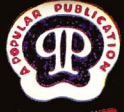


**10¢ DIME**



**JULY**

# **MYSTERY**

## **MAGAZIN**



**TWO OUTSTANDING  
MYSTERY NOVELS  
IN THIS ISSUE!**  
**THREE MEN  
FROM HELL**  
*by* **DAY KEENE**

**THE CORPSE OF SANG YAT SUN**  
*by* **DONALD G. CORMACK**  
**DANE GREGORY • WILLIAM R. COX**



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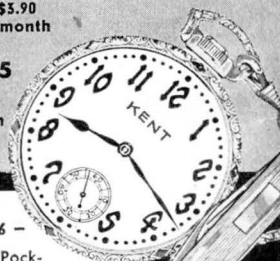
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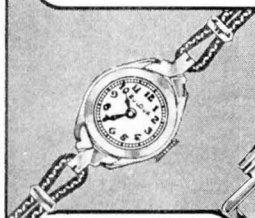
**\$1295**  
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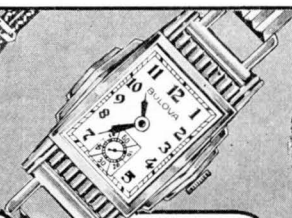
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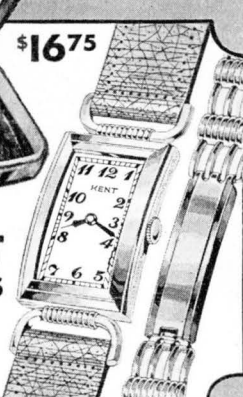
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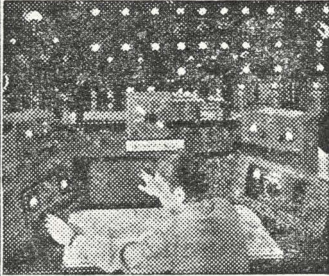


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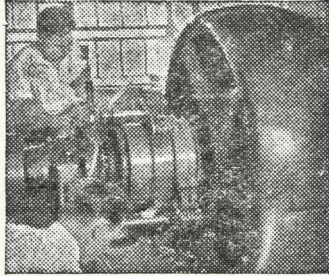
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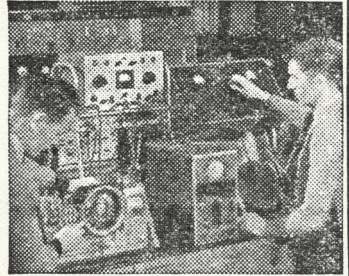
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THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

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**10¢ DIME**   
**MYSTERY**  
**MAGAZINE**

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Volume 26

July, 1941

Number 1

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**TWO SUPERLATIVE MYSTERY NOVELS**

- THREE MEN FROM HELL**.....Day Keene 8  
"Dead on Devil's Island"—that was the Department's record of the Ungodly Three. Yet the night of New York's weirdest prize fight they came back to Broadway—bringing an epidemic of stark tragedy and sudden death!
- THE CORPSE OF SANG YAT SUN**.....Donald G. Cormack 62  
Small comfort to Michael Winter were the seventeen fabulous diamonds which came into his hands so strangely. For with them came the forbidden secrets no Occidental could keep—and live—as long as The Merchant of Death ruled Chinatown!

**TWO NOVELETTES OF EERIE MENACE**

- CARNIVAL OF DEATH**.....William R. Cox 44  
The stakes were high in the game at Oswald Cortez' sumptuous house. Tom Kincaid was prepared for that. But when one man died and another drew cards that made him the king of crime, Tom had to pull the most brilliant—and dangerous—gamble of his colorful career!
- THE MAN IN THE MURDER MASK**.....Dane Gregory 92  
Who was the illusive, masked figure known only as the Face?—the man who took over the Underworld of Seaport City? All those who opposed him—exploded. Till Detective Rocky Rhodes became his body guard extraordinary!

**TWO SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES**

- DOUBLE EXPOSURE**.....Robert D. Duncan 35  
What matter if the professor, even as he died, knew Clem and Paulette had killed him? The dead can't wreak revenge—or can they?
- MINE HOST—THE GHOST**.....Costa Carouso 86  
The Hollingway boys were the perfect example of "honor among thieves"—according to the story the corpse told!

— AND —

- MYSTERY MEANS MANY THINGS**.....A Department 6  
When is a mystery?

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JULY 10th

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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Many make **\$30 \$40 \$50** a week

## I Train Beginners at Home for Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

Lots of fellows who want better jobs are going to read this and never do anything about it. They haven't the stuff in them. They just go along through life, always wishing and worrying, becoming smaller, instead of BIGGER MEN. But there are a few of you fellows I REALLY WANT TO HEAR FROM. You're men of ACTION—who say "SHOW ME HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN RADIO; prove to me that YOU'VE HELPED OTHERS TO SUCCEED, and I'll go along with you and put my whole heart into learning."

### Here's OPPORTUNITY for Men of Action

I want to tell, and prove to you fellows that I can train you at home to be Radio Technicians; that I can help you to cash in on the prosperity Radio is enjoying today. You're the fellows I want to show that hundreds of millions of dollars worth of Defense orders are giving Radio its highest boom in years. I want to show you too, why the use of Radio for home and business purposes will continue to increase; will help prevent the hard bump that many industries will suffer when Defense orders stop coming. I want you to know, too, that Radio Technicians, when drafted for military service are getting in line quickly for better ratings with more pay, more prestige; why some Radio Technicians in the Army and Navy earn up to 6 times a private's base pay. You're the fellows I want to talk to.

### Why Many Radio Technicians Make \$30, \$40, \$50 a Week

Radio Technicians use their minds as well as their hands. They have to THINK on their jobs. It takes trained minds and trained hands to repair a home or auto Radio set; to operate and maintain a Broadcast or Commercial transmitting station; to install, operate and repair Loud-speaker Systems, Police and Aviation Radio equipment. That's why so many Radio Technicians earn good pay, get good jobs, steady work. That's why, too, a trained Radio Technician has opportunities to run his own full time Radio Service business, or make extra money in spare time by fixing Radio sets from his own home.

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Course and gives you valuable experience. A Professional Set Servicing Instrument is included to increase your spare time earnings and to make more money when you begin full time Radio work.

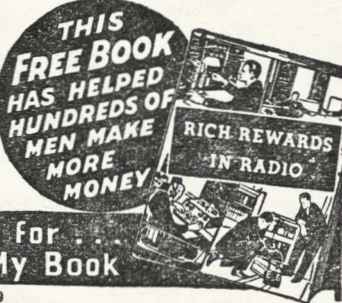
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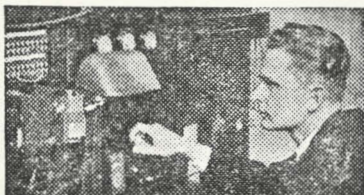
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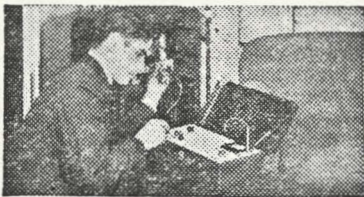
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I repaired some Radio Sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made \$600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of \$10 to \$20 a week—just spare time.—JOHN JERRY, 1629 Arapahoe St., Km. 17, Denver, Colorado

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I have a position with the Los Angeles Civil Service, operating the Public Address System in the City Hall Council. My salary is \$170 a month.—R. H. HOWD, R. 186, City Hall, Los Angeles, Calif.



# MYSTERY MEANS MANY THINGS

**M**YSTERY, we've decided, is one of those words for which there is no easy, obvious definition. It is, in that respect, like love and hate and fear. All of these words cover too much territory, includes too many nuances of individual meaning, have so much depth and scope, that the language of man is incapable of putting down their meaning in a few stilted, printed phrases.

There is mystery, for instance, in life and death; in the first flowering blossoms of spring and in the storm-racked expanse of a winter sky; there is mystery, too, in the intricate machinations of the human mind and in the careful, sometimes devious, works of man.

A magazine devoted to mystery should rightfully print many kinds of stories: the bizarre, the clever and the terrifying—all should find feature spots within its pages.

Occasionally, however, there arrives on our desk a mystery story which defies any of these easy classifications. A story which, on rare occasions, combines most, if not all, the elements of mystery. We are, therefore, not going to attempt to describe in any usual way the story with which Russell Gray shall, in our next issue, mark his return to these pages after a too-long absence. He's called his story "THEY CAN'T KILL US!" and by way of indicating its general type of entertainment we are going to quote at random, in preview style, from various pages in this unusual story:

"A couple of seconds after Steve stepped out of his car, he realized that he mightn't survive as far as Lon's house through the needle-sharp white particles that obliterated the sub-zero night.

He snapped on the flashlight he had taken from the car—and the beam sprayed directly on a snowman sitting on the side of the road.

Except that a snowman wouldn't be wearing an overcoat. One of the arms was resting stiffly out from the shoulder, and on the underside of the arm he could distinguish a cloth sleeve which the snow hadn't been able to cover.

He waded up to the snowman and brushed fluffy snow off the face. Human features appeared. Through his glove the flesh felt as if it had been hacked out of ice. In the left cheek there was a neat, bloodless hole."

A few pages later in this amazing story, standing with Steve in the doorway of a lantern-lighted stable:

"Over near the stall, his brother Lon was digging with a pickaxe. A girl was leaning on a spade and watching him with a curiously fixed expression, as if she would be unable to breathe until Lon got through.

"Hello, Lon," Steve said.

Lon scrambled out of the foot-deep pit and snatched up a rifle resting against a post. The girl whirled and cried out.

"Stay where you are!" Lon ordered harshly. "Get your hands up and—" The rifle barrel dipped and Lon gawked. "My God, it's Steve!"

Still later in the story, after a good many more very startling and extraordinary events:

"Like a skeleton finger pointing at the moon, a solitary tree stood in the clearing. Annie's arms were fastened behind her around the crooked, barkless trunk. Her thin dress was the only protection against the bitter cold. Her feet and ankles were out of sight in the snow.

Ila's voice exploded in cracked horror. She pulled away from Steve and leaped forward. He snatched at her arm and yanked her back.

"It's a trap," he warned.

"She's freezing to death! They tied her there to die!"

He held her fiercely. Beyond the tree he could distinguish a heavy coat, but from this one extended a head and feet and arms. A dead or unconscious man sprawled out. Lon probably.

"Listen to me," he said. "As soon as we step into the open we're done for. Annie couldn't have screamed like that—or Lon . . . that was to bring us to this trap baited with Annie."

"She'll die!" Ila's teeth were chattering with cold and terror. . . ."

To quote any further from this unusual mystery tale would, we believe, be unfair to both Russell Gray, the author, and to you, the reader. It's a long novelette and it will be published in the September issue of DIME MYSTERY.

THE EDITOR.



# "Give Me Your Measure Let Me Prove I Can Make You a NEW MAN!"

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE** and **OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

I know, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only **HALF-ALIVE**.

Then I discovered "*Dynamic Tension*." It gave me a body that won for me the title "World's

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When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system, "*Dynamic Tension*," transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

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Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that "*Dynamic Tension*" is what you need.

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"*Dynamic Tension*" is an entirely **NATURAL** method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun! "*Dynamic Tension*" does the work.



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Holder of title, "*The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man*."

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Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength*." Tells all about my "*Dynamic Tension*" method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's **FREE**. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. **CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 83F, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.



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I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic Tension*" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength*."

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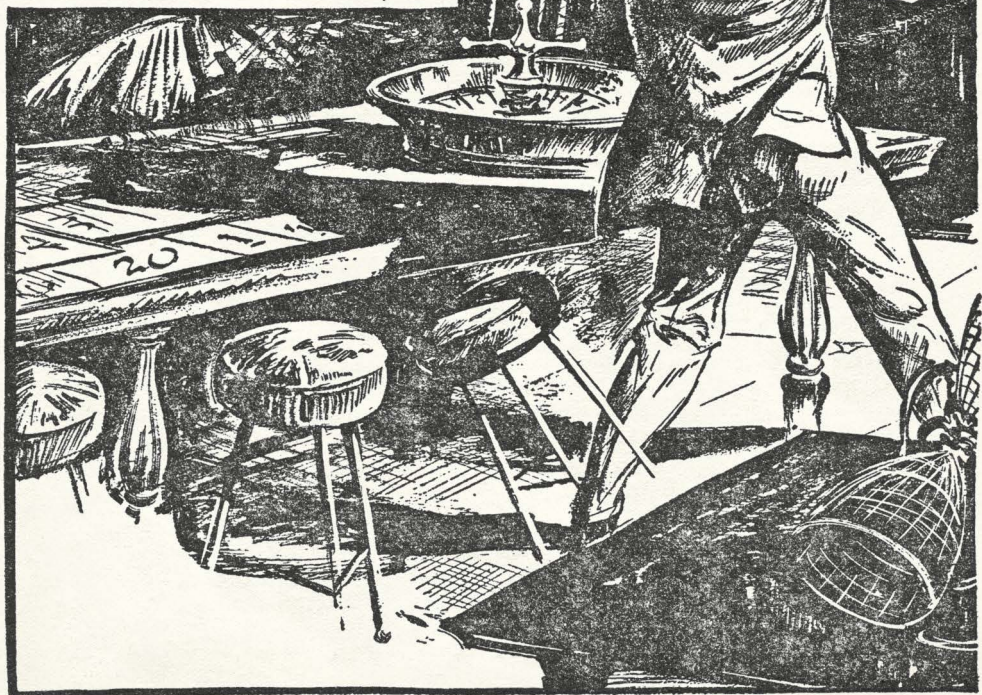
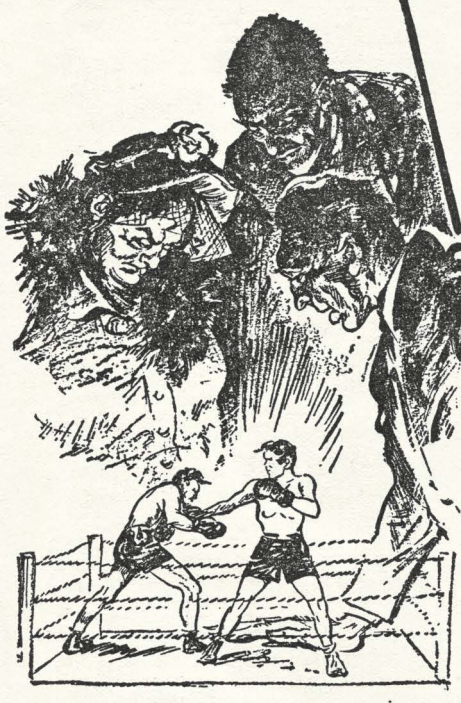
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An eerie, spine-tingling mystery novel

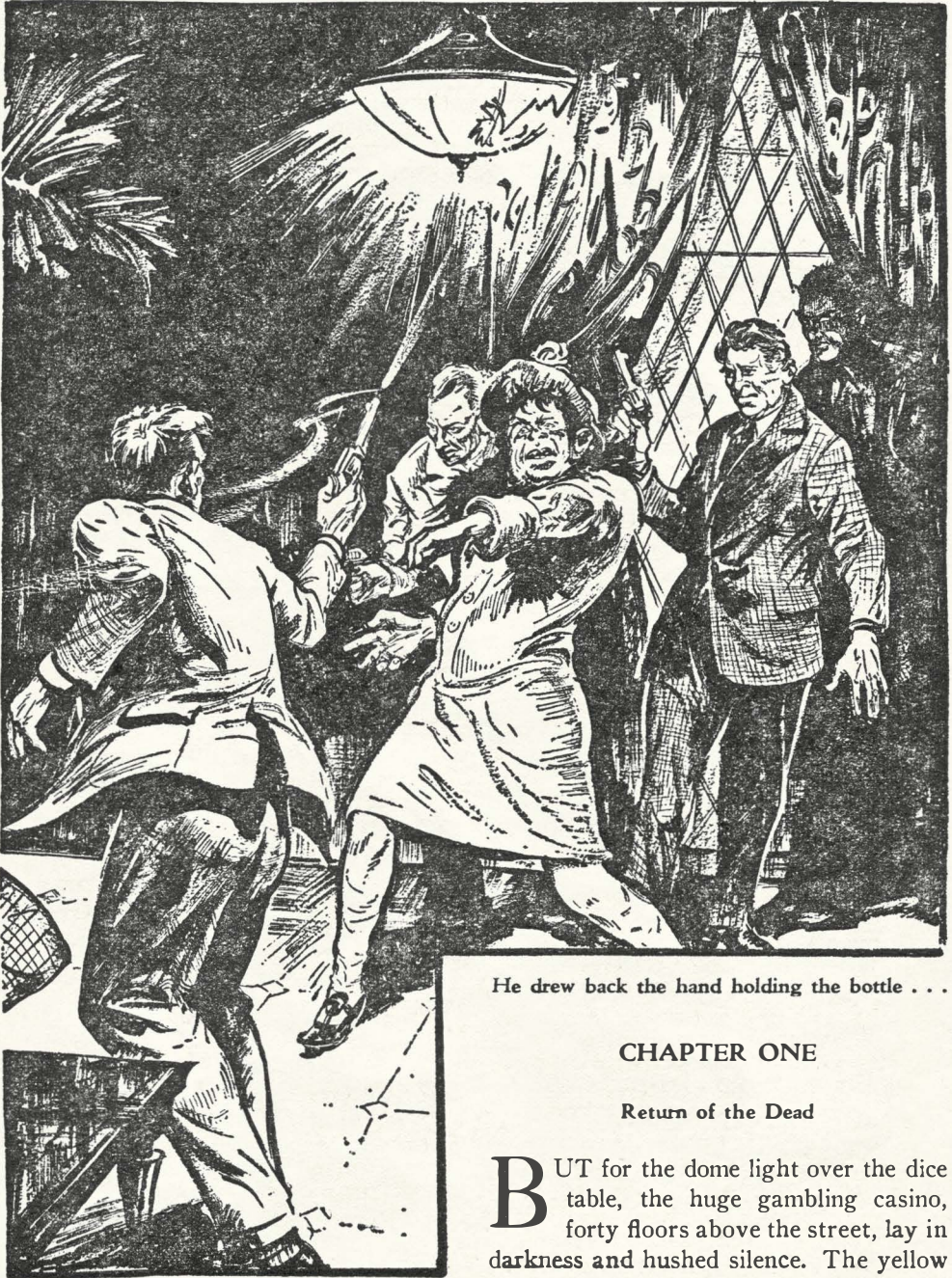
By  
DAY KEENE

THREE  
MEN  
FROM  
HELL





*They called them the Ungodly Three—that grim, malformed trio whom even the circling sea of Devil’s Island couldn’t hold. . . . Some said they were dead; but on the night that Kid McGuire fought Ronaldie for a shot at the title, they came back to the Main Stem—spreading murder, red ruin and heartbreak in their wake!*



He drew back the hand holding the bottle . . .

## CHAPTER ONE

### Return of the Dead

**B**UT for the dome light over the dice table, the huge gambling casino, forty floors above the street, lay in darkness and hushed silence. The yellow



chips on the green baize of the table's marked off surface totaled thousands.

Sugarfoot Johnson picked up the dice from the table and dropped them into their leather cup. Starting with an original bet of ten dollars, and letting his mounting bets ride, it had been his twelfth consecutive pass. He was a big, rangy, colored boy with an infectious smile. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead like opalescent pearls.

"Dey say," he misquoted, "that there comes a tide in the affairs of men when if a boy climbs in the boat an' starts to row, the next stop is fame an' fortune." He waved one white palm grandly. "An' I ain't never see the dice so hot. Let the yellow chips lay where dey fall. I shoots the whole forty fo' thousan' dollars."

The dice clicked like muted castanets inside the cup. Sugarfoot rubbed a mental rabbit's foot, and rolled them out.

"Ha!" He grunted to the tumbling cubes, "Comes up a seven an' I picks up all my chips an' cashes in!"

It was then that he heard the cough. He looked up. Twenty feet away, three grotesque shadows were crossing the big french window that led from the landscaped terrace on the set-back forty floors above the roar of Broadway. One of the shadows was tall and thin; one was squat, hunchbacked; the third was the size of a child. As he watched them, they came into the darkened room with him.

The whites of the colored boy's eyes expanded. "Who dere?" he called.

There was no answer. Sugarfoot knew that there could be no answer. Save for himself, the casino had been deserted—it was closed until after the fight. A single elevator shaft led up from the lobby of the building, and that elevator cage was at the top, where it would stay until Silent Smith, or Bill Morrow, or one of the other boys, phoned up from the lobby.

Forty floors above Broadway, the casino was as impregnable as a vault. Yet,

Sugarfoot had heard a cough; he had seen three grotesque shadows where no shadows should have been.

"Who dere?" he repeated. He peered into the darkness beyond the circle of light in which he stood; and again he heard the cough—closer this time.

The cold fingers of fear massaged his spine. He had been playing with chips for fun, but there was actual cash in the safe in Silent Smith's office.

"Who dere?" the big colored boy asked a third time—and regretted it immediately. The cold edge of a razor pressed against his neck. An answer came from behind him, in the slurred syllables of one of his own race.

"It's death, big boy," a soft voice said. "Take a look at your dice. Your luck's done crapped out."

Sugarfoot's eyes rolled wildly to the green baize of the table. Snake-eyes stared back at him. They were the last things that he ever saw.

◆     ◆     ◆

**I**T WAS eight o'clock, Eastern Standard Time. Behind the gleaming plate glass windows of Findy's Broadway Bar and Rendezvous, the usual pre-fight crowd horsed around the bar, playing their usual practical jokes. Silent Smith sat at his usual table in the corner with Bill Morrow, twisting a spill of paper between his thin, white fingers. To one who knew the scene, the only unusual feature about it was the slight, puzzled frown on Silent's face.

He was a dapper little man with silver hair; he admitted he was sixty, but looked forty. The corners of his lips turned up. His eyes were blue, mild and used to smiling. He might have been a shoe clerk, but the four carat, square cut diamond in his tie would have bought and stocked a dozen shoe stores.

For long minutes, as Morrow totaled a



string of figures scrawled upon the table cloth, the silver-haired gambler surveyed the usual scene. He didn't like what he saw—or rather, what he sensed. Super-sensitive, through years of feeling Broadway's every heart-beat, Silent sensed the well known fix was on. Still, he didn't see just how that could be. Young McGuire was one of his own boys—Young McGuire wanted the title. The man who won tonight would fight the champ. Ronaldie, burned out by years of loose living, didn't have the chance of the oft-talked of snowball. Yet, Silent knew, there was too much money—far too much money—being bet upon the fight.

Morrow looked up from the figures. A lean faced youngster, with cold, predatory eyes, he was known along the Stem as Smith's second-in-command, the heir-apparent to the throne.

"I don't like it, Chief." Morrow shook his head. "Where is all this sucker dough coming from? If by any chance Ronaldie should score a K.O., or even earn a draw, this fight is going to clip us for plenty."

"More than we can afford," Smith admitted. He sighed. "But from what we've seen of Ronaldie in training, Bill, I don't see how he can last two rounds with the Kid. I don't see how the Kid can lose—outside of being murdered."

The younger man was silent for a moment. Then he nodded at the paper in Smith's hand. "I wonder if—" He hesitated, sipped his cold coffee.

"Yes," Smith nodded. "I know what you're going to say. I've been wondering the same thing, Bill." He unfolded the spill of paper and spread it flat upon the table. In crudely printed letters were the words:

### PAY OFF OR DIE!

There was no signature. In one corner of the message, crudely drawn, were three grotesque silhouettes: one tall and

thin; one hunchbacked; and one exceedingly small.

Morrow suggested, "Maybe it isn't a rib, Chief. Maybe it's the goods."

"Could be," Smith agreed. He wadded the paper in an ash tray, and touched it with a match. "But I doubt it, Bill. The only three men those silhouettes might represent are dead."

The younger man motioned to their waiter. "Two more cups of coffee, Sam. And a box of aspirin."

OUTSIDE of Findy's the garish signs of Broadway had blinked on until the Boulevard of Broken Dreams had become a blaze of light. The night was warm with spring's first hint of summer.

On the corner of 51st Street, unrecognized, stood a boy with a coat too tight for his shoulders, and a girl with red-heeled shoes. Hand in hand, oblivious of the crowds streaming past them, they stared westward at the blazing sign on the marquee of Madison Square Garden.

### FIGHT TONIGHT KID MCGUIRE vs. RONALDIE

The boy was young. The girl was younger, not more than nineteen at the most. A smart, white chalot with a long red feather perched jauntily on top of her page boy bob. Her eyes were bright and brown and unsophisticated.

She squeezed the boy's hand slightly. "That's us, Mr. McGuire," she whispered. "Do you think that you can take him?"

The boy returned the pressure of her hand, without taking his eyes from the sign. "Take him, Mrs. McGuire?" he asked amusedly. "Why, I'll murder the bum." The amusement dropped from his voice. "This means the big time for us, Betsy. The next guy is the champ."



His wife's hand nestled contentedly in his. "You sure of that, Johnny?"

Kid McGuire nodded. "Sure. Look, honey. In spite of all the draw-and-win dough on Ronaldie that Silent was telling us about this afternoon, Ronaldie hasn't got a chance with me. I'll knock him kicking in two rounds. Why? You ain't doubting me, are you, honey?"

The girl's twinkling eyes grew serious. "You know better than that, Johnny. I—" She hesitated. "I—I just was wondering, that's all. Does—does it cost much to have a baby, Johnny?"

"To have a baby?" the boy puzzled. He scoffed. "Who's going to have a baby?"

"We are," she admitted. "I—I wasn't going to tell you until after the fight, Johnny. But—well, I think we're going to have one." She looked up at him anxiously.

A slow smile spread across his lips. "Well, I'll be—" His big hand closed upon her small one, until the pain of his pride was ecstasy to the heart of the girl with the anxious eyes. "Why, I'll knock that big stiff kicking in one round."

He crossed himself, breathed reverently: "A baby . . . us. Another Kid McGuire!"

They stared some more at the sign, then. There was no need for words; and the kisses could come later. Both knew how the other felt. They were young. They were in love. Broadway had been good to them—a fairy land where all dreams came true.

It was the girl who broke the silence. "Hadn't you better get back to your hotel room, Johnny? Moe is going to be hopping mad when he finds out that you went for a walk with me instead of sleeping."

The boy looked at his watch. It was after eight. "Yeah. Maybe I'd better, honey." He pulled her closer. "But you'll be all right?" He searched her face with

anxious eyes. "I mean, it's all right for you to be out in a crowd like this, in—well, in your condition?"

The girl blushed. "Don't be silly, Johnny." She clung to him for a moment, her eyes misted with happy tears. "Good luck, sweet. I'll see you in your dressing room before the fight."

The boy kissed her, held her for a moment. The passing throng paid them scant attention; kisses are common on Broadway. Then, walking on air, still unrecognized, Kid McGuire swaggered down 51st Street.

**H**IS girl-wife stood, considering what to do in the two hours remaining before the main bout. She started as an apologetic hand touched her lightly on the shoulder. She turned to see a tall, thin, colored man.

"Pardon me, Miz McGuire," he smiled infectiously, "but I've been lookin' all over fo' you. My name is Sugarfoot an' I works fo' Mist Smith."

"Oh, yes." Betsy McGuire returned the smile. "I've heard of you." She had, often. And anyone who worked for Silent Smith rated high with the McGuires. It was Silent Smith who had made their dreams come true. He had taken the Kid, a raw prelim boy, and given him his first boost up the ladder—as he had boosted scores of boys. The silver-haired gambler, who had seen Broadway grow—a lusty, brawling youngster uptown from Herald Square—had staked many to a new start in life such as he himself had never had. All he asked in return was that they be 'right' guys in whatever line of endeavor they might choose. With a few exceptions, most of them had made good. Johnny McGuire, the coming lightweight champion, had been Smith's latest protégé. "Yes, Sugarfoot—?" the girl asked.

"If you please, Miz McGuire," the colored man told her, "Mist Smith would like to see you fo' a minute befo' you go



over to the Garden. He's waitin' fo' you now up at his place."

The girl followed him without any questions. On the other side of Broadway her guide showed her to a cab.

"Mist Silent Smith's place," he told the driver. "As fas' as you can make it. Mist Smith wants to see Miz McGuire befo' the main bout go on at the Garden."

The cabbie swung his crate out into traffic with one hand, and scratched his tousled head with the other. He must, he decided, be getting old. But he could have sworn that he had seen Silent Smith and Bill Morrow go into Findy's within the last ten minutes.

Her eyes wide with interest, Betsy McGuire waited while her guide paid off the driver. She followed him into the foyer of the towering forty-three story building that housed Silent Smith's casino, her red heels beating a small tattoo on the composition tile.

To the right of the foyer stood the bank of elevators that served the great apartment building. Her guide turned to the left into a second, smaller foyer and the single elevator shaft that served Smith's casino and penthouse.

She asked, smiling, "Silent—Mr. Smith didn't say what it was that he wanted to see me about, did he?" She fought a sudden, unreasoning fear of the tall, thin, colored man who stood beside her.

"No, ma'am," he said evenly. "He didn't." The man's infectious smile was gone—a subtle, sinister evil exuded from his person.

Betsy McGuire fought her quickly-mounting panic. "I don't think," she began, "that I—that I—"

The elevator door slid open. The leering face of a man with the body of a twelve year old boy looked out. "Not bad. Not bad at all," he muttered. He scowled up at the colored man. "Well, okay. Don't stand there like a sap! Get the dame inside. Some of Smith's boys might come

back, and then we'd sure have trouble.

"No," the girl choked. "No!" She opened her mouth to scream—a palm clamped over her mouth. She tried to twist her body free and almost succeeded.

"Help him, Jeepo," the man with the boy's body ordered.

A third caricature of a man emerged from the elevator cage and wrapped his long arms around the girl's waist. Together they carried the fighting, twisting girl into the elevator cage and the steel door slammed behind them.

The man with the body of a boy pushed a button and the cage shot skywards, not to pause for forty floors.

"So Broadway thinks we're dead, eh, boys?" He grinned. "Well, we are. But we've crawled out of our graves. And before we're through with Broadway, they'll know that dead men can come back!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Death—The Winner

THE long corridor that led to Kid McGuire's dressing room was blue with smoke, and thick with newspaper men, police, Garden officials and hangers-on. As Silent Smith, followed by Bill Morrow and Sam Eagan, stepped through the outer door, a small-fry gambler stopped him.

"Yes?" Smith asked.

Jack McGinty swelled with self-importance. "You still giving five to one that Ronaldie doesn't earn a draw—or better?"

"That's right, McGinty," Smith said. "Those are the odds."

Morrow tried to push past. McGinty stopped him with a scowl. "Just a minute, wise guy. I've got important business with your boss."

"Yes?" Smith asked again. He noted, mildly puzzled, that the hangers-on had



formed a curious circle, enclosing them.

McGinty said. "I want fifty thousand bucks worth of those odds."

Morrow laughed out loud. "You're crazy, McGinty. We wouldn't carry you for fifty cents."

The small-fry gambler's eyes narrowed. "I'm not asking for tick, wise guy. I'm betting cash." He opened the well-stuffed brief case that he carried. It was filled with bills. "Well, big shot?" He sneered at Smith, "You made the odds. Do you want the bet or not?"

The crowd watched Silent. If he refused the bet, he might be through; a has-been who had lost his nerve. Broadway affection is fickle.

"Don't take it, Chief," Morrow advised sotto-voiced. "If McGuire should let you down tonight, we'd be holding the bag for plenty."

The silver-haired gambler smiled wryly. "No doubt. But gambling is my business." He took a small, black note book from his pocket and wrote down the amount. "Okay, McGinty, it's a bet. Give the money to Bill."

He pushed by the other man and continued on his way, followed by Sam Eagan. At the door of Kid McGuire's dressing room, Smith turned and called: "You'd better count the money, Bill."

The corridor rocked with laughter as Sam Eagan closed the door behind them. There was only one Silent Smith. There would never be another.

Eagan leaned against the door. "I don't like this set-up, Chief. There's something about this fight that stinks. And it ain't the Nazis in Denmark."

"No," Smith agreed, "it isn't. That's why I want to talk to Moe."

"If that's you out there, Betsy, why don't you come in?" Kid McGuire called from the inner dressing room. "I thought you'd never get here."

Smith opened the door. Perched on the edge of a rubbing table, Kid McGuire

looked up eagerly, then scowled. "Oh, I thought you were Betsy, Silent. You haven't seen her, have you?"

"No," Smith admitted, "I haven't, son. Not since you weighed in this afternoon. But they've been turning them away for hours. Maybe she couldn't get through the crowd."

Moe Harris, the roly-poly little manager who had managed McGuire from just another preliminary boy to a leaning contender for the title, mopped the perspiration from his bald head with a towel. "But of course. What else could it be?" He forced a laugh. "Don't be being so foolish, Johnny. Haven't I been telling you not to worry?"

The youngster nodded dubiously. "That might be it."

SMITH turned to Eagan. "Pick up a half dozen of the boys, and see if you can locate Betsy, will you, Sam?" He slapped the fighter on his shoulder, smiled. "I know just how Johnny feels. Betsy's his good luck."

"I left her standing on the corner of 51st Street and Broadway," McGuire told Eagan earnestly. "It might be just on account of her condition that she's gone back to the hotel."

"Her condition?" Smith asked sharply. "Betsy isn't sick?"

The young fighter blushed. "Well, kinda," he grinned. "I'll tell you after the fight."

Eagan left the room. Smith stood studying the youngster. He was trained to the pink of perfection. Except for his natural concern regarding his wife, there'd never been a fighter in a better mental state. Ronaldie, Smith decided, didn't have a chance.

"You've a lot of dough bet on me, haven't you, Silent?" the youngster asked.

"I have." Smith admitted. To win. But don't let it worry you, Johnny. Just go in there fighting like you always do; let



me do the worrying about the bets.”

The Kid grinned widely. “I won’t lose,” he promised. “I’ll chop that bum to mince-meat in two rounds.” He looked past Silent to the door; his voice grew wistful. “But I do wish that Betsy’d get here.”

“She’ll be here, son,” Smith promised. He turned away, wishing he could feel the confidence that he had put into his voice. He looked at his watch. Time was growing short. It was five minutes of ten. McGuire got up from the rubbing table and began to pace the room. Harris tugged lightly at Smith’s coat sleeve and nodded towards the other room.

“Yes?” Smith asked, out of McGuire’s hearing.

“I don’t like it, Silent,” Harris told

room opened and Captain Craig of Homicide walked in. With him was Matty Hardy, one time leader of the Metropolitan police, and now, during the big chief’s sick-leave, Acting Commissioner of Police. Hardy, gray-eyed, slender, thin-faced, had a reputation of living both well and high. He knew what he wanted—and got it.

Big, broad-shouldered, brutal, Craig was of the old school. The feud between himself and Silent Smith was bitter, and of long standing. His jaw stiffened at the sight of Smith.

“I thought we’d find you here,” he scowled. “Okay. On your way, Smith. How many times do you crooked gamblers have to be told to keep out of the Garden? I’m sick of tellin’ you.”

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him. “In the air is something phoney.”

The silver-haired gambler bit the end from a slim, black cigar but failed to light it. “You’re telling me?” he scowled. “You’ve seen Ronaldie tonight?”

Harris mopped his bald spot that persisted in perspiring. “In my face he was laughing. For a guy what hasn’t got a chance that guy Ronaldie is too sure. Like a cock on the walk he is crowing.” The little fat man’s face grew tragic. “Look, Silent. There’s nothing should happen to Betsy, is it? They wouldn’t dare?”

Smith lighted his cigar, said through the match flare. “Who wouldn’t dare?”

“I should be knowing?” The moon faced fight manager shrugged. He dropped his voice. “But could it be that—” He stopped short as the door of the dressing

“Been transfered to the Broadway Squad?” Smith asked.

“No,” Craig admitted. “But if the Broadway Squad can’t enforce their own rules, I can. You may be a big shot to some folks, Smith. But you’re just a gambler to me.”

“That’s right,” Smith said calmly. “I’m just a gambler, Craig. And you’ve been out to get me for some time. Perhaps some day you will. But I’m betting that you don’t.”

Craig noticed that the newspaper men had crowded into the room behind him. He played, as usual, to the gallery. “Smith, I’ll take that bet. I’ll bet you five that I pin something on you before the week is out.”

“It’s a bet,” Smith snapped him up. He took his little black book from his

pocket and poised his pencil expectantly. "Five hundred, or five thousand, Captain Craig?"

The homicide man crimsoned. The reporters, clustered in the doorway, howled.

