlights. They were swinging in the hands of a group of men.

I said tersely: "Looks like Steve Crane is back with the police and the doctor. I advise you to tell your story frankly, Norval. That's the best way of keeping out of trouble!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Beach Below

IT WAS a cold, wind-blown, excited group that presently surged into the cottage. Curiously, however, Steve Crane wasn't among them. He had been left to tend the light, while in his stead the thick-set, swarthy Mike Colona—probably thirsting for a share in this drama of the dunes—had accompanied the authorities. Also, to my surprise, Captain Waldo Richardson was with them. The old seaman had cleansed the blood from his white beard and had recovered sufficient strength to join the party as it passed his shack. Now, a tall patriarch, he stood with his cap in his hands, mumbling hoarsely as he stared at the corpse on the couch.

There wasn't much for the physician—a fidgety Doctor Whitby—to do, save function now in his official capacity as deputy coroner. The fact that O'Fallon

was dead in this blood-spattered room shocked the whole group—including Police Chief Batson and his two assistants—into low-voiced awe. He was a rugged, double-chinned man in uniform, the chief; but it was quite evident that tragic mystery of this sort was beyond his simple experience.

He questioned us. We told our stories as concisely as possible. But when the inquisition was finished, half an hour later, we had made no appreciable progress, nor had any new circumstances been disclosed.

After a time, when Batson's questions to Ruth O'Fallon became repetitious, I wearied of the talk. I wanted to be alone, to think, to analyze and correlate, if possible, all I'd learned and seen. Moreover, the warm stench of blood in this crowded room was beginning to weigh on my nerves. So I buttoned my coat, tugged my hat low over my forehead, and went out into the icy darkness.

Somehow the same salty wind I'd cursed earlier now felt inexpressibly refreshing. It seemed to wash all the ugliness of tragedy out of me. Certainly it cleared my head. I walked forward slowly some twenty yards to the edge of the bluffs. There, frowning into the impenetrable blackness that was the Atlantic, I tried to make sense of all that had occurred. The gale tore at me, but I scarcely noticed it.

The queer part of the situation was this: though we had several stories to consider, none of them dovetailed. . . . For example, what connection was there between the one fact that Captain Richardson had seen a fat man run out of the O'Fallon cottage, wiping his bloody hands on a handkerchief, and the other fact that Norval's dagger had been used for the crime? Also, how did either of these things apply to Brian O'Fallon's delirious mumbling about the artist?

It was at this point in my gloomy musings that I heard steps behind me; and turning, I faced Ruth O'Fallon.

For a moment she did not speak; then, in a low, strained voice, she began.

"Mr. Cort—"

I said, "Yes?"

"I—I came out here because I saw you go out. I wanted to—talk to you—alone."

I waited.

"It's something I don't want to say to the police," she went on, her tones hushed, strained. She had opened her eyes now and was staring deep into the night. Her brows were drawn together tightly. "It's about—Charles Norval!"

"What about him?" I asked quietly.

"Please don't—don't misunderstand me. I'm not attempting to throw suspicion on him, really. I like Charles Norval. I like him and have always trusted him. But—I loved my husband!"

This time I said nothing.

"And if I thought Charles had killed him—" with an abrupt tautening of her tone. She paused. I looked at her quickly. Her countenance had become incredibly hard, uncompromising. She turned her head, and our eyes clashed. "Mr. Cort," she said, "if I thought Charles had done it, I'd have no more mercy for him than for anybody else! That—that's why I want you, as a private detective, to—well, I want you to consider Charles!"

"But my dear Mrs. O'Fallon," I protested quietly, "how can you even suspect Norval? After all, you and he were together all afternoon."

"That's just it," she said. "We weren't!"

"What!"

"No! We—Charles didn't tell you the whole story when we were inside."

I snatched my hands out of my pockets and faced her. "What do you mean, Mrs. O'Fallon?"

She said softly: "At three o'clock

Charles and I went down to the rocks on the beach. I sat on a stone, and suddenly he cried that he'd love to sketch me exactly as I was—wind-blown, facing the gale. I laughed; told him I'd pose. He asked if I'd wait till he got his paper and crayons. I consented, and he ran home for them. He—he was away from me about twenty minutes!"

"And this was after three?" I exclaimed.

"About three thirty, I think—yes. . . . Mind, I'm not accusing Charles. In fact, I honestly can't believe he—he'd have done such a thing! He couldn't conceivably have had a motive. Still, he was up on the dunes alone for twenty minutes. I—I don't want the police to make things miserable for him because of that. But—well, my head isn't clear. I'm confused by all—all this horror. I had to tell somebody—and you're the detective my husband sent for—"

It was then Charles Norval's voice came to us from the cottage. He was calling loudly: "Ruth! Ruth, where are you?"

We looked around. His slim figure framed in the illumined door, he was peering about anxiously. I caught Mrs. O'Fallon's arm, gently squeezed it.

"All right," I whispered. "You'd better go back before they start worrying about you. You can leave Norval and this whole business to me."

"Will you tell the police?"

"Not until I have definite facts—if you prefer it that way."

I stood very tense, watching her move through the darkness back to the house. . . . back to the artist, who ran out in relief to meet her. Norval put an arm about her and led her back into the cottage.

