

10¢ DIME
MYSTERY
MARCH
MAGAZINE



NOVELETTES OF BIZARRE MYSTERY

**SHRINE OF THE
THUNDER GOD**

by DALE CLARK

AND

THE PHANTOM SWEATSHOP

by THORPE McCLUSKY

RAY CUMMINGS • LEON BYRNE • LORING DOWST

DIME
MYSTERY
MAGAZINE

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Volume Nineteen

March, 1939

Number Four

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

A LONG NOVEL OF BIZARRE MYSTERY

- The Devil's Roasting Pan**.....Loring Dowst 11
The symptoms were always the same. An incredibly sudden, fearful fever that boiled the brain and seared the soul. Then one last gasp of breath, like a blast from a furnace—and death! Even Pendexter Riddle, the extraordinary Human Question Mark, could do nothing to help those who were doomed to die—until he, himself, fell into the killer's hands.

FOUR NOVELETTES OF WEIRD MENACE

- The Case of the Tortured Corpses**.....Ray Cummings 32
George Roberts and his sister, Dot, had solved many amazing cases, but never had they fought such a ghastly murder plague as that which suddenly and inexplicably reduced its victims to a bloody mass of pulped flesh—though not a hand had touched them.
- The Phantom Sweatshop**.....Thorp McClusky 50
No one would ever have known what incredible horrors Kay Edwards discovered when she hired out to Arshalouis Sargis, the Zombie-Maker, if Lieutenant Red McNally hadn't pulled the most daring police coup of the year!
- The Invisible Killer**.....Emile C. Tepperman 68
Professor Cassius Parsons was a scientist as well as a detective, and he knew it was physically impossible for a man to strangle himself—yet with his own eyes he saw it happen; not once, but time after time!
- Shrine of the Thunder God**.....Dale Clark 92
Out of the clear, blue sky, came gruesome, flaming death—and Ghostly Jones, whose specialty was exposing fake mediums and charlatans, found that he was at the mercy of a 'spiritualist' enemy he could not see, but who came to destroy at will, and never left a trace!

A BLOOD-CHILLING SHORT STORY

- Marked for the Silent Death**.....Leon Byrne 85
Rich man or poor, all were alike to that eerie, mysterious killer who used the dumb beasts of the field and the air as his silent messengers of doom!

—AND—

- Case Unfinished**.....The Editors 4
Wanted—victims for a murder
- The River Styx**.....A Department 8

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Directions for testing this amazing mineral will be included—Just give make of car on coupon below.

SAVES OIL SAVES GAS

Nearly a million motorists have tested this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated. *Let us prove it to you at no risk.*

If worn rings and cylinders are wasting oil and gas, wonders can happen to your motor. Wonders of cutting oil and gas waste—(savings up to 50% reported)—of new power, pep and quiet without the expense of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul can be the secret of big savings to you.

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Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved in leading industrial laboratories—the mechanical engineering departments of a State University—and an outstanding School of Technology as well as nearly a million motorists.

INSTALLED IN 30 MINUTES!

Ovrhaul is quickly installed through spark plug openings—no special tools—no car tie-up. Works in while you drive and is as harmless to use as oil. Single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

READ! WHAT GARAGE OWNERS SAY!

SANDER'S GARAGE
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General Repair and Auto Supplies
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The results that we have had from the use of Ovrhaul are very satisfactory. It is extremely beneficial to an automobile motor and I have no hesitancy in saying that it is harmless to the operation of any working parts.

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I have put between seventy-five and one hundred tubes of Ovrhaul in old cars and I have not yet had a complaint.

I have been a mechanic for many years and Ovrhaul is the only product I have ever recommended to car owners for the purpose of decreasing oil and gas waste caused by worn cylinders and rings.

Every time I use Ovrhaul in a motor, the compression is greatly increased, the pep and power is helped, the motor is made quieter, and the gas and oil used is considerably reduced.

Yours very truly,
(Signed) J. L. (Jack) Reeves.

CLIP AND MAIL COUPON TODAY!

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SAMPLE FREE!

If your car is wasting oil and gas, before you spend up to \$150.00 for new rings and rebore—send your name and address on the coupon below for a free sample of this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated, and full details of a real money-making opportunity. Air mail reaches us overnight from the East.

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Without cost or obligation, rush me FREE SAMPLE. ALSO show me your big money-making plan.

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Address _____

City _____ State _____

Name and Year of Car _____

IF I FAILED...WE WERE ALL DEAD MEN



**LASHED TO SHROUDS
OF SINKING,
BURNING SCHOONER,
SAILORS SEE HOPE
OF RESCUE FADE**

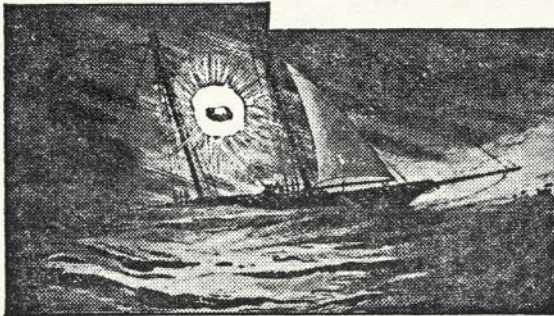
① "The dream of my life, for which I had saved since I first went to sea at twelve, had come true!" writes Capt. Hans Milton of 610 West 11th St., New York City. "I was making my first voyage as master and owner of my own vessel, the two-masted topsail schooner 'Pioneer,' when the hurricane of last September caught us 400 miles off Nantucket.



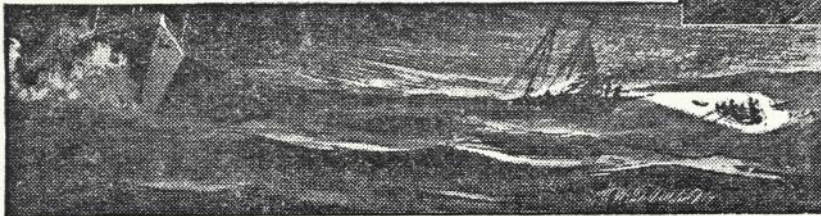
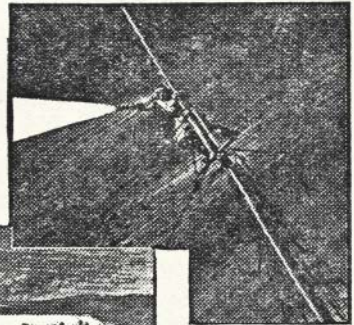
② "We were pumping to keep afloat when we passed into the windless vortex of the storm where the waves were leaping and jumping crazily and where they crashed in our companion ways and filled the ship beyond hope of saving her.

The five of us and the cat scrambled aloft for our lives. Our deck-load of lumber kept us afloat and without fresh water and with almost no food we lived, lashed to the rigging, for three endless days and nights.

③ "Once a steamer hove in sight—but failing to see our distress signals, went her way. At 3 a.m. on the fourth morning steamer lights showed momentarily over the wild sea. We rigged a huge ball of sails and blankets, soaked it with gasoline, touched it off and hoisted it aloft.



④ "But the steamer did not change her course. She thought we were fishing. The wind blew burning fragments back on the ship setting her afire in various places. I could see the stern light of the steamer going away from us. *If I couldn't stop her, we were all dead men!* I climbed to the fore-top and in desperation pulled my flashlight from my back pocket and in Morse code signalled 'Sinking... SOS... Help!'




⑤ "Slowly, I saw the ship turn! In her last hour afloat, all of us and the cat were saved from the sinking, burning 'Pioneer' by those fine seamen of the United States Liner 'American Banker' and by the power of two tiny 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries that stood by us in the blackest hour of our lives!

(Signed) *Captain Hans Milton*

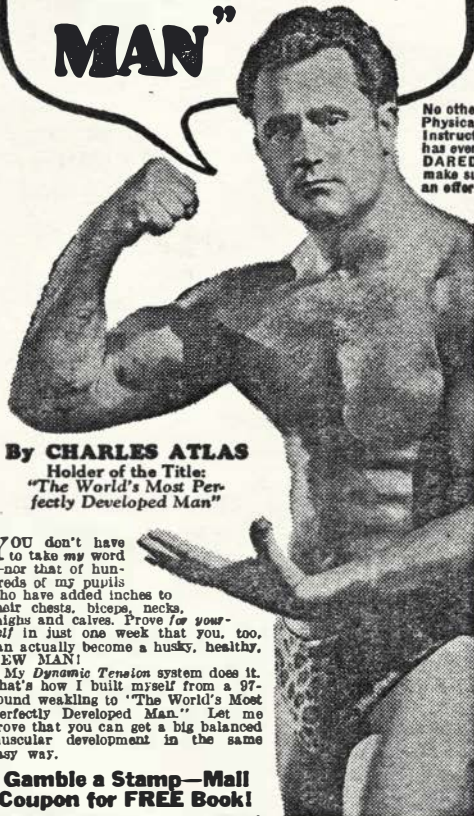
FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... Look for the DATE-LINE



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7 days I can make
YOU a NEW
MAN"*



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has ever
DARED
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"The World's Most Per-
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Write your name and address down on the
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me—give me a healthy, husky body, and big
muscle development. Send me your free book,
"Everlasting Health and Strength"
and full details of your 7-DAY trial offer.



**STERLING
SILVER CUP
BEING
GIVEN AWAY**

This valuable cup
stands about 14"
high on a black
mahogany base.
I will award it
to my pupil who
makes the most
improvement in
his development
within the next
three months.

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

Case Unfinished

ONE of the busiest branches of a
large metropolitan police depart-
ment is its Bureau of Missing Per-
sons. And for facing out-and-out mystery,
this arm of the law is on an even par with
the Homicide Division. As a matter of
fact, the solving of a fair percentage of
Missing Persons' cases eventually falls to
Homicide—for an obvious reason: So
many missing persons are finally located
and identified only after they have met
with violent death.

Of course, it is true that many of those
reported missing have not necessarily met
with foul play. Illness, alcoholism, contin-
ued unemployment . . . cause people to
wander far afield, to face starvation or ac-
cident. However, at present we are not
concerned with homeless, itinerant dere-
licts. We are concerned with disappear-
ances which seemingly are entirely with-
out reason; young people, of sound mind
and body, usually girls.

These are not prosperous times; unem-
ployment figures are gradually growing
smaller, but there still remain hundreds
of thousands of individuals who are des-
perately seeking work. It is only natural
that they should follow up any leads that
might eventually result in jobs. There-
fore, it seems all the more despicable that
there should be at large so-called human
beings who make a practice of preying
upon innocent youngsters trying to find
honest employment. Yet, it is true, and it
accounts for a certain number of those
among the missing.

A tragic example is the case of Mar-
garet Martin, pretty business college grad-
uate of Kingston, Pennsylvania. One
morning this past December, a man called
the office of a business school in Wilkes
Barre. He wanted the names of candi-
dates for a secretarial position, and among
the girls in high standing who were men-
tioned, was Margaret Martin. A little
while later she left the modest home of her
hard working parents, to meet her pros-

(Continued on page 6)

Boys! Girls! Bikes GIVEN for All!

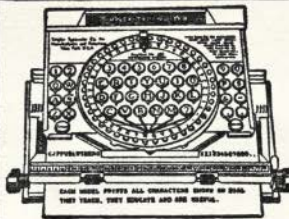


NOTHING TO BUY
NO RISK, NO CASH
SEND NO MONEY
SEND NAME
MAIL COUPON!

Everybody can get premiums or Cash. **BIKE** or other expensive Premiums **YOURS** for **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** big colored pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** for CHAPS, CUTS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remitting as explained in catalog sent with goods. **SPECIAL**—Or choose one of 20 Premiums for returning only \$3 collected. Constant users—please write. Millions pleased. Pictures pep sales. Salve sold most calls. **BE FIRST!** Mail coupon now! Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Dept. PP-91, Tyrone, Pa.

Ballon Tires

Headlight; Horn; Tool Box; Coast-brake. Yes, fully equipped. Chromium plated parts. What a Bike! A brand new sporty bike for ambitious boys and girls! **25¢**



Typewriter GIVEN

Or Big Cash Commission—Send No Money—Send Name and Address. Nothing to Buy!

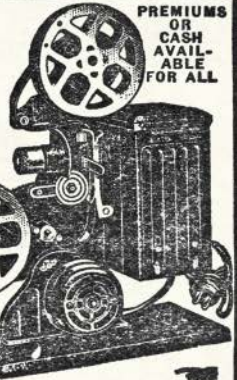
Every letter in the alphabet and the numerals from 1 to 10. Any child can write on it after two hours practice and older people will grasp the idea at once. Full directions, extra supply of best quality copying ink. Clever! Practical! Given for

simply giving away free beautifully colored art pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for chaps, burns, etc., which you easily sell to your friends and relatives at 25c a box (with picture free) and coupon now. **WILSON CHEMICAL CO., INC., DEPT. PP-91, TYRONE, PA.**

BOTH GIVEN

or Cash Commission, Nothing to Buy, No Risk—No Cash—Send No Money—Send Name—Mail Coupon—Boys! Girls!

ELECTRIC PROJECTOR—200 foot film capacity, all glass wrinkle finish and nickel trim, 110 volt motor, AC Current—Motor rewind. Tilting device. Adjustable lamp socket. Special bulb, built in condenser. Shows good size picture. It's a whiz. **LADIES! GIRLS!** Charming Wrist Watch



PREMIUMS OR CASH AVAILABLE FOR ALL



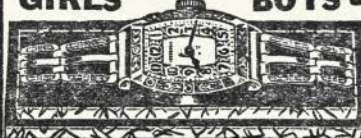
GIVEN

Beautiful **Wrist Watch** **YOURS** for **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** beautiful pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for CHAPS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remitting as explained in premium catalog. **SPECIAL**: Or choose one of 20 premiums for returning only \$3 collected. Salve sold most every home. Millions pleased. **BE FIRST!** Customers waiting. Write today for salve and pictures sent postage paid. **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. PP-91, TYRONE, PA.**

GIRLS

BOYS

BOTH GIVEN



Or Big Cash Commission—Nothing to Buy—No Risk—Send No Money—Send Name—Mail Coupon—**BOYS! 22 Cal.** Bolt. Action self-cocking Safety Iver Johnson **RIFLE**, 22 inches long. **LADIES! GIRLS!** Beautiful, sturdy, American made **WRIST WATCH** of neat size **YOURS** for **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** big colored pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for CHAPS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) remit as per premium catalog. **Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Dept. PP-91, Tyrone, Pa.**



GIVEN! Send No Money!

GUITAR GIVEN

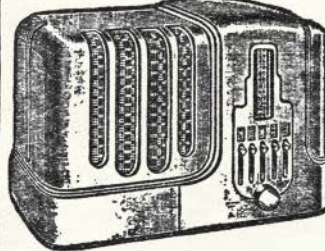
Or Big Cash Commission Send No Money Boys! Girls!

Standard size regulation guitar. Regulated—fretted bonzied finger-board—pearl position dots. A **MARVEL** Yours for **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** beautifully colored art pictures (correct size for framing) with our **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for burns, cuts, chaps, sores, etc., which you easily sell to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (giving picture Free) and remitting as explained in premium catalog. **SPECIAL**—Or choose one of 20 premiums for returning only \$3.00 collected. (44th yr.) **Be first. Send today—We trust you. Mail coupon.**

WILSON CHEM. CO., INC.
Dept. PP-91
TYRONE, PENNSYLVANIA



Full Size Nothing To Buy



GIVEN 5 Tube RADIO

OR BIG CASH COMMISSION SEND NO MONEY

NOTHING TO BUY! NO RISK—NO CASH

Automatic tuning—Super-heterodyne—AC-DC—Short Wave—Amateurs, police, and airplane calls. Standard broadcast band. 5 position tuner plus regular tuning knob. **Amazing! Yours for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** beautifully colored art pictures with our **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for burns, cuts, chaps, sores, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (giving picture FREE) and remitting as explained in premium catalog. **SPECIAL** Or choose one of 20 premiums for returning only \$3 collected. **BE FIRST! SEND TODAY—WE TRUST YOU. MAIL COUPON NOW!**—**WILSON CHEM. CO., INC. DEPT. PP-91, TYRONE, PENNA.**

MAIL COUPON NOW

WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. PP-91, Tyrone, Pa. Date.....

Gentlemen: Please send me 12 beautiful art pictures with 12 boxes **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** to sell at 25c a box (giving picture FREE). I will remit within 30 days, select a premium or keep cash commission as per new premium plan catalog sent with order, postage paid.

Name

RD..... Bx..... St.....

Town..... State.....

Print Your Last Name Only in Space Below.

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WRITE, or PASTE COUPON on a POSTAL CARD or MAIL COUPON in an envelope TODAY!

(Continued from page 4)

Realistic, flashed, finished diamond set in Genuine Solid Sterling Silver \$25/1000 "Becher" set in 1/30 14k. natural yellow gold.

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WATCH FREE
of extra charge!

CURVED SHOCK PROOF

Curved, "shockproof" GOLD PLATE FRONT watch with all the color and charm of natural yellow gold. Stainless back. Accurate. GUARANTEE by a famous \$1,000,000 FACTORY enclosed. Watch is yours FREE of extra charge with every ring ordered NOW and paid for promptly on our easy two monthly \$2 payment plan. (Total only \$4.) Remember . . . the cost of the watch is included in the price of the ring . . . You Pay Nothing Extra for the watch! No charge for Credit . . . We trust you! No red tape. We'll ship at once. TEN DAY FREE TRIAL. SEND NO MONEY WITH ORDER! Mail Coupon or Postcard NOW . . . your package comes (postage paid to your door) by RETURN MAIL.

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Rush offer. . . . Lady's Model Man's Model

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Big cash profits for you; full or spare time. Over 250 household necessities—things people must buy. Proven fast sellers; steady repeaters, earnings vary first day. FORD TUDOR SEDAN GIVEN YOU AS BONUS. Full show you how to start at once; send you everything—Big Display Outfit and quick cash plans. Details FREE—no obligation. Just send name on postcard.
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FOLLOW THIS MAN
Secret Service Operator No. 38 is on the job! Running down dangerous Counterfeit Gang. Tail-tale finger prints in murdered girl's room.

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The Confidential Report Operator No. 38 makes to his chief. Write for it.

Earn a Regular Monthly Salary
YOU can become a Finger Print Expert at home, in your spare time, at small cost. Write for confidential full report and details. Literature will be sent only to persons stating their age.

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Now, an electric welding, brazing and soldering Torch, complete with power unit, goggles and supplies. Works INSTANTLY off any light socket. Does a thousand and one repair jobs at amazingly LOW COST on aluminum, iron, steel and other metals. Indispensable for Auto, Body and Fender Repairs, and home repairs—shop, factory, farm, engineer, janitor, sheet metal, radio and bicycle repairs. Anyone can handle without previous experience with our simple instructions. **10-DAY HOME TRIAL**
Write at once for Special Introductory Low Price Offer. Try 3 in 1 Electric Torch for 10 days at our risk. Get one free by helping to introduce it. ELECTRO-TORCH CO., 2613-C Michigan Ave., Chicago

pective employer at an intersection not far away. He was not familiar with the neighborhood. Happy at the thought of her new job, she went away, gayly telling her mother she'd be home soon.

An hour went by. No word from Margaret. At first Mrs. Martin was not upset, presuming that her daughter's duties had perhaps already commenced. The day dragged by, and Mrs. Martin sent Margaret's sister, Helen, to the intersection. But there was no sign of Margaret. The police were notified and a nine-state alarm was sent out. Four days later, a young man came upon Margaret's body. He was following his muskrat trap line when he saw something protruding from a sack in a brook. It was a cold, stiff hand. The youth promptly called the authorities.

Examination revealed that the monster who had lured the Martin girl into his power had strangled her with bare hands. There were finger marks on her throat. The features had not been defaced, but there was a deep knife-slash across one thigh, another across the abdomen. Her body had been completely stripped, then stuffed into a burlap bag. The fact that the girl had not been criminally assaulted served only to further baffle the police. . .

Some years ago Evelyn Grimes, lovely sixteen-year-old girl of a middle western city, answered a newspaper advertisement in an effort to become companion to an aged lady. What could be more harmless than that? . . . Yet Evelyn's body was found some weeks later in an abandoned garage, nude, horribly tortured. . . In these two cases, and in many others of a similar nature, no guilty person was ever apprehended. What manner of criminal perpetuates these heinous atrocities? And to what purpose? The answer will likely forever remain unknown. What about the countless girls who have responded to innocent-seeming employment notices and have never been seen again—dead or alive? Is it possible that many of them met the same fate as the girls in Thorp McClusky's mystery novelette in this issue, *The Phantom Sweatshop*? Mr. McClusky was inspired by an all-too-frequent notation in the files of the Missing Persons Bureau: *Case Unfinished*. . .

—THE EDITOR.



"SELDOM SEE AN I. C. S. GRADUATE OUT OF A JOB"

"IN ALL THE YEARS I have known of the International Correspondence Schools, I have seldom seen one of your graduates jobless."

A business executive made this statement in a recent letter commenting on the I. C. S. graduates and students in his employ and expressing regrets that it was necessary to reduce his personnel.

"However," he added, "all I. C. S. graduates and students will be retained, for I

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The reason so many I. C. S. men have jobs is because they are *trained men!* A recent investigation into the working conditions of 1000 I. C. S. students revealed only ten unemployed. You, too, can be an I. C. S. man.

Mark the coupon and mail it today! It has been the most important act in the lives of thousands of men.

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★ Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X: ★

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THE RIVER STYX

ALL that Jim Big-Knife had to go on was the strange, incoherent tale of weird, steel-clad monsters against whose invincible might no ordinary man could prevail. But the young Indian detective had not inherited the keen instincts and courage of his Blackfoot ancestors for nothing. With uncanny skill he followed the trail of the dying ex-convict back to the desolate reaches of Thunder Mountain. It was there the girl warned him not to go on; that only death lay ahead of him. Later he was to regret that he had not heeded her.

The long, narrow concrete building that was the plant of the Electro-Conversion Corporation appeared abandoned in the early morning sunlight, but somehow, Jim Big-Knife was sure that inside its thick walls was the master of the death-dealing metal monsters. He knew that once he passed beyond the heavy steel door that barred the entrance, it would be too late to retreat—but Jim had never retreated in his life, and he did not intend to begin now. He pounded on the door until, at last, it swung silently open, and he was ushered into a dim entrance hall.

There was a girl at the telephone desk and she admitted him to the office of Dr. Theon Ragelman. There was the smell of death in the air, and Jim's nerves tensed as he gazed at the young man in the white surgeon's smock, seated behind the flat-topped desk. The walls of the office were lined with weapons of every imaginable kind. . . .

"Your message?" Ragelman stood up.

Jim fumbled in his overcoat pocket. "Here it is!" He jabbed the automatic in the doctor's ribs. "You can have it, the first wrong move you make!"

The man in the white smock raised his hands shoulder-high. "Are you—police?"

"Plainclothes," snapped Jim, truthfully enough.

Relief showed plainly on Ragelman's face. His lips worked as if in silent prayer, but Jim saw the doctor was trying

The River Styx

to get him to read his lips. The Indian pointed to a pad and pencil on the desk.

"Suppose you give me the lowdown, doctor. What goes on in this factory, anyway?" He motioned with the gun for Ragelman to sit down and write.

The doctor grabbed the pencil, scribbled as he replied.

"Professor Milupanni will not permit us to discuss our dealings with foreign powers," Ragelman answered. On the pad he wrote, *Help me get away from here!*

"Then the Professor had better do a little explaining, himself," said Jim. He watched the doctor's pencil write on: *He is a devil! He will kill us all! The plant is guarded! Our only chance—*

Jim never knew what the rest of it would have been. For a grotesque apparition had appeared in the wide doorway—the incredible monster Lila had told about!

The ghastly bulging eye was luminous even in daylight; the long, tenuous feelers quivered with each movement of that box-like head. The thing was coming at them, slowly, inexorably. It stamped clumsily, planting one square stump of a leg laboriously in front of the other.

The doctor crouched fearfully behind the desk, his face the color of wet ashes. He was mumbling incoherently.

Jim moved a step or two toward the appalling figure, so he would not be pinned in a corner. He fired calmly at the obscenely glaring eye—at the center of the metallic body. The harsh "ping-zing" of the ricochets told him he had wasted his lead. Mere bullets would not stop this clanking Frankenstein!

The Indian caught up a rifle from one of the wall-racks. The monster came on with even, measured pace. In its right hand it gripped a short, needle-pointed dagger; in its left, a glass sphere about the size of a baseball.

Jim crouched, waited until the fearsome thing was only a step away. He crashed

(Continued on page 111)

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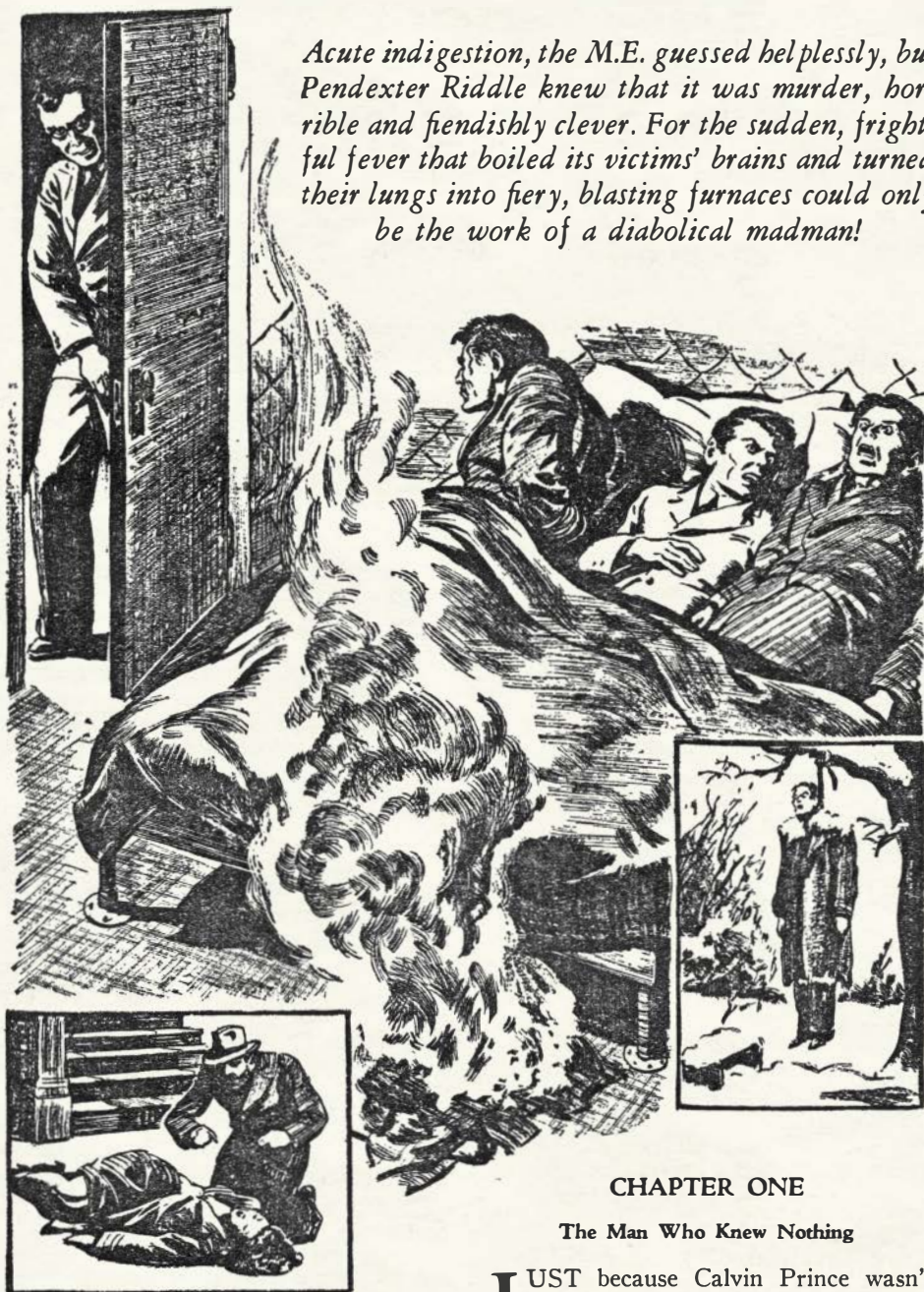
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THE DEVIL'S ROASTING PAN

A Novel by LORING DOWST

Acute indigestion, the M.E. guessed helplessly, but Pendexter Riddle knew that it was murder, horrible and fiendishly clever. For the sudden, frightful fever that boiled its victims' brains and turned their lungs into fiery, blasting furnaces could only be the work of a diabolical madman!



CHAPTER ONE

The Man Who Knew Nothing

JUST because Calvin Prince wasn't jumping up and down like a wild Indian, as the other three were, was no sign he wasn't enjoying himself. He

"You can lie here and think how close you came to catching us—and roast!"

was not blasé; he was merely glad that he was the cause of this merriment. He took a long pull from the drink he held in his hand, and continued to smile, albeit somewhat foggily, at the antics of Bud Talbot, George Newcomb and Phil Frary.

There were several empty bottles about, and they had knocked over Bud Talbot's easel, spilled paints around, generally wrecking the studio apartment Bud shared with his sister. It was just as well she wasn't at home. They were singing, "*The deal is in the bag, the deal is in the bag . . . heigh-oh the merry-oh, the bag is full of gold.*" Over and over. They got drunker and drunker, and Calvin Prince stood by smiling like the father of triplets.

Nobody heard the key in the latch. Bud Talbot happened to glance toward the door, and saw his sister, Gail, standing there with a darkly handsome man in evening dress. Bud said, grinning vapidly, "Hiya, Sis. 'Lo Nick. Have I'll drink?"

Gail's smile was obviously forced. "No thanks," she said. "Nick and I have had a couple tonight. I'd better turn in."

She kissed her escort hastily, said good night to all, and disappeared. Nicholas Gideon said, "Don't forget tomorrow night, darling," just before she left.

"Hey you big-game hunter," Calvin Prince said to Nick, "come here and have a drink before you get homesick for the wilds of Africa."

Nick laughed, and complied. He said, "As a matter of fact, the hunting is not bad in this town."

Bud Talbot heard the remark, momentarily focussed his bleary eyes on Gideon as though he took it as a slur on his sister. But George Newcomb grabbed the tall, willowy artist and said, "C'mon. Le's sing 'em our song." Which they did, with great gusto.

"What the devil's that for?" Gideon asked Prince.

"S'nothing," answered Prince lightly,

"They're jus' feeling silly. Tha's all."

At last Bud passed out and was put to bed on the divan. The others had shouted themselves hoarse and Prince herded them all out of the apartment.

Until then, Gail Talbot couldn't even try to sleep. The noise, alone, did not keep her awake. She was terribly worried about her brother. He might be one of the top-rank commercial artists in the country, but he couldn't expect to maintain his place, drinking like that. George Newcomb had better watch his step, too. The highest paid advertising copy-writer in town could be fired. . . . And Gail wondered how Phil Frary, crack salesman for a big advertising firm could keep his job. It was different with Calvin Prince. Heir to the vast Prince tobacco fortune, he could afford to do what he pleased, drunk or sober. . . . Gail was inclined to blame him for all the recent drinking. . . . She was glad that Nick could play around with these young men without losing his head. Nick was solid.

The song didn't make any sense to Gail. It was just silly. The words kept going through her head, as she dropped off to sleep: . . . *deal is in the bag. . . Heigh-oh the merry-oh, the bag is full of gold. . . .* Very silly. . . .

Very silly indeed; but no one knew that then. There was no gold in the bag. There was only grief, stark, maddening terror—and horrible death. . . .

Two days later Bud Talbot had an attack of *delirium tremens*. Calvin Prince brought him out of it; he seemed to know what he was about. He laughed in his easy, carefree manner. "Don't worry, Gail," he assured Bud's frightened sister, "I know a grand place where he can take the cure. I could do with it myself for a couple of weeks. . . ."

Gail stood in the apartment window, watching Calvin take her brother away in his car. Three days later, she had a letter from Bud, but she never saw him again.

