

NOVEMBER



10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

RICHARD SALE
FRANCIS K. ALLAN
JOHN BENDER



**LAUGH, CORPSE
LAUGH!**

*A ROD KEENEY MYSTERY NOVEL
by STEWART STERLING*

**DANGER—
HEARSE AHEAD**

*AN UNUSUAL
DETECTIVE NOVELETTE
by DONALD G. CORMACK*

Missing Page



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by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS
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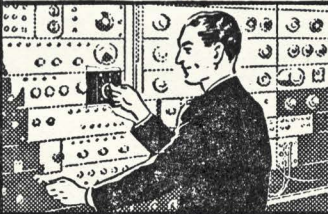
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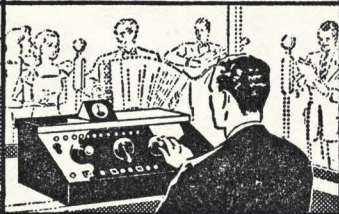
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THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE NOV. 7th

Volume 26

November, 1941

Number 3

TWO LONG, BIZARRE MYSTERY NOVELS

- LAUGH, CORPSE, LAUGH!.....Stewart Sterling 10
What was the grim and ghastly murder method which killed scores of unsuspecting people? And why should all these victims die giggling? Rookie Rod Keeney finds his first day with the Homicide Detail much more than he bargained for, and he discovers, too, that murder makes its own ghoulish jokes.
SUICIDAL BRIDGE.....Francis K. Allan 42
Only a connoisseur of crime such as this killer could conceive so unique a plan of murder. And only Fauston, the uncanny blind detective, could see the answer to this weirdest puzzle of all time.

TWO FASCINATING NOVELETTES OF UNUSUAL MENACE

- DANGER—HEARSE AHEAD!.....Donald G. Cormack 62
When Dave Random answered Dorothy Luttrell's mysterious plea for aid, he didn't guess that he was accepting an invitation to be hunted by the law as a kill-mad shamus—and that all he might do to save this girl only brought them both closer to inevitable destruction!
SING A SONG OF MURDER.....Richard Sale 82
Jim Holiday's music was the best on the air, as played by Vinnie Castro and sung by Carol Stevens, the girl Jim adored. But every note he wrote brought him closer to death, for he was, in reality, constantly adding to the score of his own funeral dirge!

TWO SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES

- FERRY THE DEAD!.....John Bender 31
We send bombers to England, but not corpses—and that was exactly what Pilot Dave Wilcox's passenger had become, miles out over the Atlantic. Dave was forced to bring that body home—and prove the corpse's finger couldn't point to him.
THE MAN WHO MADE A HELL.....Joe Kent 95
Everybody, it is said, digs his own grave. But Paul Dover's perfected invention threatened not only his own safety, but the life of his wife—and the very nation he sought to serve!

— AND —

- DEATH STILL HAUNTS THEM!.....The Editor 6
The amazing story of a modern will-o-the-wisp.

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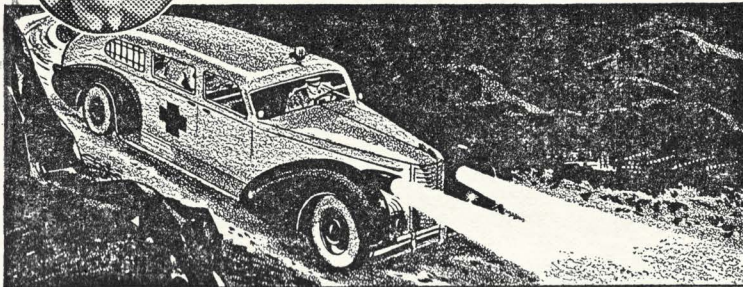


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"WE RACED DEATH DOWN A MOUNTAIN SIDE!"

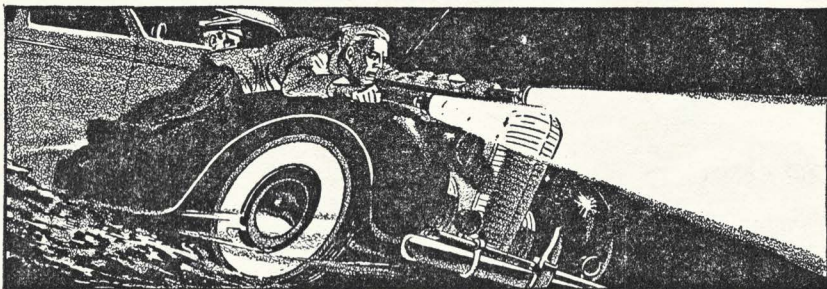


A true experience of male nurse GROVER C. BIRCHFIELD, Los Angeles, Calif.



"WE WERE RUSHING A CARDIAC CASE by ambulance to the hospital one dark night," writes Mr. Birchfield. "We were two thousand feet up on a winding mountain road and six miles from our goal, when all lights blew out.

"THE PATIENT WAS AT DEATH'S DOOR. I gave him a shot of adrenalin, but I knew with horrible certainty that unless he reached the hospital quickly he could not live. Yet we dared not move without lights.



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(Signed) *Grover C. Birchfield*

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Death Still Haunts Them!

WHAT is your favorite mystery? That's a pretty difficult question to answer, of course, because there are all types of mysteries and all types of people, and what pleases one will not always please the next. You may have a warm spot in your heart for a particularly chilling tale of Poe's, while another reader may consider something more recent—a tale of a modern mystery magazine, for instance—as the ultimate in mystery fiction.

We have our own favorite mystery story, garnered from sources as reliable as sources can be nowadays; and it might have formed the nucleus for a good fiction story plot, though so far as we know, no author has used it. The story is of particular significance right now, for like so many things today, it is the result of the present war in Europe.

It has to do with France and Frenchmen—and, of course, Nazis. It is the story of Pierre M—, who until the beginning of the war was a fairly well-known boxer on the Continent. He was not a big man, just a shade over five and a half feet, but he was superbly trained, and he had become, over a period of years, the acknowledged, if not the declared, light-weight champion of the Continent. He was a Frenchman, with a Frenchman's inherent dislike of Naziism and what it represented, but he went along without giving vent to his opinions. For Pierre M— was often in Germany, where he engaged in innumerable ring contests, and it would not have been wise for him to make statements that might have got him into serious trouble. So he journeyed to and from Germany—as well as other countries—and always when he returned to France, he made a visit to the offices of the Surete, secretly—for Pierre M— was a spy.

How much of the intrigue of the Ger-

man nation he managed to discover during his visits to that country; how much important information he managed to separate from the conversations of the Nazi soldiers who found him a favorite—even though he was French—we do not really know. But, just before the Nazis marched on Paris, just before the once-proud nation of France capitulated before the iron heel of Hitler's legions, Pierre M— was apprehended in a German city. He was held, without specific charge, for many days. After that he was given the shameful choice which had been offered to many of his countrymen who had been discovered to be important to the defeated nation. He was informed that if he swore allegiance to the Nazi cause, he would be set free. If not, he would face a firing squad.

Pierre M— was a proud man. For years he had carried the banners of France into the rings of foreign nations; for years he had upheld, in his own way, the honor and glory of the land of his birth. It was not strange, therefore, that he spat in the face of the Nazi officer who proposed such a distasteful alternative.

Thus, the following morning, Pierre M— was sentenced to die. On the appointed day and hour, the soldiers, led by the officer who had offered Pierre the choice, went to the cell in which the prisoner had been placed. But the cell was empty. Pierre M— had disappeared, escaped—and until this day he has not been recaptured.

But here the story casts off its lines of average spy thriller and assumes the distinctive mark of weird mystery. For Pierre M— has been back in Germany since that day on which he was destined to die. Of that the Nazis are certain, but now, when they mention him, it is with a measure of fear in their voices.

(Continued on page 8)

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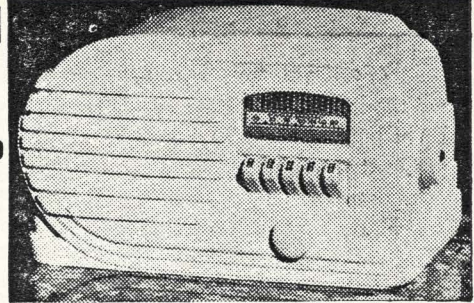
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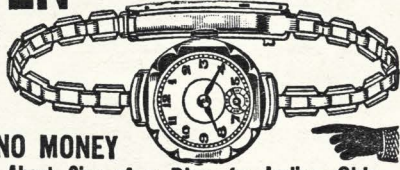


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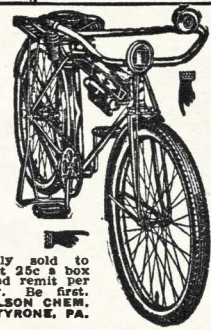
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(Continued from page 6)

Two months after Pierre M—'s escape, a card of boxing bouts was held in Hamburg. On that program was a lightweight who disposed of his opponent so quickly and efficiently that memories were aroused. The rumor ran through the officers' circles that Pierre M— had returned, and a delegation went back to the dressing rooms to talk with this boxer. He was not there, but the German lieutenant who had commanded the firing squad which had been detailed to execute Pierre M— was in that dressing room. He had been strangled—and on his chest was a pair of boxing gloves!

The matter was kept reasonably quiet, but a few weeks later, there was another boxing card, in another German city. On guard duty at this sports arena were two of the soldiers who also had been part of Pierre M—'s execution squad. Again one of the boxers was a light-weight; but this time he was not too outstanding. He won his fight, though not spectacularly, so suspicion was not aroused—until too late. No one thought of him as Pierre M—, until the two soldiers were found later—dead at their posts! And to each guard's rifle was attached a boxing glove. . . .

THE weird affair did not end there, despite the Nazis' attempts to apprehend this Frenchman who was dealing such fearsome blows to their men and their morale. They did not know when or where this "mad" Frenchman would strike again, but they took measures to insure that he would not continue to go scot free. All boxers in the country were investigated. Every detail of their personal lives and behavior was examined—and many of Pierre's weight class were detained for days. But even this failed. For Pierre M— turned up again, this time in his native France. There were no light-weights on the particular boxing program of which the Nazis now are certain

Pierre was a part. But there were a few welter-weights—the weight class just above Pierre's, and one into which he could have built himself without too much difficulty. Once again a Nazi died. A German captain was found in an alley leading to the dressing rooms. He was lying beneath a poster advertising the boxing bouts, and circled in red crayon was the name of one of the welter-weights. On the captain's chest was a boxing glove.

German Intelligence immediately tried to trace the boxer, but soon discovered that the name was fictitious, that the man's credentials had been clever forgeries. They did not discover who had helped him in the culmination of another *coup*. Though some arrests were made, the arrested parties were later released for lack of evidence.

So Pierre M— still lives, and what started out as personal revenge has now quite probably become a patriotic obsession. He will continue, no doubt, in his methodical killing of men who represent what he most despises, and the Nazis are at a disadvantage because they can no longer be sure that he will strike only at those men directly responsible for his original capture and death sentence. They can be sure of nothing but his undeniable desire to avenge, in his own way, the shame to which his nation has been subjected.

Whether Pierre M— will be apprehended and killed, we do not know. One man against the entire Nazi nation is an unfair fight, and it does not seem logical that he can continue forever. We hope, of course, that he will, and we hope too that mystery rather than logic will always be in his favor. From such characters do legends spring; from legends come the basis for much good mystery fiction—and that, after all, is the greatest interest of this magazine.

THE EDITOR

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Laugh, Corpse, Laugh!



Without altering her expression, the girl fired.

Many and merry were the murdered ones—these victims who laughed themselves to death. Rookie Detective Rod Keeney's pal, Sergeant Pulsifer, found the answer to this ghastly riddle, but before he could reveal it, he too died of weird merriment. That left Keeney—if he could live long enough—to prove that murder's never funny.



CHAPTER ONE

Merry Are the Murdered

ROD KEENEY reached for the vernier dials as the shortwave set began to squawk: "*Car Four Twenty-one. Attention. Car Four Twenty-one. . . .*"

Fat Sergeant Pulsifer, at the wheel of the patrol coupe threw out the clutch, coasted in toward the curb. "Juice 'er up high, first-grader," he grunted. "Tough, pickin' up code with all this static!"

Keeney puckered up his homely features; his blue eyes squinted as he concentrated on a clear signal.

"Only an 'investigate,' Sarge," he told Pulsifer.

The radio crackled: "*In V hosp Poly emerg Jans Varsen. P U dealear Traf C 72 B-way . . .*"

Keeney scribbled furiously on the radio pad:

Investigate emergency case, Polyclinic hospital. Jans Varsen, picked up in a delirious condition by traffic officer, Squad C, at 72nd St. and Broadway.

"Migod," the sergeant groaned. "That'll be another of them gigglers. Four of 'em croaked so far this morning."

The radio rasped:

"M E off" rekest urg info. Where vic ate, drank. Where spen nite. Rep C Ludwin hq. For Car Four Twenty-one, nine o seven ayem. Auth. Tel B. That is all."

Keeney grumbled, "That's all, is it? Just dig up the dope on what this Varsen ate an' drank, where he spent the night—"

Pulsifer snorted. "I wonder can the Medical Examiner's office tell us how to get this urgent info from a lug with delirium tremors!"

Rod Keeney, newest member of the Detective Bureau, Twenty-first Precinct, snapped his pencil under the rubber band on the record pad, and said nothing.

"If this one's like them other four goons," the sergeant grunted, missing a street sweeper by the thickness of the latter's pants, "he'll have laughed himself to death before we can quiz him."

Rod Keeney nodded, glumly. This was his first official tour of duty as ranking detective in charge of Car 421's activities; he would just as soon have run into something less baffling than this succession of tittering individuals who'd collapsed on the streets of his precinct in the last two hours. So far, every one had wound up on iced slabs in hospital morgues before he and Pulsifer could do more than list *Dead on Arrival* on their division reports.

"Y'know, Sarge, if you hadn't rounded

up that reefer gang, two weeks ago, I'd say those clunks were still shoveling out the marijuhana around here."

"Nah!" Pulsifer thumbed the siren, streaked through a red light. "Them loco smokers do daffy nip-ups, all right, but I never heard of no one bein' knocked off by inhaling a reefer.

"Still an' all, Sarge, something killed those other slap-happys. And they suffered plenty!"

"They went out the hard way, First Grader, that's a fact. Maybe there's been some of that blackout hooch in this parish."

Keeney relapsed into silence as the patrol car raced through the thickening traffic. No use jumping at conclusions. What was the last thing the deputy commissioner told them at Police College? *Never list a homicide as accidental until absolutely positive.* The only facts he and the sergeant had to go on were that—since seven o'clock this morning—the shortwave set had reported nearly a dozen deaths, outside of the four in their own precinct. In each case, the victim had died in convulsions, to the accompaniment of hysterical laughter. Keeney had seen a lot of queer things since he'd first passed his patrolman's tests, but nothing to equal this!

THE patrol car zoomed up to the receiving entrance at the hospital. The two officers ran past a row of parked ambulances, up a concrete ramp, plunged through a door marked EMERGENCY.

"Sixty-eighth Street station!" Keeney showed his new gilt badge to a white-coated interne. "Checking on that giggle case, picked up at Broadway and Seventy-second."

The interne rubbed his chin, scowling. "Inside. Emergency H."

Pulsifer inquired, "He gonna croak?" The young doctor shrugged. "No way

to tell. He's like those other cases. Fainting spells; burning up inside; pulse jumpy—and sniggering like he's enjoying the funniest joke he ever heard."

Two internes staggered through the emergency entrance, carrying a stretcher on which lay a woman. She was young, extremely fat. She chewed spasmodically on a piece of gum; her eyes stared vacantly up at the ceiling, and from her lips came simpering laughter.

"Lord!" Pulsifer shoved his uniform cap back off his forehead, planted his fists on his hips. "Another one of 'em! What is it? Where are they getting it?"

One of the ambulance attendants muttered, "She was stretched out on a bench in the park, complaining of the heat and laughing like a hyena."

"She's ga-ga." The second ambulance man put fingers around the woman's wrist. "I've seen 'em with heroin jags like that."

The woman blinked at him, tittering stupidly.

Keeney swallowed hard. "You better stay here. Sarge. Find out what she had for breakfast. "I'll go see Varsen."

Pulsifer nodded. He began to paw through the woman's handbag, which one of the internes had tucked under her shoulder on the stretcher.

The door of Emergency H was ajar. Even before Rod Keeney saw the shirt-sleeved occupant of the hospital cot, he heard the man's simpering voice:

"Fooled them . . . again, hunh, hunh. Been trying . . . to murder me . . . for months. But I'll be . . . alive, ha, ha . . . when they're dead and buried. Ha . . . ha . . ."

Murder! The detective's jaw hardened. Could all these giggling horrors be victims of attempts on their lives . . . homicide to the tune of that crazy laughter?

He pushed open the door.

The man on the cot was hardly more than a living skeleton. His tallow skin was stretched so tightly over the gaunt

cheekbones that it seemed transparent; the straggly gray hair was matted damply across a thin, dome-shaped skull. His coat and vest lay across a chair; his tie had been loosened and his collar unfastened.

A doctor with a hypodermic stood beside a nurse who held a chloroform cone.

"How's he doing?" Keeney noted that the man's eyes were closed.

"Apparently suffering considerably." The doctor frowned, puzzled. "Mind seems to be wandering. We're going to try to ease the pain with an anaesthetic."

"Ha, ha, ha." The heavy-lidded eyes opened, staring wildly at Keeney. "Mind's no more . . . wandering . . . than yours is. . . ."

"Sure," Keeney agreed, dubiously. Those glaring eyes didn't *look* sane.

The nurse lifted the white chloroform cone. "Ready, doctor?"



K EENEY held up a palm. "Lemme ask him a couple questions before you knock him out."

"Have to be brief then, officer. His pulse is thready."

The newest member of the plainclothes force leaned over the gaunt, waxy figure of the man on the cot. "You probably ate or drank something that made you sick, mister. Where'd you have breakfast this morning?"

The bony head wagged limply from side to side; the eyes narrowed craftily. "You think . . . I've been . . . poisoned?"

"No doubt of it," the doctor cut in. "Now, if you'll just tell this detective—"

The man struggled feebly to raise himself on his elbows. With one trembling hand he beckoned to Keeney. "I know . . . who it was. Ho, ho . . . yes, indeed I know . . . what they've . . . done to me." He chuckled hoarsely.

"Yeah?" Keeney had an uneasy sensation that this leaden-complexioned indivi-

dual who already resembled a corpse was—even on the point of death—ribbing him. “Tell me. We’ll fix them so they won’t try it again, mister.”

“Can’t tell you . . . while they’re . . . here.” The gaunt man waved jerkily at the nurse and doctor. “Speak to you . . . alone.”

The doctor said quickly. “We don’t dare leave him for a moment, officer. I’ve just injected digitalis. . . .”

Keeney hesitated. How far did his authority extend, here in the presence of death and suffering? A doctor was supposed to be in complete charge of his patients, yet those orders from headquarters were urgent—and more than this one life was at stake. The Deputy Commissioner had told them at the Police College: *In any emergency, act first for the safety of the citizens under your protection*, which was clear enough. The protection of the public depended on discovering what was behind this giggling epidemic.

Keeney said, “Step outside a minute, Doc.”

The doctor frowned. “The man may die, unless we watch his heart action closely.”

The passage in the Police Manual flashed into Keeney’s mind: *It is especially important to secure WITHOUT DELAY the testimony of the individual who has been criminally assaulted*. “I’ll have to risk it, doc,” he muttered. “Sometimes a deathbed statement is the only evidence we can get.”

The nurse stalked disapprovingly out of the room; the doctor followed, reluctantly.

Keeney closed the door behind them, came back to the cot. “Now, then. We’re alone, mister. Who do you suspect?”

The haggard man leered. “Come closer . . . don’t want . . . anyone to hear.” He exerted a tremendous effort; sat up; tried to slide his feet to the floor. He toppled and would have fallen if the plainclothesman hadn’t grabbed him with both arms.

Instantly, a bony wrist snaked upward toward the rookie’s left armpit. Claw-like fingers seized Keeney’s gun; jammed the muzzle fiercely in Keeney’s stomach.

“I know . . . what you’re . . . up to,” the stricken man snickered. “But you won’t . . . kill me. I’m . . . too smart . . . for you, ho, ho, ho. You make . . . one wrong move . . . I’ll shoot you!”

Keeney froze. It would only take one nervous twitch of this madman’s finger to loose a .38 slug into his chest.

He’d been instructed how to handle a situation like this at Police College—but would the oldest gag in the book work now? It was a long gamble—with his own life at stake. But he’d have to risk it.

“I don’t want to hurt you, gramp.” Keeney shrugged easily. “You got me wrong. I’m only trying to help you.”

“Ho, ho. Ha, ha, ha. That’s a . . . good one.” The pistol muzzle jabbed hard at Rod’s stomach. “I’m not . . . dumb enough . . . to believe that. *Get up on that cot!*”

With his free hand, the man reached for the chloroform cone which the nurse had left on the medicine table!

CHAPTER TWO

The Sergeant’s Gun

KEENEY made a move as if he intended to obey. His gaze shifted suddenly from the old man’s eyes to a point just over the stooped shoulders. Keeney relaxed; a broad grin crinkled his weathered features. “Just in time. Sarge,” he murmured. “Grab his arms!”

The gaunt man swivelled swiftly. The muzzle of the gun shifted away from the pit of Keeney’s stomach for the fraction of a second before the patient discovered he’d been fooled; that Keeney’d been staring at—and talking to—thin air!

In that split second, the detective seized the barrel of the service special, wrenched

it from the older man's feeble grasp.

"Calm down, now!" He prodded his prisoner with the muzzle.

"You tricked me! You're in league with them. You're going to murder me!" The man's slack lips quivered.

"Don't be like that, gramp. I'm here to see you *don't* get hurt." Keeney pushed him back against the cot. "Can't you get it through your head that I'm a cop? I'm here to protect you?"

The old man's eyes lost a little of their fanatic luminance, but he shook his head craftily. "You'd be wearing a uniform if you were a cop."

"I'm a plainclothesman, old-timer." Keeney pulled out his report book. "See. Here, where it's written?" He pointed:

RODERICK KEENEY
Plainclothes, First Grade
Shield 2741
Twenty-first Precinct
New York City

"No, sir. You don't fool me, twice."

"I'm not trying to fool you, gramp. All I want is a statement from you—who you suspect; what it was you ate or drank—"

"Then send a real cop here. I'll tell him. And nobody but him."

Keeney snorted disgustedly; flung open the corridor door. "Hey, Pulsifer! Lend a hand here, will you?"

The doctor came charging down the hall. "What's wrong? Has he—"

"No!" Keeney waggled the gun at him. "He's okay. You stay out of this."

Pulsifer lumbered up. "Trouble, fella?"

"Old dodo won't make a statement. Thinks I'm a phoney cop. Wants to talk to a guy in uniform."

Pulsifer came into the room. "What you say, mister. Any doubts about me?"

The old man seemed to be reassured. You look like a policeman. I'll tell you—" he glanced fearfully over his shoulder at the window behind him—"who's after me."

"That's the stuff," Keeney nodded.

"But you—" one bony finger pointed at the detective—"I don't trust you. You stay outside. I won't talk to you."

Rod made a wry mouth. "Okay, Sarge. Get the lowdown. I'll wait outside." He went outside, stood with his back to the door.

The nurse ran over to him. "You don't realize what you're doing, officer. That patient is standing on the brink of the grave. The moment the effect of the adrenalin begins to wear off—"

"I know," Keeney said impatiently. "He may cave. We got to run that chance. Too many people going nuts and winding up as cold meat for us to delay the inquiry." He stared toward the receiving room, where white-coated men were working over two new stretchers. "Where's the doc?"

"Working on a new case in room E. He has a theory that all the milk and cream in this district may have been contaminated—"

"Might be something in that," Keeney admitted. "Whatever it is, we've got to put the finger on it fast. . . ."

There was a dull thump in the room behind him!



HE WENT back, ripped open the door. Pulsifer was lying in a heap on the floor. The patient's bony hands were visible at the window-sill; the man was hanging there. Then the hands disappeared.

Keeney lunged for the window, saw the gaunt man, shambling at an oddly swift gait, vanish down a concrete-walled alley and around the corner of the building.

He picked Pulsifer up. "What gives, Sarge?"

"The old devil conked me with that thermos jug." The sergeant ruefully indicated a metal water-pitcher which had

rolled under the cot. "I didn't think he had strength enough to lift his voice!"

"He wouldn't have, Sarge, but the doc gave him a shot in the arm."

Pulsifer grimaced. "Near give me a fractured skull in the bargain." He fumbled at his hip-holster, howled: "The old buzzard got away with my gun! They'll shove me back on a beat!"

Keeney set his jaw. "We'll pick him up, Sarge. But there's no use shagging after him, out in that traffic. We have to find out where he holes up, if we can."

The doctor hurried in; an excited group of nurses and internes clustered about, offering details.

"Incredible!" the physician stroked his beard. "That man was as good as dead when I left you with him, officer."

"I was almost near that way, myself," the detective snapped. "He tried to chloroform me, before he kayoed Sergeant Pulsifer."

"But why should he be afraid of the police . . . unless he's committed some crime?"

"He's cuckoo," Keeney answered. "Like those others who died, chortling."

Pulsifer muttered, "He left his coat behind."

The plainclothesman looked first at the inside of the coat-pocket lining. He whistled. "Jans Varsen? Wasn't that the way our code report had him, Sarge?"

"Yeah."

"Well, know who that was? That was Jans Jorger!"

The sergeant's eyes popped. "The Small-Coin King!"

The little group of hospital attendants murmured excitedly.

"It's right here in his coat." Keeney nodded. "Jans Jorger. Six Twenty-two West Seventy-fifth Street. The old geezer who made fifty millions out of five-cent pieces gets picked up off the street like any vag who's guzzled too much smoke."

The doctor gasped. "Jorger was mut-

tering something about an attempt at murdering him."

Keeney searched the coat pockets, found nothing but a couple of old letters, a pack of cigarettes, some sticks of chewing gum and a soiled handkerchief. "He's sufferin' from delusions of persecution, prob'ly. We can't have a dilly like him running wild with a gun, or you'll have a ward-full of bullet wound cases. C'mon, Sarge."

He sprinted down the corridor, Pulsifer waddling close behind. At the receiving desk, Keeney stopped long enough to phone in a report to the station. "Send out a borough alarm for Jans Jorger—"

"The big dime-and-nickel boy?" inquired the desk-man at the other end of the line.

"The same. But he hasn't got all his marbles, now. He's armed and dangerous. No coat or hat. Five foot ten; no more'n a hundred pounds with his pants full of lead. Grab him on sight—but be careful. He's got one of these bury-me-quick cases of giggles."

Pulsifer panted: "Where'll we look for the goon? He might have gone down to that skyscraper he owns, just off Times Square."

Keeney jerked open the patrol-car door. "We'll try his house first. It's nearer."

They tore uptown at frantic speed, with Pulsifer nicking fenders and taking corners on the outside wheels. As they rocketed into West Seventy-fifth, the radio blared: "*Car Four Twenty-one. Attention. Car Four Twenty-one.*"

Keeney reached for the pad and pencil, paused. An emaciated figure was streaking along the sidewalk, the sleeve of his shirt flapping—where the doctor had loosened it to inject the hypo.

"Take it, Sarge! There's Jorger!" Keeney tossed the pad in Pulsifer's lap, opened the door and hit the pavement in full sprint.

But the Five-Cent millionaire was fifty feet ahead. He sped up the red stone steps

of Six Twenty-two; the door opened before he touched the bell. He darted inside.

Kenney hollered, "Leave that door open!"

But it slammed smack in his face. From within, a husky female voice bellowed:

"Go away or I'll call the cops!"



KEENEY banged on the door with his fist. "Open up! This is the police!"

He got no response, and he pounded again. The door was built of massive oak; the lock was heavy wrought-iron. He

The instant his feet touched the floor, there was a guttural roar of rage from the hall. A squat, stout woman rushed in, lugging a huge cooking pot. Her skin was the unhealthy saffron of old soap; her hair a sooty black. There was a mustache on her upper lip. She wore a bedraggled cotton dress, covered with a voluminous apron, but might easily have been mistaken for a man.

"Get out!" Her jet eyes blazed furiously.

Keeney held up a placating palm. "Take it easy, ma'am. Your boss is a sick man. He just ran away from the hospital. I'm taking him back."

Once again Stewart Sterling has come through with *another* top-notch novel of intriguing mystery! We've scheduled this foolproof baffler for the lead position in the next issue of *Dime Mystery Magazine*. Reserve your copy today!

wouldn't be able to crash that in with his shoulder. Besides, the newly-promoted detective, First Grade, wasn't any too sure of the proper procedure. The Manual for Detectives said: *No warrant is required to pursue a criminal, detected in the commission of a crime, even into his own home.* Still, whether Keeney had the right to break into the house, or shoot the lock off the door, in a case like this, he wasn't sure. . . .

He stepped back. To his left, beyond the stone balustrade of the little porch, was a narrow stone ledge under an open window. He couldn't see beyond the heavy curtains, but the room within was probably a library or a living-room.

He banged on the door once more, to distract the attention of that gruff-voiced female inside. Then he put a hand on the top of the balustrade, vaulted over to the ledge, got a grip on the window-sill and wriggled through.

She didn't wait to hear any more. She hurled the contents of the cooking pot at him. Keeney ducked, raising an arm. But boiling fluid splashed on his chin and neck.

He made a dive for her, grabbed her arm, spun her around. She tried to wrestle away, flailed at him with the empty pot. He grabbed her by the back of the neck, doubled one wrist up behind her shoulder-blades.

"That'll be all. First thing you know, I'll have to slap you in the jug for disorderly. Behave!"

"Leggo my arm!" she screeched.

"Stop horsing around, then. Where's Mister Jorger?"

"Where you'll never be able to get at him, you rotten murderer!"

Keeney shoved her forcibly across the hall into the dining-room opposite, propelled her toward the butler's pantry and kitchen at the rear. "What makes you think I'm trying to hurt your boss! I tell

you, I'm doing my best to save his life."

"You're a liar! You're in cahoots with her." She clubbed fiercely back at him with her free fist.

"With who?" Keeney pushed her up the stairs to the second floor.

"You know who I mean. That hussy he married must have hired you," the woman accused bitterly. "She's fixing to kill Mister Jorger, one way or another. This isn't the first time she's tried. But she won't get away with it, long as I'm alive."

"That's a lie, Hulda!"

A shrill, high-pitched voice came from the head of the stairs. Though the hall was darkened, Keeney could see a slim, white-faced slip of a girl, with a halo of pale straw hair framing her delicate oval features.

"I can't imagine what's happened to Jans!" the girl said nervously.

Keeney asked, "Who're you?"

"I'm Martha Jorger. Jan's wife." She stood very straight, her chin tilted up defiantly. "You mustn't believe Mrs. Gurz; I don't know what's the matter with Jans, any more than you do—"

"Where's your husband?"

She pointed to a closed door, across from the head of the stairs. "He locked himself in. He wouldn't let me go near him or do anything for him."

Hulda Gurz muttered, "I should think not, after what's gone on in this house."

The detective gave the housekeeper a shove. "Quiet, you. Any more shenanigans and I'll slap you in the cooler." He strode across the hall; tried the closed door. It was locked.

"Open up, Jorger," he called, "or I'll smash the door down."

The answer was a muffled shot from within the room. There was no splintering of wood at the door; if Jorger had been shooting at him, the bullet must have gone far from its mark.

Keeney braced his legs; hurled himself

forward, drove his weight hard against the inner edge of the door panel. The lock tore loose from the wood, banged open. Keeney catapulted into the room.

The gaunt man was crouched at the foot of a huge, four-poster bed. He held Pulsifer's gun with both hands, the muzzle resting on the foot-board, as if the weapon was far too heavy for him. He glared at Keeney with a curiously implacable ferocity, but he did not move or speak. The detective dived sideways to avoid a possible shot, then flung himself toward Jorger.

Still the old man remained motionless, his eyes fixed fiercely at the door. The man was dead!

Keeney realized that the instant his hands touched the other's wrists and wrenched the sergeant's gun away. He must have fired at Keeney with his last spasm of muscular effort—No!

The detective, from force of habit hammered into him at pistol practice, broke Pulsifer's gun. The chambers were full!

Where had that shot come from . . . ?

Martha Jorger flung her arms around the dead man. She crouched there, stiffly upright, propped against the foot-board. On the other side, Mrs. Gurz knelt beside the bed, grasped the corpse's legs and moaned, "I done my best to stop them, Mister Jorger. I swear that I done my best."

Keeney hated to get tough at a moment like this. But there was no alternative. "Lay off, both of you. Keep away from him."

Mrs. Gurz stumbled to her feet, came for Keeney with demoniac rage. "You killed him! I'll tear your eyes out—"

The detective put a palm on her shoulder; held her off. "Do I have to put the twisters on you? I will, if you don't keep quiet."