FOR perhaps five minutes longer I remained there, my mind teeming with new possibilities. If it hadn't been for

Captain Richardson's testimony about the unknown man who had attacked him, I'd have been ready to bet dollars against doughnuts that Charles Norval—for some reason not yet ascertained—had been responsible for the tragedy on the dunes. But there was always Richardson's story to remember. "That fat feller" loomed before me spectrally, mocking any theory I might invent which did not include him.

I scowled; was about to stride back to the house for another, more searching talk with these people. But at that instant something happened which halted me—and changed the entire course of the case.

The revolving beam of the light had just swung overhead. Briefly it illuminated the beach a hundred feet below me; and in that half-second's glow I thought I discerned, far up the line of surf, a small boat.

That startled me. There surely hadn't been a boat in sight when I'd first come across these dunes. Or could this glimpse have been an illusion?

I stood still, waiting for another swing of the light. Now I knew exactly what point to watch, and my eyes strained. When the flash came—yes! Perhaps three hundred yards away I saw it again, clearly!

Up there the line of seething surf broke for a distance of a few hundred feet. Later I learned that a sand-bar, flung out like a bent arm, formed a miniature cove in which it was possible for small boats to come ashore without risking demolition in the thunderous breakers. And now, in this cove, the small dark boat was driving its nose upon the beach!

I hardly realized that I'd snatched my automatic from the back pocket of my trousers and transferred it to my coat pocket—all this while intently watching. I knew only that my nerves were suddenly tense, and my chest thudded with a queer new agitation. The bluff at my feet

sloped down precipitously to the beach below. By squatting in the sand, balancing oneself on hands and haunches, it was possible to slide down safely enough, like a child going down a chute.

And this I impetuously did.

Reaching the beach in an awkward, falling huddle, I scrambled to my feet. Down near the water the sand was hard, easy to cross. I ran over it as fast as my legs could pound. Occasional flashes from the tower revealed the boat—a small black launch—now grounded up there. Yet I had no glimpse of any man in its vicinity. That puzzled me. Mechanically, as I neared the craft, I drew the squat automatic out of my pocket.

Fifty feet from the launch I paused for a cautious reconnaissance. With the gale sweeping against me, as if to drive me away from this lone venture, I peered about narrowly. Whenever the light flashed in my direction, I had a brief, clear view of my surroundings. But I saw nobody.

So, presently, I approached the boat.

I FELT strained, on edge. Whether or not the presence of the launch had any relation to the tragedy on the dunes above, I couldn't know. On a night like this, however, nothing which seemed unusual escaped suspicion.

At the bow of the boat I stopped. It was an eighteen foot craft equipped with a small motor; but though I searched its hull, I could discover no name. Finally I turned from it to study the sand near its prow; and—yes, a line of footprints led across the hard surface toward the dunes!

The footprints of a man who took short, heavy strides. . . . Every flash of the light revealed them distinctly. They led straight to the bluffs. I thought grimly: "Whoever he is, he's climbed up to the dunes by this time. If I can follow his prints—"

I did. That is, I followed them almost to the bluffs. There the trail became less discernible.

Though O'Fallon's flashlight was still in my pocket, I preferred not to use it. It would simply have revealed me to anyone glancing back from above. So I trusted for guidance to the intermitted flashes from the tower; moved ahead rapidly enough, with my head lowered and my eyes searching. Until—

It happened so suddenly that I had no time even to draw a startled breath.

Somebody leaped up from behind one of those sand mounds!

He sprang to view at my left, like a phantom rising out of nowhere. I whirled toward him, wide-eyed. Instinctively I jerked up my automatic. I had a blurred impression of a dark, crouching bulk that lunged at me. Its face was completely obscured by the peak of a seaman's cap and an upturned collar. I realized only that this man was swinging something at my head!

I dodged wildly. My automatic crashed, spat fire.

At the same time something cracked viciously on my skull, just above the left ear. Wincing, I saw a galaxy of explosive flames that dimmed even the light at High Point. I staggered sideways, my eyes shut in agony. The automatic in my hand ineffectively banged again. Crazy I pitched into the sand, squirmed like a lizard—and then a flood of utter blackness rushed over my senses.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chief Batson In Charge

THE first words to impinge on my consciousness were, "He'll be all right in a few minutes." They issued sharply from Doctor Whitby. When I finally opened dazed eyes I found myself lying on my back in the sand, with four men grouped

about me. The rugged Chief Batson was there with one of his two uniformed men; Charles Norval was holding a red lantern over me—his own handsome face flushed demonishly as a result; and the physician knelt at my side. Of its own accord my glance at once darted toward the water, just as the beam of the High Point Lighthouse passed overhead.

The launch was gone!

With a groan, I struggled up to a sitting posture.

"What happened?" Batson was demanding.

I looked up at him. "Did—did you see a launch out there?" I countered huskily.

"A launch? No. But there are footprints leading this way from the water. What's it all about, Cort?"

So, with one hand pressed to the aching bump on the side of my head, I told him; spoke with bitterness I couldn't suppress. They all listened in amazement.