THERE was no reason why anyone—except Pendexter Riddle—should suspect that Phil Frary, successful young salesman, had been murdered. An autopsy had been performed only because the city law demanded it, in cases of sudden or suspicious death. And although the papers hadn't hinted at murder in the slightest, they had certainly played up the suddenness.

Acute indigestion had been named the cause. Young Frary had been stricken in the lobby of his hotel, walking toward the elevator. A bellboy had reached him first. "I seen a man take an epileptic fit, one time," the boy had told reporters. "At first it was like that. He just stiffened all over, an' he couldn't say a word. I took him by the arm an' shook him, yelling, 'Mr. Frary! Mr. Frary! What's a matter?' But he didn't answer. His eyes rolled up, white—and I let go. It seemed like my hands was burning up from touching him! His face was red as fire an' the sweat begin to pour outa his hair an' cheeks an' run down his neck. His breath come out in one blast—hot, like when you open a furnace door. Then he fell down. . . ."

Pendexter Riddle had been thinking about it for some time. His mild blue eyes watched the frost-killed grass in the park beyond his window. Poor Phil; this cooling blanket would have been welcome in the moments of that life-consuming fever. Perhaps even now, in death, he was thankful for the snow. They were burying him today. The long, lean detective reached across his battered desk and called Inspector Gilroy, at headquarters.

Presently he said, "Gilroy? This is Riddle."

The voice on the other end was hardly patient: "Well, what do you want now?"

Riddle's ageless face crinkled with humor. Gilroy always had a chip on his shoulder. Not even solutions to the police

department's toughest cases, tossed into Gilroy's lap by Riddle, gratis, could make him admit that a private detective was anything but a cancerous blot on the map.

"I've been wondering about Frary," Riddle said. He waited a moment, hoping Gilroy would give him some information voluntarily. Nothing happened. "I've been wondering if the M. E. found anything to supplement what was given to the press: acute indigestion."

"What if he did?" grumbled the inspector.

"Come off your high horse, Inspector," Riddle said. "Frary happened to be the son of an old friend of mine. I'm interested, that's all."

GILROY thawed a little. "Well I'll tell ya, shamus," he said, "it was sort of queer. The M. E. said—and keep your mouth shut—that the deterioration of the brain indicated that Frary had undergone a terrific fever just before he went out. Maybe a hundred and eight, or ten. If you live after a fever like that, it'll make ya whacky. But nobody knows what could have caused it. The laboratory has about decided the fever was induced by a freak chemical reaction of foodstuffs."

"Very freakish indeed," Riddle agreed skeptically.

"Yeah, but not impossible," Gilroy went on. "Say—did this Frary drink much?"

The question surprised Riddle. "Not to my knowledge, though it's been a long time since I've seen him. In fact, I had an idea he was almost a teetotaler."

"There was signs of alcoholism, too," Gilroy said. "He probably stuffed himself with a lot of fancy grub, got drunk, and then this reaction took place. We tried to check on where he ate last, but nobody seemed to know. We'll probably drop it."

"I'm much obliged, Inspector," Riddle said, and hung up.

Maybe so. . . . Riddle didn't have anything to go on. But it was a dirty shame that a kid like Phil Frary had to go like that. A kid who had just been voted the most outstanding salesman in the East. . . . Riddle sighed deeply, got up to put another log on the fire. The scream interrupted him.

THE buzzer sounded twice, rapidly. Two persons had broken the photoelectric ray in the hall below. The scream did not come again, but as Riddle opened the door and stepped to the stair-well, a man's voice cried, "I've got to have help—a doctor! Some one call a doctor!"

In an instant Riddle was in the lower hall. There was a bearded man bent over a girl prostrate on the floor. Her hat had fallen off and her long, blonde hair had tumbled about her face, giving Riddle the impression of seeing two white, staring eyes in a gold frame. The man was trying to unfasten the girl's coat at the neck, but his fumbling fingers couldn't find the clasp.

Riddle said, "Let me try." He found the hook-and-eye at the throat, unsnapped it, undid the next few buttons. And he felt the terrific heat. He ripped the dress open and it seemed as though the backs of his fingers had touched hot metal. At that minute the girl's throat rattled and she exhaled a long, full breath. Riddle felt a withering blast of air. He said half aloud, "I suppose *that's* acute indigestion."

The man was jittery. He muttered, "Is she—is she—"

"She's dead," Riddle said simply. He stood up. The stranger appeared ready to faint, though he did not look like a frail man. Riddle grabbed him, shook him furiously. "Look here, mister, snap out of it!" The command was effective, for the man took his hat off, mopped his brow.

"I'm all right," he said.

"I didn't mean to be brutal," Riddle's voice was softer. "I thought you were going to keel over, and that wouldn't have helped. Is she—related to you?"

"No," the man said. "I don't think I ever saw her before."

"Didn't you come here together?"

"No. I was just passing by. She was stricken right outside the door, on the sidewalk. I thought I could get help in here, so I dragged her into your hall."

"I see," said Riddle. "If you could spare a few minutes, you could help me. The police will have to be notified, and when they come, you could explain how it was. It might be embarrassing for me without at least one witness."

The man seemed to hesitate. He consulted his watch. "Well, I—"

"Ten minutes at the outside," Riddle promised. "You've no idea how quickly Gilroy shows up when there's a corpse at my house." Riddle smiled, but the stranger didn't.

"See the light in that room at the head of the stairs?" Riddle asked. "There's a telephone on the desk. Get headquarters and tell Inspector Gilroy that Pendexter Riddle has another corpse for him—at his home."

The fellow went upstairs, and once more Riddle stooped beside the girl. There was no fever, now. He ran his hand down the back of her dress, felt her shoulders; they were wet. He opened her coat more, touched her dress at the hips and at the small of her back; drenched. The fever had literally boiled the perspiration from her body. He picked up her silly little hat. To Riddle, it looked like a small, black pie plate, with two absurd, curly green feathers stuck in it. There was something wistful about it, now. . . . He bent to lift her, and saw her left fist, clenched.

Reluctantly, the fist gave up its treasure: a balled-up bit of newspaper. Riddle unrolled it, saw the heading and stuck

it in his pocket. It was one of the notices he himself inserted in the *Clarion* each week. He knew it by heart:

HUMAN SALVAGE SERVICE
is devoted to the task of quelling the fear that rides you like a nightmare! Have you such a buggaboo? If so, let me relieve your shoulders of their burden, with decorum and despatch!

The Human Question Mark
231 McDermott—Rooms 2 & 3

Riddle decided against taking the body upstairs. He searched her handbag for identification, found nothing immediately informative. The police could use her garments to identify her through routine procedure. He shot the bolt on the outer door and went up to his office.

The stranger, standing near Riddle's desk, made a sudden, furtive movement. Light reflected on bright metal in his hand, then vanished as the hand went into the man's overcoat pocket. Riddle discarded the impulse to draw his Luger. If it was a gun he had seen, it wasn't threatening him now.

Riddle acted as though nothing had alarmed him. He walked casually to his desk, but as he passed close to the stranger, his hand snaked into the man's pocket, came out with a very expensive Smith & Wesson .38 revolver. Riddle frowned, looked up at the man, who took two steps backward; his face and eyes were filled with fear.

"What the devil were you about to do with this thing?" the Human Question Mark asked.

"I—I—don't know," the man answered.

"Were you going to plant it in my desk?"

The man appeared to be dazed. "I—you see—I guess so. I didn't know *what* to do with it."

"Well, why plant it anywhere? What have you done with it—shot some one?" Riddle broke the gun. Five soft-nosed

cartridges spilled out into his hand—and one empty shell. Riddle held them so that his "guest" could see.

"That's just it," the man said. "I don't know."

"You don't *know!*"

"No."

"Who the devil are you, anyway?"

The man hesitated, a baffled expression on his face. Then, like a kid who has lost his mother in a crowded department store, he said:

"I don't know."

CHAPTER TWO

One Corpse Missing

THE HUMAN QUESTION MARK telescoped into his chair. "You are certainly an illuminating young man," he said. "Sit down and we'll see if we can figure out a few things."

The man sat down.

Riddle asked, "How long have you been in your, shall we say, present state of existence?"

"I woke up this morning riding on the subway. I have no recollection of getting on the thing. I hadn't the faintest idea of where I was going—"

"I suppose you've searched your pockets for wallet, papers, or anything with a name on it?"

"Oh, yes. And I found nothing—except the gun. Not even a tailor's label."

"Have you any wounds on you? Any bumps on your head?"

The amnesia victim removed his hat, ran his fingers through his coal black hair. "Right here is a place," he said, "which is a little tender. It isn't very swollen, and it hardly seems as through a blow here could have knocked me out."

Riddle examined the spot. The scalp was bruised slightly; a very small scab had formed. The man's reddish beard might have been three days old. It was

thicker across the upper lip. His clothes were of good material.

Riddle regarded the man closely. "Downstairs, when I asked you to stay here a few minutes, you consulted your watch as though you had an appointment. Where were you going then?"

"I was just—faking. You asked me to call the police; they would question me. I knew that when I told them I couldn't identify myself they would search me. They would find the gun with one bullet fired, and if I have shot some one, they must have found the victim by now. They'd lock me up before I have a chance to recover my memory and defend myself."

"That sounds logical," Riddle said. "But you called them, did you not?"

The man shifted uneasily in his chair. "No. I was afraid to."

"I should have thought of that," Riddle said. "No wonder Gilroy isn't here yet." He put his hand on the telephone.

"Please—please, Mr.—"

"Riddle."

"That's a funny one," said the stranger. "I ought to be Mr. Riddle." He laughed nervously. "Is it absolutely necessary for the police to get at me quite yet?"

Riddle pondered. At length he said, "I guess I can convince Gilroy I didn't kill that girl. What do you suggest I do with you?"

"Couldn't I go to a good private sanatorium for a few days and let a couple of specialists work on me?"

"Yes, I suppose you could," Riddle said. Something about this was rotten. He couldn't tell exactly why, but he felt that the man was bluffing. He picked up the revolver, examined it idly. There was a silver plate on the butt. Riddle did not change his expression as he read the inscription: *First Prize, Men's Revolver Shoot, Carolina Gun Club. Presented to Calvin Prince. 1937.*

The man was talking, and Riddle looked up at him. He was not Calvin Prince; Riddle had seen scores of pictures of the young tobacco millionaire.

"I looked up several sanatoriums this morning. Heard of any of these?" He named three, adding, "Kelly's Health Farm was recommended to me."

"Yes," Riddle said. "I know of all of them. Kelly's is as good as any." He did not say that he knew Gunboat Kelly, could even depend on him to keep a special watch over a patient. "I've got to call Gilroy now, but I'll hide you in my bedroom until the cops have cleared out. Then I'll drive you up to Kelly's."

The amnesia victim seemed greatly relieved.

RIDDLE got up, stirred the fire and put another log on it. He kept on thinking of Frary's strange death—and the girl's. If this man were lying and had anything to do with the picture which was struggling for clarity in Riddle's mind, turning him over to the police might be the best way to botch it. On the other hand, maybe he wasn't lying after all. It was quite possible the man had been deliberately injured, the gun planted on him after some one else—perhaps even Prince, in a drunken moment—had committed murder. Did some corpse lie at this instant in an obscure alley, holding a .38 slug? Some man or woman who had learned something about a killer who could inflict the ghastly death young Frary and the girl experienced? There was a corpse in the woodpile—somewhere!

Prince had to be located, Riddle decided, dead or alive. And this man's memory might help. Riddle had known of amnesia patients being *shocked* into normality—taken off guard. . . .

The Human Question Mark produced a bottle of wine, two glasses and cigars. When the man was sitting comfortably,

relaxed, enjoying his wine and smoke, Riddle dialed headquarters and asked the desk sergeant to inform Gilroy that he had a dead girl in his front hall. He hung up instantly.

He considered several questions he could hurl at his "guest," and chose one calculated to register a response whether the man had really lost his memory or not. He walked about the room with no apparent purpose, then whirled and stuck a long bony finger into the man's face, fairly screaming:

"Why did you murder Calvin Prince?"

The man recoiled, leaped to his feet. "I didn't know he was dead!" he said excitedly.

Riddle got ready to pounce. This time it had worked. His Luger seemed to have sprouted from the palm of his hand. "Fine!" he said. "Neither did I. When did you shoot him?"

"Who?"

"Calvin Prince!"

"Who the hell is he?" The man began to laugh, long and loud. And the more he laughed, the more irritated Riddle became.

Finally Riddle threw his Luger onto the old desk, adding another scar. "For God's sake cut it out, will you? You'll have me nuts, too, in a minute."

The man quieted down. He said, "Look here, Riddle-me-this. I have a thousand dollars in my pocket. I don't know where it came from, or whose it is, but if you can trap me into revealing my identity, I'll give it to you. It would be worth it."

BEFORE Riddle could answer, there came a loud thumping from below. He whisked both firearms into his pockets, signaled the stranger to silence, and shoved him into the next room. He closed the door and hastened down to admit Gilroy, the M.E., and a few other homicide men.

Inspector Gilroy came in stamping the snow from his feet. "A guy can't even finish his lunch, with you in town."

"If you had seen her die," said Riddle, "you wouldn't have any appetite for lunch."

The little hallway was crowded with so many people. Snow floated in through the door. There was not room enough to close it. The M.E. was bending over the girl. "She's pretty cold," he observed.

Gilroy whirled on Riddle. "How long you been holdin' out, shamus?"

"Don't be tiresome, Gilroy," said Riddle. "I heard her scream, came down and tried to help her. I yanked her coat and dress open to help her breathe, but it was too late. I felt a hot blast, as the bellboy said he noticed when Frary died. I attempted resuscitation for a few minutes. Then I called you. You forget, it's still snowing out there and this vestibule isn't heated."

"Awright," the inspector muttered. "What do ya think, Doc?"

"Have to do another P.M. I guess. So far, it looks the same as Frary."

"Inspector Gilroy," said Riddle quietly, "has anyone been shot in the last forty-eight hours—anybody by the name of Prince?"

"There's somebody shot in this town every seven hours, shamus. But I can't dig up nobody named Prince, even to please you. What you drivin' at?"

A photographer snapped a picture. "It was just an idea I had," said Riddle. "Nothing to do with this case."

"Maybe," said Gilroy. "Who is this kid? Did she come to see you?"

Riddle said, "Apparently she staggered into the vestibule after her 'acute indigestion' seizure had started. She didn't say one coherent word. She's entirely unknown to me." Riddle's emphasis of "acute indigestion" was noticeable. The M.E. scowled, but didn't comment.

Then he said to no one in particular, "I'm inclined to think Mr. Riddle is critical of the department—and that he would rather watch us squirm than help us."

"If the great Human Question Mark knows anything," Gilroy offered stoically, "he won't tell it until he's damned good and ready. I've tried to make him talk for years—and failed. Let's get out of here, Doc."

"I don't know anything that would help right now," Riddle said. "But if you'll identify this girl through the stores which sold those clothes, and let me know the state of her stomach right away, I'll let you in on my theory."

The vehicle from the morgue arrived, and they carried the girl out. Riddle noticed that the snowflakes which settled so gently on her quiet face did not melt. The finality of it made his heart ache, familiar though he was with the sight of death.

Gilroy was the last man to leave. "So long, Sphinx," he said.

Riddle said, "So long. Keep your eagle-eye peeled for a corpse named Prince."

The inspector hesitated, gave Riddle a queer, harrowed look and stepped out into the snow.

TWO HOURS later, nearing three o'clock, Riddle drove through the gate of what had once been a great private mansion. Now it was Gunboat Kelly's Health Farm, an institution devoted to reclaiming the bodies of corpulent and over-indulgent males—with incomes. The ex-prize fighter had earned a splendid reputation along these lines, and his list of clients read like the social register. He had a colorful staff of rubbers and trainers long familiar with the smell of liniment and robust athletic sweat.

He also employed a blue-blooded medical doctor experienced in psychiatry, for one wing of the huge establishment served

as quarters for alcoholic cases bordering on the serious stage. Gunboat was also noted for his discretion.

Riddle presented the man who had forgotten his name, and explained the situation.

"Sure," said Gunboat, "I git you, Mr. Riddle. I'll have Doc Finley look him over an' maybe call in some specialist. We had a couple of them cases before." He turned to the amnesia victim. "Beggin' your pardon, mister, but seein' as you can't very well give no references, could I have it in advance?"

The man laughed. "Of course," he said. "How much?"

"A hundred bucks by the week. That might be long enough. And what name do I put down?" Gunboat wasn't impressed by the roll the man produced.

The man glanced questioningly at Riddle, as he peeled off one large bill. Riddle said, "John Doe will be good enough."

Gunboat pressed a button and presently a sawed-off little powerhouse came into the office between two cauliflower ears. Gunboat said, "This is Happy Al—Mr. Riddle an' Mr. Doe." Happy showed his toothless gums. "Happy walks on his heels, gents, but he's a good lad . . . Happy, take Mr. Doe to the Napoleon Room—no offense, Mr. Doe. I'll send Doc Finley up soon as he comes in."

After Happy had departed with his charge, Riddle said, "This may be a gag, Gunboat. Keep an eye on this bird. Can you check his phone calls?"

"You bet. You want me to obsoive him?"

"Exactly. Under no circumstances let him out without word from me. And this is confidential, Gunboat."

"That's easy," said Gunboat. "They's bars in the Napoleon Room, an' we got straight jackets, if we need 'em. Don't worry about the confidential part. If some of my clients was known, certain people would t'row a fit. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

A Matter of Death

THE YOUNG man had been hanging onto the bar in the Hotel St. Clair cocktail lounge for three hours. The barkeep was fed up, but he couldn't do much about it except weaken the drinks more; he was paid to listen to the hard luck stories of drunks, especially when they were good customers like Mr. Newcomb.

Mr. Newcomb's words had become very thick. "I'm tellin' ya," he mouthed, "I'm gonna fin' my fren' Bud 'f I have to tear the country apart."

"Of course you are," said the barkeep.

An idea seemed to come to the inebriate. He raised his voice. "By God I bet I know where he is! I'm gonna get 'im!" He started for the door.

The barkeep put his finger to his lips. "Take it easy, please Mr. Newcomb. The manager—" He didn't say any more. Mr. Newcomb had sagged to the floor. People turned to stare, some with outraged expressions, others amused. A man who had been drinking not far from George Newcomb quickly helped him to his feet, then balanced him on a stool.

"A cup of strong black coffee would help this man," the fellow said, and the barkeep promptly brought it.

Young Newcomb felt better after drinking half the coffee. He said to the stranger, "Guess I'm all right now. Thanks." The man said to forget it, and departed. Presently Newcomb finished his coffee, climbed off the stool. He was still wobbly, and he was ashamed.

He told the barkeep, "Brother, I'll probably get fired for this, but I'm going home to sleep. Hope my getting so tight doesn't get you in trouble."

"Anybody's apt to get a little too much," said the barkeep. "No harm done. Come back and see us."

The young man turned to leave. He took about three steps and stopped stock-

still. He gasped, "My God!" His hands clutched at his stomach, tearing at his vest buttons. He raised up on his toes and every muscle in his body seemed to tense to the breaking point. His face became wet with perspiration, and scarlet. His eyes were bulging hideously.

People in the lounge gaped at him, helpless to move. The bartender leaped over the bar, seized the young man and tore at his collar and tie. Suddenly he jerked his hands away.

"God Almighty!" he screamed. "He's hot as fire—I can't put my hands on him. He's burning up!" The youth stiffened spasmodically, his eyes rolled white. And he collapsed on the polished floor, soaking wet.

A man in the crowd pushed his way forward, saying, "I'm a doctor." He dropped to his knees beside George Newcomb, highest paid advertising copy writer in town. But there was nothing he could do. . . .

BACK in his office, Riddle ran through voluminous files until he had learned a few things about Calvin Prince. Two years ago the youth had inherited a majority stock interest in the great Prince Tobacco Company, makers of All-State Cigarettes, biggest selling brand in the world.

Calvin let the directors run the company, while he played around. Had he wished to interfere, however, his stock gave him nearly unlimited power. America's most eligible bachelor, he entertained lavishly, spent money like water, and was known to be extremely loyal to his friends. He maintained an elaborate New York apartment, frequently visiting his mother at her North Carolina estate.

Riddle telephoned the local apartment, received no answer. He then called Mrs. Prince's home, and was told by a Negro with a cornfield accent that, "Mister Calvin he in Europe, an' he ain't comin' home

till de dogwood done blossom—yas-suh.”

The Human Question Mark was unsatisfied. Young Prince's gun, minus one shot, in the possession of an amnesia victim—who might not be suffering from amnesia—compelled Riddle to rate the young millionaire as a key man in a situation which Riddle felt was only the beginning of a killer's sleigh ride. *Slay ride's* more like it, he thought bitterly.

Riddle's conscience hurt him when he called Gilroy. He sought information from the grumpy inspector; yet he was unwilling to exchange what he knew. It would be soon enough for him to toss Prince's name into the picture, when Gilroy turned up the scion's dead body—

From Gilroy he learned that the blonde girl who had died in his hallway was as yet unidentified. Her stomach content compared with Frary's, though there were not the same traces of alcoholism. “And,” said the inspector, “the M. E. thinks she had drunk a cup of coffee not long before the fever-inducing combustion took place in her. Maybe four or five min—say, I got to ring off. There's an emergency call for me.” And he was gone.

Riddle said aloud: “I'd bet my bottom dollar some one else has been steamed to death by that ungodly fever!” He thought of the girl he had seen die—and he thought of bearded John Doe—and he remembered he had deliberately obtained the man's fingerprints on a wine glass. He went into his bedroom and picked up the glass, in a handkerchief, took it back to his desk and set it down. He swung his desk lamp around, peered closely at the little crystal.

It had been wiped absolutely clean!

Outside, dusk was falling swifter than the snow. Lights were twinkling on the park's new mantle. Riddle suddenly realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He built up the fire, donned overcoat and hat, and went around the corner to the beanery.

The smell of coffee reminded him of what Gilroy had said. He asked the man behind the counter if there had been a pretty girl in the lunchroom shortly before noon—a blonde girl in a tiny black hat with two curly green feathers on it. The counter man smiled. He remembered her, all right; and she had had a cup of coffee. Riddle's eyes narrowed.

“Did she leave her place at the counter at all?”

“Yeah. She went back there,” the counter man answered. He indicated the rest rooms at the rear of the place.

“Was there a man here with a two- or three-day reddish beard? At the same time?”

“There's usually some bum around here with a beard, Mr. Riddle. The dame was so cute, I wasn't paying no attention to beards.”

“All right, Mac,” Riddle said. He watched a man down the counter drinking fresh-drawn coffee. “Let's have a steak—and a cup of coffee.” Nothing seemed to be happening to that other fellow.

On the way home he bought a paper. It told about the strange death of a young man named George Newcomb, in the cocktail lounge of the St. Clair Hotel. . .

GEORGE NEWCOMB had been single, a resident of the Belfonte Arms, a crack copy writer for the advertising house of J. Farrington Gerard. That's about all the newspaper offered—except a description of the man's death that left no doubt in Riddle's mind as to its similarity to two others. And the fact that Newcomb was an alcoholic. Riddle was about to peruse his files in search of the firm of J. Farrington Gerard, but the sound of his buzzer interrupted him.

He strode to the door, opened it, and stood pressed against the wall beside it. There were steps in the entryway. “Come right up,” he called. Steps sounded on the stair, light, clicking footfalls. A girl

entered the room, passing close to Riddle.

"May I—" he started, but the girl's frightened shout cut him off.

"You—you scared me," she said. "I didn't think you'd be hiding like that."

Snowflakes were turning to water on her long lashes. Her cheeks were very pink, either from the cold or from fear. Riddle's smile did not make her stop staring. She didn't look down at his outstretched hand. She merely put her bag in it, numbly.

"Thank you," the Human Question Mark said. "Let me shake the snow from your coat. Sit by the fire."

The girl seemed dumbfounded. "I had heard you were smart," she said, "but you positively embarrass me. How did you know?"

"About the gun in your bag? It's a trick to disarm you—I mean—to break down your barriers. So you'll have confidence in me. I wasn't really afraid of the gun." There was no point in telling her that the photo-electric eye in the lower hall possessed the peculiar faculty of changing the buzzer tone when the metal of firearms passed its beam. . . .

"Well then," she said. "I guess it worked." She smiled wanly, and sat on the old leather divan near the fireplace. She removed her little fur hat and the

moisture hissed as she shook it into the fire. Her brown hair picked up lights from the flames.

"I'm afraid I've got one of those things you mentioned in your advertisement. One of those awful—buggaboos."

"That why you tote a gun?"

"Yes, though it's probably silly. I called up Nick and told him I'd read the papers and wasn't it awful, and he said to get Bud's gun—"

"Whoa there!" gasped Riddle. "Your barriers are fine, but this is a stampede. Let's take things in order. . . . What's the main reason you came here?"

"My brother has been missing a month."

"I see," said Riddle. "What's his name?"

"Talbot—Buddington Talbot. Everybody called him Bud. I'm Gail Talbot. He went away with a friend to take a cure for drinking."

Riddle pulled thoughtfully on his cigarette. "I see," he said again. "That's why you haven't been to the police?"

Gail Talbot said, "That's right. Only now I'm beginning to wonder if I should have gone to them. They've admitted that Phil Frary and George Newcomb were murd—"

Riddle tensed in his chair. "You knew

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them?" For the first time it seemed as though a shaft of light was about to penetrate the shadows in Riddle's head.

"They were Bud's best friends."

Riddle's mind was whirling. Frary an alcoholic; Newcomb an alcoholic; and now Bud Talbot had gone to take a cure for drinking. There was a tie-up somewhere—a vital one. He felt that time was whirling past, that there wouldn't be time enough left in the world for him to ask all the questions that came to him. He said, "I want to know four important things, Gail. These questions may be the key to everything."

"I'll do my best," she said.

"When you first started talking, you mentioned Nick. Who's Nick? Next, who was the friend Bud went away with—to take the cure? Can you identify the blonde girl who died as Frary and Newcomb did—and what did your brother have in common with Frary and Newcomb that might mark him for the same brand of murder?"

GAIL TALBOT took a deep breath. "Here goes," she said. "Nick is Nicholas Gideon. I call him the Gay Caballero, because he's a sort of an adventurer. He's done big game hunting in Africa, been a war correspondent in Ethiopia, and stuff like that. I guess I'm going to marry him—if he gets the radio broadcasting job he's trying for. He's got blond, curly hair, and a wiry red mustache," She blushed. "He's two inches shorter than you. That covers Nick—and he'll get the job. He gets what he wants."

Riddle toyed with a mental puzzle that didn't fit. "Go on."

"The friend who took Bud away was Calvin Prince. He—"

"Good Lord!" Riddle exclaimed. Then he said, "Don't mind me. I didn't expect him to appear again so soon. Have you seen him since he took Bud away?"

"No. Not once. I feel like blaming him,

though. He had so much money he could do what he pleased, and he pleased to hand out a lot of liquor and parties to Phil and George and Bud. . . . You asked about the blonde who was—m-murdered. I have no idea who she was—not the faintest. . . . As for a reason why some one should want to kill all three of those grand boys, I simply don't know, although—wait!"

Riddle waited.

But what she said was disappointing, bitterly disheartening: "I guess I can't help as much as I thought I could for a moment. All I know is that the three boys had some plan, some scheme that to them represented success. They wouldn't let me in on it, or Nick, either. But Calvin Prince had something to do with it."

"What was Bud's job?"

"Bud is one of the smartest commercial artists in the business. All his work was for one concern—J. Farrington Gerard, the company which has the All-State cigarette account. He painted those beautiful girls in their advertisements. But he couldn't get his work in on time and they dropped him. Nick was upset about that, because he wanted Bud to use his influence with Calvin, to make Gerard give Nick an hour a week broadcasting on the All-State radio program. Nick didn't want to presume upon his slight acquaintance with Calvin Prince, who really owns the All-State Tobacco Company. But he had been contacting Mr. Gerard direct. Oh, Gosh!" She looked at her watch. "Nick is having dinner with Mr. Gerard at the Waldorf tonight. I was supposed to meet him at eight-thirty—"

"You'd better telephone him at once, to tell him you'll be late," interrupted Riddle. He was thinking of John Doe, with his reddish beard and he had an idea Nicholas Gideon could not be reached at the Waldorf.

Gail called the Waldorf, asked to have

Mr. Gideon paged. Presently Riddle was surprised to hear her say, "Hi, darling. I'm glad I caught you. Are you through? What . . . you got the job? Swell! . . . Sure I'm safe, and I haven't needed that foolish gun. You'd never guess who I'm with now—"

The devil, thought Riddle, *nothing doing there*. He picked up Gail's purse, took from it a .25 automatic. "I'll keep this," he said.

"You can have it," she said. She smiled warmly. "I feel a lot better, somehow. I'm going to have a good time tonight and not worry—because you're such a swell guy."

"Thank you, Gail," Riddle said. There was a pleasant feeling in his breast. "Oh—by the way. Haven't you had even one word from Bud?"

She puckered her brows. "Yes," she said. "I had one letter. It said something like: 'This is a pretty good place, only Cal and I can't see each other. I think they've got me in the violent department, but I'm really not that bad. We're not supposed to write letters or receive any. Old Slap-happy, though, is going to give this to Blondie to mail.' That was about all. Later I thought of looking at the postmark, but I must have lost the letter."

"Ah, yes," said Riddle, musingly. "That may be the most important thing you've told me. . . . Well, Gail, have a good time." She went out, and though the fire was still burning brightly, the room seemed to have lost much of its warmth. . . .

RIDDLE walked up and down, his long fingers plowing furrows in his thick, iron-grey hair. "You old fool," he said to himself, "if you had bat-brains you could get it. The answer is staring you in the face. All you need is—" Then he had it: "*Old Slap-happy . . . give it to Blondie to mail. . .*" Could that be Happy Al, Kelly's punch-drunk attendant? The dead blonde girl in his hallway, clutching

Riddle's advertisement . . . could she have had any connection with the Health Farm? Another fragment of Bud's letter came to the Human Question Mark: *only Cal and I can't see each other. . . .* Then Calvin Prince was there, too. Riddle remembered Gunboat's boast: *If some of my clients was known. . . .* A sudden pang of fear seized Riddle's heart. He grabbed the telephone.

"This is Pendexter Riddle. I want to speak to Gunboat."

"He's out just now. He won't be here till twelve o'clock or so—"

"Tell me this," said Riddle urgently. "This afternoon I brought a man up there named John Doe. Is he still in the Napoleon Room?"

"Yes, sir. I just seen Doc Finley come outa his room."

Riddle was greatly relieved, but he went on: "How about Mr. Talbot and Mr. Prince?"

There was a moment's silence. Then, "Who?"

Riddle repeated the question. The man said, "I don't—we ain't supposed. . . . You better ask Mr. Kelly. I don't know nothing about them."

"I'll call back." The Human Question Mark cradled the telephone. John Doe was "safe"—that was the main thing. Gail Talbot must be safe, also. But there was still a corpse in the woodpile. Whose?

By eleven o'clock Riddle was so restless he couldn't stay in any longer. Something kept urging him to action—but he didn't quite know where to begin. His reasoning had become stalemated. It was still snowing when he walked around the corner to the lunchroom.

A newsboy came in with an edition of next morning's paper, and Riddle bought one, glanced through it. . . . Gilroy was promising an early arrest in what the press called the "induced fever murders." Poppycock. Riddle was certain he was closer than the department, even though

he was still stumped. . . . His eye ran down a popular column, stopped when it reached:

A young and little-known big game hunter found good hunting right here in town when he tossed a five-million-dollar account into the lap of a very worried advertising magnate. . . . We would like that commission better than stuffed tigers. . . . Somebody was smoked out. . . .

Riddle read it again . . . five million dollar account . . . smoked out. That would be a cigarette account—Calvin Prince's gigantic company. Riddle's brain began to click. . . . Bud Talbot had drawn those beautiful posters for All-State Cigarettes—and he had worked for J. Farrington Gerard. George Newcomb was an ace copy writer, working for the same firm—Gerard. Nicholas Gideon had dined with Gerard just tonight. If he arranged the contract, did Calvin Prince help him? And in the name of the Almighty, where did murder come in? . . . Somebody was *smoked out!* Riddle thought: *burned out*—from within! He sped back to his office and called Gunboat's sanatorium again.