"You did shoot him!" Martha Jorger cried. She pointed to the back of the dead man's head.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Is Cheap

KEENEY looked closer. There was a bullet hole there, all right. But the lead had entered the brain from *below!*

He pushed the limp body aside. In the bedspread, just where Jorger had crouched, was a bullet hole.

Rod Keeney looked beneath the bed.

There was no one there. But there had been! Across the polished hardwood was a broad band which had been rubbed free of dust!

Somewhere below, a door closed quietly. Keeney ran across the hall, through a front bedroom. He parted the curtains at a window looking out on the street. There were a score of pedestrians on the sidewalk. He couldn't run down and stop them all, on the chance that one might be the murderer. The killer might have escaped down the back stairs. But whoever had fired that shot, up through the mattress, must have had nerves of ice—to crawl out from under that four-poster with three other people there in the room!

Maybe not, though. Maybe it had been these women who had made the escape possible by getting in Keeney's way, blocking his view. Question was, had either of them distracted the detective's attention on purpose?

He went back to the bedroom. There wouldn't be any use questioning them about the presence of the killer in the house; if either of them had been aware of it, she would be certain to deny it.

He felt for the man's heart, to make sure there was no pulse. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a white-clad figure edging toward the door.

"None of that, Mrs. Jorger. Stay put."

She leaned weakly against the lintel. "I've got to telephone; I've got to get in touch with—"

"Who?"

She brushed back the halo of hair from her forehead. "Some of Jan's friends," she finished.

"I'm more interested in getting hold of his enemies, myself." Keeney reached down, touched the housekeeper's shoulder. "What were you hollering about a few minutes ago. That stuff about Mrs. Jorger wanting to do away with her husband?"

The girl at the door cried, "Hulda, don't!"

The housekeeper squatted back on her heels; her face was puckered with distress; her cheeks glistened with tears. "You ain't gonna put me off it now, Mrs. Jorger. I'm going to tell everything I know about you and Mister Strobe."

Keeney got a hand under her arm, dragged her to her feet. "Who's Mister Strobe?"

The blonde moaned, "Hulda, for God's sake!"

But the housekeeper continued doggedly. "She calls him Einar. He's been coming to the house here for the last couple of months, when he—" she gestured toward the corpse—"was down at the office."

"Is that a fact?" Keeney took off his hat, wiped his forehead with the inside of his sleeve. This was the sort of stuff the Deputy Commissioner had warned them to be wary of. "*Accusations based on malice.*" Nine times out of ten it was of no use to a prosecutor. "Skip the scandal, Mrs. Gurz. Why'd you suspect her and this Strobe of wanting to put Mister Jorger out of the way?"

"I heard 'em talking about it, more'n once."

"You lie, Hulda!" The dead man's wife walked across the room. When she got close to her housekeeper, she lashed out, struck the woman with the flat of her hand. "That's an ugly lie."

Mrs. Gurz spat at her. "I heard you. You told Einar: 'If only Jans wasn't in

our way, everything would be all right.' You can't deny that!" She lurched to her feet.

Keeney groaned. "Break it up! I'll do any rough work that has to be done. Now then, Mrs. Jorger. How's for coming clean about your boy-friend? Who is he? What's his line?"

"Einar—" she bit her lip; stared miserably at the floor. "He's an old friend of mine. He—he introduced me to Jans, in the first place. I wasn't going to give up that sort of friendship just because he and Jans had quarreled about business."

NOW they were getting somewhere, Keeney reflected. "This bird in the same line as your husband?"

She nodded. "Einar used to work for Jans. They had a falling out, and Einar started his own business. The Value-Vendor Company."

"They wanted Mr. Jorger's money," grated the Gurz woman.

The plainclothesman stuck the sergeant's gun in his pocket. "How you figure she tried to do away with her husband, Mrs. Gurz? Put poison in his coffee this morning?"

It was the widow who answered. "Jans never drank coffee. If anyone gave him—something that hurt him—it was she who made his tea and brought it up to him.

The housekeeper's face was livid. "I work for Mister Jorger fifteen year, long before you came. Yes, an' I loved him, better than you, too." She lowered her head; her eyes fixed on the younger woman. "I give my life before anything happen to him. I drink the tea, every morning, before I take it to him, because I am afraid *you* fix it to kill him!"

Mrs. Jorger flared back. "You were afraid he'd let you go, Hulda. Afraid he'd change his will so you wouldn't get that five thousand."

Keeney scratched his head. How could he tell which of these frenzied females

should be taken into custody? What was that advice in the Manual? *In homicide investigations it's always advisable to hold the husband or wife of the deceased for material questioning; such procedure frequently results in subsequent conviction of the spouse so detained.*

He decided he'd go by the book. He took the blonde by the arm. "You and I better take a little tour of the station-house."

"No, no!" She tried to break away.

"Be nice, now. If you're in the clear on this—" He jerked a thumb back at the corpse—"you got nothing to worry about." He dragged her toward the door. "An' listen, Mrs. Gurz, I'll be back here soon's my partner runs Mrs. Jorger over to the station. I don't want to find anything touched in this room. Don't try to move the body. Don't let anybody in. Undersand?"

The housekeeper mumbled something unintelligible.

Keeney marched downstairs with the widow. The sooner he got help on this job the better, he realized. He'd let the boys from the D.A.'s office question this blonde. The thing Rod, himself, was supposed to be digging out was the lowdown on the epidemic of giggling deaths. It struck him forcibly that Pulsifer hadn't arrived to assist him yet. The sarge wasn't the sort to leave a pal at a time like this.

He urged Mrs. Jorger out the front door, down the steps. The radio car was still there at the curb—but the sergeant wasn't at the wheel.

There was something very screwy about this. Normally, Keeney would have obeyed the Manual for Patrol Car Operation, which would have meant hustling to the nearest phone and reporting the sergeant's absence. But this was Keeney's first day as a Grade-One plainclothesman; he didn't want to start off on the wrong foot by babbling something about the ser-

geant that might get Pulsifer in wrong. There might be some perfectly reasonable explanation—

He stopped abruptly. What was that, down the block? A uniform coat . . . slung in the gutter!

He pushed the frightened blonde into the patrol car; ran the coupe down along the curbstone.

It was Pulsifer's jacket, all right, and it had been wrenched off with enough violence to rip off two of the buttons. Keeney got out, retrieved the coat, stared down the block.

There was a Jubick *Orange Nektar* stand on the corner, open to the street. He thought he could make out a pair of blue-trousered legs and an ample expanse of regulation shirt, leaning against the counter.

He slid behind the wheel again; coasted the car up toward the corner. Then Keeney jumped out, hauling the widow after him.

They ran toward the stand. Pulsifer was hunched over the *Nektar* counter, his head resting on the imitation marble. In the sergeant's right hand, loosely held, was a glass of yellow liquid.

"Sarge!" Keeney yelled. "Hey, Sarge!"

Pulsifer straightened with a great effort, twisted around. "Ha-ha-ha, First-Grader. Come on . . . have one on the house . . . great stuff." He giggled. "Great st—"

He pitched forward, and crashed flat on his face.



THE tall, bell-shaped glass out of which Pulsifer had been drinking splintered into fragments at Keeney's feet.

Keeney glanced across at the sign on the wall behind the counter.

Jubick's Orange Nektar

"The Breakfast of Millions"

So the Medical Examiner's office wanted to know what these tittering victims ate and drank, did it! Well, here was one pretty obvious answer: "The Breakfast of Millions!"

The plainclothesman supported the sergeant with his left arm; with his right he grabbed a glassful of the pulpy drink from a middle-aged man intent on his paper.

Keeney set the glass back on the counter. "Have a glass of water, instead."

"What's the matter—"

"Hey, you!" snarled the white-jacketed attendant. "Who give you any license—"

Keeney took out his badge, let it ring on the counter. "I'm shutting up your shop, Mac."

The attendant put both hands on the counter, bent over and squinted angrily. "The hell you are!"

Keeney's lips made a thin, straight line. "As of now, Mac. I don't know what's in this stuff—" he tapped the nickled handle of the orange drink pump. "It may be okay. On the other hand—" he pointed to the newspaper the customer had dropped on the counter:

22 DEAD IN GIGGLING EPIDEMIC

"There's been a lot of folks readied up for the morgue this morning on account of something they ate or drank," Keeney said. "You've dished out a good many beakers of this brew since early ayem, huh?"

The attendant paled. "Couple hundred glasses, anyway. You suppose. . ."

"Not my business to suppose." Keeney spoke rapidly. "That's up to the analysts downtown. I'm calling the station right away; they'll send over for a few cartons of your fruit-juice. After they've tested it, they'll know if this is what's causing all the business at the morgue. Meantime, shop, he's-a close. Got me?"

The attendant shuddered. "You couldn't get me to sell it now." His eyes widened suddenly. "I drank three-four glasses myself!"

The middle-aged man snatched up his newspaper, ran for the street. Keeney fished a silver whistle out of his vest pocket, put it to his lips. He blew two long, loud blasts.

The blonde gaped, hypnotized, at the bulky frame of the sergeant sagging limply against the counter. Pulsifer's eyes remained closed; one corner of his mouth was twisted up as if he were being tortured. But every few seconds he snickered softly, as if highly amused at a private joke. The contrast between the merriment in his voice and the agony in Pulsifer's face made Keeney's stomach uncomfortable.

A patrolman pounded up, gun in hand. "Holy mother! What happened to the sergeant?"

"He got a dose of this laughing gas, or whatever it is." Keeney pointed to a wall phone. "Call the Polyclinic. Have 'em rush an amby."

Pulsifer opened one eye comically. "Pol'clink," he chortled. "Good ol' Pol'clink. This's where I came in." His head lolled limply on one side, his complexion the color of lead.

Outside on the street an ambulance screeched past, gong clanging wildly. The patrolman hung up the receiver. "Hospital says they got six ambys out on calls now; may be fifteen minutes or so before—"

Keeney swore. "Can't wait for that. Help me take him to the car."

THE patrolman took Pulsifer's feet; together they got the sergeant out to the coupe; propped him in the seat. The fat sergeant was panting for breath. Keeney ran back to the *Nektar* counter to get Mrs. Jorger.

"Come on, lady. Make it snappy. Hop in that car."

The counter attendant said, "Jeeze, copper, this stuff here—" He stabbed a finger in the direction of the *Nektar* container, "—maybe it's dangerous. And it's all over town. The company's got about eighty stands."

Keeney stiffened. The man was right; he should have thought of it, himself. He let go of the blonde's arm; dug a nickel out of his pocket; slammed it into the phone slot and dialed headquarters. Over his shoulder, he yelled at the counter attendant. "You! Where's your company's offices?"

"Nickleworth Tower. We're a subsidiary of the Nickleworth Corporation."

Keeney's neck reddened. What a fool he'd been! *Jans Jorger's own company made this Nektar!* Maybe it was all tying up now!

"Police headquarters," murmured an even voice in his ear.

"Keeney, Shield 2741 talking. Get me Captain Ludwin quick!"

Almost instantly a different voice said: "Ludwin. . . ."

"Keeney, Twenty-first Precinct, car 421, reporting on radio alarm."

"Yes, Keeney."

"Sergeant Pulsifer, working with me, just collapsed at Seventy-fifth and Broadway, after drinking a glass of Jubick's *Orange Nektar*. He's got those giggling heebies, all right. How's for putting out an all-precinct order to stop the sale of that stuff until we find out for certain if—"

"We'll hurry a couple of men right up for samples. The stop-sale order will be on the air in thirty seconds."

"I'm not positive it was the *Nektar* that got Pulsifer, but it's the only thing I saw him take since we been out."

"I hope to God it *was* that adulterated drip, Keeney. We've been analyzing everything from flour in doughnuts to sugar for coffee, without results. You're posting a man, there?"

"Right, Captain. Then I'll hustle Pulsifer over to the Polyclinic and check back with you on the other case we were asked to investigate. Maybe we got a lead there, too. This guy Varsen turned out to be Jans Jorger—"

"The Jitney Croesus?"

"Yessir. His company makes this Jubick drink."

Ludwin said, "Stick with it, Keeney. There's been thirty fatalities so far. People are beginning to get panicky."

"Right, Captain. I got Mrs. Jorger with me now. She knows more about this than—"

"Then send someone else to the hospital with Pulsifer. Shoot right down here to Center Street with your suspect as fast as you can."

"Yessir. I'll be on—" Keeney started to answer, then dropped the receiver, dashing to the street.

But he was too late, by a split second.

The radio patrol car, with Martha Jorger at the wheel, was rocketing around the corner into Broadway at better than forty miles an hour!

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullets for Keeney

KEENEY raced for the taxi stand on the uptown corner.

"Get going," he yelled to the driver of the first cab. "Follow that patrol car!" He leaped for the running board.

The cab-jockey slammed home his gears; the taxi rolled out into traffic. "First time I ever been on the right end of a chase, dick," the cabbie said.

"You're not on the right end of it unless we catch that car!"

The cab made a figure S around a stalled streetcar and a parked truck. "What's the idea—a dame driving a cop car?"

**Girls rave about the shaves you get
With thrifty, keen-edged Thin Gillette.
This blade skims off the toughest stubble—
Costs ten for four—saves time and trouble!**

New kind of edges
on steel hard enough
to cut glass

Produced By The Maker Of
The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

4 for 10c
8 for 19c

Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27c

The plainclothesman barked, "The idea is this: Don't slow up for red lights. This means life or death!" It meant life or death to Pulsifer, all right, for the Sergeant's chances seemed very slim unless the medicos got to work on him in a hurry. And it was a cinch the blonde wasn't heading for a hospital. . .

Keeney clung precariously to his perch on the running board, wondering if he should risk a shot at the coupe's tires. A hit might send the patrol car into a skid—which wouldn't help the sergeant any. Besides, there was too great a chance of hitting one of the well-known innocent bystanders, and that would only make a bad matter worse. Keeney was in wrong now, up to his neck. His patrol unit had been stolen from under his nose on his very first duty assignment! And Captain Ludwin had ordered him back to headquarters. The new plainclothesman had a brief premonition of a return to uniform; a lonely beat out in the suburbs. . . .

The cars tore through Columbus Circle at sixty, the coupe a half-block in the lead. Traffic officers whistled the patrol car on, staring in bewilderment as 421 shot past with a woman behind the wheel. They were only partly reassured by the slumped figure of Sergeant Pulsifer. When Keeney roared by, riding the board, they got the picture . . . and a pandemonium of whistles and horns broke out, behind the speeding cars.

They were gaining on Mrs. Jorger now, even though the cab had to hurdle the curb once to avoid colliding with a cross-town bus.

"Crowd her over to the curb," Keeney yelled.

The cab driver hollered, "Hang on!"

The taxi came up even with the coupe. Fenders touched—metal screamed. Keeney got ready to jump.

"Look out!" shouted the cabbie. "She's stopping!"

The police car braked suddenly, slurred

sideways a little; the taxi went spinning across the street, smashing into a delivery truck. Keeney was flung away.

He rolled to his knees, then dived for 421. The blonde leaped out on the opposite side. She headed into the throng on the sidewalk. A mounted policeman from Troop B forced his horse through the milling crowd at the crossing. Keeney pointed to Pulsifer, bellowing, "Run the Sarge over to Polyclinic, will you!"

Then he jumped, dodged a bus, jig-hopped his way through a stream of cabs and delivery trucks. He got to the sidewalk just in time to see the girl's blonde head disappearing through the crowd toward the lobby of a huge skyscraper.

Keeney lunged after her, desperately. He wouldn't lose her, now. And he had a pretty good idea where she was heading. This was the *Nickelworth Tower*.

He couldn't catch the same elevator—there were too many people between him and the gates which the starter slammed shut. But he rode up in the next express. The executive offices of the Nickelworth Corporation were on the fifty-third floor. Keeney had time to get his breath, to listen to a staccato conversation in the car.

"Terrible, ain't it! This epidemic!"

"Sure is. They say it's the water."

"City water?"

"Yeah, it's all poisoned—"

"Fifty-three." The door rolled open and Keeney edged out, his right hand close to the butt of his .38.

From behind a reception desk, a hard-eyed brunette looked him over.

"Mrs. Jorger came in here," he stated. "Where is she?"

"Your name, sir?"

"Police!" He stepped forward quickly, put his hand over the telephone transmitter she was about to use. "No phoning, babe. Where'd the lady go?"

The receptionist looked frightened. She pointed down the hall. "Second door to

the left. Into President Foster's office."

Keeney covered the distance to the door marked:

Harry Foster

President

in less time that it would take the girl to get a connection through the switch-board.

He flung the door open.

Martha Jorger stood in front of an enormous flat-topped mahogany desk, talking to a grizzle-haired man who lolled back in his swivel chair, puffing on a briar.

When she saw Keeney, she reached down inside her dress, pulled out a small gun. She aimed it carefully at the plain-clothesman's head.

Keeney thought she meant it as a warning not to come closer. He halted.

Without altering her expression, Mrs. Jorger fired.

He felt the bullet sting savagely at the side of his neck; blood trickled down inside his collar!



AUTOMATICALLY, Keeney flung himself to one side; yanking at his .38. He didn't want to kill this girl, but she was following his movements with the front sight of her toy pistol, and it was his life or hers. He steadied his arm, his finger tensing on the trigger.

The pleasant-faced man in the swivel chair had leaped around the desk. He pinioned the blonde's arms at her sides.

"Good Lord, Mrs. Jorger!" he exclaimed. "Do you know what you're doing?"

She struggled viciously, trying to bite Foster's hand. "Certainly I know what I'm doing."

Foster wrested the gun away from her, tossed it on his desk. "You're mad!"

"I wouldn't say that." Keeney stalked to the desk, scooped up the weapon, stuck it in his pocket. He stanchd the blood on his neck with his handkerchief. The bullet had barely nicked him, but it was plain that the blonde was no one to fool with. "A dame who runs away with a patrol car, kidnaps a sergeant, an' finally tries to kill the officer who's been trailing her—"

Foster said, "You're a detective?"

The blonde cut in quickly, "He's the rat who shot Jans. He meant to kill me, too, but I got away from him. I had every right in the world to protect myself."

Keeney laughed harshly. "You weren't trying to protect yourself. You were trying to put the dot on me so I wouldn't arrest this Einar Strobe you been playin' around with."

Foster released Mrs. Jorger. He stared at him incredulously. "You! Friendly with Strobe?"

"Why not?" She raised her chin aggressively. "Einar's a fine person."

The president of the Nickelworth Corporation dropped heavily into his chair. He studied his pipe for a moment. "He was Jan's bitterest enemy. He tried to ruin your husband and wreck his corporation through those phoney patent infringement suits."

"Jans stole the ideas for those patents from Einar in the first place," Mrs. Jorger retorted.

Keeney said, "Fight that out on your own time. I'm taking you down to headquarters, Mrs. Jorger, where you'll have a chance to do your explaining." He took the twisters out of his pocket. "Do I have to use these, or you goin' to be reasonable?" He did not like to wrap the steel chain around the blonde's slender wrist, but the stinging burn across the side of his neck warned him not to monkey with dynamite any more.

She hunched up her shoulders, pulled

down the corners of her mouth. "If you're going to third-degree me—"

"Third-degree, nothing!" Keeney gritted. "We're going to pin a first-degree on you, and while I'm at it—" he reached for the phone on the president's desk—"I'll just take time out to put in a pick-up order for that sweetie of yours."

Foster frowned up at him. "You're going to arrest Strobe?"

"That's the rough idea," Keeney said, then turned his attention to the phone. "Hello, operator, hustle me through to—"

"I think I can save you some time," Foster interrupted.

Keeney hesitated. "Never mind, operator; I'll call back." He put the telephone down. If he could deliver both Strobe and Mrs. Jorger to Ludwin, and if they were proved to be behind this lethol epidemic, he might square himself some for having messed up things so far. "You know where Strobe is?" he asked.

"I couldn't say positively." Foster got his hat, put it on. "But he ought to be right here in this building, on the twentieth floor."

Keeney was surprised. "He had plenty of crust, didn't he? To set up office in your building?"

"The Tower is run by a separate company," Foster explained. "Jorger didn't have anything to say about it when Value-Vendor moved in here."

Mrs. Jorger sneered, "Einar has as much right to be in this building as anyone else. His brains made the Nickelworth Corporation rich enough to build this Tower, anyway."

"Listen!" Keeney snapped. "I'm no lawyer. You're not going to get me in the middle on any arguments about patent rights or profits. All I'm interested in is homicide. There've been thirty-odd deaths this morning. It looks like the orange slush you make for Jubick was the cause."

Foster roared, "What are you talking about, man? Every drop of our *Nektar*

is certified one hundred percent pure—"

"I know, I know." Keeney ignored the protest. "Maybe it is, as a general rule. But a lot of people in this section of town—the kind who generally grab a quickie before they go to work—have keeled over with severe attacks of giggilitis, or whatever the docs decide to call it."

"Then you're the one," Foster said, "who had that order put through to stop the sale of *Nektar*!"

Keeney nodded. "You should thank me for it. If it turns out that—"

The executive reached for his hip pocket. Instinctively, Keeney held his own gun close to his side; but all the president produced was a thick packet of greenbacks. "I will wager these—" He slapped the currency down on the desk—"against your tin badge that not one drop of *Nektar* ever did anyone any harm."

"I hope you're right, mister. Fact remains, there's a long line of corpses waiting for autopsies—"

The phone rang. Foster grabbed it, listened a moment, then nodded.

He hung up, bowed sarcastically to the widow. "A friend of yours, Mrs. Jorger."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Reaper Laughs

KEENEY stepped back a pace, where he could keep an eye on both the widow and the door. Through the window beside him, he caught a glimpse of a crowd gazing up at the moving letters on the animated signboard of the great newspaper building.

48 STRICKEN WITH LAUGHING
PLAGUE. . . . 36 DEAD . . . ALL VIC-
TIMS FROM AREA WEST OF CEN-
TRAL PARK. . .

The door opened. A broad-shouldered, powerfully-built man marched in. His pale, freckled skin gave his prominent

nose and jutting chin the appearance of having been carved from granite.

The widow cried: "Be careful, Einar! The police!"

Foster nodded stiffly. "Hello, Strobe."

The newcomer paid no attention to Keeney. He went directly to the blonde. "So very sorry I am—"

Foster murmured drily, "Broken-hearted, aren't you?"

Strobe put an arm around the girl's shoulders. "I am wretched, for Martha's sake. But I am no hypocrite—I do not regret Jan's death. It makes it possible for our companies to be friends again." He looked down at Mrs. Jorger. "It is too early to talk of this, but later we will find a way to stop this senseless quarrel—"

Keeney cut in, "Maybe it isn't too soon to talk about it, Mister Strobe. It might be a good idea for you to come downtown with Mrs. Jorger. You can explain to the captain all about how you and she planned to put Jorger out of the way."

The big man released Mrs. Jorger. He moved stiff-legged over to the detective, stuck his jaw close to Keeney's face. "You dare to make such an accusation?"

"I dare. An' I dare say you'll try to talk yourself out of it, but after the evidence I've got—"

Einar Strobe smiled disagreeably. "I make no bones about having disliked Jans Jorger, but the newspapers say he was sick of a strange fever—"

Keeney took a step toward him. "You learned he was dead from the papers, eh?"

"Ah, no! You do not trap me so. I read in the extra where Jans escaped from the hospital, so I call his home. And that Gurz devil, who kept house for him, she tells me he is dead. So I come to make my sympathies—"

"Don't say anymore, Einar," the widow pleaded. "It'll only be used against you. This man is determined to—"

"To run down the people who are responsible for this bunch of wacky deaths," Keeney finished. "Somebody decided to kill Jorger an' knew the Small-Coin King used to stop for a drink of *Nektar* after leaving his house, before coming to the office every morning. The killer arranged to have the *Nektar* doctored, not caring how many other people wound up at the undertaker, so long as Jorger got it, too."

Foster exclaimed, "You must be wrong, officer. Mister Jorger never touched our orange drink; he simply couldn't stand the taste of it!"

K EENEY kept a poker face, but his head was gyrating violently. If that was true, then his whole theory collapsed. Since the poison must have been given in something they *all* took, and since Jorger never touched the *Nektar*, the orange drink was out. . . .

Keeney was on the wrong trail, all because he'd failed to stick to the rule book.



HITS THE SPOT

PEPSI-COLA

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

BIGGER DRINK • BETTER FLAVOR

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

If he'd followed regulations, he would have assistance in searching for Pulsifer right at the beginning. Mrs. Jorger wouldn't have escaped in the patrol car; Captain Ludwin wouldn't be biting his nails down at headquarters. There was nothing to do now but see this through. . .

"You might have something there, Mister Foster," Keeney said. "But it isn't up to me to decide. You better come along to headquarters, all three of you."

"Wait a minute." Harry Foster threw one knee over the corner of his desk, pointed the stem of his briar at Mrs. Jorger. "You were always having arguments with your husband about funds, weren't you? Always asking for more money than he could afford to give you?"

"Yes." Her words were like pieces of ice. "That was because, under your management, the Nickelworth Corporation only made about half as much as when Jans was running it, so—"

"Don't pass the buck to me," Foster said. "You imagined that after Jan's death, you'd be able to get all the money you wanted out of the firm. Didn't know about the new will he made a few weeks ago, did you?"

The color drained out of her face. "He didn't make . . . any new will!"

"Sure, he did—because he was afraid of what you and your brother might do!"

Strobe muttered, "What brother?"

Foster raised his eyebrows. "You didn't know she had a brother, Strobe? His name's Charley Myer; he works for us—subway route service man."

"I'm not ashamed of him." Her lips thinned, her eyes blazed. "I haven't told you about him, Einar, because—"

Foster picked it up, "—because you put Myer in here to spy on me. You made Jans give him that job so he could report to you upon the way I ran the Nickelworth Corporation. Maybe you and Charley *did* try to work out a plan to murder Jans!"

The picture grew clearer for Keeney. He had been right, after all, though not quite in the sense he had figured at first. These deaths *were* the work of a deliberate Borgia, and if the newly appointed plainclothesman could only get his hands on the killer, he might still redeem himself at headquarters.

"Where's Charley Myer, now?" he asked.

Foster snapped a lever on a mahogany communication box. "Service," he said into it. "Where's Charley Myer working this morning. . . . Sixty-sixth Street, eh?"

Keeney grabbed the girl's arm. "There's a lot of things that are pretty tough to dope out about this business. But we'll get some of them straightened out pronto. Let's go!"



OUT in the corridor, in front of the elevators, he frisked Foster and Strobe. "I'm warning you, all of you: The first wrong move and somebody gets hurt."

Foster said, on the way down in the elevator, "I have been stupid not to connect these things before."

"You and me both," Keeney answered.

Out on the street, he saw that the crowd under the animated bulletin was much larger; letters racing up across the second story of the newspaper building read:

**EPIDEMIC LAID TO BELLADONNA
POISONING . . . FATALITIES IN-
CREASE . . .**

Keeney flagged a cab. "You first, Mrs. Jorger." He got in beside her. "Now, you two—up on the monkey seats. . . . Sixty-sixth and Broadway, driver, and hit it!"

The driver stepped on the gas. "Want the radio off?"

"No, leave it on," Keeney said. It was

blaring forth news; the announcer was saying:

"Among the victims of the sinister wave of poisonings which have swept over the west side of this city since early morning, was Sergeant Peter J. Pulsifer, of the West Sixty-eighth—"

"Switch it off," growled Keeney. So now the Sarge was gone, too; fat, good-natured Pulsifer, who had helped him while he was breaking in, who had agreed so readily to pairing up with Rod Keeney when the car assignments were given out. Somebody would pay for that, he decided grimly. If he had only had sense enough to dope this thing out before.

It had been that '*urgent rekest*,' flashed over the short-wave from the medical examiner's office, that had thrown him off. What had the victims of the giggling plague been eating and drinking? The beladonna—if that was what had been causing these deaths to the accompaniment of the tittering—hadn't been in anything people ate or drank.

They slid to a stop at the Sixty-sixth Street subway entrance.

Keeney got out, gun held ready. "Stick around," he told the cabbie.

The blonde and the two men preceded him down the steps into the subway.

"He might not be working this side," Foster said, beneath his breath. "He might be on the downtown— No! There he is!" He pointed to a small man, dressed in nondescript dark clothes.

Keeney lifted the chain, herded his three prisoners through. As they strode down the platform, the detective saw that Charley Myer was loading small packets from a valise into the metal rack of a pillar vending machine.

They were a dozen feet away before Myer noticed them.

"Charley!" Mrs. Jorger cried. "They're trying to blame you for all of these deaths—"

"Shut up!" Keeney grabbed for the packets Myer had been stacking into the

rack of the nickel-in-the-slot machine. *Cinnegum!* There it was—the same bright orange-and-blue wrapper that had been on the pieces he took from Jans Jorger's pocket, there on the bed on West Seventy-fifth Street.

CINNEGUM

Ten pieces for
a nickel

Made exclusively by the Nickelworth
Corporation

Why hadn't he realized that poison could be concealed by the strong flavor of cinnamon chewing gum, just as well as by food or drinks—especially when he saw that fat woman at the Polyclinic chewing gum. And Pulsifer! Was there ever a police sergeant who didn't keep a few sticks of gum in his pocket? Probably his partner had put a chunk of *Cinnegum* in his mouth while he was writing down that second radio alarm, after Keeney got into Jorger's house.

The detective caught the lapels of Myer's jacket with his left hand.

"How many of these packets you planted, today?" he demanded.

Strobe blurted, "You believe this gum is poisoned?"

"Yeah," Keeney rapped. "It might be the chocolate or the salted nuts, but I'd say not. Jans Jorger had some of this *Cinnegum* on him when he died."

The blonde began to weep. "I'll never believe Charley did it."

Keeney pushed the bag with his foot. "Charley's under arrest, anyway. And we'll just clean out the stuff he's put in here and run it downtown for analysis."

Myer tittered weakly. "Anything you say, but . . . he-he-he . . . you see, I know there isn't anything wrong with that gum, because I've been . . . ho-ho-ho . . . chewing it myself, all morning."

The girl screamed, "Charley!"

The service man staggered back, clawing at his collar, gasping for air. "'sall-right, Sis. Just . . . a little . . . hot."

KEENEY swung on Strobe. "Hustle him upstairs; get him to a hospital. They might save him yet."

Foster cried, "I'll help you, Strobe," but Keeney lifted his .38 threateningly.

"You'll stand right still, Foster, unless you want a bellyful of something that works quicker than belladonna."

"I been pretty dumb," Keeney gritted. "I should have seen right away that you were the only one in a position to make a cleanup out of Jorger's death. Only you could plant this stuff where Myer would have to use it."

The blonde said: "And the one who'd gain most if Jans were out of the way."

Foster smiled, sad'y. "Maybe it's the air down here, or maybe this stuff is catching. You're both crazy."

"You ought to be an authority on crack-brains, Foster," Keeney said. "Anyone who'd be cold-blooded enough to kill a hundred men, women and children in order to murder one man—just so he could take over the business or cover up his thievery or however it was you figured to rook Jorger—you ought to rank right up at the top of the looney list. And even at that, you were afraid you hadn't done the job, so you trailed him from the subway to the hospital and then home from the hospital. How'd you get into the house? With a key you'd stolen from Jorger, sometime?"

Foster licked his lips.

"Tried to spread the blame around, too, didn't you?" Keeney had to fight himself to keep from shooting this innocent-faced monster. "You'd have been willing for Mrs. Jorger, here—or Strobe, or even that poor Myer—to take the rap, long as you stayed in the clear."

"I have fifty thousand dollars for lawyers to prove I'm innocent." Foster began to back away, inch by inch.

"Stand still!" Keeney commanded.

"You won't get a chance to talk to those lawyers unless you're careful—"

"*Look out!*" The blonde screamed. "He's going to—"

Foster crouched, spun swiftly and leaped over the edge of the platform, down to the railbed of the local trains.

Keeney fired a snap-shot at him, but had to pull his aim at the last split-second because of a passenger, down the platform. The executive hurdled the third rail, stumbled, went sprawling across the north-bound express tracks—directly in front of an oncoming train.

The girl covered her hands with her eyes. Even Keeney had to look away.

The engineer of the express applied his brakes, but the train was moving too fast. Foster's last piercing scream was lost under the steel screech of the wheels. . . .

Keeney saw enough to make him spring for the change booth, push in beside the change-cashier. "Phone!" he barked. "Police!"

He got through to headquarters as shrieks resounded from both platforms. Then he was talking to Ludwin.

"Captain? This is Keeney. That belladonna, or whatever it is, is in packages of chewing gum. . . . Yeah, *Cinnegum*. The kind they have in those nickle slot machines in the subway. . . . Right, All the stations from Eighty-sixth to Fifty-ninth. . . . How do I know? . . . I just caught the lug who mixed up his own batch of gum with the poison in it, then wrapped it up in Nickleworth packets and planted it in the supplies of the service man covering this territory. . . . Sure, President of the Corporation, skunk named Harry Foster. . . . No, I can't bring him in. . . . Yeah, I guess you could say he escaped—the hard way. . . . He took a dive under an express train . . . he's one guy who really went to hell in a handbasket, Captain."