"We heard your shots," Batson informed me. "Just managed to catch them on the wind. By the time we located you, though, there wasn't another soul around. Did you have a good look at that feller from the boat?"

"No-o."

"But you must have seen him!" Norval protested.

"Just a glimpse. I think he was short and stocky. And he wore a sailor's cap and a pea-jacket."

"Any identification on the boat?" Batson pressed.

"No, none at all."

Now the doctor interrupted: "I think the wisest thing to do is get Mr. Cort back to the cottage Feel strong enough to climb a trail up the bluffs?" he asked me.

Without speaking I nodded and forced myself unsteadily to my feet. They helped me. I was still dizzy, but it wasn't of my bruised head I thought. It was of the

unknown man I'd allowed to escape me. He must have spied me as I came running along the beach; and he had probably awaited my arrival—with a cudgel of driftwood for a weapon with which to greet me.

"God!" groaned Norval at my side. "What a night!"

But the night had only begun

BY eleven o'clock the only ones left at the lonely O'Fallon cottage were Chief Batson, one of his men, and myself. The living room, though still stained with blood, was hushed now. A few fresh logs blazed warmly in its hearth.

Two hours ago Ruth O'Fallon had whispered that she couldn't endure another night on these dreadful dunes; she had cried it would drive her mad to remain here, where her husband had been stabbed to death. So, escorted by a policeman, she had gone to a Truro hotel; and Norval, too, had decided that the town would be safer with an unknown murderer at large out here. As for the body of the playwright, it had been taken off to Truro, too, in the charge of Doctor Whitby. Batson had previously sent for more men and a stretcher, and the corpse had silently been borne off across the sands. The last of the crowd to depart had been Mike Colona and Captain Richardson. They went reluctantly, feeling there was no further assistance they could offer.

So now Chief Batson and I were alone in the living room. His deputy, a fellow named Haight, was prodding about in a back chamber. We had just completed a search among O'Fallon's papers, on the slim hope of discovering some new clue among them. But the quest had been futile.

Batson moved thoughtfully to the fire, and turned his back to it. For a while he stood silent, frowning down at the glow-

ing tip of his cigarette. From outside came the incessant roar of the breakers, but here we heard only the crackle of the blazing logs. Presently he muttered:

"I—I'm kind of glad to have a detective with me, I don't mind telling you. Reckon you've handled murder cases before, haven't you?"

"One or two," I admitted with a dry smile.

"Well, then, maybe the smell of blood doesn't sort of — of confuse you, the way it did to me when I first walked into this place. And maybe you've got some—ideas—"

It was evident enough that he was inviting me to talk; to air any notions I might have. I flung my cigarette into the fire and complied briskly enough. "I wish," I began, "I could see these threatening letters."

"They're over at my office. You can have a look at them when we get back to town. I collected the whole bunch—from O'Fallon, Richardson, and Norval."

"Anybody else get them?"

"Nope."

"And they simply warned those three men to leave the dunes?"

"That's right."

A MOMENT I stared into the hearth, then asked: "How are they written? Worded? I mean, do they seem to be the work of somebody with education?"

"If you mean are there misspellings," Batson answered, "no. They're all right that way. But you won't get much from the writing. They're all printed in pencil, and I'd say the man used his left hand so's his printing would show even less about the way he usually writes."

"Well," I suggested, "suppose we look at the case, then, from the point of view those letters indicate. Somebody, it seems, was damned anxious to get Richardson, O'Fallon, and Norval off these dunes.

What's the answer? Somebody probably wanted to do something up here which he didn't want anybody to witness!"

"Reckon that's logical enough, yes," Batson agreed. "But what sort of business—"

"Add to that," I drove on quietly, "the fact that a boat came ashore and left again tonight in a manner which was, to put it mildly, highly suspicious. Why did that boat come? . . . I have an idea, Chief, that somebody is trying to land contraband stuff on this beach! Smugglers who didn't want anybody around to witness what they did!"

Chief Batson looked at me keenly. He exhibited no surprise, but the lines of his countenance hardened.

"You know, Cort," he muttered softly, "the same sort of idea has been rattling around in my head, too. I think we've got our hands on something solid. I also believe that if we're right, those smugglers must have a sort of agent in this part of the country. He'd be the feller who wrote the letters to the men on the dunes. He'd also be the murderer, maybe; the fat man Richardson spotted. And his letters came from Provincetown—which is only eight miles from here!"

"Smuggling," I said pointedly, "is a case for the Coast Guard, isn't it?"

"Yep. They've got a station four miles up the beach. I'll notify 'em soon as I get back to town. Meanwhile—" He turned, dropped the stub of his cigarette into the flames, then peered at me again. "Meanwhile, though," he added tightly, "we mustn't forget or overlook the other angles of this case. Norval, I mean. His end of it."

I nodded.

"From what I've been able to see and pick up," Batson continued in a significant tone, "this artist feller has been chasing around plenty after O'Fallon's young wife. And—well, you can't be sure

of what he might have done. There's the big fact that his dagger killed O'Fallon! And there's the fact that he tried to hide his dagger in the sand—"

"Which," I cut in, "is in his favor, Chief."

"Eh?"

"Absolutely. It seems to me that if he'd murdered O'Fallon, he would have taken the dagger away with him originally, immediately after the crime."