Kelly hadn't returned. The Human Question Mark raised his voice: "I don't care whether Gunboat's there or not. It's a matter of life and death and I want to know about Talbot and Prince at once, do you hear!"

The man said, "Well, geez, Mr. Riddle. I—you see. It's like this about Mr. Talbot. One day he—" The words stopped. Riddle heard a man scream in sheer terror. A heavy crash came over the wire and then the connection was cut off. He called again, but no one answered. Plainly, it was a matter of death. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

A Knife in the Hand. . . .

ON THE way out Riddle saw Gail's little automatic on his desk. He slipped it into his overcoat pocket and

raced down the stairs. His car was in a garage, nearby. As he got behind the wheel, he felt something bump against his knee. It was the small gun; it had gone through the pocket, caught in the lining down at the hem. No matter; he had two other guns. Calvin Prince's revolver, and his own Luger.

The snow had stopped falling, but the roads were slippery, treacherous. He didn't reach Kelly's place until one o'clock. Gunboat himself answered his frantic pounding at the door. When he saw the Human Question Mark he muttered numbly, "Oh . . . Mr. Riddle . . . somethin' awful's happened."

"I was afraid so. Who was it?"

Gunboat was leading him along the hall "Jus' one o' the boys. He's in the office, dead. An' the wires is cut."

They were in the office, now. A stocky, bespectacled man stood there sipping hot coffee. "Dr. Finley," Gunboat said, "this here's Mr. Riddle." Suddenly Gunboat seemed to wake up. "Say! Mr. Riddle's a shamus—maybe he can help us!"

Riddle nodded toward the doctor, who bowed slightly. He looked at the dead, white-uniformed attendant. His head was crushed, drenched in blood.

"Is every one accounted for?"

Gunboat said, "Yeah. I ain't got the least idea who done it."

Riddle said, "There's nothing we can do about that just yet, anyway. But here's how you can help me." He paused, then went on. "Gunboat, don't you know it's criminal to hold men here against their wills?"

The old fighter rubbed his eyes and stared blankly. "I don't follow ya."

"What about Calvin Prince and Bud Talbot?"

Gunboat started, fidgeted. "Prince ain't cured yet. In fact, he's pretty bad. But that's supposed to be on the Q.T. He don't want no one to know he's here, fer fear his old lady might find it out."

Riddle would see Prince later. "Where's Bud Talbot?" Gunboat didn't want to talk about that. Riddle looked from him to the doctor. The latter's face bore an expression of quiet bewilderment.

"Well, this guy Talbot—" Kelly fumbled for words. "This'll ruin me."

"Quick man!" Riddle snapped.

"He went off one day, walkin'. He never come back."

"Why the devil didn't you report it?"

"I—I thought his family must of met him down the road an' took him home. I didn't wanta say no client of mine disappears. If I never hear nothing, I figure he'll be okay. I never hoid nothing."

"There's only one way to avoid what you feared, Gunboat," Riddle said. "That's by organizing a searching party now!"

"Out in all dis snow an' stuff?"

"That's right."

Gunboat went out to round up a bunch of plug-uglies and a few flashlights. While he was gone Dr. Finley said, "I'll be glad to join you, Mr. Riddle. Heavens, I thought Talbot had checked out. He had recovered nicely. By the way—it's frightfully cold out there. You'd better have a cup of hot coffee; there's plenty here."

"Thanks," said Riddle, "I will." He bent down to examine the dead man once more, slipping his fingers under his belt, and under his collar. The corpse was perfectly dry, unlike the blonde girl's body. He stood up and the doctor was beside him, holding a cup of steaming coffee. He took it from the doctor's hand, brought the cup to his lips—and a stab of fear pierced him like an icicle. It might be some time before he could know for certain, but he felt as though Death had touched him ever so lightly with clammy fingers. The window, backed by the blackness of the night, mirrored Finley's form. Riddle watched the image.

"On second thought, Doctor, I think my temperature is high enough." Not a muscle flickered in Finley's face. Calmly

he tapped a cigarette on a thumbnail, lit it. He betrayed no sign of concern.

"Just as you say." He shrugged.

Gunboat returned with several men, among them Happy Al who grinned toothlessly at Riddle. Gunboat said, "Happy, you take Mr. Riddle down into the hollow by the tracks; then work around through the woodlot. I'll take you, Joe, an' a couple of you other guys. . . . Fastucci, you an' Frank go with Doc. . . . Listen, you fellas: Mr. Riddle thinks that young Talbot guy never left here alive. He thinks somebody cold-cocked him in the woods. We gotta fin' him. Let's go."

They all moved into the hall, some stopping to don coats and sweaters. When they reached the porch, Riddle looked around for Happy Al. He didn't see him.

He went back to the office. Happy was buttoning his big sweater-coat. "Be right witcha, Mr. Riddle. I jis' knocked off dat cuppa cawfee. I t'ought—"

"Good God!" Riddle exclaimed. "You've got to have an emetic—" But there was no need for an emetic. It was too late. Happy Al came up on his toes, swaying slightly, his face turning crimson. He clawed at his middle, then his throat. His tongue protruded through his toothless gums, thick. He uttered horrible gurgling sounds; then his eyes rolled up into his head. He stiffened grotesquely just before he pitched in a heap.

Riddle swore, fought off the overpowering helplessness that had seized him, dragged the sweat-drenched little fighter to a room across the hall, and closed the door. He hurried down the slope of the snow-covered lawn, in the direction in which he knew lay the railroad tracks, thanking the inner warning that had forbidden him to drink that coffee. He wondered if he should arrest Finley on sight, but he remembered that many men had been in that room, any one of whom could have loaded the coffee with the drug that brought on that ghastly, destroying fever.

THE HUMAN QUESTION MARK

It was the man who found the corpse. It wasn't a quarter of a mile from the house, in an alder thicket, hanging by the belt of a polo coat from the only tree in the clump that would have supported a man. It would have been easy to find it before; no one had ever looked for it, that was all.

Nearby was the box which Bud Talbot had apparently stood on—before he kicked it away. He picked up the box, placed it so he could stand on it to haul the body down, but before he could do so, he saw a light stabbing jerkily through the grove.

A voice said, "Who's over there?"

"Riddle. I've found Talbot." A man scuffed through the brush and the snow to his side; it was Dr. Finley.

"Lord!" said the doctor. "He must have been hanging there a month. We didn't think he showed any manic-depressive symptoms."

Finley held both lights while Riddle cut down the corpse. He was careful not to turn his back toward the doctor.

Riddle recovered his own flashlight, dropped to the deep, soft snow to examine the corpse more closely. He said to Finley, upon whom he had constantly kept an eye, "Would you mind finding a couple of strong-arm boys to carry this up to the house?"

That gave Riddle the opportunity he sought. He brushed the snow off the polo coat, over the heart. There was a bullet hole there. He rolled the corpse over. The hole in the back was five times as big. . . . He loosened the coat, the jacket, shirt and undershirt; turned the stiff, cold body from one side to the other, until he was convinced that the soft-nosed .38—if such it were—had been fired into young Talbot long after he had ceased to live. The slug itself couldn't be far away. . . .

Finley returned with two trainers who, though squeamish, picked up the rigid corpse, and the procession headed toward

the house. Gunboat met them part way.

"Geez, Mr. Riddle," he said. "This is a hell of a note! I didn't pay no attention to the gal when she said she suspected something like this. I thought it was because she had a case on him."

"What girl?" asked Riddle.

"My secretary. She acted mysterious this morning and asked could she go to town. I let her. She ain't come back yet."

Riddle said, "If she was very blonde and wore two curly green feathers in her hat—she will never be back."

"Oh my God!" Gunboat said. "This is ruinous!"

"Rather," said the Human Question Mark. "However, as far as Talbot is concerned, things would have been almost the same even if you had reported his disappearance. It most likely would have been called suicide. Now—it's murder."

"Incredible!" Finley exclaimed.

"Not at all," Riddle answered. "And the man who did it is still on the grounds." They were in the hall of the big house. "Gentlemen," Riddle went on, "I want to present this corpse to the man who shot it. I want to watch his reaction." Everybody waited, breathless. Riddle considered them, carefully. "My guess is that the gun that sent the slug through this body belongs to Calvin Prince."

Gunboat said, "Holy Mother—save us!"

Dr. Finley seemed to relax a little. He said, "We can show him the cadaver, but he won't recognize it. He's in such a bad mental state we're afraid we can't cure him. However"—he shrugged—

"I wasn't going to trouble him with it," Riddle said evenly, "I was thinking of the man in the Napoleon Room."

Finley's face darkened.

Riddle looked from the doctor to Gunboat, and he said, "Dr. Finley and I will carry the corpse to the Napoleon Room. You go get Calvin Prince and bring him here to the office."

They walked through what seemed

miles of halls, then up one flight of stairs and along another hall. They reached a steel door and Finley set his end down, fumbled for keys and unlocked the door. A light was burning. There was a man lying on a large bed in the corner. Finley picked up the feet again and they carried the corpse over beside the bed.

The man was lying face down, apparently asleep. Riddle thumped him on the back. The man didn't move. Riddle took him by the arm; it was soaking wet. Riddle's heart missed a beat. He seized the arm with both hands, rolled the man over. The face that grinned up at him in death was *not* John Doe's. It was that of some ring-worn house attendant.

For a second Riddle was powerless to move. His mind was a turmoil of whirling, chaotic thoughts. All he could think was: *Failure . . . failure . . . failure!* And then other thoughts tumbled into the light of sanity: *I'm going to have a good time tonight and not worry. . . . That's because you're such a swell guy. . . . Such a swell guy? Such a damnable idiot. Without realizing it, he said aloud, "Gail Talbot—I've killed her!"*

"Exactly!" The voice was sharp, vicious. But it wasn't as sharp as the thing that seemed to cut into Riddle's brain. He fell across two corpses, flopped sidewise and saw the leering, bespectacled face of Dr. Finley, before the next blow fell. . . .

THERE WERE corpses clawing at him. And they were talking!

They were saying, "It's too damned bad you're such a nosy fool. That's what it costs you for having brains. The coffee Happy Al drank would have saved you a lot of trouble." No; the corpses were not talking. Dr. Finley was talking, at the same time he tied the last knot in the lacings that held Riddle's arms behind his back. His feet were bound, too.

"Not quite smart enough," Finley went on, his eyes flashing cruelly behind his

spectacles. "I'll be on the way to South America before morning. The girl guessed the whole thing tonight—too late, as you did. She must be dead by now. Prince, too; but he had to sign the contract first. Your friend John Doe and I made a clean sweep."

It was useless for Riddle to talk; he knew that. But he had to say something as long as there was a breath of life in his body. "Finley," he said weakly, "you could turn state's evidence."

"I'll be taken care of, but not by the state."

"By John Doe, eh? Or rather, Nicholas Gideon."

Finley smiled. "Precisely."

"And suppose he crosses you?"

"What I could tell Calvin Prince's estate would be worth a half million. Gideon's afraid of me, yet he doesn't dare kill me. I told him I had left a signed affidavit telling how Gideon came to me for a solution to make men crave alcohol—turn them into alcoholics. That's how he planned to take the Prince tobacco account away from the Gerard agency. Then, with Prince out here in his—and my—power, he could force him to swing the account to any agency. For a fat fee."

"Of course," said Riddle. Behind his back his hands were desperately writhing for freedom. "But Gideon found out that Gerard was losing the account anyway, for the simple reason that Prince was going to back Newcomb, Frary and Talbot in forming a new company—and he was handing them the All-State Cigarette account on a platter. So he decided to murder those three men and make Prince give the account back to Gerard. For which small favor Gerard would pay him—plenty! And he's succeeded—so far—"

"What do you mean—'so far'?"

Riddle didn't say anything; he kept straining against his fetters, twisting his hands. He stopped; his fingers touched the outline of what felt like a knife, in

the hip pocket of the dead attendant. If he could only wriggle it out. . . .

Finley went out into the hall, returning with a can. "The painters have been here," he said. "Very handy." He yanked up loose bedding, slit a stuffed chair and pulled out a pile of horsehair, tossed the bedding on top of it. Then he poured the paint over the whole mess.

A voice said, "Prince ain't in his room, Mr. Riddle. I waited down in the office—"

"Look out!" Riddle yelled. But Gunboat was already in the room. Dr. Finley whipped out Riddle's Luger and shot the old fighter through the head.

"Would you be so considerate as to do that for me?" Riddle said. "You rotten swine!"

"I told you I wanted you to think about it," Finley answered. And he laughed. He tossed a match into the paint-soaked heap, and when it was burning brightly, came over to the bed and looked down at Riddle, his eyes filled with hate.

The knife was in Riddle's fingers. In another minute he could open the blade, manipulate it somehow to cut his bindings. "In order to save the lives of a lot of innocent people," Riddle said, stalling, "I'll make a deal with you."

"There's nothing you can do for me," Finley said. "I like to think of you roasting here. S'long, Master Mind." He turned and walked toward the door, still laughing.

Riddle forced the blade between his wrists, against the confining strands, sawed with a wrist motion. The stuff must be rawhide; it was tougher than rope. But it parted, and Riddle swung his feet to the floor, raised his arm to throw the knife.

The door slammed, and he could hear both bolts shoot home.

Riddle held the knife; it would be better not to let Finley know he had accomplished this much.

CHAPTER FIVE

John Doe's Move

THE room was filled with black, acrid smoke. Riddle's throat felt like raw flesh, his lungs seemed to be on fire. He dropped to the floor, cut his feet free. Then, staying low, he rolled the carpet up over the fire, partially smothering it.

He dragged both corpses from the bed, piled blankets and mattress on the still smouldering fire, beat out the remaining sparks with pillows. The bed was a pipe-frame affair, not meant to be taken apart. But he wrenched one upright from the floor, then twisted the entire frame until he had ripped out a six-foot length of two-inch pipe. Using this as a wrecking bar, he broke a window and smashed the shutters through the bars. He stood there for a moment, breathing deeply. The window faced the dark woods; he saw no light, no human being. He didn't call for help because he couldn't be sure Finley had gone yet. He pried against the bars with his pipe-length. But the pipe bent.

He turned back to the room, prodded the heavy padding that covered the walls. In this improvised asylum there ought to be another door some place. Presently he pounded against an area that sounded less solid. He slashed through the padding and tore a hole. He could see where a door had been filled with plaster.

The smoke had cleared; Riddle felt his strength coming back. He seized his wrecking bar and drove it into the thin plaster again and again. The lathes were splintering away now, and the plaster on the other side. In a few minutes he had a hole big enough to crawl through.

An attendant was sitting in the office when Riddle barged in. The man's face froze with amazement when he saw Riddle with his bloody scalp.

Riddle snapped: "How long has Finley been gone?"

"Why — about — about — ten minutes. Said he was going to the village to get the sheriff . . . said you and Gunboat were in conference."

"You can't confer with the dead," Riddle said. "But you can go up to the Napoleon Room and take care of them—and put the fire out if there's any left. Go through the next room. I'll send the sheriff up in due time." The man left, speechless.

Riddle went out to his car and drove away, free—but where the devil should he go? He roused some one at the first filling station he came to, called Information in New York. No listing in the name of Nicholas Gideon. . . . The only thing he could do—the one chance—was to head for Calvin Prince's town apartment.

OF the three persons in the room, only one was unruffled. He was clad in impeccable dinner jacket, his curly blond hair glistening. Now and then he worried his red moustache. He was talking to a man dressed in a wrinkled tweed suit; a young man who was not only haggard and drawn, but lashed to a chair.

The man in the dinner jacket said, "You're being an awful fool not to sign that contract, Prince."

"Nick," said Calvin Prince, "I've told you again and again that I'd sign it if you'd let Gail go."

Nicholas Gideon looked at Gail Talbot, who was frightened and tired almost to the point of hysterics. She, too, was bound fast.

Gail Talbot said, "Don't sign, Cal. It won't look like a suicide pact if he uses that thing on me. And they'll catch the filthy beast."

Gideon heated a corkscrew over a chafing dish until it was red hot, and went over to Gail, "I don't know why I didn't think of this before," he said. "If Cal is a gentleman—" He held the glowing implement close to her face. Her eyes widened in terror.

"I'll sign it—I'll sign it!" Calvin's

voice was urgent. "I'll even write a suicide note. But let us die quickly."

"That's better," Gideon said. "You can die quickly, all right." He busied himself freeing Prince's right hand. The contract was already spread out on the table beside him. Prince picked up a pen.

"You don't have to sign it!"

All three jerked their heads around. Gideon was struck dumb. Slowly his hands went up over his head. He was staring into the tiny muzzle of a .25 automatic in the fist of the Human Question Mark.

Relief made Gail weep. She began sobbing and laughing at the same time. "It's the b-bugaboo man," she sputtered.

"The boogey man," Gideon said. "Boo!" He smiled, and his hand went under his dinner jacket.

"Hold it!" Riddle cried sharply. But Gideon didn't hold it. His hand appeared again with a gun. So Riddle pulled the trigger. The ridiculous *click* shocked Riddle more profoundly than the roar of a cannon could have.

Gideon said, "That's what I thought. It's the gun I made Gail carry. I was afraid she'd hurt some one if it were loaded. . . . Well, drop it, anyway." Riddle dropped it.

"Murder gets tiresome," Gideon remarked. "But I guess it has to go on, once it's started. Everybody's so unreasonable. And Finley must have been careless. He was supposed to have saved me the trouble of killing you."

Gideon was standing almost in a line between Riddle and the chair in which Prince was tied. Riddle looked hard at Prince, then at Gideon, and back to Prince, glancing down at the latter's feet. He could only hope that Prince would guess what was in his mind. . . .

"Yes, he was careless, John Doe." Riddle was talking slowly, deliberately. "He told me what a nice, pleasant killer you were. He told me how to trip you,

too." Gideon's face showed displeasure. "But I guess my luck won't hold forever," Riddle went on. "Now it's *your* move, and you'd better move *quick* . . ." His glance shot past Gideon as he snapped out, "*Okay, Gunboat!*"

Riddle didn't wait to see whether Gideon actually looked behind him. All he could hope for was a second's bewilderment in Gideon, and he got it. He lunged forward in a desperate dive. The movement caused Gideon to step back, even though he fired at the same time. But Prince raised his bound feet, and Gideon tripped over them. The bullet slammed into the picture moulding and Riddle struck the falling Gideon driving his head back against a radiator.

OF THE four persons in the room when Gideon recovered consciousness, only one was bound—Gideon. It was daylight. Gail Talbot stood at the window with Calvin Prince, looking across snow-clad Manhattan from a penthouse forty stories high. Riddle had told her about Bud, and the tears were glistening on her cheeks.

"Take her in the other room when the cops come, Prince," Riddle said and soon there was a knock on the hall door.

As Prince led Gail from the room, she stopped near Riddle. "You're still a swell guy, Mr. Riddle," she said. "Things are going to be all right—after awhile. I've lost such a terrible lot. But I've gained something, too . . ." Then she was gone.

Riddle admitted Gilroy and some of his staff. "Be quiet, Gil," he said. "Take it easy."

"Sure, sure," said the inspector, "I won't make no noise. But that ain't the way your cases usually end. How come no gunfire?"

"It's all over."

"Yeah, an' a hell of a time to let a guy in on it. By God—"

"Shhh. Did you pick up Finley?"

"Yeah. The boys yanked him off a steamboat twenty minutes ago. And we

routed out Mr. J. Farrington Gerard, too. They spilled the whole story. I've got it all straight except for that amnesia act of Gideon's, and the reason why the Tal—"

"Shush, Gil. I'll go down town with you and explain it. You can talk to Prince and the girl later."

In the car Riddle said, "You were going to ask why young Talbot was hanged and shot *too*."

"I sure was," Gilroy exclaimed.

"Talbot was the key man. His art work was what Prince wanted for the All-State advertising . . . As Finlay said, he and Gideon made alcoholics out of Prince, Talbot, Newcomb and Frary, got the first two up at Kelly's. They failed to wangle the account out of Prince, even though Gerard lost the account—five million dollars worth of business. So Gideon thought of working with Talbot alone. He went up to Kelly's to talk to him, saw him walking through the grounds before he—Gideon—had been seen. He took a chance and told Talbot he could force Prince to do what he wanted—that he was virtually holding Prince a prisoner. Talbot got sore and they fought, down in the grove, after Talbot told Gideon that Prince was giving the account to Frary, Newcomb and himself.

"Gideon went beserk and broke Talbot's neck. And the only thing he could do then was fix it to look like suicide by hanging. Nobody saw Gideon leave the grounds. And nobody found Talbot. Gunboat didn't dare report his absence; he convinced himself that Talbot had gotten fed up taking the cure, and had gone home. But he didn't have the courage to check up.

"Gideon could see a fifty-thousand-dollar commission and a thousand-dollar weekly radio job slipping beyond reach, and he tried to use pressure on Prince. But Prince didn't know Talbot was dead, and he held out for his three friends; if they didn't get the account, he was going

to give it back to Gerard. So Gideon went to work for Gerard, determined to wipe out Newcomb and Frary.

"In the meantime, his stooge up at Kelly's, Dr. Finley, perfected the fever-inducing formula—a concentrated mixture of quinine and a rare drug Gideon had brought back from Africa. They used it on Frary. Gideon was sorry he hadn't waited to give Talbot a dose of it, and the more he thought of it, the more he worried about Talbot's body being found and traced to him. And what he did was to serve two purposes. He stole Prince's gun, let his beard grow a couple of days, and went up to Kelly's. This time he could take no chance on being recognized. He went into the grove and fired a shot through the corpse. Then, with Prince hopped up, he could accuse him of shooting Talbot, while drunk. By holding a drunken murder over his head, he could force Prince plenty."

"But what about the blonde?"

"She was Kelly's secretary. She smelled a rat when Talbot disappeared, and she suspected Finley of doping patients. She had seen my advertisement, and the very day Gideon was up there shooting a corpse, she set out to see me. Finley met Gideon in the woods, and told him. So Gideon followed the girl, overtaking her in the beanery near my office. He dosed her coffee then. The spasm didn't take effect until she was in my hall, and Gideon followed

her there to be sure she died. When I came downstairs I told him to go up and call you, and he was on a spot—no permit for the gun in his pocket, and a shot just fired. He had purposely taken no identification to Kelly's, so he pulled the amnesia act.

"Then he influenced me to take him right straight back to Kelly's. He shaved, and Finley had Prince all drugged so Gideon could bring him back to town. Gideon tied up Prince in his own apartment—the one we just left—went to dinner with Gerard, who had the contract all ready for Gideon to get Prince's signature. After dinner, Gideon kept his date with Gail Talbot."

Gilroy turned to Gideon, who sat sullenly on the other side of him, handcuffed to the inspector. "What do you say, punk? Is that the way it was?"

For a moment Gideon didn't answer. Then he said, "As long as my good friends Finley and Gerard have done so much talking, I guess I might as well admit it. It was just about the way Riddle says."

Gilroy said to Riddle, "I guess you done it again, shamus. But you could have saved yourself a lot of kicking around by playing ball with me all along."

"That may be so," said Riddle.

"But it isn't," Gideon volunteered. "Without him, you department clucks would have been a cinch."

And the inspector said, "I hope you think of that crack when you're frying."

THE END

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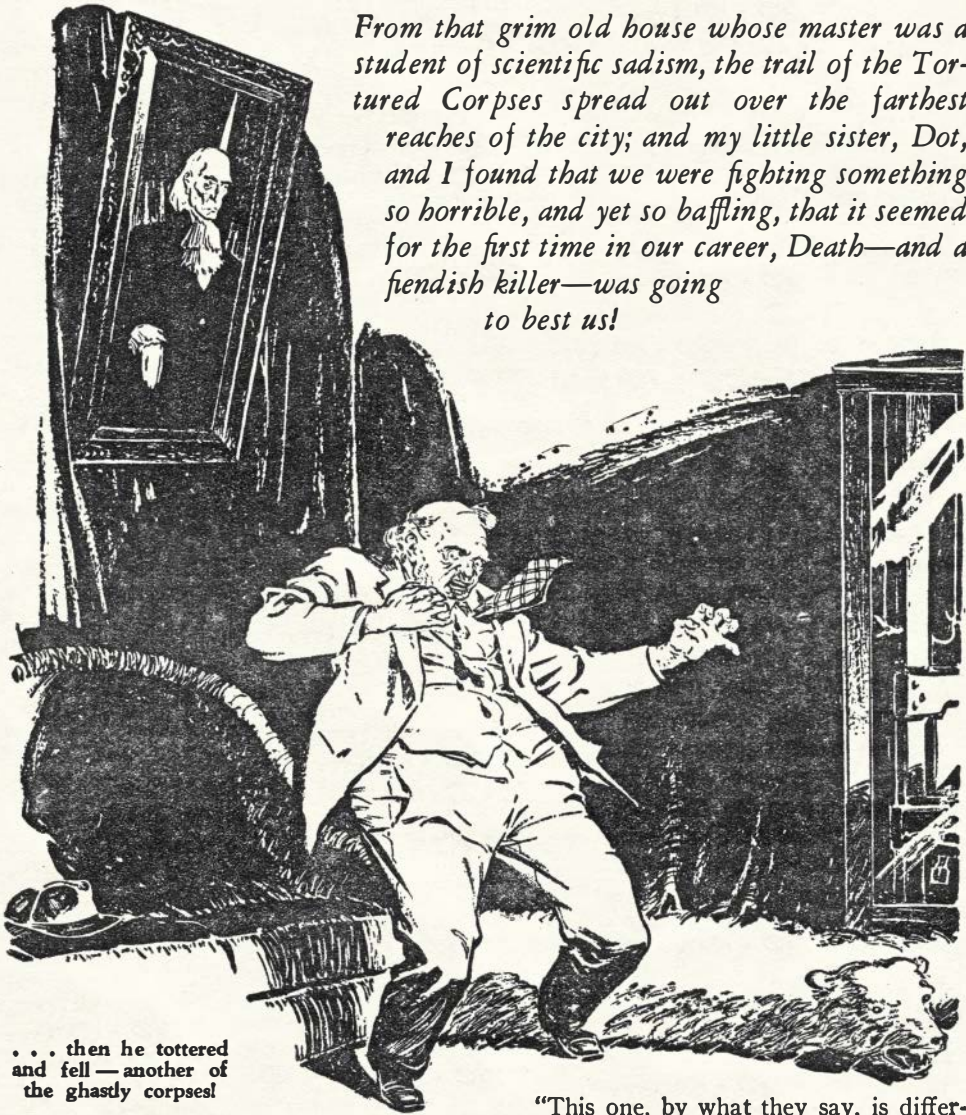
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Genuine THIN GILLETTE BLADES

THE CASE of the TORTURED

by RAY CUMMINGS

From that grim old house whose master was a student of scientific sadism, the trail of the Tortured Corpses spread out over the farthest reaches of the city; and my little sister, Dot, and I found that we were fighting something so horrible, and yet so baffling, that it seemed for the first time in our career, Death—and a fiendish killer—was going to best us!



... then he tottered and fell—another of the ghastly corpses!

CHAPTER ONE

The Invisible Torturer

I WOULDN'T let Dot look at the ghastly thing; I made her wait outside in the undertaking parlor.

"You think I've never seen a corpse?" she demanded with asperity.

"This one, by what they say, is different," I retorted.

My little sister has a will of her own. She's small, slim and dark. Quiet-looking. She looks demure and docile, but she isn't.

"I'll go in," she declared. "You wait outside, George. Don't want you to be shocked."

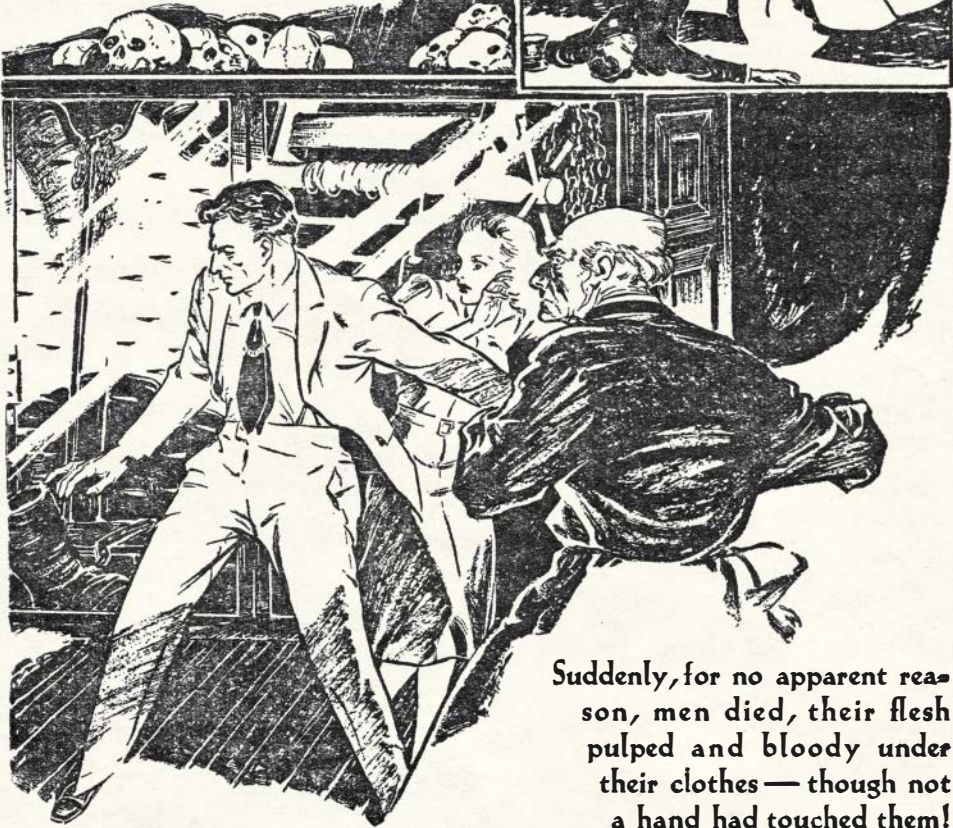
I shoved her down onto the leather couch and went in with the undertaker.

CORPSES

A "ROBERTS & CO."
Novelette

"You asked for it," he said. "Here it is."

He drew down the sheet, exposing the body on the slab. I'm pretty used to gruesome sights, but this one made me gasp. It was the nude body of a slim young girl. From head to foot, the flesh was black and blue, bruised, pulp-like, with dried blood oozing from the pores. The face,



Suddenly, for no apparent reason, men died, their flesh pulped and bloody under their clothes — though not a hand had touched them!

with bobbed black hair framing it, was a black-and-crimsoned mask, goggling with thickened protruding tongue; and the dead glazed eyes staring up at me were bulging with agony; black eyeballs now, and red with blood that had oozed from them.

"She sure took a terrible beating," the undertaker was saying. "Beaten to death — but with what? No bones are broken."

Under my magnifying glass, that puffed,

bruised flesh was even more horrible. There wasn't an inch of her body that was white; and through every pore blood had oozed.

"Had enough? Okay." The undertaker covered the ghastly thing.

"She was found nude like that?" I demanded.

"No. That's the hell of it. She was

fully dressed. An' her clothes weren't torn—no sign of rough treatment. Some guy must have beaten her to death when she was naked and then dressed the corpse."

The crime of a maniacal sadist; that's what it looked like then. "The Tortured Corpse," the newspapers were already calling it. We had seen the big first-page headlines in the early evening editions. The girl's name was Jeanne Cartier. She was housemaid in the home of one Georges Robette—an elderly, wealthy recluse, who had been, in his time, a research historian. Jeanne had been found in her bedroom in the servants' quarters of Robette's home at about four o'clock this afternoon. It transpired that she had a boy-friend. A fellow named Lee Johnson. He had promptly gone to the police—then he had called Dot and me; engaged us on his behalf, apart from what the police might do. My sister Dorothy and I are Roberts & Co., Private Detectives, in case you never heard of us.

"Let's get away," I told Dot grimly. "I'll describe it later."

The undertaker's phone rang, just as we were leaving. "My God, another one," the undertaker exclaimed as he hung up.