"Come now." The silver-haired gambler smiled. "Surely, you didn't mean five dollars, Captain Craig!" He snapped his little book shut, returned it to his pocket. "I'm sorry, but I don't bet small change."

"Whenever you're ready, Chief." Morrow called from behind the newsmen. He carried the bulging brief case tucked snugly under one arm. His lean, young face was hard.

"I'm ready," Silent told him. He called back in to McGuire. "Good luck, Johnny. Don't worry. Just wade in there and win."

"Or you, I suppose," Craig sneered, "will lose a lot of dough."

"That's right," Silent Smith admitted. "If the Kid should lose this fight, or Ronaldie should even earn a draw, well, it would ruin me."



**I**T HAPPENED in the seventh of the scheduled fifteen rounds.

Smith sat in his ringside seat on the aisle, a long extinct cigar forgotten between his teeth. He looked up as Sam Eagan dropped down on his haunches beside him.

"Not a sign of Betsy." Eagan said. "She's simply disappeared." He looked across at Morrow. "How's the fight going, Bill?"

"Terrible," Morrow told him. "The Kid has lost every round so far. You've got all the boys out looking?"

"All of the boys," Eagan nodded. "And I've phoned everywhere that I could think of, including the place. And speaking of the place, I think Sugarfoot's drunk."

"Drunk!" Smith frowned.

"Drunk," Eagan repeated. "His voice was so thick that I hardly knew it. What round coming up?"

Bill Morrow sighed. "The eighth." He shifted the brief case on his lap. "Also bankruptcy. The good old pressure fix is in, and there's not a thing we can do."

"The fix can't be in," Smith protested. "There isn't a mob in the country that would dare to try a thing like this. Except—"

"Yes?"

Smith shook his head. "The Ungodly Three. But that note was just a rib. The Ungodly Three are dead!"

"Then where," Sam Eagan demanded, "is the girl? And who saw the Kid and told him to pull his punches!"

Morrow said crisply. "Moe swears that no one's seen the Kid."

The crouching nian smiled thinly. Silent Smith's chauffeur and bodyguard, Eagan was also a Rhodes scholar who had majored in practical psychology. "Then perhaps we can still do something. I'm not thinking of the money—I'm thinking of the Kid and his wife. This fight means a lot to them."

The gong clanged for the end of the seventh round. The weaving figures in the center of the ring parted. Kid McGuire trudged wearily to his corner, his eyes scanning the ring-side seats. Before Smith could question, or stop him, Sam Eagan hurried down the aisle and whispered something to Moe Harris, who, in turn, whispered excitedly to Kid McGuire. The Kid sat suddenly erect upon his stool. Smith could read his lips form "Yeah?", but not the stream of words that followed.

"He'll be all right now," Eagan whispered when he returned to his place in the aisle beside Smith. "It seems that Betsy is going to have a baby and that's why he's been worried."

"You told him?" Morrow asked.

"I told him that I'd found her; that



she didn't think she could stand the strain of watching the fight so she was getting it over the radio in her hotel room."

The ten second warning sounded.

"Okay, Sam," Smith said curtly. "Make your lie good. If the boys aren't enough, call in the cops—hire every private detective in New York if you have to."

Sam Eagan smiled. "The boys will be enough. We'll have her in their hotel room before the fight is over." He strode back up the aisle.

Smith watched the bobbing figures in the ring. The Garden was a roar of noise. For the first time since the main bout had begun, Kid McGuire had come out fighting. There was no doubt now about the outcome of the fight. Silent had been right. Young, ambitious, deadly, Kid McGuire couldn't lose. Before the round was half over, the Kid had Ronaldie on the ropes, belting him with the deadly lefts.

"It would be grand," Smith thought, "to be young and in love again." He half rose in his seat and shouted, his voice lost in the many-throated roar.

The bell saved the gasping fighter on the ropes. He staggered, around the ring until his seconds led him to his corner. Kid McGuire grinned at the crowd, and walked briskly to his stool.

"In the next round," Morrow said. "But I still don't like it." He eased the brief case to his other knee. "McGinty isn't betting fifty grand without a dark man in the kindling."

"No," Smith agreed, "he isn't. But I don't see how the Kid can lose."

**S**MITH sat watching Ronaldie. In his day the barrel-chested Italian had been a clever fighter, if never overly bright. But the white lights and the blondes had got him at last.

He sat slumped in his corner, a wry smile on his puffed lips while his seconds worked over him frantically. Smith re-

alized with a start that they were unfamiliar, though they seemed to know their business. One of them worked on Ronaldie's battered face. The other massaged his body, and, as Smith watched, began to massage the fighter's gloved right hand.

"That broken knuckle must be giving him trouble," Smith thought. Then sat up suddenly. He had seen Ronaldie's second remove a flash of silver from his sweater and hook it into Ronaldie's glove. It had looked for all the world like a bent pin.

"Foul! Foul!" Smith shouted. He got to his feet and started for the ring as the five second warning rang.

"Sit down! Sit down!" a roar of voices stopped him. "Down in front!"

The bell rang. Smith stood where he was, his eyes on the weaving figures in the ring. Then he squatted down on his haunches. It might have been a light reflection. His nerves keyed high, his imagination had run riot. He had been mistaken in what he had thought he had seen. None of the judges or the referee had seen it.

His eyes sought Ronaldie's corner. Both of the seconds were breathing hard, their eyes glued on the fighter. Smith looked at the ring again. Eager for the kill, McGuire was forcing the fight. Ronaldie boxed with one hand; clinched, held on until the referee broke them, then clinched again. His right hand held in reserve, the gloved hand on which Smith had seen the flash of silver, he seemed to be waiting for something.

Smith stood up again. "Stop the fight!" he shouted.

His voice was lost in the roar of the crowd. The two men had met in the center of the ring, in a flurry of lefts and rights delivered by McGuire. The crowd was shouting for the kill.

It was then that it happened. Ronaldie's right streaked out. The Kid tried to roll, but misjudged the blow, and it landed flush

on his cheek. He stood a moment, shook his head as if to clear it—then crumpled slowly to the canvas.

A stunned silence filled the Garden. Ronaldie shuffled to a neutral corner. The referee began his count, "One, two, three—"

Smith stared across his fallen fighter at Ronaldie. Breathing hard, the barrel-chested Italian's eyes were frozen on the crumpled figure that lay silent on the canvas. And as Smith watched, Ronaldie, subconsciously, unwittingly, drew his gloved right hand across his forehead to stem the dripping perspiration. Then Ronaldie screamed, cutting short the count at eight. He stood a moment—as Kid McGuire had stood—shook his head as if to clear it. Then he, too, fell forward on his face.

"And there," Bill Morrow told Smith, in the brief hushed silence that followed before all hell broke loose in the Garden, "is your draw. Those guys aren't 'out'! They're dead! And we lose a million bucks."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Dead Men's Shadows

CAPTAIN CRAIG'S beefy face was smug with satisfaction. "So you tried to stop the fight, eh?" He pounded on the squad room desk until it danced. "You," he thundered at the silver-haired little gambler, "actually expect us to believe that story, Smith?"

"I do," Smith told him calmly. "It's the truth. God knows I had no reason to want to harm McGuire. I stand to lose a million dollars on the fight."

"Then you're going to pay off?" Commissioner Hardy asked.

Smith told the truth. "I haven't decided yet. There's no telling what the Boxing Commission will call it. But technically it was a draw. I suppose that I'm ethically bound to pay off."

"Ethically," Craig sneered. "Come on. Come clean, Smith. Admit that this was a betting coup and you've copped your local bets by wiring personal bets out of town. Admit that you kidnapped McGuire's wife to worry the Kid." His big fist thundered on the desk again. "And when it looked as if the Kid was going to stage a comeback you had Ronaldie's seconds hook that bent pin smeared with snake venom in his glove."

"It was snake venom then?" Commissioner Hardy asked.

Craig picked up a report from the desk. "At least that's the report the lab men just sent down. With both fighters' blood pumping the way it was, their nerves were paralyzed immediately. The lab boys say they think it was venom from a—" he stumbled over the unaccustomed word—"a Fer-De-Lance."

"That, I believe," Hardy said, "is a Central or South American snake." He glanced at Smith, asked Craig, "But how about Ronaldie's seconds?"

"I've two squads scouring the town for them, sir." Craig motioned to a plain-clothes sergeant of detectives. "Bring that cab driver in here, Hanson."

The cabbie came into the squad room twisting his cap in his fingers.

"You drove Betsy McGuire to Silent Smith's gambling house shortly after eight o'clock tonight?" Craig demanded.

"Yes."

"She was alone?"

"No, sir. There was a tall, thin, colored boy with her—she called him Sugarfoot. He said for me to get them to Silent Smith's place as fast as I could; said that Mr. Smith wanted to see Mrs. McGuire before the main bout went on at the Garden. But I don't think, sir, that—"

"I don't care what you think," Craig stopped him. "Take him out, Hanson." He turned back to Smith. "And what have you to say to that?"

"Nothing," Smith replied. "Except that



I was at Findy's from shortly before eight until almost ten o'clock. And I haven't seen Betsy McGuire since the boys weighed in this afternoon."

"You knew she was missing and you didn't notify the Police?" Commissioner Hardy asked.

"I thought that my boys could find her." Smith said. He added grimly. "But it seems that they haven't been able to so far." He wet his lips. "Both—both the Kid and Ronaldie are dead?"

Craig ignored the question. "You've searched Smith's casino?" he demanded of the squad car sergeant who had brought in the cabbie.

"No, sir. We haven't, Captain Craig," the detective answered. "I've been waiting to report on that. We can't get in. There's a crowd in the lobby over there, but no one can get up. The elevator is at the top, the push button won't work, and the colored boy who is supposed to be upstairs won't answer the phone."

The commissioner eyes Smith shrewdly. "There is some other way to get in? A private elevator?"

"Yes," Smith admitted. He took a key from his chain and tossed it on the desk. "It leads up from the boiler room. No one ever uses it but myself. Few even know it's there."

Craig took the key. "Okay. On your feet, Smith. Let's get going."

The silver-haired gambler rose, looking around the squad-room. "Where's Bill Morrow?" he asked.

No one knew, or admitted that they knew. Smith, himself, hadn't seen his second-in-command since Craig had hustled him out of the Garden and over to the station.

"Never mind about Morrow," Craig told him grimly. "If I were you, Smith, I'd be worried about myself. You don't seem to realize it yet, but you're through, Smith. I bet you that I'd get something on you, and I have—murder! Neither

Ronaldie nor McGuire are dead yet, but they're dying. And when they do, you're going to fry, Smith—for murder."



SMITH sat in the official car, a small, meek figure between the burly Commissioner Hardy, Captain Craig, and the members of his squad. The wailing of the siren echoed the screaming of his nerves. Kid McGuire was dying, and Betsy McGuire was missing. Murder had been done, and Craig was going to try to pin it on to him. Smith doubted that he could—still, one never knew. In the years that Smith had ruled as Broadway's unofficial gambling czar, his throne had been challenged many times. He'd seen the Legs Diamonds, the Larry Fays, the Dutch Shultzes, and the Rothsteins, come and go.

Their paths had seldom crossed. He had run his business after the fashion of an almost forgotten day when gambling had been a pastime for gentlemen who could afford it, and not a lucrative football to be kicked back and forth between the underworld and politics. He took pride in the fact that he had never welched on a bet.

The various administrations, over a period of forty years, had recognized him for what he was and had closed an official eye. It had only been an occasional hungry climber like Craig who, greedy for the rake-off that Smith had never paid, had ever sought to stir up trouble. And now there was trouble to spare. . . .

"Not so cocky, are you, Smith?" Craig jeered.

"No," Smith said, "I'm not." He spoke the thought that had been persisting in his mind. "Are you positive, Commissioner, that Jockey Ray, Jeepo and Alabama Sam are dead?"

"Positive," the commissioner assured him. "After you ran them out of New

York, Silent, they got into a jam in Paris and were sentenced to Cayenne for life. But I guess the heat and the jungle got them. At least they didn't live long. We had an official communique that the three of them had died shortly after landing in Guiana. Why?"

"I just wondered," Smith said quietly. He knew there was no use of mentioning the warning note with the three silhouetted figures in one corner. Craig would never believe it.

"Talk up!" The burly captain of homicide prodded Smith sharply in the ribs with his elbow. "You're not a big shot now, Smith. You're just a murder suspect. And the Commissioner asked you a question."

"I was merely wondering," Smith told him, "if it could be possible that they are still alive, and behind all this."

Craig roared with laughter. "Think up a better one, Smith. The Ungodly Three are dead. And you aren't going to blame these murders on the shadows of three dead men. You who fixed that fight!"

The gambler was amused. "So I'd lose a million dollars?"

"No," Craig admitted. "You're not that dumb. But I'm betting that you've copped all your bets."

Smith took his little black book from his pocket. "You're betting how much, Captain?"

"I'll bet you as much as you want," Craig blustered. "that when I get to the bottom of this case you go to the chair!"

"I doubt that," Smith smiled wryly. "But we'll make the bet for five thousand." He wrote the figure in his book and returned it to his pocket just as the police car braked to a screaming stop before the towering building that housed his gambling casino. Both its foyer and the outside walk were black with milling men, despite the lateness of the hour. A few were uniformed police, a few were Smith's own boys. Most of them were

minor hoodlums led by Jack McGinty.

McGinty forced his way up to the car. His voice was hoarse, with real or simulated fury. "Are you paying off, you dirty murdering crook, or are you welching?"

Craig's version of how the whole affair had happened, Smith thought grimly, had certainly gone the rounds. He said, "I haven't decided yet, Jack. Maybe I'll pay off. maybe I won't."

The crowd started to surge forward. Aided by Smith's own boys and the handful of uniformed police, Craig's men held them back; opened a lane through the mob.

"Inside, Smith," Craig ordered curtly. "Before they tear you to pieces. And I wouldn't blame them a bit."

Sam Eagan broke through the crowd and fell into step beside Smith. "There must be trouble upstairs, Chief. Sugarfoot is either drunk—or dead!"

SMITH thought of the tall, thin, colored man whom the cab driver had described. "He's probably dead, Sam. You still have found no trace of Betsy?"

"No trace." Eagan's voice was glum. "Unless—" he hesitated. "Unless she's upstairs."

"God forbid!" Silent Smith said fervently. With Craig and Hardy following close behind, he led the way to the private elevator in the basement.

"Clever! Very clever!" Craig admired the small elevator cage as it shot skywards. "But your cleverness isn't going to get you out of this rap, Smith. You're going to burn for murder."

Smith glanced at the face of the burly captain sharply, but said nothing. A vague, indefinite suspicion was beginning to form inside his mind. Even hating him as he did, Craig was too eager to prove him guilty.

The casino lay in hushed silence. The



only light was the dome light which cast its circle of gold around the dice table. A pair of dice, craps up, was at one end.

Hardy pointed to the stains near the yellow chips. "That's not ketchup," he muttered.

Craig touched it with a finger. "Blood," he confirmed. "Probably Smith had Betsy McGuire lured up here and when she tried to fight her way out, she was killed."

Hardy phoned for the technical squad. "Who killed her?" Smith demanded. "Some of your boys," Craig insisted. "It's well known on the Street that they'll do anything you say." He groped for and found the wall switch. "All right, you fellows—" he nodded to his squad—"Chop the joint to pieces. There should be a body hidden somewhere."

Smith led the way into his office. It was apparently undisturbed. He put on his gloves, and knelt down at the safe.

"With your permission, Captain Craig."

"Go right ahead." Craig jeered. "You're going to need a lot of money to get out of this jam, Smith. Why the gloves?"

"Because," Smith smiled without mirth, "I know the technical squad are a bunch of honest lads. There's no telling what strange fingerprints that they might find."

He dialed the combination, swung his safe door open. It was—as he had guessed—empty. He also knew where the fifty grand that McGinty had bet him had come from. It had come out of his own safe.

The Commissioner, finished with his phoning, strode into the office. "Is there anything missing, Smith?"

"Yes," Smith admitted. "There is. One colored boy named Sugarfoot and a little less than one hundred thousand dollars."

Craig's beefy face purpled. "Don't give us that stuff, Smith. You mean that you

**Men, here's one right across the plate:  
Use Thin Gillettes—save dough—look great!  
They whisk through beard in record time,  
Yet four blades cost you just a dime!**



*The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade*

left a hundred thousand dollars in that cracker-box with only a colored boy to guard it?"

Smith waved his hand towards the terrace rising forty floors above the street. "I've had more than that in the box, and until tonight it has always been perfectly safe. We're forty floors high. Sugarfoot had orders to keep the elevator at the top until Bill Morrow, or Sam Eagan, or myself, called up from the lobby."

"Check that set-back out there, Sergeant," Commissioner Hardy ordered. "See if it would be possible for anyone to climb up the building wall from one of the lower floors."

"No, sir," the sergeant reported seconds later from the terrace. "Nothing but a fly could climb this wall."

"Jockey Ray made his living as a human fly for years," Smith reminded. He paused, then continued quietly, as if talking to himself. "And I did bet Jockey something once. A bet that I didn't pay off."

Commissioner Hardy bit the end from a fresh cigar. "And that bet was—"

"I bet **him** I'd kill him," the silver-haired gambler said. "But I changed my mind, and ran him out of town instead. I'm sorry now that I did welch that one bet. I've a feeling that he isn't dead—that he's the one behind this."

**A**CTING Commissioner Hardy said nothing. Craig sneered. "Baloney! Stop trying to blame this on the shadow of a dead man, Smith. Come clean. Where's Sugarfoot and the girl?"

The gambler pointed through the open office door to the chips on the dice table. "I imagine that Sugarfoot's dead." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "And if it is the Ungodly Three who have her, I hope that Betsy is." He looked to Sam Eagan. "Could you swear, Sam, that it was Sugarfoot's voice you heard when you phoned here during the fight?"

"No," Eagan admitted. "I couldn't. I thought that he was drunk, then; but I don't think so now. I think I was talking to someone else."

"Who?" Commissioner Hardy demanded.

Eagan shook his head. "I don't know, Commissioner. But he was a colored man. I'd swear to that."

"It could," Silent Smith suggested, "have been Alabama Sam. He's tall, and thin—and colored."

"And dead," Captain Craig reminded. He waved a big hand towards the empty safe. "You're lying, Smith, to save your rotten neck. I don't believe that you were robbed. It's all just a part of the plant."

"Of what plant?" Smith asked wearily. "You aren't even making sense." He seemed suddenly very tired and very old. But he knew his rights, and he stood upon them firmly. "Now look, Captain Craig. Do one of two things. Either charge me with something and book me, or let me get to work on this in my own way. Remember, Betsy McGuire is still missing."

Craig looked at the Commissioner. Hardy shrugged and passed the buck back to the captain. The influence that Silent Smith wielded reached into strange and high places.

"No, I'm not booking you yet," Craig back-watered. "But remember young McGuire and Ronaldie are dying. And when they die—well, if I were you, Mr. Smith, I don't believe that I'd try to leave town."

The silver haired gambler smiled. "I haven't left town recently. That is, not in over twenty years." He and Sam Eagan walked out of the office as the technical squad walked in.

"It looks bad, Chief," Eagan glanced back towards the office. "Aren't you going to tell them that you think that the dough that McGinty bet us came out of our own safe?"

"Why?" The silver-haired gambler shrugged. "We can't prove it. And right



now I am as worried about Bill Morrow as I am about Betsy McGuire. Bill is carrying that fifty grand in a brief case. I haven't seen him since Craig hauled me out of the Garden." His mild blue eyes were cold. "And if dead men can climb out of their graves, well, Bill is probably next on their murder list." He shaped his expensive beaver to his head, the brim cocked down over one eye. "Come on. The first thing to do is hire the best doctors in New York to fight for Johnny's life. Johnny's one of my boys."

Smith led the way to the regular elevator in front.

"There'll be a mob downstairs, Chief," Eagan warned.

"That's why I want to leave that way," the gambler said. "I want to talk to McGinty. I want to tell him that for the first time in forty years I'm welching on a bet—all bets. I'm not paying off one thin dime on the McGuire-Ronaldie fiasco until we know who's back of this, and until Bill Morrow and Betsy McGuire are found."

Sam Eagan nodded glumly, and made certain that his shoulder gun slid easily in its holster. A bet was a bet on Broadway. You weren't supposed to be suckered. And if you were, you either paid off—or else!

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Guilty!

**T**HE FIRST faint hammers of false dawn had begun to crack night into morning. Death waited in a green sedan in the shadows of one of the great concrete approaches of the Brooklyn bridge. It had waited there for hours.

The tall, thin, colored man in front listened to the hunchbacked figure dressed as a woman, then said to the driver. "Jeepo say that maybe he ain't coming."

"He'll be here," Jockey Ray said short-

ly. "He's just covering up his tracks, that's all. He doesn't dare to stand us up."

The lights of a long, black coupé turned down the block in which their car was parked. They swept the green sedan briefly, then flicked off; the coupé coasted silently until the two cars were abreast. Its driver sat hunched over the wheel, his top coat collar up around his neck, his face shielded by his hat brim. He was nervous and he showed it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting boys," he told them tersely. "But nothing has gone right. Ronaldie's dead, McGuire's dying. Silent has reneged on his pay-off, and most of the out-of-town books are following his example. We've got Silent on the run all right, but we've missed the first big pay-off."

"There'll be others," Jockey told him.

The driver of the coupe shuddered briefly. "If Ronaldie hadn't forgotten and wiped his forehead before the other boys could get ahold of that poisoned pin again, everything would have gone off slick as a whistle."

"What's past is past," Alabama Sam said briefly. "An' time is wastin'. You find out where Moe Harris lived?"

The other man nodded curtly and passed over a slip of paper. "There's the address. It isn't far from here."

Jockey Ray took the paper and put it in his pocket. "And where can we find Silent?"

"I can't tell you that. Sam Eagan and most of the other boys have been picked up and thrown in on a vag charge. But Smith's taken it on the lam. You haven't read the papers?"

"No. Not the latest editions."

The driver of the coupé meshed his car into gear. "Then do," he advised. "They make very interesting reading." He hesitated, started to say something else and changed his mind. He let his clutch out slowly. "I'll see you, you know where. About noon."

The three men in the green sedan watched the disappearing tail light of the coupé. Alabama Sam smiled. "He was goin' to ask us fo' his cut of the rest of the money what was in Smith's safe. But he was afraid."

Jockey Ray ground his heel on the starter. "Never mind him. After we knock off Moe, then we find Silent. Once Smith bet me that he'd kill me. And now he'll either pay off—or die!"



**I**T WAS late—four o'clock in the morning. But for the shabby little man, who had sat at a table for hours, drinking Rhine wine and seltzer as he poured through the papers, the dingy Ninth Avenue bar was deserted.

The barkeeper glanced up at the clock. "Last chance, pop," he called. "Will you have one on the house before you go?"

"No. No thanks," Silent said. He began to gather up the papers that were spread out on the table.

"A nasty affair, that Garden mess, eh, pop?" the bartender yawned, mopping at his bar.

"A nasty affair," Smith agreed. His newspapers under his arm, he started for the door.

"And I wouldn't be that fellow Smith, for all the money in the world." The bartender shook his head sagely. "You mark my words, pop. Broadway has turned thumbs down on him and there'll be one of the lads that will be knocking him off before morning."

The silver-haired gambler smiled dryly. His entire disguise consisted of a change of clothes and the removal of the four carat square cut diamond from his tie. But he looked like a different man. He looked like the meek, inconsequential little shoe clerk now.

Outside the door of the bar, in the shadow of the L, Smith stood in the chill

of morning, wondering where to go. He instinctively turned east on 47th and walked slowly down the street, staying well to the edge of the curb.

Broadway was a jealous mistress, he thought grimly. She showered you with her favors but was always ready to believe the worst.

"But I won't pay off on murder," the aged gambler muttered. "It's McGinty, or Craig, or—" he said the last name sadly—"or Bill who's fronting this. But I'm still giving odds that it's Jockey Ray."

He paused under a street lamp to read the headline of the Morning Mercury again. It haunted him with an eerie sense of unreality, as though he was reading it in a dream:

#### SMITH SOUGHT FOR MURDER!

The sub-heading on the front page, three column story was even worse.

#### Prizefighter's Death Bed Confession Names Silent Smith As Master Mind Of Fatal Betting Coup!

Smith skimmed rapidly through the story for the tenth time. It read, in part, in the Mercury's breezy style—

. . . It is even money on Broadway tonight that Ulysses S. (Silent) Smith, well known Broadway betting commissioner, will be the recipient of an underworld bullet before morning. . . . Named by Slugger Ronaldie in a death bed confession to Acting Commissioner of Police Hardy as the master mind of a gigantic betting coup, Smith is being sought tonight by both the police and the underworld alike. . . . Failing to stop Johnny (Kid) McGuire, by kidnapping his girl wife, it is alleged that Smith, in a conspiracy with Ronaldie, had Ronaldie's seconds hook a bent pin, smeared with a deadly snake venom, into Ronaldie's glove at the beginning of the eighth and fatal round in a desperate attempt to collect huge out-of-town bets that Ronaldie would K.O. Kid McGuire. . . . But for a thoughtless gesture on Ronaldie's part which resulted in his own death. . . .



It was, Silent Smith decided, like one of Hitler's lies—so incredible and monumental that even he, himself, felt an inclination to believe it. Whoever had engineered the fatal plot had, when the whole thing had gone wrong, slid out from under by simply turning it around and fixing it on Smith. But why Ronaldie on his death-bed had named him as the perpetrator of the plot was something that the silver-haired gambler could not understand.

The plot itself had been novel, fairly clever. It had not meant for either Kid McGuire or Ronaldie to die; but a nervous second had smeared too much venom on the pin. And, for a moment, Ronaldie had forgotten. What had been planned for a temporary nerve paralysis had become suicide—and probable murder.

Out of the corner of his eye, Smith caught a flash of movement in a darkened doorway. He dropped the paper to the walk and shrank back into the shadows. He had no gun. In all his years on Broadway he had never carried one; never needed one. Heretofore he had always been able to out-think any mobster who'd ever sought his life.

But now he felt so old, so tired—helpless. Betsy McGuire was still missing. Kid McGuire was dying. And if it had been Bill Morrow who had crossed him—if it had been Bill, working through McGinty or the Ungodly Three, who had planned the murderous betting coup that had gone astray—

Smith peered intently at the doorway where he had seen the movement, saw now that it was nothing but a cat. A black cat. And the building through which it prowled was vacant.

Smith realized with a start what it was—the old 47th Street Station House that had, until recently, policed the Forties for more years than he had lived. It had been out of the old 47th Street Station that Captain Hardy had led the bomb

squad to the solution of the black-hand murders. It had been down those well worn steps that—

“What the—” Smith braked his train of thought. “Of course! Why have I been so stupid? That's who it has to be!”

He scooped up the paper from the walk, glanced quickly at an item, then crumpled the paper into a ball. “I should have thought of that before. He went in and talked to the Kid after McGinty bet me the fifty grand, and when Moe said that no one had got to the Kid, he thought he was telling the truth. Moe just naturally wouldn't suspect him.”

His stooped shoulders straightened. He had no longer felt old, or tired, or helpless. He still had a chance to save Betsy—He still had a chance to save Broadway. She was, after all, nothing but a spoiled and hysterical woman. He had slapped her out of her tantrums before. He could do it again. His rule about Broadway still held. Either you were right, or you were wrong. And if you were wrong, no matter who you were, sooner or later the bad markers that you had dropped along the Street caught up with you and swamped you.

Smith strode briskly towards the corner of Eighth Avenue and whistled for a cab.

“Yeah? Where to, Jack?” the sleepy hacker yawned without ever looking at his fare.

“Knickerbocker Village.” Smith told him. “As fast as you can make it, bud. No, wait—” he changed his mind—“Stop first at some all-night drug store. I've several phone calls to make, and there's something that I want to buy.”

“Whatever you say, sport.” The hacker pulled his flag, let in the clutch. “You're the doctor.”

“No,” Smith smiled thinly to the darkened interior of the cab. “If things go right, I'll be the wrecking crew! A doctor won't be needed.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Smith Pays Off

**M**OE HARRIS was a family man. But his family was away. He sat at the white porcelain topped table in his kitchen with a half emptied bottle of Scotch in one hand and a water glass in the other; the kitchen radio was tuned into the police calls.

Moe had been drinking for hours, ever since the doctors had ordered him out of Johnny's room. But the Scotch had done him little good. He could still see Johnny's haggard face; still see the numbed lips frame, "Betsy." Twin tears ran down the little fat man's pudgy cheeks. He swayed back and forth in his chair.

He sopped more liquor in his glass, gulped it down. The Kid hadn't fought from the bell. It was obvious now that he had been seen and warned that Betsy would be in danger if he won. But by whom had he been seen? Harris rubbed his bald spot perplexedly. Who had been the last man to see the Kid before the fight? Silent had left with Bill Morrow. Then Morrow had returned, for Silent's gloves, he'd said. Captain Craig of Homicide and Commissioner Hardy had just been leaving the dressing room. Then—

The phone bell rang in the dining room. Harris, slightly unsteady, waddled down the hallway, and reached for the receiver.

"I wouldn't if I were you," a thin voice warned him from the window.

The fight manager turned slowly towards the voice. A man with the body of a boy stood on the window sill, fourteen floors above the street. He held a revolver in one hand. A thin rope dangled from his waist.

As Harris watched him, stupidly incredulous, the man stepped into the living room and made the rope secure around a radiator pipe. A moment later the face of a colored man appeared. He

pulled himself inside the window, hand over hand up the rope. Then another face appeared. The third man was dressed in women's clothes, and a veil trailed from his hat.

"It's the Scotch," Harris thought. The telephone stopped ringing. Harris looked at the liquid in his glass.

The midget grinned. "It isn't the booze. We're real."

He detached the rope from the radiator pipe and coiled it neatly around his waist. "All right," he nodded to the squat, hunched figure with the veil. "Get it over with, Jeppo. Poor Mr. Harris has been so grief stricken over the several things that have happened tonight that he has been contemplating suicide for hours. Assist him."

"No!" Harris protested. His eyes round with fear, he backed slowly towards the kitchen. "I know who you are now. You were before my time on Broadway. But you're the Ungodly Three!"

"That's right," the colored man smiled mirthlessly. "That's us—come back from the dead."

Moe Harris opened his mouth to scream. The squat, hunchbacked figure leaped across the room; a stubby, powerful hand closed hard on the fight manager's windpipe.

"Careful. No marks, Jeppo," the first man warned.

Jeppo swung the struggling, frantic Harris to arms length above his head. The colored man chuckled softly. "A few marks won't show by the time Harris reaches the sidewalk. He's got fo'teen floors to fall."

The radio in the kitchen began to squawk. Jeppo stood listening by the open window, still holding Harris above his head.

*" . . . car one-o-five-five . . . three-eleven . . . six-o-four . . . to Owl Drug Store on Chatham Square. Signal twenty-one. Clerk reports man resembling Silent*



*Smith, wanted for murder, is making a phone call from a booth. Authority Telegraph Bureau. Time, five-twenty-five P. M. EPEF. Clark."*

Chatham Square—that's right around the corner," the colored man said slowly.

"And that probably was Smith calling here." Jockey Ray nodded curtly towards the phone. "All right. All right. Don't just stand there holding Harris, Jeepo. Get rid of him. Let's get back downstairs in the car to wait for Smith." The midget smiled, almost pleasantly. "It will be a pleasure. I've waited years for this."



FROM THE window where he watched, dawn looked like the bleary, red-veined eyes of a drunkard. Jack McGinty lowered the Venetian blind and crossed the room to where Bill Morrow lay stretched out full length on a sofa. The radio, tuned in to police calls, had just stopped squawking.

"One minute someone sees him in Harlem. Now it's in Chatham Square," McGinty fumed. "Why can't one of the boys or the police spot Smith? That guy is dangerous. He's liable to figure this thing."

"Yes, he probably will." Bill Morrow said calmly. "Silent is nobody's fool."

"No? Well, we foxed him, didn't we?"

McGinty sneered. And if those Frog seconds who broke out of Devil's Island with the boys hadn't been so generous with that snake dope, and if Ronaldie had kept his head, we'd be collecting a fortune from Smith and the out-of-town books by now."

"If," Morrow reminded him, "wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. And there's a second verse to the jingle."

McGinty picked up a heavy Mauser from an end table and sat toying with it. "You make me sick," he said. "I don't like wise guys."

Morrow shook his head. "Neither do I," he agreed. "And I'm beginning to think that you guys aren't as wise as you thought you were. Granting it was Silent Smith's money to begin with, I clipped you for fifty grand."

McGinty toyed with the trigger of the gun. "You going to tell us where you hid that dough or not, Morrow?"

Morrow nodded towards the bedroom of the apartment. "Perhaps. If you let Betsy McGuire go—unharm'd, as the saying is."

"Why the sudden yen for the dame?"

"No yen," Morrow told him quietly. "But she's only a kid—she doesn't know what it's all about. And she's going to have a baby."

McGinty shrugged. "What happens to her is up to Jockey Ray."

"Perhaps." Morrow smiled, tight-



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

lipped. He could hear Betsy McGuire sobbing in the other room, as she had sobbed unceasingly since he had entered the apartment. "But you never can tell. McGinty. I grant you this hideout is clever. But someone might figure it out— Silent Smith, for example."

"Nuts to Silent Smith," the small-fry gambler scoffed. "He's through in this man's town. If one of the boys don't bump him off, the police will burn him for murder." McGinty chuckled and put the gun back on the table. "Forget him. Smith hasn't got a chance!"

Bill Morrow twisted awkwardly so that the wires which bound his wrists and ankles cut less cruelly into his flesh. "I don't know," he said quietly. "Silent Smith has gambled on some long odds and won. Wrong guys just don't last long on the Main Stem. A lot of greedy McGintys have gone down to the bottom of the sea."



**T**HE BRONZE base of the desk lamp on Captain Craig's desk looked softer than his face. He scowled up at his superior.

"But I tell you that we're doing our best, Commissioner. I have every available man on the force out looking for Smith. And we'll have him before morning."

Hardy motioned to the office window. "It's morning now," he said curtly. "You shouldn't have let him go last night when you had him. You should have booked him for murder then."

The captain checked the angry retort on his tongue—he could afford to wait. The official big chief was due to return in a week. Hardy's temporary appointment had lasted longer than anyone had thought it would.

"Perhaps I should have, sir," he said. "And I can only repeat that no one wants

to see Silent Smith either locked up, or shot down, anymore than I do. But I assure you that we'll do our best—"

The phone on Craig's desk rang.

"Craig of Homicide," the captain growled into the mouthpiece.

"Silent Smith calling," the silver-haired gambler's voice came distinctly over the wire.

"Calling from where?" Craig thundered.

"That," Smith told him, "is my business. Don't try to cut in and trace me. The moment I hear a click, I hang up." The voice on the other end of the wire sounded tired. "It seems that your boys are looking for me. So if you really want to see me, I'll tell you what I'll do."

It was difficult for Craig to restrain his impatience. "Yes?"

"I'll meet you," Smith told him, "in my own gambling house in half an hour. Bring Commissioner Hardy with you, if you care to. I'll probably have three men with me. Three dead men. Jockey Ray, Alabama Sam and Jeepo, the ex-strong man of the old Mafia mob."

"You'll do what!" Craig shouted.

Smith repeated what he had said. His voice was bitter. "I say, probably," he added, "because Jockey, Sam and Jeepo are waiting in a green sedan outside of the place from where I'm calling now. They can't see me. But they're waiting for me. And I'm not going to disappoint them." The gambler's voice cut over the wire like the tip of a frozen lash. "You know why Craig? Because they've still got Betsy McGuire in their hideout. Because they've just murdered my friend, Moe Harris." Smith's voice was icy and final. "Within half an hour, Captain Craig, I'm paying off!"

A receiver banged into its cradle on the other end of the line.

"That was Smith?" the Commissioner demanded.

"That was Smith," Captain Craig ad-



mitted. He knew that the Commissioner had heard at least part of the conversation. Craig choked on his next sentence. "He says that the Ungodly Three are still alive, that they have just murdered Moe Harris—and that the four of them will meet us up in Smith's Casino within half an hour."

The acting Commissioner of Police stared at Craig, openly suspicious. He opened a drawer of the captain's desk, took a revolver from it and dropped it in his pocket. "Then we'll meet them together, Captain Craig. And alone." His voice was coldly curt. "It would seem that there might be more to this than meets the eye."



IT WAS twenty-five minutes of six by the clock in the window of the shabby little spaghetti joint from which Smith had made his call. A crowd of early morning workers and morbidly curious had clustered around the body in the street. There were at least eight policemen in sight. But none of them saw Smith—they were too busy taking notes and questioning the lookers-on.