That brought a dissatisfied grunt from Chief Batson. He scowled down at his fingers for a time, studying them with a kind of cold hostility. At last he wagged his head.

"Well, that stands to reason, I guess," he conceded a little sullenly.

At that instant Haight, the lanky policeman who'd been prodding about the bed-chamber, suddenly burst into the room. His eyes were strangely excited, and he was pointing a long, bony finger at a window. In low, rushing tones he urged: "Look, Chief! Out there! Those lights—"

Even before he completed the phrase, both Batson and I had sprung to the window. Haight's very agitation compelled speed. Together we squinted out into the darkness. An instant I could see nothing but the vast, blinding blackness that overlay the Atlantic. It was like staring against a wall.

But of a sudden I spied what Haight had spied first—and held my breath at the sight.

PERHAPS a half mile out at sea a red light was rising and falling, rising and falling . . . It paused a second, then moved from left to right and back, twice. Finally it abruptly disappeared, and we could see nothing . . .

"By thunder!" whispered Chief Batson in a tense, husky voice. "That's some kind of—of signal!"

We stood rigid, bending over the sill like gargoyles. A thing of this sort, occurring immediately after our discussion of smugglers, had a constricting, exciting effect on both of us. As we watched, the signal was repeated; and I seized the chief's arm fiercely.

"Come on!" I flung out. "They must be signaling to somebody up here! If we can catch him we may have the murderer!"

Batson needed no urging. We dashed out of the house into the furious gale, with Haight behind us. I almost lost my hat, catching it as it left my head. From the depths of this little sand valley, however, we could command no view at all over the dunes. So we climbed breathlessly, stumbling in our haste, to the crest of the nearest dune.

There we halted. Batson and I squinted southward, in the direction of the High Point Lighthouse a mile away. The dunes, whenever the beacon revealed them, rolled before us like a dark sea filled with monstrous waves. Haight, meanwhile, was intently studying the beach below and the land toward the south.

But there wasn't a single answering signal—no sort of light at all, in fact—to be discovered on the dunes!

We waited, breathing hard; hardly daring to voice our increasing disappointment. Presently, however, Batson grated, "Damn it all, we—we're too late, I think! They've stopped signaling out there, too!"

"But there must be some sort of boat out there," I snapped. "A ship without lights! If we could get a Coast Guard cutter down here quickly with its searchlight—"

Batson instantly swung to Haight.

"Listen, Fred!" he ordered. "Get over to the lighthouse as fast as you can leg it, and phone the Coast Guard!"

"Right, Chief—"

"Keep your gun in your hand and your

eyes open! Understand? No telling whom you'll bump into on the way!"

"Right!"

Haight had already started. The beacon flashed our way, and we had a momentary glimpse of his lanky silhouette as it darted down hill over the sands. Batson called after him: "Bring some men back with you! We may need help here on the beach!"

The answering shout was indistinguishable; Haight vanished into blackness.

Left alone on that wind-blown summit, with our coats flapping noisily, the chief and I resumed the tense vigil. He watched the sea and the stretch of land north of us. I kept my narrowed eyes fixed southward. Minutes passed. We turned restlessly. Yet we could discern no more lights anywhere. I wanted to curse in sheer chagrin.

"It's no use our hunting anybody over these dunes," rasped Batson. "He'd spot us as quick as we could see him, and he'd simply duck out of sight."

I swung toward him, whispering: "Listen, Chief. The only place a boat can safely land around here is in that sheltered cove, isn't it? Where the sand bar curves?"

"Ye-es—"

"Then we'd better get down there as fast as we can! Maybe our man'll be on hand down there, ready to meet any incoming boat. Let's go!"

AND we went. In truth, we slid down the bluffs like a couple of schoolboys, twice colliding in the descent and all but upsetting each other. At last, however, we were safe on the beach. Still watching the sea for signals, we strode rapidly toward the spot where I'd had my own unfortunate encounter a few hours ago.

As we approached the spot where the line of angry surf broke around the sheltered inlet, we became cautious.

Our steps slowed. Our eyes searched

more carefully. Only when the beacon swung this way did we have brief views of the sands ahead; but, much as we strained our eyes, we could see nobody near the place.

At last, directly opposite the cove, we stopped.

"Hell," muttered Batson, scowling about him. "Maybe this whole thing is going to end in nothing."

"On the contrary," I snapped. "Chief, I think we're in for a big night."

"Maybe," with doubt.

"Consider this: if we're right in this smuggler theory, we've got to remember that they've been trying to get O'Fallon, Norval and Richardson off the dunes for almost ten days. Today they could wait no longer; so they killed O'Fallon, whose cottage is nearest this spot. Also, a man came ashore a few hours ago—perhaps to make a reconnaissance. It all looks to me as if this is the critical night! The night on which they're planning to bring cargo ashore! That's the most logical way of explaining all the activity we've seen."

Batson mumbled something inaudible; and lashed out with a note of desperation, "If only they can get a Coast Guard cutter down here in a hurry! Smuggling, after all, is something for them to worry about! My job is to keep law and order on land, not out in that damned blackness! I can't be expected to—"

At that instant the beacon sent another lightning flash over us. At the moment I chanced to be peering straight out to sea. And as the revolving beam swung on toward the horizon, I had a mirage-like glimpse of something that made me start; made me grip the chief's shoulder furiously.