• FERRY THE DEAD! •

By JOHN BENDER



Ferrying bombers to England was hazardous enough, Dave Wilcox thought, without being forced back to Canada by a stowaway corpse that seemed most anxious to pin its own murder on Dave!

TWENTY minutes after we left the field at Newfoundland I knew something was going to happen. I don't know how, but I felt a premonition more alarming than the trouble lousy weather promised. I'd been in storms before—in twelve years' steady flying you meet plenty of them, though it always seems that the bad weather of the moment is the

worst. The business of the moment is the most important business of your life, because it is your life.

I was pushing hard for altitude, but with the load of gas I carried, it was plenty tough. I reached absolute ceiling, and yet I hadn't cleared the rain and lightning. Dumping part of my gas load wouldn't be wise, I decided. There was just a little more than was necessary to carry me and my passenger in the big Hudson bomber to England.

So it was a spot not at all to my liking. I should have turned back for Newfoundland, quick. But that meant I'd lose one thousand bucks. I could use plenty of the thousand-dollar payments a pilot gets for ferrying one of these bombers to England. When you've got your own little airline operating in the red, with countless bills and mortgages outstanding, every thousand skins is vital. So far I'd ferried ten ships. But I had fifteen trips to go before I'd own my airline all by myself.

Yet, personal finance seemed highly unimportant to me just then. The thing to worry about was the storm—and my passenger. All I knew about him was that he was a skinny gent named Hawkins, and that it was rumored around the drome that he had government business abroad. I hadn't got a line on which government he represented, nor whether his business was important enough for us to stick our necks out, trying to ride out the storm.

I was convinced that Hawkins was, by now, a mighty sick guy, unless he'd traveled a lot by air. For my own part, I was disgusted, and had doubts about getting through. Still, I was willing to try—that money looks nice and green and satisfying when they pay off. But it was more than just my life I was toying with this trip.

The air was plenty rough, but the Hudson bomber is a stable ship; the automatic pilot was, I decided, strong enough to let me take a few seconds' time off to consult with Hawkins.

I cut in the automatic peelo, unstrapped myself, and squirmed out of the seat, to go back to that section of the plane where Hawkins sat. I kept my eye on the instrument panel though, while I called first.

"Hawkins!" I yelled. Then: "Mr. Hawkins!"

There was nothing but the heavy roar of the motors, and the consistent rocking of the ship.

I yelled again, as loud as I could. "Hawkins!"

Once again, that warning sixth sense struck me forcibly. I couldn't even begin to diagnose it, but it was there, a small, cold knot in the pit of my stomach. And it wouldn't go away.

"Hawkins!"

I waited maybe three seconds more after my voice had been lost in the steady drone of the motors, then I took one final look at the instrument board and stepped out of the pilot's compartment. I walked the short distance back towards Hawkins' seat, wondering what was wrong.

I didn't think it was air-sickness, because then he would have been groaning, or clutching the side of the seat. As it was, Hawkins just sat there, looking straight ahead; and I swung my eyes up to his forehead. . . .

It wasn't nice to see. There was a bullet hole in his forehead—a small, heat-fringed hole which testified to close-range shooting. There was not much blood, except at the back of his head, where the slug had emerged.

I GRABBED on to some of the metal, tubular framework of the fuselage, and hung for a while—until the bats got out of my stomach. Then I went closer to the body. It was still sickening, then maddening, to realize that I had to turn around—to bring home a corpse. . . .

Back in the pilot's seat, I took over the controls, and swung the big plane back

towards Newfoundland. I kept seeing Hawkins' face, the funny look on it, in the windshield in front of me. I had gone the color of a corpse myself, I saw. My face was gaunt, the dark hair and eyes and the heavily-surfaced shaving area standing out like black patches against snow.

Concentrating on the instruments helped, but not very much, because in thick pea-soup like this, you're always unconsciously swinging your head up to peer ahead. That you have all the instruments for taking a ship anywhere doesn't seem to help—you still do a job of looking.

We went for about fifteen minutes, with the noise of the motors providing some slight comfort. Then, quite abruptly, one of the motors quit. I tried to start it, but it was no go. Suddenly the other motor coughed and spluttered under the work which had become too much. I nursed it carefully. But it, too, conked out cold. Reaching the field now was going to be a miracle.

I had no idea what was wrong, but it didn't matter. It was a question of getting this big bird down somewhere, preferably on land.

We should have been hitting the coast, or somewhere close to it, so I nosed down, thankful for the altitude and the fact that it meant long gliding to whatever our destination happened to be.

The big ship raced on through the night, followed ominously by the soft, small whine of its own air-resistance. At eighteen hundred feet, we broke through the last big chunks of the fog, and visibility was poor but possible. We were over land, I saw—not much over, but over at any rate. My eyes were bleary from looking for someplace to set down, and I worked the ship to eight hundred, seven. . . .

Then I saw the strip of beach. It was a long, white line that looked very good. The wind was right, so it was only

a matter of approach. I jockeyed a little, lowered my flaps and landing gear. I'd cut the switches at the first realization the motors were done, and both myself and Hawkins were strapped in tightly.

The ground was visible at three hundred feet. I saw that the beach was ridged with dunes, and knew that it would have to be a crash landing. But there was no choice.

We came in . . . I remember thinking about my passenger's safety belt, and the fact that you can't kill a corpse. . . . We hit, softly enough, but then the wheels dug into the sand, and the old tail lifted suddenly. . . .

There was the loud, roaring of splitting metal; then there was nothing but a circling blackness, with me slipping into the middle of it. . . .

I wondered how Myra would take the news. . . .



I CAME to in a hospital, and I left the hospital an hour or so later. All that was wrong with me was a few scratches on the head and a sprained wrist. But I came out accompanied by Jared Hart, the tall, British Intelligence officer, and two Canadian M. P.'s. Hart didn't have much to say—except that I was to go back with him to appear before the customary investigating officials at the drome.

It was twenty miles from where I'd crashed to the drome, about twelve from the hospital. The M. P. handling the official car which was used to take me back was an expert, and we made the trip in record time.

One thing about the British—they don't waste time any more. The officers were waiting for us, a little impatient at what they no doubt thought was unnecessary delay.

There were almost the same number of men who'd been on the field when Haw-

kins and I took off. Merkle and Johnson, the mechanics who serviced the ship, and Kirby, the pilot who'd taxied and warmed up the crate, weren't there, but the same Canadian army officials were. There was a man whom Major Lacey, the field's C. O., introduced as James Nielson. I'd seen him the night I left, and though it was not said, I figured Nielson to be on the Hudson people's payroll—a technician, or a roving trouble-shooter. Hart, who hadn't done any questioning to speak of at the hospital, was present, also.

Major Lacey dismissed the guards, called the meeting to order. He said that we were there to ascertain the facts of the case and what was to be done about it.

We got to it quickly.

I told my story, from the time I'd taken off till the time the plane crashed. Lacey and the officers on each side of him conferred, and the major said to me:

"This is by no means a trial, Mr. Wilcox—merely a routine investigation into the cause of death. It is the decision of this court that Joseph Hawkins was murdered."

I didn't say anything. I'd known somehow that that was what they'd say. But now that it was a spoken fact, it seemed to get to me a little more forcibly. Murder! And I was, apparently, the one who could have had the best opportunity to do it. . . .

Major Lacey asked: "Have you any reason to believe otherwise?"

I knew Hawkins had had no gun of his own. I knew, too, that I hadn't shot him.

I said: "None, Major."

Lacey shrugged and resumed. "It is also the decision of this court that you shall remain in Newfoundland for the next few days."

"But I didn't kill him," I said quickly, aware what Lacey no doubt thought. "What in earth should I kill him for? I didn't know the man at all."

Hart, the British Intelligence officer,

said, "Mr. Hawkins ate in the Blue Door Restaurant, and it is reported that he was quite familiar with Miss Myra Ralston, who works there. It's known that you are in love with Miss Ralston. You had reason, therefore, to resent whatever attention was paid to her. Quite possibly, Hawkins was, as you Americans say, cutting in on your time. At any rate, it's a possible motive."

I hadn't known that Hawkins knew Myra—she'd never told me. Maybe that was what sort of slowed me down, then. I know I didn't make any immediate reply. I said, finally, "I swear to God I didn't kill him!"

MAJOR LACEY shrugged. "No one has accused you yet, Mr. Wilcox."

"I didn't do it!" I told him and the other men hotly. "You're acting under the impression that Hawkins was alive when we left the ground. Maybe he was dead—he *had* to be dead!"

"Hawkins was alive when the mechanic shut the door," Lacey said, rising.

"But are you sure? Did Merkle see him? Couldn't someone have shot him just before Merkle closed the door?"

The major wasn't paying much attention. He said, "Merkle swears that Hawkins was alive. I saw Hawkins just before the door was closed, myself—and I'm convinced that he was alive."

The major stood up, reminding me that until an indictment was reached I had better stay around. Then he and his aides left the room.

Nielson sat there with me, offered me a cigarette.

"I work for Hudson," he said through the smoke. "We Yanks should stick together. It's a tight case they've got against you."

"But I didn't kill him," I said again. "I found him dead in the plane as I've reported."

Nielson rose. "Remember Freddy Stack?" he asked.

I remembered well enough. Stack was a kid I'd taught to fly when I was an army instructor in the States. That was in the days before going into the Air Corps Reserve, before I'd opened my own airline. I said I remembered him well.

"He's my nephew," Nielson told me. "He's a captain now, and I can get him up here as a character witness for you. No doubt you can get others, from the army, I mean. I know a lot of army men who'll do me—and you—a favor. Not that I think they're going to go rough on you, Wilcox. After all, they can't actually prove you killed Hawkins. I'd say they'll give you a second degree indictment—a two to five year penalty. You'll probably be free again in two years—"

"Two years!" I groaned. "Two months would be enough for me to lose my shirt. I got an airline with a mess of mortgages. So far I've been able to meet payments on them with the money I got flying. If I don't fly anymore, my airline's gone!"

Nielson tamped out his cigarette in a tray on the table. I did the same. Nielson said, "I'll try to help you as much as I can, of course, but I think you're going to have to stand trial."

I bit my lip, hard. "Just who was this Hawkins, anyway?"

Nielson smiled. He had a small broad face, like his figure; and a smile on him was something hard and grim. "He was a pal of mine, too. It doesn't hurt to have you know now—you'll find out anyway, if and when they try you. Hawkins was a member of the Secret Service—the United States, that is. He was carrying an important, officially secret letter from our government to England!"

I'd heard about that before. I'd never known for sure, but I had managed to pick up the rumors about messages which the government of the United States was sending over to Downing Street. Sometimes those messages went by pilot, other times they went with "passengers." But, in any event, if those messages, or the fact that they existed, happened to become known to the Nazis—the United States would be embroiled in a mess that could, quite possibly, lead to a declaration of war.

I knew now that I'd be given a rather secret trial. It didn't help while I was trying to discover, by thinking back, who could have had a chance to kill Hawkins. All I got out of it was a headache. It could have been anyone—anyone who had been there just before we took off. A

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silencer on a small gun; a quick shot just before the plane's door was swung entirely shut. . . .

Why, a silencer wouldn't have been necessary; the motors would have covered the noise!

But of the eight people who'd been there, including myself and Nielson, I won the booby prize, it seemed. There were too many possibilities to run down before I got the answer—before my trial came up. I was certain now that they'd hang the job on me. And all I could do was hope they didn't hang me for it!

Nielson said he'd try to dig up what he could, and for me to let him know where he could reach me.

I said I was going to see Myra Ralston, and that I'd leave word at my hotel desk if we went anywhere.



IT WAS almost five o'clock when I got back to town. I headed straight for the Blue Door, the small restaurant where most of the pilots ate when they were off duty. But I didn't go there to eat. It was where Myra worked, and five o'clock was her quitting time.

I saw her as soon as I got out of my car. She saw me too, and came running out, her long-bobbed chestnut hair swinging deliciously about her nicely chiseled face and throat. She came just to my shoulder ordinarily, but when she rose to to her toes her lips were easy to find.

I found them, and she said, "Dave, my darling," in a soft, surprised tone which was, I felt, the result of seeing me so soon again. Usually it was a couple of weeks before I got back from a hop to England.

I kissed her again before saying anything, before even attempting to. It was worth a million bucks to feel the warmth of her, snuggled there within my arms. And I didn't give a damn about what people thought.

Finally she drew away. "Why?" she asked incredulously. "I thought you and Mr. Hawkins were on your way to England. What happened?"

I had a picture of Myra as she'd been just before Hawkins and I took off. Myra, a rhapsody in white, from her dainty toes to her big handbag, standing there on the field with me, kissing me good-bye as she had done on other occasions. I remembered how she had walked with me to the plane, how the officials—who knew how she and I felt about each other—had courteously looked the other way, until she'd seen me into the ship.

To me she was perfection, all right. I had it bad.

But I couldn't help thinking about Hawkins, too.

"Maybe," I asked, "you're more interested in Hawkins than in me?"

That surprised her, I could tell. Those cool, green eyes of hers swung up to me, quickly, a shade nervously; and I felt like all the dopes that ever were.

"Dave!" she said. "You're upset. Something's wrong?"

"What about Hawkins?" I persisted.

Myra smiled. The fading sunlight danced along the smooth white line of her teeth. "You're jealous," she said intimately. "I'm glad." She giggled. "You know there's no one but you, darling. Hawkins was a customer—someone I met over the counter. Nothing more."

That made me feel a lot better. I said, as casually as possible, "Hawkins is dead—shot. I found him in the plane. . . ."

I gave her the story quickly, and asked her if she'd care to go somewhere with me for a drink. She went to tell her boss she was leaving.

We got into my car, drove to my hotel. Myra didn't say a word until we were seated in the hotel dining room.

She said, "And now you're under arrest," and it seemed so important to her I wanted to take her in my arms.

I tried to smile. "It's a technicality. It won't last for long—"

"But all your work—your airline. You need the money so badly."

"Sure," I said. "But I can still make it."

"Not if they don't let you fly."

That was a possibility. Even with acquittal, I wasn't sure that Canada would consider me a good risk anymore. And it suddenly began to look as if things were not going to be so good for me. It seemed a shame that I was to lose this girl so quickly. Five months ago, when I'd first seen Myra Ralston take over the waitress job at the Blue Door, I'd thought, "Here she is, Dave. The one and only." Now—well, I wasn't going to let her marry a failure—a jailbird, maybe.

The meal dragged on dismally. We had a few more drinks, but our conversation stopped somewhere along the way. I just sat there, making patterns on the tablecloth with the bottom of my glass.

I GUESS it must have been close to seven-thirty when a waiter tapped me on the shoulder. He had a portable phone, which he plugged into a socket in the foot of the table.

I took the phone.

Nielson said, over the wire, "Chin up, Dave. I got a nice lead. I've been out here looking at that ship you brought in. I'm convinced the motor was fixed. Someone planned a watery grave for you and Hawkins—"

"You mean someone sabotaged the ship?"

"Yes," Nielson said. "And it narrows down to Johnson and Merkle, for my dough. One of them—"

"Merkle and Johnson have some explaining to do," I finished for him. "And I'm going to check on it—right now!"

There was a sudden spluttering that almost tore my ear off. "Don't be an ass," Nielson advised sharply, when he stopped

calling me other names. "You're big, and full of muscle, and the first thing you know you'll win a second kill charge. Wait for me—"

"If you can be at Merkle's in half an hour, I'll wait for you," I said. I hung up, feeling better than I'd felt at any time since this mess started.

Myra's lips were parted; she seemed to be hanging on my next words.

"What is it?" she asked.

I smiled. "It's the payoff, kid. I finally get a break. With a little research, I can find out who really killed Hawkins!"

She considered for a moment. "You mentioned Merkle and Johnson. Is it one of them?"

"One or both, maybe. Anyway, here's where I find out. Come on!"

"Where, Dave?"

"You're going home," I said. "And I'm going out to have a talk with Merkle. He's the one who swore he saw Hawkins alive—which could mean he's the one who killed Hawkins!"

We were out to my car in the parking lot before Myra said, "And I can't go with you?"

I looked down into that tense, white face; the wide-set, sea-green eyes. Then I bent to kiss her. "Not this trip, darling. There may be a little trouble—"

"But you—"

"I'll be all right," I told her. "Don't worry. I'll phone you as soon as I can."

There was no further resistance, so I drove Myra home.



I WASTED five or ten minutes more in a drug store after I left her. I called the airdrome, checking on Merkle. It took a few minutes for one of the other ack emmas to take a look around, to make sure that Merkle had signed off the field for the night. But once I found out that he'd gone home, I knew I wouldn't

be chasing down any phoney leads.

It took me some time to get to Merkle's house, but I was in no great hurry—yet. It's one thing to know a guy's been doing you dirt, another to get him to admit it—especially when there's a murder rap connected. Actually, I had no immediate plan of action. Probably, I reasoned, I'd do just as Nielson surmised: I might let my fists do all the talking. If Merkle acted suspiciously, maybe a little working over would be the right way to loosen him up.

He'd never struck me as being a particularly bright guy. I'd always figured him for a thick slob, who knew motors and little else. It was not at all unlikely that he was only one of several mixed up in this.

I was about a block away from his house when I heard the two, almost simultaneous short pops—like cars backfiring. I gassed the car a little more, rounded a couple of corners and pulled up in front of the mechanic's cottage.

There was another car parked there, identical with my own buggy, except that mine was light blue, and the other car was light green. I swung around in front of it, got out and headed up the path.

And I hadn't gone fifteen feet before I began to get that queer sensation up the back of my neck—that sixth sense, warning me that something was wrong. . . .

Nobody answered the bell, and that odd feeling was intensified. I turned the knob, discovered that the door was open. And I discovered, too, that those noises I'd heard so recently were gun shots. The smell of burned powder was terrific!

I stood just inside the hall, and as I started to move toward the light in the back of the house, I heard the scrape of a foot behind me. I tried to turn, but never quite made it. Something hard clouted me on the skull—something hard encased in something soft. I remembered that much anyway. Then the floor was swimming up to meet me. . . .

WHEN I came to, I was lying face down on the rug, and the smell of cordite had gone. Yet, I didn't feel that I'd been out long. I checked with my watch, and as near as I could make out, I'd been unconscious for about ten minutes.

I got up and went towards that light in the rear. It came from the kitchen, I discovered; and when I stepped over the kitchen threshold, I thought somebody had clouted me again.

There was a chair nearby, and I sagged into it. My legs gradually got rid of the water in them. I surveyed the mess.

Merkle was lying near the refrigerator, his forehead wearing the same kind of hole that I'd seen in Hawkins'. He'd been standing when he bumped into the slug, I figured, for there was a red spot on the wall above him. There was a gun in his hand—but it didn't indicate suicide.

He'd been using it on someone, or attempting to. And from what I saw, I gathered that Johnson was his target. The other mechanic lay there in the kitchen also, and he'd taken his dose just below the nose.

Gradually, the weakness wore off. I got up and looked the bodies over a little more carefully. Johnson had a .45 in his mitt, but Merkle had been plucked by a smaller caliber slug, I was sure. As for Johnson, it was obvious that Merkle had shot him.

But how would the police figure it? If they found me here, they could quite logically assume I'd done the double kill. They'd say that I had killed Hawkins first, and that the mechanics had been in on it with me. They'd also say that when I thought one of the ack emmas would sing, I'd decided to kill him, or them—as this instance could be made to prove—and then I'd tried to arrange it to look like they'd shot it out with each other. Neilson's report that he'd phoned me about suspecting them would support the police's mistaken contention.

I decided I wasn't going to wait around for the cops to show. I didn't know what I'd do, or where I'd go yet, but that wasn't important. The important thing was for suckers like Dave Wilcox to clear out.

Movement helped, I found. As I went to the front door, an idea hit me. Whoever had killed these boys—or whoever had been here while the boys were shooting it out—must be in on it with one of them; must be the brain behind the whole set-up so far. And it meant one thing: Myra was now in danger, too. The killer wasn't going to stop this little murder spree until every possible angle had been run down—and Myra was a big enough angle, because she and I were pretty chummy.

I got to the gate outside the house, hoping that the murderer wouldn't reach Myra's house before I did—and then I stopped dead in my tracks!

My car was gone!

It was surprising what a thing like that could do to me. Just a second or so ago, I'd felt that the world had come to an end for me. Now, I was positive that it had done the same thing for the killer. For whoever had mistaken my car for his had actually left me the key to the case!

I grabbed for the door handle of the strange car. The door opened, and I peered inside. There were keys in the dash, just as I had left the keys in mine.

My heart leaped into my throat when

I discovered a registration card tacked on the steering shaft.

The car was registered in the name of George Johnson!

It was a terrific kick in the head—a blow made all the more painful because my hopes had been raised so high a moment back. I stood, staring sightlessly at the fender of the light green car, aware dimly that I should run, that I should get away. Neilson might show up any minute, and he wouldn't go on believing my hazy stories for long.

I fished out a cigarette, lit it. And then, quite abruptly, it came to me—not quite the answer, maybe but enough of a clue to give me a lead.

I had thought, just a while back, that Myra was in danger . . . now I knew that I had to get to her house—fast!



AFTER about ten minutes' walking I spotted a cab and hailed it, gave Myra's address. I figured that taking Johnson's car would be the wrong move, for where it was, it was evidence, of a sort. I sat back in the cushioned seat of the cab, chain-smoking, waiting to hear wailing sirens as cops took after me.

But nothing happened, and the cabbie let me out in front of the boarding house where Myra lived.



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I went up the flight of stairs to the second floor, rapped on Myra's door. There was a short pause, while I heard movement inside. Then I saw the crack of light appear beneath the door, heard Myra's heels.

The door opened. She was wearing a negligée, and she looked up at me, white-faced, as equally nervous as she'd been in the hotel dining room.

I said, "May I?" and stepped inside.

"Dave!" she exclaimed. "Is it all over? Did you catch him?"

I didn't show any signs of answering right away. I went over to the window, looking for a place outside where someone could hide—or gain quick access to the apartment. There was nothing out there but a lot of ash cans, and laundry. I tried the closet next—and found nothing.

Myra was watching me intently, waiting for me to say something.

"I was so worried about you, darling," she said. "You were—"

"A fool," I finished sharply. "I walked right into another murder rap!"

"No! Dave—"

I smiled grimly. "Only this time I got a lead, Myra. A good one." I stuck my hand in my breast pocket, took out my handkerchief and hefted it. I said, "What color is the border on this handkerchief, Myra?"

It was a startling question, I'll admit—but it shouldn't have been that startling to her. She gazed at the bit of cloth, seemingly fascinated, then she began to cry.

"Dave," she sobbed. "Whatever is the matter with you—"

"Answer me," I insisted.

Then Myra looked up at me fully. She backed against the dresser, and we stood like that, our eyes locked. I could guess what was going on behind that beautiful face. The tears stopped abruptly.

"You can't tell, can you, Myra?" I said softly. "You don't know if this is a blue border or a green one—just as you

couldn't tell those cars apart tonight. You're blue-green color blind, Myra—and now I know who killed Merkle and Johnson and Hawk—"

"Yes!" she cried, and she was moving as she said it. Her hands held her huge white pocketbook suddenly, opening the catch to slip inside. While I'd ridden over here, the puzzle had been taking shape, and I knew what was fitted into that bag, along the metal framework.

"Don't move!" Myra instructed sharply, pointing the bag-gun at me. "I'm quite an expert with this gun, and one more life doesn't matter now."

I snorted, "What a complete fool I've been!"

SHE laughed contemptuously. "But a helpful fool, Dave. I picked up a lot of useful pointers from our delightful conversations. The number of bombers being sent across at certain times; but most important, the fact that Hawkins had a written communication from the United States Government."

"So you had Merkle and Johnson fix the motors of that ship just to be certain that, if you missed Hawkins with that ingenious gadget of yours, the message still wouldn't get to the other side."

"Not quite," she said. "Johnson was my man—Merkle was just a suspicious Canadian. When we heard about the ship's crash, we convinced Merkle that his suspicions of foul play in the matter of Hawkins would be to his disadvantage. We stalled him by telling him he'd be held as an accessory after the fact—inasmuch as he didn't speak up right away. Finally he recovered his backbone, becoming dangerous to me—"

"And just who are you?" I asked.

"Fraulein Goeltz," she supplied proudly. "German Intelligence."

"It wasn't intelligent to rush out and kill Merkle," I said. "You and Neilson were the only ones who knew where I

was going tonight. It was just a question of putting two and two together to find out who was the murderer!"

She stiffened at the word. "Please," she said sharply. "It was not murder. This is war, and a copy of the United States' belligerent attitude toward the Reich, bearing the actual signature of your president, would go a long way towards getting all of Germany behind Hitler. There are still those older Germans who believe this United States is a friend."

It was strange seeing that fanatical look in Myra's eyes. I'd heard there were those kinds of people, but I'd never met one, and that it should be a girl so beautiful as she, in love with a creed so bestial.

I started closer to her, unconsciously actually, and she jerked the gun up quickly. "Don't!" she commanded.

Again I shrugged, though I didn't feel any too easy. She could kill me, and no doubt tell a very convincing story of how I committed suicide, after I had confessed my dastardly deeds to her.

I said, "You didn't get that message—"

"For which I can thank you," she practically snarled. "There was a Nazi warship waiting for you to come down in the sea, and it would have been simple enough to remove it. Yet, if Hawkins had lived to come down in your faulty ship, he might have destroyed the message before it could be taken from him. So, his death was necessary. As is yours."

The handkerchief was still resting on my palm, and I bounced it up and down some more. "All of this killing for nothing. You still won't get the message!"

She laughed, as if I had committed some great error. "That message will go on the next flight—perhaps tonight, even. In any event, I intend to smuggle aboard the next plane out. Whoever happens to be on board will go to Germany with me—or die! Perhaps I shall die also, but that will be just punishment for my failure. . . ."

I didn't listen much beyond that, for it occurred to me that she had a pretty solid set-up. It was not at all improbable that she could smuggle aboard a plane leaving the field, for she enjoyed a good deal of freedom there—freedom my companionship had allowed her.

I felt that small, cold knot in the middle of my stomach again, then, for I had manipulated the handkerchief into the proper position. I hadn't pulled the trick since I was a kid—killing flies on the wall of my old man's barn—but I didn't mind taking the chance. My number was up, so a few minutes either way didn't really matter.

I was fairly close to Myra—about two arms' lengths—and I lunged, snapping that handkerchief like a whip.

I heard the muffled noise of the gun, at about the same time my handkerchief smacked solidly against Myra's nose.

The slug rammed into my shoulder, spinning me around, but Myra was off balance, too. I grabbed at her hips and the two of us went down together.

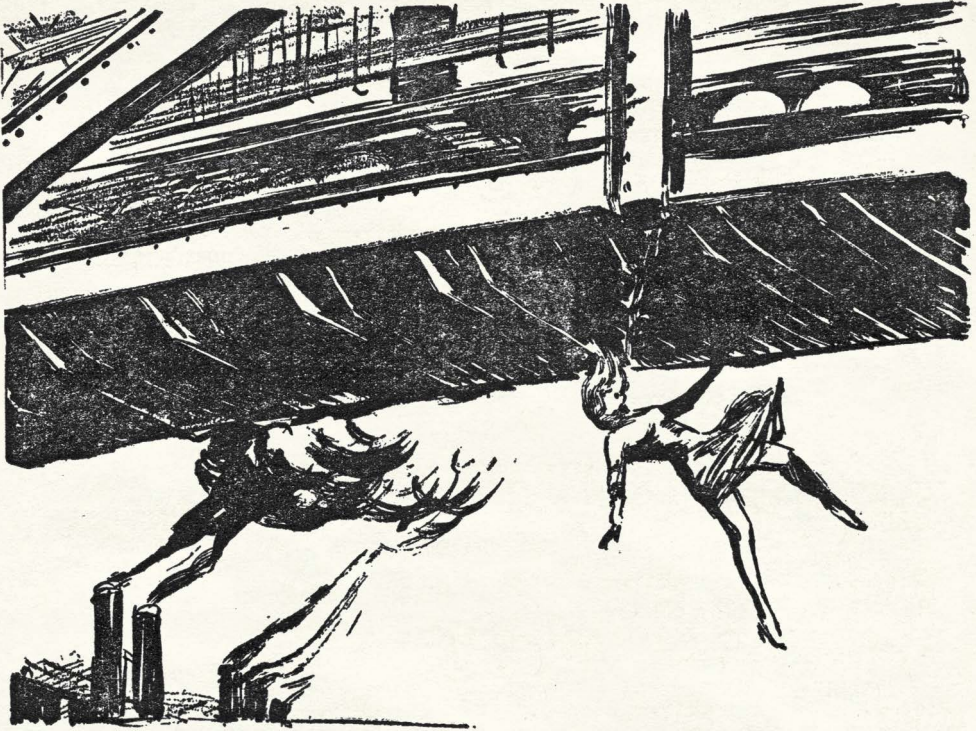
The soft sounds continued, but I didn't feel anything more. I just kept swinging the hand that had held the handkerchief until the fist on the end of it landed a solid haymaker right on the button.

I was still on one knee, looking at her inert form, when the door opened.

The landlady was standing there, and soon there was Neilson.

He said, "What the hell?" and came forward, muttering something about having just missed me at Merkle's.

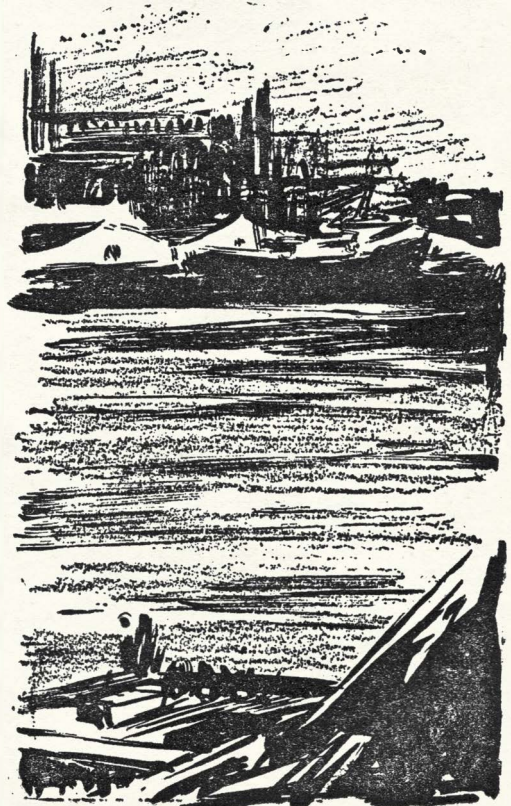
I didn't start talking back to him for at least another five minutes. I just knelt there, looking down at Myra; and I wondered if the Canadian government would let a wounded duck like me fly that next bomber for them. Myra had said something about a Nazi warship out there in the Atlantic. I had a message of my own I'd like to give them. . . .

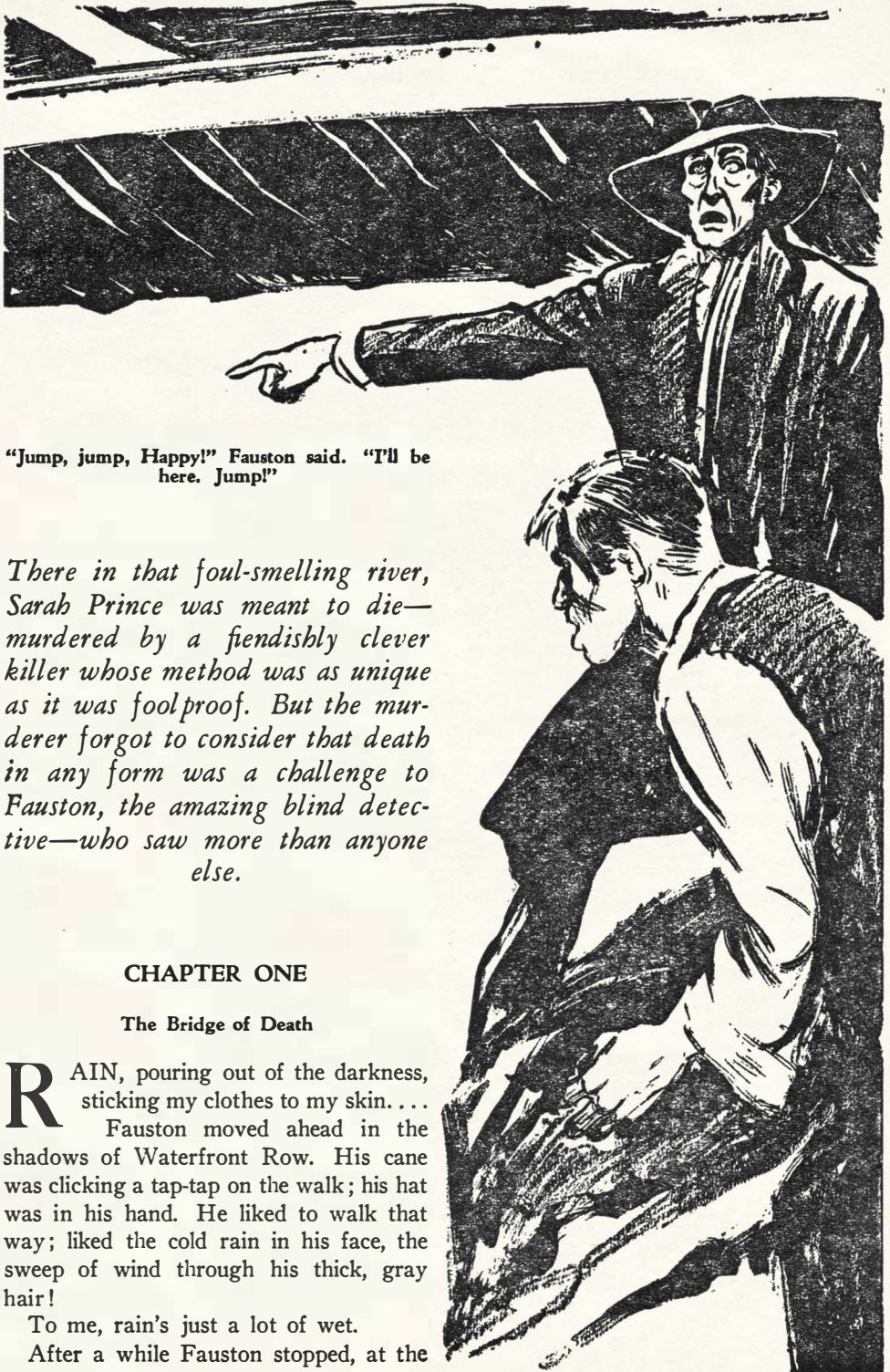


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"Jump, jump, Happy!" Fauston said. "I'll be here. Jump!"