Smith paused in the restaurant doorway to light one of his long, black cigars. He saw, through the flare of the match, the green sedan roll slowly into motion.

"At least *they* see me," he thought grimly. He tucked the match folder back in his pocket; and his fingers touched a small round bottle. They passed on to caress the four carat, good luck diamond that he usually wore in his tie. He would need all the luck it could bring. He was gambling his life on a hunch—and the odds were the devil-and-one against him.

He quickened his steps a trifle as he came abreast of the green sedan.

A thin voice stopped him. "Imagine meeting you here!"

Smith stopped, facing the car. Ala-

hama Sam had braked it to a stop and was holding the front door open.

"You'd best get in, Mist Smith," he ordered. A heavy automatic in his hand enforced the order.

"And quick!" the thin voice from the back seat added.

Smith started in mock surprise. "Why if it isn't Alabama Sam, the old crooked numbers king of Harlem. And Jockey Ray. And Jeepo—all dressed up like a woman. Three dead men, who are supposed to be peaceful in their graves."

"You don't seem very surprised," the midget piped.

"I'm not," Smith told him. "I got your card last night just before the fight." He glanced down the street to where the crowd was gathered around Moe Harris. "I thought at the time it was a rib. But I see that I was wrong."

"Get in!" the ex-Harlem numbers' king ordered. "You're through—all washed up, Smith. Your luck's done crapped out."

"Possibly," Smith admitted. He stood with one foot on the running board of the car, as if in casual conversation.

"Get into the car!" the midget fairly screamed. An automatic wavered in his hand.

The silver-haired gambler shrugged. "All right. Why not? There doesn't seem to be much else that I can do." He stepped into the car, and closed the door behind him. At least a part of his hunch had been right. They hated him too much to kill him on the street; for what he had done to them, they wanted him to die hard.

The green sedan began to roll again, slowly. Before it reached the corner, a squad car raced past, its siren wailing.

"Okay," Silent Smith nodded. "I bet you that I'd kill you, Jockey, when you ruined that young girl's life. And then I changed my mind and only ran you out of town. You were so rotten, I welched—I was afraid of soiling my hands."

The ex-jockey, cadet, and one-time human fly, raked the sight of his gun savagely across the back of Smith's head. "That's just a sample," he jeered.

The gambler said nothing. He merely clamped his lips against the pain. The colored man shook his head.

"Cut it out, Jockey. Don't mark him too bad 'for we get him upstairs in the hideout. Remember we got to go up in the apartment elevator an' the mornin' crowds is startin' to come out."

**J**EEPO, the ex-pineapple expert of the black hand mob, snarled something sharply through his veil. Keeping his eyes on the ever-increasing traffic, the colored man inclined his head towards Smith.

"Jeepo say that maybe you'd better search him, Jockey. See does he have a gun."

The midget slapped one hand lightly over Smith's body. "He never carries a gun," he grinned. "The whole Street knows that. He thinks that he's too smart to need one."

Silent Smith said nothing. He sat watching the familiar sights roll by. It would, perhaps, be the last time he would see them.

"Take a good look, Silent," the midget read his mind. "It's the last time you'll ever see the old street. We're running it, now—three dead men who came back!" He added: "And we've got a fix with Centre Street that no mob ever had."

"Yes," Smith answered dryly. "So I finally figured out." He paused. "But did I forget to tell you boys that just before I met you I talked to Captain Craig of Homicide on the phone?"

"You talked to Craig?"

"That's right. He and Commissioner Hardy would like to see the four of us in my casino sometime in the next half hour."

An awkward silence followed. Alabama Sam slowed to an instinctive stop,

then let out his clutch again. "You're crazy, Smith," he said. "You ain't goin' within three floors of your casino."

"Your apartment *is* in one of the apartments of my building though," Smith persisted. "It had to be. Because Jockey Ray came up over the wall of the setback and let down a rope for you boys when you killed Sugarfoot, robbed my safe, and kidnapped Betsy McGuire."

"So what?" the midget scoffed. "It's the one place in New York that the cops never thought of looking. Our connection saw to that. And you ain't going any higher than the thirty-seventh floor." He chuckled nastily. "You won't need to worry about coming down. We'll probably bring you out in a trunk—like we did Sugarfoot."

"Perhaps," Smith said. "But, after all, I am a gambler; I might have an ace up my sleeve. In fact, I have!" He reached in his side coat pocket, took out a squat, round bottle, and held it up to the windshield so the light shone through it. Its thick, slightly yellow contents moved sluggishly in the bottle with each motion of the car.

Jeepo squealed in terror. He had reason to. It had been a premature explosion of nitroglycerin that had cost him his appearance. Alabama Sam turned two shades lighter as he eyed the bottle in Smith's hand. He pulled over to the curb, braked cautiously. "Lawd almighty! Take it easy, man," he breathed.

"Aces back to back," Silent Smith said wryly. "And if you think you've got me beaten throw your chips in and call me."

"It's 'soup'," Jockey Ray gasped finally. He pressed the muzzle of his gun against Smith's head; his knuckles whitened on the trigger. "Put that back in your pocket, easy, Smith! If you don't, I'll drill you!"

The silver-haired gambler's smile tightened slightly. "Do it gently then,"



he cautioned, "for your own sake. I've heard that nitroglycerin is very sensitive in some respects. Were I to drop this much 'soup,' as you call it, on the floor of the car, and it should explode—" He shrugged. "Well, I doubt if they'd even find pieces."

Alabama Sam sat rigid, his eyes on the bottle of sluggish yellow liquid. Perspiration beaded on his forehead. "You wouldn't dare," he said, but not very hopefully.

"Wouldn't I?" Smith smiled. It was apparent that he would carry out his threat.

Jeepo spewed forth a torrent of excited oaths. Jockey Ray lowered his gun, admitting the temporary stalemate. "What is it that you want, Smith? What's your bargain?"

"No bargain." Smith shook his head. "I made an appointment for the four of us with Commissioner Hardy and Captain Craig. I want to keep it."

A sly smile twisted the lined face of the midget. "Okay," he agreed. "Get rolling. Sam—and watch your step. We'll do as Smith asks. We'll go up the back way of his Casino and talk to Craig and Hardy. I've an idea that they'll be alone."



**A**BOVE them was Smith's pent house. Below them were thirty-nine floors of various sized apartments. There was a police guard in the lobby; but on the fortieth floor of the building, the two men were alone.

The shades were drawn against the morning sun, and except for the dome light over the dice table, the big casino lay in darkness. Craig paused in his pacing to stare at the pair of dice on the table. They lay as Sugarfoot had thrown them, smoke-eyes.

"Not nervous, are you, Captain?"

Hardy spoke from the darkened corner where he sat.

"No," Craig answered truthfully. "I—I wouldn't say nervous." He glanced at his watch. "It still lacks ten minutes of being half an hour since Smith called the bureau."

"And you think he'll keep his word?"

Craig cleared his throat until his beefy jowls shook like a turkey's wattle. "Yes. I think so. As much as I dislike the man, I must admit that he always keeps his word."

"We'll see," the Commissioner said shortly.

A door opened somewhere in the darkness of the floor. Craig stepped back out of the circle of light, waiting—one hand on his gun.

"In here, if that's you, Smith," Hardy called. He drew his own gun from his pocket, and remained in the shadows.

The four men trailed in slowly. Jockey Ray came first. Jeepo walked behind him, his woman's skirts hiked to his knees. His veil was askew; his scarred mouth twisted with fear. Alabama Sam came next. Then Silent Smith.

Smith looked old and frail as he stepped into the light. But his eyes were cold; and he clutched a small, round bottle in his hand.

"Hold it," Jockey Ray called crisply. "Don't shoot until we get this figured out. Smith's got a bottle of nitro in his hand!"

"Well, I'll be blown!" Hardy swore. "So that's how he brought you in! And you're the Ungodly Three. Smith was right—you are alive!"

Craig said nothing.

"Well, evidently we've wronged you, Smith," Hardy offered suavely.

"Evidently," Smith agreed. He peered past the circle of light. "Is that Captain Craig over there?"

"Yes. It's me," Craig admitted. His voice sounded strained and choked.

Smith asked calmly, "Tell me one thing, Captain. Who suggested to you, before the fight at the Garden last night, that you drop into Kid McGuire's dressing room and see if I was there?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Craig said, "Drop your gun Hardy—or I'll drill you!"

"You're mad, Craig!"

"Fighting mad! I see through the whole thing now. It was you who got the communique, or said you did, that the Ungodly Three were dead. It was you, who after living beyond your means, tied up with three dead men to loot Broadway as it was never looted before. It was *you* who suggested that we drop into the Garden and have a chat with Kid McGuire!"

"That's right, Craig." Smith affirmed. "The man behind the murders has been our acting Commissioner of Police—once Captain Hardy of the Black Hand Squad, working out of the old 47th Street Station. If the Kid lives, and when I last called the hospital they said he had a good chance if we can get Betsy to his bedside, he can tell us just what veiled threat Hardy made. And Hardy made some threat. He was the last man to see the Kid before he went into the ring. That's why Moe Harris had to die. Moe knew it was Hardy, but didn't suspect him."

Hardy's voice was coldly amused. "And what proof have you of all this, Smith?"

The gambler pointed to Jeepo, who stood just in front of Hardy. "As Captain of the Black Hand Squad, you were tied into the extortion plot explosion that almost blew Jeepo to kingdom come. Your fingers were sticky, but you were acquitted by the trial board. They stripped you of your command, though; gave you the band to lead."

"Proving?"

"That they knew you were guilty but couldn't prove it. If that was true, then

Jeepo could have some hold on you. I think he has. And when the Ungodly Three escaped from Cayenne they came to you, with a proposition. You were desperate, pressed for money. You know the real commissioner is coming back next week—so you agreed."

Hardy smiled dryly. "Go on. You interest me. But you still haven't said a thing."

"Then tell me this," Smith asked quietly. "How could Ronaldie confess to you that I was the man behind the betting coup that cost him his life? You never even saw him after he was carried out of the ring—until he was dead! You were still upstairs here when I left last night, and Ronaldie died as Sam and I pulled away from the curb. We got the flash over the radio in the car."

CRAIG swore feelingly, hoarsely. "Okay." Hardy's voice became a whisper. "I had a big idea and it suddenly went wrong." His voice gained strength. "But don't think, Smith—and this goes for you too—Craig, that you're going to leave here to expose me."

"Now you're talking," Jockey Ray approved. "We can knock off these two guys and still loot Broadway plenty."

"Providing." Smith shook the bottle of thick, sluggish liquid in his hand, "that you can figure out how to kill me without this blowing us all to bits!"

Jeepo mewed with rage. Alabama Sam translated glumly. "He say he rather die than go back to Devil's Island."

It was the break for which Smith had waited. "All right!" He smiled at Jeepo. "Die!" He drew back the hand holding the bottle as if about to throw a ball. "Catch!"

What followed was utter confusion, as Smith had known it would be. Jeepo backed, squealing, into Hardy. The Commissioner fell with the man on top of him, firing at Craig as he fell. But he fired blindly into darkness. Craig's first shot



had shattered the dome light. Smith, the bottle still in his hand, crouched in the sudden darkness by the wall, as lead bit into the splintered paneling above him.

"Get off of me! Get Craig and Smith, you fools!" Hardy roared. "Smith's tricked you. He doesn't dare throw that nitro. He—" Hardy's words choked in his throat. Craig had fired at the sound of his voice.

Jeepo, scrambling to his feet, screamed as Alabama Sam's searching razor swept the back of the room for Smith, Craig fired again—at the scream. He missed the man completely; but it didn't matter—Jeepo was already dying, and the lead pellet of death that searched for him smacked into the tall, thin, colored man instead. Then—all was sudden silence.

Silent Smith got cautiously to his feet. He stared, puzzled, at the stream of sunlight spotlighting the floor.

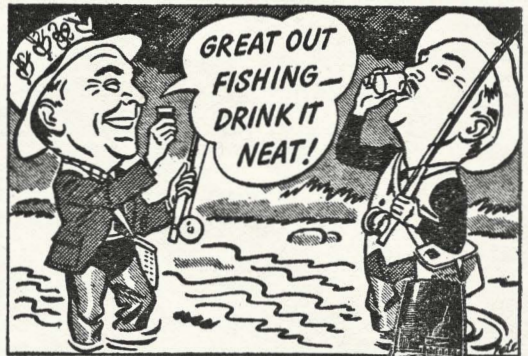
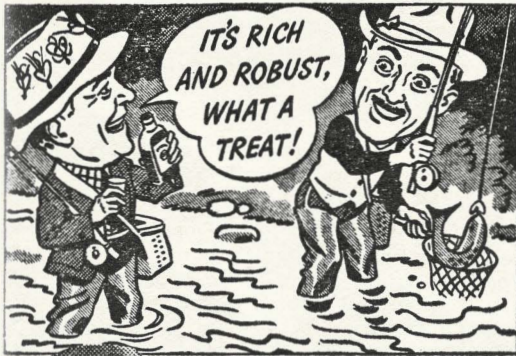
"Got 'em all, I guess." Craig grunted gruffly. "I may be dumb, but I can shoot." He mopped with his sleeve at the icy perspiration on his cheeks. "But I thought for a minute that you were really going to throw that bottle of—Hey! Wait! Where's Jockey Ray?"

Followed by Craig, Smith strode through the open french window, out onto the set-back. He looked down the sheer side of the building. Two floors below—and thirty-eight stories above Broadway—Jockey Ray, clinging like a fly to the toe and hand holds afforded by the ornamental stone, was reaching with one foot for the sill of an open window.

"Hold it, Jockey!" Smith called down. "Stay right where you are until Craig can get—"

The human fly screamed his hate. "You gray haired devil! I—" He glanced up, stopped short as he saw the bottle in Smith's upraised hand. "No!" he

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screamed. "Don't! Don't throw that at me!"

Smith's hand opened. The squat, round bottle left it—fell directly at Jockey's head.

The man with the body of a child twisted desperately to avoid it. He lost his balance, clawed for a moment at the unyielding stone—and hurtled into space.

Softly Silent Smith said, "I always pay off, Jockey."

Craig's florid face was purple. "You shouldn't have done that, Smith!" He gaped down at the stream of ant-like figures who stood transfixed, their white dots of faces upturned. "There's no telling how many will be killed when that nitro hits the street. *You'll burn for murder yet, Smith!*"

But Silent didn't hear him. He was on his way to Betsy McGuire. The hospital had said that Johnny had a chance, a fighting chance to live if he could see her.



**S**MITH turned from the starry-eyed girl who knelt at her husband's bedside.

"Johnny will be all right now?" Silent asked the doctor in charge.

The doctor nodded, smiling. "Perfectly all right. Clean living and a fighting heart were as good as an antidote." He smiled as the girl-wife kissed the hand that Johnny had put in hers. "And right now his wife is the best medicine

that he should have. He'll live to fight the champion—and win."

Smith smiled. "That's all that I wanted to know." A wave of weariness swept over him as he glanced around the room. Bill Morrow stood by the door; in the doorway, Captain Craig of Homicide was waiting.

The silver-haired gambler squared his shoulders. There still was much to be done. And he was old; tired. Craig stepped aside to let him pass, but in the corridor stopped him.

"Just a minute, Smith. That bottle you threw at Jockey. The one that splattered on Broadway."

"What about it, Craig?" Smith asked. "It may have upset her stomach but it didn't hurt her, did it? Broadway's a beautiful woman, but after all, she's only human. In the last twelve hours she had more than she could handle, and she needed what she got."

"I—yes, you're right, Smith," the captain said. "But will you tell me why that nitroglycerine didn't explode?"

"Because," Smith told him gently, "it wasn't nitroglycerine. It was mineral oil."

Bill Morrow whooped with laughter. Craig's florid face went crimson. He turned on his heel and stalked away.

Silent Smith called after him, softly: "About that little bet we had, Captain Craig. A matter of five thousand dollars that I would burn. I'll expect your check in the morning." He added, "A certified check, Captain—the McGuire baby may need a lot of shoes."

**THE END**





# DOUBLE EXPOSURE

By ROBERT D. DUNCAN

*They were sure they could kill the doddering, ailing professor—and flee the tropics they both hated. How could they know that he had hidden in their own bodies the seeds of his terrible revenge?*

CLEM FARSON propped his feet on the veranda railing, hitched about in the native-made cane chair until his thinly-upholstered bones were fairly comfortable, and gazed down the wild grass expanse to the beach. The



"Hurry!" Clem whispered. "We mustn't be too long, or he'll be suspicious!"

faintest whisper of a sultry breeze ruffled the turquoise waters of the Bengal Sea. The sun was slipping behind the timber-thatched hill, and the water was turning indigo. It would be dark in half an hour. Paulette, who had gone fishing and dugong hunting with her husband, Professor Henry Irvington, should be returning almost any minute—alone.

There would be no questions asked. The beautiful young woman, her large, jet eyes reddened from weeping, would tell the missionary priest how her husband had thrown the harpoon from the small motor launch, had impaled the floundering body of the dugong, giant East Indian relative of the South Atlantic manatee, or sea cow. The pain-maddened creature had dived, and the harpoon rope twisted about his wrist had yanked Professor Irvington down a dozen fathoms. (Certainly not a sudden, vicious push by a devoted wife could have caused the unfortunate occurrence.) And even if he had freed himself from the rope, he couldn't swim. Why hadn't Mrs. Irvington tried to rescue him? She could swim expertly, put to shame the sleek brown Andaman Island natives. Oh, there was a perfect answer to that. Clem and Paulette had figured that out long before. Sharks, attracted by the blood of the wounded dugong, had congregated for a ghoulish feast on the sea-mammal and man-mammal. Even the police from Port Blair, capital of the string of islands and a hundred miles away, wouldn't blame the stricken young woman for not throwing herself to the bloody banquet. And they'd never investigate anyway. Life was cheap on those remote islands, four hundred miles from Rangoon. The report of the unfortunate death of Professor Henry Irvington would reach Rangoon on the next packet-boat, through Father Anthony. But Clem Farson and the lovely young widow would be on that boat, the first leg of their trip to San Francisco, where

lay the wealth Clem was to claim, as Professor Irvington.

The purple shadow of the hill reached out farther into the bay. Clem looked at his watch. What the hell! She ought to be back. He picked up the binoculars from the table at his side, squinted through them. Not an object on the water save the two bobbing buoys that would guide the launch home. The breeze stiffened, and it was cold. Clem shivered, reached for the bottle of Scotch, poured a stiff one and gulped it. It scalded, but didn't warm. He knew the cold feeling had nothing to do with the breeze. What if something had gone wrong? Could Irvington know? Know all the time that his assistant, Clem Farson, had found something more engaging than anthropological work; had found lovely Paulette more engaging than the study of the primitive Negritos of the Andamans? Did Professor Irvington know Clem had been an actor, and planned to capitalize on his amazing physical resemblance to the raw-boned scientist; had practised for months in imitating his gestures, speech, even his handwriting? Irvington himself had remarked that Clem could pass for him anywhere, they looked that much alike.

Clem jumped to his feet, lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, began to pace the veranda of the cottage. Suppose Irvington knew? It was odd the way the Professor had suggested the dugong-hunting trip. Clem and Paulette had planned it. She was to talk Henry into it. The professor was no swimmer, and frightened to death of the water. She was to shame him into the expedition. But that morning at breakfast, Clem had casually mentioned that dugong-hunting was great sport. Paulette was to take her cue and say, "Oh darling, why don't we try it?" But Irvington raised his gaunt face and said with unwonted enthusiasm, "Splendid idea! I need a change, and you do too, Paulette! Let's start right after breakfast."



Paulette had been pouring her husband's coffee. Her hand jerked and the hot fluid gushed over Irvington's thin, pallid hand. He made no outcry, simply wiped his hand with a napkin. For an instant Clem had felt admiration instead of contemptuous pity for this man who was going to die. Trying to be a hero, win back her love. First evincing enthusiasm over a dangerous trip, now masking his pain.

As Clem paced the veranda, stopped to take another drink, squinted again through the binoculars, the cold hate returned—and cold fear.

**T**HE launch would have to pull up the string-piece within minutes. One of them would return. But mightn't that one be—*Henry Irvington?* He loved his wife intensely, almost insanely, and once he told Clem he wouldn't blame a man who killed a faithless wife. If Irvington knew—had known all along—that might explain his eagerness to go on the hazardous adventure. A sudden push—and it would be a widower, not a widow, who tied up the launch and walked up to the cottage. And there would be a gun in his hand.

Clem instinctively patted the reassuring bulge in his jacket pocket. It gave him courage, but not enough. Another nip from the pinch-bottle took effect, and he stopped pacing and squatted back in the chair. He was a fool to worry. They might have had motor trouble. And how could Irvington be suspicious? He trusted implicitly the pleasant-speaking, brilliant young man he had met in a Rangoon bar a year before. Why, he had hired Clem on the spot. Professor Irvington had gotten expansive, invited Clem to a table after Clem had knocked the daylights out of a drunken Lascar who had somehow gotten by the doormen, and had insulted the lovely young Mrs. Irvington.

The professor had just returned from

Angkor Vat, in Cambodia, making a study of the famous ruins of the Great Temple of the Khmers. He was on his way to the Andaman Islands to study the primitives there, and he could use an assistant like Clem Farson. The only whites on the tiniest island of the straggling chain were the missionary and his novice assistants. Clem was well educated, knew a little anthropology, and could take dictation. Thus he could help the professor with his book, and could protect Mrs. Irvington while the Professor made inland expeditions.

Clem grinned. The fool! Didn't he notice the come-on look Paulette flashed him that night in Rangoon? Clem, so like her husband—yet so different! Browned and wiry, while the Professor was pale and skinny. It was a swell set-up, and Paulette begged him to come along. It didn't take much begging.

Clem butted his cigarette and poured another drink. It had been almost a year now. Paulette had suggested the idea. They planned it perfectly. Clem had been an actor, good enough to slip by the cops who wanted him for embezzlement and a stick-up of the box-office in the last theatre he'd played in the States. And the day came when Professor Irvington had swallowed one highball too many, unhinged his tongue and signed his own death warrant. His research almost completed, he figured on going back to San Francisco, where money awaited him, a large estate in the mountains, being managed for him by a friend, whom he hadn't seen in fifteen years.

Inside the cottage a clock chimed. Clem Farson leaped to his feet, his nerves jangling again. Six, and no sign of the boat! He snatched up the binoculars again, but it was so dark now that they were useless. The cold fear came flooding back. Perhaps Irvington had guessed—taken Paulette's life and his as well. But no—he'd want his revenge before he died.

He was reaching for the bottle when he heard the *chug-chug* of the motor, then the launch's claxon. Clem snapped on the switch at the veranda post, grasped the handle of the spotlight to focus it on the dock. There was a dead click and no light. He cursed. He should have fixed that frayed connection.

But as he moved down the cement-and-cyrena shell path through the darkness he decided it was just as well. The spotlight spread like a shotgun charge and he'd be a perfect target, if Irvington happened to be returning—alone. Yet—would Irvington be such a fool as to blow the klaxon? No. He'd come in silently, cut the motor away out in the bay, paddle in, steal up to the cottage, gun in hand. . . .

CLEM FARSON wanted to stride boldly on down to the dock. But the tiny light on the prow of the launch suddenly focused on the mooring pile and hit him square in the eyes. He instinctively scuttled to one side, crouched behind the barrel-thick trunk of a cocopalm. Here he could see, and not be seen. And what he saw made him reach for the automatic.

Professor Henry Irvington leaped from the cockpit of the launch to the dock, and stood there in inky silhouette. Clem's finger found the trigger of his gun.

"Clem! Clem! Turn on the light!" It was Paulette's voice, and Irvington was helping her clamber up out of the launch.

Clem shoved the automatic back in his pocket, mopped his face and stepped out of the darkness. *Both of them!* Both of them back! What went wrong? Did Paulette lose her nerve? *I've got to act natural, smooth. . . .*

Irvington was tying up the boat. He was cheerful, too cheerful. Under the light his gaunt face was lemon, spectral, twisted with an odd smile. "Where'd you pop up from? Looks like you startled Paulette."

Paulette's eyes were wide and staring—staring at the bulge in Clem's inside jacket pocket. Irvington's back was to him—Clem swiftly unbuttoned his jacket, so the bulge would be less conspicuous. Then he thought: why? Irvington knows I always carry a gun. You have to, with these blasted natives. I wouldn't use it on him anyway. Too dangerous. The missionaries are armed and I'd never get away from this hell-hole except in shackles.

Clem's voice was natural, jovial. "Heard the klaxon. Spotlight's on the fritz. Stumbled down here in the dark and then your light blinded me and I ducked around it. But what happened to you? You had me worried. Engine trouble?"

Professor Irvington had finished tying up the boat, reached down to snap off the prow-light, and the three made their way up the path toward the cottage.

"Yes. The engine failed. I'm not much of a mechanic. It was Paulette who finally got the confounded thing started." He sighed, clutched his wife's arm, pulling her toward him and away from Clem. "You're very silent, my dear. Cat got your tongue, or just tired—and a little disappointed?"

"Disappointed!" Paulette gasped, immediately regained her composure, and laughed. "Oh, our rotten luck. A little fishing, but not a single dugong, not even a shot at one. But I don't mind, darling. There'll be other days. Tomorrow, maybe."

They were mounting the steps of the veranda. Irvington was breathing harshly. "Not for me, my dear." He laughed metallically. "I'm afraid I'm a sissy, Clem. Too dangerous a sport for me, I've decided. We saw a native hook into one of those devils and capsize. The sharks. . . ."

Clem opened the screen door, ushered them in. There would have to be another method. And Clem knew what it would



be, when Irvington said that he needed a drink and one of his heart tablets.

"Poor darling," Paulette cooed. "You go in your study and lie down. Clem, you fix him a drink, will you? And I'll get the medicine."

CLEM'S smile was wolfish as Henry Irvington shuffled into his little book-lined room. His voice was hearty and genial. "Fix you up right away! Bottle's out on the veranda."

"Thanks, Clem. Not used to being out on the water all day under a blistering sun. Guess I'd better stick to shore." He laughed feebly.

Clem Farson stepped swiftly outside. Paulette was waiting for him in the kitchen when he came back with the bottle. In her hand was another bottle.

"This one?" she whispered.

"Yes." Clem twisted the spigot, and the rush of the water, soon followed by the thumping of the automatic electric pump, cloaked their voices.

"Hurry!" Clem whispered. "The ice. We mustn't be too long or he'll be suspicious. If he isn't already! What happened? What went wrong?"

Paulette had the ice-tray out of the refrigerator, an ancient model but a prime luxury on the island. She made a great clatter as she melted the cubes loose, scooped them into a bowl. It was safe to talk in normal tones, such was the combined racket, but still she muted her voice.

"There wasn't a chance. He wouldn't stand up in the boat, even when he had a heavy fish on the line. Afraid he'd lose his balance."

Clem Farson gripped her arm and said, "*Afraid he'd fall overboard—or be pushed?*"

Paulette put ice into a tall glass. "I don't think he suspects. I'm sure he doesn't, darling! If he did—would he give us a chance like this?" She picked up the smaller bottle.

Clem looked at the bottle and its label. "You're right, honey. If he knew, he wouldn't be lying down in there and—"

A new sound intruded, unidentifiable, but persistent. "What's that!" Paulette gasped. She turned off the water and the other sound stopped too. Neither breathed. Then the sound resumed, now clear; and there was no mistaking what made it. It was the clatter of a typewriter, and it came from Henry Irvington's study.

"What the devil—" Clem whispered. "I thought he was sick. So it was just an act."

"No. He's had spells like that and come out of them just like that." She snapped her fingers.

"Not when I've been around, Paulette!"

"Just the last week, I mean, while you were gone to Rangoon." She poured Scotch in the glass. "It's his heart. It'll be better this way. If you're sure these pills—"

"They'll do it. An overdose. Riskier than what you should have done this afternoon. Father Anthony knows medicine, but—I'm sure natural causes will be—"

The shout from the other room sheared off Clem Farson's words, and the typewriter stopped at the same instant.

"Clem! Paulette! Hurry it up, you two! Where the devil is that drink of mine?"

PAULETTE gurgled more Scotch out of the bottle into two other glasses, called cheerfully, "With you in a minute, darling." Clem did the rest. One pill was the normal dose. He took the remaining nine, swiftly crushed them in the bowl of a spoon, as a mortar, using the back of another as a pestle. The powdered result went into the tall glass, Professor Irvington's special glass. His *very* special glass on this very special night. Clem followed Paulette into the study and watched her set down the tray.

Irvington was sealing an envelope, carefully licking the long white flap, then pounding it until it stuck. Then he took his drink.

"Working, darling? You ought to be lying down! You're worn out!"

Irvington lifted the glass to his lips. "Nonsense. I'm all right. I'll be much better after I've gotten this inside me." He cleared his throat. "Here's how!"

Clem and Paulette raised their glasses and Professor Irvington did something he'd never done before. Instead of conservatively sipping the drink, he gulped it half way down, paused for breath, and finished it in another prodigious gulp.

Paulette laughed nervously. "My, you did have a thirst, dear! Shall I—mix you another?"

Henry Irvington folded his arms across

Irvington just stared. His face was yellow and globules of perspiration studded his forehead. His eyes bulged, and Clem, with an unholy fascination, watched the swollen artery in the doomed man's temple throb at a furious pace. The heart would burst any second now.

"Didn't you hear what I said, man! Or maybe you didn't quite understand! You just took your medicine, and you're dying! Nine of your heart pills in that drink! You know what that means! You're all washed up, Irvington! Paulette's mine, has been ever since we met up. You didn't fit in the picture any longer, so—"

His voice trailed off as Henry Irvington, his face a living death mask, nodded his head slowly. One, two, three times.

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his chest, smiled his queer twisted smile and said, "No thanks, dear. That one was quite sufficient. Excuse my bad manners in swilling it down that way, but I *was* thirsty. However—you did forget my medicine."

Clem's hand jerked, knocked over his glass. There wasn't a pill left. Both he and Paulette had forgotten about the cursed medicine. But what difference did it make now? Those pills were already doing their deadly work and the end would come much quicker because the poor fool had swallowed the lethal dose in five seconds, instead of lingering over it for twenty minutes. Henry Irvington was going to die, and he might as well know. It would be a pleasure to tell the simple, unsuspecting sap.

"We didn't forget your medicine. You just took it, Irvington." He waited for the result.

Then he slid limply to the floor.

Clem Farson and Paulette Irvington stood there, looked at the strange smile on the upturned face. She shuddered, turned away, and they stepped from the room of death into the kitchen.



**W**HEN Father Anthony, summoned by a native boy, arrived at the cottage, he found a dead man, a weeping widow, and the dead man's assistant and colleague, apparently shocked and upset.

The good Father asked very few questions, tendered his sympathy, and said he'd arrange for burial. The funeral ceremony was simple and brief. Mr. Clem Farson would escort the widow on the packet boat to Rangoon, communicate



with Professor Irvington's relatives in the States, who would in turn advise Father Anthony as to the disposition of the deceased's personal effects. Mrs. Irvington was too grief-stricken to want or make any claim to her husband's *lares* and *penates*. She and Clem packed up their own personal effects and the packing included a bundle of banknotes totalling a thousand dollars, and the envelope Professor Irvington had sealed the night he died.

"To my wife Paulette, on her twenty-sixth birthday," the uneven scrawl read.

"Open it," Clem said.

"No darling. I know what it is. Money. He promised me a trip to Rangoon and a bracelet for my birthday next month. We'll tuck it away for a rainy day."

Clem kissed her. "There aren't going to be any rainy days, sweet. And you're going to have a better present than a trip to Rangoon and a bracelet. It's a trip to the States, and a fortune for the wife of the new Professor Henry Irvington."

AS THEY stood on the rear deck of the packet-boat, watching the palm-fringed island fade, Clem Farson exulted, forgot all his fears. They'd accomplished the whole thing so beautifully. And it would be a cinch to pass himself off in front of Irvington's friend, who hadn't seen Irvington in fifteen years. He looked like him, talked like him, was prepared for every question that might be asked. Irvington had told him he'd mailed his friend, Richard Brewster, a photo of his young wife. And that he'd be returning soon, his work in the Andamans done, to retire, take over his estate.

And Professor Irvington *would* be returning with his lovely bride, take over the estate—and then in a month or so he would get the wanderlust again, sell the property and leave for parts unknown.

What could be more natural for a man who had spent most of his life in the far outposts of civilization?

Packet-boat to Rangoon, delay in getting another steamer on the next leg, passport red-tape, war stringencies, but then at last Honolulu, and the three thousand miles to 'Frisco didn't seem so far. He radioed Brewster that he was coming back, bringing his wife. The time moved too fast. Clem would have to do a perfect job. This Brewster guy knew Irvington from their knee-pants days, before Paulette ever knew him, and there were details about the dead man's youth Paulette couldn't supply. If those questions came he'd have to fake, stall, get rid of Brewster as soon as possible. There was an idea. When you've killed one man, another doesn't matter. But it might not be so easy this time. The desolate Andaman Islands and California were two different propositions.

Every day Clem practiced in front of a mirror, Paulette coaching, and finally approving. When they docked in San Francisco and went down the gangplank she whispered, "Darling, you're perfect!"

Perfect or not, when Clem, with Paulette clinging to his arm, approached the door of the sprawling mansion, his automatic was handy. If he should make the slightest slip, this guy Brewster would call the cops to arrest an impostor, and it wouldn't be long before they found out the impostor was a murderer.

Irvington hadn't exaggerated. The place spelled money. The grounds were an elaborately landscaped park, the perfect setting for the house. Twenty rooms, Clem guessed. And if he played his part right he'd be the master, Paulette the mistress of the place.

He sounded the brass knocker. The door opened after eternities of seconds, and the gray-haired, wizened butler who stood there opened his mouth, but no sound came.

"I'd like to see Mr. Brewster," Clem said, speaking in the voice of a man now dead.

The butler was gasping. "Wh-why. Professor Irvington, isn't it? Yes—of course it is! And after all these years!"

**F**ARSON felt a warm flood of triumph. He had put it over perfectly.

If the butler recognized him immediately—but then the warmth suddenly changed to ice, and uneasy, clammy fear swept over him. The butler was staring at him curiously. Was he supposed to know the old buzzard, call him by name? Irvington had talked freely about his home in the States, about Brewster, and Farson had pigeon-holed every little detail. But he had said nothing about servants, nothing about a butler who would recognize him at once even after a fifteen years' absence.

"You don't remember me, sir?"

Paulette clutched his arm, stayed the hand that was moving toward the pocket that contained the slim automatic, and chirped, "It's been a long time, I guess, darling—"

Farson tried to follow the cue, groped for words, and stammered, "Er—yes. I—" And then his wits clicked. "Fifteen years in the tropics; couple of bouts with Asiatic fever—memory a bit hazy. I remember you of course, but names—can't seem to grasp them out of the past—"

"Adams, sir. But it's quite understandable that you wouldn't recall it, since I was in your service only a week before you left for the Orient, and put Mr. Brewster in charge. I'll announce you at once, Professor Irvington."

The old man turned and shuffled down the hall. Paulette relaxed her fierce grip on Clem's arm. "Good work, darling," she whispered. "But that was a lucky break, too. Watch yourself! This Brewster—don't talk much, let him do the talking."

"Leave it to me, Paulette." A million within his grasp! After the months of planning, suffocating on a disease-ridden island, journeying half-way around the world, Clem Farson wasn't going to falter on the last dozen yards from the goal, the dozen yards to the library where Professor Irvington would greet his old friend Brewster. And then the brief reunion, followed by a little informal business, such as transfer of the key to a safe deposit vault. . . .

The butler reappeared, ushered them into the great library, and closed the door softly. A plump, beaming little man was waddling towards them, both hands outstretched.

"Henry! By the Lord Harry it's good to see you again! And this—this is the blushing bride! Even lovelier than your picture! Do sit down, sit down, tell me all about yourselves. Have a good trip? You must be tired to death. Drink? I'll ring for Adams." Brewster yanked a bell-cord, and went babbling.

"You're looking splendid, Henry. Different, too. But I suppose that's the tropics, traveling, and," he added waggishly, "being married to such a radiant young creature as Mrs. Irvington."

It was all too ridiculously easy. The drinks came, and Paulette's warning to let Mr. Brewster do most of the talking proved quite unnecessary. He grew more expansive, and the only questions he asked were about the exotic islands in the Bay of Bengal. Clem answered them with ease, and he and Paulette enjoyed themselves at the expense of the garrulous little fool. And then, the perfect climax. . . .