A newspaper reporter had telephoned him the news. Another tortured corpse had just been found! Miles from here, over in the outskirts of Brooklyn, a policeman's body had been discovered, lying dead on the floor of a radio car. Patrolman Thomas McCoy, dressed in his uniform; and under it his body was mangled, blue-black, beaten into a bloody pulp!

Dot and I knew then that we were on a big case. What possible connection could Patrolman McCoy over in Brooklyn have with this Jeanne Cartier, maid in the home of the aged historian, Robette!

We were on our way to Robette's now, only a few minutes' drive in mid-town New York, from the undertaking parlor. Robette's home was a small but preten-

tious, old-fashioned mansion on Riverside Drive—set on a corner, with big snowy grounds all around it, divided from the street by a ten-foot iron fence. As we drove up to the side porte-cochere, young Johnson, our client, was there waiting for us—a thin, wiry fellow in his twenties. He looked like a bank clerk.

"Come in," he greeted. "He'll see us—but he's not particularly cordial."

WE found Georges Robette to be a man of perhaps seventy—tall, erect, with snow-white mustache. He was clad now in a brocaded silk smoking robe, with black dinner trousers and patent leather dress shoes showing beneath it.

He bowed briefly. "Miss Dorothy Roberts?" he inquired. And as he regarded Dot's small figure, her dark bobbed hair under the modish little toque, he smiled. "A girl detective—how interesting."

"Thanks," Dot drawled. "Glad you think so."

He maybe hadn't been cordial with young Johnson; but he was pleasant with Dot and me. He led us into his study. Dot and I have trained ourselves never to show any emotion, but we both gasped, nevertheless, as we entered that weird somber room. It was draped in black; bookshelves lined its walls. A big glass cabinet held what at first I thought was a collection of trophies. Then I saw that they were tiny models of instruments of torture—ghastly crude mechanisms that throughout history have been famous for bringing agony to the human body. One end of the room held only a huge oil painting—a portrait of a repulsively cadaverous old gentleman with powdered hair and dressed in a long black coat with a white stock and ruffles at the sleeves. But it was the eyes that held my attention. They seemed almost alive, and their piercing, malignant gaze was the embodiment of all the evil power of hell. On a brass plate at the bottom of the huge gold

frame was the title: *Marquis de Sade*.

" . . . my friend, Paul Hutchins." Robette's voice, introducing another man who was here, jerked me out of my startled surprise.

"Mr. Roberts—glad to meet you."

This Paul Hutchins was a lawyer—a big stalwart, handsome fellow of forty-odd, distinguished-looking, with black hair greying at the temples. He had been seated at the radio. He shook hands with us and went back to it—a news commentator telling dramatically of the "Tortured Corpses"—the discovery, now, of Patrolman McCoy. We all sat down for a moment to listen.

"These news commentators are too lurid," Hutchins declared. "A roaming, sadistic maniac—hear what this fellow's saying? He'll have the people in a panic, afraid to go out on the streets. Tortured—beaten to death—I say, this is right in your line, isn't it, Robette?"

"Yes," Robette murmured. "Too much so—starting in my house with poor Jeanne." Old Robette seemed to shudder. He was sitting tense, staring at the radio. A bookcase was beside me; idly I glanced at its books. A library of books on torture! I read the titles: *The Spanish Inquisition . . . Psychology of the Water Torture . . . Sadism*—there was a whole shelf of exhaustive works on things sadistic.

This Robette was a student of historical torture!

ROBETTE, horrified now, listened to that radio commentator, fascinated. Then we were all electrified. Still another "Tortured Corpse" had been found! A girl in the Bronx. The body, fully dressed, had just been discovered—sitting in a seat of a darkened movie theatre! The discovery had caused a panic in the little theatre—half-a-dozen people were hurt in the rush to get out!

"It's incredible," Hutchins muttered.

I heard old Robette suck in his breath. Incredible. . . . The real weirdness of the thing began dawning on us now. A girl here on Riverside Drive this afternoon. A policeman in Brooklyn. And now a girl in a movie theatre in the Bronx. Where next? *Who next?* It wasn't only us; I could imagine that a million suddenly-terrified people in the Metropolitan district were asking themselves those frightening questions.

Suddenly in Robette's weird study, with that horribly vivid portrait leering at us, we heard a voice calling, and the tread of hurrying, footsteps.

Hutchins shut off the radio. We all jumped to our feet as a man burst into the room, one of Robert's frightened servants behind him—a paunchy, middle-aged grey-haired man who looked like a prosperous business executive.

"Carruthers!" Robette and the lawyer, Hutchins, both gasped at once.

The visitor was out of breath from his hurried entrance. His clothes were disheveled; his big fur coat was buttoned crooked with his haste. He had come in a taxi from his nearby home, and he gasped at us, "Heard you were here, Hutchins—wanted to tell you—they just told me by phone—"

"What the hell is it?" Hutchins demanded. "What's happened?"

I saw Robette standing, as though not breathing—just standing fascinated.

"In my shipping room," Carruthers gasped. "They just called me at my hotel. My head book-keeper—she—she was working there tonight—some delinquent accounts—and now she—they found her dead! Just now. Tortured—beaten—mangled like—like Jeanne Cartier of yours here. Like that policeman—"

He suddenly checked himself as though his breath had given out in the middle of a word. And then the ghastly thing happened—a thing so monstrously unexpected—a thing that changed now the

whole aspect of the weirdly mysterious affair. Incredible thing—yet it was happening here before our eyes—

The paunchy middle-aged Carruthers was standing in the center of the room, with us in a crescent before him. Dot and I; Robette; Hutchins, and young Lee Johnson who stood pallidly staring from across the room.

Carruther's face was grey with his horrified excitement of the tragic news he had just heard. Then all in a second his face, neck, and his suddenly flailing arms were black, with puffed bruised-looking skin and the blood, crimson, trickling from the pores! For a horrible second he was a dead man still on his feet, staring at us with popping eyes that were oozing blood. Then he tottered and fell—another of the ghastly corpses, mangled within his clothes as though an invisible assailant had been here and beaten him to death!

CHAPTER TWO

Death's Hairbrush

FOR a few minutes we were all in a chaos of horrified panic. I telephoned the police. Robette had rushed out into the hall, with Dot after him. Dot never loses her wits: she wasn't going to let that fellow Robette get out of her sight. Then one or two of the servants came in, adding to the confusion. What young Lee Johnson did, I don't know. The weird, black-draped study was hot, and one of its windows was open for air. I recall that after a few moments I rushed to the window and that Johnson suddenly appeared behind me. The window was only three or four feet above the ground—a side window with a dark vista of the frozen side yard, dotted with naked trees and the blank wall of an adjacent apartment house beyond the fence a hundred feet away.

"Did something come in this window?" young Johnson murmured. "If something

came in and attacked him right here—"

Well, if it did, then it was something totally invisible; I had been close here at the window—closer than Carruthers himself—

"Help! Help!"

From the dark garden came the agonized, terrified call. Young Johnson crowded me. I shoved at him as I leaned out the window.

It sounded like Hutchins' voice. And then I saw him, over in the dark driveway where a car was parked. He was backed up against it, struggling in the grip of someone inside the car! I went out that window feet first, landed in the snow and ran.

But even at that, I was too late. Hutchins had been jerked into the car; the door slammed; the car—it was a small sedan—plunged along the drive for the street. For a second I leveled my automatic, but the car was gone before I had any chance to shoot its tires.

Dot was shouting at me from the window; I saw her slide out and leap to the ground, with young Johnson after her. But I didn't wait. I had parked my own sedan just off the drive near the front gate. I got it into the street just in time to see the other car madly dashing across West End Avenue.

That was a mad chase across town. How that bandit car ever made it without a smash-up, I don't know. We went like a couple of fire engines—by good luck having the green lights with us—across Broadway to Central Park West. A park gateway was here; the bandit car plunged into it. I wasn't more than a few hundred feet behind, by this time. That was about as wild a dash as I think I ever made—winding those curving, undulating park drives at a good fifty mile clip.

Fortunately, this frozen night, there was little traffic. Where we were heading I had no idea—it was all I could do to keep my mind on not cracking up. The bandit

wasn't shaking me off, but I wasn't gaining on him either. For a minute I saw the lights of the big hotels and apartment houses of Central Park South, looming through the trees ahead. Then we swung left and were heading North again.

The mad killer—who in these few hours had terrorized the city—knew I was after him, of course. With his wild attempt at a getaway and simultaneously abducting Hutchins—he was desperately trying to lose me on these comparatively lonely park roads before heading back into the city again.

But he couldn't lose me. I had my automatic on the seat beside me and another that always lives in a holster on the steering post. I was fatuous enough then to think that I'd nab the grisly killer, right at the start of the gruesome mystery of the tortured corpses. . . . "*George Roberts of Roberts & Company, nabs the maniacal sadist!*" . . . What swell headlines that would make! . . .

IT WAS a nice dream but it smashed in a hurry. Suddenly I saw the bandit car slowing up. It wobbled—abruptly turned off the road and banged its nose into a tree. With my own brakes grinding, I all but smashed also.

And I didn't nab the maniacal killer. As I jumped out, I saw the left front door of the wrecked car dangling open. There were plenty of frozen thickets into which he could have ducked; plenty of dark winding paths. . . . Like a dog at the hunt I dashed around that vicinity for a minute or two. But there was no sign of him. He'd walk of course; not attract any attention. But I attracted plenty, frightening what few spooning couples were here braving the frosty night.

Disappointed, I went back to the wreck. The bandit had known he couldn't make away with Hutchins, so he had saved himself. There were a couple of other cars and a few people gathered at the wreck

when I got back. Vaguely I pictured Hutchins lying there gruesomely mangled as though beaten to death; but he was only crumpled to the floor, wedged between the seat and the dashboard. He was dazed; one of his eyes was swelling from where he had bumped in the crash—and he was fumbling at his throat.

Obviously, his assailant had strangled him and just about knocked him out when the getaway started.

We got out of that park turmoil within a minute or two. My detective badge convinced the excited onlookers that we had the right of way.

"You're all right now? You can walk?" I murmured to Hutchins.

"Yes—I guess—I'm all right."

I bundled him into my car and we got away. He wasn't greatly injured, save for that shiner which was puffing now like a pudding so that already his left eye was closed. On the way back to Robette's place on Riverside Drive, he recovered enough to tell me what had happened to him. It was his car, in which the bandit had so nearly abducted him. Hutchins had gone outdoors to move it off the drive, to make room for the police cars which were so soon to come. And from within his car a lurking man had reached for him, jerked him in so that all he could do was shout for help.

"What'd he look like?" I demanded. "Did you see him?"

Hutchins hadn't, except that he was a powerful man dressed in dark clothes.

"That crack he gave me right at the start just about knocked me out," Hutchins declared ruefully. His fingers gingerly investigated his shiner. And then he began feeling other parts of his body. I imagine that was psychological. I felt myself tingling all over, with a bruised achy feeling as though any minute all my capilleries would burst, with blackening flesh and blood oozing through my pores!

When he got back to Robette's, the

scene had certainly changed. The police were here. The quiet cross-street, and that bend of Riverside Drive were jammed with traffic; the pavements thronged with excited, milling people.

Inside the big house, the police were tramping around the lower story where the corpse of the paunchy Carruthers still lay weltering in Robette's study. That portrait, the grinning, medieval count leered out from the canvas as though he were pleased at this modern torture scene.

The weird room and Robette's reputation as a student of sadism—was too much now for the police to swallow. The old man already was under arrest. Sitting in a chair with a grim policeman beside him, he was grey with terror. Or was he only sullen? Could *he* be the maniacal killer? It didn't seem possible. By what ghastly agency had he caused these weird deaths? And if he were a fiend, why in Heaven's name would he start his crimes in his own house?

PAUL HUTCHINS hit the ceiling when he found that his friend was accused.

"You're crazy," he told the police sergeant. "I'm a lawyer—you know me—I'm Paul Hutchins—I'll defend him—make you look like a fool. Or we'll sue you for false arrest—how in hell do you dare—"

"Take it easy," I suggested. I told the sergeant of our encounter with the killer who had tried to abduct Hutchins.

"I damn near got him," I said.

Robette just sat and stared. For all Hutchins' expostulations, that police sergeant stuck to his guns.

"This maniac killer—whatever the hell he is," the sergeant declared doggedly, "is here this afternoon. Then he's in Brooklyn—the Bronx—here again—an' now you've lost him in Central Park. I don't give a damn about that. I don't know anything about this case yet, an' you don't either."

Well, he was right enough on that. Then Hutchins declared he'd get bail for Robette at once.

"I don't want it," Robette suddenly murmured numbly. "They—there will be more of this—more of these horrible murders—I'll be safer in jail."

For a while, Dot and I stood together, watching the turmoil of the police and reporters who now were coming in droves. And I found myself with my arm around my little sister. My own feelings startled me. Heaven knows we've been in a lot of weird cases together—but somehow this one seemed to have a menace that suggested the supernatural. A fiend—somebody—or *something*—that could be anywhere—or everywhere at once. I guess everybody felt it. The sergeant still wrangling with Hutchins, looked sweating and uneasy.

Young Lee Johnson, more pallid than ever, was still backed against the wall, with eyes roving the crowded room.

And I held Dot. It was as though some damnable unseen thing might be lurking here among us now.

"We'll take it easy on this—watch our step," I murmured. "Don't you make a move without telling me first, Dot."

"Okay," she agreed. And flashed me her whimsical little smile. Then I saw that she was eyeing me. "You—you feel all right, George?"

I guess we both felt as though one or the other of us might suddenly blacken, with trickling blood, tottering, falling to make another of the grisly corpses. . . .

The lower rooms were crowded with excited people. Out in the garden, policemen were poking around with flashlights. Whatever trail that killer might have left in the snow as he hid himself in Hutchins' car was obliterated now.

Suddenly I was aware that young Lee Johnson had slipped from the room. I left Dot talking with a couple of policemen. The lower floor of the big mansion was in

a turmoil, but the investigation didn't seem to have progressed upstairs as yet. The big Baronial hall at the moment was deserted. I moved along it to where a big padded curving staircase led upward. And suddenly at the top of the stairs I glimpsed a swiftly moving figure—*young Lee Johnson!* He was just ducking into the upper hall!

Two steps at a time I went up that padded staircase after him. But at the top I paused. It wasn't my idea to seize him. I wanted to find out what he was after. . . . The upper hall was wide, dim and carpeted, with a vista of bedroom doors. Johnson was just turning a distant angle; and as I ran softly forward, I saw him dart into an open doorway.

It seemed the back of the house: the servants' rooms, with a small steep staircase at the end of the hall, that led downward, perhaps into the kitchen. Johnson had hastily swung the door after him. But it hadn't closed; it was ajar.

For a minute I stood listening at the crack of the door. There was no sound. Through the vertical slit I could see that the bedroom was solidly black. Then I heard Johnson's soft footsteps; and a creaking, as though he had opened a drawer or a wardrobe door. What was he doing in this dark bedroom of Robette's home? Looking for something? Or planting something? He was using a flashlight now—I could see its moving sheen. Cold air was coming out the crack, as though the bedroom window were open.

For a moment I waited. Then, automatic in hand, I quietly swung the door and went in.

"I've got you, Johnson," I said softly.

LEE JOHNSON dropped the flashlight, which was extinguished, and in the blackness he leaped at me, his body striking me so that I went backward. I didn't shoot; I certainly had no intention of killing him out of hand. For a minute we

stood swaying, fighting. His fist hit me quite a clip, but I came back with a left hand jab. Then we broke apart. There was a dim light behind us; I guess he could see me. But I couldn't see him. He had jumped backward, crouching down on the floor by the window where the shade not fully drawn down, was flopping in the wind. Dimly I could make out a bed; a wardrobe. Women's garments on a chair. The bedroom of the murdered maid, *Jeanne Cartier!* I got that impression, and I was right—that's what it was.

In that stricken second I could hear Johnson panting over by the window.

"Take it easy," I murmured. "I've got a gun—I can drill you, if you insist."

"Why—good Lord—you Roberts?" I saw the blob of him rise up. He hadn't known, in his startled terror at my sudden entrance, who I was. "You, Roberts—"

Beside me there was a rustle. From the inky blackness behind the wardrobe, a blob rose up. A third occupant of the dark bedroom! It took me wholly by surprise. A fist hit my wrist, so that my automatic clattered away. Then like a missile hurled from a catapult, this new antagonist's body struck me. I went backward and down.

Ordinarily I'm pretty good at a rough and tumble fight, but this one, for me, got started all wrong. As I went down, with what I could feel was a heavy, powerful man on top of me, my head struck a corner of the iron bedstead—a crack that made everything blaze for a second with colored lights. I didn't quite pass out. Above the roaring in my ears, I heard my adversary's grim chuckle:

"Two at once—fair enough."

Was he strangling me? Or pawing at the sleeve of my jacket? The maniacal killer! My second encounter with him already! He had come here, after escaping me in Central Park—come here, climbing in this second floor open window—

"The end of you—" he was gloating.

But my strength must have been rapidly coming back. I could feel myself struggling with him; then I had him by his hair. And suddenly I was aware that young Johnson had leaped on him from behind, so that all three of us were entangled on the floor.

It was a brief but weird struggle with that unseen killer. He had a damnable strength. I felt him knock Johnson away. And Johnson didn't come back. In the blackness I heard a cry burst from him—a ghastly indescribable, choking cry. Then there was the sound of his body as it fell with a thump.

I think that with my dizzily roaring head, in another minute the murderous fiend would have had me. But quite evidently he didn't realize it. Or he felt, quite rationally, that the noise of this turmoil would be bringing the police up here. I still had him by what seemed a thick crop of hair; and suddenly he heaved himself off me.

I was struggling to my feet as he dashed for the window, jerked up its shade and jumped out. There was a thump as he landed on a roof a few feet below the sill. The roof of a little black verandah, as I saw when I dizzily got to the window a second later. Already he had jumped from the verandah to the ground. I had a vague glimpse of him—just a scurrying blob—as he ducked through the dark backyard, out a back gate and into an alley that led to the other street.

"Maniacal sadist nabbed by George Roberts." That would have been a nice headline, but again he had escaped me! . . .

I turned back to the bedroom. "Johnson—are you hurt badly?"

There was a little city sheen, pallid from the outside snow, coming in the window. I could see young Johnson lying on the floor. I lighted my flashlight; turned it upon him.

Ghastly sight! He was dead! His face, his hands, his chest where his shirt had

been torn away—all his flesh was puffed, blue-black, with horrible contusions. And everywhere the blood was oozing from his distended pores.

Another of the ghastly corpses, with his popping eyeballs and eyesockets bleeding as though with tears of blood!

A bit of dirty, crumpled paper, wadded into a ball, lay on the floor. I snatched it up. In the clenched fingers of my right hand I was holding a few strands of brick-red hair. And beside the corpse of Lee Johnson on the floor, a hairbrush was lying—a queer-looking hair-brush with bristles of gleaming copper wire!

CHAPTER THREE

A Medical Angle

THE fiend had gotten away for the second time that night. We searched the neighborhood; but in a big city like New York, if you give anybody a five minute start it's like looking for a needle in a haystack.

I didn't tell anyone but Dot about those brick-red hairs I had snatched from the murderer's head. Nor about the little wadded ball of paper I had found. I had them carefully put away; and I kept the hairbrush in my pocket. Was it the implement by which these ghastly deaths were produced? We had no way, as yet, of saying.

I imagine it was about midnight that night when Dot and I got out of the turmoil of Robette's home, where three victims—Jeanne Cartier, William Carruthers and young Lee Johnson—had in a few hours been killed.

In our apartment in midtown New York—it wasn't far from Robette's—we spent half the night pondering the grisly puzzle. What possible connection could those victims have with each other? William Carruthers was the owner of a big candy factory in upper New York City, near the Westchester line. His head-bookkeeper—

a middle-aged woman—had been found a mangled corpse. Two people in a candy factory. What had that to do with Robette's maid? Young Lee Johnson had been Jeanne's boy friend. But the policeman in Brooklyn, and a young girl, found in a movie theatre in the Bronx seemed totally disconnected.

The radio, now at one A. M. was still carrying lurid news of the affair at Robette's; the newspapers blared headlines.

Paul Hutchins, the lawyer, had gone with the police when they took the still-numbered Robette to the Station House. Hutchins would have arranged bail; but old Robette refused it. Was he afraid that he would be the next victim?

"Or maybe it's a pose," I said to Dot. "That red-headed villain—I damn near caught him twice. Maybe he's an accomplice—and Robette the real fiend. That's what the police think—"

"Let's look at those red hairs," Dot suggested. "You pulled them from the head of the killer. That at least, is helpful."

In our laboratory we put the hairs under a microscope. They were the brick-red type; natural color; slightly, naturally wavy. Healthy hair, from what we guessed was a youngish man.

So much for that and it wasn't much. We had inquired—no servant at Robette's was red-headed. None of them knew any red-headed man. We had even already shot a few telephone calls. No red-headed man seemed connected with the Brooklyn policeman, nor the girl who had died in the Bronx movie theatre.

Then Dot and I examined the hairbrush. It had a hard wooden handle and base, with copper wire bristles embedded in rubber. Queer-looking affair. The shape was unusual; the wood was not lacquered. There was no maker's imprint. The thing evidently was homemade; but even so it didn't look crude. We tested it for fingerprints; nothing showed up but smudges.

"Easy!" I cautioned Dot. "Good God—

don't let those bristles prick your hands!"

Under the microscope the copper wire bristles showed with beveled ends. The wire was burnished—pretty flexible, annealed wire; and cleanly gleaming. So far as we could see under our most powerful lenses, there was no blood, no poison on those wire bristles. I pulled one out. We tested it chemically. Apparently there was nothing.

"Maybe the brush hasn't a damn thing to do with the case," I told Dot.

And what had Lee Johnson gone up to that bedroom for? Was it to find that little crumpled ball of paper? The police already had searched the dead girl's possessions, of course. But I could imagine that Johnson had had some information from Jeanne; he had found that paper in her bedroom—had dropped it when I jumped on him.

DOT and I had already glanced at the fragment of paper. We spread it before us now. It was a soiled bit of cheap notepaper, crumpled, diagonally torn; scribbled with pencilled notes. It read:

"Possibly a crystalline concentrate to be. . . . C₁₆ H₂₀ O₄ N₈ . . . add Nitrate of. . . ."

The diagonal tear obliterated the rest of it.

A chemical formula. Of what? The word "*possibly*" suggested a proposed experimentation. Was this something that the murderer had been working on a long time ago? The soiled and dirty fragment of paper suggested age.

The notes were scrawled on both sides. The other side read:

"Aqueous solution to be heated to boiling point, then add St. N. . . . This with Digatalin . . . St. N.—Chonhno—in ultra concentrate where normal apothecary dose 1/30 grain would be 1/500 grain, with Strophanthin in equal concentrate deadly at 1/1000 grain dosage. . . . Also try Caff. Cit. as alternate. . . ."

Nothing that I could recognize offhand. We got out our copy of the Pharmacopia and searched it. . . . $C_{16}H_{20}O_4N_8$. . . I couldn't identify any such chemical.

"Ever heard of St. N.?" Dot demanded.

I never had. And the Pharmacopia gave us no clue. Chonhno was equally meaningless.

Digitalin suggested Digitalis—which has, even in extremely small doses, a powerful action on the heart. And Strophanthin we located—a drug of extremely poisonous nature with a safe dosage of only 1/120th grain!

I went and saw Johnson's body the next day. In the ghastly puffed, blackened bloody flesh of his neck there was what seemed a slash. Or a jab. Had he been jabbed by a poisoned weapon? I recalled that the fiend had seemed to be trying to get at the flesh of my arm. To slash it with this hairbrush? That seemed impossible.

Dot made some progress that next day. On the floor of the movie theatre in the Bronx where the girl's body was found, a little white crinkled paper had been discovered.

"The Carruthers Candy Company wrap their chocolates in paper like that," she told me that evening.

The police were working along the same lines. The newspapers now were carrying headlines about poisoned candy. . . .

That evening, the lawyer Paul Hutchins, telephoned us. He had been in touch with us pretty constantly; he was himself working on the thing, because he was determined to exonerate Robette. . . .

"This sadism angle—that's all police talk," he insisted. "Something went wrong in that candy factory. Robette's as innocent as you are."

BUT Paul Hutchins evidently, in his heart wasn't as confident as he talked. Lawyers are that way. Hutchins himself was frightened. In his suburban home, he

had two hired flatfeet for guards—one at his bedroom door, one outside his window. We couldn't blame him for that, Heaven knows. The red-headed killer—whether a tool of Robette or not—was still loose. And he was still striking. A child this time. A little Italian girl was found lying in the gutter of a lower New York street—her body the same horrible mass of contusions with blood oozing from the pores. . . .

There had been police autopsies now. What they disclosed, if anything, Dot and I didn't know. I must say, that evening which was destined to be the end of the ghastly affair, I was almost afraid to let Dot out of my sight. The fiend knew that we were working on the case. Would he strike at us. *At Dot?* That got me. I'm not unduly imaginative, but the mental picture of my little sister as she would look lying in that grisly death—it gave me the shudders. . . .

But we had done a lot of routine investigating; we couldn't always be together. I had seen Hutchins again that afternoon at his law office. He was still nursing his swollen eye, that shiner he had gotten in the automobile when the killer abducted him. I showed him the hairbrush, but he had no idea what it could mean. Then I went with him to call on Mrs. Carruthers, widow of the candy manufacturer. And that led to nothing.

Then I got track of a red-headed young man who at least seemed to have some vague connection with the affair.

"There's a lot of red-headed young men in New York," Dot said as we had dinner alone in our apartment that night. "What's this one's name?"

"Bob March. He used to work in the Carruthers Factory. And before that he was a chemist's assistant. A drugstore downtown. I'm going down to see that chemist. You know damn well, Dot, that there's a medical angle to this thing."

Well, I left her—alone there in our

apartment. "But don't go out," I told her.

She stared at me. "I thought you and I were detectives," she drawled. "You've many times said I'd have made a good gunmoll if I hadn't decided crime doesn't pay—" Dear little Dot—she gave me her whimsical grin. "Am I a detective or a fifteen-year-old sub-deb?"

"But this case is different," I retorted.

It was different—no argument on that. I'd certainly never felt like this before about Dot.

"If I go out," she said, "I'll leave a message for you on our recorder. Or I'll phone one in."

We have a little phonograph-recording gadget on our telephone which takes messages when you telephone in and we're not home.

"You stay here," I insisted. "I won't be long."

I left her sitting there in our living room. Dot wasn't frightened. This killer struck so unexpectedly. And he seemed everywhere at once—everywhere, and nowhere—like a menace supernatural that lurks in every shadow. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Call for Help

DOT sat down, pondering the ghastly affair. Was Robette, sitting now in jail, the real killer, with a band of murderous thugs, whom he had hired to spread death throughout the city? Robette, maniacal sadist, shuddering with a thrill at his own danger that this grisly thing might be tracked down to him? And thrilled with sadistic gloating joy that because of his cleverness, a whole city was in terror?

Our apartment has rather an unusual layout. We're on the ground floor of a big apartment building, in a sort of small side wing so that our rooms occupy it all, with windows on both sides opening onto a dark secluded little garden. We have

our own private entrances back and front, with a driveway for cars that leads to two streets—one way out through a big parking lot.

Dot had all our window shades fully down. For a while she played the radio. Then a news commentator came on, with more talk of the "Tortured Corpses. . . ."

Abruptly the ringing of our front doorbell brought Dot to her feet. She shut off the radio. At one of the windows a mirror shows who is at the door. A tall thin stooped figure was there now—a man with a big black felt hat, a black overcoat with an old-fashioned flowing cape hanging from its shoulders. He was ringing insistently. Our entrance light shone on his face—an old man with scraggly white hair; his face sunken-cheeked.

Dot slipped her automatic into the pocket of her shirt and went to the door.

"You—are you Miss Roberts?" His voice was thin, cracked with senility.

"I am Dorothy Roberts."

"May I come in?"

For a second she hesitated. "It's important," he urged.

"Come in," she said impulsively. She closed the door after him, and he shakily sat down in one of our big leather chairs.

"I'm an inventor," he said. Then his gaze swept the room, darted over to the door of our interior hallway and then back to her face. "Are we alone here, Miss Roberts?"

She ignored the question. His trembling hand went suddenly to his pocket. That made Dot stiffen; made her hand dart for her automatic. But he only seemed fumbling for a cigar. "Could I have a match, please?" he added. "Really, I've very upset. I can't explain—I'm sorry—"

If he thought that experienced little sister of mine would bend over him and light his cigar, he was much mistaken. Dot was on her feet, watching him narrowly. And she tossed a folder of matches to his lap.

"Oh—thank you," he said.

"WHAT did you come to see me for?" she demanded as he tremblingly lighted his cigar.

"To see you—and your brother. Your brother isn't here? That's too bad. You see my name is Ezra Thomas—I'm an inventor—"

"So you said," Dot agreed. Was the senile old fellow really confused, trying to collect his aged thoughts? Or was he sparring for time? Dot suddenly felt her heart pounding; despite the automatic in her pocket she was sorry now that she had admitted this weird visitor.

"I'm looking—" he said abruptly, "you see—I've mislaid a hairbrush—"

That made Dot's heart leap, you can imagine. "I'll pay you well," he was stammering—"you and your brother. If you have found it—you could return it to me—a lot of money for you, Miss Roberts. You see, I don't want—"

That last word seemed to stick in his throat. He didn't rise from the chair. His legs jerked; all of him seemed galvanized, with a quiver as though some ghastly force were unloosed within him. And then before Dot's horrified gaze he had turned blue-black, his flesh suddenly bloated, with blood oozing from it!

All in a second or two. And in the chair now he was slumped—a ghastly corpse, with blood-foam at his mouth, blood trickling from his ears, and his goggling popping eyes drooling crimson!

The dim silent living room whirled around Dot with the rush of her horror. And abruptly she heard a click. The room lights went out. With the drawn shades the place was suddenly dark. Dot may have had time to draw her automatic; but she certainly had no time to use it. From under the light-switch which was close to our inner hall door, a dark figure rose up! The red-headed killer! His heavy body knocked her backward; his hand

caught her wrist, twisted the gun away.

"Easy sister," he chuckled. "I've got you." But she fought; and with a snarl of rage he flung her down, cuffing her. "You little damn fool—want me to kill you—"

"Yes—go ahead—" she panted.

"Well I won't—I can't—not yet—my boss wants your brother too—"

He was tearing at Dot's waist now as she lay limp.

"Stop that!" she murmured sharply. "We've made a lot of noise—you'll be caught here—"

That brought him to his senses. "By God you're right," he muttered. "Come on—get up. Got to get you out of here."

He jerked her to her feet, with the automatic muzzle jabbed against her breast where her blouse was torn away.

IF ONLY I could have been psychic, to have known what was happening in our own home to that little sister I loved so dearly! But I didn't know. And at that moment I was down on the lower East side of the city, in the apothecary shop where I understood the red-headed Bob March had formerly worked. The old apothecary closed his shop promptly when I told him I was a detective working on the case that they were calling the "Tortured Corpses." He led me to his little back room.

"I want you to help me identify some chemicals," I said without much preamble. "What, for instance, is Chonhno?"

He stared at me. "What?"

I wrote it down.

"That's absolutely new to me," he said as he studied it. He was an earnest old fellow—one of those old-fashioned kind. Obviously he was frightened at my visit.

"Chonhno?" he repeated. "If that's a drug, my goodness I've certainly never heard of it." He reached for his big volume of *Pharmacopia*, but I stopped him.

"I looked for it; not in there," I said.

"How about St. N.? What's that stand for, if anything?"

That stumped him also. Then I wrote down $C_{16} H_{20} O_4 N_8$. "Ever heard of that?" I demanded.

He pondered it. I'm a pretty good judge of character. It didn't seem to me that this old fellow could possibly have any guilty knowledge of the case.

I saw him start with surprise. "That?" he suddenly murmured. "Why good Heavens—Why that reminds me of something—it certainly does—"

"Of what?" I prompted. "Is that a known drug?"

"No—no, I don't think it is. But it reminds me—two years ago—a young man who worked for me—"

"A red-headed fellow," I interjected promptly. "That's one of the main things I came to see you about, Dr. Arton—"

He was trembling now. "Is there—is there a red-headed young man mixed up in that ghastly murder business?"