There in that foul-smelling river, Sarah Prince was meant to die—murdered by a fiendishly clever killer whose method was as unique as it was foolproof. But the murderer forgot to consider that death in any form was a challenge to Fauston, the amazing blind detective—who saw more than anyone else.

CHAPTER ONE

The Bridge of Death

RAIN, pouring out of the darkness, sticking my clothes to my skin. . . . Fauston moved ahead in the shadows of Waterfront Row. His cane was clicking a tap-tap on the walk; his hat was in his hand. He liked to walk that way; liked the cold rain in his face, the sweep of wind through his thick, gray hair!

To me, rain's just a lot of wet. After a while Fauston stopped, at the

crossing where the freight tracks narrow in toward the yards. I walked on up beside him.

"How about going back now?" I said.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty. That's late. There's a taxi stand—"

"I have my memory," he said.

That's Fauston's way. He don't let me forget for a minute how much he remembers.

He's smart. Not the way plain people are, but sort of like an outlaw horse, or maybe a tiger that stalks game. I sometimes wonder if that knife didn't scrape his brain, that night nine years ago when Carmen Scantelli blacked him out forever.

Scantelli was the big-boy of those western kidnapers, and Fauston was chief inspector, then. He worked eighteen months following a will-o-the-wisp, and in the end, Scantelli and those Shane twins got their last ticket down the river. But that last night, something slipped. A forty-five got past the guards, and Scantelli came out to even the count. He got to Fauston's house, and slipped up to the bedroom.

I don't guess anybody knows the whole story. Fauston's never said a word. But when the cops got there, a pen knife from Fauston's desk was on the floor. What had been Scantelli was dead in one corner.

Fauston had killed him—unable to see him! Because Scantelli had blinded Fauston with that pen knife! The boys all guessed Fauston had been asleep when Scantelli came in, and Scantelli did a lot of damage. But he didn't figure that Fauston would get up off that bed. Yet, Fauston did, and somewhere in that room, he got his hands on Scantelli.

From that night, Fauston lived in blindness. But whatever feeling he'd had in his eyes didn't die. It just sort of turned and grew back into his head, sharper than ever, more accurate.

There's hate in his head, too. Hate boiling down against his brain. That knife touched something, I tell you. I know it. And that's what makes me scared.

I've been trying to leave him. For nine years, I've been planning everyday. But then that humming starts again between my ears, and that slow, red fog clogs my eyes; and it's just like I was back in the Garden and it was the ninth round again. Tank Elders is throwing the right that slammed by head on concrete rail outside the ring.

When that feeling comes back, I know there's no use in running. Wherever I go they'll call me Slappy, or Punchy, or Dope. And trouble will always be there. Like the time when I thought the old salesman was Tank Elders again, and I knocked him down the stairs. They had me in jail, fixing to send me to a sanitarium. I wasn't ever going to get out.

It was about then that Fauston was looking for somebody to help him around. He heard what they were going to do with me. He said he'd take me. That was nine years ago, just after he lost his sight.

He's thought me a lot, sure. When that humming's not in my head, I see a lot of things clear. But I can't help being scared of him. Then the humming and the thick fog comes again, and I know there's no place else to go.

That's the way we are. He's blind and smart in that scarey way; and I'm the guy they call Happy, scared of him, but living with him; walking with him, like to-night, through the wind and rain.

"We shall walk on," he said after a while.



I DROPPED behind. He always walks alone, talking to himself. At last he turned up across the bridge that spans the South Fork of the Condiac.

All of a sudden then, his cane stopped. I went close, and his hard fingers gripped my arm. I knew he was listening to something.

"We're near the trestle?" His voice was a whisper.

"Yeah. Right across." Over to the right, the triple tracks from the freight yard spanned a high skeleton of steel. A stench rose from the water below, and now and then a sick yellow light shone from a warehouse down near the river.

"A girl is moaning," Fauston said at last.

I listened. "I don't hear anything."

"I do, Happy," he said softly. Then out of the distance came the wail of the train. A rumble grew like thunder. The rails began to sing. Fauston turned to me.

"A girl is on those tracks," he said.

"She better be getting off. That train's coming—"

"Can you beat it?" he shot at me suddenly.

I glanced back to the trestle approach—a hundred yards maybe; then about two hundred yards down the trestle, over the wet ties. One slip would drop you into that skummy water. The train roared up around the far curve.

"I can't make it now," I said.

Fauston shrugged. "Look at the tracks. What do you see?"

As the engine straightened, those rails shone like ice, black and hard. The trestle was empty.

"There's not a thing out there."

Fauston's face remained blank. The train rushed on. The light burned brighter. Sparks showered out of the box. The trestle thundered, and the engine roared past, leaving the darkness and rattle of the box-cars. Then . . .

In the shadows, a thin body hung just a second before it dropped into that stinking river. I saw a girl's white face; the waves of her loose hair. Her body sank quickly.

"God!" I stared, waiting for that oily water to break; for her arms to pull toward the shore.

"God!" I said again. "A girl! The train got her!"

"Jump! Jump, Happy!" Fauston's voice was brittle.

I peeled off my coat and hat, got rid of my shoes. As I swung up on the railing, that humming started, down there between my ears.

"Jump, jump, Happy! I'll be here! Jump!"

Fauston shoved me out into space. Down I went, smashing into the thick water. I fanned out, hunting. At last I came up, looked around. The river was just like a flat plain. The girl was still under.

I went down again. The humming kept getting louder in my head. I had to quit. Hell, there wasn't any use! The train had got her. I'd seen her fall. . . .

Then something brushed my head. I reached out and got a thin waist. I had her. At last I pulled in to the bank. Fauston was waiting, following me with his ears.

"Here," came his swift whisper. "Put her here, Happy."

I dragged her up into the mud.

Fauston knelt down. His thin fingers ran over her face, tracing every line and feature. Once I saw a movie of some guy who played the piano real good. That's the way with Fauston when he's learning a face. He touches it, plays on every line; and it could be one year or ten, and he'd still remember.

HIS fingers moved to her pulse.

"Still alive," he said softly.

Then his voice got hard. "Get up! Up, Happy!"

Suddenly that tangle caught in my head. I started to yell. My fists clenched.

Fauston said, "I wouldn't, Happy. Remember Scantelli."

My fingers turned weak and empty. That's the way it goes, somehow—the humming mixes me up.

“What is it, Happy? Your head again?” Now Fauston's words were low and soft.

“The humming,” I whispered.

His fingers found that tender place behind my ears, began to press. Some of the noise went away. At last his fingers stopped pressing; his hand touched my arm.

“I don't always remember, Happy,” he said slowly. “I forget the humming, and sometimes—sometimes others forget certain things about me. But we are not angry. No, Happy. Never you and me.” Then his hand left my arm; his voice turned hard again. “I shall find a taxi, alone. You go up on that trestle. You will find foot-prints leading out on the ties. You need not search for the girl's. I'm pretty sure that she was carried out there.”

“But I looked. There wasn't nobody else.”

“Look closely, there where you saw her fall. You'll find mud.”

“Okay,” I sighed, “but I don't see why.”

Fauston sort of smiled to himself. “You saw no one on the tracks, therefore no one was there. This girl was *beneath* the ties.”

“How did she—”

“She was cradled by rope or by wire swung over the rails. The train-wheels cut her loose. Then you saw her drop.”

I blinked. “Why didn't she swim, if the train didn't hit her?”

“Because she's half dead with dope! Have you no nostrils? Can't you catch a pulse? She was meant to die. And those wise men who call themselves the police would have pronounced it suicide.” He gathered the girl in his arms.

“When you learn what you can, come home,” he said.

I watched him go up the steep, slick bank; yet his steps were sure as a deer's. I shook my head, climbed toward the trestle approach. I reached the place where the ties leave the ground and span out across the spider-work of steel. I struck a match. And there *were* foot-prints!

Two men had gone out on the trestle. Carefully I followed, seeing the dark water below. When I reached the center, I struck another match. There, the foot-prints were messed up—the men had stopped and worked. And there was a wire still hanging to one rail, dangling down.

I saw it now, like Fauston saw it, blind as he is. The river would have carried the girl away; that dope would not have been noticed when they found her.

I followed the foot-prints back toward the bank again. They didn't turn toward the road. Instead they went straight ahead, and finally entered a wide, dark alley that twisted between warehouses and back-sidings. Gordon's Alley, they called it. I lost the prints there.

I turned back toward the taxi stand. But now something was racing my heart—like it used to race during a fight, when the crowds were yelling.

It's watching Fauston work. He don't advertise as a private investigator. He never operates with the cops. Since that night when some dumb dick let Scantelli slip out to reach him, he's hated the word “police.”

But sometimes, he decides to go after something. When he does, he usually breaks it apart. He does it his own way—that hard, black way he thinks; the crazy hate that's in him boils till he's through.

He don't give a fig about law! He's got his own. And when he gets through, he makes it end the way *he* wants. No judge ever passes a sentence; no cop ever knows.

Maybe that's why I can't leave him. It's like watching a swaying snake, watching Fauston work.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder's Playwright

FAUSTON slipped out the bolt when I knocked.

"You were right! I found—"

"The doctor's here, you fool," he whispered. "Go to your room. I'll call you."

I got the slant. He wasn't letting any information out. . . .

I was dressed in clean clothes when Fauston opened my door.

"The doctor's gone now," he said, leading the way back to his bedroom. In the dark river-bottom, I hadn't seen much of the girl. Now I could.

Her hair was turning back to a kind of gold-brown. As it dried, loose waves were forming. Her eyes were closed, her lashes curved on her cheeks.

"Stop gaping, Happy," Fauston snapped.

"She—she's pretty," I said.

"Do you recognize her?"

"No." I shook my head. "I never saw her."

He sighed as he moved nearer the bed. She stirred; her lips moved.

"Don't—don't kill me! Don't kill me, mother. . . ."

Fauston's fingers found hers, turned them slowly, touching the tips, the palms of her hands.

"Not working hands," he said finally. "How old is she?"

"Twenty-one," I guessed.

"A college student, perhaps," Fauston muttered.

I followed him into the study and sat down. I went through the girl's stuff. Nothing was there—no tags, no marks. All I got was a lip-stick holder out of a zipper pocket. Inside was a rolled-up slip of paper.

I read Fauston the words: "Why should I live any longer?"

"So? We have found the suicide note," he said slowly.

"You mean, she did it herself?"

"Doubtful, Happy." He tilted his head to the side. "She spoke of her mother, remember? She said, 'Don't kill me. Don't kill me, mother.'" He waited a moment. "That's an odd suggestion for a daughter to make to her mother, don't you think?"

I said, "Aw, she was just raving around! People say lots of things when they're like that."

"On the other hand, people may speak a subconscious truth." He touched the tips of his fingers together. "It is quite possible that a last half-lucid image prompts her words. It is that moment wherein her mother tried to kill her." He nodded to himself. "That could be."

"But why?" I asked. "And who is her mother?"

"Why, and who?" he mused softly. "Sound questions, Happy. Why, and who?" Then he leaned forward. "Get the case-book."

I unlocked the filing cabinet and took out the big loose-leaf ledger Fauston calls the case-book. Almost every crime of the last nine years is written up in it—notes, facts, ideas that he's told me to write down. I took it back into the study.

Fauston held out two fingers. I gave him a cigarette and lit it, then he leaned back.

"I seem to recall another case, Happy, years ago. A girl was swung beneath the tracks of a bridge. A train cut her loose and dropped her to her death. But—" He waited a long time. "But I don't remember where it happened," he said finally. "The first one I ever forgot."

I looked to see if he was kidding, but he was dead serious.

"Read page 94," he said at last. After two lines, he stopped me.

"Page 162." Again I started. Again

he stopped me. We tried page after page, and were wrong every time.

Finally he sat erect. "Curse you! You have eyes, made for seeing. Still you know nothing! If I had eyes, I'd know that girl. I'd find that case."

I yelled right back. "There's lots of people I never saw! Lots you never saw. I never heard of a case about a bridge." Then it slipped past before I could catch it: "Why don't you get the police? They'd clean it up?"

For the moment his body became hard as steel; his breath whistled past his teeth. His lips twitched once, and his voice began to tremble.

"Ah, yes," he whispered, like a cold wind across a grave. "Ah, yes." Then his fingers crushed my wrist, twisting me up before him.

"It is best not to joke, Happy?"

I swallowed. "Yeah," I managed. "Yeah, sure."

His fingers loosened. He sank down, lifting two fingers. My hand shook as I lit the cigarette—and the first little humming came again in my ears, like it always came when things happen too quick for me.

"The door is locked? The windows barred?" Fauston shot the questions like bullets.

I told him yes. Not since nine years ago has Fauston slept in an unlocked room.

"Then bring me my coffee, and you may go to bed."

I went in the kitchen and put the pot on the stove. Always after something sets him crazy, Fauston wants his coffee. When I brought it back, he touched my hand.

"I did not bring the pain again, did I, Happy?"

I swallowed. No, it's not hurting now."

"Good." He sighed. "I speak too fast. I regret too late." He patted my arm. "Now go to bed. When this little job

is over, we shall have time for talking again. I shall tell you the stories."

"Stories. . . ." That made me happy. Sometimes when he's not mad, he tells me about my fights that I can't exactly remember; about how I scored eight knockouts in a row. When he tells me them, nothing else matters. Things get warm and sure again.

After I crawled in bed, I kept thinking about the girl. After a while, I heard something. I pushed down the covers and listened. It was a voice in Fauston's room. It was Fauston, talking slow and clear:

"Mary. This is mother, Mary," he was saying. "Ann. This is mother, Ann. . . . Jean. This is mother, Jean. . . ."

His voice sounded like one of those mechanical parrots that had got stuck on the same note, saying name after name.

Finally I went on to sleep, still hearing that voice through the wall.



IT WAS gray at the window when he woke me.

"Get up," Fauston whispered. "Come in here."

I put on my slippers and followed him into his room.

"Watch her face," he instructed. Then he knelt down. He took her wrist, fitting his fingers to her pulse. Then he spoke:

"Sarah. This is mother, Sarah."

The girl's head moved. "Mother! Oh, mother—don't—"

She was really scared. Her eyebrows drew together. "Mother," she begged again.

Fauston twisted toward me. "Her pulse, her breathing responded. Her name is Sarah. And her other name begins with P. I get a reaction there. Something like Prance or Pierce." He turned back to her, saying to me, over his shoulder, "Make me some coffee."

His voice went on, soft and slow:

"Miss Payne. Hello, Miss Payne. . . . Miss Pence. Hello, Miss Pence. . . . Miss Prince. Hello, Miss Prince."

Then there was a scuffle of feet. The kitchen door flew open, and Fauston came in. His gray, thick hair was tangled on his head, his lips were twisted in a smile.

"Her name is Sarah Prince!"

"Yeah?" I said. "Maybe it's not." I don't see how he could be so sure.

"Her name is Sarah Prince," he repeated. He sat down at the side table

"You guess! You've forget!" he snorted. "The girl's mother was mentioned. She was Alma Bently, an actress. Quite famous in her younger days. She was divorced from Prince. He was granted the children. One never hears of her, these days. Or does one?" he questioned softly.

He twisted suddenly, "Happy, do you know that Alma Bently's old house is on Claybourne Street. And the houses of Claybourne back against Gordon's Alley!"

If you are enjoying the adventures of the fabulous Fauston in this story, you'll be sure to thrill to the *Spider*, Master of Men, in his latest novel-length crime crusade, SATAN'S SEVEN SWORDSMEN. You'll find it in the October issue of the *Spider Magazine*, now on sale.

and fitted his long fingers together. After a few moments, he tilted his head toward me.

"You've never heard that name, Happy?"

"Naw, I never heard it."

He sighed. "For nine years I have tried to teach you, and yet such a simple thing as a name—" He jerked forward. "Last Monday you read me *The Morning Telegram*."

"I always read you *The Morning Telegram*."

"There was a death item regarding a Wilbur Prince—died of heart trouble in Arizona. Remember, Happy? Wilbur Prince died, leaving two daughters. One was named Loraine. And the other—" he tapped the table—"the other was named Sarah. Sarah Prince."

I tried to remember, but I couldn't. When you read three papers a day for nine years, things don't stick out. Not unless you've got a memory like Fauston's.

"I guess I read something, but I forget."

I stared, trying to see it clear. "You mean—you're saying—"

"Shut up!" His words were very far away.

"That case we were looking for, Happy. I remember now. It was not a case. It was a play—murder-psychology—called *Suicide Bridge*. I saw it in New York many years ago.

"A mother murdered her own daughter. In her youth, the mother had been quite beautiful. With age, she grew ugly; her daughter became more beautiful. The mother's vanity was tortured. She resolved to kill her daughter, destroying the beauty which tortured her. She drugged the girl. With the aid of a servant, she carried the girl out on a bridge and cradled her beneath the tracks, just like Sarah. The train came through, and the wires were cut. The girl was dropped on rocks far below. The mother's vanity was restored."

I stared at Fauston's face, all flushed and red.

"Nuts," I said. "I don't believe no mother would—"

"Alma Bently would remember that play, being an actress," he continued, ignoring me. "She's growing old, now—her beauty is fading. Her child is lovely. Maybe that would drive her a little mad." He smiled at me. "You see, Happy, you and I—we should understand the madness that comes of lost things. Yes, she would have sat alone and planned."

Suddenly he laughed, high and shrill. "Yes, Alma Bently could have done it—growing old; remembering her lost beauty." Then he laughed again.

I said, "You're just saying things. You can't prove none of what you're saying now."

"Proof? Just saying." He tilted his head around. "When did I need proof, Happy? When did I 'just say?' No—" He moved his head from side to side—"whatever I do, Happy, I make only one rule: Always I must satisfy myself. When I do that, all questions are answered well."

He leaned back, asking for a cigarette. After I lit it, he motioned for a cup of coffee. When I came back, he was still smoking, hunched down deep in the chair. I set the cup down beside him, waited in the other chair for a long time before he moved.

Finally he turned his head toward me, and spoke so low I could hardly hear:

"It is not good for me to understand this madness such as Alma's. Too much, perhaps, we are the same. She and I. Perhaps we both think when we are alone. We remember those things we have lost. We are not quite sane."

He lifted the cup and drank the hot coffee down in one gulp. Then once more he leaned back.

"When I am quiet again, there are things we must do, Happy. First we must know more of this Alma Bently. Then—" he paused—"then, if all is as I believe it will be, I shall become a playwright for a day." He smiled at me. "You don't

understand at all, do you, Happy?"

I shook my head. "I don't know anything about playwrighting."

"I shall rewrite a last act for an ugly leading lady. I shall rewrite *Suicide Bridge*. For if I am right, it is time for Alma's last act." He sighed. "First though, I must rest. Like the pain in your head, Happy, sometimes I have a pain too—the hurt that comes of seeing one's self too well; of knowing where one is going, that day when a thin thread breaks."

Then he closed his arms on his chest and went to sleep for a while. All the time I just sat there, wondering what he meant about the last act, and all that. I wished I knew what he was going to do. But when I tried to think, I just got all tangled up.

CHAPTER THREE

"The Lady Is Dead!"

WE SHALL visit Carlo Pundit," Fauston said after breakfast.

"Carlo Pundit?"

"A retired theatrical producer. I must know more of my leading lady. Perhaps Carlo can tell me. Yes," he repeated, "I must know just how mad Alma Bently is. . . . Get the car!"

Carlo Pundit's place was all covered with pictures of actors and actresses, most of them in their costumes. Pundit was still eating breakfast when we got there.

"I want information, off the record," Fauston began.

Off whose record?" Pundit asked.

"Alma Bently. Remember her?"

"Everyone in show business remembers Alma."

"I understand she retired about five years ago."

"Why, yes, she . . . retired." There was just a little stop in Pundit's words, but it

was enough for Fauston. His lips tightened.

"Why the hesitation, Carlo? You make me believe that she did not, as you say, 'retire.'"

"Well, the fact is, it wasn't exactly retirement."

"No?"

"Alma was hurt," Pundit explained. "She fell during a rehearsal five years ago—shattered some bones in her spine. It left her paralyzed in the lower part of her body. That's why she, as we say, 'retired.' The accident was never publicized."

"She's paralyzed!" Fauston fairly shouted. His face turned white. I saw things clearer then. If this Alma Bently was paralyzed, she couldn't be moving around to try to murder anybody—and that put Fauston's idea up a creek, I guess.

"Are you certain?" he asked. "Are you positive?"

"I know, man! I was there when she fell. And Ed Cowan, the doctor who attended her, is a good friend of mine. He said she'd never move her legs again."

Fauston just stood there. At last he shrugged. "Then perhaps you can tell me some other things: what did she think of those two girls of hers?"

"What did she think of them?" Pundit repeated.

"I mean, did she care about them? Did she love them?"

"Why, sure!" Pundit said. "We always figured Alma got a raw break on the kids. I guess you know the story?"

Fauston shook his head.

"Well," Pundit said, "she married this Wilbur Prince when she was young and just getting started. He was older than she, had plenty of dough. They had two girls. I'd say they're around twenty-one or so, now.

"Anyway, after Alma began to click, Prince got jealous of her success. Finally

he trumped up a lot of charges alleging she wasn't a fit mother, and got custody of the girls in the divorce suit. I don't think he really wanted them. He just wanted to hurt Alma. And it did. From the day that case closed, she started to fade."

"Then she loved them," Fauston said slowly. "I don't believe it! I have reason to think she hated those children."

"Then you're drunk," Carlo snapped. "I know different. I remember when Ed Cowan told her she'd never walk again. There were just the four of us—"

"What four?"

"Ed and Alma and Lowe Marley and me. Marley was Alma's manager and advisor. When Cowan told her, she just looked at the ceiling a little while, then she turned and smiled. And it was a real smile—sort of a long-awaited-for smile. And she said, 'Perhaps I should be sad, but I'm not. Really I'm not. I've lost my husband. I've lost my children. But I'm going to start again. I'm going out where they are. I'm going to know them, all over, and make them love me. I never had time before.'"

"But she never went?" Fauston said.

Pundit shook his head. "Something must have happened that none of us ever knew. She returned to her old house, and never went out again. For two or three years, I used to go around about once a week. I never got inside that front door."

"Doesn't anyone ever see her?"

"Only Marley and a maid. Marley still handles her money. He goes in and out; the rest of us hear of her through him. That's all."

"I wonder why?" Fauston asked.

Pundit shrugged. "I've wondered too. Finally I decided there must have been some trouble between Alma and Prince when he learned she was coming out there where the girls were. Maybe he told her the girls didn't want her—that would have broken her heart. Marley says she's sick

most of the time—nothing in particular, just sick at heart.”

“But she loved the girls?” Fauston said. He couldn’t seem to swallow that.

“I’d bet my bottom dollar on it,” Carlo told him.

Fauston sighed. “Well, that nails that.” He turned toward the door, then stopped. “Do you remember about twelve years back? *Suicide Bridge?*”

“*Suicide Bridge?*” Carlo thought, then nodded. “Eddie Bernan’s production at The Crystal Palace in 1930. It didn’t last long.”

“Did Alma Bently see that play?”

“I don’t know. I guess she—” He stopped; his eyes got narrow. “No,” he said. “That was 1930. In ’30 and ’31, Alma was touring Europe. She never saw that play. It folded before she got back. Why?”

“Nothing.” Fauston let out a long sigh. “It means nothing now.”

I followed him out to the car and closed the doors. For a while he just sat there without moving, his lips drawn tight, his hands locked together.

“Drive home,” he ordered at last, his voice cold and dead.

“Someone shall pay,” he whispered over and over, almost to himself. “No one makes a fool of Fauston.”



BACK in the apartment, he threw himself into a chair and asked for a cigarette. I settled down to see what he was going to do. He kept sinking down deeper into the chair; the lines got darker and heavier in his face. He smoked cigarette after cigarette.

An hour passed before he shoved himself up.

“I’ve made an error,” he said, walking up and down the room. “The girl’s name can’t be Sarah Prince. Sarah Prince’s mother is paralyzed; also, she loves her

daughters, according to Carlo. But the rest of my theory is sound. That girl remembers a moment when her mother tried to kill her; that memory burns through the shell of her coma. It’s too vivid, too constant for illusion. There I am correct.

“And where—” he turned to me—“where will you find such a murder plan but from the play, *Suicide Bridge?* It’s too unique. There must be a relationship somewhere. Whoever tried to murder this girl was once on very close terms with that play—so close they were deeply influenced; convinced of its practicality as a means of murder!”

He sank down in his chair again and cupped his head in his hands.

“You may go to your room, Happy. Turn on the records as you go.”

I got up and stopped by the radio-victrola. Whenever Fauston got like he was right now, he always wanted those records playing. Some kind of a symphony, he said. He told me once that it was written by a blind man in Germany, a long time ago. He seemed crazy, that time he told me; he kept on talking about what the music tried to say, and how he could understand it because he was blind, and the guy that wrote it was blind too.

I went to my room and plunked down on the bed. After a while I got to thinking maybe I was back at Ted’s, training for a big bout in the Garden. Then I was in the fight and had Tank Elders groggy when Fauston woke me up.

“Listen to this!” He snatched a cigarette from my pack and walked up and down the room. “Listen! Alma Bently is dead!”

“Dead—”

“Don’t interrupt. Alma Bently broke her spine and was through. She decided to go West. Now, what would that mean to her manager, Lowe Marley? The loss of his big gravy train. So he kills her and disposes of the body. Don’t you remember: *Only Marley and a maid see her*

now. The maid is in on the game. Marley lets it be thought Alma is still alive; meanwhile he milks her fortune, pretending to be handling it for her."

His cheeks were blazing with excitement. "Get the case-book."

I got the book and came back.

"Start about page 200."

I turned and began to read. Fauston waited.

"Read that again," he said all of a sudden. It was something he'd told me to write down about five years ago.

Found, June 16, 1936, under pier of Warburton Co. on South Fork near Condiac outlet: Decomposed body of woman, age between forty-five and fifty. Dead three to five days. Body badly damaged. No means of identification. No missing person report. Also found: blood on South Fork freight trestle; analysis showed it to be that of recovered woman above. Verdict: death due to train, accidental. No identification at time of pauper burial.

"Stop there! There was Alma Bently! Look at that last note again. No identification!"

He started to walk the floor again. "Five years ago Alma Bently stopped seeing people. Five years ago an unidentified body of a woman was found. And where was she killed? On that same trestle where we found Sarah! I understand it all now. Alma Bently never saw *Suicide Bridge*, but Lowe Marley did. And he borrowed the method to murder Alma—"

"But it says the train hit this other woman," I reminded. "It says they found blood on the track."

Fauston whispered, "That train never hit Alma. Marley planted the blood to establish the accident theory. Alma Bently's body was swinging by wire when a train cut her loose—just as Sarah was swinging. Marley is the murderer."

I tried to get it straight, what he was saying. "But, listen. "You've been saying all along that her mother was the one. Now you—"

"Happy, when her father died, Sarah came to visit her mother. Marley got someone to pose as Alma until the daughter was inside the house and securely trapped for the kill. And that's what Sarah keeps remembering so horribly—that last lucid moment when someone tried to kill her. Someone was *disguised* as her mother. Now, do you see, Happy?"

I blinked. "It's screwy. Nobody's going to think it's that way."

"I'm not interested in what people think." He paused. "Let's pay a visit, now, to Alma Bently! You'll be my driver, and I'll be David Carelton, a distant cousin in the Prince family."

"But you just said Alma was dead. Now you want to go see her!"

Fauston smiled slowly in my direction. "That's exactly what I said. You're learning to remember, Happy." His smile faded. "Go to my room. Bring me a fresh shirt—one of those with a stiff set of cuffs. And Happy—*do not touch those cuffs*. Do you understand."

"Yeah, sure, I heard you."

I got the shirt and came back. Fauston already had the other one off. He slipped into the clean one, buttoned it, careful not to touch those clean, stiff cuffs. Then he jammed on his hat and opened the door.

"Let's go, Happy. I am curious to learn what happens when one calls on a lady who is dead."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Blind Who See

NOBODY answered my knock on Alma Bently's door.

"Knock again," Fauston ordered. After a long wait, soft steps came down the hall inside. The door was opened by a hunched, flat-faced woman.

"We came to see Miss Bently," I said.

"Miss Bently never sees anybody," she answered.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Fauston moved in. "I've come here from Phoenix. There was a little business I had to discuss with her."

"Business?" the woman said.

"Well, hardly business, either." Fauston smiled. "You see, I'm David Carelton, Wilbur Prince's cousin. I've had the duty of clearing up his estate, and—well, I believe there's something coming to Alma."

"You mean money?" For just a second, her gray face changed in different ways—first like she was afraid; then like she thought he was lying; and last, like she had to find out something.

"Maybe Miss Bently can see you."

"We'll wait," Fauston agreed. The padding feet shuffled off again. A door slammed, deep inside the house.

"Miss Bently can see you for a little while," the woman said when she came back. We followed her back down a dark hall. She opened a door and nodded. We went into a high, shadowy room. The furniture was dark and heavy; and the smell of medicine took your breath away.

On the bed, under a whole mountain of cover, was a thin, gray-haired woman. Her face was lined, and powder made it look like those maps that show hills and rivers. Her bony arms were outside the cover. Her eyes were almost closed.

"Come in," she said weakly. "Mamie tells me you're Wilbur's cousin."

"Yes. From the California branch of the family."

"I don't remember." Her head rolled slowly. "Old and sick, now. I don't remember as I used to."

Just then the front door creaked. A heavy voice boomed. The maid's feet beat double-time down the hall. There were whispers at the front, then heavy steps coming back our way. The door opened on a big, round-bodied man with black hair and small, deep black eyes. He

stopped when he saw us; he frowned.

"Come in, Lowe," the woman said. "Lowe, this gentleman is Wilbur's cousin from California. Mr. Carelton. . . . Mr. Marley, my friend and manager in the old days."

Fauston held out his hand. I watched Marley's face when he saw those sockets in Fauston's head. A sigh filled his chest, and he smiled, almost to himself. I guess he figured a blind man couldn't count.

"Glad to see you, Carelton. Staying in town long?"

"No, I'll leave tomorrow. I wanted to come by. As I was about to tell Alma, I have to clear up Wilbur's estate. There's something for her, you know."

"How much?" The question exploded at the bed, jerking everybody around—everybody but Fauston, that is. His face didn't change. Marley froze, and a mist of sweat showed on his cheeks. He swallowed.

"But, Alma, dear!" he said. "Just what would you do with more money?" It was supposed to be a joke; he winked at us. Then he said to Fauston, "A woman and her money—"

"Make a man rich," Fauston finished for him. His voice was smooth as satin. "Well, I'll be going now. I have an appointment at the bank this afternoon. If you'll let me drop back later, I can give you the final information."

"Why, yes, I believe I'll feel well enough." She looked at Marley. "You'll come too, won't you?"

"Of course," he nodded. "But you don't need me, really."

"All agreed?" Fauston said. He moved from the middle of the room to the bed. "I'm very glad I was able to see you, Alma," he said gently. He reached down and took her hand, patting it softly. "I'll see you again this afternoon."