"Glad you came back, Henry. I've kept your affairs running smoothly. You'll find everything in order. But I'm just as glad to be rid of the responsibility. My things are all packed, and I'm driving East to my college reunion. Need a little change."



Brewster babbled on some more, but finally departed, leaving Clem in his secure role as master of Irvington Manor.



IT HAD been such a cinch that at first they were strangely uneasy. It had gone too smoothly, almost. But after a month had passed and Clem had converted a large part of Irvington's securities into cash without a hitch, they began to breathe freely. Irvington's lawyer and his broker welcomed him back and conducted genial transactions. They understood the Professor's well-known anathema toward publicity, and his quiet return was not betrayed to the press. They also understood his restlessness and eagerness to dispose of the property and light out on another scientific junket. The sale was conducted quietly, and Clem and Paulette were prepared on a day early in April to depart for points unknown, richer by a million dollars.

It was their last night in the mansion. They were to catch the morning plane to Mexico City. And the next day was Paulette's birthday. Just a few minutes away, for the minute hand of the clock was scissoring shut with the hour hand.

Clem wasn't too steeped in gloating and Scotch to forget. When the clock started booming midnight he tugged a small box out of his pocket and gave it to her.

"Happy birthday, darlin'," He kissed her. She opened the box, saw the emerald necklace, and kissed him.

"Little better'n what that miser Irvington would have given you, eh, Paulette?"

Her face darkened with hate and contempt. "Just a little. Rich as he was he never would spend more than—" She stopped. "I'll show you. That envelope he left. Remember? Let's open it. Let's see what a cheapskate he was."

Paulette found the envelope, ripped it

open. Two five dollar bills fluttered out, and there was a note.

Clem sneered. "The cheapskate. Let's see what his last words were."

Clem and Paulette sat side by side and read the note together. A few minutes later they went to the kitchen, boiled a kettle-full of water, poured it over their hands, then looked at each other, dully.

THE following morning when the new owner of Irvington Manor arrived to take possession of his new home, he was surprised to find police cars in the driveway, and inside the sprawled bodies of Professor Henry Irvington and his young bride, both with bullets through their heads. A suicide pact, the cops said. It was obviously that, from the letter found clutched in the Professor's hand. But there were parts of the letter the police couldn't understand. It read:

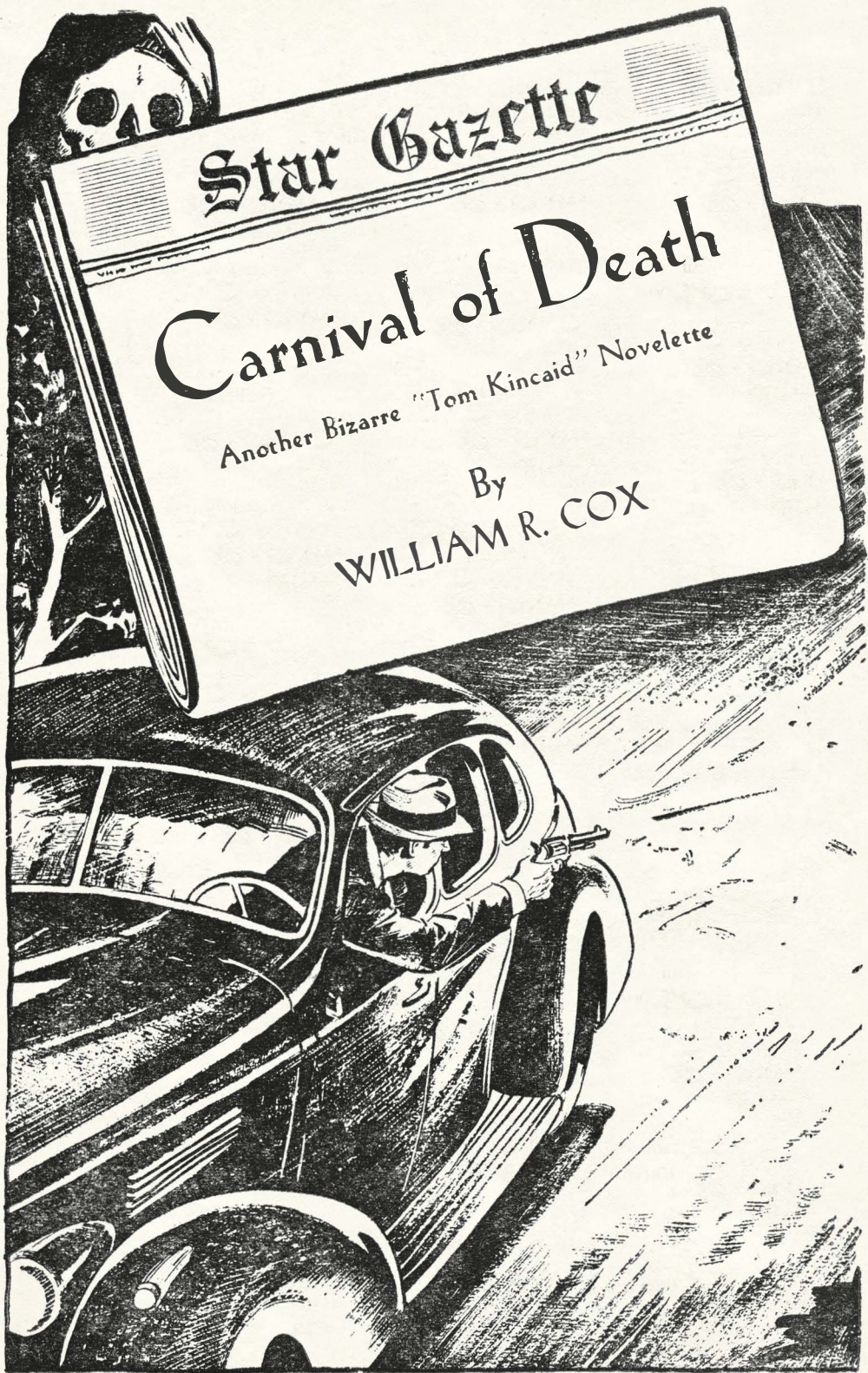
"My devoted wife:

As I write this, you and your lover are preparing me a drink. My last drink. You didn't know that I saw you prepare my medicine. I'll drink it down, gladly. I'm grateful, in a way, because I hadn't the courage to kill myself. But somehow I don't mind being murdered, because I was going to die anyway, horribly, and so are you—you and your lover.

I've known for a long time. You and Clem were too confident, became careless. I saw you together, overheard your plan to take my place. I let you go ahead, enjoyed your smug confidence, your bland assurance that I was a fool. I enjoyed the thought that I'd have my revenge, because you both are doomed to a hideous death, unless—well, I'll be merciful, give you a choice. The money enclosed will buy you an easier way out. A gun, in case you haven't one.

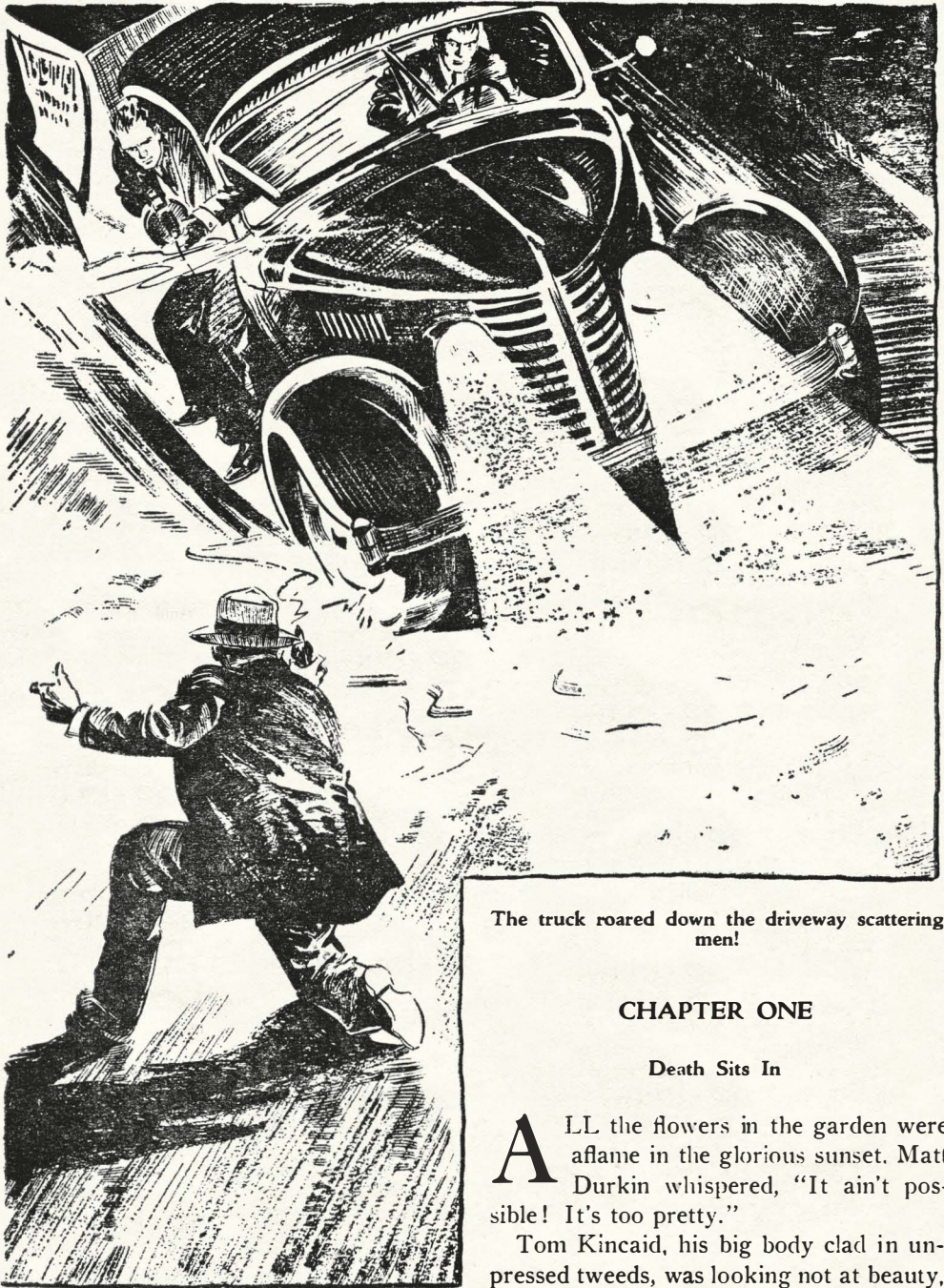
Remember when you spilled the scalding coffee on my hand this morning, and I didn't flinch. That wasn't grit or heroism, darling. That was leprosy. I couldn't feel the burn, a sure sign of the disease. Clem has it, and you have it. *You are both lepers!* I know the many other little signs. If you don't believe me, pour some boiling water on each other. Happy birthday, my pet. See you in Hell.

Henry."





*Gambler Tom Kincaid and his partner, little, hard-boiled Matt Durkin, go for a quiet game to a millionaire's Long Island mansion—and find, instead, a mad night of murder and mayhem engineered by their old friend, the banker-who-went-mad—George Grey!*



The truck roared down the driveway scattering men!

## CHAPTER ONE

### Death Sits In

**A**LL the flowers in the garden were aflame in the glorious sunset. Matt Durkin whispered, "It ain't possible! It's too pretty."

Tom Kincaid, his big body clad in unpressed tweeds, was looking not at beauty,



but beyond, at the house which only a millionaire could have built. He said, "It's a nice place, this garden. We can talk here. I don't like this calm hake, Matt."

"Oswald Cortez likes to gamble," Matt said. "We need money. Young Pete the Pet Cortez is a punk, but his daddy is all right. And Cary Ogilvy is level. You should worry about these millionaires."

"George Grey was a millionaire, too," said Tom Kincaid. At the mention of the common-place name of the ex-financier who had turned to crime, little Matt Durkin's face clouded and became not quite so handsome.

The dapper little fellow said, "We'll be seeing Grey, one of these days. This is just a small vacation, Tom. These rich man like to gamble against odds. They're paying us to play against them, giving them a battle for their dough."

Tom Kincaid moodily surveyed the Cortez mansion. It was a sprawling piece of varigated architecture which had been built by the father of the present owner, the grandfather of young Peter Cortez. Cortez was a name with which to conjure.

Oswald Cortez could afford to tilt against professional gamblers, especially two as well known for their honesty as Tom and Matt. The invitation had come through Cary Ogilvy, who was grateful—the matter of a crooked game in which Ogilvy, a wealthy rug manufacturer, had been squeezed. Tom and Matt had unsqueezed him.

That had been in the days when Tom Kincaid, nee Timothy Kinsolving, had operated a chain of gambling places throughout the country. The Kincaid empire had been based on the motto, "Always give a sucker an even break—you might get a return bout."

That empire was no more. A man—gone sour after years of banking in Jersey; his millions safe in vaults about the land—had begun to organize the underworld. He had ruined Kincaid's gambling

empire by the simple process of killing Tom's men.

One of those men was Matt Durkin's cousin Joey. Matt had not forgotten. Others were gamblers, honest gamblers.

George Grey had caused their deaths—almost succeeded in getting Tom and Matt. He had failed, but had escaped with his life.

There was a last moment blaze of sun in the Cortez garden; then twilight fell. Matt shivered and said, "Let's go inside, Tom."

Kincaid said, "Play your cards tight tonight, pal. Let me do the kiting. I've got a hunch on this."

Matt said, "We don't need the money that bad. Why don't we blow, if that's the way you feel?"

"Did you ever stop to think," said Tom deliberately, "about George Grey? There's no evidence against him, for any crime!"

"We saw him kill—"

"Our evidence wouldn't mean a thing," said Tom. "We're pretty well known as gamblers ourselves. My name is not Kincaid—a fact known to Grey. He's in a better position than we are, chum."

Matt said softly, "Let him get within gun range. I'll find him a position—horizontal!"

"Nix," Tom said. "It would mean the chair for you. We can only lie low, and watch our chance to get him dead to rights."

"Well spoken, Kincaid!"

The voice came from behind them. Tom whirled like a cat. He was a two-hundred pound man, but his motions were those of an athletic lightweight.

In the last rays of the sun, vision was slightly distorted; the man loomed very large. He was fairly handsome; fifty-odd, with a clipped, grey mustache. His eyes were deep-set, sharp; his nose was a predatory beak, yet thin and aristocratic.

He looked like what he was, a retired banker—George Grey. He said, "Just got



word that you were here. I ran down with a friend of mine to see old Ozzie. I hear we're going to play a little dealer's choice."

Matt said, "Let me at him, Tom." His face was white, his eyes stony. The .22 revolver was already in his hand, pointed straight at Grey.

Tom said, "No!" and Grey smiled.

"Of course not," Grey said comfortably. "It would, as Kincaid mentioned, mean the—the hot squat, as my underworld associates say." He laughed without mirth. "Just be yourselves gentlemen. Play your cards, later. And play them right!"

He laughed again and moved insolently past them, going towards the big house.

Tom looked about at the gorgeous blossoms in the garden of Oswald Cortez's magnificent estate. He said, "This has become an evil place."

Matt stared at the revolver in his hand. He was shaking now; two spots of color had risen in his cheeks. He said, "I would have killed him—in cold blood. . . ."

"Yes," Tom said. "Evil breeds evil. Let's go play our cards, Matt."



**J**ARED CLIVE stared insolently at Tom and said, "I'm pleased to meet you."

Tom smiled. "We've met before. In Miami. Hialeah."

Clive mumbled, "Maybeso."

Ozzie Cortez was a full-bodied, jovial soul, with pale pink cheeks and energy tremendous at the built-in bar of the great game room. "Let's have one, then go to town," he suggested. "I'm itchin' to get in a game."

Tom walked across and helped with the ice. He did not know whether to speak or to keep silence—Jared Clive was a con man, a card slicker and an ex-convict. George Grey was sponsoring him.

If he told Cortez, and Grey denied the facts, where would it get him? Grey was

an old business acquaintance of Cortez; his word was better than that of two admitted gamblers', however honest their reputations.

Jared Clive and Grey were sitting at the round deal table, already caressing decks of new cards. The other player was to be young Cortez—"Pete the Pet" to a thousand-odd chorines. Cary Ogilvy, young, clean-cut, open-faced, was talking with this heir to the Cortez millions.

Pete was a case, Tom knew. If he was not being sued by a blonde, he was being tossed from a horse, or playing a bad game of tennis against a nationally-known star who had become stooge for the moment. He was a grasping young egotist without brain; weakly handsome; too well-dressed.

Oswald Cortez said heartily, "The women are in town. Sent the servants off. Got the place all to ourselves. Oh—your chauffeur is over the garage, Grey. Radio, books, liquor up there for him."

Tom handed the drinks around. So Grey had a chauffeur now. Tom wondered if it was Red the Goon, or maybe Charley Dodo. Both these gunmen made a specialty of posing as chauffeurs.

"Let's get started," Cortez suggested. "This will be good. I can't wait!"

They arranged themselves around the table.

Cortez's pleasure was almost childlike. He said, "How about we buy a thousand, and play five thousand behind the stack?"

George Grey's eyebrows went up. He said, "Pretty steep, Ozzie!"

"With all your dough, you should holler," chuckled Cortez. He was dishing out chips with both hands. Tom watched young Pete the Pet. There was a strange light in the eye of the heir to the Cortez fortune. Peter, Tom decided, had never played for such high stakes. Yet the boy seemed unafraid, as eager as his father.

They began cautiously, as all poker games begin, with five card stud. Then Cortez dealt and called noisily for seven

card stud—choose five and gig the pot. Tom knew that poker was ended—it was all straight luck now.

Grey, playing recklessly, was winning. Tom never stopped watching Jared Clive's deal, but could detect nothing dishonest. Matt was winning, too; playing them close to his vest. Young Cortez and his father were the losers; Ogilvy stood about even. It was midnight before Tom knew it, so swift was the action. Young Cortez excused himself for a few minutes, and Clive's eyes narrowed as the youth slipped back into his seat. Ogilvy dealt a hand.

The red light was beginning to dance in Grey's eye. Tom felt the blast coming—somewhere near the surface of the apparently calm ex-banker slept that volcano of his greed for wealth to control the underworld; the mad dream of a banker who all his life had stayed within the realms of dry finance. In the Grey blood there had been a wild streak—Tom had met Grey's black sheep brother in Mexico. In fact, Tom had been forced to shoot that brother in self defense.

Now, George Grey had retired banking, had threatened to take over the underworld, organize it tightly—use it for his own gains. Tonight there was something afoot to further that plot.

The deal went around again. Cary Ogilvy picked up the cards and said, "Five card stud for a change. These wild games are too hot."

The pleasant rug manufacturer dealt. On the second round, Grey drew a queen, but Ogilvy's king was high. Grey raised a hundred dollars, proclaiming his queens. Matt dropped, Clive dropped.

Tom stayed with spades. Ogilvy stayed. Young Peter Cortez said, "Going up!" and placed two hundred in the pot. He had a way of poking his chips out, haphazardly, which annoyed the professional gambler in Tom Kincaid. There were only a seven and an eight showing in front of Peter. He was recklessly boosting a small

pair, Tom thought. Or maybe a straight.

Grey accepted the challenge, and re-raised. The others promptly got out, sacrificing their stakes. Grey had the cards; young Peter was pushing his. They got straightened out a five hundred dollar bet and Ogilvy dealt.

Young Cortez drew another seven! Grey's card was a troy of no value.

CORTEZ said, "Bet a thousand dollars!"

Grey's eyes narrowed to slits. Then he pushed two thousand dollars into the pot. "Raise!"

He had nothing showing, not a pair. Tom swore inwardly—Grey was cagey. With money invested in the pot, he was going to find out just where young Cortez stood. He didn't believe in that first raise of Peter's. It was close figuring.

Peter Cortez was not made of steel. He hesitated, said weakly, "I'll—call."

Ogilvy reached for the cards. Peter asked falteringly, "May I have a cut?"

"Certainly," boomed his father. "House rule says cut on fifth card."

Grey's face went rigid. Jared Clive leaned forward, his lips parted, his eyes on young Cortez. Matt's chair slid noiselessly back from the table. Tom wished devoutly that he had a gun to back up Matt's little .22.

Pete the Pet seemed to hesitate, staring at the proffered deck. Then he poked out his forefinger, in an annoying way. The cards slid apart. He followed them with uncertain fingers, stacking them for the deal.

Ogilvy calmly threw a card. It slid a bit on the green baize table top—an ace.

A ten-spot went to Grey, but the ex-banker did not even glance at it. He was staring at Young Cortez. Jared Clive's breath exploded noisily.

Matt hummed a little tune, sliding his chair back. Tom edged sideways on his seat.



Grey's flat voice said, "I'll bet you five thousand dollars—that you have aces and sevens!"

Peter frowned. "I'm the bettor. My sevens are high on the board."

"Slick-acing us," muttered Jared Clive indignantly.

"I can smell the wax from here," murmured Matt.

Young Pete turned pale. Ozzie Cortez stared around the table. "What's that? What did you say?"

George Grey leaned forward, his eyes swivelling to fasten upon the host. He said, "Your son, my dear Ozzie, is slick-acing us. He slipped the aces out of the deck and left the room. He waxed the backs of them. Then, when he gave that one-fingered poke, the deck separated so that he got an ace to match the hole card—" Grey reached over, turned up Peter's card. It was the ace of spades—"See! Your son, Ozzie, has been consorting too much with Kincaid and Durkin!"

Tom expected it. Pete the Pet was thoroughly scared, now.

Ozzie Cortez choked, "Now wait. I can pay all losses. This—this is embarrassing. If you can prove it, I'll deal with Peter."

Cary Ogilvy was on his feet. He said, "No one is a great loser except, possibly, Mr. Grey. If we reimburse him—"

"I don't want your money," Grey cut in. "But I want you to know that Kincaid taught Peter that trick. Peter lost money to Kincaid—got into his clutches. People think Kincaid is an honest gambler— Bah!"

Ozzie Cortez was bewildered. He turned towards Tom. Matt got up and slipped backwards to the wall. Grey was working himself into a murderous rage.

There was a light switch. Matt could reach it—if trouble started. . . .

Grey drew a gun from his pocket. He said, "I've had previous experience with Kincaid and Durkin. I insist that they do not leave until—"

The lights went out suddenly. There was motion in the dark, then a scream. Ozzie Cortez cursed.

Tom reached for his pencil flashlight. He sprayed it, on the table, quickly on the wall behind him. The lights came on again. Matt stood frozen, hand half-raised, within reach of the switch.

But Tom was staring across the deal table now, blinking his eyes unbelievably at what he saw.

Cary Ogilvy drew a deep breath and said, "Don't anyone make a move to leave now, if you please."

Ozzie Cortez wailed, "No!" looking at Peter, who was slumped in his chair. Protruding from his throat was a long, slim stiletto. Even as they watched, he seemed to sigh, then slipped gently to the floor of his father's elaborate game room.

Pete the Pet would never slick another ace.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Charley Had a Gun. . . .

CARY OGILVY said, "We had to send for the police, of course. I know there is no proof that you killed young Cortez. But. . . ."

They were in a small basement room. Upstairs George Grey was elaborating on the villainy of Tom and Matt, while a pale-faced Oswald Cortez walked the floor. Jared Clive was there, backing every word Grey uttered in defamation of Tom.

Cary Ogilvy went on, "Your reputation as a gambler, living on the edge of the law, so to speak, is against you in this, Tom. Matt could have turned off the lights—"

"I didn't!" Matt said. "I was going to, and take a shot at Grey. But I swear I didn't turn them off."

Tom said, "And I didn't kill that young fool. Grey made use of an unforeseen situation. He couldn't have known that young

Peter was going to cheat. Unless. . . ." He shook his head in grim admiration. "Maybe he did know it. Grey's a clever man. Go upstairs, Cary, and see if you can calm down our host."

"I hate to see you arrested." Ogilvy hesitated.

Tom said, "You'll do us more good if you get Cortez in a better frame of mind. Grey has us fixed for the electric chair right now."

Ogilvy went reluctantly from the little room—a sort of store-room, with a few boxes piled in a corner. It was built next to the oil furnace; and the door was stout. As the rug maker left, Tom heard the ominous sound of a turning key.

"And Charley Dodo is out there with a gat," said Matt Durkin. "We're hooked."

Tom said, "What about fingerprints on that knife? No one in the room was wearing gloves. If we could get back into that room and get that knife before someone else does—"

Matt said, "This is New York County. They don't dare move the body until the M.E. gets here."

"Clive or Grey could wipe that handle clean. It would complicate things—but they could swear we had the opportunity."

"Who did it?" asked Matt.

"It doesn't matter right now," Tom said grimly. "The thing worked out perfectly for Grey."

Matt said, "We've got to work out of here. We're like rats in a trap. The Law will throw us into the can, where we can never find out who killed Peter Cortez!"

Tom nodded, silent; he leaned against the brick wall. There was a single bulb in the middle of the ceiling. Only the stout door provided exit.

"Turn out the light," Tom instructed.

Matt snapped the switch. The little room blackened. Matt said, "I don't get it!"

"The door—try it!"

Matt fumbled around silently. He whis-

pered, "Tom! It's open! What the—"

"I thought so," Tom said. "George Grey doesn't want us caught by the police. He can't stand even the slightest suspicion. He must be planning something big."

"You mean if we talked—even though we are gamblers, we might put a bee in the cop's bonnets."

Tom said, "That's it. Charley Dodo is out there somewheres. He's got a gun. If we tried to escape, and he shot us. . . ."

"Charley would fry," objected Matt. "He's notorious."

Tom said, "Well?"

"Let's go!" Matt whispered.

They opened the door, waited a moment. It was pitch dark in the cellar; overhead were small noises which might mean anything. Then, in the distance, a shrill sound pierced the night.

Matt hissed, "Cops!"

Tom put his big hand on the little fellow's shoulder and guided him. Tom's uncanny memory for detail stood him in good stead now. He found the stairs leading upwards, and went up first, two steps at a time.

A door lead out. Matt started for it, but Tom grabbed him. Steps led up to the main body of the big house. Matt whispered, "They'll get us."

"Let them—inside the house," was the answer.

Tom went ahead. There was a large, spotless kitchen. There was a butler's pantry. On the other side of the door, Cary Ogilvy's persuasive voice said, "Tom and Matt are not criminals, Ozzie. They're known all over the country as square gamblers. Until recently they run games in every large city in America—honest games."

"The lights," choked Ozzie Cortez. "Durkin pulled that switch. Who but he or Kincaid could have thrown the knife?"

Ogilvy said slowly, "I wonder! Tell me, where's the switch to turn off all the



lights in the house? The master switch?"

Cortez said, "Why, in the garage, I believe."

Cary Ogilvy said, "I see. Well—I'll take a look around. Grey might need some help out there."

Tom's hand clamped down on Matt's arm. Grey was outside the house. He would not have had Charley Dodo cut them down. He would have shot them himself!

**M**ATT said, "What next?" They could hear Cortez walking up and down. There was another door leading off the butler's pantry, which seemed to be in the middle of the downstairs floor plan. Tom pushed at it. On the other side was a dining room.

They tiptoed through this room. There was noise outside, quite suddenly. The cops had come up without their sirens.

There was much bustling around; loud voices came closer. Tom opened the French windows, stepped out on the terrace. A giant, uniformed cop yelled, "Halt!"

"It's all right," Tom said. "Inside."

The cop hesitated. Tom added sharply, "You'd better get a move on!"

Matt said, "They're waiting for you."

Tom stepped past, and strolled down towards the high hedge which bordered the driveway. As they gained the deep shadow, a figure skulked from the garage. Tom stole forward noiselessly.

The figure stopped—a huge man in the whipcord uniform of a chauffeur. He started down the driveway cautiously, gun in hand.

Tom glided closer, his sloping, boxer's shoulders spreading under the loose sports jacket. The figure paused, whirled about as Matt tossed a small stone behind him.

Tom stepped forward. His left hand seized the gun, his right swept in a short arc to the base of the chauffeur's jaw. Twice more that lightning right hand hammered. It drove the man off the gravel, into the bushes.

Tom hefted the gun in an experienced hand. It was an automatic, not good for perfect marksmanship. He liked to call his shots—a safety deposit box held medals he had won with his steady pistol hand.

Matt said, "Charley Dodo, eh? Where do you suppose Grey is hiding?"

Tom said, "I don't know. You get our car. Come down without starting it—there's enough pitch to the driveway."

Matt went without question, into the large garage. Tom held the gun in his hand, waiting, watching Charley Dodo, onetime rodman, now chauffeur for Grey.

A voice from the house yelled, "Garity! Don't let nobody get out! Two men have escaped!"

The car came rolling silently, a dark sedan of recent manufacture. Matt's face was white behind the wheel. Tom slipped in the opened door, closed it silently and



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quickly rolled down one of the windows.

At the entrance a man stood guard. Tom leaned out the window. "Did they get away?"

"No," said the cop. "No one got out here!"

"Good," said Tom. "Tell Mr. Ogilvy we'll see him in town, when we finish this business."

"Who are you?" the cop was suspicious now.

Tom said, "Shhh! We're trying to trap someone!"

Matt stepped on the starter. The car caught and the cop stepped aside, puzzled, but completely taken in by Tom's confidential manner. The sedan roared out onto the highway.

Matt said, "They'll have the radio on us."

"Sure," said Tom. "Stop at Minenna."

They left the car on a side street and walked the neat suburban streets to the railroad station. In an hour they were in a room of the Chetterly Hotel, downtown near Greenwich Village, registered under assumed names.

Matt complained, "But this ain't gettin' us anywheres. The cops'll be after us for sure, now. Grey'll explain Charley Dodo by saying that he is rehabilitatin' the bum. What do we do next?"

"We stay out of jail for awhile. Let Grey make the next step. He wants us dead, you know—not in the gow."

Matt said, "You should have let me have him out there in the garden."

Tom shook his head. "You can't do that. It's murder . . . and I never could go for plain murder."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### "Hitler And I!"

**I**T WAS a new sensation to be hunted—Tom Kincaid had always been friendly with policeman. In New York he had hundreds of pals who would have

been glad to come to his assistance; but now he dared not reveal his whereabouts.

Matt was restless. The little man was a direct actionist. He kept saying, "But we're not gettin' any place."

"Grey will find us," Tom told him. "He has men scouring the city for us. Sooner or later he'll find us."

"And kill us," said Matt grimly. "Pleasant thought! Why don't we look for Grey, instead?"

"Because Oswald Cortez has practically accused us of killing his son. They're looking for evidence to link us with young Peter's past."

"There ain't any," Matt said inelegantly. "I never saw the jerk before."

"But Peter had been in trouble. He was trying to win money—a lot of it. I've been looking around. . . ."

Tom went out that night, quite boldly. Matt took in a movie, but his partner went down to a night club called the Golconda Club and sat at a small table in the rear. He was hidden from view by a column and a potted palm, but by craning his neck he could command a good view of the room.

A big man in loud clothes came in, wearing a blonde on each arm. He had a bruise on his jaw; but he was very gay. He took a ringside table; was lordly with a five dollar bill which the head waiter pocketed. In the Golconda Club, a five dollar tip was a mother lode, Tom knew very well.

The man turned; light fell upon his slightly swollen features. It was Charley Dodo, all right. One of the blondes said, "Since when you been in the big chips, Charley?"

"I'm a showffer," leered the big man. "My boss is got millions."

"He don't give you no millions."

"Maybe I know where the bodies is hid," Charley Dodo said in his booming voice. His laughter resounded over the noise of the trap drums.



Tom made sure he wasn't seen by the party at ringside. His only clue so far had been a tip from a gambler friend that this was Charley Dodo's hangout. It had proved a ten strike. Now he had only to stay with it until Charley got drunk—and separated from the blondes. He was pretty sure he could make Charley talk—with a little pressure.

The orchestra whipped up the beat. The trap drummer really burned the skins. Charley Dodo poured champagne from a green bottle and laughed with his two companions.

Then Charley was no longer pouring wine. He was slumping over the table, and there was something much darker than champagne on the white drapery. One girl fainted. The other stared for an incredulous moment, then screamed.

Tom knew she was screaming; but the sound of the traps was too much for the blonde's vocal chords. For a moment no one in the place was aware that Charley Dodo had been shot—no one but the two girls and Tom Kincaid.

Tom went out the kitchen door like a flash. There was a flight of steps, leading upwards, and a man was just turning the corner above. Tom went up after him.

He skidded around into a long hall at the top of the steps, saw three doors, all of which were closed. Tom paused, on the balls of his feet, the automatic in his hand.

There was a sound within the room on the right, at the end of the corridor. Tom crashed through, aware that the door gave with suspicious readiness.

He landed on his knees, the gun flat on the floor as he threw out both hands to save himself. Someone kicked his right arm, and he went forward on his face. The gun slid away. Tom jerked back to his feet.

George Grey was sitting in a chair behind a desk. He said, smiling, "Welcome, Kincaid! Just in time for another murder charge! How you do get into trouble!"

A short, wide, red-haired man leaned against the wall; in one hand he held the automatic which Tom had taken from Charley Dodo, back on Long Island. In the other was a gun which still smoked, just a little.

Tom said coolly, "That was neat timing, Grey."

"You keep falling into my hands." Grey's satisfaction was apparent. "You're so stupid, Kincaid, that I wonder how you ever were able to hold together any gambling organization."

"You'll never understand that. My guys were loyal because we worked share and share alike. And we were on the level. You couldn't understand that."



GREY'S deep-set eyes began to show the red flicker which Tom remembered. His voice grew deeper. "I'll give you one more chance, Kincaid. Reform your syndicate of honest gamblers—front for it. Then, under my direction, when the time is ripe, make a nation-wide killing with every device known to the underworld. There are millions in it—untold millions!"

Tom said curiously, "You've got a couple of million. Why aren't you satisfied?"

The red lights leaped higher. "I'll own this country! When Hitler gets through with Europe and comes over here, I'll hold the power. My underworld legions will deal with him. Together—Hitler and I can rule the world!"

"A nice thought," Tom murmured. "You'd make a fine team. Does der Fuehrer know about this?"

The maniacal note slipped into Grey's laughter. "He'll know! Oh yes—he'll find out. When the time comes, I'll be ready for him! Few people exist who know me as other than George Grey, retired banker." He drew himself up behind the desk. He looked like a retired banker,

Tom admitted. "Only a few trusted employees—and you," Grey said.

"And I'm to join up?" Tom asked.

"Or be turned over to the police for the murder of Charley Dodo! With the murder of Peter Cortez behind that charge."

Tom looked at the man against the wall. He said, "Red the Goon, eh? You've already hired a new chauffeur!"

"Don't quibble! I want my answer!"

Tom said, "Now I wonder why you had Charley Dodo killed? Not just to pin a rap on me. You had me, when I walked into this place. You must have something hot on the fire, Grey. What is it?"

"You answer my proposition and don't ask questions!"

Tom said thoughtfully, "I suppose Cortez is in it. You weren't out there just to play poker—and you might not have known that Matt and I would be there. You had young Cortez in the cut somehow or other. . . .ahhh!"

"Be careful what you say, you fool!" Grey was glancing sideways at Red the Goon. The carrot-haired gunman chewed gum, his ears cocked, his slant-eyes wide open.

Tom said quickly, "You killed my New York man and took over the place. Peter Cortez gambled there. That was how you thought you could tie me in with him—by inference. You had Charley Dodo frame him, somehow—then you had to have Charley killed to keep him from bleeding you. Running an empire of crime leads to that sort of thing."

Tom grinned at Red the Goon. He went on, "So you did the job on Charley. Next, Grey will hire someone to do it to you. Dead men tell no tales—Grey learned that from Captain Kidd. The story books tell us that Kidd used to have two men dig the holes in which he buried his treasure—then killed them and buried them along with the chests of looted gold and jewels. How'll you like that, Red?"

The gunman's eyes narrowed. They

shifted momentarily to ambitious, power-loving George Grey.

Tom moved. His speed was incredible in a man so big. He went all the way over to the wall, and put one foot on Red's left brogan. Tom's right fist lifted under the chin, all his weight behind it.

He knew better than to linger. He saw Grey's hand go for the desk drawer; he ducked, saw the flash of the gun. The bullet peeled his hat from his head, but by chance his outstretched hand caught the falling headpiece.

Tom went through the door, down the steps. There were heavy footsteps coming up. He waved his bullet-torn hat and said, "A crazy man! Shootin' at people!" and pointed back towards Grey's office.

The cop lumbered past, service gun in hand. Evidently the copper above had been the back door watch. Tom went out into a small yard and scaled an eight foot fence.

He wandered in those closed and odoriferous back yards, for an hour. Then he came out on quite a different street and walked to a cab stand.