"Nothing less," I retorted. "Brick-red hair. Short, Stocky. Powerful build—"

"Bob March!" he murmured. Then he told me all he knew. He said that; and I believe it. Two years ago this Bob March had seemed to be experimenting. The old apothecary had seen several queer-looking memorandums that March had made. . . .

"You've got them now?" I demanded.

"No—I never had them. But with that $C_{16} H_{20} O_4 N_8$, you remind me. March was always very interested in $C_8 H_{10} O_2 N_4 H_2O$ —you see the connection? Half as many atoms! and that's Caffeina—he was always so mysteriously interested in Caffeina—"

I am no chemist. But still I have dabbled on the edges of it a bit. For an hour the excited old Dr. Arton and I worked with the Pharmacopia and our own imaginative wits to decipher those fragments of formulae. Caffeine. . . . In its concentrate, a powerful heart stimulant. . . . And then we hit upon March's scribbled

St.N. "Why my goodness," the old apothecary exclaimed. "I have it now! That's his shortening of Strych. Nitras. Strychnine!"

Another powerful heart drug! With a normal dosage—as March's memorandum said—of 1/30th grain, to be raised by what diabolical chemical combination we could not say, into something that would be a lethal dose at only 1/500th grain!

And Strychnine is $C_{21} H_{22} O_2 N_2 HNO_3$. Another of March's abbreviations! Chonhno!

THEY were grim medical visions indeed, which our minds presently conjured! Drugs here—or the implication of new derivatives to be obtained from them—which in concentrated lethal doses might war one with the other—chaotic battle in the human circulatory system! Digatalin—some concentrate-variety of Digatalis, doubtless. . . . Caffeine, to have its atoms doubled for a new weird drug. . . . Strophanthin, and Strychnine. . . .

Then at last we had the ghastly picture. Warring drugs. . . . A sudden dilation of the heart. . . . An instant and horrible raising of the blood-pressure. A sudden loss of resiliency of the walls of every blood-vessel—heart, arteries, veins and capillaries. . . . Blood under horrible pressure—like water penned up in pipes suddenly fragile. . . . A ghastly explosion—heart bursting—every blood-vessel bursting, suffusing the flesh so that it darkened, with a simulation of bruises and contusions—puffed and swollen, and with blood forced out of every pore! . . .

"Well," I said at last. "This fellow March was evidently a medical genius, only his talents went in the wrong direction."

What connection did March have with the dead Jeanne Cartier, that his formula-notes might have been in her possession? The old apothecary helped me with an answer to that.

"Jeanne Cartier?" he said. "Well I never heard of her, but I do remember that he had a young French girl in love with him. He was trying to get rid of her—he wouldn't marry her. I never did like that March boy—"

"Can I use your phone?" I said. "Want to call my sister," I was triumphant.

There was a click as the connection was made. Then I heard a blur of sound. Our phonograph-recording gadget! I stiffened, with that dim apothecary shop whirling around me as I listened to the jumble from our recorder. And then there was the muttering mumble of Dot's recorded voice: "*Don't kill me! . . . Taking me to the Candy Factory—what for? . . . you damnable. . .*" Then it squealed as the needle had jumped its track. And with our automatic mechanism, in a moment it switched back and began again: "*Don't kill me—*"

I must have been in a daze as I got away from the startled old apothecary and rushed from his shop. Then I was in my car, which I had parked at the corner. . . . It was a long drive from downtown up through the city, into the Northern Hudson section near the Westchester line where the Carruthers Manufacturing Candy Company was located. I guess I broke all speed records. But though I was dazed with horror when I started, I had all my wits when I got there. This was no time to blunder, with Dot in the hands of the killer. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Murderer's Ghastly Chemistry

THE Carruthers Factory was a low, rambling wooden building at the end of a lonely street which was mostly empty, wooded lots, with a railroad siding in a patch of woods beside it. I parked my car quite a distance away; went forward on foot. The place was solidly black and

silent, pallid with a faint sheen from the trampled snow in the yard.

Were Dot and her captor here? I crept up to one of the big lower windows. There was nothing to see but big piles of white cardboard candy boxes—evidently a store-room. Was I too late? Would I find Dot here—another of those ghastly corpses?

With this new line of vision it seemed that from behind one of the distant box-piles a dim glow of yellow light was coming—as though a tiny night-light were burning somewhere back there. I found a lower door, here by the side window. My skeleton key opened it. Cautiously I went in, closed it after me.

No need to prowl further! Within ten feet of the door a figure lay on the floor, partly under the table. The whole eerie, silent interior blurred with my flood of horror as I thought that it was Dot.

But it wasn't. With a rush of thankfulness I stooped, saw that it was a man. A little sheen of illumination straggled on him from the distant night-light. It was an amazing disclosure. The body here was another of the bluish-black ghastly corpses, crimsoned with oozing blood still wet. A youngish, stocky, powerful fellow, with a bristling shock of brick-red hair.

Bob March! The killer—meeting his own death here in the same horrible fashion as his victims! The dead hand gripped a square of paper. I stooped—saw the scrawled pencilled writing. . . . The signature at the bottom—Bob March. . . . He had killed himself. And here was his confession—I glanced at its beginning—"I am going to end it before you get me—"

Rambling, incoherent stuff. I saw that there was a mention of Robette—a declaration that Robette was innocent. . . .

I suppose that I had been kneeling there under the table beside the gruesome corpse of March for only a few seconds and suddenly I stiffened. A little black object was lying in a nearby aisle. My heart pounded with horror as I went to it.

One of Dot's little shoes! It was a tiny, strapless shoe. I knew she could slip it off with the toe of the other foot. Was it pointing to this cross-aisle, telling me to follow?

I hadn't gone more than a dozen feet when I came upon her other shoe. . . . I was at a room partition now, with a little door. I shoved. It opened. Creaked a little. . . . Another dim room of piled candy boxes and big, brown cardboard shipping cartons. On the floor here Dot was lying bound and gagged—Dot with her blouse torn, her face pallid. But a rush of thankfulness swept me—Dot wasn't one of those ghastly black and crimson things; she was alive, mouthing her gag, twitching frantically at her bonds to warn me!

There was no time for me to do anything. Beside me a huge pile of candy boxes heaved outward, engulfing me. What little light was in the room suddenly was extinguished—but I had a fleeting glimpse of a big blob of man's figure hurling itself at me.

My shot through the tumbling mass of boxes went wild. Then the figure struck me and as we fell, my automatic was knocked away. The boxes were heaped upon us; they crushed under us as we threshed. In the darkness I could feel the stalwart power of my antagonist as he rolled me over, sprawling on me, panting as his fingers sought my throat.

And abruptly one of my flailing hands struck his face. Queer. A puffed, swollen eye! . . . A shiner. . . . Memory leaped at me. I gasped, "Why you—Paul Hutchins—by God I know you now—"

IT SO startled him that he sucked in his breath with a gasp; and involuntarily his fingers relaxed on my throat. Then as I threshed, they tightened, shutting off my wind, strangling me. My head was roaring, with spots like a myriad pin-points of light swimming in the darkness

before my eyes. My senses were beginning to fade; and dimly I was aware that the back of my head had struck something as I fell and now was wet with blood.

Paul Hutchins, the lawyer. . . . His weight pinned me. A dim light-shen now was on his face—pallid, sweating face distorted by the swollen eye and by the lust of his murderous rage so that he seemed demoniac.

"So you—know me?" he panted. "Well, that makes no difference now. I certainly had you fooled, didn't I, Roberts? You thought a fiendish killer abducted me in my car—" He chuckled at his cleverness. "That was to be sure I was completely above suspicion. There wasn't anybody but me in that car, Roberts. I hit that tree pretty hard, but it turned out all the better—gave me this black eye as evidence of my encounter with the killer!"

"You damned dirty villain," I gasped.

"But that's only your opinion," he retorted ironically. "Maybe you're thinking of March, not me. March devised the drug, because he wanted to get rid of Jeanne Cartier. He had seduced her—he couldn't shake her. Lee Johnson was after him for that—so we included Johnson in the ones who had to be killed. March thought I was going to make him rich out of this job! He was all wrong! Naturally it has to be blamed on someone—who better for me to blame it on, than March! So I killed him too, and forged a confession for him."

Half of my brain was taking in Hutchins' gloating words. But the other half was thinking of Dot. Vaguely I could see her lying near me, bound and gagged. Was this to be the end of Roberts & Co.? The back of my head was sodden with blood; but the chuckling, murderous lawyer, absorbed now with his own cleverness and his triumph that all his plans had succeeded, was letting me breathe. Strength was coming back to me. But I stopped threshing, lying limp, waiting for a chance

to make a last desperate lunge. "You've—got me," I weakly panted. "You don't have to kill me?"

"Of course I do," he chuckled. "You and your sister were getting a little too active. You never guessed what I could gain by all this, did you? But you met the wife of Carruthers, the candy manufacturer—she's a handsome woman, isn't she? Handsome—and rich, now that her husband is dead. And she's going to marry me—she's loved me for years—she'll never suspect that I killed her husband. That candy company was sold to a rival concern about a week ago, so I didn't mind injuring its reputation with poisoned candy."

RRATIONAL, scheming villain, lavish with murder. . . . I suddenly stiffened under his sprawling body, as in the dimness it seemed that Dot had moved! She was lying partly behind Hutchins. Had she rolled over?

"I'll get a fortune of seventy-five thousand out of Gloria Carruthers," Hutchins was gloating. "But even that wasn't my biggest stake. Georges Robette is a millionaire. He has great confidence in me as a criminal lawyer." Again he gave that conceited, triumphant chuckle. "Robette is well known as a student of torture—and of sadism. So naturally I started this mysterious affair of tortured corpses in Robette's home. Naturally the police arrested him, and what more natural than that I should spring to his defense! He's already paid me a forty thousand dollar retaining fee—little enough—a millionaire with the electric chair facing him. And tomorrow, when the case is ended and I've proved it was only Bob March, poisoning candy out of revenge and hatred for Carruthers who discharged him—my client Robette will be released. Exonerated completely. He's agreed to pay me double forty thousand if I can clear him."

I hardly heard his panting, triumphant

words. The bound and gagged Dot had rolled again. She was close to Hutchins now; and suddenly her little body doubled within its ropes like a jackknife. Then straightened. Her head butted into Hutchins' side. The unexpectedness of it, rather than the force of the blow itself, so startled him that he ripped out a terrified oath and his fingers left my throat as he lunged himself around. And again Dot plunged. It was my opportunity. My head had cleared; and as the startled Hutchins' attention, for a second went to Dot, I heaved him so that he sprawled sideways upon her. He had no time to recover. He tried to twist and come back at me; but I was up; I jabbed with my fist—slammed him down, pounding him.

"Had enough?" I demanded at last. "Yes—yes," he gasped.

I found my automatic; held it on him, and lighted my flash. Vain, glorious, daring murderers are usually cowards at the end. All the gloating triumph was gone from his contorted, pallid face now; there was only terror on it—stark despairing terror. And suddenly he mumbled:

"I never thought it would come to this—that things would go wrong for me—" I saw that his hand had gone to his mouth, but I couldn't stop him. And suddenly as I lifted him to his feet, he sagged against me—noisome, horrible. . . . So horrible that I leaped away and let him fall, with his flesh puffing, darkening with chaotic deranged blood escaping under horrible pressure so that it oozed out, crimson. . . .

At my feet Paul Hutchins lay dead—the last of the ghastly corpses. . . .

THERE is little I need add. The incident of the odd-looking wire-bristle hairbrush for a long time puzzled us. But now that the affairs of old Ezra Thomas, the inventor, have been investigated, and his housekeeper has told us what she suspected, we believe we have the approximate truth of the hairbrush angle. The

aged inventor had been defrauded, apparently, by the unscrupulous Hutchins, of an important industrial formula. Old Thomas now was threatening to retain legal help—to expose Hutchins as a swindler. So Hutchins included the old inventor among those whom March and he must kill.

The hairbrush, it seems, was an inspiration of March alone—a scheme by which, unknown to Hutchins, the cold-blooded young murderer might get additional money for himself. That hairbrush was a model—an invention which old Thomas had newly patented. March stole it. He climbed, that night, into Jeanne Cartier's bedroom to plant the hairbrush. He figured the police would discover it. The thing would get publicity—a danger of involving the old inventor into the ghastly affair, so that Thomas would be frightened. And March could blackmail him, threatening to inform the police of the brush's ownership. The old man, as it happened, responded to March's blackmail threat by taking the matter into his own hands. March had evidently hinted that I had the brush—so Thomas made his mysterious call upon Dot to try and buy it away from us. . . . Hutchins would have contrived to force Dot to lure me to the candy factory. He didn't have to do it! Through Dot's cleverness, I got there quicker than he expected!

I think that about covers the main details of the weird affair. Physicians and research chemists who are working now on March's fragmentary, mysterious formulae—and with the autopsy findings from several of the victims—tell us that undoubtedly the drug was administered in several ways: through the candy, the results of which were left to chance; a jab with a poisoned needle, doubtless in the case of Lee Johnson when he fought to aid me in the darkness of that bedroom. And in the case of Carruthers and old Thomas—both of whom habitually were taking medicine—by a gelatine capsule or something of the kind, with a coating requiring a considerable time to dissolve in the stomach.

The exact details of the drug-concentrates are still being investigated. But in the main, the old apothecary and I worked out the thing with a pretty fair exactitude. This ghastly raising of the blood pressure to burst all the vessels of the circulatory system, interests the medical men very much. They say they are ready now to demonstrate an exact duplication of March's horrible results. Dot and I have an invitation for tomorrow night—to go to the Laboratories of the American Society of Research Medicine. They tell us we are to see a guinea pig meet its death in super-modern style.

We're not going.

THE END



BE KIND!



Be considerate! Don't cough in public places. Carry with you Smith Brothers Cough Drops. (Two kinds—Black or Menthol, 5¢.)

Smith Bros. Cough Drops are the only drops containing VITAMINA

This is the vitamin that raises the resistance of the mucous membranes of the nose and throat to cold infections.

The PHANTOM SWEATSHOP

CHAPTER ONE

Two Assigned to Die!

AT APPROXIMATELY the same hour on the same day Detective-Lieutenant Edward 'Red' McNally and Kay Edwards, his fiancée received assignments from their respective superiors which were destined to lead them both into a maelstrom of unbelievable horror. Kay, down in the insane cacophony that was the *Evening Herald's* city room, received her assignment first.

Maurice Conway, the city editor, sum-

moned her to his huge horseshoe-shaped desk. For an instant he studied her narrowly from beneath his green eyeshade.

"You'll do," he said quietly, then. He was a small, singularly homely man with closed-cropped, grizzled hair, and a wistful, boyish smile. He smiled now. "It beats all, the shapes the good Lord puts on some of our girls nowadays. You're perfect as you are, kid, but if you weighed an ounce less you'd look half-starved. It's fine breedin' and small bones, I suppose."

He began to make doodle-marks on his blotter with a blue pencil. Kay smiled and waited.

"With a little blue make-up on your cheeks and under your eyes, you'd look as though you hadn't had a square meal in a month," Conway mused. "And in shabby, cheap clothes. . . ."



A Vivid Novelette of
Twentieth Century Slavery

by THORP McCLUSKY

Kay Edwards' city editor sent her to find the hideous reason for five female corpses floating in the river, nude—and she did. But no one would ever have known what Kay learned if Lieutenant Red McNally hadn't dared to face the Zombie-Maker singlehanded!



Red, helpless, saw that they were living zombies—and Kay was there among them!

“Kay,” he continued, “I think we’ve got a chance to make a scoop and bust up something pretty rotten in this town. I’m talking about that phantom sweatshop.”

Kay nodded. She knew all about it.

Wherever informed persons gathered the talk drifted, sooner or later, to the sinister, shadowy industry that was flooding the state with illegally manufactured dress goods. Unethical store-owners were offering ladies’ and misses’ garments at

prices below the cost of production. And the public bought. For the garments were invariably well-made—of good materials—and the average person will take advantage of a bargain, even if he vaguely suspects that that bargain is made possible only through some other, unknown person's misery.

The Interstate Commerce Commission was powerless to act, for the unsavory industry operated only within the boundaries of the state. Officially the State Labor Commission knew nothing of the industry, for there had been no complaints, and the bootleg business was obviously operated by some ostensibly respectable concern. . . .

Kay spoke slowly. "I think I know what you're driving at, Mr. Conway. You want to send a spy into that sweatshop—somebody who can get evidence from the inside."

Conway nodded, his grey eyes grim. "Wherever that factory is—and I'll admit that I'm as much in the dark about the answer to that one as you are—it has to hire help. Where does that help come from? It isn't recruited through advertisements. My guess is that it's picked from pauper families living in the south side slum district—girls and women too ignorant even to realize that they're being exploited. Now," and he picked up a typewritten slip of paper, "here is a list of definitely shady employment agencies located in that section. And here is a list of slum rooming houses." He hesitated, and his tired grey eyes lifted slowly to Kay's face. "Understand, I'm not ordering you to take this assignment. It will certainly be unpleasant, and it may be dangerous, too; that damned sweatshop is coining money. You may refuse the assignment, if you wish."

"I thought you knew me better than that," Kay said levelly.

Conway, smiling gently, pushed the slips of paper across the desk. "I do,

Kay," he quietly murmured. "I do . . ."

TWENTY minutes later Kay, acutely conscious of a flat, .25 calibre automatic pistol strapped on the inside of her right thigh—Conway had insisted that she take the weapon—was standing in front of the cashier's grille drawing her expense money. Forty blocks away, on the second floor of Police Headquarters, Red McNally was sitting before Chief Lockwood's ponderous oaken desk, listening to the chief punctuate terse, crisp sentences with stabs of a muscular forefinger.

"Fishing a drowned woman out of the river once in awhile is no novelty," Chief Lockwood was saying grimly, "but five of 'em inside of six weeks is too much. They're natural deaths; they're drownings; no marks of violence on any of 'em; they look like suicides, and the papers think they're suicides, and we thought so too, for awhile, but we know now they ain't.

"We know they ain't because some smart bird over in the morgue noticed that they all had bits of colored thread in their hair and under their nails and in their clothes. And ravelings from cloth. And then Doc Hanlon remembered that some of 'em had needle pricks in their fingertips, and he went back and looked at 'em all. By God, they *all* had needle pricks in their fingers, only some more than others.

"And that ain't the only similarity, either. They're all strays; there ain't a one of 'em that had any family connections worth mentionin'. Good grief—two of 'em ain't even been identified yet!

"McNally," he mumbled, "It doesn't take any Sherlock Holmes to figure this thing out. When we find the man who's operating that phantom sweatshop we'll find the man who murdered those girls—or had 'em murdered. Don't ask me how it was done; Doc Hanlon's stumped. All he says is that the cause of death in all

cases was drownin'. And why were those girls done in? Probably because the big boss got suspicious they were going to tip off the authorities about what was going on in his nice little hell. Jeez—if I ever get my hands on that bird!"

He paused, then went on, more calmly, "That's your job, McNally—to locate that hell-factory. It won't be any cinch, because for all we know the damned affair may move around faster than a flea on a dog's back. Most likely it does just that; what do they need for operation anyway—besides a few dozen sewing machines and an empty loft? They can pack up and move the whole outfit in an hour.

"You're on your own time now, McNally. You're under nobody's orders but mine. If you want help you've only to requisition it. But I want you to find that sweatshop. Grogan will give you the files on the case. That's all—and good luck!"

He heaved his two hundred and twenty pounds of bone and iron-hard muscles to his feet, and extended his hand across the broad, scarred desk. Red grasped it, then turned and quietly left the great gaunt room.

Back in his own little cubicle in a corner of the Detective Bureau with a half dozen folders before him, and his stubby briar pipe going nicely, Red set to work. Most of the fragmentary evidence which concerned the phantom sweatshop was new to him, or at best merely hearsay; the case had only just been transferred to Homicide. Red knew that his first job was to familiarize himself with every detail of that mass of evidence.

At one o'clock, with the germ of a possible plan of action beginning to take definite shape in his brain, he picked up the telephone to call Kay. It was their custom to lunch together whenever possible. There was a little restaurant across the square from the Herald Building which specialized in Irish stew.

The *Herald's* switchboard operator told Red that Miss Edwards had gone out on an assignment, but that she would call in at five o'clock.

Red told the switchboard operator who he was, and the girl giggled and promised to tell Kay that he had called.

"Well, that's that," Red thought, as he hung up and walked over to get his hat from the wall rack. "The beanery for me this noon. Tonight Kay and I'll go someplace nice and have a real meal."

Farthest from his mind was any thought that Kay would fail to telephone him at five—that she had already vanished more completely than as if she were dead!

CHAPTER TWO

The Phantom of Slavery

KAY, jaunty and slim in her boyishly tailored suit, whimsical hat, sheer silk-en stockings and alligator-skin shoes, turned to the left as she came from the Herald Building and, after walking two blocks toward the river, walked into Moe Bloom's combined pawnshop and ladies' and gents' used clothing emporium.

She remained in Moe's twenty minutes. When she departed, even her own mother would have had difficulty in recognizing her. She wore a shapeless, shabby, cloth coat, a cheap cotton dress, twenty cent stockings revealing several runs; and scarred, resoled shoes. She carried an imitation-leather purse—obviously not new—and a yellow-glazed, paper suitcase. Her cheeks looked sunken, her dark eyes looked haggard and desperate, and her hat was an abomination.

She walked several blocks further into the south-side slums, entered one of the rooming houses on Conway's list, selected a two dollar room and paid a week's rent in advance. Leaving her suitcase in the room, she regained the street and began her round of the shady employment agencies. It was then about eleven o'clock.

The first two places she picked were obviously not connected with her assignment. They merely listed positions open, and the salaries: busboys, domestic servants, scrub-women, house-to-house canvassers, and so forth, salaries from five to eighteen dollars per week. No garment workers needed. However, an innocuous notice posted on the cracked blackboard in front of the third place, seemed worth investigating. The scrawl said:

*Girls—Women
Piecework—dressgoods factory
Steady employment
Good Pay*

It lacked half an hour until noon, and Kay rarely lunched before one o'clock. Making a mental note to telephone Red before one, Kay walked into the agency.

The place was little more than a hole in the wall. A wooden railing divided the room into halves, one reserved for men, the other women. The bewildered and unfortunate flotsam of humanity who entered this place sat listlessly on long bare benches ranged along the opposite walls; two railed-in desks at the rear of the room were presided over by a ponderous and flaccid female, and an equally fat, greasy looking man who chewed incessantly on an unlighted cigar.

Kay wrote down a fictitious name, her slum address and personal history, on the application blank which an apathetic girl gave her. She found a vacant seat on the bench, sat down and waited.

She did not have to wait long. Although there were a half dozen girls and women ahead of her, the name she had written down was the next one to be called.

"Miss Reed!"

For a split-second the name didn't register, then Kay stood up and walked down the room. The grossly obese woman pointed to a chair, and Kay sat down.

"It says here you're from out of town,"

the woman said abruptly. Her voice was harsh, metallic.

"Yes, m'am," Kay said humbly.

"You been at that rooming house long?"

"Just today," Kay admitted. "I came to town to look for a job."

The woman's fat lips curled in a mirthless smile. "What'll you do if you don't get a job? Go back home?"

Kay shook her head.

"I gotta get a job. I don't get along with my folks; they don't want me around any more. I can't go back home."

The woman's eyes stared at her, black-pupiled, inscrutable, like the eyes of a snake. Slowly, rhythmically, she nodded her head. She rose heavily to her feet, and, with a curt, "Wait here," waddled over to the man. There was a brief, whispered conversation, and then the man nodded. The woman returned to her own chair and ponderously reseated herself.

"Didja ever do machine sewing?"

Kay, striving to hide the exultation that seethed in her brain, answered with simulated eagerness. "Oh, yes, ma'am! We have a sewing machine at home—"

"It ain't the same," the woman snapped. "But you need a job, and I guess you can learn—" She wrote a name and an address on a pad, tore off the top sheet and handed it to Kay. "Sign here," she directed, pointing to the fine printing on the carbon copy. "And if you get the job, your boss will send us your first week's salary, direct."

Kay took the pen and signed: Mildred Reed. Her hand trembled ever so slightly as she penned the unfamiliar signature.

"All right," the woman said briskly, "if you get right over there now you'll catch Mr. Sargis before he goes to lunch."

Kay bobbed her head and murmured her thanks as the repulsive creature—Kay couldn't think of her as a woman—waved her away. Kay's heart was beating with suppressed excitement; she had seen the

basilisk gleam in the woman's eyes and she knew—*knew*—that she was on the trail of the phantom sweatshop. Even Conway wouldn't expect such immediate success!

BACK on the street, she considered telephoning Red, then shook her head. The address tucked away in her shabby purse was some ten or twelve blocks distant; there wasn't time now. She'd telephone him after seeing Mr. Sargis. The interview wouldn't take long.

Hell must have rocked with laughter as she made that decision!

She walked rapidly along the teeming, blatant street until she came to its end, then she turned off to the left down a narrow, cobbled alley that led toward the river. Here were only the meanest tenements; rearing, windowless warehouses, ramshackle loft buildings and dingy factories. Great trucks rumbled incessantly past. Undernourished children played without laughter on the narrow sidewalks and in the infrequent, tincan littered vacant lots. It was a district to sear one's soul.

The number Kay sought was a one-story concrete structure. On its windows, in faded gilt, was the legend: Schumacher Brewing Co. Directly behind it stood an old brick building, huge as a medieval castle, with blind, boarded windows. No beer was being manufactured in that brewery, Kay knew. Schumacher's had been bankrupt for years.

A square wooden sign attached to the wall of the smaller structure bore the crudely stenciled legend: Sargis Manufacturing Co. Ladies and Misses Wear.

Kay glanced briefly at the sign, opened the door and walked in. She found herself in a small, cheaply furnished anteroom. The rear wall of the anteroom was broken by a door and a tiny, square window. The single word "Information" was printed over the window.

Kay went to the window and presented her employment agency slip to a hard-featured receptionist, who scanned it swiftly. She said, "I'll see if Mr. Sargis will see you." She rose, disappeared through a door which led into the rear of the building. Briefly Kay heard the muffled hum of machinery. Then the girl was back again.

"Okay. Go through that door there and down the corridor. Mr. Sargis' office is the last door on the right."

Kay obeyed. As she passed from the anteroom into the corridor the hum of machinery became more distinct. She walked down the corridor and knocked on the door the girl had specified.

A man's voice said, "Come in," and Kay entered. It was a fair sized room, but it was miserably furnished with a cheap oaken desk and chairs, a motheaten Axminster rug, and a few gaudy chromos that apparently had been hung on the walls in the days when the brewery was in operation.

FOR a long moment the man did not speak, sitting as utterly still and menacing—Kay somehow knew—as a leopard crouching before its spring. His eyes, soot-black and fathomless, slowly surveyed every detail of Kay's appearance—her cheap, worn clothing, her pallid, wan face. Not a muscle in his finely-chiseled, dusky face moved.

Languidly, he lifted a small, exquisitely manicured hand and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he directed. His voice was soft, mellifluous with the age-old culture of lands far east of Suez. Only the faintest shadow of an accent hinted that the language of his birth was not English.

Key, her gaze riveted on the man's face, took the chair he had indicated. Suddenly she realized that he was staring into her eyes with a queer, fixed intensity; the weird, chilling thought that his gaze oddly resembled the basilisk stare of some

great serpent, struck abruptly, warningly, into her brain. She dropped her eyes, and the sensation instantly left her.

A smile flitted across the man's curiously mobile lips, revealed a flashing glimpse of dazzlingly white teeth. It was an oddly impersonal smile, brilliant, emotionless.

"You're not native to this city?"

Kay stiffened. It was the same question the obese creature had asked her in the employment agency! She shook her head.

"No. I've come here to try to—to make my own way—"

The man nodded. "The agency telephoned that you were coming over. Said that you were on your own—that you needed work pretty badly—"

Wordlessly, Kay nodded.

Abruptly the man seemed to come to a decision. "Very well," he said quietly, in that almost hypnotically musical voice of his. "We'll take you on. You'll learn—"

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. Kay saw now that he was a larger man than she had at first thought; he was a trifle over average height, with catlike muscles bulging beneath his tight-fitting, almost foppishly tailored coat. In the lancing sunlight that, striking through the uncurtained window, now touched his head and shoulders, Kay saw that the hair at his temples was definitely grey. She started to rise.

"No, stay where you are," the man purred.

Kay, gripped in that split second by inexplicable fear, slowly sank back in her chair. And suddenly the feel of the flat little automatic strapped inside her right thigh was ineffably comforting! The man walked around from behind his desk, approached Kay. Drawn by some strange fascination she felt powerless to resist, her gaze slowly lifted, met his eyes.

His eyes were like pools of malignant power; black and fathomless. They

seemed to suck her very soul into velvety depths, to sap the strength from her body. Dimly she realized that he was willing her gaze to meet his own, and desperately she tried to look away—and could not. Through swiftly gathering mists she saw his hands—his small, delicate hands—undulating rhythmically in sinuous hypnotic gestures, gestures that reminded her vaguely of pale seaweed sensuously swaying in a black sea. The mists before her eyes swiftly deepened, became an engulfing, abysmal void down which she seemed to be sliding, at first slowly, then faster and faster. A sound like the exploding of a million universes roared in her ears. And then came oblivion. . . .

Sargis stood looking down at the girl, sitting rigidly in her chair, staring with wide open, blind eyes into his face. His body was trembling violently; great drops of perspiration glistened on his forehead. "You sleep?" he asked. His voice was a thin, cold flame.

Kay's lips moved. "I sleep," she replied. No vestige of human emotion colored her words. They might have been spoken by a phonograph—by a robot.

Sargis stooped over her, looked deep into the dilated pupils of her eyes. Then he straightened.

"I am your master," he said slowly, "and in all things you must obey me, and me only. Do you understand?"

Like the voice of one dead, measured, cadenceless, Kay's reply came: "Master, I understand."

Sargis wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Very well," he said, and then—deliberately, as though speaking to an idiot child—"Rise, and follow me."

As Kay rose stiffly to her feet there came into the room, faintly, from the carillon in the tower of Saint Augustine's Church, twenty blocks across the city, the bell-tones of an old, old hymn. It was just one o'clock. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

All Roads Lead to Death

FOR Red McNally that afternoon passed on the wings of the wind. After a light lunch of frankfurters and beans, lemon pie and two glasses of milk at Hennessy's, he climbed into his venerable coupe and drove to the morgue, where he spent a depressing twenty minutes viewing the two unidentified corpses that still lay in the icebox. He listened to Doc Hanlon's bizarre opinion—transmitted faithfully and with elaborations by the attendant—that the multitude of tiny wounds on the cold, stiff fingertips were undoubtedly needlepricks. He returned to headquarters and plunged into deskwork. He made one telephone call which he fondly hoped might produce results. That was to the Municipal Light and Power Company. It was five o'clock before he knew it.

"Kay'll call any minute now," he told himself—and the grey-walled, prosaic room in which he sat immediately seemed less drear. But five minutes passed, then ten, then fifteen, and still his telephone remained silent. And punctuality, with Kay, was almost a fetish!

Red picked up another folder, began doggedly to scan through it. But his thoughts were wandering. Obviously Kay hadn't called the *Herald* city desk yet. Why?

At five forty-five, rather sheepishly, Red telephoned the paper. The switchboard girl told him sweetly that Miss Edwards hadn't called in all day. "Somebody here says that she's out on special assignment," she volunteered.

"Let me talk to Conway," Red demanded.

"Mr. Conway's gone home."

"Well, let me talk to somebody that knows where Miss Edwards is."

After a moment a man's voice came over the wire. "Hello, this is Schuler—"

"Say, Schuler," Red barked, "this is

Red McNally, over in Homicide. Where's Kay?"

"Oh, hello, carrot-top! How are ya? Honestly, kid, I don't know where Kay is, except that she's out on one of those roving assignments that Conway springs every once in a while. I hadn't ought to spill this, but I think it has something to do with that phantom sweatshop aroma—"

"God Almighty!" It was not an expletive; it was a tortured prayer. "Doesn't Conway know that those girls we've been fishing out of the river are sweatshop killings!"