I pointed; whispered: "Look! A couple of hundred yards straight out! Watch when the light comes again!"

"Eh?" violently.

"There's a boat heading this way!"

CHAPTER SIX

The Battle On The Beach

I HAD seen it vividly, unmistakably! Following the direction of my finger, Chief Batson glared into the night. He had to wait for the intermittent flashes from the tower in order to see. At the first swing of the light he could discover nothing at all. But when it passed over us again—

"By George!" he gasped. "Yes! Yes!"

That time both of us spied it. Not a large boat; merely a dory not much bigger than a steamer's lifeboat. Yet, now that we could see it every few seconds, we soon discovered it was heavily manned. It wasn't using a motor. Propelled by four oars on each side, it resembled some gigantic dark insect crawling across the black sea.

Instinctively Chief Batson and I sank behind a little hill of sand. We, at any rate, had no intention of being revealed by the passing flares from the tower. Crouching low, we watched over the mound as if it were the rampart of a trench.

Suddenly Batson whispered, "I'll bet that thing *has* an engine! They're not using it *because* of the noise!"

I nodded stiffly.

"Is it the same boat you saw before?" he demanded.

"No! This one is much larger."

"Then the other must have been scouting—"

"Possibly. Here they come into the cove!"

Batson groaned, "God, I hope Haight gets back soon with more men! Lord knows what we may be up against here!"

I turned my head for a swift glance along the top of the bluffs. There was still no sign of the man for whom the signals at sea had been intended. Peering back at the cove, I found I could now

discern the outlines of the boat even in darkness. It was scarcely fifty yards off shore. Batson and I crouched perhaps a hundred yards from where it would run upon the beach. We could clearly hear the clatter and squeak of oars now—sounds that pierced even the thunder of surf.

And then, as the light again illuminated that unforgettable scene, Batson hoarsely gasped: "It's people, all right! People! Look, will you? Look! There must be at least thirty in that dory!"

Thirty? To me they seemed to be a veritable horde.

"There's women among 'em, too!" burst from the chief. "By heaven, women!"

He was right. Distinctly, whenever the beam swung overhead, we could now make out the individuals in that strange boat. Men wearing caps; women with shawls over their heads . . . All of them huddled together, crowded, with huge bundles filling whatever gaps there were among them . . .

"You—you'd think it was a shipwrecked crowd coming ashore!" Batson ejaculated.

"A shipwrecked crowd would show lights!" I retorted. "We know they have a light to show! And they'd yell—instead of sitting so scared!"

"What do you make of it, anyhow?" tensely. "Think this is a crowd of aliens they're trying to smuggle in?"

"If it isn't," I snapped, "I'll eat a pound of sand out of my hat!"

ALIENS! Immigrants defying immigration laws, being rowed ashore in darkness to this lonely strip of Cape Cod coast. Perhaps cars waiting somewhere on back roads to bear them away. And with an ocean ship hovering a few miles off shore until this dory would return to it after completing its furtive mission . . .

The whole thing suddenly seemed appallingly clear!

We crouched there in the sand, a hundred yards from the cove. We felt we were securely enough concealed by the mound. Our plan for the moment was merely to be distant spectators of this weird drama.

And then, with a swish, the dory's prow grated on the beach—and men sprang ashore from her.

Three or four of them first. They carried ropes with which they tugged the craft farther up on the sands. One man's voice reached us in soft gutturals. He was issuing orders. Suddenly the rest of the dory's occupants were tumbling ashore. They jumped over the gunwales like rats deserting a sinking ship. Men, women, young and old, accompanied by a jabber of softly clamorous voices.

And at that instant—Batson and I were caught off guard!

From the center of the dory, where it stood mounted, a small but dazzling white searchlight shot its beam against the dunes! No doubt the thing was intended merely to light the way of these people in their contemplated scramble up the bluffs. But the white glare, sweeping along the bluffs, burst full upon us before we could dodge behind the mound!

And there we were—as vividly illuminated as actors under a spotlight!

"Damn!" croaked Batson.

For a few seconds both of us were utterly blinded. We threw up our arms to shield our eyes. We turned away, winced, cursed. It was too late to attempt concealment. We had already been spied. The light remained fixed on us. Men were yelling. Yells of amazement and rage.

"Steady!" I grated. "From now on it's going to be hell!"

I faced the light again, savagely. My left hand partly covered my eyes; my right kept its grip on the automatic. I

expected to see the whole mob dash at us.

To my astonishment, however, they were leaping back into the boat! . . . Screaming. Actually fighting for precedence in their crazy scramble to regain their places in the craft! A sort of panic obsessed the whole crowd of them.

"They can't know how many of us may be hidden around here!" I blurted to Batson. "For all they can see, this may be a trap with fifty men waiting on the bluffs! That's why they're trying to push off again. They—"

I got no further.

There was a sharp crack on the beach; a jet of red flame! Within four feet of me sand flew up in a tiny fountain as a bullet struck the mound.

"Here it comes!" Batson panted.