We went back down the hall, Marley guiding Fauston all the way, the way people do an ordinary blind man.

"Of course," he was saying, "she's not the old Alma, now. She's broken terribly in the past few years. No one knows. That is, not one but myself. I was her manager in the old days. I still do my best for her, keeping her comfortable, dropping in every day."

Fauston nodded. The front door opened. "I'll see you this afternoon then, Marley?"

"I'll be here, if I can."

And something gave me a hunch he would, because money was the subject.



FROM Alma Bently's, it was a five minute drive to Carlo Pundit's. Fauston plowed right past the maid and started shouting in the hall. Pretty soon, Pundit showed up, looking mad.

"Good Lord!" he yelled. "You'd think I'd get a little peace—"

"I want something," Fauston interrupted. "Have you got any of Alma Bently's old letters—an old contract, anything—"

"I might have." Pundit frowned. "But I want to keep it."

"Get it," Fauston ordered. "I'll bring it back. Hurry!"

Carlo opened a cabinet and thumbed through a stack of dusty papers. "Now, listen," he said when he took out a sheet, "this is a contract Alma signed with me a long time ago. Don't let it get lost or torn."

"I know, I know." Fauston snatched it and turned toward the door. I trailed him out to the car.

"Home, Happy," he ordered.

So home we went; upstairs to his study.

"Bring in your kit and glasses," he told me.

By the time I got back with the glasses and solution, he had his clean shirt off. That fresh, stiff cuff was spread across the table, waiting for me.

"Get the prints off that first," he ordered.

"Off your own shirt?"

"The finger prints of the fake Alma Bently, you fool! Why did you think I wore a clean shirt to a rat nest? Why do you think I held her filthy hand, if I wasn't getting her prints. Get them off that shirt cuff!"

He shoved the contract at me when I finished with the shirt. I worked it over, getting four different sets.

"Compare them, Happy. Compare each set on the contract with that set on my shirt. None will match. Those prints on my shirt are not Alma Bently's. That woman in that bed is not Alma! She's Marley's dummy for this game. See if I'm not right."

I tried to match the prints. The first ones wouldn't work. The second wouldn't work. The third—I looked again, careful. . . .

I looked at Fauston, scared to tell him. I took a deep breath.

"They match," I said.

"What?" he shouted. "No, you're wrong, Happy! Look again."

I looked again. "They still match," I said.

For a long time Fauston just sat there, without moving.

I tried to move, but the chair creaked. I began to get scared. I don't know why—just seeing Fauston, all turned to steel like that, maybe; knowing how hot the mad hate was boiling in his head. Then everything in the room seemed to melt together in my eyes, and slowly it all turned into the same old red haze. Something twitched in my ears; the little humming started. I knew it was coming back. Pretty soon it would be pounding, and beating like a big wave.

I grabbed the chair. I tried to cough. It caught in my throat, and I choked. Then I had to cry. I tried to do it soft, so he wouldn't hear. But his head swung

around, and for just a second, those blank sockets were fixed on me—burning me, cutting me.

Then Fauston relaxed, suddenly. "Is it the pain, Happy?" he asked very softly.

"It hurts," I said. "I'm scared. I don't know—don't know—just scared."

"And I've frightened you. You think I'm angry, don't you, Happy?" He sighed and smiled.

"You do not understand, and I don't think I can tell you. It is not that I am angry with you, Happy? I'm angry with myself—hate my own limitations, the futility of endless darkness. These things make me what I am. They make you fear me when really you should pity me. Yet—" He tapped my knee—"you are a wiser man than you know, Happy. You have chosen to fear me and not pity me, which is best. If you pitied me, I believe I'd kill you."

He spread his hands and smiled. "But you don't understand." He waited a moment. "Would you like to play your radio, Happy?"

"Can I get just plain music?" When he's awful sorry for hurting me, he lets me play my radio, even though he hates them—says they drive him crazy.

"Go ahead. Turn it low."

I went into my room, walking careful through the red fog so I wouldn't hit anything and maybe make him mad all over again. I closed my door and turned the little dial of the radio. Pretty soon, I was hearing the music, thinking how maybe in a year or so I'd be fighting again. If only the humming would go away. . . .

AFTER a while the music ended. An announcer came on with the news. I was thinking about fighting, and I didn't get up to cut him off. It wasn't till the door from the study opened without a sound and Fauston stepped in that I really woke up. I started to turn it off, thinking maybe it was too loud.

But he grabbed my hand and held it like a vise. He was listening to what the newsman was saying:

" . . . the decomposed body was recovered this morning from beneath pier 4 of the Cobb Warehouse and Export Co. Authorities express the belief she has been dead about four days. Thus far efforts at identification have been futile. The assumption of suicide is further strengthened by a note, found in the girl's coat pocket.

Police request that anyone having knowledge of a missing girl; age nineteen to twenty-one; blonde; last seen about four days ago, please communicate with them immediately."

That was the end of the news. Fauston shook his head.

"And you would never have heard it," he said slowly. "They were shouting it in your ears, and still you didn't hear it. Oh, Lord—" He stopped.

"I am sorry," he said. "You were dreaming the fight again. I know, Happy."

Then he wheeled into the other room and grabbed that clean shirt off the table; he tore the finger-printed cuff loose from the rest and came back.

"Here, Happy. Take this. Handle it carefully, now. Take it down to that trestle. Take your glass. Compare this print on the cuff with any prints you can find around the place where Sarah was swung. Do you understand?"

"Sure, I know. My head don't hurt any more." I stared at him. "But look, if this is the old lady's prints and she's paralyzed, she wasn't never out on that bridge killing nobody."

"Don't talk, Happy. Get down and compare those prints. Hurry. . . ."

I was picking 'em up like I was back doing road work, when I came up the stairs again. The second I knocked, Fauston had the door opened.

"What did you find? What was it?" he shot at me before I could get in.

"Those prints—I found some where they had Sarah. They're like those on the

cuff. It was that old lady. It was her all along!"

"No, Happy. The old lady did not do it," Fauston said softly.

"What?" I gasped. "What'd you mean, she didn't? The prints fit, like you wanted 'em to. You been hollering her mother did it. Now I prove it, and you say no."

"I have been mistaken. Now I am right." He shoved his hat down on his head and opened the door again.

"Come along. I'll show you who killed Alma Bently; who tried to murder Sarah; and who did murder her sister Loraine."

"Loraine?"

"The girl in the Wilbur Prince notice, the girl on the news report just now. That was Sarah's sister, Loraine. You see, Happy, we made our walk too late to save her."

"You mean, they dropped her before."

"That's what I mean. Now, come along and I'll show you the murderer." He settled down in the car and I got in behind the wheel.

"To Carlo Pundit's," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Play Is Over

CARLO sighed when we came in. "You've played hob with my day! What now?"

"I suppose you have a file of old plays?" Fauston asked.

Carlo said he had.

"Get out *Suicide Bridge*. Read me the cast."

Carlo found a torn little book and began to read. When he finished, Fauston nodded. "Do you have pictures of those people?"

"Most of them."

"Get them out."

It took about fifteen minutes to round them up from the walls and old books and drawers. At last Carlo spread them out on the desk.

"Now, Happy," Fauston said, "find the person you saw this morning."

"Find who—"

"You'll know when you see," he snapped. "Look!"

I started through the pictures. One was a girl; then a young man; another girl; a thin old man. Suddenly I stopped, looked back, staring at that face again. Then something clicked—that man . . . He was the *woman* in Alma Bently's bed this morning.

Fauston noticed my silence. "Found it, Happy?"

"I got it," I said. "It's an old man."

"Carlo, tell me who that is."

Carlo said, "That's an old bird named Enoch Ressel. He died five years ago."

"Five years ago," Fauston whispered. "Five years ago Alma Bently went into seclusion." He snapped, "Give me your telephone." He started to dial. "Hello, Marty? Give me Marty in the coroner's office . . . Hello, Marty. Do me a favor. Look in your 1936 files. A woman was found in the South Fork, hit by a train, remember . . . Well, look up your record and see if her right hand was missing."

There was silence while Fauston waited.

"Hello . . . The right hand gone? Fine. Oh, no, just wondering."

"Come on, Happy," he ordered as he slammed down the receiver. I followed him out to the car.

"Drive home," he said very softly. Then he leaned back and began to smile, like everything was jake, now.

"You do not comprehend, do you, Happy?" he asked at last. "But listen. I shall tell you.

"When Alma Bently was paralyzed and decided to go west, Marley was faced with the loss of his income. I imagine he had been embezzling over a period of years—couldn't make a satisfactory accounting. If Alma tried to break off and settle up, he was ruined. When she insisted, he

killed her. Knowing many theatrical dead-beats, he found this Enoch Ressel who would do for the masquerade. Together they killed Alma beyond recognition, planted her beneath the trestle, and let her go down the river. She was no cinch to identify. Ressel, Marley, and that maid have been slicing up Alma's fortune. It was easy for Marley, who was familiar with her affairs.

"They've made it work for five years. The public was kept out of the house. However, when Wilbur Prince died, the two girls came to see their paralyzed mother. That could have ruined the game. Marley and the maid and Ressel let them come in, with Ressel pulling the mother act. Before the girls got their bearings, they were attacked and drugged; carried out on the trestle at night, and swung under the rails. Sarah never quite had time to recognize the fraud. All she remembers is her paralyzed mother, coming to murder her. But we saved her. We lost Loraine because she was dropped before—"

"But those finger prints," I said, remembering. "They're the real Alma's. And they're on your shirt and the bridge."

"Of course they are, Happy. Ressel didn't step into this gravy train free. He paid a price in pain. When they killed Alma, they removed her right fingers. Those were grafted to Ressel's fingers—a quack doctor was secured somewhere. So when a check was written, Ressel would leave Alma's prints. Should any suspicion ever arise, there could be comparison and proof. Oh, they were ingenious," Fauston admitted. "Why, they even deceived me for an hour. Yes, indeed, very clever.

"But the psychology," he continued. "That is most interesting. You see, Happy, one unskilled in the art of murder is afraid to experiment with untried methods. Now, that trestle idea. . . . It was a logical, vivid hangover from some past

experience of the murderer. And who would have had such a unique experience at close range? Only someone connected with the original *Suicide Bridge*; someone impelled by the touch of drama. An actor, of course." He smiled at me. "It worked in the play, as Ressel recalled, so he figured it would work again."



I PARKED the car outside the apartment house, and we climbed the steps toward our rooms. After we got inside, Fauston didn't sit down or smoke or do any of the things he usually did. For a while he just stood there inside the door, staring at the floor with those sockets of his. Then he shook his shoulders and walked into the bathroom and closed the door. I heard glasses clattering, and water being turned off and on. Finally he came back and went to the front door.

"I shall have to leave you for a while, Happy," he said slowly.

I looked at him. He hardly ever goes anywhere without me.

"You don't want me to come?" I asked.

"Not this time, Happy. This time I am not too sure. It's best I go alone. I shall be back," he smiled. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a torn little book. It was that *Suicide Bridge* play he'd got at Carlo Pundit's.

"While I'm gone, you are to read this. It's short—you'll be able to finish in time."

"In time for what?"

"For the last act, Happy." He smiled again, patted my shoulder. "Read the play, Happy. Perhaps you will understand. I shall be most interested. I'll tell you what," he said suddenly, "if you read the play and get the right answer, I'll tell you the fight stories when I return tonight. All right?"

"About how I could have beat Tank, huh?"

"That's exactly what I'll do. Just get the right answer from the play."

He opened the door and nodded, smiling, and turned down the steps. I heard the downstairs door close behind him.

I saw that little book on the table. I never read no plays. I never done nothing like that. But hell, if he's going to tell me about fights—just for reading something like that—it's okay with me.

I got the book and sat down. At first I had a tough time; in plays you got to see who's talking, and where, and all that. It must of been dark before I got to that last act. Then I started to get the hang. Not clear, but almost.

You see, in this play, the mother who killed her daughter was sort of crazy. After the murder, she got whackier. She kept remembering how the girl had looked, swinging out there under the tracks; how she's smashed down on the rocks. Finally it got so that everyday, the mother and the servant would go out in the middle of that bridge again. They'd look at the place where they'd tied the girl. They'd laugh and talk, remembering. Whacky, see.

They kept getting worse, till one day they got out there and laughed and talked so much, they forgot about the train. The darn thing came through and caught 'em out in the middle of that long span. So they were killed—right where they'd murdered the girl. That was the end of the play, so I closed the book and lit a cigarette. I tried to think what Fauston meant when he said, 'get the right answer.' I wanted to get it, so I could hear my stories. I tried to figure what he meant.

Then, *wham!* I got the slant. I knew where Fauston had gone—over to that creepy Bently house. Maybe he was going to tell them who he really was. But he'd gone there. Blind! All by himself.

That's what he meant about the answer: I was supposed to figure where he was, and come help him.

It felt good to think like that, so clear and sure again. Then I thought, "I got to get over to Bently's."

I grabbed my hat and scrambled downstairs to the car. It was dark as midnight when I headed toward the place I was supposed to go. But I was hurrying, so I wouldn't be late.

I killed the motor and beat it to the front door. I must of knocked five minutes before the flat-faced maid came and peaked out.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Fauston's here. I want to see him!"

"Nobody called Fauston here," she snapped. "We don't let people in." She started to shut the door.

I got a foot in the crack and pushed. For a couple of seconds she held, then all of a sudden she jumped away. The door flew back. I was pushing so, I couldn't get balanced again. I tripped on the carpet and I fell inside. I saw the woman's arm coming down; there was a vase or pot or something in her hand.

She hit me with it. . . .

IT WAS like a million of them humming noises all put together, right over my ear. Then it broke. I tried to get up, but the fog was all around, and I couldn't hear or see. I grabbed. First I got a leg, and pulled. Fingernails cut my face, clawing me. I felt a bony throat in my fingers. I couldn't see, so I just twisted.

I could hear that old woman screaming, over and over. But the humming was busting my head. I kept twisting that neck. After a while the fingers stopped clawing, and pretty soon they slipped down, loose against my legs. She wasn't yelling anymore.

I let her go and she moaned. I stood up and leaned against the wall, trying to shake that red mist out of my eyes. . . .

Finally I remembered: Fauston! He was here—blind. . . .

I started feeling my way down the wall, back to that dark bedroom where Ressel had been.

I found the door and pushed. I started, half-seeing the empty bed with the mountain of covers thrown back.

Ressel was gone!

Then I got scared. They'd gone. They'd taken Fauston. They were going to kill him. . . .

I searched every room, kept calling his name. But I got no answer.

At last I felt my way back down the hall to the front door. There was the woman, lying there, moaning a little. I sat down and tried to think, but the humming tangled everything. Seemed like all I could remember was the name of a book or a play or something. A name kept going through my head: "*Suicide Bridge, Suicide Bridge, Suicide Bridge.*"

Then something hit me: Maybe they went to the bridge! I had to go to the bridge. That might be the answer. . . .

I went to the car, but I'd lost the keys. I walked slow, feeling my way against the sides of the buildings. Finally I got to the freight tracks; I turned toward the trestle. I looked into the dark, but there was nobody there.

I sat down in the mud on the bank, and the humming got louder against my ears. Fauston was gone, and nobody would tell me about my fights; and I hadn't got the answer he told me to get, or he'd still be here—

I heard a sound. I turned.

Two people were coming out of Gordon's Alley. They were carrying something. It was Fauston! Marley and Ressel were carrying Fauston between them; he was unconscious.

They kept coming, out of the alley, down the tracks. They started out across that dark trestle.

They were going to swing him under the rails, just like they'd swung Alma Bently and Sarah and Loraine. They'd

beat Fauston to his play! They were going to kill him!

And I couldn't move.

They got to the middle of the trestle, then Marley took a grip on Fauston's heels and slipped him over the side. He began to swing him, slowly. Ressel got down on the other side. When Marley had Fauston swinging, Ressel grabbed for Fauston's shoulder. They were ready to tie him up.

It took them a while, but they got it done. They stood up, ready to leave—and that was when it happened. Both of them yelled, and went flopping down on their knees.

They hadn't got Fauston cooled clear off. He was as alive as they were. And he had reached those long steel arms up through the ties; he had a knee apiece of Ressel and Marley, pulling, locking them to the ties. And they couldn't reach him to fight free!

Both of them kept cursing and begging at the same time. All at once I saw it. Fauston was going to hold them there till the train came through!

This was that answer he'd been telling me about; he'd just wanted me to come down and look.

I heard them screaming out there; then, far away, came the train whistle.

I heard Fauston laugh. . . .

The rumble of the train wheels came closer, turning into thunder. The whistle came again, nearer. The screams were all tangled now, yelling without words.

Suddenly, down at the curve, the white beam of the train cut the dark. As the engine straightened, the trestle turned almost blue from the big lamp. The rails gleamed like dark, hard ice. And out there in the middle huddled the two men, tearing at their legs.

With the last ten feet of space, Ressel and Marley froze, their faces turned toward the locomotive.

Then it struck, the sparks showering

from the fire-box. The wheels screamed against the brakes.



THERE was a soft splash in the water. I looked down. There was Fauston, swimming in, slow and sure. He crawled out on the bank and tilted his head, listening.

"Happy?" he called.

I had to wet my tongue. "Yeah, I'm here."

He stood up, shaking his shoulders. His arms and coat and shirt were cut. Then I saw his face. He was smiling.

"We're done here, Happy. We may go home now," he said. He waited for me to get up. I couldn't move. All I could do was stare—at those cuts, at his smile. I kept remembering how he'd held those men out there. I began to shake.

"Did you hear, Happy? Let us go—"

"I'm scared. You killed them. I don't want to go. I'm scared." Then I started to cry. "Maybe you'll kill me—"

"You fool!" His steel fingers dragged me up close to him.

"Killed them! Killed them, you say!" His breath was hot in my face. "I have killed no one. No one, you understand. I have simply made a plan fail. They tried to murder me. In the game of murder, the price of failure is death. Don't you understand? For five years, they played a game of murder. For five years they won. Tonight they played again. Tonight they lost. This has been no murder. This has only been the end of a game; a game which has but one end. Now it's over."

He sighed, his fingers loosened. "Now, let's go home. Where's the car?"

I tried to remember. It came back. "I lost the keys. When she hit me, when I was hunting you, over at that house—"

"What?" He whirled, and his voice was soft and low. "You mean—you

mean, you believed I was in trouble? You went to Bently's to help me, and they hurt you? Is that what happened, Happy?"

"You said to get the answer. That's what I thought I'd do. But she hit me, and the humming came back. I guess I lost the keys. I don't remember exactly."

"But you went to help me," Fauston repeated slowly, like he was trying to memorize it. "Sometimes you hate me," he said softly. "Sometimes you fear me. I hurt you, and bring the pain in your head. And yet, you went to help me."

He touched my shoulder. "Your head?"

"It hurts pretty bad. She hit me," I said.

"I see," he whispered. He waited a long time. "I didn't mean for you to go there, Happy. I meant for you to come here. I should have told you. I was afraid to take you there, and yet you went." He took my arm. "Let's go home, Happy. You will dress the cuts on my arms. You will make us some coffee, and then I shall tell you a long story about fighting. I'll tell you about the night you whipped the champ from Argentina. Then the pain will leave your head. Would you like that, Happy?"

"I sure would. You'll tell me how I whipped him?"

"I'll tell you," he agreed. "And Happy—you won't be afraid of me then, will you?"

"I'm not afraid when you tell about fighting. I'm not afraid of anything then. Everything gets all right."

"Everything gets all right," he echoed. He nodded his head as we moved away. "If there was only a story someone could tell me, a story that would take the darkness away. . . ."

That's the way with Fauston. Half the time, I don't know what he's talking about.

DANGER - HEARSESES



CHAPTER ONE

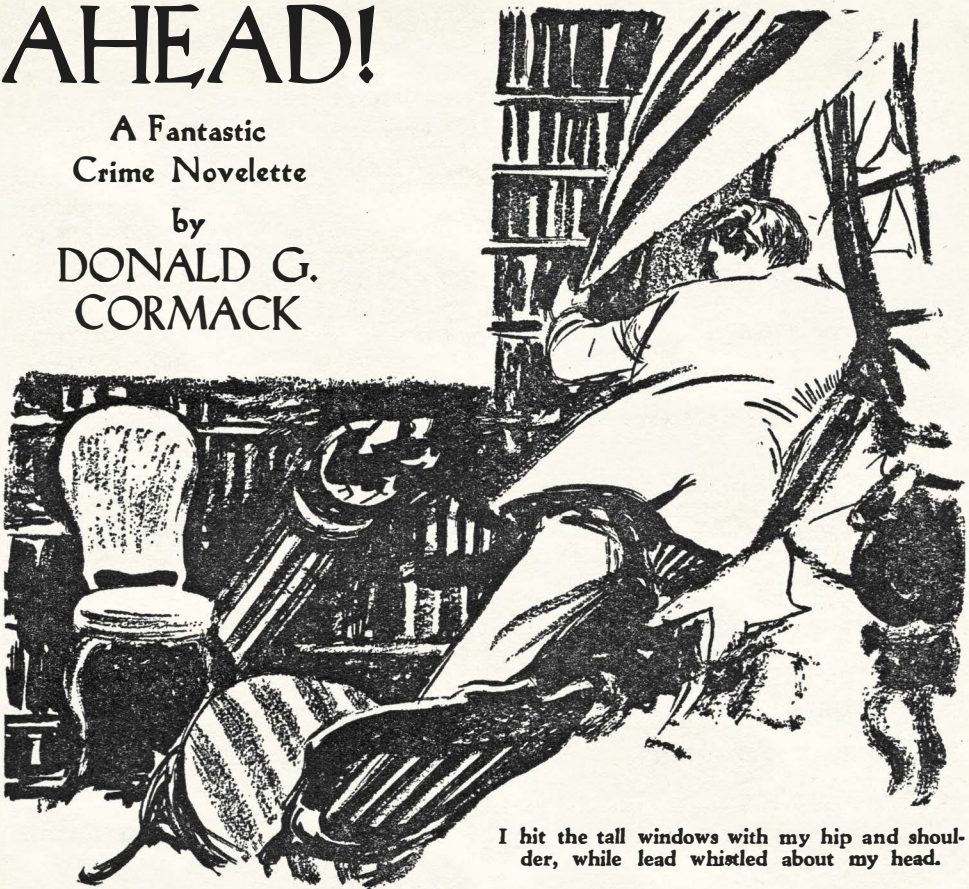
"Come Into My Parlor . . ."

ON CERTAIN days everything seems to go wrong. I guess there's no one who hasn't had it happen. Well, this day I'm going to tell about began just like that—and kept getting worse. I overslept and had a headache when I woke up; my last clean shirt had a frayed collar; there wasn't a single

AHEAD!

A Fantastic
Crime Novelette

by
DONALD G.
CORMACK



I hit the tall windows with my hip and shoulder, while lead whistled about my head.

Why was Private Detective Dave Random lured to that house of death, where the girl who sought his counsel begged him to forget her? And why should a wealthy cripple stalk the slums seeking a bar-room brawl? The answers to those tantalizing questions would save Dave's life—but the only man to quiz was the Corpse on Crutches.

pressed suit hanging in the closet; the "soft boiled" eggs I ordered for breakfast. . . . But you know how it is. And when I got to the office and remembered I'd given my secretary the day off, I was in a thoroughly foul humor.

My stack of mail that day consisted of a single letter—a tiny, purple-hued note obviously from a girl. I tossed it on the desk, flopped into the swivel chair, and remembered with perverse satisfaction that tomorrow was the first of the month. The rent for my apartment and this office

were both due. The sharp peal of the telephone interrupted my fun.

"I want to speak to Nan," some guy said when I answered. "Nancy Corliss. Put her right on." He might have been talking to some office boy.

"She's out of town," I told him with vindictive satisfaction. "I don't know when she'll be back. I sent her after some out-of-town newspapers." And I hung up abruptly.

I'd never heard of Nan Corliss. I figured the guy had the wrong number, of

course. It was my own ill humor combined with his impertinence that got me sore. Then I picked up the small envelope again.

I noticed it had been postmarked at twelve the night before. It was a puzzling sort of letter. It read:

Dear David Random—

I have just learned something that is as terrifying as it is incredible. But it could be true—hence this hasty note. The danger centers directly on my father, so I must be cautious in asking outside aid. I dare not call at your office in person, for fear of reprisals. Will you, sometime today, telephone me at home and arrange an outside meeting? Pretend you are an old friend. Believe me, I am not a girl easily frightened—and this is deadly serious!

The address and telephone number were listed, and the letter was signed *Dorothy Luttrell*. Now what would you make of that? I'd heard of the Luttrells, of course; they were wealthy and socially tops. But too many times a girl with Dorothy Luttrell's money-padded background will write a note like that over some purely fanciful menace. Like seeing papa frisking around with some young wren—and then imagining everything from blackmail to extortion as a result. But I put the note in my pocket and figured I'd make the call later on.

Right then things began to happen in quick succession.

A girl started it, bursting into the office without knocking. She didn't pay any attention to me. She swung the door almost closed behind her, then peeked out into the hall as though she expected to be followed.

I had the impression I was witnessing a scene in a movie thriller—but it was all very real to the girl. When she finally closed the door and turned around, I saw two things at a single glance. She was

terrified—and she was very beautiful.

"I—I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was so sure someone was following me! I—they mustn't know I came to see you!"

"Take it easy," I said, smiling. She'd evidently seen too many wild mystery pictures. "Have a seat and light up a smoke. Relax!"

My mood was getting more cheerful by the moment. A beautiful girl can do that—and this one had what it took. She had titian hair, emerald-green eyes, and the kind of a figure that monkeys around with a guy's blood pressure. Even scared, she looked lovely.

She came over to my desk and plunked her handbag down—and right away I didn't feel so cheerful. The "plunk" of that bag could only have been caused by something heavy inside. Like a small automatic. And frightened girls packing shooting hardware can be dangerous.

"Don't begin talking right away," I said. "There's no hurry."

And then that damned phone rang again. That part wasn't so bad; it was hearing that imperative voice on the wire that ruined the hopeful improvement in my temper. It was the same guy demanding to speak to the unknown Nancy Corliss again, and using the same dictatorial tone.

"Listen, mister," I answered as patiently as I could. "You've got the wrong number. There's no one here by that name. Please go away!"

"It's the right number, bud," he snapped back. "You're Random, the private peek, and Nan's probably in your office right now!"

That almost floored me. I covered up the mouthpiece with my hand and turned to the girl.

"Your name wouldn't be Nancy Corliss, would it?"

The effect of that was amazing! She came to her feet in a flash, the color draining from her face. Her lips were parted,

as though for a moment she couldn't get her breath.

"Who—never mind!" she said crazily. "Tell them there's no one here! Tell them you never heard of anyone by that name! Please!"

I gave the guy the message—then slapped the phone back on the hook and came to my feet fast. But the girl was already out of the office, her high heels clicking as she ran down the hall. I didn't stop to figure anything out then! I didn't even notice the handbag she'd left on my desk. I grabbed up my hat and raced after her.

Which smart action, I'll admit, was simply *asking* for it!

AS LUCK would have it, the girl got to the elevators just as a "down" car hit the floor. I yelled to the operator to wait, but it didn't work. I had to wait impatiently for the next one.

I reached the sidewalk, caught a glimpse of the bright yellow jacket she was wearing, and a second later she'd disappeared into the side street. I didn't hurry as I made for the corner. I knew there'd be only a scattered few pedestrians down that way, and that I could overtake her easily. What I forgot for the moment, though, was that some other guy might have the same idea.

I rounded, came to an abrupt stop and stared at the little tableau two hundred yards away. A tough looking yegg had halted the girl, and the way the guy's hand, through the pocket of his topcoat, was pressed against the girl's back, tipped me off.

My own hand went for the gun under my arm, and the guy nudged the girl toward a car at the curb. It was too late to use my gun. The girl was already behind the wheel, and the yegg was getting into the rear seat. I saw her look back over her shoulder, waiting for directions, her face white, her eyes dark with fear.

A second later the car pulled from the curb.

For the first time that day I got a break. There was a taxi standing a few yards from me, motor idling as the driver read a tabloid. I hopped into the hack, indicated the sedan ahead, and was thrown back against the cushions as we got under way. But I still didn't feel any too good about the way this business had begun.

The girl had come to my office, true—but that was all. She hadn't retained me to look after her interests; she hadn't explained her trouble; she hadn't even given me her name. The telephone call had implied she was Nancy Corliss—nothing more. And my rights in this matter, at the moment, were simply those of any citizen to prevent criminal violence. I wondered if the girl's beauty had anything to do with my Galahad play.

The cab driver pulled to the curb over in the fashionable Sutton Hill section of town. He wiggled a finger at the side street just ahead.

"They turned into Carter Place, boss. It's a dead-end street."

I handed the cabbie a couple of bucks and walked quickly around the corner. The sedan I'd been trailing was the only car on the block, and it stood in front of Number 15. Carter Place itself faced a small private park, and that particular home was a small, swank dwelling in the middle of the block.

For a moment the ultra-respectability of the section almost convinced me I'd mistinterpreted the whole set-up. Then I heard the girl's screams! I was running when the first shot blasted out. The screaming continued, but it was much weaker now—and there was no doubt which house sheltered the violence!

I raced up the short flight of steps to the front door—though I had no intention of stupidly ringing the bell and inquiring if anything were wrong. I hopped over the railing at the top of the stoop, angled

out one leg until I had a toe-hold on a small balcony in front of the living room, then with a quick lunge swung my body across. A moment later I was busting through the French windows.

Two spine-chilling facts hit me between the eyes right off the bat. There was a young girl lying in the center of the room, and she had been brutally shot to death! And—the dead youngster *wasn't* the girl I'd trailed!

That's as far as my reasoning got. I was still stooping over the girl's body when I froze at the touch of a cold steel muzzle behind my ear.

"Hello, sucker!" a voice growled. "Welcome home!"

A girl laughed in the background—the voice of the girl I'd followed. Then the whole world dissolved in a brilliant explosion of pain.

I PASSED out only for a second or two. The hat I was wearing probably saved me from a cracked skull—and the booming sound of someone pounding on the front door, blending with the throbbing in my own skull, seemed to help focus my senses.

"Give it to him now!" the girl's voice urged in a vibrant whisper. "Blast the so-and-so to hell! Quick, before the cops get here!"

"Shut up, stupid!" the man's voice ordered. "That's probably them right now! Take it easy. He's as good as dead this way, anyhow."

The pounding on the front door stopped, and I figured a third member had opened it. I heard a man saying, "Hello, McQuade! You didn't lose any time. We've had some trouble." The cop's voice—a private cop for the section, I found out shortly—came slowly toward me as he walked through the foyer. "I see a guy climb through your window while I'm on the other side of the park. You got him all right? What—" and he became silent.

"Little Nan Corliss, Howard McClung's nurse," the guy who had opened the door told the cop in an oily, sad voice. "The first shot caught her in the back, as you see."

As my brain became clearer, I began to get the full meaning of the desperate jam I was in. Murder! Perspiration broke out on my forehead. The emergency brought my strength back with a rush. I had to get out of this! I had to have time to rip this frame wide open! For the moment, though, I lay there quietly, eyes closed.

"I heard the screams out in the kitchen," the yegg broke in now. "I came running in just as he must've busted in and shot her. She was already dead. I slugged him before he could turn around. Mr. McClung was right here in the room, but he couldn't do anything, him being a cripple. But he saw the whole thing, and after it was over, he fainted. I just carried him upstairs." The thug who had lured me to the house was silent for a moment, then spoke again, as though he'd just remembered something. "Oh—and the boss said he thought he recognized this guy. McClung said he'd seen his pictures. He's David Random, a private dick."

"Where's the phone?" the private cop demanded in an angry voice.

When I heard him ask for the police, I knew it was now or never! Like a coiled spring, I rose up and darted forward. It was so unexpected, I almost made the rear windows before the first shot blasted the glass near my face. Then the whole Maginot Line seemed to open up into sudden explosive action.

I hit the tall window with my hip and shoulder—and then was vaulting over the balcony and into the small back yard. A six-foot wooden fence stood between me and freedom, but I don't remember scrambling over it. All of a sudden I just found myself on the other side. But I do

remember one thing before the fence cut off sight of the house.

The sight of that beautiful titian-haired girl standing framed in the tall window and spraying lead slugs at me the way you'd pump Flit at a cockroach.

Two minutes later I was tumbling into the east-side subway. I was afraid to walk and afraid to take a cab. The prowl-car flash would be out for me within a matter of minutes. I was due for as hot a time as a uniformed Nazi trooper in Picadilly Circus!

CHAPTER TWO

The Man Who Lived Two Lives

SO MUCH had happened that it was hard to realize it wasn't yet noon. But I did realize that my hours of freedom were limited. I couldn't hope to dodge the cops for long. My sole hope was to crack the frame against me during that brief time!

I rode the subway up to Woodlawn, then rode it back again and out into the wilds of Brooklyn. By that time the early afternoon editions of the papers were out, and I bought a copy. They had the story, all right.