At the Chetterley, Matt was listening to a small radio, smoking cigarettes furiously. He leaped up. "Where've you been?"

"Seeing George Grey," Tom grinned. "I think I got something."

When he had finished telling about it, Matt said, "All we got to do is check on some of the boys around town. It's worth taking the chance, too."

Tom nodded. "If Grey doesn't kill us within the next twenty-four hours, we'll have him—right in here." He held out two spread hands.

"If he don't kill us," Matt groaned. "Every hood in New York will be out huntin' us."

"I wonder how he explained Red the Goon's condition, and the two guns in his office—one of which killed Charley Dodo."

He was to find that out next morning, when a newspaper headline blazoned:



**MAN KILLED IN GANG WAR. CHARLEY DODO SHOT BY RED MACKERY IN VILLAGE DIVE.**

Red the Goon Mackery never woke up until they had him in a cell. Tom had really socked him. And when Grey's high pressure lawyer got to him, Red the Goon agreed to refrain from mentioning George Grey—for a promise of early release and complete immunity for the murder of Charley Dodo.

Grey had learned the ways of the underworld quickly. He was on his way to the millions he coveted.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Trumps Don't Always Win

**I**T WAS not twenty-four hours, but forty-eight, before Tom and Matt were riding on the truck towards Long Island.

It was a one-ton job, quite fast; the body was panelled. The letters on the side said, "STANDARD BOX CO. NEW YORK CITY." Matt drove, as usual. Tom sat on the comfortable seat with a tommy gun on his lap.

Tom said, "Drive right on by the Cortez place. There's a side road—not the one we took escaping, but another, closer road. We'll park the truck there—"

"And pray nobody finds it."

Their nerves were taut as piano wire. It had been a hectic forty-eight hours. They'd almost got out of town the night before, but a fusillade of shots had convinced them that it was no use to try it in their own car.

Grey had men posted everywhere. Over the Queens Bridge, the truck had rolled past two outposts of Grey gangsters, but had not been challenged. Matt drove down the highway, past the gates of the great Cortez estate. The entrance to the sandy road was dark, and the truck lights seemed ghostly as they rolled between the pines.

They turned off the road where there was a place in the trees which afforded ample room to park. Matt turned the truck, giving them an open line of retreat towards Minenna in case of emergency.

They went through the sparse woods to the Cortez fence. It was a high fence, but they had Tom's agility to get them over.

"It's good you're an acrobat." Matt spoke as they moved through the heavy plantings of bush and tree, towards the house. "Look! Lights!"

Tom nodded. "Grey is going to town. That's what the boys seem to think. He's ready to pull his coup on Cortez."

There was a guard, lingering beneath a giant oak on the vast lawn. They could see the lighted tip of the man's cigar.

Matt said disgustedly, "We can't sneak up on that guy!"

Tom eyed the many yards of clipped grass between him and the tree. "But we can go in the back way."

They circled. The moon came out, which was not so good. They got into the shadow of the garage, quite close to the house. The guardian of the back portal was a low-browed thug, and Matt said scornfully, "A movie type. Let's take him."

He broke into the open, lighting a cigarette, a dapper, harmless little man. He strolled up to the guard and said, "Where's Mike?"

The guard had a thick ear and no neck to speak of. His voice was hoarse, "Mike who? Who're you, cull?"

Matt said, "I'm Durkin. Don't you know me?"

The guard said, "Durkin? Matt Durkin!"

"Certainly, you chump. They expect me, don't they?"

Thick Ear struggled with the idea. Then he asked with elaborate cunning, "Where's Kincaid?"

"Right behind you," grinned Matt.

Thick Ear turned and Tom was there, all right—swinging that right. Thick Ear got it on the button. He collapsed like an old sack.

Hastily they dragged him into the garage. When they had bound him, Tom counted cars, and checked on the light switch, though he had known about that all along.

They went into the rear of the house. There was nothing to it, now. George Grey had taken over the underworld forces even to the glaring faults which abound in all criminal enterprises. The efficiency of the banker could not overcome the old adage about the chain and its weakest link.

Again, it seemed, the servants were away. There was no one on the ground floor of the big Cortez home, but sounds came from below stairs.

"The game room!" Tom said.

**T**HEY WENT down. Tom had a long-barreled, pearl-handled marksman's gun tonight, and was aching for a chance to use it—on one person. He would kill George Grey as a cop would kill a mad dog—to preserve the lives of others. So long as Grey was alive, murder would flourish, innocent people would die to further the schemes of the power-mad ex-banker.

At the partly-opened door of the game room, Tom paused, holding Matt back. The voice of George Grey came through. "I have all the evidence here. It is in the form of depositions, of course, but witnesses can be produced—and the newspapers would love a libel-proof story like this."

Oswald Cortez gasped, "Grey—you're a villain!"

Ogilvy's crisp accents came through, "I've suspected it since the night—"

"Since the night Kincaid killed Peter?" Grey finished suavely. "You're both wrong. I'm not going to give this proof

that Peter Cortez was a scoundrel and a card-cheat to the papers. I'm going to burn them—and forget it!"

Oswald Cortez said thickly, "Your price? You've got a price?"

"I've got a straight business deal."

"I've told you no!" said Cortez. "My munitions holdings are at the disposal of the government. No one else can have any part of them."

"I'll pay par value," said Grey. "I only want to—"

Tom stepped inside the room. "He only wants to have them ready for a pal, don't you, Grey?"

Cary Ogilvy said, "I thought you'd be around, Tom."

Jared Clive sat across the room from Grey. Evidently the con man had risen high in the ex-banker's mad empire, Tom thought swiftly. Cortez's face was mottled with mingled suspicion and rage. He roared, "I want an explanation from you, Kincaid! Ogilvy says—"

Tom was watching Grey. The red lights were dancing again in the madman's eyes. Tom said, "Not a move. I'd kill you without compunction, Grey."

"Your play, Kincaid," Grey said.

Tom nodded. "I'm enjoying it. Let's sit around the deal table, gentlemen. With our hands in plain sight!"

Matt dragged the table from against the wall. Tom said, "That's just about where it was—that night."

Cortez said, "Is this—is it necessary?"

"Yes," said Tom sympathetically. "I want you to know *how* your son was killed, Cortez."

Grey sneered. "You intend killing me, this time?"

"Perhaps," Tom said carelessly. "It would be good riddance. Cary, you sit there. Then—an empty chair. Sorry, Cortez. . . . Then Grey. Matt, you're next to Grey. Now, Clive. Then Cortez—then I sit in. The same as—that night."



They sat, staring at one another. Tom's gun rested on the green cover, steady in his big hand.

He said softly, "Let's pretend young Peter is outside, as he was that night."

He let the words sink in. He went on. "Clive, you're a cold-decked man from away back. Here are some cards. Show them what you did."

"Don't be a fool," grated Clive.

The muzzle of the gun came around. It pointed straight at Clive's head. "Your left or your right eye? Have you a preference, Clive?"

The con man jerked as though on wires. Tom said, "Show them—slowly. I'm sure you have a deck handy."

Jared Clive's eyes slid around to Grey. The banker was sitting motionless, as though in a trance, his deep-set orbs glowing like banked fires. Clive's hands moved woodenly. The deck of cards slipped into his coat pocket. An identical deck appeared, broken and ready to deal.

"The ace went to Peter, in the hole," said Tom. "Peter had a habit of poking at things with his forefinger—at his chips, for instance. Grey and Clive noticed this at the gambling house which they stole from me."

Cortez said, "It wasn't your house when Peter lost his money there?"

"No. Grey killed my men and took it over," said Tom. "Grey is a villain, as Cary suggested. They ran in this deck with the slick aces—already waxed by Clive. When a young Peter poked the deck for his cut, another habit of his, I found out in New York—that asking for a cut on the fifth round—he slicked-aced himself unknowingly!"



**A**LIE," snapped Grey. He was coming out of the trance, Tom noted. The mad lights in his eyes were dancing, no longer banked fires.

"Then," said Tom, "Grey and Clive went into their act. We were fooled, Matt and I. Matt scented trouble and made for the switch."

"He turned out the lights," said Grey.

"No," said Tom. "I turned my flash on the switch, just to make sure. *It was still in the same position while the lights were out!*"

"You can't prove that," snorted the ex-banker.

"No," Tom agreed. "I can't. But I know it."

Cary Ogilvy broke in, "The lights were turned off from outside. I'll bet on it!"

"Charley Dodo is dead," said Tom gently. "He could have told us. It was he who switched off the lights at a pre-arranged signal from Grey. He threw them on again, quickly, so that he could move out of the garage for an alibi, if necessary. Clive told him he could do the job in a jiffy—"

Jared Clive gasped, "No!"

"Grey generally hires his murderers," said Tom. "You did a knife-throwing act once, twenty years ago, Clive. In vaudeville, where you learned all those cute card tricks. We've been checking on you, my friend."

"You can't prove any of this," said Grey. "You know you can't make it stand up."

Tom said, "I'm fully aware of that."

He let his glance rest on Oswald Cortez. The millionaire was stony cold, his lips white. He seemed to grow, his big body expanding as he rose and leaned forward, resting his hands on the table. He said intently, "Do you think he needs court proof, Grey? Do you think you can kill my son and go scot free?"

"You're a fool if you believe him," Grey replied. "It's a fantastic story. And—there are photostatic copies of this evidence against your departed son. They are in a safe place. If anything happens

to me, they'll be delivered to the newspapers."

"What of it!" roared Cortez. "You think that will stop me? You think I fear publicity above my desire to avenge the death of my son?"

Ogilvy said softly, "Easy, Ozzie."

"You warned me, Cary," said Cortez. "When the knife was found free of fingerprints, you showed me only Clive could have had access to the room."

Tom spoke with satisfaction: "That's all I wanted to know. If they wiped the haft of that knife—they're certainly guilty!"

Grey did not shrink. He said flatly, "I see you are all convinced."

Clive was shaking, beads of perspiration dotted his lip. He blubbered, "You can't—you can't just kill us!"

"Shut up, you fool," Grey snapped.

"You—you can't. Grey planned it," Clive jabbered. "He's a fiend. He had something on me—he's got something on everybody. He's the devil himself."

Grey laughed, and the sound was like a chain drawn across the edge of a jagged steel plate. "Weaklings! All weaklings. I shall have to find a race of supermen to get my work done. Or of robots who will obey without question. Kincaid, twice I've spared your life because I need you. Join me! Let me take over this pitiful Cortez and his millions. Let us add them to the millions I already control! Don't be a fool, Kincaid!"

There was a note in the man's voice which Tom could not fathom. It was almost as if this were Grey's hour of triumph, as if he were about to be brought to justice.

Matt gritted, "Let me kill him where he sits, Tom."

"No," Tom said. "No murder. I'll give him his chance. Outside, in the clean air."

They rose, Clive and Grey in the middle of the group. Tom said, "Out the back

—and watch for his strongarm men."

They went up the stairs. They were almost out of the house when they heard a slight tinkle of glass. The overpowering odor came upon them so swiftly they could not guard against it. One whiff and they were all reeling, choking, fighting for air.

All but Grey and Clive. They were ducking, running, small, conical masks quickly adjusted over their faces—running for outdoors and freedom.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### "We'll Fight!"

TOM groaned. "I should have searched him. It's my fault."

Matt said, "How many weapons you got in the house, Cortez? You got any ammunition?"

"Why—I'll call the police!" said Cortez.

"The wires will be cut," Tom assured him. "This is now a state of siege. How many men he has out there is, I won't bother to guess about. But that they're armed is certain.

"Those guys'll never rest until they get every one of us," Matt said gloomily. "We all know too much now."

Tom said, "We'll have to make a break, of course."

"They'll mow us down. But we got to. They can pick us off—fire the house—or use some more of that gas." He coughed a little.

Cortez said, "This is not possible! Here on Long Island! My own home!"

"You don't know George Grey," Matt told him. "That guy would rob a poor box."

Cary Ogilvy said, "He's insane, of course."

"Whacky as a bedbug!" said Matt. "But smart as a whip! Listen!"

Outside a hoarse voice said: "Youse



guys come out one at a time. Mitts up, too."

"Our pal, Thick Ear," Tom tagged the speaker. "Grey will be in the background, giving orders. Grey takes few chances."

"Clive is kill-nutty with fear." Matt offered. He'll be in the front, pitching Grey's orders."

Tom was silent, thinking. The terrain was impossible as defense against an armed force. There would be machine guns, gas bombs, gunmen accustomed to the kill. Grey wouldn't overlook a bet. The four of them would be a fine target if they made a break for their truck.

He said, "Look. Take what weapons you have. Make a stand on the roof. Watch out for fires—shoot anyone who tries to set one. Otherwise, lie low and protect yourselves."

"What you goin' to do?" demanded Matt.

"Bring that truck up close enough for us all to load into it. I can fight them from the truck."

"You'll all get killed!"

"Then it's your turn," said Tom grimly. "One of us has to live to fight Grey. Cary or Cortez or you or me. Agreed?"

They shook hands all around. A rattle of gunfire sounded and windows shattered. Tom said, "Too bad your nearest neighbor is a mile away. Cortez. But one thing they have to fear. We're close to the highway. They must have a man posted to warn them of the occasional car which comes down that road. From this window you can see the reflection of headlights. There! You see!"

The glow came up as a car topped the small hill. It dropped down. There was complete silence outside. The three men stared at the lights of the passing car. When they looked around, Tom was gone. Tom was out the back door, over ground he already knew—into the garage; and his hand was on the switch of the electric system.

He tore it loose, as footsteps sounded. It was Thick Ear, back at the same old stand. Tom leaped and struck and the man crumbled very satisfactorily. Tom bent and possessed himself of the short belly gun which Thick Ear dropped.

He went out and around the back of the garage. He could see figures moving about the estate. Reinforcements, he thought. Surely there hadn't been that many when he and Matt arrived.

There was a man near the high fence, watching the spot which was shaded from the moonlight by the trees. The lights of a car passed in the distance. At an unspoken command the guns rang out again, pouring lead at the house.

Tom sighted along the belly gun, and gently squeezed the trigger. The guard pitched forward on his face. Tom sprinted like a dash-man across the cropped lawn; he leaped, and caught the top of the fence. He landed in a relaxed heap on the other side.

THE truck was close at hand. He went around, off the road, and crept close, his heart beating fast. If they had discovered the truck and its contents, all was lost.

He crouched behind a thicket, holding his breath. The square bulk of the truck was black against the sky. Nothing stirred.

The back doors of the box-body were carefully greased. They swung open noiselessly. Tom went inside and a voice said, "Gotcha!"

Tom was already altering his course. His big body flew sideways. The belly gun in his hand spoke.

He felt the nip of lead, but the bullet tore more of his shirt than his arm. He fell upon the figure and choked with his strong hands.

It was Jared Clive, the weakling, who even in the end could not resist the ejaculation which had cost him his life.

Tom put the body in the bushes. He

was past the thought of mercy, now. He was going after Grey, and Grey's underworld myrmidons. The machine gun was heavy on the seat of the truck. Tom stepped on the starter and the powerful motor purred comfortingly.

The windows rolled up with some difficulty. They were not ordinary windows. They were half an inch thick, laminated bullet-proof glass. Tom rolled the truck onto the sandy road, adjusting the loophole in the windshield as he went. If he could possibly manage the truck with one hand. . . .

He came to the gate of the Cortez place. The guard posted to warn of cars called loudly to those inside the grounds. Tom cut down speed, pretended to go past. At the last possible moment he swung the wheel hard.

The truck responded nobly. The guard, unable to leap out of the path, was caught by the mudguard and thrown into the air. Tom picked the machine gun off the seat with his right hand, and slid the snout through the slot in the windshield. This truck had cost him plenty, but it was, he thought grimly, worth every cent.

Men leaped, presenting firearms of every description. Tom triggered the machine gun. Men faded, running; some dropped. With his left hand, Tom steered the truck to the *porte cochere* and stopped before the front door.

He honked the horn. There was a tremendous burst of firing. Three men came around the corner of the house, directing their aim at the loophole through which Tom was vulnerable. His finger caressed the tommy gun trigger again. The men stopped; one dropped; then another. The third threw down his gun and ran.

Tom threw open the door nearest the house and shouted, "Now!"

There was a small, scratching noise in the sudden stillness. Matt's voice cried weakly, "Tom!"

Tom did not hesitate. He went down out of the cab, across the walk. Others were approaching, and somewhere far off he could hear Grey calling. "We've got him. Blast that truck!"

Matt was floundering on the steps, one leg dragging. He gasped, "They came into the house. I—we got them all. But—they got Cary. And by God, they got Cortez."

Tom's arms swept up his small comrade. In two jumps he was back by the side of the truck. He placed Matt tenderly on the seat and said, "Hang on. Grab the gun!"

Then he was behind the wheel. Men were pouring towards him. The whine of a high-powered rifle sounded; a mushroom bullet spat against the heavy windshield glass.

The motor raced; the lead sung like a horde of bees about the cab.

One arm gripped, through the windshield, then about the tommy gun, Matt tried to return the fire. He was hurt, but not so badly that he couldn't help. The truck roared down the driveway, scattering men who crouched to aim at its tires.

The tires were all right—the new safety type. They would not go flat for awhile. Tom got to the end of the driveway, swung and went down the road with the lead still pouring. He drove furiously towards New York for almost a mile before he made the direct right turn.

He parked the truck and asked, "Matt! How bad's that hit?"

Matt said slowly, "I'm—all right. Just—my leg. But seeing Cary die—and Cortez. It got me. Grey had a hundred men out there. He's a real devil, like Clive said."

Tom said, "Yes." Then: "Can you hold the fort here for a few minutes, with the tommy gun?"

"Where you goin'?"

"To the devil," Tom said.



**T**HE fire raged. Once again the garden was aflame, but this time it was a ravaging holocaust which levelled the carefully-planted shrubs and plants. Tom waited, behind a tree.

The fire engines had come, and the police. It would be necessary to go back pretty soon, to make a getaway with Matt. A man came staggering, his jaw twisted oddly. It was Thick Ear.

Tom collared him. Thick Ear tried to talk, failed. The man was frightened to death. Tom said, "Grey! I want your boss. I'll tear you apart if you don't tell me!"

Thick Ear mumbled. Then he pointed aloft. A plane dipped, circled, flew over the horizon. Thick Ear grunted. "Got 'way. Devil! Men killed . . . all over . . . He got 'way."

Tom let the man go.

There was no reason for hanging around. For a second he watched the great house of Oswald Cortez provide a pyre for the unfortunate millionaire.

George Grey had failed to gain a foothold in munitions; had failed to pin a murder rap on Tom Kincaid. But once again he had gone free while his henchmen paid.

Tom's own wounds began to ache. He walked toward the truck, a mile down the road, evading a couple of cruising police-

men. He stumbled the last yards and gained the cab.

Towards New York, the truck lumbered along. Matt slept fitfully. Tom was dogged, trying to make time. There was still Red the Goon, in jail for murder. If he could make Red talk—

Just over the bridge a boy was yelling, "Extry! Extry! All about sensational jail-break! Extry!"

Tom bought the paper, knowing full well what he would read: Red the Goon had escaped! There had been no violence, he saw. Just a walkaway. Someone had been bribed, the story hinted. Someone with authority.

Grey had learned the ways of the underworld with amazing swiftness. Now he had bought the necessary minions of the law. Now he was moving in like the mobsters of other days. But unlike those gargantuan denizens of the underworld, the ex-banker was clever!

Tom drove towards a hospital, which would be a haven without publicity. George Grey was still at large, and the country would never be safe so long as Grey could use those millions for his evil ends.

Upon Tom Kincaid's broad shoulders rested the burden. They did not slump as the truck rolled over the side streets of New York.

THE END



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CHAPTER ONE

Who Am I?



I WAS sitting on the edge of the little iron cot, staring at the patch of sunlight on the rough stone floor. There were black diagonals running through the square of gold where the bars across the small window blotted their shadows through the light. Slowly, as the sun sank

in the west. the patch of light crept toward my feet. It was almost touching my shoes now. In another half hour, I knew, the sun would be gone.

I don't know how long I'd been sitting there, looking at the floor. Hours, maybe. There was a giant metronome beating a slow, ponderous rhythm deep within my head, and each throb of it sent a shock of pain through my whole body. But the pain was getting better now; it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been yesterday. And the day before. . . That was queer! I couldn't remember the day before. The wall of pain seemed to have cut away all my yesterdays.

It was like coming out of a dream slowly . . . slowly. . . .

Far back in my mind I had a kaleidoscopic memory of a hospital ward—the prison hospital. There was a nurse mixed up in it; it seemed to me she had red hair. I could remember a tired-looking, elderly doctor who'd mumbled to himself as he dressed my head; something about "trauma" and "possible complications." After that there was the cell again, with me sitting in it, alone with my pounding skull. I don't know how long they kept me in the hospital, or how many days I'd been back in my cell.

The other prisoners shuffled out of the tier on their way to the shops; they came back for the lunch-time roll call, then marched away again, not to return until night. I didn't join them. My lunch and dinner were brought to my cell, and I didn't have to go to the shops. Not just yet, anyway.

That day, as I watched the patch of sunlight creep toward my feet, I finally came out of it. The haze in my mind had been slowly clearing, until now I was aware of my surroundings again. And it was then I realized that the past had slipped away from me. I only knew that I was an imprisoned convict! I didn't even know my own name!

That sudden realization brought me to my feet. Who was I? What was I doing here? I jumped to the door of the cell and grabbed the bars in unreasoning terror—pure animal terror of the unknown. I shook the bars until the heavy door clashed on its hinges; I yelled twice at the top of my lungs—but nothing happened. The cell tier was empty, and no one paid any attention.

A moment later I managed to get a partial grip on my nerves. I stood rigidly where I was, and felt the sweat on my body get cold and clammy beneath the dun-gray uniform I wore. I kept repeating to myself, "Steady, kid! Steady! Let it ride a while; don't force it."

If someone were born full grown he would have felt much the same way as I did. The panic of the moment even made me forget the steady pounding in my head that had been with me through those half-remembered days. I turned back into the cell and examined the place in which I'd spent weeks, months—maybe years. I didn't know.

There was a dirty mirror on the opposite wall, a small shelf standing below it. I walked unsteadily over to the mirror and looked into it, half afraid of what I might see. But it wasn't so bad: a rugged, square-jawed face that might have been called strong if only it weren't expressing such bewildered panic. And the eyes—they were like blank windows, dull with the grime of vacancy. Like it or not, the stranger I saw was myself.

Marks of adhesive plaster on my forehead showed where a big bandage must have been held in place. It was gone now; only a small patch was stuck high on my left forehead. Evidently the damage to my head hadn't been done on the *outside*. I yanked the bandage off and saw a cut that had been stitched. It was almost healed now, and my black hair seemed to droop down naturally to cover it. So, that part wasn't very bad—if only . . .



"Hey, dreamy," a voice said suddenly. I turned to see a uniformed guard standing at the door of the cell. "How you feeling, dreamy? Come out of the shadow world yet?"

When I didn't answer, he went right on. "You're lookin' better kid. I'm glad to see it. Warden Haas says he wants to talk to you as soon as you know the score. I'll take you down tomorrow morning. I have a hunch something new has come up on your case. Or maybe they're going to reward you for helping stop that jail break. Maybe they're going to sew some wound stripes on your snappy uniform." The guard laughed pleasantly.

He went away then. I sat down on the cot again. My head was still hammering, and each beat of my heart served to batter tender brain tissue. The questions that kept repeating themselves over and over didn't help any.

Was I a cheap little hoodlum convicted of petty crime? Or was I, perhaps, a—murderer? Pickpocket! Safe cracker! Forger! Embezzler! The questions became accusations after a while, and at last I stretched out on the cot, trying to concentrate on the sounds that came from the machine lathes in a prison shop nearby.

I got my dinner before the other convicts returned. A young doctor came with it. He tested my reflexes by tapping my knees with a little rubber mallet, searched my eyes with a small flashlight, then asked me a lot of questions. Most of my answers were "I don't know," or "I don't remember;" but I did remember stuff that happened in the last few hours.

"Where's the dressing I put on your head?"

"The bandage? I don't remember," I said again. "Maybe I lost it somewhere. Maybe one of the guards has borrowed it."

"Well, don't lose this one," he said as he started to plaster me up again. Then he added: "You're all right. You've got

what we call retrograde amnesia—loss of memory for the past. You'll remember things from now on, and that blank past will come back slowly, too. In six months—maybe less—you'll get it all back."

The doc left and I ate my cold dinner. The food made a heavy drowsiness settle over me, almost as though I'd been drugged. I got undressed, removed the annoying bandage and turned in. I felt as though I hadn't slept in a week. I guess that was right, too, as far as normal sleep was concerned. I didn't know a thing until morning.

◆     ◆     ◆

THE pain was almost gone next day, and I felt pretty good. But the past was as blank as ever. I tried not to think about anything but the present. I didn't have much chance for anything else, anyway. Shortly after breakfast the barber came in and gave me a quick shave. He was a short, fat guy, with a nervous manner and a wild look in his eyes. He was a convict, too, and I couldn't help feeling nervous when he started scraping me under the chin. A guard stood only six feet away, but he might just as well have been up in Albany if the fat guy got out of hand suddenly.

The barber was almost finished when he began to whisper without moving his lips—prison fashion. At first I didn't know who was talking, but I got the words all right.

"They miss you when they try las' time. They fail," he said. "Thatsa good! Is fine! Maybe you be lucky when they try again. Is always a chance you be lucky again. I hope you gotta the habit!"

So somebody had tried to get me! The barber hadn't said *if they try*, he'd said *when they try*! That was a big comfort to a guy who wasn't trying to figure friends and enemies, but who was only trying to remember his own name and background.

I kept thinking about the whole set-up in a sort of detached way until the guard came for me, shortly after noon. It was almost as though I were watching a movie about a stranger stuck on a tough spot. The whole thing was impersonal, if you see what I mean. In a very short time, though, there was nothing detached about my thinking or the way I felt. Things became vivid and very real. There's nothing impersonal about murder when you're the intended victim.

I was standing by the little window, looking out toward the river when I heard the rattle of keys behind me. The lock of the cell clicked open.

"All right, Winter," the guard said. "Follow me."

But he didn't let me do any following. He took me by the arm and marched me through long corridors, unlocking and relocking three doors before we came to an elevator that took us up to the warden's office. We were almost there when the guard turned and grinned at me.

"You were born lucky, kid," he said. "That guy died. It's a murder rap now. But the warden's got good news for you."

*Murder rap!* Then I had been in for atrocious assault with intent to kill—but now it was murder! What possible good news would come out of that? Winter, the guard had called me. Winter—murderer!

Warden Haas' voice told us to come in. A moment later I was facing the small, gray-haired man behind the desk.

"Here's your prisoner, sir," the guard announced stiffly. "Michael Winter, thirteenth twenty-seven."

Haas didn't say anything right away. He was looking at me silently, with a strange expression on his face; not angry nor accusing, just puzzled.

"I'm worried about you, son," he said at last. "But first let me tell you you're free. Another man confessed to the crime of which you were convicted. I hope you

won't be embittered by this miscarriage of justice. After all, two weeks in prison won't harm you permanently. You'll take it in your stride, I'm sure. What's got me worried is that head injury you sustained. The doctor's report . . ."

"I'm all right now, sir," I said quickly. "It's just the past that is gone. It'll come back. Relaxation will do it."

"Here's the point, Winter," Haas persisted. "There was a prison break attempted, as you know. You refused to fall in with it; you even tried to prevent it. That's how you were injured. I'm convinced that break-out was simply a ruse, a camouflage to cover up an intended murder—*your* murder! Luckily, it failed—this time. But there's nothing to stop a second try!"

"I can take care of myself," I said quietly, and I was surprised at the unconscious note of conviction in my voice.

"You've got money, position and influence. There's no reason why you shouldn't be able to take care of yourself. However, I'm afraid you'll be foolish enough to try to get to the bottom of the frame-up that sent you here, and the reason for these attempts on your life. In your present state, that would be suicide."

Haas was about to say something more when the door opened and a city detective came in, with a prisoner handcuffed to him. He unlocked the handcuffs and walked to the warden's desk.

"Here's your new prisoner, Warden," he said. "The one to replace Winter. Do you want to book him now and sign for the delivery?"

The warden grunted and began to rummage through some papers on his desk. I looked over at the new prisoner and gave a start of surprise when I saw him clearly. He was a small Chinese with a seamy, aged-parchment face. His small black eyes darted quickly to the three other men, noticing that we weren't observed. Then he smiled as though there were a secret un-



derstanding between us—and one of his almond eyes deliberately winked at me! At the same time, without moving his arm from his side, he flipped a ball of paper with his thumb. Instinctively, I caught the paper, and turned toward the warden with the same movement to avoid detection. The little bit of business had gone unseen.

But what possible connection could I have with a Chinese murderer? The warden had said I had money, position, influence—yet a ragged, aged Oriental killer had penned some note to me in the hopes of being able to pass it later! Why?

“Arrange for Winter’s railroad ticket,” the warden said without looking up. “Here’s his release. Get his clothes, and let him go whenever he wants. There’s a train around six, I think.”

All the way back to the cell I was eager to read the note the little Chinaman had given me. It might give me a line on my exact status, might help to answer some questions. But it didn’t. It only made the whole set-up more confusing. The note read:

*Look out for The Merchant of Death! Beware the glass spheres! The Merchant and his men may be waiting. Smith and Mary will try to meet you with the limousine. If you have to take the train, there will be an escort waiting at the terminal in New York. San Yat Sun sends best wishes from The Cause. Good luck!*

*Lin Sen.*

Smith, Sang Yat Sun, Mary, Lin Sen—how had the skein of my past life been woven in with those names? The Merchant of Death was my enemy; Sang Yat Sun, evidently, my friend. But how in the name of heaven was I to tell them apart? And what was this “Cause?” Was I the leader of some criminal outfit? And the “glass spheres”—I didn’t even try to dope that one out. It was too fantastic. Maybe the little Chinaman was nuts!

Just how crazy he was I found out shortly.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Riotous Reception

They brought me my clothes about four that afternoon. I could tell at a glance that the suit had cost plenty; and the silk shirt was a made-to-order job. That made me feel better—it indicated I was far from broke. But the sealed manila envelope that came along with the clothes gave me the biggest kick of all. When I ripped it open I found a bunch of keys, a wrist watch, and a wallet. The wallet contained seven hundred bucks for pocket money!

I was sufficiently impressed by the whole thing. The small identification card in one pocket of the wallet read: “This is to certify that the person named, described and pictured below has been licensed as a private detective until the expiration date stamped hereon.” And there was my picture, with the official seal of the State of New York impressed through it.

I was still trying to absorb all that when I came on the next surprise. It was a statement—in what was obviously my own handwriting—reading: “I, Michael Winter, hereby acknowledge my custodianship of valuables worth, as of this date, \$500,000.00. These valuables are the property of the organization represented by Sang Yat Sun, and shall be surrendered on demand under the conditions already agreed upon.”

A half million bucks! I was holding something (I didn’t know what) for some Chinese (who was no more than a name), and I had placed these valuables for safe-keeping in some place of which I hadn’t the vaguest memory! From that moment Sang Yat Sun’s name took on a sinister quality.

For the time being I had forgotten all

about The Merchant of Death. It didn't occur to me then that others, too, could be vitally interested—a half million bucks worth—or that Orientals have many forceful methods of urging remembrance on a forgetful mind.

It was the return of the tier-block guard that brought me back to the present. He unlocked the cell, escorted me down the corridor and turned me over to the guard who had conducted me to the warden's office earlier that day. The second attendant took me out on the grounds, across to the double-gate entrance. On the way he gave me my railroad ticket, told me the train time, and finally held out his hand.

"Funny thing, Mr. Winter," he said as we parted, "first you get framed into the pen for beating the life out of some hopped-up Tong member, and then an Oriental jailbird tries to flatten your head with a club, and finally a little old Chink confesses you out of the jug. It's what they call poetry justice. Just like poetry—it sounds crazy."

The attendant in the gate house was opening up when the guard remembered something else. "Oh, yeah—there's a girl waiting outside for you. Mary—er, something-or-other. The gate phoned in an hour ago."

We shook again, and I walked through. The Chinaman's note had said there'd be a Mary and a Smith waiting for me with a car—not that I was trusting anybody until I knew where I stood. But when I got outside I couldn't see anything waiting, person or car.

It was a small half-frightened voice to one side that revealed the girl. She was alone.

"Mike?" she whispered. "Mike, is that you?"

It was late afternoon now; the shadows were long. Her tiny form was indistinct, but I could see she was the prettiest little thing any man could hope to find waiting. I walked over slowly, not knowing what

to say; and her big eyes were searching my face intently.

"Hello, Mary," I mumbled. "It was good of you to come." She seemed to be waiting for something—but what else could I say?

She didn't seem to hear my words. Her two small hands were gripping my arms with surprising strength; she looked up at me.

"So it *is* true!" she said fiercely, at last. "They did hurt you in there! It's your memory, isn't it, Mike? You don't remember me at all. . . . Dear, I can see it in your eyes—you're looking at me as though for the first time!"

I thought she was going to break out crying, but she didn't. She turned suddenly down the road, holding me by one arm and whispering something about taking care of me; about waiting until we got home. I figured I'd let her get over the shock before I tried to explain.

The prison is located on the river and the nearest town is about a mile away, higher on the bank. A dreary dirt road connects the two, winding across abandoned fields that are almost covered by wild shrubs and second-growth woods. It's a depressing stretch of country at best; and in the dusk it was more than forlorn.

Neither of us spoke. I figured it was best to wait for lights and people before saying anything. I remember covertly studying the girl's clean-cut profile, and liking the alert awareness of her self-reliant manner. She surprised me suddenly, though, when she stopped abruptly and turned to me.

"Mike, I want you to kiss me," she said in a tense voice. "I'll *make* you remember me! Kiss me!"

I was a little slow, I guess. I stepped forward and held her by the shoulders, looking down at her pretty face; then leaned down to meet her lips with mine. But some alert sense remained with me—I heard the footsteps behind!



I stiffened, started to turn, but the girl's hands held me firmly, almost desperately—and I realized then she must have seen all along what was behind me! The savage wrench of my muscles never got started. The girl thrust me violently backward, off balance, directly in the path of the dark form that rushed at me, club upraised!

"Slug him, Togo!" I heard her yell.

I never know how a forgotten skill subconsciously guided my hands in that wild moment. I was on one knee, the figure rushing directly at me with the club already descending, when my arms shot up in practised deliberateness—one under his chin, another under his left armpit. A sharp twist and a heave,

why. *This gang of Oriental thugs wanted me alive!*

They were spreading out now, circling to cut me off. I saw I hadn't a chance of breaking through that slowly closing ring of yellow assassins. Realizing how hopeless my position was, I came to a halt, breathing heavily, my eyes searching wildly for some avenue of escape. And then a miracle of assistance arrived.

It came in the shape of a black limousine, roaring over the crest of the hill, slewing from the road to jolt and bounce crazily as it crashed its way across the field. Guns were blazing from the open windows of the car. It circled the field once, then came to a halt in a central position.

After those lightning seconds of action,

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---

and his body was flying through the air.

The attacker landed a good fifteen feet down the road, with force sufficient to jar an automatic from a shoulder holster. Other figures were rising in the semi-darkness, in a wide circle about me, and I didn't hesitate. A split second later I was running, crouched over, toward that dropped gun. Once I had it in my hand, I spun and angled off the road—directly into the path of a waiting Oriental, armed with a gun and club! I shot instinctively, never expecting to escape the lead slug the Jap was set to deliver—but he never fired! The fool tried to get me with his club instead of using his gun!

As I streaked into the nearby woods, I realized none of the others had taken a shot at me—shots that would have been set-ups for them. And then I understood

I heard a girl's voice yelling, "Run Michael! Head for the railroad! We'll cover you!"

Now several dark forms had spilled from the car, were crouching beside it in the concealing shrubbery as the gun-war reached new intensity. It was then that the fantastic episode occurred.

One of the men from the limousine—a Chinese, I saw—attempted suddenly to shift his position from one side of the car to the other. For a moment his form was limbed in the headlights, and at the same moment one of the attackers leaped to his feet, his arm whipping forward as though he were throwing a baseball. That attacker immediately paid with his life for the act—but his glinting projectile was arcing through the air. The Chinese saw the missile hurtling toward him; he screamed

stridently, clumsily attempting to thrust his body aside. And then the glass ball struck.

The nightmare sequence that followed took only seconds of time, but it seemed like an eternity. The ball shattered—and the entire field was vividly lighted by the blinding globe of fierce flame.