He raised his own gun and blazed away. I could see that two men in the uniforms of ship's officers had left the crowd and were boldly running toward us. Both of them brandished revolvers. We must have been excellent targets in the glare of the dory's searchlight. It was only distance that saved us, for those two men fired at least six shots as they came.

In answer Batson sent four bullets at them; and still they continued their charge.

"It's them or us, Cort!" he grated. "And I'd rather it be them! Come on, man—use that gun of yours!"

I DID. With those two oncoming seamen sending bullets at our heads, I think I faced them with a snarl. Certainly with no compunctions about shooting. I'd simply been waiting for them to come closer. I aimed and fired. The Mounties had taught me how to handle a gun. Now—I watched one of those men stop abruptly, clutch a hand to his throat, turn about crazily on his heels, and sink slowly into the sand.

"That's showing 'em!" exclaimed Batson.

At the sight of his fallen companion, the other ship's officer stopped in bewilderment. Stared from the figure on the beach to us. I lifted my automatic again, ominously. He started back, uttering a shrill cry; whirled about and dashed wildly toward the dory.

Already sailors were pushing it off shore. Some of the passengers had leaped out to help. They were still yelling hoarsely. They heaved desperately. And slowly the boat slid off the beach.

Of a sudden the great Cyclopiian eye of the searchlight was shut. We didn't know then that it was one of the chief's bullets, sent after the fleeing officer, that shattered the blazing lamp. The abrupt darkness, now more blinding than ever, found us impetuously lunging over our protecting mound of sand.

"We've winged one of 'em, anyhow!" gasped Batson. "Maybe we can—"

The rest I missed in the throbbing excitement.

Guns in hand, we raced down to the very edge of the water. By the time we reached it, however, the dory was two hundred feet out in the cove. Its oarsmen were pulling madly. A score of voices clamored in incoherent, terrified chorus.

"Let them go!" Batson panted, his tones full of fury. "Let them go! The Coast Guard will pick up the whole damn crew of them 'fore they're a mile off shore! Just let them go!"

As a matter of fact, I'd already ceased peering after the dory. My thoughts had darted to the sailor who'd collapsed on the sand. So I spun around and ran back, thinking, "If he's alive, we may be able to force the whole story out of him!"

But the hope was futile. The man lay dead.

He sprawled face-down in the sand, his seaman's cap still on his head. A revolver

lay under his right hand. He had a stubby, powerful figure, and when I'd frowned at him a while, I said tightly:

"Chief, I have an idea this is the fellow who came ashore in the other boat. He seems to be about the same size, anyhow."

"Well, then," grimly muttered Batson, "he came ashore just once too often!"

We were both kneeling beside the dead man. Because the dory had already swung out beyond the bar into open water, we no longer hesitated to use our flashlights. I put mine down in the sand, so that its beam flared full upon the dead man's face. He had been shot in the chest, just below the throat. . . .

"There's nothing on his uniform," I said tensely, "to indicate the name of his ship."

"So I see," Batson drove through clenched teeth. "He looks foreign to me, though. Italian or Spanish, I'd say. . . . Let's dig through his pockets."

WE did. Thoroughly. The trousers yielded only a handkerchief, a package of Egyptian cigarettes, matches, and a small box of cartridges. The jacket gave us nothing at all—so that, in the end, we squatted there in frustration, frowning at each other across the body.

Batson suddenly growled, "Looks like we drew a blank."

"As far as this man's identity or that of his ship is concerned, yes," I conceded. "But—" I stopped, scowling out to the point where the dory had now been obliterated by the night. Only when the glow of the tower flashed over us could the boat with its strange cargo be discerned at all. After a moment I abruptly rose. "Chief," I snapped softly, "suppose we leave this man and his ship to the Coast Guard. It's their job. Ours right now is to find the murderer of Brian O'Fallon!"

"Sure, but how—"

"I have an idea!"

Instantly Batson was on his feet, his eyes narrow. "What idea?"

"If you'll come up to the dunes with me, I'll explain as we go! No use wasting time."

"How about him?" with a quick gesture at the body.

"Nobody'll touch him here! Besides, Haight ought to be back soon to watch. Come on, Chief," I urged, "I think we'll find O'Fallon's murderer up there!"

Only a second the police chief hesitated. Then, jamming his revolver out of sight, he stepped briskly around the seaman's body and strode with me toward the bluffs.

"All right," he snapped. "If you've got a definite idea, I'll play along. Let's hear it!"

And as we climbed a makeshift, zig-zag trail to the dunes, often moving upward on hands and knees—I told him what had blazed across my mind.

"As we see the thing now," I panted, "here's a gang of smugglers trying to bring aliens into America and probably charging them a few hundred a head for the job. There's a fortune in that sort of traffic. It isn't done haphazard. It's usually carefully planned out. When this crowd picked this particular point on the coast to land its cargo, they probably didn't choose it by sheer chance. They must have studied its possibilities. Why, they even knew the exact spot, within the shelter of the sand bar, where it would be safe to come ashore!"

"Go on," the chief pressed. He was at my side as we clambered up the steep, sandy bluff. His breath was short.