"Hell, no! Red heard Schuler's sharp gasp. "Spill the dirt, will ya?"

Red's fists, clutching the telephone, tensed until his knuckles gleamed white. For a long moment he did not speak, then he said, his voice thick but steady as a rock:

"That's—not for publication yet, Schuler. Understand? I want to know where I can find Conway, though. Conway'll have *some* idea where she's gone—"

Schuler's voice was grave as he replied, "The girl gave you the right dope. Conway's gone home. I'll grab a cab and hop out to Conway's just as fast as I can—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" McNally rasped. "This is a job for one man, not an army of newshounds. Keep out of this! And listen; I'm starting for Conway's now. Call him and tell him that I'll be there in ten minutes, will you?"

Without waiting for Schuler's reply he jammed the receiver into its cradle. Three swift strides and he was out the door, in the long, empty stone corridor. He broke into an impatient, loping run.

Twelve minutes later his old car squealed to a halt before Conway's suburban home. As he ran up the steps the newspaper editor himself opened the door.

"Good God, McNally!" he babbled hysterically. "Schuler just phoned—said you were on your way out. Great Heavens, man, when I gave Kay that assignment I'd

absolutely no idea that anything like—”

“All right, skip it!” Red snapped. “Where’d you send Kay — to what places—”

Words poured from Conway like water from a breaking dam. “I thought if she could get into that sweatshop, work there for awhile, she’d get evidence enough to bust it wide open! I gave her the addresses of a bunch of shady employment agencies and some cheap rooming houses. I didn’t think there’d be any particular danger; Kay’s a damned clever girl, McNally, and besides, she was armed—”

“Armed!”

Conway nodded emphatically. “I gave her a leg holster and a .25 automatic.”

“Oh, my God!” Red groaned. “Now you’ve done it! How long do you think she’ll last if somebody spots that gun on her? All right, give me those addresses. I’ll try and trail her.”

Conway nervously stammered names and street addresses, and Red scribbled them on the back of an envelope.

He turned to go.

“Conway,” he hurled back over his shoulder, “if any harm comes to Kay through this—I’ll break every bone in your body!”

The door slammed behind him. An instant later his car roared away into the deepening night.

IT was half-past nine before Red, doggedly working down through Conway’s list, came to the rooming house where Kay had engaged a room. The landlady, a blowsy, faded blonde well in her forties, recognized Kay from Red’s description, even though Red was unable to describe Kay’s attire.

“It’s the same girl,” she declared uneasily, plainly perturbed by this invasion of the police. “She came in here about half past ten this morning, picked out a room and paid a week’s rent and left her suitcase and went right out. She hasn’t been

back since. She give the name Mildred Reed, and said she was lookin’ for work. She had a list of employment agencies, and I guess she was goin’ to try them in this vicinity first. They’s the Argus, and the Colonial, and the Empire, and the South Side, all right near here. What’s the matter; is she wanted for somethin’? I don’t want no trouble; I run a respectable place—”

“I’ll take a look at her room,” Red interjected briskly, and the woman led him upstairs. He glanced about the cheap, dismal bedroom, with its iron single-bed and pine bureau, and looked through the suitcase. Two secondhand dresses, some cheap underthings, toothbrush and toothpaste. Nothing that would lend any clue to her real identity. The girl who had rented that room had been Kay, all right.

Downstairs again, in the too-ornate, cheaply flamboyant “parlor” Red thanked the woman, added briefly, “I don’t expect Miss Reed will come back here. If she does, I want her to telephone headquarters at once. I am Lieutenant McNally—Homicide Division. If I am not in, have her leave the message that she’s all right, and have her wait here. Don’t worry; she’s not wanted for any crime. Understand?”

The woman nodded emphatically. . . .

Red, as he strode down the sagging wooden steps and climbed behind the wheel of his coupe, swore quietly to himself. After a moment he kicked the starter, drove a hundred yards down the street, and parked. A vacant lot was on his right; it was dark and semi-quiet here; he could think. And think he had to, desperately. The black certainty that Kay was a prisoner, that she was in mortal danger, burned in his brain. God! Perhaps she was already dead!

Those employment agencies were closed. They would not reopen until nine o’clock in the morning. And, meanwhile, precious minutes were fleeing, minutes any one of

which might be, might already have been, Kay's last!

Dazedly, his face a haggard, tormented mask of foreboding, Red started his car and drove to headquarters.

Outwardly, he appeared composed as he entered the big, brightly-lighted second-floor room and strode over to his desk; he had had a few minutes to get an iron-hard grip on himself. He dropped into his swivel chair and picked up a long envelope that lay on his desk, ripped it open.

It was a list of newly organized, and, in the opinion of the Light and Power Company, possibly fly-by-night dress-goods factories. And their electric power consumption over the past sixty days!

"Good for Kingsbury!" Red exulted, as he scanned down the list. "He must have skipped his supper to get this out; I didn't expect it until tomorrow."

But as he studied the list his heart sank. There were over twenty concerns listed; how was he to determine which was the one he sought?

If it were only morning—

Still, there were ways by which he might whittle down the list. In the ordinary routine of his profession he picked up a great deal of information, of various sorts, and he put that information to work now. First, he put small cross marks after the names of all the concerns which were near the river; that cut his list in half. Next he put crosses against those concerns whose managements had been in various legal or semi-criminal difficulties. Last of all he carefully checked the power consumption of all the concerns.

When he had finished, the name of one concern was marked by three crosses! The Sargis Manufacturing Company!

RED had heard a few things about Arshalouis Sargis. The man was an Americanized Asiatic; a Persian, Red

vaguely remembered. He had been for a number of years a dealer in Oriental rugs and objects of art, but the depression and his own prodigality—he was a magnificent spender—had put him into bankruptcy. Now he was operating a small dressgoods factory in the old Schumacher Brewing Company office building; he had leased it from the bank, which held the mortgage. To a man like Sargis it was a terrific comedown. There were ugly rumors that he overworked and underpaid his few girls, and there had been one or two desultory investigations, but no actionable evidence had been uncovered.

That didn't concern Red; that was nothing. Instead, he was wondering, somberly, why a small concern like Sargis' was consuming electric power sufficient to run a hundred sewing machines!

The answer was plain. Somewhere on those premises Sargis was operating the phantom sweatshop, operating it with unknown, unpaid, and apparently invisible labor!

And the slow crawling river lapped against the crumbling, rear brick wall of the old abandoned brewery!

Slowly, as he sat there motionless, pondering, the muscles of Red's face tightened until his expression was a stony mask. Slowly, then, Red rose to his feet. Briefly, caressingly, his right hand touched the police positive nestling on his hip. He turned toward the door—

"Red! Uh—I mean Lieutenant!"

It was Sergeant Orlich's voice. Red wheeled.

"What's the matter, Sarge?" Red's voice was dry, taut.

"Matter!" the grizzled veteran rejoined. "What's the matter with you, you mean! You look like a walking death's head."

Red said thinly, "You're nuts, Sarge."

Sergeant Orlich said quietly, "I don't know what you've got up your sleeve, but whatever it is, unless you want to spill it, you'd better go home and get some sleep."

Red nodded curtly. "Home's where I'm going, Sarge. Good-night." He clipped the words and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Zombie Girls

THE clock in the steeple of Saint Augustine's Church boomed one lonesome, mournful note as Red's coupe slid quietly to the curb half a block from the Sargis Manufacturing Company. The cobble-paved pavement gleamed wetly in the cold, arclights.

Red switched off the lights, climbed from the car and walked down the slimy cobbles toward the single-storied structure. His footsteps seemed fearfully loud in the clammy, congealing quiet. The deserted street, the engulfing night, even the black formless buildings seemed listening, watching. . . .

He had no clear idea of what he intended to do—only that he must watch the river, watch the waterfront, watch the Sargis plant until the black night faded. He had skeleton keys; perhaps he could get inside the building.

He glanced swiftly up and down the deserted street, then disappeared like a drifting shadow into the cobbled yard between the brewery property and the grim, gargantuan gas-tanks on his left. With that step he became no longer an officer of the law, but a trespasser. He knew that he dared not try to enter the Sargis building from the street side. But there might be a door somewhere at the rear.

There was. A wooden structure, obviously once used as a passageway between the offices and the brewery proper, connected the two buildings. In it was a small door leading into the yard.

Hidden from the street by the intervening office building, Red tried key after key in the lock. After what seemed an interminable succession of failures, the lock surrendered. With infinite caution Red

turned the knob, slowly swung the door inward. He stepped inside into abysmal darkness, shut the door behind him, and turned on his small pocket flashlight.

In that same instant something moved, close beside him and to his left. He whirled, reached for his gun. . . . There was a sudden swishing sound.

Abruptly his skull seemed to explode into blazing, coruscating light! He felt himself falling forward into infinite depths.

PERCEPTION returned to Red McNally slowly, in intermittent, throbbing flashes of sentience that gradually merged into aching, mind-shattering consciousness. His brain seemed less a brain than a flame-lanced agony. An unshaded electric light shone directly into his eyes; his aching arms were twisted unnaturally behind him. As his senses cleared he realized that he was sitting bolt upright, trussed by half-inch hemp rope to a straight-backed metal office chair. A few feet away was a cheap oaken desk, and on the desk were a variety of articles he recognized—his service automatic, his badge, his watch, his driver's license.

Tilted back in the swivel-chair behind the desk, watching him through heavy-lidded, soot-black eyes, was a swarthy, plump, clean-shaven youngish man dressed in denim overalls. The young man, observing that Red had in some degree regained consciousness, smiled with indolent, tigerish pleasantry, produced a wicked-looking blackjack, tapped it once, significantly, against his left palm, and remarked:

"I telefoam Mr. Sargis. He come here queek now."

Red struggled briefly, futilely, against the restraining bonds.

"What's this place? Sargis' office?"

The man grinned ingratiatingly. But his cruel black eyes gleamed with demonic satisfaction as he maddently reiterated, "I telefoam Mr. Sargis. He come queek."

Red relapsed into stony silence. Slow moments throbbled past. Then a car purred

softly down the street, stopped, and a door *chukked* quietly. A pause, then the sound of another door, opening and closing, then footsteps. The door at Red's back opened, and Arshalouis Sargis walked in.

The man was, as always, immaculately dressed; no slightest detail of his attire revealed the fact that he had been roused only a few minutes before from a sound sleep. His round, dusky jowls were freshly shaven, his sleek hair was precisely combed, and a faintly scented handkerchief peeped from his left breast pocket. Ignoring McNally, he came across the room lightly, almost mincingly, and made a quick, impatient gesture with his right hand. The dark-skinned guard rose hastily from the swivel chair. Sargis sat down, picked up the various articles that had been taken from Red's pockets, and examined them one by one.

When he had finished, he conversed rapidly for a moment or two with Red's captor, in an oddly cadenced, nasally sing-song tongue Red had never heard before.

Then he turned to Red. His features were imperturbable.

"It is a pity that you have meddled so deeply in my affairs, Lieutenant McNally. It is a tragedy that you and your sweetheart must die—tonight! I could not fail to recognize in this photograph"—his forefinger gently tapped the snapshot of Kay lying on his desk—"the Miss Reed who applied to me for work this morning."

He sighed deeply. "Untie his feet, Ilderim, and the ropes from the back of the chair, so that he may stand and walk."

WHEN Red, except for his hands, was free, Sargis picked up the service automatic and gestured politely.

"Stand up. Follow my brother; I will follow you, in turn. Ilderim, take his personal belongings from the desk and carry them with you. They must not remain here; they must accompany him—to his death."

Ilderim opened the door. Red, his savagely throbbing brain alert with the cold poise of utter desperation, stumbled to his feet and followed. There was no chance now to attempt a break.

"Use his flashlight, Ilderim," Sargis murmured.

The lights in Sargis' office went out. Only an eerie circle of light from Red's flashlight remained. In the semi-gloom the strange, grim procession walked through a large room along one wall of which stood a row of electric sewing machines.

Through another door of ponderous, solid oak, and now they were in a monstrous, cavernous chamber, concrete-floored and brick-walled. Enormous round vats connected by mazes of coiling and twisting pipe as thick as a man's thigh loomed in the flickering shadows like the colossal mechanisms of a futurist's nightmare; the men's footsteps echoed hollowly like little whispering things hiding in the darker recesses. The strong smell of old mash still clung to that gargantuan room.

Single file, they threaded their way through the huge vat room until they reached its rear wall. Here a narrow iron staircase spiraled down into black darkness. Ilderim, the round cone of light from Red's flashlight eerily framing a snakelike segment of the stairs, started down. For an instant Red tensed, hesitated. Suppose he were to catapult his one hundred ninety pounds of bone and muscle into the man's broad back, send them both crashing down that iron staircase to the concrete floor twenty feet below? The torch would shatter; Ilderim would unquestionably be stunned, if not killed; Red, falling on top of his body, might conceivably escape injury. There would be a minute or two of utter darkness. Perhaps, in that minute, he could free his hands, search the man for a gun or other weapon, find a hiding place, do *something* to lessen the odds against him. . . .

But even as he was tensing to spring, he felt the hard muzzle of his own automatic stab into the small of his back.

"No tricks, Lieutenant," Sargis purred in his ear. "The old brewery walls are thick and strong; the sound of a shot here would not penetrate to the street. Continue your descent, if you please."

Red shrugged grimly, and continued on down the stairs. Presently he reached their foot, stood on the wet, slime-covered floor of another cavernous, pipe mazed room.

"We are only a few feet above the river level," Sargis murmured. "The cold room, Ilderim. The lights, if you please."

Ilderim swung open a wooden door that was as thick and ponderous as the door of a safe. He stepped through, and abruptly lights, dazzlingly bright by contrast with the yellow flashlight beam, blazed up in that vaultlike chamber.

Sargis nudged Red with the automatic. "The refrigeration room of the old brewery," he murmured. "And now the home of my dressgoods industry—the phantom sweatshop, I believe it is sometimes called. You will please enter."

THE cold gun muzzle dug into the small of Red's back. He moved slowly forward. Behind him the heavy door swung solidly shut; heavy iron clamps grated home in rusty grooves.

A row of immense wooden tuns, each with a capacity of many thousands of gallons, extended along one side of the gigantic cryptlike chamber. Refrigeration pipes, naked now of frost, covered the walls. But it was not these things at which Red stared, while his scalp crawled and his brain reeled. . . .

No, his gaze was fastened on the double row of steadily clattering electric sewing machines ranged in the long narrow space between the empty tuns and the right-hand wall—and at their zombie-like operators! Half a hundred sewing ma-

chines were there, and at each one sat the figure of a girl or woman, performing her single operation over and over again, with a peculiarly unvarying repetition of movement that seemed somehow unnaturally precise, unnaturally mechanical. Were those silently toiling figures not really flesh and blood at all, but automatons incongruously constructed in the semblance of human beings?

They worked rapidly, steadily, never looking up, never speaking. And Red saw now that up and down the narrow aisle between the whirring machines two men moved—two men of Sargis' dark and alien race, who incessantly replenished the diminishing piles of cloth, oiled and tended the machines, and carried the half-sewn garments from operator to operator!

And then hideous realization swept Red's soul. By some dark, horrible thaumaturgy Sargis had enslaved these girls' minds, enchained their intelligence until all that remained was the dim spark necessary in order that they might repeat the simple mechanical operations he had taught them! They were living zombies!

"God!" he sobbed.

Behind him Sargis was softly speaking. "You understand now, eh, Lieutenant McNally? You understand now why I can sell so cheap? Because my girls ask neither wages nor lodging—only the food with which I stoke their bodies that they may continue to work. Cheap food, Lieutenant McNally. Food that you or I would not eat unless we were starving.

"It never occurred to you that Arshalouis Sargis was a great hypnotist, a great mesmerist, eh? But it is true. It is a science which I learned many years ago, in my youth—a science which has always remained my—do you say, avocation? Yes, that is the word; avocation. I possess the power to force any will less strong than my own, to do that which I command. Many years I exercised that power but rarely—and even then merely to

amuse my friends. Only when your crazy depression bankrupted me, swept my fortune away, did I employ it to save myself, and Ilderim, my brother, and others of my family who were destitute.

"Yes, I conceived the phantom sweatshop; it is my work. And if no interruption comes for but a few months more I shall have laid the foundations of a new fortune—I shall have amassed enough capital with which to attempt some new, legitimate venture. That day the phantom sweatshop shall truly become a ghost, for it shall cease to exist. . . .

"THESE girls? They must die. Were I to restore them to normalcy they would remember my face, my name; though they would not remember this.

"Some have already died—as you know. They were girls whose subconscious minds threw off, after a time, my hypnosis. They awoke in this place—at unexpected moments. They fought desperately to escape; they excited my other girls. I thought it best to exterminate them. There was no certainty that, even if I rehypnotized them, they would not reawaken again. Some minds are stronger, more rebellious than others. So they died. Just as you and Miss Reed must die tonight."

"You fool!" Red gritted. "Do you believe for an instant that our deaths will be considered suicides? These drownings have gone beyond coincidence. There will be an investigation."

"That does not matter," Sargis crooned indifferently. "By dawn I will have removed this factory, my girls, everything—to a new location twenty miles down the river. Only the legitimate plant—the what you call camouflage, the blind—will remain. An investigation will reveal nothing. . . .

"But—enough of this. Walk ahead of me down that aisle—"

With the gun probing into the small of his back, Red knew that there was noth-

ing he could do but obey. He stumbled forward, his mind alert, his muscles tense.

God—where was Kay? Suddenly Sargis halted. "Don't you recognize Miss Reed, Lieutenant?" he crooned.

Incredulously Red stared at the slim figure stooped over a whirring machine, midway down the long grim aisle. The girl sat with her back toward him, her head bowed. She wore a cheap, sleazy cotton dress, her blue-black hair hung in lank, disheveled tendrils, concealing her face; her hands and arms were festooned with ravelings and bits of thread. Abruptly Red realized that he had unconsciously been looking for a proud, defiant little figure; had Sargis not spoken he would have failed to recognize this pitifully stooped, submissive creature.

He stopped; his body stiffened.

"Careful, Lieutenant," Sargis purred. "This is not a play; this is reality. Heroics will only hasten your death. . . . But—I see that you recognize her. It is as I expected—"

He spoke abruptly to the mechanically toiling girl.

"You may rise."

Obediently, deliberately, like a sleepwalker or an idiot child, Kay pushed her work aside and shambled to her feet.

"Kay!" Red whispered haltingly, unbelievably. "It's—it's Red! Don't you—see me?"

No faintest flicker of recognition touched her lax face! She was no more aware of his presence than if he had never existed!

"She sees only me," Sargis crooned. "She obeys only me. Until I choose to rescind my hypnosis, I am her god. Precede me—and listen. . . .

"You," he purred—and Red sensed that he had turned his head slightly, to stare into Kay's glazed eyes—"walk beside this man. Go where he goes—"

Ilderim leading, Kay and Red walking side by side, Sargis following, the strange

procession walked down the long aisle of sewing machines that had now stopped their whirring. At the end of the refrigeration room Ilderim opened another huge door. Sargis closed the door behind them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cruise for the Dying

IT was dark as pitch, but the damp smell of the river and the soft lapping of water against invisible piles told Red that they were standing on the rotting old brewery wharf, built before the days of modern highways and heavy trucks, and for many years unused. Gradually, as Red's eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw the vague outlines of a small cabin cruiser.

Ilderim moved like a shadow along the wharf and stepped down to the cruiser's after deck. Red, the automatic prodding inexorably into the small of his back, followed. Kay moved beside him like an automaton. Sargis remained standing on the dock, a darker blotch against the night, waiting to cast off. In the concealing darkness Red's fingers writhed and twisted, strove to reach the knots that bound his wrists. Underneath the deck the engine suddenly began purring. . . .

Sargis cast off the bow line, moved toward the stern. Red, though he could not see Ilderim's eyes, knew that the man was watching him narrowly. Kay stood quietly, uncomprehendingly, beside Red, in the stern.

From around the corner of the brewery's black monolith came the stabbing beam of a flashlight, heavy, hurrying footsteps! The beam lanced out across the wharf, framed Sargis, standing there, and the three figures in the stern.

"Just a minute, there!"

It was Orlich's voice, deep, sharp, commanding. The flashlight beam advanced onto the wharf.

"Look out, Orlich!" Red screamed.

The words were drowned in the thudding roar of the automatic in Sargis' hand. The flashlight beam vanished. Three quick jets of red flame stabbed back from the shore end of the wharf, but Sargis had darted behind an upjutting pile.

Red was straining at his bonds. The knots were hard as iron, but it seemed to him the hempen loops were infinitesimally stretching. . . .

Ilderim's flashlight beam rived the dark, struck full upon Orlich's crouching form, pinned him in a circle of pitiless light against the rearing brick wall. Red wheeled, dove headforemost at Ilderim's knees. A split-second after Sargis' gun roared, Red's shoulder struck Ilderim's legs with battering-ram force, the flashlight beam caromed crazily toward the zenith and abruptly flicked out.

Ilderim, s p e w i n g incomprehensible oaths, staggered to his feet and pounced upon Red's back. Strong hands circled Red's throat, gripped. Ilderim was snarling like a black leopard. A dull roaring grew in Red's ears; his brain whirled. . . .

"Leave him there and help me with this—carrion—"

Through the roaring mists came Sargis' voice, saccharine, low-pitched, imperturbable. The grip on Red's throat fell away; the weight pressing upon his shoulders was gone. His burning lungs sucked in great gasping drafts of the damp, blessed air. His brain cleared.

A commotion in the stern told him that Sargis and Ilderim were lifting something heavy and limp and motionless from the wharf to the afterdeck. Sargis spoke quietly:

"We'll have to weight him down, rip his abdomen open, and throw him overboard in deep water. He's shot through the head; his body must never be found—"

Kay had moved until she stood close beside Red, quietly, uncomprehendingly. . . . Red's hands were still tugging at the bonds about his wrists. . . .

SARGIS and Ilderim were silent, listening. Other than the soft whisper of the water and the occasional sigh and creak of the wharf's aged timbers, there was scarcely a sound.

After what seemed, to Red, an interminable time Sargis said quietly, "No one heard the shots. It will be safe to leave."

Ilderim stepped forward to the wheel. The purr of the motor deepened, then slowed as the propeller took hold; the cruiser moved like a dark wraith through the ebon-floored vault of darkness.

Furtively Red tugged at his bonds. Was the loop about his left wrist slowly slipping down over his thumb? . . .

The city's lights were merging now, merging astern of the cruiser into a faint, receding glow. Then Ilderim cut the motor, let it drift with the current.

Sargis stood up, stooped over Red.

"Get up! I think that there is more than mere acquaintanceship between this girl and yourself; I am going to command her to leap overside and give you the opportunity to rescue her from a watery grave—if you can! My brother will cut the ropes from your wrists; we want no drowned bodies drifting ashore tomorrow with manacled hands. . . . Ilderim, when she jumps—use the knife!"

He spoke in a slumbrous, crooning murmur to Kay.

"The water. The still, black water. Walk to the rail, my child, and jump into the water!"

Slowly Kay moved—a dark vague silhouette—toward the rail. Behind him Red heard Ilderim's breathing. Sargis had turned slightly toward Kay; Red sensed that the man was watching her with brutal enjoyment—reveling in his strange, cruel way in this supreme demonstration of his powers. Now, if ever, was the time—while Sargis' attention was diverted. . . .

Red's shoulder muscles tightened. He flung himself sideways and down to escape any astonished thrust of Ilderim's knife;

his arms strained with the mad strength of despair at the ropes binding his wrists. A sharp, burning pain darted up his left arm from fingertips to elbow, and his hands were free!

Sargis whirled. His gun roared in Red's face; red-hot pain jerked Red's left shoulder and spun him half around as he catapulted across the deck. Red plunged against Kay's knees; she sprawled forward heavily, making no attempt to lift her hands to shield her face. Red's good right hand jerked the .25 automatic from her leg holster; he whirled, fired.

The dry, snapping report of the small pistol was drowned in the thudding roar of Sargis' automatic. Orange flame bathed Red's face; for a millionth of a second he believed that Sargis had shot him between the eyes and that this was death. But the flame faded, and now he saw Ilderim towering above him, tall as the stars. The man's right arm was swinging down like a great scythe. . . .

He fired again and again. The little gun chattered, and Ilderim wavered and crashed face down on the deck; simultaneously something struck the teak planking with a sharp silvery clatter. Ilderim was dead.

In the darkness Sargis coughed, drily. Red rose tremblingly to his feet, the little automatic in his right hand probing the gloom like a questing tentacle.

"If you move, you're done for!" Red gritted. His voice was strange, high-pitched, like a hysterical girl's.

Sargis laughed, bubblingly.

"I'm done for anyway. You got me through the spine; I can't move—"

Behind Red something moved. It was Kay, walking mindlessly toward the rail. He spun about, grasped her arm. She struggled to pull away from him with dim, fixed purpose!

"Free her, Sargis!" Red snarled. "Or, by the god you worship, I'll kill you by inches!"

Sargis laughed. Then he gasped, in a blood-strangled whisper:

"I do not fear your torture. But I will free her, and the others, too, if you can return me to the wharf in time; their enslavement is valueless to me now. But they will have to be brought to me; life would flee me quickly were I moved."

Red drew Kay, still struggling with a peculiar dull tenaciousness, toward Sargis.

"You may awaken, child," Sargis murmured, and crimson bubbles formed and broke on his faintly moving lips. "I release you from the enjoinders I have placed upon you—"

Beside him Red felt Kay's small, sweet body stiffen and shudder convulsively as consciousness surged like a pent-up river through her tortured mind. Dimly he sensed that from the darkness where Orlich lay had come a gasping moan. Vaguely he knew that a pinpoint of brilliant light—the searchlight on a river patrol cruiser, was rushing toward them over the inscrutable, ebon river; the dry hammering of racing motors was growing, growing. But those things were less than nothing; his whole mind, his whole soul, was focused on Kay. . . .

And then Kay screamed, once, hideously, like a person awakening from nightmare only to realize that the nightmare was true!

IT was dawn, the cold grey false dawn that precedes the sunrise. The swarm of police, newspaper reporters and photographers who had stormed the Schumacher Brewery property in the night, were for the most part gone. The bodies of Ilderim and of the man who had called himself Sargis—he had died at two A. M., on the deck of his cruiser—had been removed to the morgue. The two dusky-faced attendants were down at the detective bureau, undergoing a merciless grilling. The drivers of two trucks who had driven into the cobbled yard were also

under arrest. The proprietors of the Argus Employment Agency—man and wife—were in jail. Fifty bewildered and nerve-shattered waifs—whom Sargis, true to his promise, had released from hypnosis, one by one, as he lay dying, were temporarily quartered in the Ella Haywood Home for Wayward Girls. The phantom sweatshop had ceased to exist.

Three persons—two men and a girl—walked slowly through the cobbled yard to the street, climbed into Red McNally's battered coupe. Red kicked the starter, and the car quietly slid away.

"So his name wasn't Sargis, after all, just as he said," Red said musingly, after they had driven a block or so. "It was Arshalouis Skendarian. A Persian—"

Sergeant Orlich nodded his white-bandaged head. "He once ran an oriental rug business," he recollected. "But the 1929 crash ruined him. He held on for awhile, borrowed money and all that, but people just didn't have the money to buy the quality goods he sold. The phantom sweatshop came after the referee in bankruptcy finished with him. He told the truth when he said that he had dependents. There was that brother, Ilderim; and those two the cops nabbed in the cold room were cousins. They'll probably find others, too, before they're done. . . ."

His voice trailed off into silence. Kay's head drooped tiredly against Red's shoulder. . . .

"Thank God that bullet only seared your skull, Orlich. I thought—and I guess he thought, too—that he'd finished you."

Sergeant Orlich chuckled. "A half-inch lower, and it would have been a different story."

After a moment Red said, puzzledly: "There's still something that I can't figure out. How did you happen to trail me to the Schumacher Brewery—reach the wharf just as Sargis was casting off?"

Orlich laughed. "That was simple. I've known you long enough, lad, to be able to

tell pretty well when you're mixed up in something. When you came into headquarters last night I knew in a minute that whatever you were tangled up in this time was serious. So, after you went out, I just ambled over to your desk and took a look at a letter you'd forgotten. It was from the Light and Power Company. It was a list of names, and you'd put three crosses by the Sargis Manufacturing Company's name. So I just put two and two together, and when I came off duty, at one o'clock, I took a little ride over there. When I saw your car parked where it was I knew that I was on the right track. I started snooping, and I was pretty close to the back of the brewery when I heard sounds—pretty faint sounds, I'll admit—back on the wharf. You know the rest—”

Red nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I know the rest. Thanks—pal—”

THE small coupe was only a block away from Police Headquarters.

In the east the gigantic golden fan of the new day was just beginning to unfold above the horizon.

“I think you'd better let me run you over to the hospital,” Red persisted, as the coupe slid to the curb before the long grey building. “You'd better take care of that nicked dome of yours—”

By way of reply Sergeant Orlich opened the right-hand door and stepped

lightly to the sidewalk. White-turbaned by bandages, he stood there grinning.

“No, thanks. I'm staying right here until the last gun's fired. I'll bet that after you've taken Kay home you'll be right back here yourself. You're not a guy to miss any excitement, either. And there'll certainly be hell popping here today.”

Kay's head lifted tiredly, but determinedly, from Red's shoulder. Her dark eyes were haggard, enormous with exhaustion; her small, piquant face was wax-pale, mirroring the horror she had undergone.

“But he's not taking me home now, Sergeant Orlich! I'm not going home now! Mr. Conway wants a first person, human interest story on my experience in the phantom sweatshop. Right away; it's to be syndicated. And there'll be a bonus, of course. So—I can't go home now!”

Above her head Sergeant Orlich met Red's gaze. Thoughtfully Orlich nodded, rubbed a hand ruminatively along his grizzled jaw.

“Well, anyhow, you can stop somewhere and kiss her good and hard on the way downtown, McNally. I guess she'll find time enough for that!”

Abruptly, a trifle hysterically, they were all three laughing. Through nervous laughter that was close to tears, Kay heard her own voice answering, with infinite conviction, “There's always time for loving Red. . . .”

THE END



THE INVISIBLE KILLER

A Novelette by
EMILE C. TEPPERMAN



It seemed physically impossible, yet Professor Cassius Parsons saw with his own eyes the man reach suddenly for his throat—and strangle himself to death! The weirdest, most fascinating murder angle ever introduced in a detective story. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Warning of the Vu

THE small laboratory of Professor Cassius Parsons was white and clean, and amazingly orderly. Young Parsons himself was a studious looking, lean man of uncertain age, with an almost apologetic air—which changed to annoyance when his secretary announced Miss Luddington and Mr. Rudge.

As Enid Luddington was ushered into

the laboratory, Professor Parsons sighed, as if unwilling to leave his retorts and test tubes, even for so appealingly beautiful a girl as Enid. He reached for a pair of spectacles lying beside him, put them on. Queerly enough, though he never seemed to need glasses when working upon the most delicate tasks of qualitative chemistry or biological experimentation, he always wore them when talking to people. For him, those specs were a sort of defensive armor against the intrusion of human beings into the private shell of his scientific preoccupation.

Enid Luddington was petite and vivacious, with reddish-brown hair and a small uptilted nose. She looked around the spic-and-span laboratory with evident astonishment. She threw a quick glance to the short, slightly bald man who accompanied her.

"This," she said, "doesn't look to me like the office of a man who makes his living by solving crimes!"

Her escort shrugged. He had a high,

ranged as to fit into a space some ten feet long by four feet wide.

"It's a remarkable laboratory," he said.

Enid Luddington's gaze lighted on an instrument in one corner, with a mercury line, and a peculiar stop-watch apparatus. "Ooh!" she exclaimed, putting her hand out to it. "What's this?"

Professor Cassius Parsons had been eyeing them both with disfavor, though his disfavor was somewhat tempered by unwilling admiration for Enid.