As the dead Chinese slumped slowly forward I remembered the words of the note the aged Chinaman had passed me—the crazy, unbelievable words: "*Look out for The Merchant of Death—and beware the glass spheres!*" I wished fervently I were still locked up in my cell at the prison, where death, if it did come, came in a recognizable, understandable form.

The sight had frozen the actions of everyone, even the attackers, and a voice from the limousine broke the silence. A man was shouting: "Boss, make a break for the train! We can't leave until you're safely away!"

I knew it was the only way. The shooting had started again and it would be impossible for me to get to the car. I stumbled forward in the half dark, almost blind from the eye-stabbing brilliance of that recent flash. Whether it was pure luck or whether the others were as blind as I was, I don't know; but soon the shooting was behind me and I was on the outskirts of the town. Once again the sky was lighted with that fierce blaze, and shortly afterward I heard an automobile's motor roar into life as my rescuers made their escape.

A glance at my watch told me my train was due. Oblivious to the stares of the townspeople, I trotted through the streets and ran onto the platform just as the train was starting to pull out.



**F**OR the first ten minutes of the trip I struggled to compose my ragged nerves. They had taken quite a beating in the past twelve hours.

I succeeded in calming myself by simply stating all the facts I knew in straightforward words. I had position, money and influence—but I also acted as a private investigator when the spirit moved me. I had been engaged in some case in which I was the custodian of half a million in valuables for some Oriental group. That group was trying to protect me. But a second group of Orientals wanted to get their hands on me—alive. I had been framed into the penitentiary—where an attempt was made on my life. By the second group? Probably. And that attempt at murder, though a failure, had robbed me of my memory. Knowing this, through the underworld contacts at the prison, the second group had tried to lead me into a trap by having a girl pose as Mary on my release. But The Merchant of Death had failed, through the intervention of my own crowd. In a few minutes I would be met by Sang Yat Sun, leader of my "cause"—or, rather, some cause with which I had become allied.

It occurred to me then that a newspaper might give me additional facts to help fill in the blank in my past. On a seat, half way down the deserted car, I found one discarded. A minute later I was reading the item relating to my release from prison. There wasn't much in it I didn't already know; only the last paragraphs were of interest.

"It is said," the account ran, "that Winter was co-operating with the better elements of Chinatown in an effort to wipe out the wave of terrorization and extortion that some criminal gang has been attempting here—a crime empire that was a sort of Sino-Jap counterpart of our own Chicago-Capone set-up of a few years ago, though with distinctly Oriental angles added.

"Police scoff at such reports as The Merchant of Death story—a fantastic legend of a shadowy, unseen Oriental overlord—which have been circulating in some



gullible quarters. Explaining the bodies recently found in Chinatown—to date, seven in all—police point out it is a brutal, macabre method of preventing identification once murder has been done. They are unable to explain at this time why the bodies were not disposed of. They promise, however, that those responsible will soon be apprehended.”

Those two paragraphs showed me that the police were even more in the dark than I was. I realized, too, that whatever the forces I opposed, my fight had only just begun.

When I thought of the half million bucks worth of valuables I was supposed to hold in trust, I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. Certain it was that the “better elements” of Chinatown were interested in my health—until that fortune had been turned over. If my health level were to be lowered, they’d do the lowering personally—and slowly. It looked as though I was a permanent loser no matter what way the dice fell, unless I could do some remembering in a hurry—500,000 dollars worth.

The train was squeaking and groaning as it pulled to a stop in Grand Central Terminal. The platform was fairly crowded, and I spotted the figure of the huge Chinese who lounged inconspicuously at one side. As soon as he saw me at the window, he turned and nodded to some one farther down. I passed a half dozen heavy-shouldered Orientals before the train came to a stop.

A fine sweat bathed my brow as I left the car. I knew I had to face the music—and I knew that Sang Yat Sun and my “escort” were awaiting me anxiously. Once on the platform, a tall, smiling Chinese walked up to me. This was evidently Sun himself, and his smile sent a shiver through me. It was the kind you turn on or off at will; the sort of smile he might be wearing as he knifed you, or when he acknowledged an introduction.

“Welcome, Boss Winter,” he said quietly in a high voice. “I have come, with a few of your faithful followers, to escort you home. We feared in your journey danger might beset you. You will forgive us, I know, if we appear over-solicitous for your well being. Friendship and affection often magnify possible evil. Will you walk with me?”

“Let’s go, Sun.” I replied, and the sound of my voice surprised me. Inside, I didn’t feel any too good, but my voice was confident, even domineering. I knew that if I could maintain that attitude, I might stall these people for a while.

Sun and I walked toward the exit, and the other Orientals paralleled our course in a wide, uneven circle about us. I had the uneasy impression that they were the honorary pall bearers at a funeral—my funeral.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Pieces of the Past

THE Oriental and I entered a limousine that waited outside the terminal. As soon as the car pulled away from the curb, the Chinese who had formed our escort melted unobtrusively into the crowds on the sidewalk. Sang Yat Sun spoke into the little telephone, giving the chauffeur in front my address. After that he was silent, but I knew his wide-slanted eyes were studying me.

Theater traffic choked the streets. We moved forward slowly. I recognized street numbers; fashionable restaurants whose interiors I could have described minutely—I think I could have drawn a pretty complete map of the whole city. And that was a strange thing. I knew where places were, what they looked like; but I had absolutely no memory of ever having been there myself.

My own background was lost, but the pattern of larger things was still intact.

"A disagreeable and regrettable episode," Sun said softly, at long last. "Your incarceration with felons, I mean. As soon as I heard, I called together the Loyal Sons and asked for a volunteer to confess. Lin Sen received that honor. It is too bad he must be executed for a crime he did not commit, but it will be a glorious death. You had to be saved at any cost. He is the instrument of your salvation."

I straightened in the seat. "You mean that Lin Sen had nothing to do with the crime?"

The Chinese shrugged. "Does it matter? But I'm sure you do not suggest that one of your own men would have committed a murder and then let his leader stand convicted of the crime." Sun's slit-lidded eyes alone were alive in the inscrutable yellow mask of his face; those eyes burned with black intensity as they bored into mine. "It is said that you suffered a loss of memory while in prison. Is that true?"

"Exaggerated," I said, but feeling my muscles tighten. "Greatly exaggerated." We were getting closer to the point.

"Nevertheless," he persisted, "the possibility of such a tragedy has alarmed me, as well as the men. Do you not think you ought to share your knowledge of the whereabouts of the diamonds? I presume you did not have time to place them in a vault. The police came for you so quickly. If two or three of us knew . . ."

Diamonds! So that was it! I remembered the words of the note in my wallet: ". . . shall be surrendered on demand under the conditions already agreed upon."

I said, "You know the agreement, Sun. It still goes."

"Ah-h!" Sun whispered strangely, his long fingers twining together. "Very well, then."

The limousine pulled to the curb in front of a fashionable apartment-hotel; the chauffeur came around to open the door. Sun said, "I shall produce a member of

the Chinese Consultate and demand their surrender tomorrow. I am so gratified everything will conclude happily, so relieved—for your sake. In the meantime, Mr. Winter, guard those diamonds well. If they were to be lost or misplaced, I could not be responsible for the fanatical rage of my countrymen. They are very primitive in their loyalty. I'm afraid they would spare neither you—nor those you love!"

I felt like smashing a fist into his long, narrow face—both in fear and in anger. Instead, I turned away from him, glared for a moment into the vacantly grinning brown face of the Eurasian chauffeur, then strode into the building and entered an elevator.

I had expected the arrangement of my apartment to be familiar, but it wasn't. I'd never seen anything like it in my life. I stood at the door for several minutes gazing at the chaos before me. Furniture had been ripped apart, bit by bit; lamp bases had been smashed; the walls had been broken in all hollow places; my radio was a shambles of wires and shattered tubes; books strewed the floor, and drawers were dumped unceremoniously. Everything hollow or closed had been broken wide open.

My reaction then was typical, I think. I grabbed a bottle from the liquor stand, half filled a tumbler and went to the kitchenette to get ice cubes and soda. Then, the drink complete, I sat on a heap of wool stuffing, wires and feathers that once had been an easy chair and tried to do some thinking. But my only thoughts came in the form of questions: Were the diamonds gone? If so, who had found them? And then, suddenly, I knew they were still in the apartment! The mysterious Merchant of Death and his crew, as well as Sang Yat Sun and his followers, were anxious that I continue living for the next few hours. That meant only I knew—or was supposed to know—the whereabouts



of the jewel fortune. What methods they'd adopt to share that knowledge, I did not care to guess.

But one threat stuck in my mind with grim insistence: "*They'd spare neither you—nor those you love!*"

My doorbell rang then, brought me out of it. I was good and sore, tired of being shoved around by both people and circumstance.

The automatic I had captured up near the penitentiary was still in my pocket. I yanked it out, thumbed down the safety catch as I strode into the foyer, then flung the door wide open with the gun held level at my waist.



**T**WO people stood outside; a man and a girl. The man was heavy and clumsy; he had the face of a pleasant looking bull dog—faithful and tough. But it was the girl I really looked at.

She was almost too lovely to be true, too beautiful to be real. She was small, with darkish blonde hair and gray eyes—eyes that were wide with surprise.

We stood that way for several minutes—me goggling at the girl; the two of them gaping at the gun I still held leveled. It was the square-faced man who spoke first.

"You got a permit for that thing, Boss?" He laughed uneasily, without conviction. "You gonna ask us in? Or are you gonna wait while we grow?"

The girl said only, "Michael!" without taking her eyes off my gun.

I felt like a fool as I put the gun away and stood aside. I knew from the man's deep-timbred voice that he was the one who had led the rescue gang near the prison. The girl, then, was the real Mary—and the paper I'd read on the train had mentioned a Mary Bannister to whom I was reportedly engaged! Elation swept over me as I followed them into the shambles of a living room.

I saw at a glance the difference between this girl and the one who had led me into the trap. Not only on the outside, either, but in the way she controlled herself after the shock of my loss of memory. There was no over-acted sorrow, no semi-hysterics.

"I'm sorry, Michael," she said. "We heard earlier. But things will work out, dear. You'll see. We'll *make* them work out." Her lower lip trembled slightly, but she held it with her teeth. She was game—a fighter.

The man with Mary was roaming about, observing the chaos, nudging piles of wrecked furnishings with his toe and clucking to himself as he shook his head in disapproval. He limped heavily, I noticed.

"Some mess, boss," he remarked sadly when he came back into the room. "You won't hardly ever get the place properly set to rights. Umh-umh! I never saw such a mess."

Then he looked embarrassed. "I'm Gimpty Smith, the guy who takes care of



you and the apartment—except when those heathens trick me away for a solid ten hours. This little doll is your financay, Mary Bannister. We're glad you rode that train in the coach instead of in the baggage car. More comfortable in a chair than in a wooden box. Lost two men in the fight. The car's a wreck."

As his jerky sentences were spoken, Gimpty Smith piled a lot of woolen stuffing into the bare wooden frame of a chair, then threw a torn piece of fabric over the mound and offered the chair to Mary. While he was fixing two more seats, I mixed some drinks. Finally the three of us sat in a circle while I told Mary and Gimpty all I could remember. I figured they would fill out the blanks for me.

"You outline the stuff that came before that, Mary," I said when I'd finished. "For instance, how did I first get into this thing?"

"That was my contribution," she replied. "I run a little mission house down on Pell Alley, in Chinatown. You've helped me finance it; as a matter of fact, you've helped in its administration at times. Well, it was shortly after one of those bodies was found—the second one, I think—" Mary bunched her shoulders slightly—"that I noticed the influx of new faces in the mission. There were Eurasians, Japs and new Chinese. We both thought they might be the cause of the sudden unrest and terror in the Oriental quarter, and you started to investigate."

"Yeah, Boss," Gimpty broke in. "You discovered these heathen thugs were organized to shake down the whole Chink section—were maybe shaking down other Chink settlements in the country. Their threat was this fire business—they burn a guy—"

"I get the idea, Gimpty," I said quickly when I saw Mary's face.

Mary continued: "You discovered their leader was known as The Merchant of Death—but no one, probably not even his

own men, knew his real identity. He could even have been a white man. But one thing was certain—this whole campaign of extortion and slaughter had been organized by some patriotic outfit in Japan. That was the irony of it: they were forcing Chinese merchants to finance Japan's war against China.

"When you discovered that, Michael, you went to the illegal Chinese Tongs and organized them in a counter-movement. It was dangerous, but it was the only way to fight such a menace. And that's how Sang Yat Sun comes into it. He is one of the most influential men in Chinatown, but a member of no Tong. You invited him to head the association of Tongs—known as the Loyal Sons of Free China—because he was the only one all of them would trust, as he was not connected with any Tong. That was the beginning, and about as far as we were able to get before you were arrested."

I COULD understand Sang Yat Sun's grimness now. I shuddered when I realized the savagery of the allies I had lined up to combat The Merchant of Death. Evil against evil—in the interests of eventual justice. And in the meantime my life, and the lives of my friends, rested on a foundation of T.N.T. Sang Yat Sun was on the same spot, too. If anything went wrong—as it had gone wrong—and every crazy Oriental Tong was after us, death would be the least of our worries. On the other hand, if The Merchant of Death got us first. . . .

"One last fact is important," Mary was explaining. "All three of us knew that my Oriental Mission was the focal point for any investigation; it was there we learned the background of this scourge. But I was ordered to close the mission by the Board of Health—and there's only one man in Chinatown with enough political pull to do that! Delray—Martin Delray, the machine politician and local ward-heeler! It



takes an engraved invitation and a letter from the governor to get in to see him. You were working on that angle when the police took on that framed-up charge. Witnesses said they'd seen you knife one of Delray's thugs!"

A lead? I'll say it was! So that was why I had been sent away! That was why Delray would waste no time in taking more forceful measures now that I was free again through the fake confession Sun had arranged. I knew I'd have to see Martin Delray right away.

Gimpy Smith's sudden laughter spiked my thoughts. He slapped his knee with his hand and said, "You forgot the best part! It's the night before they grab the boss what I'm talking about. The boss comes to me and says he thinks he's discovered the Japs' headquarters, then he gets dressed up in his evening clothes like he's going to a party. He leaves here about midnight—and comes back at dawn, still fresh and smiling. And he's got the diamonds! They've been turning the dough into diamonds for easy shipment to Japan. But the boss swipes them beforehand! What a laugh!"

He was, I felt, the only one who saw the humor.

It was shortly afterward that I sent Gimpy and Mary to a hotel where Mary would be safe and Gimpy could keep an eye on her room. First, though, I got three facts without their knowing it, or realizing I was about to set out for night-shrouded Chinatown, stamping-ground of the Tongs and headquarters of The Merchant of Death.

From Gimpy I learned I had a roadster in the apartment-hotel's garage, its key on my chain; also, that on the same chain was a key to Mary's mission house on Pell Alley. From Mary I got Martin Delray's address. Those facts were my passport to trouble.

Ten minutes after they were gone, I was in the car and on my way.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Murder's Mission

I WASN'T kidding myself any about what I had to do. The blood wasn't leaping in my veins with the spirit of wild adventure. I was just grim and determined, knowing I had a job that *must* be done—despite all the odds against me. I knew that if I failed, the loss was more than my own life—it was Mary's life as well.

Delray was my man. It was after midnight now, but I had to see him, slap the truth out of him if necessary! The leader of the Japs was unknown, masquerading under the title of The Master of Death. Even his own men didn't know who he was—and he could be a white man.

It had been one of Delray's thugs who had been used to get me out of the way—both to stop my investigating and, perhaps, to give The Merchant of Death an opportunity to get his jewels back. I was going to see Delray, without an engraved invitation. The engraved rifling on a lead bullet would do the trick.

I left my roadster on the outskirts of Chinatown, walked through the narrow, twisting streets with upturned collar and down-angled hat. The unreality of this city within a city came to me then: the alley-like streets that were gloomy canyons of shadow; the shuffling alien forms that crowded past me, chattering in a sing-song monotone; the exotic smells of spice and perfume that came from the basement shops; the Eastern mystery that lurked behind curtained windows.

I wasn't depending on any intricate stratagems now; I was figuring on honest action. When I got to Delray's private home I knew that action was the only recourse left, anyway. Located on deserted Pell Alley, not far from Mary's mission, the isolated house was flanked on each side by dark warehouses—and every one

of its dark windows was impassably guarded by thick steel bars.

In spite of the apparent inactivity of the place, I knew there were armed men on guard inside. Without breaking my stride, I approached the entrance deliberately, close to the flanking wall so that it would be impossible to see me from the windows above. Once inside the entranceway, I pulled out my automatic, held it an inch away from the lock and blasted three shots through the door as quickly as I could squeeze the trigger. The door swung loose. I went forward, into the dark foyer hall. Feet started pounding downstairs and a voice nearby grunted in sleepy alarm.

Groping quickly in the blackness, I came on a tall vase, which I heaved with all my might into the living room beyond. As the vase crashed loudly into fragments, the second-floor guard rushed past me, a second thug banged noisily through from the kitchen and the sleepy front-hall man was shouting confused directions. I got upstairs to the second floor before they flipped an electric switch or thought to use their flashlights. From here in I had to trust to luck.

Running down the hall toward the master bedroom, I rammed against a steel door—a door that had no outside knob! On the spur of the moment I yelled, "Open up, Boss! For God's sake, Delray—they're at your window! Let me in! It's the Tongmen!"

The panic that lived in this house, plus the surprise of my midnight action, is what probably put it over. The door clicked open! In a single streak of movement I was inside, had slammed and locked the door, and had flipped the light switch, gun held ready. The gun wasn't needed.

Delray stood before me in his pajamas, empty handed and half-paralyzed with fear. He was a big man; once he had been powerful physically, but now he was just huge and flabby. His jowl-padded

face was slack with fear; his eyes were glazed in their deep sockets.

"Winter!" he said at last, almost with relief. "I thought it was . . ." He caught himself, nerve and composure coming back. "Winter, what does this mean? By Heaven, I'll have you jailed for this mad stunt! I'll—"

"If I'm jailed for this, Delray," I said, over his suddenly brave voice, "it'll be for murder! You're through jailing me, Ward-Heeler. This time I've come to kill you!"

The thugs had started pounding on the door now, realizing too late what had happened. But they'd never break that steel barrier down. Delray knew it too.

"What do you want, Winter?" His voice was hoarse. "You must have a price. They all do. I'm willing to pay."

"That's better," I told him. "You see, I happen to know you're the one behind this terror in Chinatown—and that means you're the one who framed me with those phoney witnesses; the one who arranged the attempt on my life in prison; the one who asked the Board of Health to close the Oriental Mission so that my investigation couldn't continue! *It means, Delray, that you're The Merchant of Death!* The price of your life? A complete, signed confession!"

He was shaking his head violently. "No, no! You're wrong! I was forced to do all those things! I had to, to save my own neck!" His small eyes were riveted on the muzzle of my gun as it beaded on the center of his paunch. He was fascinated, half-hypnotized by that round eye of death. "Winter, I swear—"

"You've got thirty seconds left," I told him flatly. "If it isn't you, who is it? Who forced you to do those things?"

"He was masked," Delray jibbered desperately. "I couldn't see his face. He threatened to kill me like—like those others! Winter, he was an extremely tall man. He looked like—"



Delray's voice choked off as he lifted his eyes to look behind me. Those eyes went suddenly wide; he faltered backward, heavy arms raised as though to ward off an attack.

I wasn't ready to fall for the old trick—I kept the gun on him. It was when the lights in the whole house went out suddenly that I knew he wasn't fooling. I threw myself sideways then, landing over at one side of the room on all fours—and it was at that second Martin Delray's voice shattered the quiet darkness.

He screamed. . . .



I HEARD the shiveringly familiar tinkling sound a fraction of a second before that unbelievably brilliant light flooded the room with its eye-blinding vividness.

Delray's screech choked off with sharp abruptness; and the flames rapidly died out.

But I didn't observe any action, short as it was. It would have been humanly impossible to have watched it, anyway. At the sound of the fat politician's scream, my eyes jumped instinctively to the window, the source of the attack. And I thank Heaven for that instinct! At the very moment I looked, I saw the glinting streak of a second sphere—as it came directly at me! A thousand hours of boyhood baseball was the only thing that saved me. Before I even had time to think, my hands went up to meet the sphere; I pivoted in a circle on one toe as I gently broke the ball's momentum.

It remained in my hands unshattered!

Afterward, sweat broke out on my body and my hands shook as I wrapped the fragile instrument of death in a large handkerchief and put it in my side pocket. It wasn't until that moment I noticed that the searing heat of the first sphere had blistered my right side, face and hand, and

had started my coat smouldering. But I did discover one thing—the composition of the balls. Inside the glass sphere I could see bright, silver-colored filings mixed with a black powder—probably aluminum shreds mixed with oxide of iron. That, I knew, was the industrial composition of Thermite—and Thermite, used in welding steel, burned with a heat in excess of 3000 degrees Centigrade! It was easy to imagine what steel-melting heat would do to a man. The thing was primed, I saw, by a second glass ball inside the first. That ball was filled with water, and when it burst it would set off chunks of metallic magnesium in the essential mixture, acting as a fuse. I got the shivers again when I realized The Merchant of Death was throwing Thermite at his victims.

It was the thought of the man behind all this that got me started again. I stepped across the room, not looking at Delray's body, and opened the steel door cautiously. The house was deserted. Delray's guards had fled at the first warning of the presence of The Master of Death. I figured I ought to be running, too—but I knew I wasn't going to. Instead, I was headed for the probable lair of The Master himself—Mary's deserted mission home!

When I gained the street I could see faint tracings of dawn in the eastern sky. I had about an hour before daybreak. As I walked the short two blocks to the closed Oriental Mission I got a sudden hunch, a crazy hunch. The fat politician had said the masked leader had been an extremely tall man, and I had a feeling he was about to name Sang Yat Sun as his suspect. It would fit—Sun filled the description. Was it possible Sang Yat Sun was mixed up with *both* organizations?

Getting in the Oriental Mission was simple with the key. There was a wooden barrier nailed across the doorway, just as the windows were nailed up with boards, but it was easy to rip the boarding partly

loose, slip inside and use my key on the second doorway. Once inside, though, it looked as if I'd reached the end of the trail.

A long row of sheet-covered benches formed a sort of chapel in that first room, with a simple altar at the far end. Here was where the services had been held—and it was obvious nothing had been touched in the meantime. Then, off the sides, I found two public rooms, a recreation room, an office and a kitchen layout. Upstairs, I realized, there would be nothing but small bedrooms and dormitories. But what about the cellar? That was my best bet!

Here, again, I met failure. My pocket flash showed me plenty of regulation equipment, dust and filth—but nothing more. I was about to turn back when I got my first lead—my ears, not my eyes, gave me the break. From somewhere—seemingly from miles beneath my feet—came the far, faint rumble of many voices. Whether it was singing, chanting, or simply many voices talking, I couldn't tell. But I determined to find out!

After twenty minutes search I came upon the entrance to the subcellar. I could see where a new entrance had been broken into the cellar of the mission from the basement of the warehouse next door. I could see, too, that the steps I descended were newly made. This whole subcellar meeting-place was recently dug, newly cemented. Which, as I suspected, was one reason why Mary had been forced to close her mission: to furnish an undiscoverable headquarters for the Merchant of Death and his Yellow legion!

Gun in hand I descended; though there was little good that gun would do me if I ever ran into the whole gang in this nest of killers. But they must have been very sure of themselves. There wasn't even a guard along the stairs. At the bottom, I found a huge door, log-built, reinforced with iron bands. It wasn't latched or

barred, and it swung in easily when I pushed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Beware Those You Love!

THE long, narrow subterranean chamber was fashioned of rough cement, painted black. Huge ceremonial Japanese lanterns lined its walls, giving a macabre note of festivity to this grim dungeon. Scores of Orientals sat in the narrow hall—Japs, renegade Chinese and Eurasians—all of them facing a massive stone idol enshrined on a raised platform at the far end. Beside the idol, kneeling, was the figure of a gigantic Oriental, naked to the waist—and in one hand he supported a tremendous headsman's axe.

The audience of this forbidden chamber was chanting a strange, sing-song dirge. Somehow the pagan notes of that unholy song were familiar to me, as though I'd heard them at some time in my forgotten past—and when I remembered, a chill ran through me. It was the Oriental hymn supplicating the savage gods before the execution of criminals! Among this murderous crew, who could elect to think another criminal?

As the evil, mournful dirge continued, I noticed the heavy vapor emanating from the idol's mouth. When the singing became wilder, more savage, I knew it must be a drug-induced frenzy caused by the vapor that now filled the hall. I recognized the drug, too—marijuana, the ancient drug of assassins!

Suddenly the song stopped, and at that moment a tall, sinister figure walked out upon the platform which supported the idol. The man was clothed in a long black gown that reached the floor. His entire head was encased in a tight-fitting black silk mask; the only ornament he wore was an embroidered skull that gleamed on his chest. His very presence seemed to strike



terror in the hearts of his own followers, and I knew without question who he was.

Before me was the unknown and mysterious Merchant of Death!

The leader didn't speak, then or later. He made a motion with one gloved hand and immediately six prisoners were marched into view, their hands tied behind them and their heads shaven, Eastern style. Terrified, scarcely able to stand on their trembling legs, each victim was held by his captor in a single line at the rear of the platform.

Meantime, the gigantic headsman dragged a massive block into view, and a seventh prisoner was marched before the silent audience. I recognized this seventh prisoner! It was the tall, narrow-faced Sang Yat Sun! The shock of that recognition had just struck me when a voice started to boom through the hall, amplified electrically and coming from somewhere far in the background.

*"All the prisoners will kneel. The first to go, Sang Yat Sun, shall kneel to his dishonor and receive execution!"*

Sun's legs were kicked from under him by the headsman; as he crashed to his knees his head was shoved onto the block and tied securely with a rawhide thong. Hands bound behind him, helpless, the victim waited as the headsman raised the gleaming blade high over his head. The voice boomed out:

*"Sang Yat Sun, go in dishonor! Die kneeling, bound, head shaven! Bring shame to your ancestors in your craven death! Be disowned and cursed by your gods! Lose all hope of Nirvana in your eternal damnation!"*

At that moment a moan went up from the audience. The gleaming axe flashed down. . . .

I was leaning weakly against the wall of the stairway. Even if I had had an insane impulse to rush forward and try to save Sun, my paralyzed muscles would not have allowed me to do so. And now I

turned and went back up the stairs.

It was mid-morning when I stumbled out on the street again. By now I had a single object: to get Mary as far out of the city as the first train would take her. After that, I'd call in the police and raid The Merchant of Death's subterranean lair. I hadn't called them in the past for two reasons: first, because what I could tell them would have been more confusing than helpful; second, because my theft of the jewels, without turning them over to the police immediately, made me as guilty as the original hi-jackers in the eyes of the law. But now I had concrete information, and my own incrimination was of small importance—so long as Mary was safely away.

I stumbled through the crowded streets of Chinatown without thought of caution. It didn't occur to me that my life was more in jeopardy now than ever before. When I reached my roadster I didn't stop to wonder at my free passage through that Oriental world in broad daylight. Perhaps it's just as well I didn't. I might have realized I wasn't molested because my doom was already sealed.

◆   ◆   ◆

WHEN I got back to my apartment, the first thing I did was to call Mary at her hotel. The details of that call is a half-forgotten nightmare in my memory. But the pain of that one, all-important fact is still very real. Mary was gone! I remember insisting it was impossible, arguing with the clerk as he rang again, and finally I remember the force with which the truth smashed through to my stunned brain. I slammed down the receiver with a crazy sob.

Mary had had a caller early that morning. He showed credentials to prove he was a member of the Chinese Consulate, said it was on Mr. Winter's behalf he had come, and insisted that Mary be informed,

even though she'd left instructions not to be disturbed. The rest was simple. Mary and Gimpty had left the hotel with him.

I remember sitting where I was, stunned, half-hypnotized by the dazzling rays the sun struck from the bottom of one of the glasses in which I'd mixed the highballs. After a time I investigated, as much for something to do as anything else—and saw two twenty-five carat diamonds resting in the bottom of the glass! The other two glasses held a similar treasure. With my vague thinking, it took me several minutes to figure the thing out. Then I went into the kitchenette and dumped the rest of the ice cubes into the sink, melted them with hot water. There was the rest of the jewel treasure—seventeen huge stones in all.

I didn't feel any elation at the discovery of the diamonds. I realized that while my house had been torn to shreds in the search for them, they had rested securely in the simplest of hiding places—frozen in the middle of ice cubes in the refrigerator. Suddenly I laughed, crazily, without humor. I had the jewels to bargain with, now—and it was too late. With what I'd learned, these Orientals would never let me live—as witness the attempt on my life in Delray's home, the evidence of which I still carried in my pocket. And for what information I might have given Mary, she too must die. Oh, they'd pretend to bargain, but I knew it was hopeless.

I laughed wildly again. Now I wished fervently that they had found the diamonds! Through my own cleverness, I had doomed both myself and the girl I loved!

I left the apartment then, went back to my car. I don't know what I intended to do, if I had *any* plan at all. I started back to Chinatown, but after a while my reason seemed to return, and I pulled the car over to the curb. I had to remain calm; had to think straight.

I knew that Mary was in the hands of

one gang or the other. I knew that very soon they'd come to me and simply *tell* me what they wanted me to do—and I'd do it. But there wasn't any real hope. I'd go to them, give them the stones—and die with the girl I loved.

As I listed the gloomy facts, a crazy plan came to me. It wasn't any rescue scheme—except by the wildest imagining—but at least we wouldn't die unavenged. We'd take a lot of them with us when we went; there'd be no further terror. . . .

My car jumped into motion then. I hadn't much time, I knew. The yellow emissary would be calling soon.

My first call was at a radio studio, where I interviewed an executive, rented a sound-proof room and a recording apparatus, and spent the next twenty minutes making an electrical transcription. After that I arranged for the hire of a broadcasting sound-truck, had an interview with the operator and slipped him fifty dollars to do something extra.

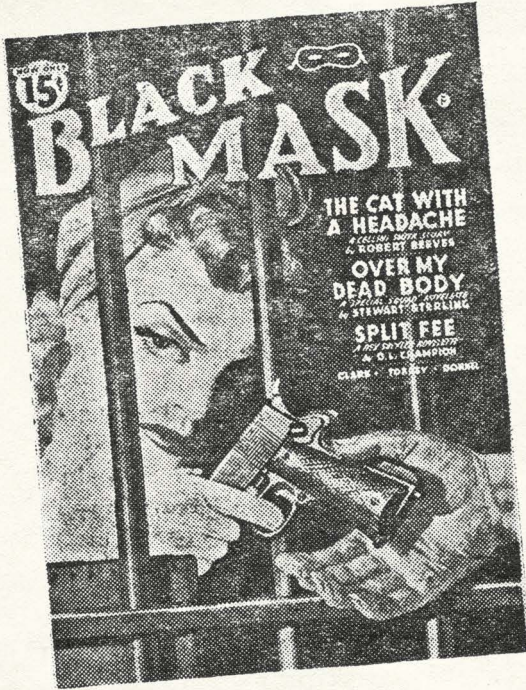
Then I visited a Fifth Avenue jeweler. It took them almost a half hour to do what I wanted. When everything was finally set, I realized how slim were my chances of success—everything depended on two absolute necessities, and both of these facts were highly doubtful. The first—that it had been the followers of The Master of Death who had grabbed Mary. I was betting on that because I had seen the leader of the Tongs die—Sang Yat Sun—and the arrangements for Mary's kidnaping seemed too clever for the blunt Tongsmen. But if Sun had made those arrangements beforehand . . . The second—that Mary had been taken to the execution chamber I had visited this morning. If my first bet was right, the second couldn't be far off.

But any success still meant that Mary and I must die.

I had expected a telephone call or a message, telling me what to do "to get your girl back." They'd get in touch with

*(Continued on page 82)*





6  
SWELL  
SERIES  
STORIES!

**We've Gone ALL OUT for Thrills This Time!**

ROBERT REEVES returns, Cellini Smith in tow, to nurse *The Cat With A Headache*.

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This great JUNE issue of—

# BLACK MASK

Is on Sale NOW!

(Continued from page 80)

me somehow, I figured. But when I got back to my apartment, I found an emissary coolly *waiting!* He got up slowly from his seat, arms calmly folded across his chest, and I gasped in amazed stupefaction when I saw who it was!

The man before me, smiling without meaning, was Sang Yat Sun—*whom I had seen executed three hours ago!*

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Merchant of Death!

“**Y**OU seemed surprised, Winter. I found the door open and walked in to await you.” I knew this wasn’t true, and Sun probably didn’t care whether I believed or not. “You see, it is my disturbing duty to bring bad tidings. The Merchant of Death and his men have seized Mary Bannister as a hostage. We must capitulate—go to them unarmed and surrender the diamonds for her release.”

The guy’s two-faced trickery got me sore, even in that moment of danger. He didn’t realize I’d seen his double executed that morning; and now he was still pretending loyal leadership of the Tongs. I couldn’t guess the meaning behind that execution—but in my moment of anger I didn’t take advantage of my knowledge to pretend I was still fooled by Sun. That was a mistake; it kicked away an advantage.

“How’s your neck, Sun?” I asked.

His face stiffened with surprise and anger; but he didn’t move.

“You’ll come anyway—and unarmed,” he said softly. “There are many ways for a person to die. Sometimes even death is a valuable commodity that can be sold. You will get the jewels and accompany me, unarmed. Your girl isn’t very comfortable at the moment, and delay on your part might prove distressing for her!”

I felt like leaping at the yellow-face, but I did as I was told. I threw my gun on the couch, put the bag of jewels in my pocket and followed him quietly out the door. When we left the building, a policeman strolled directly in front of us. Sun smiled at me in a tormenting way. We both knew that if I went for that cop, grabbed him and started to jabber my story, Sun would disappear before I made myself understood—and Mary’s finish would be painful as well as certain. I was hopelessly caught, and I knew it.

I saw the sound-truck waiting down the street; the sight of it merely fanned my rage to a greater intensity. What a fool I’d been to hope such a mad scheme would work!

I followed Sun into the waiting limousine, and it immediately leaped into motion. I couldn’t see if the black truck followed us or not—I hoped fervently the driver had been asleep. Then, as we drove, my curiosity got the best of me. That’s the streak of insanity that makes a detective, I guess—curiosity for facts even when you are driving to your own funeral. I asked Sun for an explanation, and his cold, dead face merely swung in my direction, then looked away again. He wasn’t interested at all.

I was right about the place we’d be taken. The car pulled up around the corner from Mary’s mission house. We entered a little Chinese restaurant there, went through the back and into a warehouse; then, from the basement of the warehouse, entered the upper cellar of the mission. After that, we simply traced the steps I’d covered before.

If the sub-cellar had been bad before, now it was something that made the past seem kind and gentle by comparison! At first I couldn’t understand what I saw—but when I did, a shout of absolute fear left my throat!

Mary and Gimpty lay on two long



tables, strapped side by side on the raised platform. Above them, ponderously swinging from side to side, was a massive knife blade. Each time it completed a swing, some mechanical arrangement caused it to drop a few inches lower. It had traveled at least half the way toward the tables. There was only about three yards of space left between the victims and the knife!

Sang Yat Sun was satisfied with my sudden reaction.

"It is fortunate you obeyed punctually and didn't contrive any delay," he said. Then, turning to the dozen Oriental thugs who lolled about the room, he clapped his hands for attention. "Leave us!" he ordered. "Wait in the cellar above until you're called. Guard the passage well!" He turned back to me. "And now, Mr. Winter, the jewels, if you please!"

"You'll stop that knife?" I whispered desperately. "You'll set them free?"

Sun smiled. "We shall see," he said. "I don't think it's your place to do any bargaining now. Come, the jewels!"

Numbly, I tossed the chamois bag to him. I couldn't take my eyes from the ponderous descent of that swinging knife.

SANG YAT SUN poured the diamonds out on a table before him, pawed over them with avid joy of possession, oblivious to anything else. His final victory seemed to have cheered him as nothing else could have done. He was mumbling to himself, and finally he turned to me.

"You were asking, Mr. Winter, for the reasoning behind these strange happenings. I'll be glad to—"

"I don't care about that now!" I shouted wildly. "Sun, will you stop this cruel farce? Set those people free!"

Sun saw the look in my eyes. He pulled a gun from his pocket, laid it on the table in front of him. "In the beginning," Sun said, determined now to tell me, since

I didn't want to know, "the Japanese government contacted me, asking if I'd direct the agents they'd send into the quarter. I agreed. Our purpose was to raise money for the impoverished Japanese government through terrorizing and extortion. I suppose you've guessed that, as you've probably guessed that our spheres were simply Thermite bombs.