POLICE SEEK DETECTIVE IN MYSTERY SLAYING OF GIRL

Huddled in the last car of the train, I read the account:

NEW YORK, N. Y.—A young girl, identified as Nancy Corliss, was shot and killed earlier today in the home of Howard McClung, 15 Carter Place. McClung, a cripple and invalid, eyewitnessed the slaying and later identified David Random, a private detective, as the murderer.

Dr. William Embick, McClung's physician, told police Nancy Corliss had been engaged by his patient less than two months ago. She was not a registered nurse. She acted as a companion and personal secretary to the cripple.

No motive has been established for the slaying, thus far. All that is known is that Random burst in upon the cripple and his secretary and shot the girl down in cold blood. Attracted by the screams, Luther, the chauffeur, managed to subdue the murderer. He feigned unconsciousness, however, and effected his escape shortly afterward.

Immediately after the slaying, police raided Random's office in mid-town New York. There they found a handbag belonging to Nancy Corliss, and it contained a small automatic registered in her name. Officials suggested she had called on the private investigator, perhaps at his request and that she had expected trouble, as indicated by the gun. It is probable she was forced to flee the office, leaving the handbag behind. Employees of the building testify that the girl seemed terrified on leaving the premises, and that the private detective followed her immediately to the McClung home.

Early arrest of David Random is confidently predicted by the police.

I was neatly framed, all right! But why? Why should a group of complete strangers go to all the trouble of luring me away from my office so that I could be framed for a murder on the other side of the city?

It took me a little time to get the answer to that one, but at last I arrived at some thing that made sense. Nancy Corliss—the real Nancy I'd seen dead in McClung's house—had to be gotten rid of for some reason, probably because of something she knew. A scapegoat was needed to take the rap. Okay.

A fall guy had been selected—me—and the girl and her stooge had enticed him into the trap with their phony abduction, after first catching his interest with a little play acting. The original plans, which had called for my death at the scene of

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the crime, had to be changed at the last minute after the private cop had arrived at the house too quickly. And then I'd escaped. Okay again.

But still the same question—why me? The answer to that, I figured, must lie in some of the cases I'd handled recently. I shoved my hands in my pockets and struggled to find some tie-up. And then I had it—right in my hand! I pulled a crumpled letter out of my pocket, the one I'd received in the mail that morning, and stared at it as the rest of the pieces began to fall in place.

If the girl who'd written that letter—Dorothy Luttrell—were mixed up in this, the frame added up. Suppose Dorothy and Nancy had found out something, and Dorothy had written a letter about it to me. The only way the criminals could get out of that would be to silence the two girls, framing me for one murder, and thus wiping out the whole threat. Only one question still remained—was Dorothy Luttrell still alive, and if she was, would she still be willing to talk?

There was one way to find out! Dangerous as it was, I decided to call on Dorothy and put my cards on the table.

IT WAS mid-afternoon now; I couldn't have picked a worse time to walk around in the open. But I hadn't any choice. Clearing myself was a race against time—and I was praying for a few more hours of freedom. Twice I had to double back on my tracks when a cop sauntered into my path. Maybe I was being too jumpy—but in my case, one pinch would be the only pinch. And at last I did make the Luttrell home.

I didn't have any trouble seeing the girl. The butler took me into a comfortable drawing room, then went away to announce me to his mistress. Dorothy Luttrell came in a moment later. She was a pretty kid—not beautiful, like my first caller that day—but her face expressed

character, breeding and sportsmanship. I liked her before she even spoke—and she didn't speak for several moments. She stood in the doorway appraising me quite honestly and frankly.

"I received your letter this morning," I said at last. "I'm sorry I couldn't meet you outside somewhere. Circumstances prevented it." I didn't mention the jam I was in; if she didn't know yet, it was probably better that way.

She smiled slightly, but it seemed to take an effort. "Things have changed with me, too. I was mistaken when I thought I needed an investigator's help. I don't. I was foolishly alarmed over nothing."

So they'd gotten to her already! Somehow, she'd been convinced that silence was her only hope—when her active aid was my only possible salvation! She walked over close to me now, and I could see the lines of strain and worry on her face. But she had a magnificent presence and bearing. I knew this was a duel of wits between us.

I smiled as nicely as I could. "I'm glad in one way, and sorry in another. Furthermore, you had my curiosity aroused. Would you mind telling me what it was you *thought* was threatening this household?"

Dorothy didn't answer right away; her hazel eyes, lovely even in panic, darted around the room as though unconsciously seeking aid. Then she made a decision. "As I told you, it was about my father. He retired from business three years ago because of poor health. But since that time, he's been getting worse. He seemed to be worried, depressed, fearful. In imagination I saw some outside physical menace breaking his health and cutting him down. That's all—just imagination!"

"How do you know you weren't right? What proof have you?"

She shook her head quickly and vio-

lently. "No! I had a long talk with dad today. He explained everything. He even told me about things he'd meant to keep to himself—personal things. And then, later, when Doctor Embick arrived. . . ." She caught herself just too late. Her frightened eyes jumped to mine to see if I would pick up the name. I looked as though it meant nothing to me; I hoped she'd go on, but she didn't. However, I knew Dr. Embick treated both Luttrell and McClung—if that fact did me any good.

I put both my hands on the girl's shoulders, and her eyes widened in surprise. "Dorothy Luttrell," I said gently, "why are you lying to me?"

She broke from my grasp and took a quick step backward as though I'd struck her in the face. "*How dare you!*" she breathed, fire in her words. Her pretty face was livid with indignation—or fear.

"What does the name Howard McClung mean to you?" I pressed on. "The only hope for your father—and you—is in the truth!"

I was certain now that the girl's letter had been an understatement, if anything. Her father was being wrecked mentally and physically by some criminal force. Was it too late to save the girl, at least? Tears were in her eyes now—tears of anger at her own weakness.

"Are you going to answer me, Dorothy?"

"Yes! Get out!" She stamped her foot. "Get out of this house!"

"Not until I've seen your father. Maybe he'll help me save you both. Maybe he'll tell me the truth!"

Her reaction to that almost floored me! "Wait here a minute," she said. "I'll be right back." And she left the room.

For a second I didn't know what to think—and then I saw she'd swung the door negligently closed behind her as she left. Could that possibly mean . . . ! I saw a telephone stand across the room. I

jumped for it and swung the receiver to my ear. The girl's voice came over an extension: "Operator, I want a policeman!"

SOME minutes later, breathing heavily, I was nearing Carter Place for the second time that day. I had escaped the cops at Dorothy's house—but without much time to spare. The threatening cries of the prowl-car pack had been urgent in the distance as I sped out of that neighborhood. And now but one avenue of investigation was left to me—McClung and his household. The most dangerous of all.

Now I was certain Dorothy and her father were caught in the same deadly web that had enmeshed me—and I was certain, too, that Howard McClung and his criminal satellites formed the other end of this axis of murder. The showdown was fast approaching.

A big limousine stood in front of McClung's house, and Luther, in a chauffeur's uniform, was flicking at its spotless finish with a dust cloth. From the looks of the waiting car, I figured the cripple was about to take a drive. I entered the private park and searched out a bench well concealed by the shrubbery from which I could keep a lookout.

Half an hour later, the chauffeur got in the car and drove away. I figured I was stymied then, but shortly afterward the front door opened and the cripple came out.

The first sight of McClung was something of a shock. Somehow, you always expect a cripple to look like an invalid; to see a strong man incapacitated only emphasizes the tragedy. Howard McClung was a tall, raw-boned man with broad shoulders and big-knuckled hands. But in spite of all that apparent strength, the two stout crutches were the only support that held him upright. His legs were lifeless, and the pain-twisted cast of his

freckled face told mutely of his suffering. His weary resignation seemed completely at variance with his flaming shock of red hair.

A liveried butler steadied him at one side, and between the two of them they managed to get down the flight of steps to the sidewalk. The butler looked up and down the street for the car, then turned to the cripple and said something. McClung nodded, and the servant went hurrying down the street. The cripple watched him out of sight, then turned quickly and started down the street in the opposite direction, the crutches creaking under his eager haste.

I don't know what prompted me to follow the cripple. It was such an easy task of trailing I let him get a half block, then a whole block ahead. Since he was heading into the slum section by the river, I wasn't afraid he'd suddenly disappear into one of the tenement houses along the way. And that was where I made a mistake.

He turned a corner a minute or so ahead of me—and when I got there, he had vanished! The street itself was a foul slum that made even the Bowery look respectable—so what in Heaven's name would the wealthy McClung be doing over here? The action astonished me so, I stood where I was for a full ten minutes trying to puzzle it out. The block in which he had disappeared was lined by wilting, unpainted tenements and a frayed, two-bit flop house. Could the fashionable McClung be visiting someone over here?

A tatterdemalion bum swung suddenly out of the flophouse, and for one unguarded moment I almost let out a yell. Then, of course, I saw my mistake. The bum was exactly the same build as McClung—but he was certainly no cripple. He was striding along the garbage-littered sidewalk arrogantly, walking away from me, and just for the hell of it I decided to get a look at his face.

I didn't follow him far, though. He turned into a grimy barroom in the middle of the next block, stood at the bar with his back to the window. I saw the bartender laughing and talking with the bum as he poured out two hookers of rye, and I figured it was useless to stay on any longer.

The bum whipped down the two ryes, with a beer chaser, and right away the bartender filled them up again. Feeling pretty foolish about the whole thing, I was about to turn away when the argument began. I knew there was going to be trouble, so I stuck around.

I SAW the drunk come up to the tall bum, and I saw him get shoved roughly away. Then the bartender yelled something at the drunk, and at the same time the drunk was swinging. He clipped the bum a beauty right on the eye, sending him backwards off his stool. By that time, the bartender was coming over the bar with a baseball bat—and some friends of the drunk's were coming from the back of the saloon. Then the brawl was on in earnest, with chairs, glasses and bottles whistling through the air.

The sound of the police sirens that snapped me out of it. Hell, I'd almost forgotten every cop in town was looking for me! I got out of that section, and fast! Right then I was wanted for trespass, breaking-and-entering—and for murder! And I knew, with a weary sort of resignation in the face of things beyond my control, that before the night was over I'd have added materially to that string of "crimes."

There was no use looking for McClung any longer, so I cut over west. But when I got back to Carter Place I took the same concealed bench in the park and facing the house. I wanted to get one more look at McClung before I began any forthright action. And, truthfully, I couldn't get

that ragged bum out of my mind. There weren't many men built on the same generous physical proportions as the crippled McClung. It may sound stupid, but I was still curious.

Twenty minutes later Howard McClung toiled painfully back to his private home. I heard the squeak of his protesting crutches even before I saw him in the gathering dusk. When he was almost opposite the park, he paused for a moment to rest. A street lamp was just ahead, and as he leaned wearily on his crutches, he raised his head so that I could see his face. I blinked my eyes, scarcely believing what I saw! The simple sight of that face brought me involuntarily to my feet!

Howard McClung, the cripple was sporting a beautiful black shiner, his left eye almost completely closed! A second blow had opened up the skin on his forehead! He had undoubtedly been the arrogant, ragged tramp in the center of that barroom brawl!

As though watching something that couldn't be true, I saw the cripple struggle the last few yards to the foot of his stoop. Wavering there uncertainly on his crutches, he called helplessly to his servant to help him up the steps. No immediate answer came to his shout, but he waited where he was with resigned patience.

With McClung still before me, I tried to find an answer to what I'd seen with my own eyes. I'd heard of crippled beggars throwing off their deformities and incapacities—and their poverty—at the end of a good business day on the street. I'd heard of these malingering beggars casting aside their ragged work clothes for a silk dressing gown in their own comfortable homes. That was old stuff.

But who ever heard of a wealthy man masquerading as a cripple in the midst of luxury and a staff of servants—then sneaking off to a slum to cast aside his crutches? It just didn't add up!

And what connection could rich, well-known Paul Luttrell have with such a purposeless fraud? How could it affect his whole life? And why was it so important that his daughter be prevented from introducing a private investigator to the set-up?

I swore I'd get those answers before the next dawn. Hell, I had to! My own freedom was at stake! And I knew McClung's home probably sheltered some of those answers. One way to get them would be to bust into the place later in the night.

My attention snapped back to the house now. The front door had opened, but it wasn't the butler who came down to help his master. It was the simian chauffeur. He growled something at the cripple, and then the two of them toiled up the stairs. Inside the vestibule, an overhead light illuminated the pair. I heard the chauffeur's growling voice again, muffled by the doors but louder this time. Suddenly his hand lashed out and he batted McClung a half dozen times across the face with the palm and back of his hand. The butler opened the front door then and the chauffeur sent the yelling cripple sprawling through the opening and into the house.

The front door banged behind the trio, choking off the angry blend of their violent voices, and the street was dark and quiet again.

Suddenly, I had a hint of what I was getting into.

CHAPTER THREE

The Corpse Comes on Crutches

WHEN you're dodging the cops and trying to solve a case at the same time, the kick-and-gouge type of investigation is about all that's left. And when on top of that you've a morning deadline coming up, you're

licked before you start—unless, like me, you're too pig-headed to admit it.

As far as I could see, the fake cripple McClung was my best bet. It seemed obvious he was being held unwillingly by the thugs across the street—held by some threat I hadn't discovered yet—and that he'd probably crack if I could get him alone for five minutes. I decided it was time for me to bust into the house and begin to slug some of the answers loose. I hadn't many hours left.

When I saw the chauffeur leave, I figured the coast was clearing. I could handle two men a lot more easily than three. My big mistake, though, was not to watch where the chauffeur went—because he went for me, even if he did use a round-about route.

I never heard his footsteps on the soft grass. The first thing I knew, his elbow was crooked around my throat, hauling me to my feet, and his other hand had twisted one of my arms painfully into the middle of my back. Houdini himself couldn't have gotten out of that one!

"Don't tell me you was waitin' for a streetcar, chump!" he growled in my ear. "It looks to me like you was casin' the joint—so maybe you cased too much for your own good! Let's have a gander at that mug of yours under a light."

Luther was pushing me down a footpath and toward a park lamp that stood a hundred yards ahead. I knew once he got a look at my face he'd recognize me—and then I'd have about as much chance of breaking this frame as an Italian in Ethiopia! That thought filled me with desperation—and I tried the only stratagem left to me. Surprise.

"Look, Luther," I snapped. "Did the boss tell you to do this? Are you and McClung deliberately trying to double-cross me? If you figured I'd go to the cops before, now it's a hundred-to-one shot. And you can tell that to Embick, too!"

"Huh?" Luther asked stupidly. "How do you fit in this?"

But his surprise made him loosen his grip on my arm—and that's all I wanted. I twisted suddenly and spun loose. At the same time I brought over a stiff left chop to his prominent jaw. Luther went down—and bounded back again as though he'd hit a spring mattress. I clipped him again—and started running. I had a much bigger fight to worry about!

I figured I'd stay on the lam for about half an hour before I went back. I walked to a coffee shop and had a sandwich and a glass of milk; that killed a good fifteen minutes. Then I started for Carter Place. This time I was going to bust into that house—or else!

I was about half way down the street when I slammed suddenly to a halt as a scream ripped through the night. Then I was running—because the scream had come from McClung's house, and it had been the scream of a girl!

I didn't make the house, though. The girl came rushing out on the stoop when I was almost there. She paused for a moment, looking back involuntarily, the back of one hand pressed across her open mouth. Then, as she turned to come down the steps, I saw who it was.

It was pretty Dorothy Luttrell!

Dorothy whirled as she caught sight of me. For a moment she stood looking full at me, her white, scared face ghostlike in the semi-darkness. Then she choked out a muffled sob and ran quickly to a roadster at the curb. She rammed the car into gear, roared away down the street.

Whatever it was that had driven her almost to hysterics, would be found in McClung's home. I trotted up the steps, wondering at the wide-open front door, and went cautiously into the foyer hall. Then I saw what it was. I couldn't miss it.

The butler was sprawled out on his back, his white hair now stained red, and

his face was something to remember. He hadn't any recognizable face left.

Had Dorothy done this? Had she, in her desperation for her father's life, come over here and settled the problem in a fit of crazy hysteria? Before I could think any further along that line, a groan from the living room sent me stumbling forward.

MCCLUNG was sprawled across the couch, both hands pressed against his chest as though to hold back the blood that was oozing through his fingers. His mouth was wide open, gasping, and blood trickled from the corners of his lips. His eyes were already glazed with death, but the magnificent strength of the man seemed to be defying even that grim power. His eyes came up to meet mine, but I knew he didn't recognize me. I didn't try to question him.

"Embick?" he muttered. "That you, Embick?" Then his eyes closed. He seemed to be gathering his strength to speak.

Suddenly McClung was looking at me again. "So it's over at last," he mumbled. "Thank God! I couldn't have stood any more of it, man. If I'd realized what it would be like, I'd never have agreed in the first place. Cooped up; limping around on crutches; watched all the time; sneaking away for a few precious minutes of freedom whenever I could duck out; threatened with prison when you found out I'd cut loose. Hell, man, I might just as well have been a real cripple! What did I want with money under those conditions? But, thank God, it's over now."

His eyes closed; his breathing seemed to stop. . . .

Abruptly his eyes opened again. He looked as though he were blind now, but he made one last effort to speak. "You've



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got to tell Luttrell the truth!" he gasped urgently. "You've got to tell him he didn't kill my son—that I never had a son. I'd have told him myself long ago—if it hadn't been your threat of prison. That would have been even worse than this. And it was all my fault; I was drunk when it happened. Luttrell's got to know I wasn't really crippled—and that no one was killed in the accident."

McClung was still looking at me, and I waited for him to say something more. I tossed my hat on the side table and knelt beside him. Then I saw he was dead.

My breath came out with a whoosh. I realized I'd been holding it unconsciously. Some of the dark answers behind the criminal set-up were coming out now. I could guess at a lot of the explanation. But would I be in time to save Dorothy from Embick, hog-tied by the law as I was? I could make one last try to convince her she had to talk—and I could do it now. If that failed. . . .

I grabbed up the phone beside the couch and put through my call. Dorothy herself answered the summons. She couldn't hide her sobbing.

"This is Dave Random, Dorothy," I told her. "And you're going to listen to me now! You saw what happened here tonight. You know you can't keep silent any longer. Your one hope—and the hope of your dad—is for you to talk. Tell the police all you know about McClung, Embick and your dad. This is a case of blackmail or extortion. Your father is innocent! He isn't guilty of the things he thinks! I know, because McClung gave me the story before he died. Now, are you with me on seeing this tragic mess to a conclusion?"

She didn't answer right away; I waited silently. Much of what I'd said was pure bluff. I didn't know if blackmail or extortion was the answer. It wasn't, I found out later. But at least I knew Luttrell was being taken by Embick.

Dorothy spoke then. "Dave Random, I beg you—implore you—to forget everything you've learned; everything I told you! Don't you see? If you go through with this, you'll wreck three lives—and all to no purpose! Just go away and leave me alone."

"Can you say that after what you saw tonight, Dorothy? This is murder, youngster! Murder! And someone's going to pay! Now you can't believe I killed Nan Corliss!" When I said that there was a funny tightness in my throat. Dorothy's suspicious presence at the scene came back to my mind. Would she be the one to pay?

"I didn't see anything tonight," she snapped back. "I don't know why you're trying to trap me into some admission. I couldn't have 'seen' anything, as you suggest. I've been home all evening! The butler and my father will bear that out! Please don't bother me again."

She hung up then, and I stood staring stupidly at the receiver. I was licked—and Dorothy was doomed! Because I knew that when someone has murdered three times, any other murders are on the house. They don't count after the first one—and they're easy to commit. Dorothy and I were down on the list. That was as certain as my own failure.

I was sweating plenty then.

It was a noise at the front door that made me whirl around, made my hand jump for my gun. And my gun was gone! The holster was empty!

THERE was a huge tapestry extending from ceiling to floor, at one side of the room. I skipped over to it, saw that there was a good two feet clearance between it and the wall. Behind the drape and just above my head, I saw a wide ledge that topped the wainscoting of the room. It was made to order for a temporary tenant. I swung my legs up, gripped with my heels and writhed my body onto the foot-wide shelf. Then,

peering through a part in the drapes, I saw who it was who had entered the room—and was glad I hadn't had any gun!

Luther was there, along with a second guy who sported a snappy Vandyke—and behind them marched a uniformed cop, gun drawn!

"All right, let's have it now," the cop said. He indicated the chauffeur with a nod of his head. "You called Homicide yet?"

"I tell you I didn't even come in the house!" Luther protested. "I was walking down the street, returning from the garage, when I heard what sounded like shots—and screams. I ran right away for the law. I want no part of anything like this!"

"That's right, officer," the bearded guy said. "I'm Embick—McClung's physician. I arrived just as all this happened. I saw the chauffeur—Luther, here—turn around and go searching for you. I waited outside on the stoop, where you found me."

The patrolman grunted noncommittally. "Stand over there, the two of you. Don't touch anything—and I mean *anything!*" He took out his handkerchief, wrapped it carefully around the receiver, and put through a call to headquarters. His report was brief and specific.

I cursed my stupidity in touching that phone in my unthinking alarm over Dorothy's danger. Then I thought of my strangely missing gun again—and remembered my struggle with Luther out in the park. When he'd first grabbed me he probably looked for a gun as a matter of course. Either that, or it had fallen from my holster during our short fight. No matter how it had come into his possession, once he had it he made it fit in his plans—and to hell with the unknown owner.

I knew my gun would be found somewhere in this room—and after having been established as the weapon of death,

my fingerprints would be discovered carefully preserved on it! The sight of my hat resting on the side table, where I'd tossed it before kneeling beside the dying McClung, couldn't depress me any further. My list of crimes had a new one added. A second murder charge!

"You was parking in front when the shots came," the cop repeated, looking at Embick. "You saw this guy Luther coming down the block; you saw him turn and go looking for me. So you waited for the two of us outside." Embick nodded, and the cop scowled at a box of cigars he was afraid to touch. "Okay," he grunted. "That might do for Homicide—if the garage alibi and your identities stand up."

Homicide didn't get there until a good twenty minutes later. By that time my cramped muscles were silently howling in protest. When the detectives, the assistant M. E., the photographers and fingerprint men finally walked into the room, I was grimly fighting to stay put on my perch. About the only thing left for me to do, I figured, would be to roll right out into the center of the room, generously presenting myself as a twice-framed murderer in the middle of the stage-set evidence.

"What the hell is this joint—a clearing house for murder?" the detective inspector in charge wanted to know. "This is my second trip!"

Pictures were flashed; the room was dusted for prints; the murder gun was found under the couch; the hat, with the initials D. R., was in plain sight. They'd examine it in a minute.

"Regulation-issue Police Positive," one of the detectives observed. "Serial numbers still plainly marked. Fingerprints on the weapon. Hell, this is almost too good to be true. We ought to get treated like this more often!"

Another of the detectives had been examining the hat. "Dave Random!" he

shouted, spotting the initials. "He's our man! A month's salary that gun and prints belong to him. If it works out that way, have Headquarters send out a second pick-up order on him right away. Dave Random! Trying to get rid of the only eyewitness to the first murder! Hell, this is sweet! Come on, gang."

They were trooping toward the door now, their work done. A sheet had already been thrown over McClung, another over the butler, until the wagon came—though the autopsy would be simple routine.

I felt like shouting the truth to them. I wanted to jump into the midst of the bunch and make them listen. Every passing second now only made Dorothy's death nearer—and more certain. Mine too.

The detective inspector posted a cop at the front and back doors. Then he turned to Luther, stabbing a thick forefinger at him. "You stick around, Luther. The garage and the doc back your story, so you're in the clear on the murder, but we want to ask some more questions on the background of this crime. Something stinks, if you ask me."

A sick sort of look came over Luther's face. He glanced quickly at Embick, and the doctor sent him an encouraging wink. Luther was clear on the murder charge, all right—because, as far as I could see, Dr. Embick had been the handy boy with the gun. My gun! But the cops might start checking on the chauffeur's past—and if they found a long record under several names, it would be just too bad for him. If that's the way things stacked up, the guy had only one choice. He had to bust loose while there was still time. He had to get past the two guards before the cops returned for him.

The police talked for a minute in the foyer. Then they were gone, the air hazily blue with the cigarette smoke. And Dr. Embick was gone too—to wind up

the fantastic crime he had set in motion three years ago. In the jam I found myself now, could I possibly save Dorothy and her father from their preordained fate—when even the victims were fighting against me?

CHAPTER FOUR

And Sudden Death

ALONE now, Luther's nerves began to act up. I knew he'd have to do something, and do it soon. If my hunch were correct, it wouldn't take headquarters long to unearth his criminal past. Luther seemed to realize that too. He lit two cigarettes in succession, putting them both out after only a puff or two. He paced up and down the room, pounding his right fist into the palm of his left hand. Finally he made up his mind. He walked to the portières that hung in the doorway, concealing himself from anyone on the other side.

"Officer!" he yelled in alarm. "Officer! Come here—quickly!"

I slid down off my perch now, sensing the action coming up. The cop came through the doorway—not quickly, but with a puzzled, angry frown on his face. He was still scowling when Luther's sap caught him behind the ear. He didn't let out a peep as he slumped forward, cold.

I was crossing the room at the second Luther's blackjack connected. He was bending over the unconscious cop, breathing heavily, when I came up behind him and whispered softly: "Luther. Turn around. I've got something for you!"

He was spinning and swinging the blackjack at the sound of my voice—but he wasn't quite fast enough. I was thinking of the going over he handed me in the park as I dug up a Sunday punch from down around my ankles. It was

a honey! Luther must have figured I hit him with the piano stool—if he had time to figure anything. When he hit the floor he was about as lively as a kippered herring.

I stood there for a moment wondering how in hell I could guarantee Luther's presence until the wagon arrived for the corpses—and then the obvious solution hit me. I took the cop's handcuff's and keys, dragged Luther across the room, and manacled him to McClung's body. If he got the urge to travel places, he could carry McClung with him. And, if he had a brain in his head, he'd lock himself in a closet before that patrolman rejoined the conscious world.

After that, I got out of there fast—before the cop in the back of the house got around to checking up with his partner. At the corner I hopped into a cab and gave Dorothy Luttrell's address, praying I'd be in time. Though what I was going to do once I got there, I still didn't know.

I saw the ambulance in front of the house when we were still a black away. I knew what that meant—Embick was working fast. He'd evidently ordered old man Luttrell to his sanitorium—and it was a cinch Dorothy would trail along. My hack had hardly pulled up to the curb at the far end of the block when the little procession began to move—the ambulance, with Dorothy's roadster behind and my taxi bringing up the rear. I had an odd feeling this was a funeral train, driving the last mile. And it was a funeral train—with the mourners themselves slated to be the soon departed. . . .

I knew we were headed for Embick's own sanitorium because of the large lettering on the back of the ambulance—but I hadn't the vaguest idea where it was located. At the end of nearly an hour's drive, it turned out to be situated in the upper reaches of the Bronx. Now, when for the first time in two days I

would have liked to have had some cops around, I had to end up in an isolated section like this!

The two cars ahead went into the private entrance of the hospital and I ordered my jockey over to the curb. I counted out the bills I owed the guy, handed them to him along with a good-sized tip. I couldn't walk into this trap without some promise of help—even though the cops might quite possibly shoot me on sight. I'd send this cabby for the police, and the way to make sure, was to tell him who I was.

"Listen, son," I snapped at him. "The cops want me for murder. I'm Dave Random, kill-crazy Shamus—"

He goggled at me in fear. "Geez, mister—I won't tell nobody! I wouldn't dare—" And with that he slammed the hack into gear and roared away!

I stood there, dazed. Of all the crazy breaks! There was nothing to do but tackle that murder sanitorium single-handed!

IT WAS easy enough getting into Embick's place. I pushed through the revolving front door and found myself blocked by a reception desk. A middle-aged, horse-faced nurse sat behind the desk. Her uniform was a starched, spotless white, and her skin looked freshly scrubbed. Even her horn-rimmed glasses looked antiseptic as they glistened in my direction. She didn't say anything; only her eyebrows moved inquisitively.

"Paul Luttrell," I said. "I understand he was ordered to the hospital suddenly. I'd like to see him for a moment."

Horse-face looked shocked at the suggestion. "That would be impossible," she decreed. "Mr. Luttrell is an emergency case; an immediate operation is necessary. He's being prepared for surgery now."

He was being prepared for more than

surgery, I knew. He was slated to die on the table—and the operation would be successful *because* the patient died. My feelings must have shown on my face, only the nurse took it for personal concern.

“However, if you’re a close friend of the family,” she said, “you may wait in Doctor Embick’s office. Miss Luttrell is there now.”

She pushed a button on the desk, and a male orderly came briskly down the hall. I tried to think fast then, but it didn’t do any good. Should I beat it? Would I be of more use free and on the outside—or should I blunder on ahead and do what I could as I went? As far as I could see, I wasn’t going to play the role of the Marines no matter what I did. And by that time I was already following the orderly.

He opened a door marked *Private* at the far end of the hall, and waved me through. As I stepped forward, the door closed behind me—and I heard a faint click, as though a well-oiled lock had been bolted home. But I didn’t think of that just then. I was looking at Dorothy on the far side of the luxurious office—and the expression on her face made me wonder if I wasn’t really a rat. Maybe I was wrong, after all.

“So you wouldn’t listen,” she said bitterly, acidly. “You had to precipitate a tragedy through childish curiosity!” Her lips were trembling as she fought back her sobs. She flung herself into a chair with a helpless little gesture of defeat. “And I begged you to stay away.”

“It doesn’t matter about me, Dorothy,” I told her. “The police are after *me* now—no one else. But I thought you’d tell me your story before they finally caught up with me. I’d really like to hear it. And maybe I could be of some help. You can trust me, child.”

Evidently Dorothy wanted to talk. Her sad, fear-haunted eyes studied me for a

moment. Then she began. “Three years ago dad had a bad accident. He’d been at his club, at a banquet, and had stayed on later to have a few drinks. Then, on the way home, he . . . he ran down two people with his car! A man and his young son. They were poor working people. The man was badly injured, and the child was . . . killed!”

“Did your father see all that himself?” I asked.

Dorothy shook her head. “In the attempt to avoid the accident, father wrecked the car and injured himself. He was unconscious until the next day. But Doctor Embick happened to be at the scene. He treated both father and the victim, McClung, while they were in the hospital.”

“And what about the fatality, Dorothy?”

“That’s where Doctor Embick was so fine! He could see no purpose in having a charge of homicide brought against dad—especially since he’d had a few drinks before the accident. So, with McClung’s permission, the boy’s death was written off as a hit-run crime by some person unknown. In return, dad promised to take care of Howard McClung for the rest of his life—and to spare no money in an attempt to restore the use of his crippled limbs. I don’t know much about law, but such an agreement among the three probably increased the charge from homicide to one of murder. Collusion in concealing a homicide would convict all three.”

I nodded. “So your father supported McClung handsomely, and at the same time, no doubt, paid Embick for costly therapy for the cripple, for consultations and diagnoses with specialists, for high-priced treatments and expensive operations. He must have been handing out plenty! And I suppose it all went to Doctor Embick.”

“It did take huge sums—but father

was willing to do anything to expiate his sin of killing and maiming innocent people. He told me he was eager to pay. It lessened his sense of guilt.

"He went each day to see McClung. In poor health or not, he felt it his duty. And it was the living evidence of the terrible wrong he'd done, the constant reminder of the tragedy he'd caused, that was breaking his health. That's why I went to see McClung tonight. I have money of my own, and I was going to offer it to him if he'd go away—just get

on father. I'd never heard of McClung before—nor of father's daily visits to see him. The very secrecy convinced me something was wrong.

"So I wrote you last night. I believed the girl. But when I told Embick about it today, asking him if such a mystery could be behind dad's failing health, he told me he knew about the case. Father had to explain the whole thing then—the secret he'd kept for three years. And it was then I saw how a girl could turn such knowledge to her

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out of father's sight. Maybe then dad's health would improve.

"But when I got to the house—well, you know what had just happened! If I was afraid of the police finding out about father before, now I was terrified he and Embick would be accused of a second killing!"

I let out a deep breath. What a setup to force a man to extort money from *himself*—willingly! Both moral and legal pressure had been brought to bear—with the sucker putting the pressure on himself!

HOW long have you known of this 'tragedy', Dorothy?"

"Since yesterday," she said quietly. "I'd known all along, of course, about dad's failing health—had often wondered about it. He seemed so depressed, at times so frightened. Then, yesterday, Nancy Corliss asked me to meet her. She said she thought McClung wasn't a cripple at all—and maybe he and the chauffeur were working some sort of trick

own use! Embick told me Nancy had a doubtful past. McClung hired her over his objections, he said. He said she'd probably guessed the truth—that dad, Embick and McClung were concealing a death—and that she wanted me to investigate and be convinced of the crime myself. Afterward, he said, she probably planned to extort money from me as the price of her silence. Father begged me to forget everything—for his sake."

"And after Nancy was so conveniently killed? What then?"