"Please do not touch that," he told her stiffly. "It is a sphygmochronograph—an extremely delicate instrument. I use it for checking the movement of my pulse when I am engaged in intricate research. And now, I shall be obliged if you will quickly state your business. I must leave on a trip shortly—"

**The Mysterious Voice
Ordered Them To Kill
Themselves—And They
Obeyed!**



The man in shirtsleeves seemed to do a dreadful, macabre dance. . . .

intelligent forehead, but his face was thin and hungry looking. There was intense interest in his eyes as he surveyed the highly technical equipment surrounding them. All of it was so compactly ar-

"Oh, no!" Enid Luddington broke in. "You mustn't go on any trip. We—that is, my cousin, Frank Rudge and I—have a case for you which you *must* take. My father is Eustace Luddington. Between him and my Uncle Norman, they own half the coal mines in Pennsylvania. So

you see we have enough money to pay any fee you ask. You *must* come to Black Acres, our estate in Pennsylvania. There's been a murder. My sister Cleo's maid—"

Professor Cassius Parsons frowned. "My dear young lady, I am not interested in the amount of money possessed by your father and your uncle. Neither am I interested in the murder of your sister Cleo's maid. I regret that I cannot go with you to Black Acres, as I have another matter—"

"But," she broke in, puzzled, "aren't you the Professor Cassius Parsons who calls himself *Crime Consultants, Incorporated?* Aren't you the former professor of criminology at Harvard who is conducting independent research under an endowment from a joint fund contributed by the associated Police Departments of all the large cities in the country?"

He nodded. "That is true, Miss Luddington. I evolved the theory of bringing science to the scene of the crime. My crime laboratory truck, which is equipped as a replica of this compact laboratory, brings every device of modern scientific criminology to the very spot where a crime has been committed, thus facilitating the necessary investigation."

Enid's cousin, Frank Rudge, had been looking around avidly. "You've got some wonderful equipment here, Professor. I'm an inventor myself, so I can appreciate all this. Perhaps you've heard of me? I am the man who perfected the mining process by which the Luddingtons were able to make a fortune from practically useless mines."

Enid Luddington didn't give Professor Parsons an opportunity to respond. "You *must* take this case, Professor. Some one is threatening to wipe out the entire Luddington family by—*auto-strangulation!*"

Cassius Parsons raised his eyebrows. "*Self-strangulation?* That would be suicide."

"No, no! It's a sort of hypnotism by remote control. We are told we will choke ourselves to death with our own hands!"

Professor Parsons smiled fleetingly. "I should be extremely interested in viewing such a phenomenon. Aside from the fact that it is impossible to compel a subject to commit suicide by means of hypnotism, I assure you that to choke oneself to death with one's own bare hands is an impossible feat."

Frank Rudge, the bald-headed inventor, laughed shortly and bitterly. "That's what I thought, Professor. But Cleo's maid was actually found strangled to death—with her own hands gripping her throat."

"And the *voice!*" Enid Luddington said in a suddenly frightened whisper. "I get cold prickles whenever I think of that *voice*. It calls up on the phone, and we can't trace it, and it tells us that we shall all die the strangling death!"

"You see," Frank Rudge explained, "Eustace and Norman Luddington have made a tremendous fortune out of their coal mines. But many men have died in those mines. Only a couple of months ago, a shaft caved in, and forty men suffocated to death. This—er—*voice* that calls up seems to want to visit the same sort of strangling death on all the Luddingtons."

Professor Parsons had listened to both of them with lagging interest. His gaze was straying out of the casement window, across the gorgeous vista of the Hudson River. This laboratory of his was located in a small brownstone house in the Washington Heights section of New York City, high above the Hudson. From the window one could see far out into Jersey, and downward at an angle to the George Washington Bridge.

Enid Luddington, following his gaze, went over to the window, where a long-range telescope was set upon a revolving

tripod. Without asking for permission, she tilted the telescope downward and applied her eye to it.

"Dad is coming here to see you," she told Professor Parsons. "I made him promise. When he comes, he'll *make* you agree to come out to Black Acres with us."

"Why don't you consult the local police?" Cassius Parsons asked testily. "They should be able to protect you. I am not a bodyguard—"

Frank Rudge laughed hollowly. "Don't be silly, Professor. The Luddingtons are a law unto themselves out there on Black Acres. They'd no more think of calling in the local police, than of riding in the subway. Enid's father, Eustace, always rides around with a special guard anyway."

THE phone rang just then; and Professor Parsons picked it up. A queer mouthy voice at the other end said, "Professor Parsons, do you believe that I could compel you to strangle yourself to death with your own hands?"

The Professor frowned into the instrument.

"Emphatically no!" he said. Almost magically his hands began to work with deft, efficient speed. He moved a peculiar-looking instrument along the bench, and screwed a rubber tube with a metal flange on to the end of the telephone receiver. "However, your theory intrigues me. I should be glad to hear more of it." He now had the strange-looking apparatus hooked up to the receiver, and four automatic pencils, propelled by metal arms each on a separate cable, began to trace wavering lines on four sheets of graph paper in the machine, as the *voice* of the other end chuckled and proceeded.

"I see that you are an unbeliever. You will want to be convinced by an actual demonstration. After the demonstration, Professor, I suggest that you turn down

the request of Enid Luddington to come to Black Acres. Otherwise, I assure you that *you* will strangle *yourself* with your hands, just as all the Luddingtons are going to do. I mean to wipe them out, to make them suffer as those poor miners suffered. And if you insist on butting in, you shall share their fate!"

Professor Parsons was watching the moving pencils on the graph chart.

"My dear Mr. Voice," he said, "I had no intention of accepting this case before you called. But now I am growing interested."

"Well, forget your interest, Professor. I suggest you turn your telescope on the George Washington Bridge—in about two minutes. You will see what I mean."

There was a click, and the wire went dead. Enid Luddington and Frank Rudge were watching the four graph pencils in the machine with puzzlement. Cassius Parsons explained.

"This is a *vocalometer*—a device which I myself perfected. By means of this instrument I can measure the vocal chords of anyone talking on the phone, so that I have a permanent record—not only of his voice—but of the structure of his throat. In this case, either by comparison with these graphs, or by examination of the throat—if such an opportunity should arise—I shall be able to identify the man who just spoke to me."

Enid Luddington stared at him, goggle-eyed. "But—but how can you do all that—"

Parsons smiled. "By applying the principle of ionization to the voice vibrations, and analyzing the fibres of those vibrations. But never mind that. Do you, or Mr. Rudge, know who just called me?"

"Why—why—should *we* know?"

"Because," he told her gravely, "unless I am the victim of a practical joke, that man was the one who has been calling your family. He threatened me. And he warned me that he would give a

practical demonstration of his powers, on the George Washington Bridge down there within about two minutes."

Enid Luddington's face went white. "Why—Dad's coming across that bridge! He's coming here from New Jersey. He promised to meet me here at your laboratory!"

With trembling hands she seized the telescope and applied her eye to it. "There! There are the cars! See, he always travels with a bodyguard. Nathaniel Kimber—that's my brother-in-law, Cleo's husband—is in the first car. And that long, black twelve-cylinder job is dad's car. And behind him is the small sedan with two of the Special Police from the mines."

PROFESSOR PARSONS swung out an arm of the telescope, which opened into a periscope device allowing two people to look through the telescope at the same time. The powerful lens brought those three cars up close, and he could clearly see the driver of the first, whom Enid had named as Nathaniel Kimber.

"Nat is the general manager of the mining properties," she explained as they both watched the procession. "See how Dad is crowding him? Nat never likes to travel fast, so Dad always makes him drive ahead, and then honks him till he gets him up to eighty or ninety. They must be going seventy across the bridge now!"

In the second car, they could clearly see the hawk-like countenance of old Eustace Luddington, Enid's father. And suddenly, without warning of any kind, they saw Eustace Luddington do a mad and inexplicable thing.

He seemed suddenly to squirm in his seat and to thrust himself upward, with his foot pressing against the accelerator. Then he deliberately took both hands from the wheel, raised them to his throat, as if he would strangle himself to death!

The heavy coupé, without any direction from the wheel, roared ahead like a thunderous projectile. It sideswiped the sedan of Nathaniel Kimber, just ahead. The glancing blow deflected Luddington's car from the road, sent it flying at a tangent across the bridge toward the far railing. It jumped the concrete curb there, smashed into the railing, tore through it with an explosive crash. Flames burst from the car as it went hurtling end-over-end off the bridge and down, down into the waters of the Hudson River.

There was a vast sputtering and crackling as the water engulfed the lurid flames. And then it was all over, and there was nothing on the surface of the water. Up on the bridge they could see Nathaniel Kimber running crazily toward the bridge rail to peer over, and the two Special Police from the last car running to join him, and a Bridge Authority Patrol Car racing to the point of the accident.

Professor Cassius Parsons took his eye from the telescope. There was a queer glint in it. He turned and saw that Enid Luddington had fainted, and was in the arms of Frank Rudge, her cousin.

Absently, Professor Parsons took down from a rack above the bench a vial of carbonate of ammonia which he handed to Rudge. "Let her inhale that," he said. And then he added, "You know, I think I shall go to Black Acres. I have just witnessed the impossible. But if the impossible is possible, then science is fallible." He sighed. "It is a direct challenge to the scientific mind. Yes, I shall go to Black Acres. Tomorrow, after my lecture before the Police Chiefs of America!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Voice Commands

THE great Luddington house at Black Acres was all of stone. Built out of the sweat of thousands of gray miners

in black and noisome shafts, it somehow mirrored the hardness and the ruthlessness by which Eustace and Norman Luddington had acquired their immense wealth.

And now that Eustace Luddington was dead, it was characteristic of Norman Luddington that as he sat here in the huge vaulted living room, he mourned not nor did he weep; but he gave all his thought to his own safety. He sat in the great plush armchair near the fireplace, and his cold grey eyes studied the rest of his ill-assorted family that was gathered there.

Enid Luddington was there, and Cleo her sister. Cleo was as different from Enid as it is possible for two sisters to be. Tall and statuesque, she always preferred to stand rather than sit, because it showed off her figure to better advantage. Frank Rudge was there, sitting at the other end of the room, with his eyes on the rug. In the presence of old dour Norman Luddington, Frank Rudge was always sullen and brooding. Brilliant chemist that he was, he had developed many processes for improving the coal from the Luddington mines; but he had never been permitted to break away on his own. Now, at forty, he was still dependent upon Norman Luddington's whim. Nathaniel Kimber was there, gaunt and sallow-faced from lack of sleep. It was he who had failed to protect Eustace Luddington from death on the George Washington Bridge the day before. His voice was shaking now as he retold the terrible story before the assembled Luddington family.

The sixth person in the room was Basil Fellowes. Fellowes had married into the Luddington family five years ago. He had married a daughter of Norman Luddington, who had died shortly after. He still regarded himself as a member of the family. He was tall, heavily built and broad-shouldered, but he affected a fop-

pish manner of dress, and considered himself a much better man than Nathaniel Kimber. The only other member of the family who exhibited any liking at all for Basil Fellowes was strangely enough, Kimber's wife, Cleo. Even now she was standing at the window with him, engaged in animated but low-voiced conversation, and paying little or no attention at all to her glowering husband, Nathaniel Kimber.

Kimber had just finished telling the story of how Eustace had died, and there was a dead silence in the room. Then old Norman Luddington pushed himself out of the chair by the roaring fireplace. He stared around the room from one to the other of the uncomfortable occupants.

"You all know the situation!" he rasped. "Two weeks ago we began to receive these telephone calls, which could not be traced. The man who called seemed to have a grudge against the Luddington family."

He paused, and glared viciously at Basil Fellowes, who had snickered. "It won't be very hard to find people with a grudge against the Luddingtons!" Fellowes said. "The trick would be to find people who *like* them!"

Norman Luddington's face grew purple. He took a half step forward and then stopped, when Nat Kimber put a hand on his arm. The old man shrugged and went on as if he had not been interrupted.

"This mysterious voice has said the same thing over the phone every day. '*You shall all die like the miners who died to make you rich.*' He meant of course, the regrettable incident where forty of our men were caught in a slide in Mine Number Sixteen, and suffocated to death."

Fellowes interrupted again. "You omit to mention, dear father-in-law, that those forty miners died because of the criminal

negligence of Eustace and yourself, in forcing them to work in a shaft which should have been condemned as unsafe."

NATHANIEL KIMBER left the old man's side, crossed the room swiftly and faced his brother-in-law. "Close that mouth of yours," he snapped, "or I'll close it for you! And get away from my wife!"

Cleo Luddington threw a glance of hatred at her husband, and then gave Basil Fellowes a smile. "Don't be a boor, Nat. If you had half the manners of Basil, you'd never talk to him like that."

Nat Kimber's face was twisted in anger. "Yeah? Well let's see how he likes this!" He swung with his right, and caught Basil Fellowes in the side of the jaw. Fellowes fell backward, caught himself against one of the drapes, and regained his balance. His hand darted to his hip pocket.

"Damn you, Nat, you can't do that to me!" He brought out a small pistol, started to raise it. But Cleo put both hands on his arm. "Don't, Basil! Please be sensible!"

Fellowes hesitated, scowled at Kimber, felt his jaw, and slowly put the pistol away. "All right, Cleo. I'll let it pass—this time!"

Kimber grinned crookedly, and walked unconcernedly away.

It took several minutes for the excitement to subside. During all of it Frank Rudge, the chemist, had not even once raised his head from his hands. And slim little Enid Luddington had watched it all with wide, troubled eyes. Old Norman Luddington stood very still, with a grim smile of expectation upon his thin lips. When the flare-up subsided, he resumed talking as if nothing had happened.

"As I was saying, this mysterious caller has threatened us daily, and though we have made every effort to trace his calls, we considered them the efforts of a crank.

But then one of Cleo's maids was found, strangled to death in her room, with her own hands at her throat. It was then that Eustace and I provided ourselves with armed protection. Now it seems that the threats of this unknown are being fulfilled. We must take steps to protect ourselves, and to apprehend—"

Frank Rudge suddenly looked up. "You don't seriously think that some one made Eustace strangle himself by mental suggestion, do you?"

Norman shrugged. "I don't know how it was done. But Eustace is dead. And the rest of us—"

He stopped at a discreet tap on the door, and roared, "Come in!"

An aged, grey-haired manservant entered. "*That man* is on the phone again, Mr. Norman," he said to Luddington. "He wants to talk to you, sir. Shall I plug in the extension?"

He was carrying the extension phone and the cord, and at Norman Luddington's nod he plugged it in.

Nat Kimber whispered, "By God, keep him on the phone. I'll trace his call, all right!" He raced out of the room, and they heard him issuing orders to a couple of the Special Police stationed in the hall.

In the meantime Norman Luddington took the instrument. His hand was shaking. Everyone in the room was tense. Here was the same call they had been receiving every day for a week. And right on the heels of Eustace Luddington's death!

Norman cleared his throat and said, "Well?"

The voice at the other end could be distinctly heard all over the room as it crackled out of the receiver.

"One of you has died! He has felt the doom of suffocation, like the poor devils who have given their lives in the mines for your comfort. *And he did it with his own hands!*"

Norman Luddington demanded hoarsely, "Who are you? What do you want?"

There was a brittle laugh from the phone. "I want nothing, except that every last one of your accursed house shall taste of the strangling doom. At a word from me I could cause every one in that room to throttle himself to death. But it is better that you should do it slowly, one at a time. So you, Norman Luddington, shall be next. I command you now—*strangle yourself to death, and know the horror of suffocation!*"

Already, the others in the room had noticed that Norman Luddington was acting queerly. His hands, holding the phone and the receiver, began to shake as if with palsy. And suddenly he uttered a choked cry and flung the telephone away. A dreadful, smothered scream forced itself from his lips. And then both of his hands flew up to his throat and encircled it awkwardly, squeezing and kneading, pressing at the Adam's Apple in a desperate, unbelievable endeavor to strangle himself.

Basil Fellowes rushed to his side, and Frank Rudge sprang across the room. Nat Kimber, hearing the cries of Enid and Cleo, came charging back among them. The three men crowded around Norman Luddington, trying to tear his hands away from his throat. But to no avail. It was as if those gnarled, bony hands of his were welded there.

And in less than a minute Norman Luddington, the second of the two great coal tycoons, lay mottled and dead on the floor, victim of an unknown's command to strangle himself.

IT WAS the next evening when young Professor Cassius Parsons drove his small half-ton truck up to the entrance of the Luddington Estate. Black Acres could be entered only by one road, across a small bridge that spanned a natural ravine. At the head of this bridge there

was a small guard house, with a man on duty day and night, armed with a rifle.

Professor Parsons descended from the truck and made himself known to the guard, handing the man one of his neatly engraved cards which read,

CRIME CONSULTANTS, INC.

New York City

The guard phoned back to the house, and in a moment he came out and opened the gate. "Drive right up to the house, sir." His tone was a trifle more respectful than it had been on first seeing the small truck.

Professor Parsons adjusted his glasses, thanked the man, and drove in. The grounds were well patrolled. Three times he saw armed men with rifles moving about among the numerous outbuildings which surrounded the big house.

As he swung into the gravelled driveway and under the portecochere, he was met by the entire family. He returned Frank Rudge's grudging nod, and accepted Enid Luddington's hand. She introduced him to the others.

"My sister Cleo. And her husband, Mr. Nathaniel Kimber, whom you met the other day when—" there came a quick catch in her voice, which she mastered at once—"when dad—died. And this is Basil Fellowes—poor Uncle Norman's son-in-law."

Professor Cassius Parsons looked with favor on Enid Luddington, but he acknowledged the nervous greetings of the others stiffly.

"Before—ah—going into the house," he said, "I should like to ask you to place one of your armed men here to—er—guard my truck. It contains very valuable equipment."

Nathaniel Kimber shrugged. He called over one of the Special Police, and stationed the man at the truck. Only then did Cass Parsons permit himself to be led into the vaulted living room.

Enid Luddington seemed to warm to him, and her eyes lost a little of their sombre sadness as she talked to the quiet young professor of crime.

"The body of Uncle Norman is in the library," she told him. "He is to be buried in the morning. We have our own private cemetery, here on the estate. If—if they ever recover dad's body from the Hudson River, we'll—we'll bury him here too. The undertaker has just finished with Uncle Norman."

Professor Cassius Parsons blinked. "You—ah—still persist in not calling in the local police? You have not allowed them to make an autopsy?"

"I should say not!" exclaimed Cleo Kimber, who was standing next to Basil Fellowes. "One of the reasons why we allowed Enid to persuade us to call you in, was because we wish to have no scandal. We do not wish it known that Uncle Norman committed suicide."

The Professor calmly looked at Cleo Luddington Kimber. "Your uncle did not commit suicide, Mrs. Kimber," he said flatly.

"But look here, old fellow," Basil exclaimed. "We all saw him choke himself to death. We couldn't tear his hands away from his neck."

Nathaniel Kimber said, "You don't think this *voice* over the phone could have exerted some power of suggestion—"

"No, Mr. Kimber. In both the case of Eustace as well as Norman, there was a very lethal agency which brought about death."

CHAPTER THREE

The Choking Death

KIMBER glanced humorously at the others. "After all, Professor, you just got here a few minutes ago. How can you be so sure?"

Professor Cassius Parsons said mild-

ly, "I suggest that you try strangling yourself with your own hands, Mr. Kimber. You will understand what I mean."

They all looked at each other, startled. They had been so close to the two deaths, had actually seen Norman Luddington strangle himself, that it had not occurred to them that it was impossible.

Nathaniel Kimber swore to himself, in a low voice.

Frank Rudge, the chemist, looked interested for the first time since last night. "You think it was poison of some kind?" he asked.

Cass Parsons studied him for a moment. "You are a chemist, Mr. Rudge. What is your opinion?"

Rudge dropped his eyes. "I wouldn't know about poisons. I deal only with industrial chemistry."

"You have a laboratory here on the grounds, I understand?"

Frank Rudge threw a quick glance at Enid, then at Nathaniel Kimber.

"I see some one's been talking to you about me!"

"Only what you yourself told me the other day—plus a bit of investigation on my part." Parsons turned to face the others. "I—ah—should say now, that I have investigated each of you to some extent."

"But why worry about us?" Cleo demanded. "Why don't you find this mysterious *voice* that is killing us to take revenge for those filthy miners?"

"That will come in due time, Mrs. Kimber. Now, I should like to have your permission to perform an autopsy upon the body of Norman Luddington. You need have no fear of my bungling," he added hastily. "I have a degree in medicine, and I have had considerable experience. I should like—"

"Never!" Cleo shouted. "I'll never agree to cutting up Uncle Norman!"

Nathaniel Kimber looked sourly at his wife. "Why do you object, Cleo?" he

asked sardonically. "You never loved Uncle Norman very much. In fact you were only waiting for him and your father to die, so you could divorce me and marry Basil!"

"That's a lie!" Basil Fellowes shouted.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Professor Cassius Parsons reproved very mildly. "I beg you to remember that there is a dead body lying in this house!" As the two men subsided, he sighed, and said to Enid, "Then I shall forego the advantage of making an autopsy upon your uncle's body. It handicaps me—"

He was interrupted by a hoarse shout from one of the armed men outside the house. Almost at once an alarm bell began to ring somewhere, and two powerful flood-lights were switched on by someone outside on the grounds.

Nathaniel Kimber and the others all rushed to the window, and there, bathed in the floodlights, they saw the thing that had caused the alarm. It was the figure of a man. He was running from one of the outbuildings. He was in his shirt-sleeves. His face was purple with bursting blood vessels, and he had both hands clamped tightly about his throat. Those hands were squeezing, squeezing, throttling the life from his body!

Cleo screamed, and fainted, and Basil Fellowes caught her as she fell. The others watched, fascinated, while that man in shirtsleeves seemed to do a dreadful, macabre dance, then fell, thrashing his legs, to the ground. And all the time his hands kept choking, choking.

Three or four of the armed guards had run over to him, and they looked helplessly on while the unfortunate victim completed his own destruction.

Nathaniel Kimber shouted hoarsely, "Good Lord! That's Sitky, one of my Special Police! How—"

Of all the people there, Professor Cassius Parsons was the only one who acted with decision. Almost before the

others realized what was the matter with Sitky, Parsons was in motion. He threw open the French window, leaped the low balcony to the ground, and raced across toward where the man thrashed in dying convulsions.

BUT he was too late. When he thrust himself roughly through the group of guards to kneel at Sitky's side, the man was already dead, with his hands clamped at his throat like a vise.

Professor Cassius Parsons came to his feet, and crackling orders issued from his lips like the staccato rapping of a trip-hammer. In response to his commands, two of the guards lifted the dead man and ran with him toward the little truck, parked at one side.

Parsons was there ahead of them, unlocking the sheet-steel rear door. He let down the tail-board, instructed the men to place Sitky upon it, face up, and disappeared into the interior of the truck. In an instant he reappeared, wheeling a pulmotor machine. With the assistance of the guards he set it up, and within two minutes of the time when the first alarm was given he was administering resuscitative treatment.

Everybody there knew and recognized the pulmotor, for it was standard equipment at every coal mine, where it has more than once saved the lives of miners nearly dead of suffocation. But in this case there was no response. Sitky was dead.

Enid, Nat Kimber and Frank Rudge had come out of the house, and were tensely watching Professor Parsons' efforts. They had left Basil Fellowes to revive Cleo by himself.

Finally, Cass Parsons stopped using the pulmotor. He looked at them somberly. "I am afraid there is no hope," he said.

Nathaniel Kimber exclaimed, "But there's no reason for it. There's no sense

to it. Why should anyone want Sitky to strangle himself? He wasn't a member of the family. He had nothing to do with those miners who died—"

"Didn't he though?" the voice of Basil Fellowes reached them. He was coming toward the truck, leading a pale and gasping Cleo. But Basil was enjoying himself. "Wasn't Sitky one of your men, Nat, when you broke the strike in Number Sixteen Mine, and forced the miners to go back to work in a condemned shaft? I wouldn't be surprised if every last soul on this estate died like this!"

He looked sardonically at the group of armed guards who had gathered around the truck. The men shifted nervously. Their morale was beginning to break.

Frank Rudge shifted uneasily. "This thing seems to be striking indiscriminately. And there was no warning this time!"

"And we don't know who's to be next!" Basil Fellowes shouted. "For my part, I won't stay another minute. I'm going into town and take a room at the hotel. Maybe I married into this family once, but I don't want any part of it now!"

"Not even the piece of money that Eustace must have left you in his will?" Frank Rudge asked sardonically.

"Not even that!" Basil exclaimed. "I'm leaving now!"

He started to stride away, but Nathaniel Kimber's sharp command halted him.

"Stop!"

Kimber came up close to him. "No one leaves these grounds until we've cleared up what goes on here. You'll stay, Basil, and like it!"

"To hell with you!" Fellowes snarled, and swung away.

Nathaniel Kimber motioned to two of the guards, and they quickly stepped to either side of Fellowes, seized his arms.

Cleo exclaimed sharply, "Leave him alone, Nat!"

But Kimber only smiled crookedly.

"Leave him alone to escape?" He waved to the Special Police. "Take him down to the store-room in the basement, and lock him up. Here's the key."

Cleo started to protest, but Basil Fellowes was strangely quiescent. "At least if I'm safely locked up," he said, "you won't be able to accuse me of these killings. I'll go."

He took the small pistol from his hip pocket, and gave it to Cleo. "You will know how to use this," he said significantly.

The guards led Fellowes away.

Frank Rudge grimaced. "I don't like you personally, Kimber, but I think that's the only thing to do. No one should be permitted to leave."

Kimber, as an afterthought, said, "I hope the professor approves." He grinned. "After all, you're an expert—" "Hello! Where's the Professor?"

Cass Parsons had disappeared from the truck.

EENID LUDDINGTON was the only one who had seen where Professor Cassius Parsons went. The others had been absorbed by the clash between Kimber and Fellowes, but Enid's eyes were all for Parsons. So she saw him nod to her, and smile, and then climb out the front of the truck and fade away toward the bunkhouse from which Sitky had come staggering.

Professor Parsons did not go far, for he found what he sought on the ground, just outside the bunkhouse entrance. It was a still smoldering cigarette with an inch-long ash. It was lying right in the path Sitky must have taken in coming toward the spot where he fell.

Carefully, Professor Parson scooped it up in a small cellophane envelope which he produced from one of his pockets. The ash fell apart, but remained in the envelope, together with the stub of the cigarette. He raised it to his nostrils,

took a quick whiff, and nodded. Then he prowled around the bunkhouse, looking into the windows. He saw a room where there was a coat and shoulder holster hanging on a hook. And on the floor he noted a crumpled, empty cigarette package; the same brand as the one in the envelope. He climbed in through the window, picked up the package with a pair of pincers and placed it in another cellophane envelope.

Quite contentedly then, he returned to the truck.

Cleo and Enid, and Frank Rudge and Nathaniel Kimber had already gone into the house. Two of the guards had removed Sitky's body, and Enid had left one of the Special Police to guard the truck.

Professor Parsons acquired this information from the guard. Then he climbed into the truck and closed the door, lighting an electric lamp inside. There was a bench along one side of the interior, with test-tubes, retorts, and rows of chemical vials. At one end was a complete fingerprint set.

He dusted the package of cigarettes carefully, tried it for fingerprints, and frowned when he found only one set—undoubtedly Sitky's own. Next, Professor Parsons began to work on the cigarette. He crumbled it, placed fragments in four test-tubes, and proceeded to add chemicals, then place them over Bunsen burners. At the end of fifteen minutes he seemed to be satisfied. He took one of the test-tubes and placed it in a small closet, which he locked. Then he carefully washed his hands and left the truck. As he entered the house, his studious forehead was once more wrinkled in thought.

They were all gathered there in the great living room, shivering in spite of the fact that a huge log was crackling in the great fireplace.

"Tell me," Professor Parsons said to

Enid, "Did your Uncle Norman smoke at all?"

She shook her head. "No. Neither did father. They both hated tobacco."

Parsons seemed to concentrate in thought, while Frank Rudge watched him tensely, and Nathaniel Kimber looked at him with tolerant amusement. "I had to lock Basil Fellowes up in the store-room downstairs," Kimber told him. "He wanted to run out on us."

Cass Parsons seemed scarcely to have heard. Suddenly his eyes sparkled behind their glasses.

"Show me exactly where Norman Ludington was standing when he began to choke himself to death!" he snapped.

They pointed out the spot, perhaps ten feet from the fireplace, near a small refectory table. "Wilkes brought the phone here, and Uncle Norman stood near the table," Enid informed him.

Cassius Parsons dropped to his knees, as he had done in the road earlier in the evening. With his eyes close to the deep-napped rug, he examined every inch of space around the table. Suddenly he uttered a short exclamation, and picked up a small piece of transparent material that looked like mica. Then he picked up another, and another; the pieces were so small that it was difficult to handle them as he slipped them into a third cellophane envelope.

Frank Rudge laughed nervously. "What have you got in those envelopes? Clues?"

Parsons nodded seriously. "They contain the threads of a noose which I am surely weaving around the neck of a murderer, Mr. Rudge!"

CASSIUS PARSONS got to his feet, his eyes fixed on the chemist. "Tell me, Mr. Rudge. What kind of experiments are you conducting in your laboratory?"

Rudge said, "Well—I'm working on

a process to purify coal. If the impurities are removed from bituminous coal, it will burn forty percent longer."

"And what does that process consist of, Mr. Rudge?"

The chemist's lips tightened. "I'm not talking about that! For ten years I've been working out special processes for Eustace and Norman. They've made millions on my ideas—and given me an allowance! This process is going to net me ready cash. When it's perfected, I'll sell it—not give it away!"

Professor Parsons nodded. "I can well understand your feelings in the matter. But will you tell me only this; does your process include running the raw coal through a *chlorine* bath?"

Rudge's eyes narrowed. He hesitated. "Well—yes—"

"Thank you, thank you," said Professor Parsons. He opened the envelope containing part of the remains of the cigarette he had picked up outside the bunkhouse. "I can now tell you how Sitky was murdered. This cigarette has been impregnated with *chloropicrin*, which is a compound of chlorine. Chloropicrin was used in the later days of the world war, as a strangulatory gas. Its effects are horrible and ghastly, as you have all seen. When Sitky inhaled the fumes of the cigarette, the *chloropicrin* immediately attacked his lung tissues and all the walls of his pulmonary system. It caused acute *oedema*."

He paused and gazed around at the staring group, then went on calmly. "*Oedema* is an intense swelling of the membranes, caused by an effusion of watery fluid from the blood vessels. You understand that the feeling a victim has is such that he believes his throat will burst apart. He will naturally, then, attempt to prevent that by pressing his hands against his throat. That is why you thought Sitky was strangling himself."

Enid Luddington was white-faced. Cleo

was looking with queer, frightened eyes at Frank Rudge, and Nathaniel Kimber stepped behind the chemist, putting a hand on the gun in his pocket.

Rudge muttered hoarsely, "Are you accusing me—"

Professor Parsons raised a hand. "I am not accusing you or anyone—yet. I have no proof that it was you or anybody else who placed a package containing one impregnated cigarette in Sitky's room."

"But," Enid managed to say, "what about Uncle Norman—"

Cassius Parsons smiled. "He was killed by the same gas of course. But it was administered to him in a more subtle fashion. The murderer placed a small capsule of *chloropicrin* in the telephone instrument, in the small crevice above the bar upon which rests the receiver. When Norman Luddington removed the receiver, the bar slid upward, shattering the capsule and releasing the gas. He inhaled it as he talked."

Frank Rudge glanced nervously behind him at Kimber, who had his gun out. "I never did it!" he breathed.

"What about father?" Cleo asked. "He was in a car by himself. And he wasn't smoking. How was *he* killed?"

Cass Parsons frowned. "I can't work that out as yet. There was a faint odor of *chloropicrin* on the roadbed of the George Washington Bridge—"

Abruptly he snapped his fingers. "Ladies and gentlemen, I believe I shall be able to produce definite proof of the murderer's identity within five minutes! Kindly excuse me!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Murderer's Hand

LEAVING everyone gaping, Professor Parsons dashed from the room. He headed directly across the grounds toward the huge garage which was capa-

ble of accommodating twenty cars. It was dark in here, and he found the switch, flicked it on. He stooped alongside the nearest car, and examined the rear end, sliding almost underneath to do so, disregarding the fact that he was soiling his neat grey suit with grease. Then he moved from car to car, inspecting the rear end of each. He had reached the fourth or fifth automobile, when suddenly all the lights in the huge garage went out.