"And so the plan began. But then you entered into things, guessing at the purpose of our activities, organizing the Tongs to combat us. I was genuinely worried until the Tongs offered me leadership of *their* cause, as well as the one I already headed—the one they were sworn to wipe out. My identity, you see, was unknown to the Japanese agents. I was known simply as The Merchant of Death, and I was always masked. Only the dozen men you saw in this cellar when you entered know who The Merchant really is.

"I thought everything was fine until you got uncomfortably close to my identity—and stole the treasure that represented all we'd been able to collect. To stop that investigation, and to give me a chance to get the jewels back, I had you framed into jail as leader of the Japanese. I was sure the jewels were in your apartment, but I was unable to discover them. That fact, plus the fact that someone almost killed you in prison—an over-fanatical Japanese agent, made it necessary for me to set you free again. I knew there were ways of *forcing* you to reveal the hiding place, though such a procedure was dangerous to the secret of my identity. However, there was no other way.

"As leader of the Tongs, I had a volunteer "confess" and you were set free. When my Japanese agents failed to get you alive on leaving the penitentiary, I knew I'd have to kidnap the girl. But even then you were almost too quick for us. In less than twenty-four hours you covered an amazing amount of ground, Mr. Winter."

I was scarcely listening to the man. I was watching that knife, hoping and praying something would happen to stop this. Even my impossible plan of the sound-truck would be welcome now—

"In fact, you've learned so much you're too dangerous to live, Mr. Winter. And your two friends—they must die, too, for what you may have told them. There is no other way, as you probably have suspected. I don't suppose it's necessary to tell you that the rest of the Japanese agents who aided me are prisoners in the mission upstairs, that the dozen men who have helped me make them prisoners will shortly leave with their share of the diamonds. The other half will be mine!

"How perfectly it worked! Those six Tong members you saw at the execution this morning were set free—after seeing "Sang Yat Sun" executed, dying nobly for the cause. My death will be reported to all the Tongs, and the only ones who realize my identity will be accepting a small share of the profits. With the quarter of a million dollars I have gained, I'll duplicate this same terror in San Francisco's Chinatown—and after that, in other cities. You see, Mr. Winter, even the Japanese shouldn't trust a renegade Chinese!"

I don't know what else he was going to say. The door at the far end of the dungeon suddenly burst open. One of Sun's trusted thugs burst into the room. The Jap was wild with panic.

"Master! Master! The whole of Chinatown is marching upon us! The Tongs are closing in from all sides! We'll be massacred!"

Sun went slightly pale. "Nonsense!" he snapped. "No one knows where we are!"

Then, permeating even to the depths of this deep cellar, came the stentorian voice of the loud-speaker on the sound-truck I'd hired. The thundering words were repeated over and over—in my own voice:

*The Tongs have been crushed! China has been crushed! The Merchant of Death rules all Chinese people! Everyone is ordered to enter the Oriental Mission, to pay homage to the Japanese masters of the Chinese people! Slaves, obey this order! Despised Tongmen, lay down your futile weapons and admit defeat! On to the mission!"*



THE raging sound of the crowd's fury came to us now, and I could imagine the axe-armed Tongmen who stalked boldly up to the front of the mission and hacked down the doors, then poured into the building. The trampling sound of their feet came to us—and then the other noises began: they came upon the first of the Japanese!

White-faced, opened-mouthed, Sun didn't react for several long seconds. His back toward me then, and in that moment I leaped to the execution tables and ripped Gimpty's straps away. As he flung himself from under the down-inching knife and jumped to release Mary, I swung back to face Sun.

The Oriental's face was black with rage now, understanding the extent of his failure—knowing who had brought it about. He leaped for the table and snatched up the gun. At least he would execute us before the hatchet-men came for him!

His arm flashed up—and in the same split second my hand jumped from my pocket, holding the Thermite bomb I'd caught the night before! The very sight of it filled the Oriental with fear. He started back, forgetting about his own weapon. But he had started too late to get away from that bomb. . . .

Mary, Gimpty and I were racing for the stairs. We gained the upper cellar, sped to the opening that led to the warehouse. A few moments later were walk-



ing through the restaurant to the street.

Outside, Chinatown was a riot of enraged mobs. The Chinese fought for the privilege of entering the mission, screaming their hate of the Japanese. The sound-truck had been smashed to bits by the rioters, but the driver, forewarned, had been safely away. Then, as the three of us raced for a cab stand on now-deserted Mott Street. I noticed the heavy smoke that burst abruptly from the mission house. That was the end of Mary's Chinatown venture—and I breathed a sigh of relief.

It was in the cab, speeding homeward, that Mary said, "Michael, we escaped with our lives, and that's the important thing. I'm so very thankful for that. But, somehow, I can't help regretting that Sun got the diamonds, after all. That makes it look almost—well, almost as though we'd failed. It means we had the whole struggle for nothing!"

I heard Mary's gasp and saw Gimpty's eyes pop open in surprise when I pulled the second chamois bag from my pocket.

"Sun didn't know his diamonds!" I said. "The ones I gave him were excellent copies of the originals; it would have taken an expert to tell them apart. I bought them only an hour before I handed them over to Sun." I saw Mary's eyes shining with wistful delight as she gazed longingly at those perfectly magnificent stones.

"And these jewels," I added with malicious emphasis, "are going to be turned into cash and given as an anonymous donation to the Chinese government. Of course." I amended quickly, "it would be possible for me to purchase one myself. It would certainly make a handsome gift for some lucky young—"

Which was as far as I got. Mary was suddenly in my arms, a wriggling bundle of delighted squeals.

#### THE END



## Attention, Reader!



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# MINE HOST—THE GHOST

By  
COSTA CAROUSSO



Thunder crashed. The lights went out. Then Perce screamed, "Look!"

*The old Hollingway house was struck by lightning, burst into flame and consumed the three Hollingway cousins. That was the accepted story—until I heard the dead man's tale!*

THE heat had been unbearable all day. But now, a breath of air was stirring. Pedestrians looked hopefully at masses of clouds forming on the horizon. Presently, thunderheads swelled toward the zenith, cutting off the sun. Yellow squares of light began to show against the black walls of the office buildings. Muted rumblings sounded. The clouds merged overhead and sank downward.

"Like the first dawn of creation," I said to myself, looking through the window. "Or the first dawn of doom!"

I wheeled sharply. I hadn't heard the man arrive at my side. I wasn't aware that I had spoken aloud. He was a gnarled little gnome of a man. His hair was white and his little eyes were black and bright.

"You'll forgive me," he said politely, "for presuming to read your mind?"

I nodded, still puzzled.

"It was not difficult," he said. "I have learned that a young writer invariably thinks in trite phrases at first. It occurred to me that you were comparing the scene before us to the popular conception of the first dawn of creation, so I hazarded an alternative."

"How did you know I was a writer?" I said, nettled.

A mischievous smile tugged at the old man's lips, but his voice was bland. "I asked our esteemed bartender," he said, nodding toward George. "Would you join me in a drink?"

At that moment the storm broke. Thunder crashed through the room. Rain streaked down the windows till it was im-



possible to distinguish anything outside. Pitiless lightning blasted the sky apart.

It would be hours before I'd want to go out, and besides, I felt that a writer could pick up something useful from one of these old timers. I agreed to join him and we sat down.

"I haven't seen a storm like this for eight or nine years," I said. "Since the summer lightning struck the old Hollingway mansion and killed the three Hollingway cousins."

My host sipped his Scotch-and-soda appreciatively. "Lightning didn't strike the Hollingway place," he said.

Now everyone knew that lightning had struck the Hollingway place and burned it to cinders along with the three cousins who were inside. So if this ancient little man believed in a different version, I wanted to hear it.

"What did happen?" I asked.

"It was set afire deliberately," the old man said. He stirred his drink carefully, then raised it to his lips. "By a ghost." He looked at me, obviously enjoying my impatience.

"Come now," I said. "Surely you don't expect me to believe in ghosts."

"No," said the old man. "The point is—the Hollingways did."

My curiosity was itching, but at the same time I was detached enough to realize that the old man had a superb gift for story telling. "You should have been a writer," I said.

"I was," he answered. Thunder crashed outside. The old man smiled.

"Go on," I prompted. "The Hollingway house wasn't struck by lightning; it was set afire by a ghost. The Hollingways weren't killed accidentally; they were murdered."

"That," said the old man, "is something that you'll have to decide for yourself." He looked at his glass, which was empty, so I told George to bring the bottle. I sat back to listen to his story.

He told it well—so well that I could see the rain glistening down the walls of the Hollingway mansion; see the headlights of Eric Hollingway's car as it wound up the half-mile bluestone driveway bordered by dark trees. . . .

— — —

ERIC slammed shut the door of his car and turned up the collar of his coat. Flashes of lightning grotesquely illuminated the empty house. In another moment it was lost in the darkness and rain. Eric ran toward the steps, cursed when he stumbled. Then his huge fist was turning the key, pushing the heavy door inward. He snapped on the switch and brilliance flooded the room. He went from one room to another, turning on the lights, looking into the closets, searching beneath the beds and behind the furniture. Finally he went downstairs and paced the floor.

Half an hour later he ground out his fourth cigarette and looked at the telegram again. *Come to the country house tonight*, it said.

A noise sounded on the porch. A moment later his cousin Jim was standing before the door. Water streamed from his clothes and made a puddle at his feet.

"Well, here I am," he said. "What do you want?"

"What do I want! What do you want?"

"Nothing," said Jim. "I got your telegram and I came." He held the pale yellow slip to Eric.

Eric read it. It was the same as his. "What made you think I sent it?"

"Well," said Jim. "The whole thing was your idea in the first place, so I figured—"

"My idea!" Eric roared. "Cut that stuff. All of us were in on it. And you know it!"

"Of course we were," said Jim. "Don't

get excited. If you didn't send that telegram, Perce must have."

"Yeah," said Eric. "But why doesn't he show up?"

Jim lit a cigarette and tossed the match into the fireplace. "I wish I had a drink," he said.

"Take it easy on the drinks," growled Eric. "Someday you'll shoot your mouth off and then we'll all be sunk."

Jim's lips tightened, then he opened them to speak. "Some day—" he began. The door creaked open and Perce stood dripping on the threshold.

"What happened?" he asked. "What's up?"

"Didn't you send those wires?" Jim asked.

"No," said Perce. "I thought that—" He took a telegram from his pocket and handed it to Jim. "I got one, too. I didn't—"

"I'll be damned!" snarled Eric.

Thunder crashed against the house. Lightning stabbed at the windows. The rain beat an incessant tattoo upon the roof. The room was silent save for the breathing of the three men.

"Maybe Kelston sent them," suggested Jim. "Maybe he wanted to talk to us about the will."

"Why wouldn't he sign his name, then?" asked Perce. "And why come all the way out here?"

"You've got me," said Eric. "Do you think that shyster suspects anything?"

"For God's sake, watch what you're saying," warned Perce.

"It's all right," said Eric. "I searched this place from top to bottom when I came in. Nobody's here."

"I don't like it," said Perce. "I'm getting out." He moved toward the door.

"Wait a minute," said Eric. "Kelston will probably show up."

Perce's hand was on the doornob. He turned, his face colorless. "It's locked!"

Jim and Eric sprang forward. Eric

seized the knob, turned it one way and then the other. Then he grasped it with both hands and heaved with all his body. The door didn't budge.

Jim sprang to the window and threw it open. Wind lashed the curtains, rain splashed on the floor. Jim said, "Good Lord!"

"What!" shouted Perce.

"Bars," said Jim. "Inch-thick bars."

"The devil you say!" bellowed Eric, shouldering Perce aside and leaping forward. Fear was in his face when he turned.

"YOU and Perce take the upstairs rooms," ordered Eric. "I'll take the downstairs and the cellar."

"Let's all go together," said Jim.

"What's the matter," sneered Eric. "Scared?"

"No, I'm not scared," said Jim. "And lay off me. Someday you're going to push things too far and I'll—"

"You'll what?" asked Eric.

"Cut it out, you two," said Perce.

"What I meant," said Jim, "was that we all ought to search this place carefully. Maybe someone planted a dictaphone. This looks like a sly police trick."

"Oh," said Eric. "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. I never thought of that."

"No brains and all brawn," said Jim.

"Shut up, you guys," said Perce. "And be careful what you say. I don't like this."

"Come on," said Eric, moving toward the cellar stairs.

The storm receded with rumbling growls, then awakened with even greater fury. Branches lashed the house; lightning threw eerie shadows against the windows.

"Well," said Eric. "There's no dictaphone."

"There's no way out, either," said Jim.



"The phone!" said Perce. "Why didn't I think of the phone!" He leaped forward and snatched up the receiver. He jiggled the hook. The other two men pressed in close. Finally Perce let the phone slip from his fingers. "Dead," he whispered.

"All right, Eric," said Jim. "What's next?" His voice was hard.

Eric looked up, bewilderment on his heavy face. "I don't get it," he said. "What do you mean?"

"I mean how much of our cut do you want—to let us out of here alive? Or is Perce with you on this?"

The bewilderment on Eric's face slowly changed to understanding; the understanding exploded into rage. "Why, you dirty little—" he bellowed, lunging forward. "I'll break every—"

Jim ducked beneath Eric's flailing arms and grabbed his legs. They crashed to the floor together. "Hold him, Perce!" he shouted. "Hold him before he gets his gun!"

Perce waited uncertainly for a moment. Then he dived in. One of Eric's thrashing heels caught him in the chest and sent him reeling across the room. Eric's hands closed on Jim's throat.

"Perce! He'll kill us both! Quick!"

Perce got unsteadily to his feet, then jumped at Eric's back. He got a strangle hold and twisted. Jim struggled free and pinned back Eric's arms. Perce kept squeezing till Eric began to choke. "No!" he coughed. "Stop. Haven't any gun!"

Perce stopped choking him and searched him while Jim held down his arms. Finally he stood up. "Let him go," he said. "He hasn't got a gun."

"Well, don't try anything like that again," warned Jim. "Perce and I can finish you."

Eric struggled to his feet and sank into a chair. His lips were bleeding and he wiped away the blood with the back of his hand. "You damn fools," he said. "I didn't have anything to do with this."

Neither of the two men met his eyes. He looked at Perce and then at Jim. "Don't you believe me?"

"I don't believe anyone when that much money is concerned," said Jim. "You were here first. How do we know you didn't fix up this place and send those telegrams?"

"And then lock the door from the outside?" jeered Eric. "Don't be ridiculous. You're supposed to be the brilliant Hollingway."

Jim was silent for a moment, then he turned to Perce. "You were the last one in here," he said. "You made this trap. You—"

PERCE stepped back slowly. He watched Jim advance toward him and looked to see what Eric would do. "No! I swear I didn't. Eric, you've got to believe me!"

Thunder crashed against the house. The lights went out. Silence held the room.

"I suppose he cut the wires, too," said Eric. "Don't be so damn suspicious, Jim. We're not trying to double-cross you."

"The lights don't prove a thing," said Jim. "The storm did that. I'm not trusting anybody."

"Cut the jaw," said Eric, "and let's see if we can find some candles."

Hurried footsteps sounded on the rug. Then Perce screamed "Look! Lights! Anderson's place has lights, and it's on the same line!"

"Someone cut the wires," whispered Eric. "Someone. . ."

Perce slammed himself against the door and pounded on it with his fists. "Let me out of here," he screamed. "Let me out of here! Let me out!"

"That's no good," said Eric. "I'm going to see if I can find a candle." He stumbled against a chair and cursed. He lit a match and walked into the hall. Perce fell into a chair and covered his face with

his hands. Jim stood nearby, motionless.

"Find anything?" Perce asked, when Eric came back.

"I got a candle," Eric said. "But it won't last very long." He came in holding the candle in front of him. The spasmodic light deepened the lines on his drawn face, outlined his eyes with cavernous shadows. His face was like a mask of fear. He set the candle on the mantle and then drew back.

The three men were seated far apart. They didn't speak. Their eyes darted from the flickering flame to one another. Their hands were clenched. A wrist watch inexorably counted the tickings of eternity. Eric was the first to move. "Got to see a man," he said, rising to his feet. His words were strained.

Jim watched him out of the corner of his eyes and glared back at Perce. The sound of Eric's feet faded into silence. The silence was shattered by a gasping scream. Eric came pounding back.

"I saw him," he said. There was no expression in his words. "I saw him."

"Saw whom?" snarled Jim.

"I saw Uncle John!"

"No!" screamed Perce. "No!"

"I saw him. Upstairs in the hall. He was standing there looking at me."

"Don't be a damn fool," said Jim. "He's dead."

"I know," said Eric. "This thing was dead, too. It didn't move. It didn't speak. It just stood there."

"It's your imagination," said Jim.

Eric shook his head. "No. I saw it."

"I'm going to see it," said Jim. He began moving toward the stairs. Then he stopped and turned. "Come on, Perce," he said. "We'll both go. Just to prove Eric's wrong."

"I don't want to see it," said Perce. But he rose slowly to his feet and went to Jim. "I don't want to see it. I want to prove to myself that there's nothing there." They walked off together.

Eric covered his face with his hands. His hands tightened convulsively when he heard Perce scream. He got up and met Perce and Jim in the hall.

"You saw it," said Eric.

"Yes," said Jim. "It just stood there."

"But he's dead," said Perce. He's dead."

"I know," said Eric. "I gave him enough to kill ten like him."

"I saw him in his coffin," said Jim. "I saw him in his grave. I saw him buried under six feet of ground, and the dead don't walk again."

The candle guttered and went out.

**F**INALLY the rain stopped and there was no sound at all. Then there was the soft rustling of cloth and the sound of feet moving across the carpet; a gasp and a groan.

"He's dead," said Jim. "Eric's dead."

"You killed him," said Perce.

"Yes," said Jim. "Because he killed Uncle John. Now maybe the thing is satisfied. Now maybe it will go away."

"Light a match," said Perce.

Jim lit a match. It showed Eric sitting in his chair, leaning slightly forward. The light of the match reflected from the knife blade in his throat, just below the ear. Then the match went out.

"You killed him because you want all the money," said Perce. "You're going to kill me, too."

"No," said Jim. "I left the knife there. I killed him so the thing would go away. I don't want the money."

"Light another match," said Perce.

Jim lit another match. His face was haggard and his eyes were wild. His features wore the slackness of an idiot's.

Perce lifted the gun and aimed between Jim's eyes. Then he pulled the trigger.

"You wanted all the money," he said. "You were going to kill me, too. Now I'll get all the money." The echoes quieted and died.



Footsteps sounded upstairs in the hall. Then on the stairs.

"It's coming down," said Perce. "It's coming down to get me." He laughed. "It won't get me," he said. He lifted the gun to his head. "It won't get me." The gun roared. . . .

I POURED a stiff drink from the bottle and drank it straight. The old man was looking at me, waiting for me to speak.

"That makes a hell of a good story," I said, searching in my mind for what name he used to write under.

"But of course you refuse to accept it as the truth," he said.

"Naturally, I don't believe in ghosts," I shrugged.

The old man smiled tolerantly. "At first Eric and Jim and Perce didn't believe in them either. But when tension developed in their minds, they finally did—and went mad."

"But you said this Uncle John was dead," I protested.

"No," he corrected me. "They said he was dead. What actually happened was that the heart medicine he was taking

acted as an antidote to the poison they gave him, and he only became very sick.

"With all his money it was easy to have a sculptor make a wax effigy of him to be buried. The rest was relatively simple."

It still made a good story, but all I had seen in the Hollingway tragedy was the bare fact that a house had been struck by lightning and burned to the ground, with three unfortunate men trapped inside.

"What about the fire?" I asked. "You forgot to explain about the fire."

"Oh, that! Well, the whole mess was pretty sickening, and if the newspapers got hold of it, it would have been nauseating, so I punctured the oil tank down in the cellar and attached a long fuse to it."

"You!"

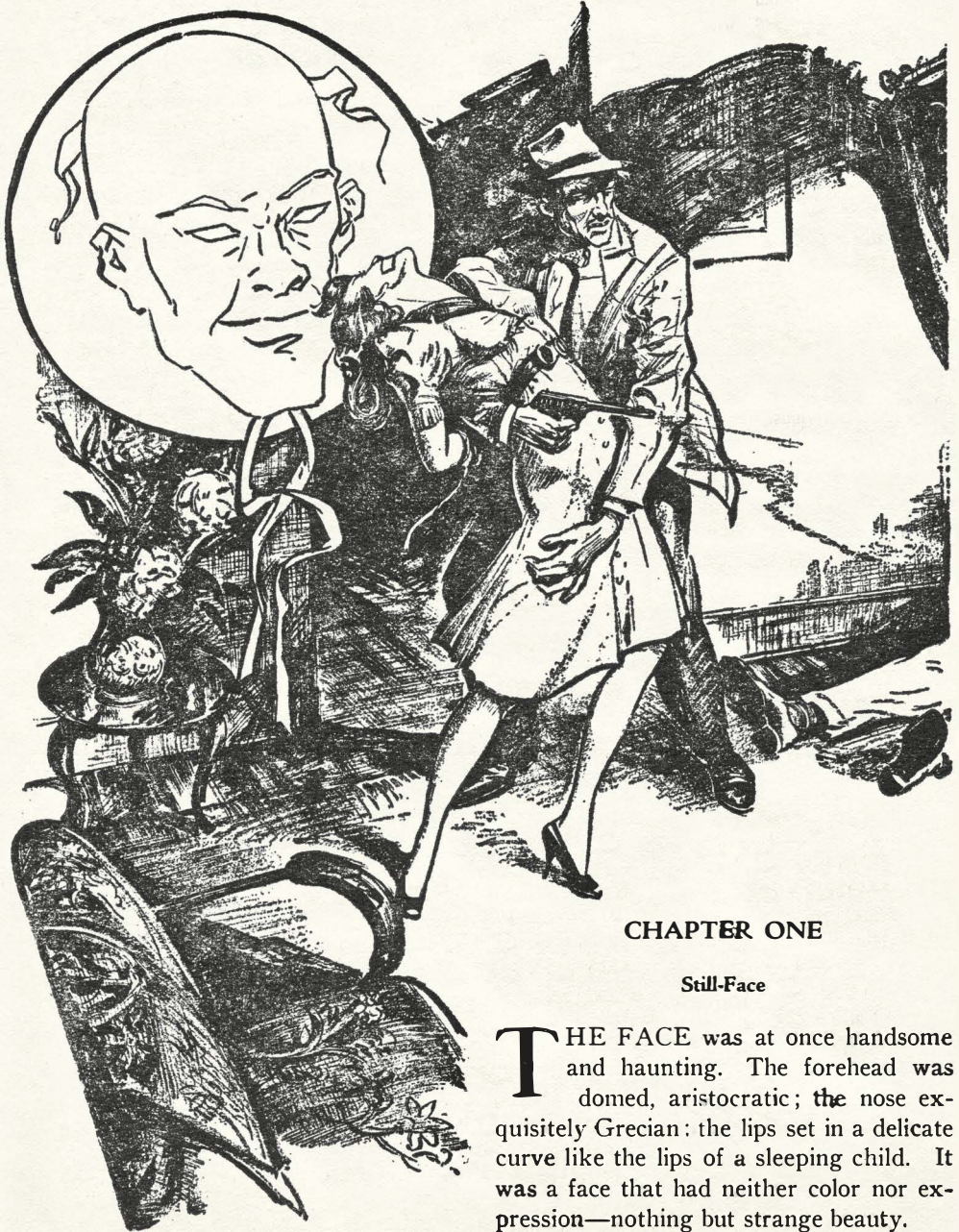
"I? Did I say I? Pardon me. A slip of the tongue. I meant Uncle John." He smiled at me benevolently. "Fancy me doing a thing like that."

But suddenly it struck me that there was only one writer whose mind was capable of thinking up a situation like that. His name had been J. J. Drake. And J. J. Drake was the pen-name used by a mild little man called John Hollingway.



# The Man in the Murder Mask

*He was known to the police and the Underworld as the Face—an illusive, masked figure who came mysteriously to Seaport City and began taking over the rackets. Those who opposed him—exploded! Till Rocky Rhodes, detective extraordinary, was hired to protect the Face, instead of find him!*



## CHAPTER ONE

### Still-Face

**T**HE FACE was at once handsome and haunting. The forehead was domed, aristocratic; the nose exquisitely Grecian; the lips set in a delicate curve like the lips of a sleeping child. It was a face that had neither color nor expression—nothing but strange beauty.



I had seen such faces, under a shroud, but never on a living man. Not that this face had died. It had simply never lived. It was made of wax.

The man behind the face sat quite motionless in an immense, brocaded ottoman, his slim white hands templed on propped elbows. Only his eyes seemed to have life. Dark, mobile, faintly sardonic,

they matched the smiling voice that slid through those thin lips. Matched, in some way, the odd beauty of the face.

"You do not like my face, Mr. Rhodes?"

"That's hard to say," I told him. "I haven't seen it yet.

There was low, liquid laughter behind the mask. It merged with the soft music which came from a cabinet radio in one corner of the room.

I side-stepped just as the hog-leg began to kick his palm!



An Action-Packed  
Mystery Novelette

By Dane Gregory

"You are seeing it, Mr. Rhodes. To all intents and purposes, this *is* my face. As for the thing it conceals—well, I can assure you that you wouldn't like that. It would leave you with a very bad taste in your mouth."

I said, "I've already got one." I explained by nodding toward the three men stationed at the door.

One was tall and thin and saddle-nosed; he had a black-barreled Colt Woodsman centered on my belt-line. A small, squat man stood beside him, watching me over a cut-down .38. The third was a yellow-haired kid, slack-lipped, sleepy-eyed. He was fondling an ugly little Spanish automatic. I felt quite like an insurrectionist standing against a 'dobe wall.

The Face said crisply, "Put your guns away, boys!" To me: "Sit down, Mr. Rhodes. My most humble apologies. I hadn't noticed the arsenal. None of my men resorted to physical violence, I hope?"

I folded into the nearest chair, tried to relax. "It depends on your definition of physical violence," I said. "I was routed out of bed in the middle of the night, covered with three roscoes, and ordered to throw on my clothes. Then, I was prodded into somebody's car and taken for a ride."

"Again, Mr. Rhodes, my apologies," the Face murmured. "My men had instructions to bring you here, but not in any such absurdly melodramatic fashion. They have been seeing too many movies, I'm afraid." Abruptly, "You know me, I take it?"

I nodded. "They call you the Face. If you have any other name, I've never heard it. You moved into town about three years ago, hired a few torpedoes who happened to be at liberty, and immediately put the grab on the local coin-machine and policy rackets. At present, I believe you own a string of hat-check concessions, several aldermen, and half the cops on the

rackets squad. You are, in brief, a power. Still, I don't like being jockeyed around by your performing apes."



SADDLENOSE growled something and began to inch his Woodsman out of its holster sling. The Adonis mask moved slowly from side to side, beautiful and unreal. "No, Harry. No—Let's stop quibbling and get down to cases, Mr. Rhodes. Your fee will be five thousand dollars."

"What!"

"I can offer you an added inducement," the Face said. "There is a rumor afoot, Mr. Rhodes, that your career as a private detective is about to be terminated. Your license will shortly come up for renewal, I understand. The police commissioner is determined that it shall not be renewed. As you say, I own my share of the aldermen. If you accept this case, I can promise you that considerable pressure will be exerted in your behalf. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

I studied the end of my cigarette. My office address had been Eight-Ball Boulevard ever since I set myself up in the private eye business; but it was the only business I knew. Without that license, I'd be facing a long, lean winter—there weren't many soup kitchens in Seaport City.

I said, "Let's hear your proposition."

The Face moved one graceful hand. He picked up a copy of the *Seaport City Herald* and scaled it lightly toward me. The newspaper fell right-side up; a crimson banner line caught my eye:

**KILLER CLAIMS  
SIXTH VICTIM!**

I didn't read the story. I had read it several times that afternoon, and I could have recited the first few paragraphs from memory. They went something like this:



Terror swept like grass-fire through Seaport City's underworld this evening, following the bizarre death of August (Little Augie) Weiss, publisher of a daily tip-sheet and reputed overlord of the handbook business in this city.

Weiss stepped out of the Grotto, a downtown restaurant, right into an explosion that literally rocked Fourth Avenue from one end to the other. As in previous cases, police admit that they have no idea how, why, or by whom Weiss was murdered.

The handbook czar is the sixth man to have met such a death in a period of three weeks. Other victims of the nameless blast killer were Hymie Krantz, head of the laundry protection racket; Joseph (Sailor Boy) Sears, said to have been in control of a statewide narcotics ring; Vincent Mangano, boss of the poultry and dairy rackets; and Lucky Lou Hinman, owner of a string of gambling houses.

Though police at first attributed the murders to a sudden outbreak of gang warfare, they believe now that the killer is a fanatic armed with some new and terrible weapon. The previous theory was discarded when the deaths began to strike indiscriminately among Seaport City's various rackets, apparently without logical motivation.

I lifted my eyes from the paper and said, "You can deal me out. Fanatic or not, he's getting rid of the right people."

Saddlenose growled again. The small, squatty man took a few, quick steps forward, and the kid with the yellow curls said sleepily, "Careful, guy." But the eyes in that white and empty face retained their smile.

"I expected some such reaction, Mr. Rhodes. I'm afraid you don't understand the situation. Unlike the police, the underworld has *not* discarded the theory that this is gang warfare. Another death or two will touch off the fuse, and from that moment on chaos will literally tear this town wide apart. There will be pitched machine-gun battles on the street. Cops will die. Children and other innocent bystanders will die. Do you follow me?"

I followed him, all right. I'd seen that kind of warfare back in the temperance days.

The Face steepled his fingers again, said softly, "Very well. My interest in the case is, of course, purely selfish. I am a sensitive man, Mr. Rhodes. It would embarrass me to be riveted with cupro-nickel slugs. In fact, I would not care to have my mode of life altered in any way at all."

He waved one hand; an outsize cabochon emerald burned like a tomcat's eye on the middle finger. The gesture encompassed the splendid, somber room with its shaded lights and its ankle-deep rugs and its Forain etchings. "As the situation stands, I'm doing well enough for myself. I have no wish to extend my sphere of influence—I want merely to keep what I've gained. And open gang warfare might well cost me all of that."

The mask leaned toward me, a corkscrew of light running across its cold, ivory planes. Passion suddenly grained the man's voice. "Under this shell I am not a pretty thing, Mr. Rhodes—a living gargoyle. But, I love beauty. I love it as some men love—" He stopped; deprecating laughter bubbled softly behind the face. "I cannot hope to enlist your personal sympathies. I can only hope you will take pity on the innocent ones who may die if the mobs should run amok. And, there is another consideration, of course. How do you know this killer will always, as you put it, get rid of the right ones?"

**H**E HAD me there. Nobody knew definitely whether the murderer was working for civic, or personal motives. With Seaport City's various crime tycoons out of the way, he would be in a position to set up his own empire—an empire fortified with the weapon that could produce those terrific blasts. The situation had appalling possibilities.

"If I should happen to track him down," I ventured, "what would I be expected to do with him? I'm not turning him over to you and your—"

"I ask no such commitments. It will satisfy me to see the man behind bars."

There was danger in a case such as this, danger above the threat of sudden death. The local bluejohns didn't like me, and still less would they like my intrusion in a murder case of such magnitude. With a five-grand poke at stake, any other slipshoe in the world could have afforded to risk their enmity. I couldn't. I was living on stolen hours; one of these days some shrewder-than-average cop was going to catch me with my fingers in the hour-glass.

There had been that cold-deck deal in Montana. There had been that starry-eyed rookie cop named Ted Tarrant—a big, dumb kid who hadn't liked the idea of strutting around with a badge on his breast and a hungry hand behind him. There had been the day when important money sent the same Ted Tarrant to jail, all wrapped up in a leak-proof murder frame. And later—five endless years later—he had galloped to freedom with Tommy slugs tearing leather from his heels.

This trail wasn't cold; it would never be cold. One misstep and the world would know that when you scratched Rocky Rhodes, Ted Tarrant stopped itching.

Still, there was the matter of my private op's license; the fact that I needed money. And an even more important fact, one I'd been keeping under my hair: It looked very much as if a redheaded girl had already dragged me into this case, some forty-eight hours before.

I came to my feet. "I'll take the case," I said. "I'll take it, but I'll handle it in my own way. Which means I want no interference from you or your—"

I stopped. At that moment, the radio music blanked out and an announcer's voice jumped into the waiting silence:

"We interrupt our program of classical favorites to bring you a late news bulletin. Another mysterious blast murder has just been reported in Seaport City. This time

the murderer's victim appears to have been a person *without* underworld connections."

I sat down again. Call it intention, or thought-transference, or anything else you like—whatever the word, there's no denying the fact. All at once I knew beyond doubt I was going to hear a familiar name in a second or two . . . and I heard it.

"The blast occurred at Sixteen Twenty-four Winslow Avenue, the home of Miss Ann Hedges and her foster-brother, Kerry Powell. The entire outer half of the residence was demolished, police say, indicating that a time-bomb of some sort had been planted on, or near the front porch. The body of a woman was found in the debris."

The announcer pulled in a gusty breath and stalled for a dozen watch-ticks, obviously building his suspense. My fingers tried to squeeze right through the chair-arms.

The announcer continued:

"Although certain identification is impossible, it is believed to be Miss Abigail Clark, an elderly woman who kept house for the two. Miss Hedges and her foster-brother were at a movie when the blast occurred. Police are now questioning the pair in an effort to discover the motive behind the crime. Keep tuned to this station for further developments."

The slow, sad strains of the Pathetique symphony welled into the room. The Face said quietly, "He doesn't always choose the right people, it seems."

"So it seems," I agreed, my voice flat, strange.

Ann Hedges was the name of the redheaded girl who had dragged me into this case some forty-eight hours before. A very lovely redheaded girl, with the kind of eyes you wouldn't mind looking into forever.

Surely, I thought, there ought to be a better place for bombs than her front porch.



## CHAPTER TWO

## The Shadow of the Scythe

**L**IEUTENANT BERT DRAGO of the homicide squad flattened his immense red hands on my desk, lowered his head to impale me on a glacial blue gaze. "If I were you," he said, "I'd read that paper on the train. You're through in this town, Rocky. All caught up."

I kept on staring at the front page. It fairly screamed:

**MISSING SCIENTIST BELIEVED  
BLAST SLAYER**

**Police Begin Search For Ethan Richards;  
Pair Grilled**

New and sensational developments in Seaport City's most bizarre mass murder case followed hard on the heels of the explosion last night at the home of Miss Ann Hedges and her foster-brother, Kerry Powell. A housekeeper, Miss Abigail Clark, lost her life in the blast.

Grilled throughout the night, the two made disclosures which immediately set local police on the trail of their foster-father, Ethan Richards, a private research chemist of nation-wide repute. They confessed that Richards had been missing for the past six weeks, and that at the time of his disappearance he was perfecting a powerful, new explosive which he had tentatively called detonite.

Derived from dinitrotoluene, Richards' discovery is a powder which, inert at ordinary temperatures, explodes spontaneously at 96 degrees Fahrenheit. He had meant to turn the formula over to the United States war department for use in the armaments program, according to the pair.

Police, however, incline to the theory that Richards is actually attempting to use his discovery as a springboard to under-world domination. "The man is unquestionably mad," Police Commissioner Ralston J. Bounds said this morning. "He has all the fiendish cunning of madness. I'm certain that my men will apprehend him before he makes further progress in his campaign of murder and terrorism."

In a statement to the press, Miss Hedges heatedly denied that her foster-father could be the mysterious blast-slayer. "He wouldn't

have wanted to murder Kerry and me," she said. "He adopted us when we were kids, and he's always treated us like his own children. Whatever the world may think of him, I know that he is not guilty of these crimes. . . ."

"They admitted this—they confessed that!" I said bitterly. "You and your fellow Cossacks must have had lots of fun flexing your muscles at those two. Wasn't it enough that they'd just seen their home turned into a shambles?"

Drago's brows tied themselves into a single, shaggy knot above his lidded eyes. He slapped savagely at the desk top, narrowly missing the spindle that skewered a month's assortment of bills. "The girl was your client—that's something she let drop last night. She'd hired you to find Richards. Now look, Rocky, you can't make me believe you didn't smell a tie-in between Richards and these blast murders. You were holding out on us, and you know what happens to a private shamus who doesn't play catch with—"

"Ease off, Drago!" I palmed the roll-top. We faced each other like two table-tippers at an old-fashioned seance.