"When they chose this spot," I continued, breathing hard myself, "it seemed pretty well deserted—and therefore pretty safe. But unexpectedly, two weeks ago, both Brian O'Fallon and Charles Norval came to the dunes! That meant there

might be unanticipated witnesses to the landing of the dory; people who might rush to the tower and notify the authorities of what they had seen!"

"But how about—"

"Wait," I interrupted. "So far things are clear enough, aren't they? My guess now is that they must have had a lookout stationed on the dunes. In other words, an agent. And this agent, discovering that both O'Fallon and Norval had suddenly become a menace to the scheme, did his best to get them away. He sent those threatening letters. They failed. He must have become desperate then. Knowing that O'Fallon's cottage was the only one which actually commanded a view of the cove, knowing that the dory was scheduled to come ashore tonight, he killed—"

"But what about Captain Richardson?" Batson gasped. "Do you think he—"

"Yes, I think he murdered O'Fallon!"

"But man—Richardson—"

"Why not?"

"I've known him so—so long! He—"

"Listen, Chief. Richardson has been here five years. He's poor, judging from the shack he lives in. A couple of thousand a year from these smugglers might have meant heaven on earth to him! Don't you see?"

"Y-yes," Batson panted, wide-eyed. "Still—"

"If he's been on the dunes five years, the smugglers must have known about him when they chose this spot. They wouldn't have waited until the last week or two to try to get him away. They'd have done that long ago, before they decided to land here! The very fact that they allowed him to remain indicates they had no reason to fear him. He was one of them! As for the letter he got, that's a trick old as these dunes. He simply included himself when he sent the notes, to avoid suspicion."

WE were near the top of the bluffs now. Batson's eyes were fiery as he glared at me over his shoulder. "How about 'the fat feller'?"

"We have only Richardson's word for that! I think it was a lie."

"But he was punched in the mouth! You can't get away from the fact that he had a tooth knocked out! Who did that, if your theory is right?"

"O'Fallon, I'd say."

"O'Fallon?"

"Yes. Probably in self defense, just as Richardson jabbed the dagger at him. And incidentally, Richardson, as well as anybody else, could have got that knife from Norval's place. A crude way of throwing suspicion on Norval; that was all. And the ideas pile up, chief, the more we consider them. For example, Richardson has an old revolver. That might have been the weapon which shattered O'Fallon's window the other night."

Now we were on the dunes. As we straightened after the climb, somewhat exhausted and breathless, our eyes met. Both of us were scowling. I had only one thing more to say, and I said it tersely.

"Look, chief. Didn't Richardson assert he'd seen the fat fellow leave O'Fallon's cottage? That meant Richardson was near the cottage. Why, then, did he drag himself all the way to his own shack, after being punched? He's half a mile away. Why didn't he go into O'Fallon's cottage? . . . It simply doesn't make sense! It makes his whole story ridiculous!"

An instant longer Chief Batson peered at me. Then he swung around determinately and led the way toward Captain Richardson's shack. His jaws were rugged. His eyes were fiery. He said only, "Come along, Cort!" But that was enough.

Chief Batson's mind was possessed of a certain Scotch shrewdness which he exhibited to full advantage that night. He

must have realized, as we approached the tumbledown shack, that our theories were not yet buttressed by conclusive proof. Yet he was doggedly determined to end this case; to make his arrest. Accordingly, he attempted strategy.

As we neared the home of Captain Waldo Richardson, the old man himself opened the door and peered out at us suspiciously. He must have seen our flashlights from his window.

"That you, Chief?" he called.

"Yes!" snapped Batson. He said nothing else until we stood in front of the towering, white-bearded patriarch. Then, his eyes flaming, he snapped: "Captain, we just killed a man down on the beach!"

"Wh-what?" with a gasp. "Another death?"

"I reckon you saw everything that went on from the dunes! No use acting now, Captain. The man we shot did a bit of tall cursing before he died. He cursed you to hell for not answering signals and warning that boat away! He didn't know, of course, that you were afraid to signal with so many of us on the dunes to watch. So he—"

Well, we didn't arrest Captain Richardson.

As Batson spoke, the old man sucked in a sharp, wild breath. His eyes widened, and terror suddenly flashed in them. He fell back a step, clutching for support at the door jamb. At that moment the beacon swung our way. Luridly it illuminated the bearded face, and that face was ghastly. The chief's strategic thrust had struck deep. . . .

No, we didn't arrest the captain. For suddenly, with a choked cry, he recoiled into the shack. The heavy door slammed hard in front of us. We sprang against

it, but the captain had already shot its bolt.

"Richardson!" yelled the chief. "If you don't open—"

Something that might have been a laugh or a sob burst out of the shack. A hoarse, trembling voice, scarcely recognizable, answered bitterly.

"Sorry, Chief! I—I'm a mite too old for this kind o' trouble! I ain't waiting for it!"

A second later we heard the roar of the captain's ancient revolver—a crash, followed by a thud! With an oath, I sprang to the window. The interior of the shack was dark. But when I stabbed the beam of my flashlight into the place, it revealed the tall old figure crumpled on the floor.

And our end of the case was finished.

IN the morning, after the Coast Guard cutter had seized the freighter *Westlake* with its alien cargo eight miles off shore, I was in Truro. I had spent an hour talking to Mrs. O'Fallon and Norval; and now, while awaiting the afternoon train, I wired Brackett at the office.