"Frankly," she said, embarrassed, "I didn't think you'd done it. I thought McClung had killed her when she tried to get money from him. Remember, all three men were facing a murder charge if the truth came out! But I tried not to think about it. No matter who had killed her, no matter what happened—I had to protect my father and the doctor who had risked his professional reputation to save him from jail!"

Now I tried to explain the whole thing to Dorothy again. I told her there never

had been a son; that McClung had recovered rapidly from his injuries, which were only slight; that all the treatments and operations her father had paid for had been phony—simply dough in Embick's pocket; that the cripple had been living like a king as a result of the fraud; that it was all a frame—with McClung, in the end, an unwilling partner who couldn't escape his self-made trap.

But she was still doubtful. There were two explanations—hers and mine. As long as her father stood the slightest chance of being criminally involved, she was going to stick by him. I told her in detail about my own frame—the removal of Nancy, who'd guessed too much; the intended removal of me, who might have learned too much in the letter Dorothy had sent. Then I explained how Embick had finally seen the game was finished—and had removed both McClung and the butler to protect himself and his partner, Luther.

"Neither you nor I nor your father will leave this sanatorium alive!" I told her brutally. And for the first time panic and grudging belief was coming into Dorothy's eyes. "And if you don't believe me," I ended up, "just try to leave this room right now!"

Dorothy let out a little cry. Then she was across the room, tugging and pounding at the door. That solid barrier was locked tight. We were prisoners. And the fact seemed to prove to the frightened girl everything I'd said—but it proved it too late.

I hopped over to the window, but Embick's office was barred on the outside. Then I searched desperately for a sight of the police squad the cabbie might have dared summon—and I saw nothing. After that, as a last despairing chance, I tried Embick's office phone—but, as I'd expected, the switchboard had its instructions. They refused me any connection.

THEN, as though at a signal, the door was unlocked and Embick himself stepped into the room. He was holding a gun in one hand, and I could tell from his expression he'd been listening to us.

"You're a bright boy, Random," he said. "Much too bright!"

"You don't dare kill us here, Embick," I bluffed. "With Nancy, McClung and the butler wiped out earlier, another triple killing at your own hospital would certainly tag you as the one-man massacre artist. You alibied Luther two hours ago—but you couldn't alibi yourself! It was only your professional reputation that saved you!"

Embick smiled easily; he was sure of himself. "It's open season on you, Random. The cops'll thank me for erasing you. As for old man Luttrell, he's very sick. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't survive the operation. And who can tell what a grief-crazed girl will do? Something insane—like jumping out of a window or wrecking her car." He stood there, his eyes over-bright and that quizzical, cruel little smile playing about his mouth- corners.

I could tell by the hard set of his eyes it was coming now. I braced myself for it. And I wondered desperately what I could do to save Dorothy—if, in any way, I could use Embick's shot as a signal to the cops. I saw I couldn't—but at the last moment I tried one final stratagem—rusty and cobwebbed as it was.

"There's someone behind you, Embick," I said quietly. "A cop!"

Embick laughed, as I knew he would. "Then I guess I'm licked!" he mocked me. "Why, I can even feel his gun poking into the back of my neck right now! Try something new, Random!"

And then, so help me, it happened! A hand came around the edge of the door and shoved a Police Positive against Embick's hairline! A detective followed

the hand. He disarmed Embick and scowled at me.

"How in God's name can you see around corners, Random?" he asked. "And tell me why you didn't wait until he'd condemned himself a little more?" He leered at me deliberately. "He *might* not have shot you before I'd heard all I wanted. Now we'll have to beat it out of him the hard way—and he'll get what was coming to you."

More cops were coming into the room now, and I could see the cab driver in the background excitedly pointing me out to each succeeding member of the force. The cop Luther had slugged was among them too. Without a word he swung Embick around and planted a looping left on his jaw. Embick went down—but the cop seemed to be the worse hurt. He was dancing around the room and holding his fist.

"This paw's awful sore," he gasped.

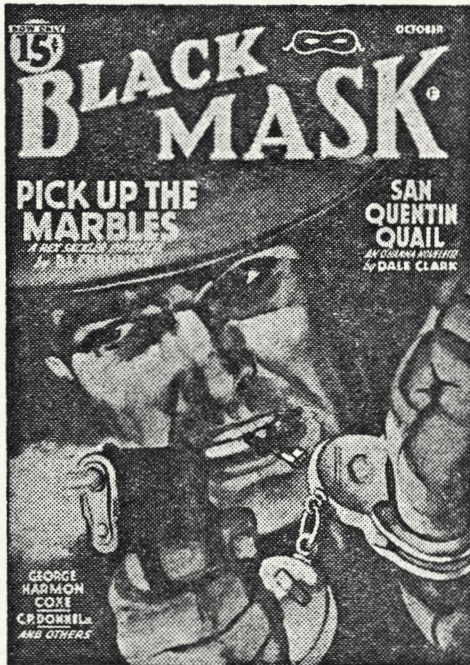
"That guy Luther's got a head like a rock. He *had* a head like a rock, I mean."

Dorothy's small hand was in mine as we were herded out to the waiting wagon. I knew we'd all have a long session at headquarters—but everything was under control now. A detective stood in front of Luttrell's room until he could be removed to another hospital—and a second dick had one of the nurses in tow. She was the titian-haired doll who'd framed me that morning. She was hysterical—and admitting plenty.

Did I say everything was under control? My heart wasn't exactly under control as Dorothy and I rode in the Black Maria, sitting close together and grinning at each other like a couple of high-school kids.

Even a hard-boiled private cop is new to some experiences. Like being head man at a wedding, for instance. . . .

THE END



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"If you go out that door," she said, "you will get a bullet in the back."



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CHAPTER ONE

The Girl in the Rain

SO MANY things make a beginning, it's difficult for me to know where to start. I guess I should start with the night I met Carol Stevens on the Manhattan side of the George Washington bridge. Not on the land side. We were both out on the bridge in the darkness, close to the Manhattan side. Looking down, we were barely over the river. I noticed this when I first picked the spot, because I wondered whether the Hudson River was deep or shallow at that point. It seemed a crazy thing to do, to debate on depth. When you are jumping off a bridge to commit suicide, you really can't be too particular.

That's why I was on the bridge. It was a Monday, raw with rain and shrouded

with a thin fog that was making a damp, cold night of it. But I didn't care any longer.

I didn't know that Carol Stevens was watching me. But she was—this girl who liked to walk in such weather

When I started to climb over the railing, my nerve was pretty good, and there wasn't much to keep me from jumping. New York had been a pretty rotten deal for a Dakota boy come to make good; and when you're broke and haven't had a meal in three days, and find people afraid of the look in your face, it breaks your spirit. You don't need a good deal of courage to do the job.

But Carol Stevens touched my arm. . . .

I saw her frightened face, white in the mist; a sweet face, with a young lost look in the eyes and a small mouth that trembled. She said faintly, "You—you mustn't do that."

I could have shaken her off easily—she was barely touching me. But the look, the interest in her eyes made me hesitate. I came back and I said, with a smile, "Don't be alarmed. I thought I saw a piece of change on the ledge there. I was going out to get it."

She knew I was lying. She looked at my eyes and I could tell that she knew it.

I said, "What's your name?" to unfasten our eyes.

"Carol," she said. "Carol Stevens. What's yours?"

I said, "Jim Holiday. You're a nice girl, and I appreciate your thought. But you oughtn't to be out alone in this kind of night. You're too pretty."

"I like the rain. I was just walking. Then I saw you. I thought—" She laughed nervously. "Guess I've been reading too many melodramatic books, Jim. What do you do?"

"I don't do anything. I'm from Wells, North Dakota. I've been around for six months."

"No job?"

"No. I'm broke. That's why the quarter out on the ledge looked good to me."

She knew there was no quarter on the ledge.

"You'd better run along," I said.

"How about walking with me?" she asked. She was still trembling a little. "I'd like to have some one to talk to. It gets lonesome in the rain."

"Then why not go home?"

"It's lonesome there too," she said. "I'm all by myself in a three-room apartment. Walk back with me, and I'll make you some coffee."

"I'll walk with you," I said. "But you'll not make me any coffee. How could you take a chance on a bum like me?"

"You're no bum," Carol said quietly.

So I walked her home, and I went up with her. She had a nice little place. I got a chance to clean up, and she made me some coffee. It was like being alive

again, having a friend. Carol had a spinet piano and lots of sheet music, and after I'd finished the coffee and sandwiches she made, I played for her.

"You play beautifully," she said. "Can you play this one—High on a Windy Hill?"

I took the music and played it. Carol sang. She sang it like an angel would have sung it; she had a wonderful voice. And then I tagged her: Carol Stevens!

"I know you," I said. "You're Vinnie Castro's vocalist. You sing with Castro's band at the Mirador."

"How did you know that?"

"Because I've been plugging at every orchestra in the city to give me a break and play some of my songs."

"A song writer?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Only no one's ever heard any of the things. I came here from Wells half a year ago, with two hundred dollars and a lot of ambition. I haven't got any of either left. I thought it would be easy to ride in with my stuff; make a million and become famous. Instead—well, there wasn't any quarter on that bridge."

"Play something for me," she said. "Some of your own songs."

I played a couple of the tunes I'd been trying to peddle: The Moon is Low, The Dark Hills, Love is a Mirage. Her eyes got wide and I could see she liked them.

"They're wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I ought to know! I sing songs every night! Jim, they're beautiful. The only other man who can write melodies like that is Vinnie Castro himself—and his are few and far between."

I said, "Glad you like them."

"Like them? They're terrific!" she said enthusiastically. "You give me those copies and I'll show them to Vinnie tonight when we open for the supper show. I'll eat my hat if he doesn't ask you to let him introduce them."

"Why are you doing all this for me?" I asked. "Are you sorry for me?"

"No, it isn't that," she said. "I don't know. . . ."

But I knew, and I was glad. That was the night we met—the night we fell in love. . . .



I DIDN'T care much for Vinnie Castro from the beginning. He was too much on the greasy side—a slick-haired, dark-skinned charmer with one of those fixed smiles and perfect, white teeth. He had one of the best bands in the country—warm brass with a shuffle rhythm—and his records sold like hot cakes.

But more than that, Vinnie Castro was one of the most popular composers in the racket. He had a top ASCAP rating, and he had done the score to numerous Broadway musicals. He had a melodic style that was difficult to imitate. The fact that my own style was a dead ringer for his didn't mean that I was imitating him, either. It just happened to be the way I wrote.

Anyway, he must have liked what he heard of my stuff that first night when Carol took the sheet music down to him. When she came back, late in the morning (she let me hold down a couch while she was gone) she said that Castro wanted to see me, first thing in the morning.

"You're in, Jim," Carol said happily. "I could see it in his eyes. These tunes are Vinnie's dish."

"That's swell," I said.

"Let me stake you to ten dollars to get yourself a place to stay and to get fixed up," Carol suggested. "You can pay me back out of the advance you get tomorrow. I think Vinnie will want to publish your songs himself. He has his own house, you know, under license from BMI. He worked that so he could keep

on the air when the ASCAP trouble came up. How about it?"

"All right," I said. "I can't afford to be proud with you. But I hope you know what you've done. It wasn't enough just meeting you. Then all this kindness. You asked for it, Carol. If I fall in love with you. . . ."

She looked at me steadily. "Maybe I wouldn't mind that."

"All right," I said. "You're committed."

I got a little room in a cheap hotel on 44th Street, bought a razor and some things, and made a new man of myself. I had my suit pressed, and by the time nine o'clock rolled around next morning, I looked respectable, if not prosperous.

I went to the Mirador Hotel to see Vinnie Castro. As I say, I didn't go for him much. He was good looking, charming, pleasant, dishonest and sneaky.

"Holiday," he said, as we had breakfast together, "you have some pretty fair stuff in this batch. Got any more?"

"Some, not many," I said. "Most of them are in my head. I don't write them down much. To tell you the truth, I got so discouraged being unable to peddle these things, I gave up for awhile."

"But you've got a lot in mind?"

"Plenty."

He didn't say anything for a little while. And then, suddenly, he asked, "How would you like to work for me? I'll pay you a hundred a week to ghost for me."

I was surprised. I said, "Ghost for you? I don't get it."

"A hundred dollars a week to write music for me. I sign my name to the stuff—Vinnie Castro songs. You remain anonymous, and nobody knows anything about it."

"That's a funny thing for a guy like you to suggest," I said. "What do you want with my songs? You write your own."

He lowered his voice, staring at me queerly. "Listen, Holiday, you're young, you're ambitious, you're just beginning. Me, I've been writing music for a long time. It comes pretty hard."

I shook my head. "It's my music, Mr. Castro. I've got to have my name on it. What I write is mine."

"Two hundred a week. That's final. Listen, kid, I'm in kind of a spot. I've got contracts to fill. I've got a score for a Hollywood picture, a musical comedy for Sam Lauber, my weekly radio spot with a new Castro tune every week. I've got big advances on all that stuff and I haven't got a thing in the larder. I've tried to get a ghost before, but there wasn't a soul could match my style. You've got it, Holiday, and I'm willing to pay for it."

"But it's my stuff," I said. "Why should I sell it for two hundred a week, while I last?" I frowned. "Besides, it's crooked. If my songs are good enough to pass as yours, they're worth money to me, not you. I don't want any part of the deal."

"Hell, man—" he started angrily. Then, his eyes smouldering, he paused. His voice was more friendly when he spoke again. "Carol's a good friend of yours?"

"Never saw her before last night," I said.

"I see," he said. "She's a nice girl though, eh?"

"The best."

"Maybe you're in love with her," Castro suggested sleekly.

"Maybe I am," I answered, resenting the fact that it was none of his business. "She's one in a million."

Castro nodded. There was something in his eyes that bothered me, and I wish it had bothered me enough then. I should have walked out and tried peddling my stuff elsewhere. But I was desperate, and for a moment, I even thought of selling

some of my things to him and getting enough money to make a fresh start.

He said, "Well, then, how's about this? Seventy-five for me, twenty-five for you—and equal billing on the songs. I'll plug them, get them into the big money with my name. You know you can't do it without me. You need me and I need you."

I still didn't like it, but what could I do? I was broke and young and I'd been knocked around plenty. This was a step up the ladder, a break, a chance to make the right contacts. A chance to go someplace.

I said, "Okay."

Castro stood up and shook hands with me. His hand was cold and clammy. "Good. We'll go over to my office on Broadway where we can draw up the papers. Then you go to work. I need about fifteen tunes as soon as you can turn them out. Can you do it?"

"Yes," I said, "But it'll be pretty tough work."

Castro shrugged. "That won't hurt you."

CHAPTER TWO

Music—or Murder . . .

WE WENT to his office. The contracts were drawn up and signed. He drew them up himself, with just the two of us there. I asked about a witness, but he said it wasn't necessary.

He gave me my copy and then he said, "I can't take chances with you, Holiday. I need the stuff desperately. I've got an aunt down in the village—owns of those old brownstones. She lives there by herself. I'm going to give her a ring and send you down. You're going to work right there until you've got some stuff to deliver and you need a rest. There won't be a soul to bother you—good piano, all the materials, radio and whatnot. I used

to do all my work there. Rhyming dictionaries—everything you need. Here's the card. You go right down there. *And don't tell a living soul where you're going!*"

"But I want Carol to know—"

"I'll tell Carol for you. But I don't want anyone to know about this. It would ruin me. I'm trusting my reputation to you, Holiday, a perfect stranger."

He softened me up with that stuff. It was like putting me on my honor. As if I were a Boy Scout. I took it hook, line and sinker. He gave me the address and I went down to Greenwich Village. It was an old brownstone on Charles Street, and it looked pretty depressing. All the windows were boarded up; the place looked deserted, even haunted. I knocked on the door. An elderly little woman with gray hair and a tight, hatchet face opened the door and I went in. I didn't come out of that house for five months, and I was lucky to get out at all. . . .



OF WHAT is murder made? If you read the newspapers, you think it is all violence, and jealousy, and blackmail and envy and frustrated love.

But murder is made of much subtler stuff than that. Those are the obvious things.

Murder is made of a man's dark purpose. Of a piece of jingly music. Of a girl met in the night on a misty bridge. Of solitude, imprisonment, and a man's life, running dry of all the things that made it great. Of a little old woman with the heart of a monster.

It began innocently enough. I put Mrs. Castro down as an eccentric. The house was dark and gloomy, if you wanted it that way, but it was comfortably furnished, and there was plenty of electricity. But there was not a window in the

place. Every window was boarded up.

She looked at the card I gave her and she said, "Yes, I understand. Vincent sent you. I will show you to your room."

"He said he'd telephone about me," I supplied. "I'm going to write music here."

"There is no telephone." There was a strange finality in her voice. "I will show you your room. Please do not leave it without permission. I do not like to be startled."

The room was very large, well-furnished with a fine bed, easy chairs, a spinet piano, a small recording machine, a good radio set, an adjoining bathroom. Plenty of lined paper, supplies; everything a composer could hope for. I made myself comfortable.

I didn't like Mrs. Castro. She had a lean wolfish look, tight-faced and cruel. Nothing suspicious in her eyes; it was there boldly, a cold, calculating expression that chilled me a little.

I tried to forget her, and I peeled off my coat, rolled up my sleeves and went to work. I had a lot of nice themes running around inside my head, and I started playing them and putting them down on the sheets. I had a lot of lyric tag lines, and I consulted these and settled down to earnest writing.

I worked through to dinner time and never even knew it. First thing, the door opened, and Mrs. Castro came in. For a moment, I almost liked her. She brought me a perfectly delicious supper on a tray, set it on my table.

"Do you have any baggage?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I was pretty short-handed. Guess I'll have to run out later and pick up some things."

"Not at all," Mrs. Castro said. "There are plenty of things in the bureau and the closet. They'll fit you—pyjamas and things. My son said he would come by tonight to see you."

"Your son?" I looked surprised. "He said you were his aunt."

"Yes. But his mother died when he was a child. I raised him." She said it fiercely. "I raised him to be what he is—I reared him to fame. He is a genius, he shall always have fame? I taught him that way, and nothing will ever stop it. Nothing!"

She paused then to measure me with fanatical eyes. "If there is anything else you would like," she said, "press the buzzer over the piano and I'll come up."

I wondered why she said this. I found out when I tried to leave the room later. I couldn't get out. The room was securely locked on the outside. I wasn't exactly claustrophobic, but after all, there wasn't a window in the place. Without electric light, it was black as a tomb. I beat on the door awhile and then I heard some one coming upstairs.

THERE was a peephole in the door and I expected to see Mrs. Castro's eye at it, but when the door opened Vinnie Castro came in. He looked studiously grim; even his flashing smile was grim. "Hello, Holiday, old man," he said. "How's everything going?"

I said, "Castro, I don't like this place. I don't want to work here. I can appreciate that you want to tie me down and make me go to town for you, but I don't like it here. And I don't like your aunt. I'll get a hotel room uptown and work there. No one will disturb me."

"Oh, no," he said. "You stay here."

"But she locked me in!"

"She's just eccentric," Castro said. "Ignore her. Do your work. Fifteen tunes, and you get a vacation. I see you've got something already. How does it go?"

He sat down and played it, singing the lyrics, softly. "Excellent," he said, "really excellent. Just fourteen more."

"Why fourteen? Carol gave you three."

"I'm not going to use those," he told me. "They aren't good enough. Fourteen more."

"But listen, Castro, I don't like it here—"

"Change and the deal is off," he said. "Stick it out and you'll be rich and famous. You'll be glad later that you've got this solitude, believe me. It's worth a thousand hotel rooms. You can really get things done."

He rose. "I'll take this song with me. You get going on the others. I'll polish this up." Then he walked out.

I tried to go after him—but the door was locked. He could have left it open—he wasn't eccentric. . . .

That was when I began to get afraid. I couldn't work anymore that night. I went to bed, but I kept seeing things. I could see Mrs. Castro's tight face in the dark, and always she had a knife in her hand, as if she were going to cut my throat. And when I saw Castro in the dream, he had a gun, and behind it all was the mutter of the Nibelung music of Wagner. I was a chained slave; I was going to be kept there to work.

Next morning I decided that I'd had enough. When Mrs. Castro came with my breakfast, I pulled her inside and held the door open. "I'm leaving," I said. "I've had enough of this place. I'll go crazy cooped up here in this room."

She set the tray down very carefully on the table. She reached into her dress and pulled out a short-barreled revolver. It was loaded. I could see the dull tips of the bullets in the chambers.

"If you go out that door," she said quietly, "you will get a bullet in the back."

She was as cold as ice, and I had a queer sensation, knowing she was capable of shooting.

"What is this?" I asked tremulously. "I'm a song writer. Why do you want to keep me cooped up—"

"I do what my son tells me, to the letter," she said evenly. "He tells me that if you try to leave, I should kill you. So I will. It will not be new, young man. It is an old experience for me. Come away from the door."

I stepped away from the door. She made me sit down in the chair. "After this," she said, "you will receive your meals through the panel in the door."

"I wouldn't touch your food now," I said.

"Then you'll starve."

"There's no point in keeping me," I said, challengingly. "I won't write another piece of music!"

"Then you'll be killed," Mrs. Castro replied without hesitation. "Vincent will explain all that to you when he comes today."

She stepped out of the room, holding that gun on a line with my stomach.

And there just wasn't anything I could do.

CHAPTER THREE

Castro's Cellar

CASTRO came at four o'clock. He opened the door and entered breezily. He wasn't armed—at least, not that I could see. I thought of slugging him and making a break for it, but I had an idea that even with Castro out cold, it wouldn't be so simple. I had an idea that if both he and the old lady were dead at my feet, it still would be hard to get out of the place. How could I do it? There was only one thick, oaken door. I'd have to knock it down.

"Hello, Holiday," Castro greeted. "I want you to listen to the band tonight from the Mirador at nine. Your new piece, *I Remember*, is going to be aired."

"I want to get out of here," I said.

"Done anything today?" he asked, as if he hadn't heard me.

"I'll never write another note of music while I'm in this house," I said.

"That's too bad." Castro's eyes were as expressionless as a snake's. "Let's go downstairs, Holiday. Want to show you something."

We went downstairs, beyond the main floor—into the cellar.

In the cellar floor there were two fresh patches of cement.

"Just what is this?" I asked.

"That one," he said, "wasn't so good. He had a nice style, like mine. But he only lasted for four songs before he went to pieces."

"So you killed him?" I said. "Castro, I'm no kid. I don't believe all this mumbo-jumbo. You don't kill a guy for a song."

"Perhaps not. He tried to blackmail me when his talent gave out. He was set to spread it about that Vinnie Castro was washed up. My aunt took care of him."

"And the other one?"

"My former agent," he said. "He worked with the song writer, tried to bleed me for silence. You see, Holiday, it was more than just a song. Each tried to do something to me that would have ruined me. Maybe I am washed up. I can't write a decent tune anymore, but I've done three hundred in my time. And it's just paying off now, when I'm finished. I'm not going to let the work of a lifetime slip away when the big dough is starting to come in. That's why you are going to do my songs for me."

I said nothing.

"And when you stop writing decent songs which I can use," he said, "you'll join these two in the cellar. Remember that. You write songs and stay in your room. You'll never get out of this house again alive. That's the way it is. That's the way it's going to be. And here again it's more than just songs, see? Carol's nuts about you. And you're in love with her. Well, that is going to be changed too."

I happen to figure Carol in my plans. I'm going to marry her myself. Do you understand?"

"Sort of killing two birds with one stone," I said.

"Exactly. You'd be dead now, but you're valuable to me. Remember, Holiday, you write songs and you live. A minimum of one a week. When you fall behind and go sour, you're finished. You've got a lot of talent, so you should last a long time. Is that clear?"

"Yes," I said.

"If you make a pass at my aunt, or attempt to break out of here—which is almost impossible, Holiday—it means execution. I can't afford to take any chances, you see."

"All right," I said. "You've got me."

He smiled in a sinister way, and took me back to my room and left me there. . . .



FIVE months is a long time to stay in one place. I got an idea how Admiral Byrd must have felt when he tried that lonesome stretch in the Antarctic.

Five months of beating a piano and writing good tunes; of dreaming and being terrified; of going slowly crazy; of seeing things in the dark . . . the same horrible things over and over.

I wrote more songs than I had to, but I hoarded them, and fed them out one a week. I had to insure my life this way for it was possible I might get sick or go blank or something. I kept eight songs ahead of myself. While I was working I dreamed of Carol, who was a million miles way. What did she think? Did she figure I had gone back to Dakota, taken a runout on her?

But I never dreamed of her at night. I kept seeing things in the dark: the slabs of concrete in the basement; the face of Mrs. Castro. . . . and the ugly mouth of the short-barreled gun. . . .

ALL the time I tried to figure a way out. You'd think offhand that there was some clever way a fellow could break out of a place like that. There were obvious things like yelling blue murder. But the place was sound-proofed like a broadcast studio, and screaming would have earned me nothing but a bullet. I didn't want to tangle with Mrs. Castro until I was certain I could take her—because if I missed they would finish me. There was no chance to make weapons—she fed me everything in paper, with a paper knife and fork and spoon and cup. And there was no opportunity to use a weapon because I never saw her anymore; the food came through a panel.

Even Castro gave up visiting me. As long as there was a tune a week, he was satisfied. I had to send a tune through the panel every Friday on the tray.

I could have almost anything I wanted. I received a morning and evening newspaper. I knew what day it was. I listened to the radio and it saved me from going mad. I used to tune in on the Mirador, to hear my own music played by Vinnie Castro and his orchestra. ". . . *And now, ladies and gentlemen, a brand new Castro melody. . . .*" It was thrilling and ironical to hear your own music, sounding so beautiful, and yet belonging to some one else.

I thought one night of setting fire to the house; I almost did so. It would have driven everything into the open. But the chances were that I would burn alive. Mrs. Castro, the she-devil, would never have bothered to unlock me. And mine would have been the first room to go.

I tried to write lyrics which Carol might understand, about how we met on the bridge and how I was now a captive, separated from her by Satan, yet hoping to get to her somehow. But Castro always changed these lyrics.

Living constantly by the radio, I heard a hobby program one day, headed by a Dr.

Sutter. It was impossible for me ever to contact him as I would have liked, yet the thing worked out miraculously.

The day I first tuned in on him, Dr. Sutter was describing the construction of an electric phonograph, for the young tinker-about-the-house. He explained each step with remarkable simplicity and clarity, and at the end of the program, he remarked that we should all be on hand the following week to start construction on a small radio transmitter.

"All you need for this transmitter," said Dr. Sutter "is an empty spool of thread, some small wire, a 50,000 ohm resistor and a small electrolytic condenser, along with a receiving condenser from any old radio set. You'll be surprised at what you can do with these. And oh yes, the transmitting tube will cost you one dollar and forty-seven cents; ask for a 117L7GT." Whereupon he repeated these instructions and said he would speak again on Monday.

I'd written most of it down, but even then I thought it was rather hopeless. I didn't know anything about radio, and certainly I had no chance of getting these parts. Or had I?

I looked at the list, then opened up the radio receiver that Castro had left for my benefit. I did find a 50,000 ohm resistor of $\frac{1}{2}$ watt rating, as Dr. Sutter had said. And there was the regular tuning condenser that you turn to find your stations, and the electrolytic condenser. I only knew this because the word was printed on the gadget. But no tube.

I broke a tube then and when I sent back my tray that night I put the remnants on the tray and wrote, "*Please get a 117L7GT tube for the radio. Doesn't work without it.*"

Next day, there was the tube on the breakfast tray. I was elated. I waited for Monday, and when Dr. Sutter came on, I was ready with my pencil. He started by explaining what the nine prongs on the bottom of the tube meant and how they should be connected. I did not understand very much of what he said, but that night, in a piece of wood, I mounted all the parts as best I could, without solder, just wiring them together. So at least I got really started on something.

This continued through the week. Each day he would explain a new circuit. I suppose it was simple to many, but to me it was terribly intricate. The payoff came on Friday when he said, "Now you need what is called a radio crystal of some frequency between 7000 kilocycles and 7300 kilocycles. Plug this into its holder, turn on your juice, tune up your set, and you will be transmitting each time you close the key. You must learn the code, of course, and under no circumstances hook the set to an antenna unless you have a license. But you can send to your own receiver in your own apartment with this little transmitter, and it will be a lot of fun."

He then said that next week they would make a photo electric cell or what-not, and I felt crushed.

I wondered whether I might put it over on Mrs. Castro. I sent a note that night: "*Need crystal for radio ground for 7100 kilocycles. Old one is worn out. Any radio shop.*"

By George, next day it was there in a little black box, and I plugged it into its holder in the transmitter.

I didn't have any key to send with, and I didn't know the code or how to send it anyhow. Also, I couldn't hear anything

on the receiver because it still had a tube missing.

So I dropped the whole thing for awhile, because I didn't want to make her suspicious. I kept writing my songs and seeing things in the dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Key to the Door

ONE day Vinnie Castro visited me to see how everything was going. "Damn you," he said savagely, "Carol's still in love with you, and there's no way to snap here out of it. She's trying to find you. I wish that I could kill you, Holiday. Only you won't be buried in the cellar. You're going to be found somewhere, so that she knows you're dead. That'll break the spell."

"Kill me then," I said. "I'm going crazy here."

"Not so fast," he said. "You're writing wonderful stuff, some of it better than anything I ever wrote. So you had better keep pounding it out. Do you listen to it on the air?"

"How can I?" I said. "A tube blew out in the set."

"My aunt gave you another one."

"I know, but she sent the wrong one. I guess I asked for the wrong one by mistake."

"I'll get you a tube and you can listen. Holiday, I'm going to put the pressure on you. Two songs a week—or else!"

Then he left. He wanted me to write myself out faster. Then he would get rid of me.

That night, a new tube arrived. I plugged it into the receiver and the receiver worked, badly, but it worked. It sounded pretty rough, and I figured that was because I'd taken a couple of things out of it for the transmitter.

I plugged in the transmitter and when it had warmed, I turned the condenser.

Nothing happened. Then I turned the receiver to 7100 ky. in the short wave end of the band and tuned the transmitter. Every now and then I'd hear a sort of chirpy whistle. I didn't have a key, I could only hold two pieces of wire that should have gone to the key together. But every time I did that, a chirpy whistle resulted at 7100 on the dial.

I had to find out the code. I asked for a dictionary, a big dictionary. Mrs. Castro gave it to me. I turned to the Continental Code, and there it was! The whole thing!

I think I had been there three months when I first saw that code. I memorized that code and for a whole month I spent all my time sending that chirpy whistle. I could listen to it. I would send: "*This is James Holiday being held a prisoner by Vincent Castro at 12 Charles Street, New York City, in a deserted old brownstone house. Please tell police at once. I am to be murdered soon.*"

A month of that, all the time. And one day, Dr. Sutter on his program said, "Remember the little radio transmitter we constructed some time ago? My letters tell me they have been very successful. Some listeners have written in to ask what they have to do in order to hook it up to an antenna and really get in communication with other amateur—"

I didn't hear the rest. My heart fell. I'd been sending for an empty month without an antenna. The only person in the world who could hear my signals was myself.

L UCKILY, the receiver had an outside antenna. I just hooked that to the little transmitter. I had to retune the whole works and then start sending again. There was only three or four watts output, Dr. Sutter had said, which was almost nothing. But I kept at it, morning, noon and night. I got better at sending, too. And by listening to other

amateurs, some sending slowly, I began to understand the code.

But no one answered me; no one heard me. I just kept trying. And I got in such a frenzy, I wasn't writing music. Before I knew it, I had gone through my backlog of songs, and one Friday morning I had no music to send out on the tray.

Vinnie Castor came that afternoon. "No song, Holiday?" he said. "There had better be one by tomorrow morning. If not, it's the end. It may be the end anyhow. I'm not going to be needing you much longer. I've got enough contracts to let me retire, played right, and I've got plenty of your songs that I haven't even used yet."

"I had a good idea," I said, "but I was afraid you would kill the lyrics. It was going to be called *In a Boarded-up Brownstone House*, and it's something I've had in the heart of me."

"Sounds good," he said. "I may let it stand. That's a swell title, and if you feel it that way, it might be a good song. Go ahead and write it. If you don't try to send hidden messages I'll let it stand."

I had it for him in the morning. I worked like a dog on it. I didn't try to

send any message. I just wrote a haunting thing about a boarded-up brownstone house which had captivated me, but the house was old and haunted now and love was a thing of the past.

I listened on the radio for it, and he played it straight, the way I had written it. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever done. Then I went back to transmitting. Over and over again, a plea for help. I would listen for some one to answer, but I couldn't translate the dots and dashes well enough to know if anyone had.

That night, some one else came to the house. I heard a commotion downstairs, and then footsteps on the stairs, and next thing my door was unlocked and Carol Stevens rushed in. She threw herself in my arms, and I was so weak with excitement I couldn't say a word.

"I knew," she said. "That song! They've all been your songs. I knew it! There was something of you and your style in all of them. And then the brownstone house—I knew he had an aunt who lived in one, and I guessed—I guessed—I felt in my heart that you hadn't left me, Jim!"