"Just to keep the record straight," I said, "Ann Hedges went to the Missing Persons Bureau when Richards disappeared six weeks ago. She reported that he was working on a new explosive—a fact which may or may not have been recorded in the official archives. Anyhow, she didn't try to conceal it. Now the quick-witted cops think there's a tie-up between Richards and the killer, so they accuse me of withholding evidence they had in their hands six weeks ago."

"You must have known—"

"—that Richards is the murderer? I don't know it yet. Neither do the city's finest."

Drago said stubbornly, "You're done, Rocky. Get in our way on this case and we'll snow you under with technical charges. That's final."

He turned and lumbered toward the door, two hundred pounds of wrath and resolution.

I said, "Wait!"

"What—"

"Where's Ann Hedges? She's still my client. I've got a right to see her."

Drago looked incuriously at his toes. "Why, we ain't exactly keeping those two in custody any more. We turned 'em loose this morning, and they rented the house right next to their own home." He frowned at me. "Now, don't blow your lid! We got a heavy police guard around the place."

I bared my teeth. "You're using 'em for bait, eh? The killer tried to get them once, and you know he'll try again. Well, it ought to work out fine—for everybody but them."

"We got a police guard around—"

"So now," I said wearily, "all you need is another one around the cops. From what I've seen of local police guards, a caravan of Mack trucks could pass through unseen. What does it matter how many cops you've got when they all pound their ears at the same time?"

Drago gave me a long, prying look that sent a feather-stroke of fear down my spine. "Funny thing," he said darkly. "A guy that talks that way about cops is usually a guy that's scared to death of 'em." He slapped the door shut and left his words behind him.

And for the first time in weeks I took a drink before lunch.



I FOUND an avid swarm of thrill-hunters boiling around the roped-off shambles that had been Ann Hedges' home. Most of them stared in wordless awe at the scrambled masonry.

I plowed a furrow through the mob, made my way to the house next door—a blank-faced, greystone structure, set well

back from the street and screened by tree-shadow from the hungry eyes out front.

Two massive bluejohns met me in the vestibule, neither of them glad to see me. I told them Ann Hedges was my client and that, according to Regulation 63, a private detective had the right to converse with his client under any circumstances. While they were trying to remember Regulation 63, I made a right-hand turn into the shadowy living-room where Ann and her foster-brother sat in a virtual state of siege.

Ann whispered, "Rocky," getting up out of her chair and coming toward me—a kid-size girl, trim, slim, with hair that swung about her throat in a tumbled cloud as bright as a cardinal's crest. I looked at her and saw that she'd lost something more than her sleep last night. She'd lost a certain, essential part of her youth and her spirit. There was a dogged valor in her tilted chin, but her wide brown eyes housed grief and fear.

"The police say— Rocky, *you* don't think he. . . ."

"I didn't know your foster-father, Ann," I reminded gently.

"The police!" Kerry Powell said bitterly. "They couldn't be right about anything." He trapped nervous hands between his knees, took quick, jerky pulls on his cigarette. His was one of those pink-white varsity faces some people wear with blonde hair. "It wasn't enough to accuse dad of being a murderer—they're treating Ann and me like criminals, too. I want to take her out of the city, but they say we're in technical custody as material witnesses."

I couldn't do anything about that. I didn't like it—I've never liked police traps baited with humans. Evidently Commissioner R. J. Bounds had spoken.

I said, "Would Ethan Richards have had any motive for wanting you two removed?"

Powell looked at his cigarette. Ann



looked down at her doll-size feet. Out of a long, tight silence she said miserably, "Not unless he's insane."

"And if he is insane?"

Her eyes lifted, steadied. "I—I guess there's something you ought to know. Kerry and I always helped him with his work in the laboratory, and we—we both know the formula for detonite. If he wants to keep the secret to himself. . . ." Her voice sagged into silence.

It was motive, with a capital M. It put the finger on Ethan Richards, and it put Ann and Kerry right under the shadow of a scythe. I said, "Who else might have guessed you know this formula?"

"Well, all dad's friends knew we helped him with his work. And—and there's Rolf Parmalee, of course."

I leaned forward. "What about Parmalee?"

"He handled dad's legal business," she said. "We—Kerry and I—took a copy of the formula to him yesterday morning."

I said morosely, "There're lots of things I haven't been told, it seems. Am I supposed to be a detective—or the village gossip?"

Ann put one slim hand on my arm, her eyes huge with contrition. "I'm sorry, Rocky. We weren't trying to conceal facts—we just didn't see any connection between that and all this." Her fingers shaped a small, sad gesture. "Dad wanted the government to have that formula; we thought it was time we took steps on our own initiative to make sure the government got it. We gave Rolf a copy of it—just in case anything happened to us."

I knew Rolf Parmalee. I knew him for a lawyer too poor to be anything but clean-handed—in a city where clean-handed lawyers were scarcer than "Please Park Here" signs. Even so, it occurred to me that a formula presumably worth millions might tax the honesty of Diogenes himself. It occurred to me at the same time that a routine call on Rolf Parmalee

might open some new avenue of investigation. All the others had cops and stoplights on them.

"You're going?" Ann said. "Rocky, you'll prove dad isn't doing these things, won't you? I know he's not a murderer. I *know* it!"

"Then I'll prove it," I said; but I had my fingers crossed. "Take care of yourself, kids. While the cops are watching you, you watch them."



PARMALEE would see me at his home that night, he informed me over the telephone. "I'm sorry I can't make it sooner, Rhodes, but I'll be tied up until then."

So that was that. I spent the rest of the day sorting facts, and tailoring theories to fit them. That job left me with a cigarette wheeze and too many stray scraps of theory. Whether or not the cops had noticed it, there was one particular fact that stood out, begging for attention. Of the six rackets bosses who had made the great transition, every one had just emerged from a local restaurant, bar or night club at the time of his demise. . . . Detonite exploded at a temperature of ninety-six degrees Fahrenheit, and normal body heat is around ninety-eight. One fact turned in the other, like a key in a lock.

But I was still trying to open the lock when I braked my coupé that night in front of Parmalee's home on Prospect Drive. The lawyer met me at the door; a lean, fit, middle-aged man with bright, quick eyes and eloquent courtroom hands.

"Glad you came, Rhodes. You're working for Ann and Kerry, I understand. Any progress?"

I've got a stock answer for that one. "Sure," I said. "There're just a few questions I want to ask you. This formula of theirs, for instance—you're making ar-

rangements to turn it over to the War Department?"

He gave me a glimpse of neat white teeth, his eyes darkly amused. "You're a direct man, Rhodes. The answer, of course, is yes. I wired Washington, today. Frankly, I won't feel comfortable until I've got rid of the thing."

"It's that valuable?"

"It would be priceless," said Parmalee, "to a country at war. For use in friction bombs, you know. The stuff is simply and inexpensively made, I understand, and—well, it seems to have frightful potentialities. . . . Anything else?"

I said, "Yes. You knew Ethan Richards, Parmalee. I didn't. From your personal knowledge of him, would you say that he could possibly be the guy behind these crimes?"

The smile disappeared from Parmalee's lips. He looked down at his woven fingers; his small, sharp cheekbones seemed to push at his skin. "Three hours ago I wouldn't have said so. But now—yes! Richards is the man!"

"What?"

"There was a strange letter in my mail this evening, Rhodes; an unbelievable letter. It warned me that I would die if I made any effort to dispose of the formula."

There was a shadow of carefully controlled dread in the eyes that lifted to mine. "The letter was in Ethan Richards' handwriting—and it was signed with his name," Parmalee said. "If you'd like to see it. . . ."

He rose, crossed the small, subdued living-room and stepped into the darkened room beyond. The door creaked shut behind him, and then I was alone with silence and cigarette smoke and the sharp-cut memory of Ann's belief in her foster-father.

I waited. I waited one minute, two, three . . .

I got to my feet. All at once my nerves

pulled tight, with that familiar sense of fear rushing ahead of its cause, cooling my blood before I knew the reason.

"Parmalee!" I yelled. I started for the door.

I never reached it. At that moment, the door wrenched itself from screaming hinges and came to meet me, and with it the whole shattered face of the wall; and, with it, all the noise that had ever been or would ever be. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Trouble I've Seen

EVERYTHING seemed to be aimed at me, but it was only the door that hit me. It hit me broadside—a hard, flat, thwacking blow like the slap of a Jovian palm. The impact hurried me backward to the south wall of the living-room, and the door went with me all the way.

The chances are that it saved my life. It careened tipsily into the wall, made a kind of extemporaneous lean-to over my fallen body, a roof against the splintered glass and the flying chair-legs and the slabs of plaster that pelted down in a jumbled, surrealist rain.

I couldn't hear much of what was going on. The roar of the blast was still in my ears, covering them as tangibly as molten rubber. All other noises were only faint impressions in that greater noise. I felt no pain, merely a deathly fatigue that weighted my eyelids and sprinkled dust in my brain. *Well, this is it, I thought drowsily. This is the tall, dark sleep I've heard so much about.*

I had made better guesses. It was a three-quarters blackout—nothing more. A minute later I had come alive and was in motion again, padding slowly and clumsily around the edge of the door. I got to my feet, stood there, swaying on widespread legs, my right arm braced



against the wall. It was the only arm I could use. My left shoulder had apparently caught the whole solid smack of the door panel, and the appendage that drooped from it was as dead as the dove of peace.

I didn't need a medical degree to know that I'd not be chinning myself with that particular arm for a while.

The blast had shattered every light bulb in the house, but starshine reached through broken windows to spotlight the chaos around me. Nothing looked the same. Two floor lamps that had stood in opposite corners of the room now leaned against each other, like a pair of tired drunks; and everything else—books, bric-a-brac, furniture—was shaken into a kind of nightmare omelet. I clicked on my fountainpen flash and waded through the wreckage toward the small, square study into which Rolf Parmalee had gone.

It was nothing like a study now. The blast had originated there, breaking the floor and the walls and the ceiling apart like the shell of a Cicero pineapple. My flash beam scampered nervously along the plasterboard. . . .

Death was no novelty to me. I'd seen it before, in some of its least attractive guises. The human mind gradually builds up a psychic antitoxin to it. But this was different, a sudden, complete effacement of a personality.

The slender, smiling man who had been Rolf Parmalee was dead, one slim white hand lay palm upward, the fingers crooked as in an abortive effort to snatch at the lost threads of life. I caught myself noticing the faint blue line on the middle finger where a too-small ring must have fitted once.

Finally I began to move. Snapping off

the flashlight, I thrust it back in my pocket and cat-stepped toward the great, jagged rent in the north wall of the house.

Not more than three or four minutes had elapsed since the blast. But even so, I'd remained too long. Suddenly, I could hear an excited babel of voices breaking through the shocked hush outside; and it was a sound that meant just one thing to me: Trouble!

In the event of a showdown with the boys, I had all the logic in the world on my side. Unless I happened to be working as touch-off man for the Blaster—and thus far not even Drago had accused me of that—there wasn't a single conceivable reason why I might have put the nudge on Rolf Parmalee. Still less was there any reason to suppose I'd have cooled my keds in a place where a blow was due at any moment. My broken arm alone should have been enough to clear me. But it doesn't do a man much good to have all the logic in the world on his side—not when all the cops in the world are on the other.

I knew exactly how it would be. If only to elbow me out of their way, the shields would dream up a charge of some kind and rush me into storage for a while. A while? Once let them get my prints on the blotter and I'd soon be tearing pages out of an endless book. The state of Montana collected fingerprints, too.



OUTSIDE, I flattened my shoulders against the building and ran my eyes quickly over the terrain. Voices were converging on the house; but the darkness just ahead of me was not yet populated. Dipping my head, I made

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for the low hedge that skirted the lot. A moment later I had hunkered down in friendly shadow and was scuttling, lobster-wise, toward the street.

I got there without being seen. A crowd boiled darkly around the front of the house, making the shrill, confused noises that crowds make on such occasions. Nobody singled me out for special attention. I eased into the little coupé, gripped the wheel with my one good hand, threw leather at the starter.

People immediately began to notice me.

"Officer, that coupé!" a woman's voice complained. "It was right there in the driveway all the time. Should you let the man—"

Somebody, obviously a harness-cop, spun from the crowd and bawled, "Hey!"

I twisted the wheel. The coupé jumped away from the curb on a thin lament of gears. I toed the gas-pedal down to the floor-boards and kept it there.

"Halt!" the cop bugled behind me. "Halt in the name of the—"

I didn't catch the name.

I was a good forty feet away when gunfire began to pierce the night. A Magnum would have stopped me at that distance, but not a regulation service oscar. The coupé yawed slightly, then stretched out its wheels, spurning gravel like a thoroughbred. I spun it into a murky side-street, the wind of passage singing in my ears, and drove due west until a murkier street gaped invitingly on my left.

The sounds of pursuit dissolved into silence. A dozen streets later I could see my way around the eight-ball. Unless, of course, the bluejohn had happened to catch my license number—in which case I would have only two hundred and ninety-nine other bluejohns to worry about. But the chances of that were so negligible that I decided to think of my broken arm instead.

It hurt. With every jounce of the

coupé, my stomach seemed to flatten and curl up like a waiter's shirt front in an old pre-talkie comedy. I couldn't stand much of that. I parked the coupé in a swatch of shadow and sat there for ten minutes or more, filling my lungs with cool, clean air. The pain stayed with me but the nausea passed. I prodded the car to life and made for home.

The arm would have to be set before I did anything else. But that was all right. I knew a friendly medico who would come over to my apartment and set it without asking too many questions. Meanwhile, there wasn't much to do. Parmalee's death, timed with an inhuman ingenuity, had spilled new confusion into this little mess. Now I was fresh out of leads again—and dodging uniforms into the bargain.

I eased into the Sheraton Arms, rode the self-service lift up to the fourth floor, and plodded on twelve-pound feet down the corridor that led to my three rooms and. I had keyed the doorlock open, stood trying to locate the light switch, when my scalp began to pucker again at the point where it merged with my neck.

Something was distinctly haywire.

I'd left the windows down when I went out, so the flat should have smelled of stale cigarette smoke and venerable upholstery. It didn't. It smelled of clean night air, and I could hear the window curtains frothing gently in a breeze no electric fan had manufactured. And I could hear . . . a sound—a thick, labored, rattling sound, like the respiration of a croupy child. I'd heard it before, more times than one man ought to hear it. I knew beyond a ghost of a doubt what it meant.

Nobody else had a right to be in my apartment. Certainly nobody else had a right to be dying in it. But the fact remained that somebody was dying there. That thick noise was the sound a man makes when he is using up the last few breaths of air allotted to him.



**M**Y FINGERS locked on the .45 holstered under my left lapel. Slanting its muzzle into the gloom, I slid noiselessly along the wall, until my right elbow found the light button. I gave it a prod and then ducked to one side, whisking the gun-barrel across the lighted room.

But nobody poured lead at me. Nobody stirred. The place wore a deep, rich hush broken only by the sigh of the window-curtains, and by that other sound.

The draught pushed through an open window to my left. Somebody armed with a glass-cutter had obviously stood on the outside fire-escape and thugged his way into the place according to the by-laws of the cat-burglar's local. Shards of the broken pane were scattered across the carpet; near them, his feet and hands outstretched, his varsity face devoid of color, lay the man who had been shot.

His wide gray eyes were pinned emptily on the ceiling; there was no faintest stir of thought in them when I crouched down beside him and said thickly, "Kerry."

He was still breathing.

"Kerry!" I touched his shoulder and crowded words through the tight, dry pain in my throat. "For God's sake, kid, what happened? Where's Ann? How did you get here? Who—who the devil did this to you?"

He tried to focus his eyes on my face, but there wasn't that much strength left in his body.

I said feverishly, "It's Rhodes, Kerry! It's Rocky Rhodes! Understand? You've got to tal to me, Kerry. What in heaven's name—"

The gray lips shaped a single word. "Rhodes?"

"Yes!" I said.

Kerry Powell stirred fitfully. "Ann . . . they got Ann, Rhodes."

My heart went into a power-dive. "Who, Kerry? Who?"

"I . . . don't know. It was my . . .

fault, Rhodes." The kid's voice quickened, strengthened, as if he were drawing on some last reserve of energy "There was a phone call—I thought it was from you. Said to . . . get Ann and sneak out through the basement door . . . past the police guard. Said to . . . bring her here."

I said, "And you thought the call was from me? Good Lord, Kerry, why would I have wanted you to—"

"Said you thought . . . some of the cops had sold out to the . . . killer. Said we'd be safe . . . here." His voice sank again into a broken mumble, thin and faraway. "Thought it was you. Afraid . . . afraid all this happened because I was—"

"Go on, Kerry!" I cut in desperately. "Look, kid, maybe I can help Ann if you'll tell me the rest of it." I didn't really think so, though.

"Ann. . . ." He reached for strength again. "They got her, Rhodes. They were waiting here, and they let us in and . . . shot me down. I—that's all I can remember—"

"How many were there, Kerry?" My voice was urgent.

"I don't . . . know. They were just—just faces. I didn't know any of them. . . . But they got Ann, Rhodes. They took Ann away with them, and it was . . . all my—"

The kid sighed heavily; his head drooped a little toward one shoulder. I said, "Kerry!"

He didn't say anything.

"Kerry!" I whispered again.

It was over for him. Death had smoothed his face and left it young again, soft, ingenious, faintly bewildered—the face of a good-hearted kid whose only offense had been that he was a little too scared, a little too credulous.

Well, it was over for him. But not for Ann Hedges; not for the girl with the tumbled bright hair and the eyes that were gentle as May. It was probably just beginning for her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## Drago Gets Ideas

SOMETIMES in my dreams I would find myself shut away in a house without doors or windows, a nightmare house, suggestive of the big stone building in which I'd spent five years of my life. My fingers would grope frantically along the bare face of a wall, hopefully pursuing a hopeless quest, then I would come to a corner and to another unbroken wall. So it would go until I woke—a procession of bald, dark walls stretching on and on, into the black pit of nowhere.

It was like that now. Wherever I turned there seemed to be a wall in front of me, and it was a wall as blank as a cretin's eye. I had no idea where to look for Ann. I had no idea who the killer was, though the finger continued to point at Ethan Richards. I had no idea what to do about Kerry Powell's murder—a complicating factor more than likely to put my neck in a thirteen-loop cravat.

I burned a chain of cigarettes, and let my feet slap out a dreary lockstep rhythm on the carpet. My broken arm still hurt; and I could feel the heat of fever in my cheeks. I knew that I ought to be abed with my arm in splints and my brow in ice-chips. But there was no time for that now, no time for anything but blunt, decisive action. The clock on the mantel was stolidly snipping away fragments of Ann Hedges' life.

Meanwhile, I pounded the carpet and kept on playing riddle-me-this.

The perfect precision. That was the most incomprehensible thing in the whole affair. The Parmalee kill had been timed and executed with a finesse that taxed all credulity. Young Powell had been murdered and Ann Hedges snatched with the same kind of finesse. And obviously it had been planned by somebody who knew

that I would be dodging plaster at the time, who knew it was an easy matter to let sleeping cops lie, who knew he could safely gamble on Kerry Powell's fear and Ann's uncertainty. Sane or otherwise, the man did things in a way that smacked eerily of omniscience.

The handset telephone on my desk raked silver spurs across my nerves. I palmed the transmitter and said, "Rhodes."

"This," said the voice at the other end, "is Ethan Richards."

The fever was building in my veins, and for a halved instant I thought delirium had come with it. I sank in a chair and blew a small "Oh" into the mouthpiece.

THE voice said tonelessly, "Please dispense with the ancient ritual of trying to trace this call, Mr. Rhodes. It would simply be a waste of time, and time is of the essence. . . . Well, are you there?"

"I'm here," I said. "Go on."

"To begin with, Mr. Rhodes, I must admit that your interest in my affairs has disturbed me. Frankly, I'm afraid of you. Oh, not of your brain—that seems a pretty commonplace article. But your apparent immunity to death and your infinite capacity for muddling through—you must be disposed of one way or another, Mr. Rhodes."

My voice sounded as if it came from a cave. "Meaning," I said, "that you tried one of those ways at the Parmalee place—but your rock didn't hit both birds."

"Well put. A less formidable enemy would now be where the woodbine twineth not. But you, Mr. Rhodes, are incredible. So I shall have to try something else."

"And that is—"

"Persuasion. You have doubtless noticed that Kerry is dead. You also know that I have—appropriated Ann. At present nothing very serious has happened



to her, Mr. Rhodes. I've kept her alive for the obvious reason that she might be needed as a hostage. You understand?"

I said, "No."

"I want you to give up this case at once. I have many channels of information at my disposal; I know that Ann is not your only client. You are also working for a gentleman known popularly as the Face. As an indication of your intentions, you will go at once to this faceless one, and tell him you have retired from the case. After you have done that—and believe me, I'll know whether or not you have done it—you may expect another call from me."

The transmitter slipped in my sweaty palm. "Wait!" I said. "You mean Ann will be murdered unless I follow your orders. What assurance have I that—"

"—that she won't be murdered, anyway?" The flat voice cracked open on thin, slaty laughter that sent a parade of chills down my spine. Sane? A saner man had written *Mein Kampf*. "You have no such assurance, Mr. Rhodes. But after all, you're scarcely in a position to dictate terms. Good evening."

There was the clac of a broken connection. I dropped the handset into its cradle and got to my feet. I put on my hat. I fumbled the .45 out of its sling and gave the chambers a brief, routine inspection. Then I palmed the door open and stepped out into the half-light of the corridor.

In all well-planned nightmares, one thing fuses fantastically with another, so that there will be no dull lapses in the continuity. Knowing that, I wasn't particularly surprised to see the moonlike face of Lieutenant Bert Drago floating down the corridor to meet me. I was just sick.

Drago said, "Hello, Rocky. Going somewhere?" His lips broke open in a gold-spangled grin, but the eyes above the grin were like chips from a gravestone.

I flicked the ash off my cigarette, letting my broken arm hang nonchalantly at my side. "Out," I said vaguely. "What gives, Bert? Anything new?"

Drago pushed his stomach very close. "Yeah. Not so long ago somebody did for a local lip named Rolf Parmalee. Another bomb, I guess. The beat-cop threw lead at somebody lamming from the place in a coupé, but the guy got away. . . . By the way, Rocky, you drive a coupé, don't you?"

I said airily, "Lots of people do. They tell me the horseless carriage is becoming quite a fad."

**D**RAGO kept his mirthless smile. "You private detectives say the funniest things," he simpered in ghastly mimicry. "It's just possible, though, that lots of people don't drive coupés with a bullet or two in the rear end. I'll be having a look at that bus of yours in a couple of minutes, Rocky. Right now I got something else on my mind."

His eyes ground like two stone pestles into mine; I knew then what he was going to say. I had all the sensations of a man watching the judge put on his black cap.

"Where," said Drago, "are young Powell and the Hedges girl?"

This is the payoff, I thought.

I stretched my eyes like an ingenué. "Good God, Bert! You—you don't mean they're not—"

Drago said patiently, "At home? No. Those lunkheads on the stakeout found the kids missing and phoned headquarters a few minutes ago. You know, Rocky, it seems to me you were the guy that raised so much stink about the police-trap idea. Kind of looks like you were also the guy that stole that bait." Drago quit grinning. "Where are they? We want 'em back."

"Now, wait a minute, Bert," I said feverishly. "Am I supposed to have lammed with the kids at the same time I'm supposed to have murdered Parmalee?"

What am I—a dick with two or three astral bodies working for him? I—”

Drago said, “Let’s have a look at your apartment. Rocky. If they’re not there, what’ve you got to worry about?”

I cocked my muscles. “No, you don’t! Not without a search warrant. Matter of principle, you understand.”

Drago smiled. “I got me a kind of John Doe search warrant that’s as flexible as your Sunday garters. In!”

His stomach crowded into my midriff, two hundred pounds of cop behind it. The impact tipped me off balance, spilled me backward against the door, my broken arm pinned tightly to the panel. Pain and fever exploded in my brain; my free hand made a clumsy pass at the .45. A moment later Drago was covering me with two guns—mine and his.

“You’re getting to be a nance, Rocky. I’d have had a tougher time taking a lollipop from a weaner. Now open that door, and let’s see what makes.”

I opened the door and went in.

Drago clicked on the lights and let the door slap shut behind him. He stood there blinking in the sudden radiance—and I had added ten candles to my next birthday cake before he saw Kerry Powell.

His eyes swelled a little; he took two slow steps forward.

“Murder,” said Drago.

I said, “See the broken glass,” and it sounded as if I were reading the first line in a schoolboy’s primer. “Somebody got in through the window and murdered the kid, Bert. I wouldn’t have come in that way—the landlord lets me have a key. I didn’t do it, Bert.”

“Murder,” Drago repeated.

He plodded toward me, behind the guns, two round black chimneys ready to smoke death. “Where’s your telephone? I better call the boys.”

“Now listen, Bert,” I wheedled. “For God’s sake, let me talk for a couple of minutes, will you? I’ll tell you the whole

thing from beginning to end. Kerry and the girl—”

“Save it. Save it for your mouthpiece! Where’s the telephone?”

I said, “You win. It’s over there.”

Drago swiveled. “Huh? Where?”

“Right here under my hand,” I told him. Sure enough, there it was. I wrapped my fingers around the cradle and shoved it at him hard, praying that the cord would reach. It did—the instrument connected with the side of his jaw, a solid thud like the push of a mule’s hoof.

I followed through. Drago’s shoulder thumped the wall and he teetered around on the rims of his heels, trying earnestly to hoist the police rod into line. I hit him three times on the point of the jaw before I realized that once would have been enough.

His sliding feet pushed a scatter-rug out of the way, and he fell, covering the bare space where it had been. I pocketed his service gun, put my .45 back where it belonged. Then I trundled Drago into the adjoining room, found the familiar pair of handcuffs without which he would have felt undressed, snapped one of his big hairy wrists to the bedstead.

After that, I blacked out the lights and went away.

Not only was my favorite client punching death’s doorbell, but I was also an escaped convict wanted for murder, abduction, resisting an officer and using official property for personal business. I hadn’t merely cooked my goose—it was crusted with charcoal now.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Masks Off at Midnight

**N**OTHING in that vast and splendid room had changed. The same Forain etchings broke the subdued monotony of the walls; the same shadows

*(Continued on page 108)*



# DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."



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## DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 106)

lay in their appointed places. The floor was paved with the same soft carpeting.

Rich damask draperies stirred languidly to my left, moved by a draught that slid through the open French doors beyond; and to my right, his thin, graceful body folded into the brocaded ottoman, sat the man with the strange, still face.

"Good evening, Mr. Rhodes."

Dark eyes smiled quizzically at me through the beautiful, pale mask. The man behind it tented his long, slim fingers, the huge emerald splashing its princely fire from one hand. He said, "You might have been shot, you know. In times like these, it is rather dangerous to enter my house without first ringing the doorbell."

The pain still made its home in me, and the fever-hot blood throbbled in my temples like snake-drums booming in a swamp. But I could think now, with that quick, unnatural brilliance that comes to a man when his mind is skating along the edge of delirium.

I slumped into a chair. "I came in through a window. I didn't want to be roughed up by your three hired roscoes again. Where are they, by the way?"

The Face said vaguely, "They are here and there, Mr. Rhodes. But, you have come to deliver a report, I take it."

The Adonis mask leaned toward me. The man toyed with his emerald, twirling it on his narrow finger.

I told him about the blast at Rolf Parmalee's home; I told him about Kerry Powell's death; Ann's abduction; of the ultimatum I had received over the telephone; and of Drago.

The Face listened attentively. "Extraordinary. You have come here, then, to inform me that you are retiring from the case?"

I said, "No."

"But you told me that Ethan Richards

(Continued on page 110)



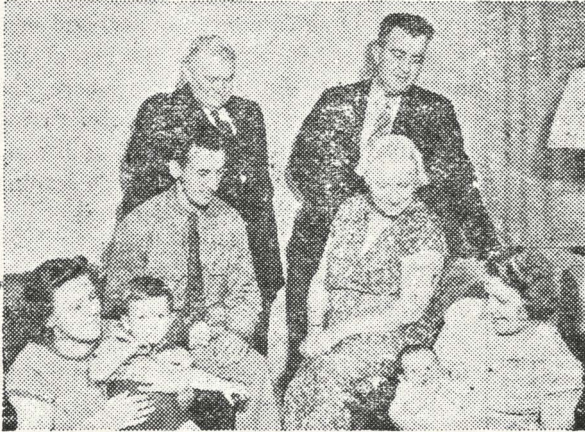
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(Continued from page 108)

had ordered you to turn down this—”

I said. “I didn’t tell you it was Ethan Richards. That was what he said. . . . If he’d used an Ouija board instead of a telephone I might have believed him. It’s my candid opinion that Ethan Richards has been dead these many weeks.”

There was silence, then there was noise. The fingers of my right hand were cradling Bert Drago’s police popper, and now I shot once, through the pocket of my tweeds, into the obscurity where the drapes were stirring. They were stirring much too much for so small a breeze.

There was the sound of a body leaning backward into the French windows.

THE DRAPES parted. The kid with the yellow hair and the slack, stupid face stepped out, pitched forward into the carpet and lay quite still.

The Face said impersonally, “It seems we had an enemy in our camp.”

I thought, one down—but there are more in the house.

I eased the gun out of my coat and centered it on the man in the ottoman. I said, “I’m the kind of dick who just muddles through—but that telephone call was about as subtle as a dirty joke. I guessed right away that I was supposed to walk into a death-trap. It took genius to see that the death-trap was here.”

Silence claimed the room.

“Really, Mr. Rhodes,” he murmured finally. “Surely you’re not implying that I am in league with the blast murderer?”

“You *are* the murderer,” I said.

The hush dissolved. “You’re delirious, Mr. Rhodes,” Face said. “I would scarcely have hired a detective to track down myself.”

I got up and slowly tagged the gun toward him. The door to my right squeaked ever so faintly on its hinges. “You didn’t hire me,” I offered. “I was hired by a

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29x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
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**THE MAN IN THE MURDER MASK**

man known as the Face. Don't move, please. You look quite a bit like him—but there are differences. That ring, for instance. It's a little too big for you. It was a little too small for him, so small that it left a faint blue line on his middle finger."

Laughter purred softly from the motionless face. "An extraordinary theory. Most extraordinary. And where, then, is the gentleman I'm impersonating?"

I pulled another answer from the crystal globe of my brain. "He's as dead as Noah. The little affair at the Rolf Parmalee home. I have an idea he was dead before the touch-off, though."

The door squeaked again, a little louder this time. The masked man laughed with his eyes. "Then I am—"

"You," I said, "are a man who used to be the squarest lawyer in town. You are now a criminal with dreams of empire. The name is Rolf Parmalee!"

My gun whisked sideways, cuffed twice at the heel of my palm. It was slanted into the wedge of darkness where the creaking door yawned on a hallway. A face was there in the aperture—a diminutive, low-browed face. It was looking at me over the bore of a cut-down .38.

The face yelled once; went backward into the gloom.

I thought, That's two of them. But how long can I keep this up?

I shifted the gun-barrel back into line.

**H**IS FINGERS lifted slowly and began to fumble with the false-face. It came away. Parmalee's dark, quick eyes smiled at me out of a face as wan as the mask. "And now?"

I said, "Where's Ann Hedge?"

"Suppose we exchange information. After all, you've nothing to lose. I'll tell you where Ann is if you'll tell me how much you know."

If she's alive, she's doubtless here in



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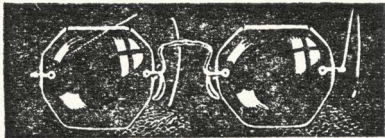
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## DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

this house, I thought. But there's another gungel here, too, and I'll probably catch lead before I find her.

"First of all," I said, "the Face was your brother, wasn't he? The hands and the mannerisms are pretty much alike."

Parmalee nodded. "My twin brother. He was injured in a Chicago gun battle, tuberculosis of the bone resulted. After various operations, his face was rather unpleasant. Hence the mask."

I kept the gun on his heart. "He came here and started getting rich. And that hurt, didn't it, Parmalee?"

"It hurt," Parmalee conceded.

"Ethan Richards came to you with his detonite formula, wanting you to turn it over to Uncle Sam. You killed him, hid the body somewhere, and kept the formula for private use. Right?"

Parmalee smiled. "Right."

"You were going to be the biggest frog in the lily-pond. You were going to knock off all the top-sergeants in the rackets business, murder your brother, assume his identity, and set yourself up as *der fuehrer* of the whole underworld. Right?"

"Go on," he suggested.

"You got next to the gungels on your brother's payroll, doubtless promising them a bigger spoonful of gravy. Through them, you also got next to some of the employes in the various hat-check concessions your brother controlled. Smooth, that. Detonite explodes at body heat. A little bit of it in the sweatband of a man's hat—it worked like a breeze, didn't it?"

"An astute deduction. Mr. Rhodes."

It was my fever talking, but I didn't bother to say so. "When I phoned you this afternoon, you decided it would be a good idea to speed up your plans. So you got the Face out there on some pretext or other—he seems to have believed in brotherly love—and you threw the switch on him. After I called on you tonight, you planted a detonite bomb near his body



## THE MAN IN THE MURDER MASK

and then lammed, fast. Meanwhile, your gunsels were springing a trap on Ann and Kerry. You knew they know the formula, and you wanted them out of the way."

My index finger crooked. I peeled my lips and said, "All right, Parmalee—give! If you've murdered Ann Hedges—"

His eyes were laughing again, a world of mockery in them. "I haven't murdered her, Mr. Rhodes—not yet. Ann is standing in the doorway behind you."

And sure enough, there she was.

Her arms were trussed immovably to her sides. Her hair fell in a coppery cloud about her throat. Huge with fear, her eyes screamed a warning at me above the adhesive tape that silenced her lips. And back of the girl, his scrawny arm clamped about her waist, so that her body shielded him, stood rod-man number three—the saddle-nosed guy.

I sidestepped just as the hogleg began to kick his palm. The first bullet did nothing more than slap air against my cheek. But the second scooped a shallow trench along my left rib-case. The impact drove me backward to the floor; my broken arm caught the whole weight of my body, and there was a moment of pain my grandchildren will remember. Then darkness. . . .

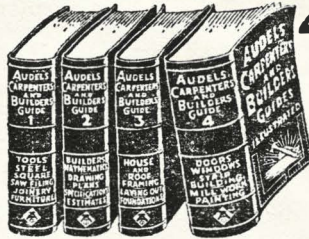
**F**OR AN instant, I thought I'd fainted. Actually, my fingers had stayed on the job, catching instinctively at the light-cord and ripping it out of the socket. Parmalee flung himself through the gloom and dropped to his knees beside me, hands seeking my throat. He found it, just as I found the police rod, and Parmalee lost the decision.

I pumped two shots into his straddling weight. He sighed heavily and fell away. Saddle-nose said, "Chief! Chief! You're not—"

I crouched on one knee, then came softly to my feet, my gun ready. Out of

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a tall silence, the torpedo said gloomily, "Chief?" as if he didn't really expect an answer. I went on waiting.

Ann moaned faintly somewhere near the floor, so I knew she was no longer being used as a chest-protector. I put the police rod back in my pocket. Groping, I found the end of the light-cord. Then I slid my fingers along the wall until they touched the socket.

Saddlenose was within three feet of me when the light went on. I think he'd had the same idea, but I had beaten him to the patent office. And that made all the difference in the world.

I fired twice through the pocket of my coat. It was as simple as that. Older than the Sphinx, I stumbled across the smoky room and began to remove the tape from Ann's lips as gently as possible. Her wide eyes were talking to me, but I had laboriously untied the knots at her sides before she could shape one audible word. "Oh, Rocky, Rocky!"

I tried to help her to her feet, making a sad botch of the job. "They didn't—hurt you?" I mumbled.

"No. But Kerry—Kerry and dad . . . Oh, Rocky. . ."

I said, "I know, Ann."

"Rocky! You're—you're hurt!"

"A little," I agreed mildly. "Call a doctor, will you, Ann? And look, Ann, you'd better call the cops, too. Tell them everything you know, and—tell them there's a dick named Drago handcuffed to the bed in my apartment, and . . . tell them I'll swap all the publicity in this case for a clean bill of health with the law. Drago won't like the bargain, maybe, but the commissioner will."

"I'll tell them, Rocky," said Ann. "But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to pass out," I said.

I leaned forward into the cool, sweet dark, and lips that were soft and warm pressed against mine.

**THE END**





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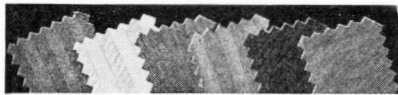
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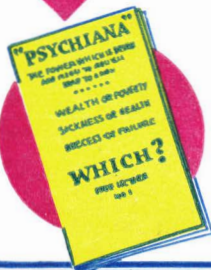
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