O'FALLON MURDERED STOP SEE TODAY'S PAPERS FOR DETAILS.

Apparently Brackett hadn't yet read the account of the night's drama in the news. For, true to form, he instantly wired his orders back to me.

COME HOME STOP THIS IS NOW A POLICE CASE STOP DON'T MEDDLE IN IT.

So I sent him one more telegram. It said simply—

I'M LAUGHING.



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WE'VE never counted the daily accumulation of stories that reach our desk each morning for consideration. Or tried to average up the week-after-week inflow of manuscripts to determine just how many we do have to read before finding enough to build an issue of DIME DETECTIVE.

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Now meet a new author who's just climbed to the top in this issue. We'll let him introduce himself. Fred Allhoff—

spent three restful, undistinguished years at college. Thumbed rides around the country in odd moments. Waited tables in restaurants, wheeled kitchen ranges on

warehouse hand trucks, sold brushes (about three) and dished out tools in a factory. Had three newspaper jobs. Quit one of them. Voted once in my life. Illegally, under the name of Dan Kelly, after sleeping in a flop house on election eve. Got two bits and a half pint of whiskey (with a fellow reporter) for voting for an Irish councilman. Two bribers were indicted and fined the price of a couple of novelettes. The managing editor went into a dance over the swell exposé. He danced for six months, then fired me. I free-lanced, doing fact stuff and fiction. The fact stuff sold; the fiction didn't. Got in two years of rewrite and editorial work in a New York magazine office.

Wrote one book, but it wasn't mine. I took it down on a typewriter while the author dictated it. It took about five days and nights. At three o'clock in the morning of the second day, the house detective pounded an interruption on the hotel room door and announced himself. The author began looking—and you can't blame him

—for a fire escape. But the house detective merely wanted us to accept another room where the typewriter wouldn't disturb other guests. The gentleman who had been looking for a fire escape was Robert Elliott Burns. The book was his: "I Am A Fugitive From A Georgia Chain Gang."

While in New York in 1931, sold my first fiction yarn. The depression created a vacancy in the job I'd been holding. Went to Florida. Free-lanced. Came back to Ohio. Still free-lancing.

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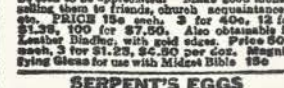
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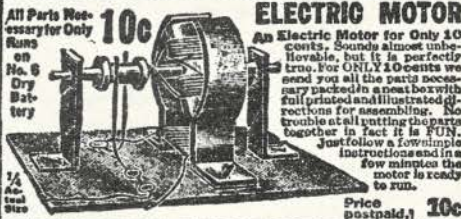
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20x5.5-23	3.85	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-24	3.95	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-25	4.05	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-26	4.15	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-27	4.25	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-28	4.35	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-29	4.45	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
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20x5.5-33	4.85	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-34	4.95	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
20x5.5-35	5.05	8.00x16 3/4	2.95
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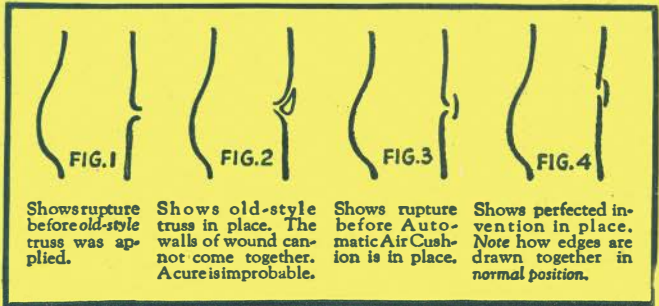
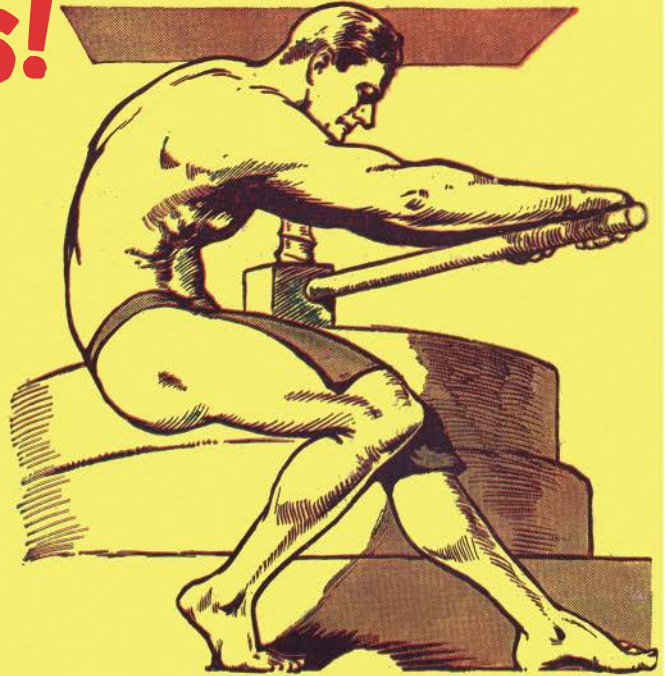
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