"My God," I said finally, "you should



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never have come here alone like this!"

"She wouldn't let me in—I had to hit her—I knocked her down. Let's go, Jim. Hurry, let's get out of here—"

She came up the stairs, Mrs. Castro did, with the gun in her hand and cold-blooded hate on her face.

I shoved Carol back into my room, shut the door. She had left the key in the lock, and the lock snapped. We were trapped!

"Jim!" Carol whispered, frightened.

"We're finished," I said.

The transmitter was our only chance. I sat with it and kept sending: "*SOS SOS Please help, somebody; please help. Send police to 12 Charles Street, New York City.*"

Carol sat beside me, her face close to mine. She was frightened but happy. "I knew your things from the beginning," she said. "The one about *Misty Night*, I knew you meant that for us. But Vinnie was so clever about everything. I tried to follow him, but he always lost me. He kept asking me to marry him and I kept stalling. Then when you wrote of the brownstone house, it came to me. He used to complain about the taxes he had to pay for his aunt's place. 'Old broken down brownstone,' he used to say. No one ever remembered it. But when you wrote the song—"

I stopped her. "Listen," I said.

Somewhere, far away, a siren was screaming, growing louder and louder.

"Fire?" she asked.

"Wait," I said, breathlessly.

The siren grew noisier, shriller, turned into the street, right to the house. Car doors opened and shut. Fists pounded on the door. Some one fired a couple of shots, and then there were men in the house. Then there was an exchange of sharp shots; feet on the stairs.

A cop with a red face and huge ears and tight blue eyes opened the door. "James Holiday?" he asked.

"Yes," I said faintly. "Yes."

"Come on, sonny boy," he said. "You're finished with this joint."



THE police had shot Mrs. Castro when the old woman attempted a gun battle with them at the door. She died the same curious enigma that she had been alive, her soul wrapped up in her nephew whom she called her son.

As to how they found me, that was quite a story. A radio ham in Melville, Massachusetts had heard my signals but thought they were phoney because I didn't reply to his call. He wrote to the amateur organization—the American Radio Relay League—and they monitored me for a night or two, then informed the New York Police on the chance that it was a real distress call.

The cops took Vinnie Castro easily. He had no idea the jig was up. He was playing at the Mirador for the late show when they arrested him.

Fortunately, I was able to prove my right to all the tunes I had written, for not even Vincent Castro had noticed one little idiosyncrasy I had put in each and every song—an F minor chord in the third bar of every chorus I had written.

Well, you know the rest. I write them, and wife Carol sings them, but the doctor tells her that in a little while she'll be singing solely on the radio for a few months. Becoming a mother just doesn't go on the stage or with a band in a night club.

I still keep seeing things in the dark. It's something I can't stop. You don't live that long with death and get over it too quickly.

But I guess Vinnie Castro sees things in the dark, now, too—different things than I. But he'll be through with all that during the week of September 5th. The State has said so.

THE END

The Man Who Made a Hell

By JOE KENT



The box hummed an instant. . . . Paul saw the lumbering man fall.

Paul Dover's death ray was intended to make the United States forever safe. How was he to guess that he himself would be hunted to the death by the very people he sought to protect—and that his wife's life was destined to be the price of a nation's freedom?

JOE MITCHELL threw down his cigarette and drew a deep breath. "You want to know what I think, Paul?" he asked flatly. "I think you've gone too far! Oh, I know that science must progress, must go ahead! Sure, I'm no scientist—I'm just an ordinary private dick. But I tell you that if you're smart, you'll take that box and destroy it!"

Paul Dover's keen black eyes flared hotly. "That's what people always say, Mitch, when someone invents a new weapon. Yet we have the gun, the bomb, gas—"

"They're different!" Mitchell countered. "A gun doesn't always kill. Bombs can miss; gas can be fought with a mask. But this—this death ray you've made doesn't miss—it hits and kills instantly! Don't you see, Paul? It's too big for human hands to hold. What if it fell into criminal control—a foreign power, say? What then?"

"It won't," Paul said simply. "Dr. Warner and I have made only this one ray-box. We've treated just three plates; each plate is capable of only three ray-exposures. We alone can make more. In other words, in the world now, there are only nine shots for our box. Tonight the investigators from Washington will be here. I will demonstrate it, and turn it over as an army weapon. Then it's out of my hands."

Mitchell sighed and jammed on his hat. He turned to the door.

"In my business, hunches mean a lot. And I've got one now. That little box of yours can make a hell on earth. People just can't be trusted with that much power. Before it's all over, you'll wish to God you'd understood that. But then it will be too late. . . ."

The door closed behind him, but the echo of his warning lingered in the room. Paul deliberately shook his shoulders and turned.

At the desk in the corner, Dr. Madison Warner, his associate, was staring across the lab, his huge, lined face dark and sober.

"I've been thinking, Paul," he said slowly. "Suppose your friend is right? Suppose we have, as they say, ' . . . rushed in where angels fear to tread?'"

"You, too!" Paul exploded angrily.

"Listen, Warner. We've merely done our work in making this death ray. Tonight we turn it over to army secret officials. We haven't committed any crime!"

"Perhaps not a crime, Paul. Perhaps only an unfortunate mistake." The big man rose slowly, holding his hand above his heart. "All day I have been feeling ill, Paul. Nerves, maybe. Maybe my heart. But I really am afraid that we've gone too far."

Dr. Warner put on his hat laboriously, as if it tired him to do so. "I don't think I'll come tonight. You give the demonstration to the investigators. Tell them my heart acted up." He paused at the door. "And Paul, if you too begin to fear, you have my permission to destroy our ray." He closed the door behind him, leaving Paul alone.

Paul Dover stared at the little black box. "No! I won't! I've only done my duty! Someone had to perfect a death ray. Why should I be afraid? I've done nothing wrong. I've only done my work."

He lifted the box and carried it to the massive steel cabinet. He locked it within, then bolted the windows, glancing at his watch. Five o'clock. The secret investigators were due at eight, which was not too far distant now.

Paul went out, making certain to lock the lab securely. As he walked homeward, he thought of Margie. She too would question—not in words, but in her eyes. In their dark, troubled depths would be the same endless question: "Haven't you gone too far, Paul? . . ."



PAUL DOVER faced the three government representatives from Washington. "Gentlemen," he said, "I regret that Dr. Warner, my collaborator, is unable to be here tonight. A slight heart attack keeps him at home, unfortunately."

Then his voice grew deadly serious. "What you are to see tonight, gentlemen, is actually the work of four men—Doctors Warner, Clinton, Lucien, and Reese. They have all assisted me. Ours is no weapon of fantastic impossibility. It is fantastic only in its power—for good, or for evil—depending upon who controls it." He paused. "The use of rays is nothing new, but a death ray whose power is absolute, whose effect is immediate from a distance of over a mile—that *is* new! No man can foresee its criminal possibilities. No man who holds its secret can be too careful."

His slender, trembling fingers lifted the box—a small, black box with a short scope extending from one end. Webs of antennae-like wire wove across the short, circular tube; a tiny slot for the sighting lens opened at the top.

"The beam or ray is revolutionary," Paul explained. "A plate is fed into the box, much as a photographers' plate. Each plate contains the strength for three shots or actions."

"You mean you can use the beam three times before replacing a plate?" one investigator asked.

Paul nodded. "At the present time, for safety's sake, we have created only three plates—the one in the box now, and two others in my cabinet."

"I'm ready to see it work," another of the men said.

Paul moved to the distant end of the lab and pulled back a curtain. There, in two cages, were a dog and a rat.

"If this small-scale demonstration interests you," Paul said, "we may try a larger one. Now, I will stand at the back of the room, turning the ray first on the dog, then on the rat. You will see each die a silent, instantaneous death . . . I am going to turn off the light. Perhaps you will see a tiny needle of flame spit across the room. That will be the ray."

He moved to the wall-switch at the

back of the room. "Gentlemen, do not move from your seats! I don't want you in the line of action."

The overhead lights went out, but one dim bulb burned behind the two cages.

Paul opened the sighting-shutter and sighted the dog. His finger tripped the switch. The box hummed . . . and the dog collapsed without a sound. Paul shifted to the rat; again the box hummed. The rat dropped.

"You see—" Paul spoke into the dark—"The distance can be a mile." He turned to the wall switch, and the room was bathed in light.

Paul moved forward, his face flushed with pride. Then, abruptly, he halted, blinking; his breath drained away. The men still waited, their eyes staring blankly, their bodies rigid. . . .

"No! Oh, God, no!" he cried. "Wake up! It's over! Don't sit there!" Frantically he shook one man. The body slumped to the floor, and Paul knew that these three men were dead!

His eyes raced about the room. All the windows were locked; the door was locked. There was no one else here—only he and three bodies. A slow, rising terror welled upward from his heart, scourging the blood in his veins. He tried to fight it down; to think.

He hadn't let the beam waver—not a fraction. And there had not been enough exposures to kill three men and the two animals as well. He touched the ray-box, then pushed it away with a shudder. His fists clenched as he paced the floor.

The police would call this murder—and no one would believe him innocent! How could they? He went to the steel cabinet, and a cry froze in his throat.

The other two plates were gone! Stolen!

"But, but," he started aloud, "there's not another box! The plates couldn't be used!" Yet the plates were gone; and in his heart Paul knew how the men had



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died—just as had the dog and the rat. He sank into a chair, staring at the wall; trying to think. Moments ticked into minutes; minutes stretched on while he waited.

The imperative blast of the telephone crashed against his ears.

His heart trip-hammered. If he answered—if he didn't . . .

At last he picked up the phone. "Washington calling Paul Dover." The operator's metallic voice crackled across the wire.

Paul managed, "I . . . I'm Paul Dover." The connection clicked. A heavy voice spoke: "Mr. Dover . . . General Headquarters. Did our representatives keep their appointment with you at the arranged time tonight?"

"I—they—yes, they came," Paul said. "We are trying to trace them. On these armament investigations, we plan a strict schedule for their protection. They were due to call us from their hotel some minutes ago. We cannot locate them. They would not break the schedule unless something was seriously wrong. Can you tell us when they left you?"

"When they . . . left?" "You'll have to speak louder, Mr. Dover. When did our men leave?"

The receiver turned slippery in Paul's sweating hand. "Hello, Mr. Dover! Are you there? What's the matter, Dover?" The angry voice thundered through the wire.

Paul sat mute, trembling. "Operator!" the voice roared. "What's the matter down there?"

"What is it?" asked the operator. "The line is still open. Hello, Mr. Dover? Washington still wants you."

The receiver slipped from Paul's fingers and clattered to the floor.

The angry voice continued to issue from the receiver. "Hello, operator! Contact your local police. Have them send a squad

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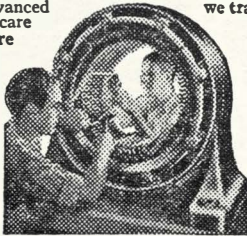
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out to Paul Dover's laboratory immediately. Do you understand?"

"I understand . . ." the operator replied.

Paul started across the room, his eyes on the phone. He could hear the girl's voice as she got the police. Paul went on, backing hypnotically. He passed the dead men. He bumped against the door. He sobbed as his eyes raked the scene a last time. Then he grasped the ray box and whirled. The door slammed shut behind him. He plunged out into the night.

THE distant wail of a siren cut the air, coming nearer. A red beacon blazed down the street. Paul threw himself into a hedge as the car roared past.

They were going to the laboratory—after him. . . .

He stumbled back to his feet and started his groping flight once more. Home! The single blind answer hummed through his mind. Margie was there—she'd know what to do. Margie always knew what to do.

His breath tangled again. The siren was screaming back toward him; again the red beacon shone down the street. Paul ducked into the shadows again as it roared past; then its tires screamed at the next turn.

Going to his house! They were cutting him off! The drag-net was out. There was no place to go. Nowhere to hide!

He lay in the bushes, trying to think. For the first time in his life he knew the flood of hopeless despair through which no thought can rise, from which no plan can form. A hunted murderer!

He groped to his feet and swayed, panting.

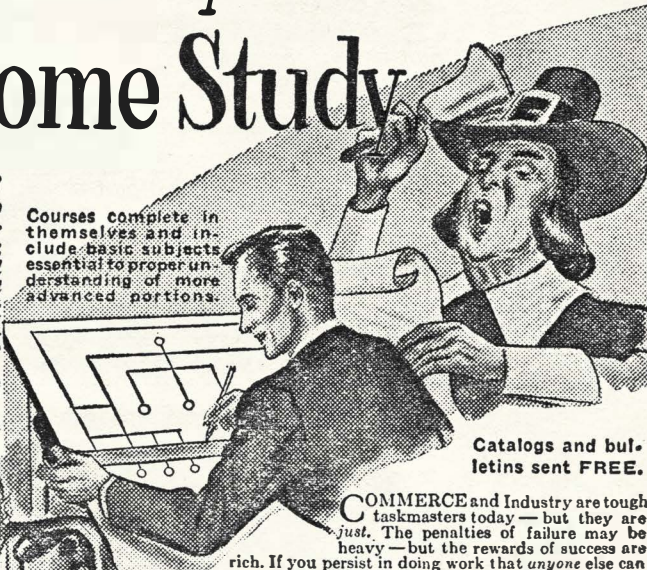
Mitchell's! Mitchell would know what to do! He would hide him. Paul started

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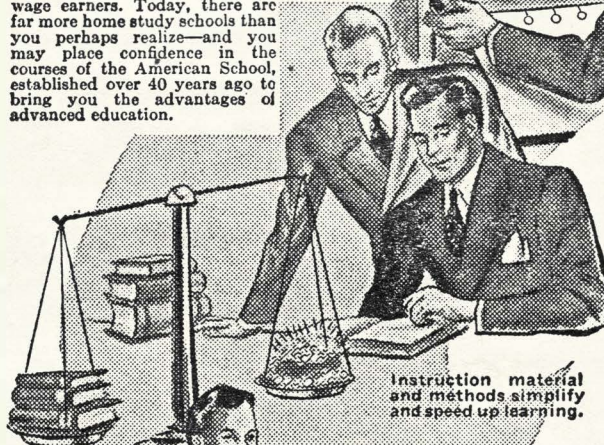
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through the dark, while sirens screamed, coming and going, criss-crossing behind him. The red blazing beacons were driving him to the ground; swelling his heart in his throat.

At last he stumbled up the steps of a lower east side rooming house and leaned against the lobby wall. His fingers touched a bell.

A head appeared at an upper landing. "What is it, down there?" Mitchell called. Then he saw who it was. "Paul! What's the matter, Pa—"

"Don't! Don't call!" Paul sobbed. He pulled himself up the steps and dropped inside Mitchell's room. The man closed the door behind him.

"Lock the door!" Paul whispered to his friend.

"What's the matter with you? What's happened?"

"They're dead! Killed, in my lab. The men from Washington!"

"What!" Mitchell's gray eyes snapped alive.

"Someone killed them when the lights were off! But I didn't do it! I swear I didn't!" He sobbed. "Then headquarters called from Washington. The police are at the lab now! They're at my house, hunting me! They think I did it, Mitch!"

"How were they killed?" Mitchell asked. "Who was there?"

"No one was there but me and the men. Everything was locked. And they were killed with the death ray. There wasn't a sound—no shot, no blood—"

"But you told me that yours was the only ray box!"

"I thought so too," Paul sobbed. "But there's another one now. And my other two plates are gone. Mitch, you've got to help me. You're a private detective."

Mitchell said speculatively, "So a death ray is loose on the world. Your plates are gone . . . you're planted for murder."

(Continued on page 104)

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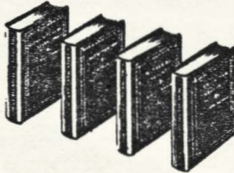
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(Continued from page 102)

His eyes hardened. "I told you, Paul! I begged you to destroy that thing! I—" He stopped, sensing the futility of his words.



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"They all think I did it," Paul said slowly. For a long moment Mitchell didn't answer.

Then he said, "And there's something else, Paul. They took Margie in. They've got her in the City Jail."

"But they can't! Margie's not in this!"

"This case isn't law and order, Paul. They're after you, and they'll stop at nothing. The whole set-up, criminally and psychologically, is against you. You're wanted for murdering army men—that's hell, these days. People say you've taken the ray and gone over to a foreign power."

"They've got Margie," Paul whispered. "What will they do with her?"

"I don't know," Mitchell said. "That's why I'm telling you, Paul. I think you better go in, if you love your wife. Give up. Take the long shot on my turning something up before your trial. If you don't. . . ."

"What—if I don't?"

Mitchell sighed. "A crowd tried to raid the jail this morning. The cops beat

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THE MAN WHO MADE A HELL

them off, but they're afraid to try to move her. There's a mob of five thousand people around that jail. They're ugly, Paul. They say she knows where you are. They're making threats: Either you come in and give up, or they go in and get Margie!"

"No!" Paul leaped erect, his eyes dark and unbelieving. "This can't happen! Things like this don't happen here. I didn't kill those men!"

"In times like these, anything can happen. The people are scared, Paul. That death ray story slipped out, even though the federal boys tried to keep it quiet. It's set public opinion afire. You aren't a criminal to them. You're a demon! A threat to every life and home!"

"They'll kill me for murder if I go in," Paul whispered. "And if I don't, they'll kill Margie." He shook his head. "What can I do, Mitch? What can I do?"

Warily he got to his feet. "I'll go in," he said at last.

"Wait!" Mitchell cautioned. "You can't just walk to the jail, man! You wouldn't get through that crowd alive. The first dick you meet will shoot you down. I'll take you to Captain Moore's house and call him from there. He's hard but straight. Maybe he'll stake you out somewhere."

"Here." He pulled out dark glasses. "Get these on. Put on this hat, too."

They slipped downstairs, and Mitchell stepped outside. He gestured, and a taxi lurched to a stop.

"Get in quick, and keep your head low," Mitchell ordered. Paul stumbled into the back seat, burrowed his chin into the coat. The doors slammed, the car lurched forward.

"Giving up, for something I didn't do," he whispered.

"Shut up, Paul. Try to take it easy. Maybe I'll blow it open." Yet the words were hollow. Deep inside Mitchell knew it was too big. It wasn't a case, like rob-

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bery or murder. It was a fight to control society, a nation.

The cab stopped for a red light. At the corner newsstand, a radio blared; the announcer's vibrant voice crashed against Paul's ears:

"Warning! Police issue this warning to the public! Paul Dover, killer-scientist, has struck again! In flagrant contempt for the drag-net set against him, Dover returned today to the scene of his first crime. Another man is dead!

The bones of Dr. Madison Warner, Dover's associate, were discovered an hour ago in the grate of Dover's furnace, at his laboratory. Identification was established through the victim's burned watch, a ring, and a metal identification plate, all likewise found in the ashes.

The victim was last seen alive at his home this morning, where he was questioned concerning the possible whereabouts of Dover. In the interval, Dover's laboratory has been under constant watch by local and state police. No one saw him return, though all doors and windows were locked and guarded. . . .

THE cab started slowly. Suddenly Paul's fingers closed on the door-handle. He stumbled out into the street, falling with the momentum of the car.

Mitchell said, "Paul! What the—" He ordered the driver to stop, shoved out a dollar. "Go on," he snapped frantically. He hurried back to Paul who was picking himself out of the street, his face bruised and cut, his clothes torn.

"Paul!" Mitchell whispered, "you'll be seen. You can't—"

"The killer got Warner," Paul said slowly. "You know what that means. I can't go in now, Mitchell. I never could go in. Listen—the killer framed me to get me out of the way. That's all I've thought of. Now I see the whole story. He's killed Warner. Tomorrow he'll get the others—Clinton, Lucien, Reese. They worked with me and Warner."

"But why—"
"He's got to! Don't you see? We're the only ones who can fight the death ray.

THE MAN WHO MADE A HELL

We're working on a counter-ray—a beam to fight our own. It isn't ready yet. The murderer will kill them before they finish!

"They think I'm a demon. Well, a demon is loose on the world—with my invention! How he got it, I don't know. How he evaded the drag-net to kill Warner—" Paul gestured emptily. "None of these things could happen, yet all of them have. And he's not through!"

"But what can you do, Paul?" Mitchell whispered frantically.

"I've got to last one more day. I've got to have one last talk with those men before I die. I know more about the counter ray. I must give them my facts. Then when I die, they can fight back. I have to stay out, even—" he choked— "even though they've got Margie. Can't you see, Mitch? It's bigger than my life or the life of my wife. Something I've made can destroy civilization!"

"I see," Mitchell said slowly. He stopped a moment, answering Paul's desperate stare; then he touched the man's shoulder. "I've called you a crack-pot, Paul. But that was before today. I understand what you're doing."

He halted, but only momentarily. "Come on! I'm with you!" he said flatly. "We'll get back to my room. I'll go after those scientists; I'll bring them to you. You can give them all the dope you've got." He grasped Paul's arm.

At the corner, the heavy figure of a cop appeared, coming forward, with a slow, methodical intention; and his hand was dropping to his gun.

"Paul, don't move. Something's—"

The cop caught the whisper. His hand jerked down, pawing for his weapon. Mitchell leaped to the side, shoving Paul into a lobby.

The gun blasted. A whistle raked the air.

"Come on, run!" Mitchell urged.

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 107)

Through the lobby they plunged, out to the next street. Their flight caught the attention of the crowd.

"That's him! There he goes!" Spectators shouted.

"I've got to get away," Paul sobbed. "Just one more day—"

"Go down the alley! I'll split the chase! Try to make it back to the room. But get clear first. Don't lead them. Run!"

With a last frantic shove, Mitchell drove him on and fled in an opposite direction.

NIGHT. Mitchell threw another cigarette stub into the pile already amassed. He paced the floor. Nine hours had passed, and still Paul hadn't returned.

Then the knock came; something scraped against the door. Mitchell threw the bolt. There, sagging against the wall was what was left of Paul Dover. His clothes were ripped and torn. His face was livid beneath its coating of dirt. His eyes were glazed and hollow. He started to fall, and Mitchell caught him. Swiftly Mitchell carried him to the bed.

He ripped away the clothes. Paul had been shot, and already the wound was beginning to color, poisoned by dirt and lack of care.

Paul opened glazed eyes; finally they cleared. He tried to move his lips.

"I . . . got . . . away," he whispered. "One . . . more . . . day. The men . . . the counter ray. Got to tell them—"

"Paul! Can you hear me? We've got to get you to a doctor. You can't lay out any longer. Do you understand?"

Paul heard. His dark eyes were still for a long moment, then his head rolled slowly on the pillow.

"No. I made a hell on earth, Mitch. Go

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THE MAN WHO MADE A HELL

to Lucien. Bring him here. I've got to tell him. Bring him. Hurry!"

Mitchell rose, while a fury fought inside him. Each minute was precious now; the poison was spreading in Paul's body.

"I'll go," he said bitterly. "If you can take it, damned if I can't!" He plunged out the door and down the steps. A block away he got a cab which sped him to Lucien's house.

Steps answered his knock at the door. Lucien himself answered.

"You worked with Paul Dover on his death ray, didn't you?" Mitchell asked.

The man's eyes narrowed at the name. "Do you know where Paul is?"

"If I did, what would you do about it?"

"I'd kill you, or make you take me to him," the man answered.

"Or maybe you'd call in the cops?"

"Cops!" Lucien exploded. "I've known Dover since he was a kid—long before he ever held a test tube. I know he's no killer. He's been framed. He's gone ahead on the counter ray, but he can't work now. I've got to get his notes—"

Mitchell's fingers left his gun. "Okay," he declared softly. "Paul's hurt. He wants you now. I'll take you."

Without a word, the man got his hat and stepped out on the porch with Mitchell. They went across the dark lawn.

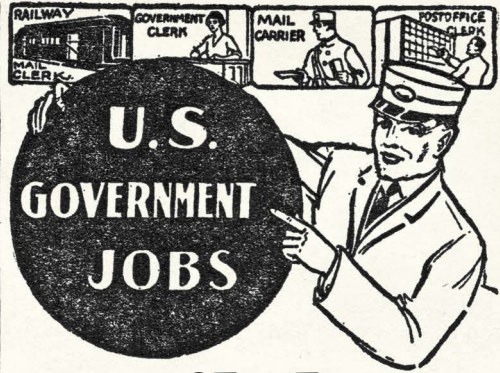
At the curb Mitchell said, "We'll get a cab and—"

His words cut off abruptly. There was no one with him. Lucien had vanished!

Mitchell whirled, retracing his steps. He tripped and went down. There on the grass lay Lucien—dead! He had not been shot; there had been no sounds at all.

Mitchell's mind raced to the obvious conclusion: the ray!

Slowly he rose, listening. Fear gripped his heart. Nothing about him moved. A sense of overwhelming oppression pounded through him. He twisted and started to



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DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

run, each instant expecting death to strike from the darkness.

He slowed as he came into the lighted section of the city. At a newstand he stopped, and read the screaming headlines which testified to facts he already knew: Paul Dover had been traced to the lower east side. He had been shot. His capture was promised momentarily!

Suddenly another wave of fear clutched at Mitchell. The net would close now; Paul would be found, there in that room. And he, Mitchell, would be branded an accomplice!

Finally he began to move homeward. He went up the stairs, opened the door. There on the bed lay Paul. There were fever spots in his cheeks; the veins in his arms were coloring.

"Lucien's dead," Mitchell said slowly. "He was killed with the ray, just as we started here."

Paul's tortured eyes closed.

"Paul, they're going to get you!" Mitchell said. "It's hopeless! Give up! Please go in! If they find you here . . ."

Paul's eyes were clear, now.

"I see," he started carefully. "I hadn't thought of that, Mitch. When they find me, you'll pay the price as well." He waited a long moment. "You can't get the doctors here—the scientists, I mean. They're being killed, and I'm dying. That's right, isn't it, Mitch? This poison—"

Mitchell nodded. "Gangrene."

"Then there's no use trying—" He halted as a hawking newsboy passed beneath the window, yelling: "Extra! Extra! Dover strikes again! Death ray kills Doctor Reese! Extra!"

THE room was filled with a brittle quiet after the boy passed on. Paul stared up at his friend.

"Heard anything of Clinton?"

"There hasn't been any report."

THE MAN WHO MADE A HELL

"Then he's the only one left . . . and the killer will go to him next." Paul stopped, coughed. He lay back, gasping.

"I made a hell, Mitchell," he muttered, half-deliriously. "You told me I would. I did. Now I'm dying. Reese, Warner, and Lucien have died. The government men died. And after us, thousands will die. I went too far . . . too far." He closed his eyes and turned to the wall. At last he spoke, his words muffled by the pillow.

"Go get the police, Mitch. I want to go in before I die. Got get them. Hurry!"

Mitchell fought with himself for a moment, not wishing to do this, but there was nothing else he could do. . . .

Paul listened to his fading steps. Then, slowly, weakly, he pushed himself up. He felt for his tattered clothes. His body burned as he struggled to stand erect. Once he fell back, stumbled and groped his way to the dresser. From a drawer he

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took the ray box, turned it slowly in his hand.

"I made you," he whispered hoarsely. "With my own hands and brain I made you." A wisp of strength returned.

"One more shot left," he whispered. "The killer had six. He used three on the government men. One on Lucien. One on Reese. That leaves one—he hasn't had time to mix the chemical for more. He'll use his last shot on Clinton unless I get him before he has time to make more plates."

With trembling fingers he shoved the box inside his shirt. He fitted on Mitchell's glasses, pulled an old hat down across his eyes. He felt his way to the door, down to the street.

He went past men who would have shot him without a word; past people who would have mobbed him. Down street after street, through the darkness; step after faltering step of painful progress, each one bringing him nearer, each moment finding him closer to death.

He stopped. Ahead loomed the house of George Clinton. Paul noticed the squad car parked at the distant corner. The place was being watched!

Silently he loosened the box within his shirt. He felt his way into the heavy hedge, and started working his way down toward the house. As he went nearer, the lights in the lower rooms blazed out.

With agonizing slowness he worked back in a wide circle, still moving in the

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THE MAN WHO MADE A HELL

hedge; the thorny bushes clutching at him.

At last he stopped. From this point of vantage he had a clear view of Clinton's study. And there was Clinton, writing at his desk! Paul cursed the clumsy trap the police had laid. He started his vigil.

Suddenly his pulse leaped. His eyes caught a flick, like a darting needle of flame. It pierced the darkness and vanished. And in the instant Clinton slumped at his desk. The killer had made his play!

The study window slammed up. A policeman leaned out.

"Spread out, boys! Dover got him! He's out there now!"

Paul's eyes never left the spot from which the needle-like flame had come. Already he was moving forward.

Flashlights sprayed the darkness about him. Shouts rocked back and forth.

"Oh, God, let me make it," Paul prayed. "Don't let a light touch me yet."

(Continued on page 114)



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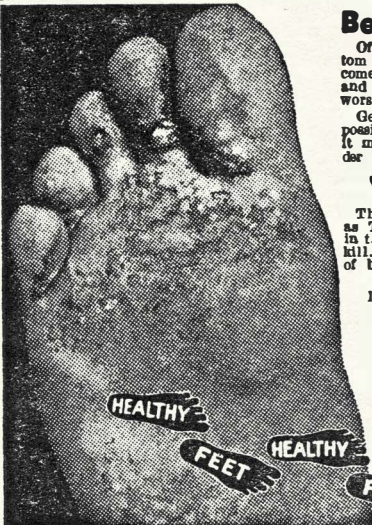
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(Continued from page 113)

Then his heart leaped. From the place where the ray had come, a shadow was moving—a huge, lumbering shadow.

Recklessly Paul leaped out. His body tore through the hedge. A voice thundered behind him.

“Who’s there? Stop!”

Paul plunged on. A blazing light swept along the ground, burst full upon him.

“Stop, Dover! I’m shooting!”

A gun spoke; lead whistled past Paul’s head. He forced his weakening legs on, pursuing the shadow.

The gun blasted again. A smashing blow of the slug rocked him to his knees. The pain burned through his back; blood choked his throat.

He stumbled up. The fleeing shadow was nearer, running. The man lumbered past a street light. In that instant Paul glimpsed his profile, and the sight stunned him.

“No! Not—not him,” he whispered.

“Stop, Dover!” Shots sounded with the cop’s shout. Flashlights wove a net around Paul. The fleeing man was pulling away, his flight covered by the attack on Paul.

Once more, guns roared. A bullet knocked Paul’s arm useless.

Going down, he realized that they had him. The killer was escaping!

With a last effort, he hauled one knee up, balancing the ray box. With his good hand he set the shutter. His glazed eyes trained themselves through the sight, found the fleeing man. His finger squeezed. The box hummed an instant. Paul held the sight long enough to see the lumbering man fall. And he saw a box shatter. The other ray box was destroyed!

A flashlight blazed full in his face. He was still kneeling, the ray box in his hand. Guns exploded; leaden hail showered him and the box.

AND that’s the way it was.” A white-faced, weary Mitchell spoke to the room full of officials. “Paul Dover knew it was death to make the play he did. And he had the courage to make it.”

“Paul Dover was right,” Mitchell went on slowly. “In the end he realized that his invention had to be destroyed. It was too great a power for a man to hold. Great power breeds temptation. It makes a relentless monster of a little, greedy man. Paul had the brain to create, and the wisdom to control himself. The killer did not.

“I knew Paul Dover all his life. I knew him well. And I think it is better that he died as he did. He would have died, anyway. And even had he lived, by some miracle, his life would have been self-torture. He would never have forgotten the death that his invention had caused, the murders his brain-child had wrought. Those things would have haunted him always. Paul Dover died the way he prayed to die, in destroying his own folly. I think,” Mitchell ended, “that he died a happy man.”

Another man rose. “There is nothing more I can add. Paul Dover’s name will be cleared—more than cleared! Our debt to his sacrifice will be publicly acknowledged. He worked for his profession, and he sought to give his creation to his government. He was deceived by a man he trusted.” The speaker sighed. “It is a sad thing that great men must fall for the sins of little men; that power breeds a lust for criminal power. It is a sad thing that Paul Dover had to die for the crimes of Madison Warner—a man who framed his own false murder, whose plans must have been beyond the wildest imagination of any of us. In killing Warner, Paul Dover gave his own life. But he kept something greater. He kept faith with himself.

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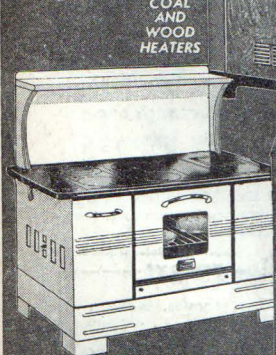
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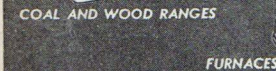
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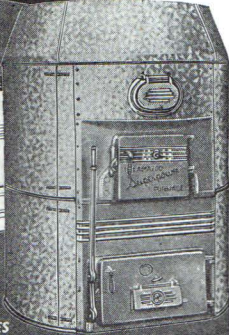
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