Professor Cassius Parsons frowned in the darkness, and felt for a flashlight which he did not have. Then he smiled. He reached into one of the cars and switched on the headlights. This gave him enough light to continue his examination of the other cars in that row. As he slid under the next to the last one, he drew in his breath quickly. His exploring fingers had found a protuberance alongside the universal shaft which did not belong there.

He tapped it and found that it emitted a slight hollow gurgle.

He climbed out from under the car and jotted down the make and license number. He was just about to turn away when a reflected flicker in his right eyeglass made him aware that there was something moving behind him.

His lanky body swivelled and twisted instantaneously, and it was that high-speed action of his which saved his skull from being crushed in by the heavy tire-iron which came swishing down upon him.

As it was, the massive tire tool missed his head, smashed into his right side, temporarily paralyzing his arm. He fell against the car, and needles of pain shot through his back. The headlights of the car at the end of the row blinded him, and he could not see his assailant. But the man leaped upon him silently, swinging the tire-iron once more.

Cass Parsons sensed, rather than saw,

the tool coming down. He clamped his teeth shut against the pain in his side, and dived low under the blow. The iron struck the car, viciously resounding clangorously.

Cass flailed out with his left fist, and felt solid bone under his blow. The other man danced away, keeping out of the glare of the headlights, and while Cass limped around in a pivot, the man smashed in at him from the right, hurling him against the car, and then gripping his throat. At the same time he brought a knee up to Cass Parsons' groin.

The professor gasped with the sudden agony, and doubled over. But at the same time he reached behind him with his left hand, seized one of his assailant's trouser cuffs, and heaved mightily.

The man uttered a hoarse croak, and went hurtling backward, letting go his grip on Parsons' throat. He fell to the floor, rolled over twice away from the professor, and ducked behind the second car to the rear.

Cass heard him open a car door, and at once the headlights went out. The unknown assailant had plunged the place in darkness once more.

Cass started to move warily after him, dragging his right leg a little. He heard scuffling footsteps, then saw a shadow slip out of the garage into the night. At the same instant he caught the faint sound of breaking glass, down near the door.

Professor Parsons stopped stock still. He waited a moment, and then took a tentative sniff. His lips tightened.

It was the already familiar smell of *chloropicrin!*

THE MURDERER had stolen in here no doubt with the idea of partially throttling the professor, then pressing the open bottle of strangulatory gas to his nostrils, and leaving him to strangle. But, having been beaten off, he had tried in a different way. He had smashed the

whole bottle of *chloropicrin*, allowing the fumes to permeate the garage. They would kill anything living within those four walls.

Actual experience in the world war had shown that a solution as weak as 1:50,000 would cause death *in the open*, if breathed for more than one minute. How much more deadly would it be within the confines of this garage!

Professor Cass Parsons looked about him in desperate search of another exit. There was none, and the windows were too high to reach unless he found a ladder—and by that time he would never be able to climb it.

Before the *chloropicrin* could spread effectively to the spot where he stood, he drew in a great, deep breath. Then he clamped his mouth shut. With fingers moving in desperate speed he removed his eyeglasses and forced the ends of the nose-piece close together so that they formed an effective pair of pincers. These he forced across the tip of his nose in such a way that they clamped the nostrils tightly together.

Holding his breath thus he darted toward the small open door in the larger double doors. These larger doors were closed, and the only method of egress was through that small opening. But now, as Cass headed toward it, he saw that some one was shutting it from outside. Almost before he had taken another step, he heard the latch click, indicating that he was locked in.

To attempt to break that door open with his fists, or even with a tool would have been suicide, because he could not have managed to hold his breath that long.

Cass Parsons stopped running. With the cool detachedness of a true scientist, he went over the situation in his mind, seeking a solution to his predicament.

The breath was almost bursting in his body when he decided on the one proper

means, involving the least element of chance—though that means was far from certain.

There was a single limousine standing in the middle of the floor, facing the door. He leaped into it and turned on the ignition key, stepped on the starter. Then, with his head far out of the window, and still holding his breath, he put the gear shift in first, let up the clutch, and pulled the hand throttle all the way out.

The heavy limousine sprang forward like a hurled javelin. There was only some thirty or forty feet to the door, but when the limousine hit them like a clap of thunder, they parted in the middle as if they had been held by a cardboard lock.

Cass Parsons expelled his breath in a great, whistling *whoosh* as he tore the glasses from his nostrils and pushed down the clutch. He transferred his foot to the brake, and the limousine came to a stop almost with its nose against the rear of the great house.

Several of the armed guards came running, and Professor Parsons, breathing rather quickly, asked them if they had seen anybody come out of the garage. They said they had not.

Parsons nodded and sent them back to their posts. Then he went to his truck. He unlocked it and climbed in, and worked fast for five minutes, picking from the shelf of chemicals two vials whose labels bore the terms: *sodium thiosulphate* and *sodium carbonate* respectively. He also opened a container of cotton padding in layers, from which he took a handful.

Then he left the truck, locking it behind him, and went into the house.

THEY were all in the living room—even Basil Fellowes. Nathaniel Kimber had his gun out, and was covering both Fellowes and Frank Rudge.

"One of these two is the murderer," he said. "I'm playing safe and holding

the two of them. Cleo stole my key and released Fellowes, and I caught him outside on the grounds just now."

"I did no such thing!" Cleo shouted. "He thinks he'll get grounds for divorcing me by claiming that I did it!"

Kimber grinned at her. "You wish you had me locked up down there, don't you?"

Enid Luddington looked at Professor Parsons questioningly, and at the mushy looking objects he was holding in his right hand. His left hand was in his coat pocket.

"So," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose all of you men were outside the grounds in the last few minutes. There is no way to know who attacked me in the garage?"

Kimber exclaimed, "Attacked? How did you get out? Was that the racket we just heard out there?"

Professor Parsons did not answer him. Instead he asked, "To whom does the sedan with the following license belong—F21-799?"

Kimber walked across to the door, turned the key and put the key in his pocket. Then he faced them with the gun in his hand. "That's my sedan," he said in a curious flat voice.

"Then you are the man who murdered the members and servants of this family," Professor Parsons told him matter-of-factly. "You have an extra tank attached to the under side of your car. It contained *chloropicrin*, which you stole from Rudge's laboratory. You were directly in front of Eustace Luddington's car, coming across the George Washington Bridge. You released the gas by pulling a wire which opened the cover at the back of the tank. The deadly gas escaped along with the exhaust fumes from your car, and were sucked into Eustace Luddington's car by his fan, causing him to strangle to death.

"You killed Sitky probably because he was your co-conspirator. It was he who

phoned me at my laboratory. You had him cut into one of the telephone wires here on the grounds, and make his telephone calls of warning. You killed him because you wanted no one to be able to talk. Eventually you would have killed all the other members of the family, until the vast Luddington estates came into your possession!"

Nathaniel Kimber smiled. "Perfectly reasoned, Professor. You couldn't have known better, if you'd done it yourself."

"I'm glad to see you do not attempt to make a denial," said Cassius Parsons. "Because the tire iron in the garage, with which you attempted to kill me is still there—with your fingerprints upon it."

Nathaniel Kimber was still smiling. "I knew the crisis was here when I failed to get you. I heard those garage doors smash open, and knew you'd gotten out somehow. But if you think I'm licked, you're mistaken."

He kept the gun wavering from one to the other of them, and brought out a vial of greenish-hued contents. "You're all going to strangle yourselves to death here in this room. And I'm going out and say that the *voice* got you all!"

HE RAISED his hand and hurled the bottle of *chloropicrin* at the fireplace, where it shattered, releasing its fumes.

"Notice that the French windows are all shuttered!" Kimber crowed. "You can't get out for at least five minutes. And then it won't matter!"

Out of his pocket he brought a small flexible mask with a filter across the nose and mouth. He raised it to his head, trying to adjust it with one hand, while keeping them covered with the other.

Professor Parsons had not been idle. He raised one of the cotton pads to his mouth, swiftly passed the others out to Enid, Cleo, Fellowes and Rudge. "Breathe through that as I do!" he ordered.

They caught the idea at once, having

heard and read of gas mask filters.

"I expected you to do something like this, Kimber," Professor Parsons said before placing the filter over his mouth.

Kimber didn't have his mask adjusted yet. His eyes were open wide with hate and frustration. He raised his gun to shoot.

And Professor Cassius Parsons fired through the pocket of his coat—once.

The shot caught Nathaniel Kimber in the right shoulder, spun him around, hurling the gas mask from his fingers.

By this time the fumes of the gas were spreading throughout the room, and they reached Kimber. The choked scream that burst from his lips was like the terrified death-bleat of a trapped animal.

And while they all watched, fascinated by the horror of it, Nathaniel Kimber strangled himself to death just as he had caused the others to do.

It was Cassius Parsons who fished the key from the dead man's pocket, and led them all out into the open.

Enid Luddington smiled up at him, wanly, while Cleo and Frank Rudge and Basil Fellowes huddled together in whispered talk.

Enid put her hand in that of Cassius Parsons. There were little globules of moisture in her eyes.

"Whatever fee you ask," she said, "is yours of course. But—but you'll stay a while anyway?"

Professor Parsons shook his head.

"I must be off," he told her. "I only stopped here on the way, because the nature of the case challenged my scientific instincts."

"You were going to handle another case?" she asked.

"Yes. I am headed for the Blue Ridge Mountains—to solve the case of the Whirling Dervishes."

"You'll come in on the way back?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "If I am alive. I understand that these Whirling Dervishes appear out of the night and breath fire into a man's face, literally roasting him to death."

"I wish you—the best of luck!" she whispered.

And she stood there a long time, watching his laboratory on wheels cross the bridge over the canyon, on the way to unknown adventure.



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MARKED FOR THE SILENT DEATH

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Rainer pawed for the sawed-off shotgun . . . but the bird flashed off into the darkness. . . .



That curious zig-zag path that Death took on those dark, silent nights of terror sent Dennis Rainer to set a trap in the fear-filled house where that noiseless doom must strike once more. . . . And the bait he used was his own body!

THE cat appeared so suddenly within the darkened house, as though it had materialized full-grown from the gloom and stillness and the sense of fear which filled the place, that no one at first saw. For that matter, no one ever saw it except one man—and he died shortly afterward.

All his life Carlton Voight had been afraid of cats. The mere presence of a cat terrified him as the sight of a snake does some persons, consequentially, during his lifetime there never had been a cat in the great, ugly palace on Fifth Avenue. Yet now, in the thick darkness before dawn, the cat materialized in the first floor hallway. It had come through none of the first floor doorways or windows, for they were all carefully locked and guarded.

Carlton Voight's life had been threatened.

The cat was black as the night, its long tail swaying with a kind of controlled, muscular fury. When it lifted its head, its lips curled back so that its small white pointed teeth glowed against the darkness. After a moment it went down the hallway and in utter silence began to mount the stair. Light from a window touched it, reflecting the burning yellow of its eyes

Along the second floor it moved, as quietly as the passage of death. The door of Carlton Voight's room was ajar, and the cat slipped through. Before its amber gaze was the dull outline of the bed where the man was sleeping, breathing heavily.

The cat made a soft, muted whine. It crouched, and leaped, straight for Carlton Voight's face.

The instant after the cat struck, after Carlton Voight's lids popped open and he stared into those flaming eyes, time stopped dead. Years passed through the man's brain as he lay there, paralyzed with terror. Then the cat raked his claws across Carlton Voight's cheeks and jaw.

The man's scream was like a live thing ripped bleeding from his throat—and the triumphant howl of the cat mingled with it. Voight dived from the bed, hit on hands and knees, hurling himself erect, and fell again. He was screaming, but he didn't hear the sound of his own cries, one awful shriek upon the other. He was crawling, trying to get erect, and falling, and he reached the hallway before he went down for the last time. His cries drooled off to short, agony-racket sobs. His hands and feet beat frantically against the floor. . . .

THE servants came, turning on blazing lights, staring down at the man who had owned and controlled millions of dollars lying in knotted convulsions upon the floor. His face was twisted upward to the light, but it was no longer that of a

human being, swollen to twice its size, featureless, and vivid blue. The color was seeping down through his body, and as the color moved the swelling went with it until he resembled some hideous blue balloon out of a parade. His distorted lips scarcely parted as he sobbed, "The cat! The cat!"

The servants and guards stared around them. There was no sign of a cat.

The cat itself had long since vanished through a window into the night.

For two hours Carlton Voight lay in agony. Then he died.

Two nights later, at approximately the same hour, a wealthy movie producer died in Hollywood, a continent's width away. And he died exactly as Carlton Voight had done, screaming about a cat, and with his body grown bloated and blue.

Shortly afterward, in Washington D. C., an Army general was killed in the same manner.

By this time the police had established certain facts—facts which served only to make the case more baffling than before.

Carlton Voight had been warned, under pain of death, that he must secretly contribute one hundred thousand dollars to a charity which shipped food and clothing to Madrid. And Carlton Voight had sneered at the idea. He hated democracy in all forms. He believed in the rule of the aristocrat and of power. He had mercilessly controlled the lives of his thousands of employees. But now he was dead.

The movie magnate had been warned to contribute a hundred thousand dollars to a charity shipping supplies to China. He had waved two flat hands in the air, said, "Me, I should give one hundred grand to the Chinks? I laugh!" But two nights later he had screamed, and died.

The army general had been warned he was to die, but had been asked for nothing. He had always lived beyond his salary and was in debt. No one could have hoped to get much from him.

As far as the men personally were concerned there seemed to be no connection between them. They had never met nor had they had any business connection. All three were killed by a poison which the papers explained as a concentrated snake venom, a refined product infinitely more deadly than the bite of a cobra.

The charities to which Voight and the movie magnate had been asked to contribute were established, legitimate agencies. Each had been notified anonymously to expect a large contribution.

A wealthy Chicago politician was next warned to contribute or die, but took such precautions that he considered himself untouchable. His house was proofed against every kind of animal. Not even a mosquito could get in, no less a cat. But there were times when he had to leave the house, and on Michigan Boulevard, in the heart of the city, a wild hawk flew against his face and clawed him. He died two hours later.

A man in Texas was killed who had been warned but asked for nothing, given no way to avoid his death. He was not wealthy and could have raised little money if he had been asked for it.

A wave of insane terror swept the country. A madman was loose, a madman who had animals to perform his murders. And the murders themselves were senseless, it seemed. If the killer was a man driven mad by the Fascist wars raging throughout the world, and wanted to force wealthy men into giving money to fight against them, why did he kill those who were not wealthy? There seemed to be no link between his victims. His next blow might fall anywhere. . . .

Six men and a woman had died before the night Dennis Rainer landed on the private airfield of Senator Donat Wallace.

THERE was no moon. The pilot circled the field, dropped flares, and set the ship down. Dennis Rainer watched ap-

provingly—he had been a stunt man in Hollywood, both as a pilot and gymnast—and he realized that this man knew his business. The plane rolled to a stop with scarcely a bounce. The motor died.

“Here we are,” the pilot said. He climbed out of the open cockpit plane. Dennis Rainer raised himself on his hands, swung his feet over the cowlings, and dropped to the ground with a single, effortless motion.

“There don’t seem to me any welcoming committee,” the pilot observed.

Light wavered in bright circles around the burning flares, but beyond and between them the darkness crowded. The light flickered over the plane and over the pilot’s face which was like that of a death’s head. His cheekbones were high, his cheeks and eyes sunken; his teeth showed when he grinned, but there was no light in his eyes.

“The old boy was in such a sweat to get you here, you’d think he’d be out to meet you. Except he ain’t leaving the house much these days.”

“Perhaps that’s safest,” Rainer said.

“Yeah.” The pilot looked off into the darkness. With the light of a flare touching his teeth and cheekbones he looked more like a skull than ever. His body was skeleton lean. “It wouldn’t be no great loss to humanity,” he said softly, “if somebody was to get the old boy.”

From what Dennis Rainer had read of the senator’s record he was inclined to agree; but he said, “Without him you’d be out of a job, wouldn’t you?”

The pilot was still looking out into the night. “I can always get a job. I’m good with a ship.”

The man turned slowly, the light moving across his gaunt face. “The old boy has the State Commissioner of Police with him.”

There was something about his voice and face that told Rainer he meant more than he was saying, that some hidden

meaning was concealed behind his words.

"Yes?" Rainer said.

Far out in the darkness appeared two small spots of light, like white-hot eyes. There was no sound except the low moan of wind whimpering at the plane's wings. The white spots grew larger.

"You'd think it was Commissioner Douglass who got the warning," the pilot said, "the way he acts. He's scared clean down through his guts. He's yellow."

The eyes had grown larger and brighter and had become the headlights of an automobile that moved slowly across the field. The pilot watched them.

He said, without looking at Rainer, "If it would stick to the rich ones, there wouldn't be much complaint. Most of those guys ought to be knocked off. But I can't understand why it got the poor fellows too."

"It?" Rainer said.

"What do you want to call it? A *him*? Nobody ever saw anything except a cat or a bird. Maybe there ain't anything else."

"Poison is a man's weapon. Or a woman's. Not a cat's."

"It was snake poison," the pilot said. The car had stopped in front of them now. "Here's the old boy's chauffeur." Then, out of the corner of his mouth, "That was just an idea," he said. "Just an idea."

SENATOR WALLACE'S home was a huge, colonial place, circled now by floodlights. The car was stopped by a national guardsman, then allowed to pass. Finally Rainer was in the living room of the house with Senator Donat Wallace and Commissioner of Police Edward Douglass.

He was shaking hands when the girl entered. The senator said, "Mr. Rainer, my niece, Ellen Marshall."

Rainer turned his grey eyes toward her, and abruptly, deep inside him, something

trembled like the plucked string of a harp.

Three years of Hollywood had inured him to beautiful women, but Ellen Marshall was not the Hollywood type. She was not beautiful in the conventional sense of the word. Her face was thin, her eyes dark and slanting. There was something Oriental about those eyes, almost hypnotic.

She said, "You were a stunt pilot, weren't you?"

Senator Wallace interrupted. "He's doing more important things now, Ellen. Try to take an interest in something besides flying. In my life, for instance."

"I have the State police all around this place," Douglass said, but there was no strength in his voice.

Rainer looked at him. He was a big man with a middle-aged coating of fat beginning to cover powerful muscles.

Rainer said slowly, "Have you been threatened also?"

Douglass' gaze skidded fearfully toward the senator, then back to Rainer. "No. Of course not. I'm not a wealthy man. What could this—" he hesitated on the word—"this person get from me?"

"There have been also poor men killed," Rainer said.

Senator Wallace said, "All right, Mr. Rainer, you'll be in charge here. What are you going to do?"

Rainer looked at him quietly, without any expression on his lean face. "Why don't you pay the money?"

Wallace was amazed. "You recommend that?"

"It's a worthy cause."

"Damn the cause! You think they are worth a hundred thousand dollars—a bunch of lice-eaten Chinamen! You think any collection of scurvy—"

"Do you say that in your campaign speeches, Senator?"

Wallace's big face had grown purple with fury. For a moment Rainer thought the man was going to strike him. He

balanced himself, waiting; then the senator got his temper under control. "I offered you a job," he said finally. "Do you want it?"

"Yes," Rainer said. "I want to find the killer—not so much because of the men he is killing but because he is hurting the very causes he is trying to help. He is losing them more than he gains; he is losing them the good opinion of the entire nation, and the nation's help."

There was a knock on the door and a servant said, "Mr. Robert Campbell is here."

MR. ROBERT CAMPBELL was a small, aggressive man in his middle fifties. He was a man of wealth who gave freely of his time to charities, heading several of them.

"I came about the donation," Campbell said.

Angry blood began to cloud Wallace's face. "You're working with the fiend!" he shouted. "Can't you be satisfied with a hundred thousand dollars! Can't—"

Rainer's voice cut like a knife, "Wait! You've already paid the money?"

"Once," Wallace said. "A week ago. This is the second demand on me. And both times this man—"

"Don't lose your head, Senator," Campbell interrupted. "I was merely notified that you wanted to make a contribution, notified by an unsigned letter mailed in New York. You are the first of this person's—ah—victims who has been allotted to me. Your money has been well spent. And this next contribution—"

"There won't be any next contribution!" Wallace snapped.

Campbell's light eyebrows went up. "Very well, Senator." He smiled faintly. "You'll excuse me if I hurry and say good-night," he said, "but I'm a nervous man. I—I don't like danger."

With his going a cold, tangible sense of terror came into the room.

Rainer turned to the Police Commissioner. "Show me the precautions you have taken."

Outside, spotlights flooded the house from various angles, armed guards moved back and forth. Yet, here too was the sense of fear. Men's eyes, gleaming under the lights, moved jerkily.

One of the guards called the Commissioner aside and began to whisper. Dennis Rainer moved on, past the last spotlight into the thickening darkness beyond. He stopped here, his head bent slightly to one side, listening. The chill wind brushed at his face; a puff of dead leaves blew past like scurrying rats.

He was turning to go when he saw the pilot. The man was close by, his thin body bent slightly to the wind, his face raised, staring quietly at the house. It was so dark here that his face showed only as a blur. Dennis Rainer went toward him.

"Hello," he said.

The pilot's head moved slowly. "Evening," the man replied.

"That girl in there," Rainer said. "Miss Marshall, can she fly?"

"Can a bird?" the pilot said.

Across the glare of lights Rainer noticed that Commissioner Douglass had left the guard and was walking back toward the house. When Rainer called to him, the Commissioner came slowly over the lighted lawn.

The pilot said, "What do you want with him?"

"I was wondering if you two are acquainted."

The pilot grinned. "You suspect everybody, don't you?"

"Everybody," Rainer said shortly.

And then it happened, completely without warning. . . .

A BIRD whirled out of darkness striking downward like a falling lance, straight for Commissioner Douglass. He

saw it, and the scream was still rising in his throat as he flung himself backward, both arms crossed before his face. The hawk struck.

Rainer's voice boomed out as he hurled forward, his right hand pawing for the gun at his hip. But the bird lashed into the darkness and was gone.

Douglass was writhing on the ground, shrieking and pawing at his face with both hands. He clawed at his flesh, clutched hands full of earth as he rolled, beat his head against the ground. And always he screamed.

It was like an island in the sea of light. None of the guards came near. The pilot had vanished.

Dennis Rainer stooped over Douglas. He could see the marks on Douglass' face left by the poisoned claws of the hawk, but he paid little attention to them. He knew there was no need to rush the Commissioner to the house. Already he was turning blue and swelling.

Rainer tried to hold the man still and examine the shoulders and collar of his coat. He put his nose down close, then he turned to where the Commissioner's hat had fallen. He picked it up, and noticed the white feather that was sticking in the band.

Once more the bird struck downward through the fringe of light and darkness. It was no more than a blur, slashing straight for Rainer!

The detective hurled the hat from him, leaping backward, firing in the same motion. At the grey edge of darkness the hawk fell.

From where the guards watched near the house they could not have seen the hawk fall. Rainer walked to it, kicked it farther back into the darkness—but as he did so he kept looking up into the air as though the bird had escaped. Then he went to Douglass and lifted him and carried him into the house.

From the hallway he heard Senator

Wallace saying, "Get Robert Campbell on the phone! Quick! I'm going to pay! And tell him for God's sake, if he knows who this murdering fiend is, to tell him I'm paying! Tell him I'm paying!"

THEY were all in the living room of Senator Wallace's home: the Senator, his neice, the pilot, and Robert Campbell who had come to accept Wallace's donation, and Dennis Rainer.

Rainer looked at them, each in turn. "The hawk is still out there," he said. "At least it got away alive, and I believe it is still there. But if you will all do as I tell you, we can get it, and perhaps the killer who controls it."

"For God's sake," Wallace whispered. "Do something! Do anything, but. . ." His lips worked thickly.

"Just stay where you are, all of you," Rainer said.

He went out into the hallway and to the rack where his hat hung beside the others. From his pocket he took several white chicken feathers. He fitted one into the strap of the pilot's hat goggles, went back and called the man out. He whispered to him.

The pilot grinned his skeleton grin, put on his jacket, and went out.

As he went through the door Dennis Rainer stepped swiftly and silently, to a window. He saw the pilot go down the steps, stop and look back, then turn fast and go off to the left.

Rainer went back and called out the girl. When she too went out the door there was a white chicken feather in her hat.

Robert Campbell came next. "I'm not certain I approve of what you are doing, Mr. Rainer," he said. "Undoubtedly this murderer is mad, but the purpose for which he is working—"

"Is purely his own selfish gain," Rainer said.

"You mean—" Campbell was standing

near the door, his hat held with both hands. "You mean—"

At that instant the lights went out.

SOMETHING whined in the dark. It smacked the wall inches from Rainer's face, and he heard the hum of a steel blade vibrating. Then his own gun was swinging up through inky darkness. He fired once. Somewhere in the house a man screamed horribly. A pile-driving weight crashed across Rainer's knees and he went down.

He was twisting while he was still falling in the air. His left hand struck the floor and he cartwheeled off it. Something lashed the cloth of his trousers. Then his foot, whipping through the air, struck something hard.

Close by him a man began to scream in unbearable agony.

Rainer found the light switch and clicked it on. Robert Campbell lay at his feet, still holding a small knife. There was a long scratch across his cheek where he had cut himself in the fight. Already his face was beginning to turn blue and swell.

Rainer leaned over him. "Quick!" he said. "Why did you kill the poor ones, the army general who was in debt, the Police Commissioner? What was the connection between all these men?"

Campbell choked down his sobs, but his voice was throaty with pain. "Secret organization . . . Cause another depression, and grab power. They were army officers, police commissioners, politicians. Fifty or more—coast to coast. . ."

"How did you know? Why did you hate them?"

"My idea, my plan! Stolen from me by Carlton Voight, the first man I killed. He barred me from the organization. Others didn't know I—knew. . . . Would have killed all except those I could control!"

He shuddered and bit in agony at his swelling lips until the blood ran.

It was almost dawn when Ellen Marshall drove Rainer and the pilot to her uncle's private airfield. For a while they drove in silence, then Ellen said, "Undoubtedly the man was mad."

"All mass murderers may be called insane," Rainer said. "Robert Campbell was no crazier than the others who murder for profit."

"Profit?" the pilot asked.

"Of course. His victims made secret contributions to legitimate charities, but charities where he was the big man. And the contributions were secret—there was no real check on them. He could appropriate the vast majority of the money for his personal use and nobody would know; yet by seeming to be working for charity he could cover his own contact in the matter."

"How did he work the kills?"

"Simple animal training. Those were hunting hawks and they could be taught to strike at almost anything. He used a white feather on a hatbrim. Probably in the case of the cats they followed and attacked a certain odor. I have seen animals trained to do that, though it is possible he used another method."

"You trapped him with the white feather on his hatbrim?"

"Yes. He thought the hawk was still outside and would attack if he went out; yet if he moved the feather I would know he was guilty (I was pretty sure of my man, but I couldn't take chances. I had to test both of you as well as Campbell). So he backed up against the light switch, cut it off, and tried to kill me in the dark. The Senator heard the fight and got frightened and began to yell. It was quite a mess."

"It would have been more of one for him if you hadn't come," Ellen Marshall said softly. . . .

SHRINE OF THE THUNDER

CHAPTER ONE

Bolt from the Blue

THE girl leapt across the sun-flooded patio, swift as the hummingbirds that darted among the hibiscus blossoms. She ducked under the pepper tree,

raced blindly through the mist of a lawn sprinkler.

"Wait!" she wailed the words. "Don't go! Please!"

John Weatherby shrugged age-stooped shoulders. His eyes were fixed on the sleek black car backing out of the garage.

"Sarah, kindly control yourself."

The girl seized his arm. Hysteria bubbled in her voice. "Dad! I just found this! On the desk with your mail!"

Fat tires veered off the concrete driveway. The chauffeur had his head poked out the window, amazed eyes glued on the girl's figure and the scrap of paper in her hands.

A voice from behind the idol said, "Hold it!" And the tattooed giant slammed Ghostly against the vaulted ceiling. . . .



Ghostly Jones, they called him, because he had devoted his life to crushing fake mediums and charlatans who preyed on innocent people. But he had never tangled horns with a "spiritualist" enemy who could summon stark murder from a cloudless blue sky!

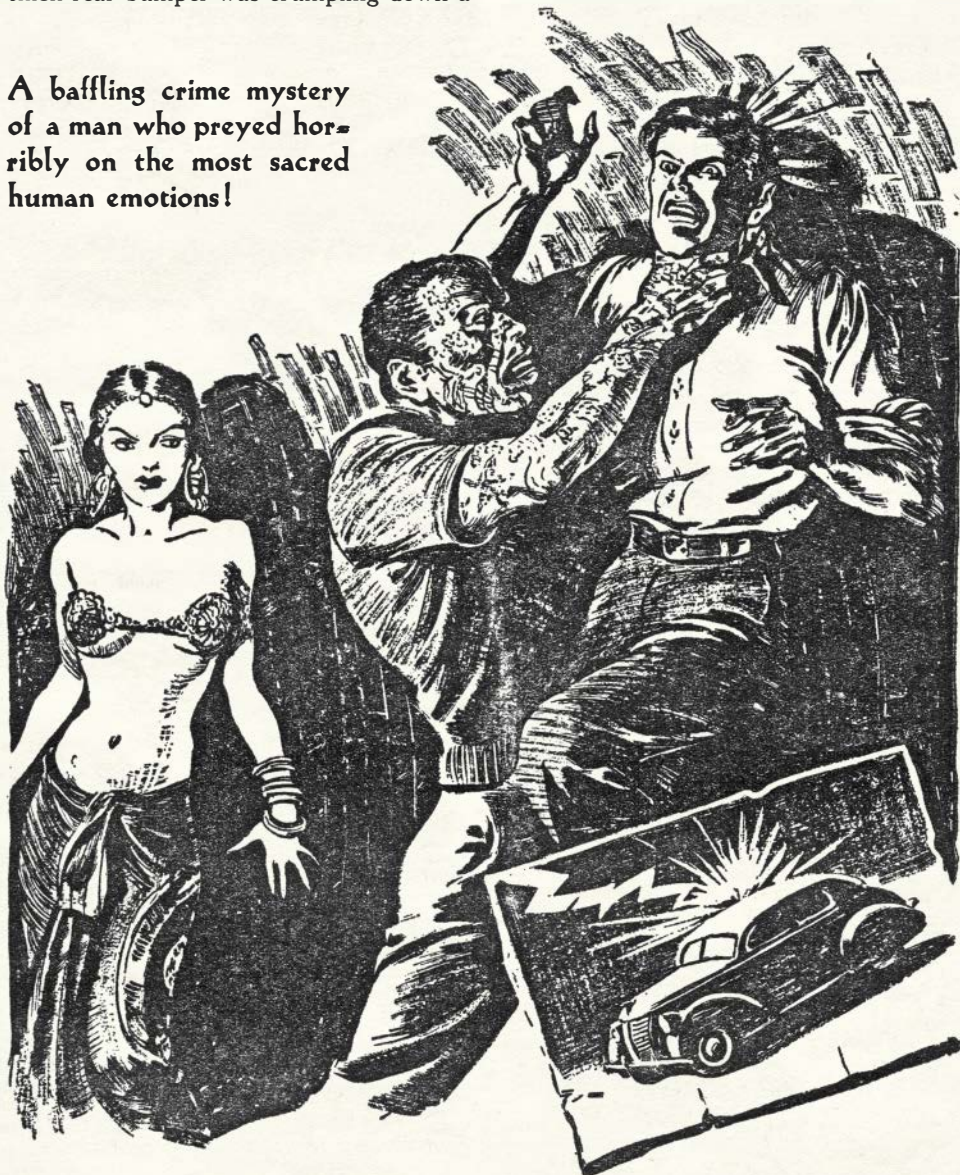
GOD ● A Novelette by DALE CLARK

John Weatherby said, "I know. I left it there myself. Preposterous, it is!" His eyes under their bent white brows re-focused on the big black car. The fat tires were far off the driveway now, the thick rear bumper was crumpling down a

foolishly. He jerked around. Sarah saw the man's shoulders dent into the cushions as he flung his weight down onto the brake pedal.

She wouldn't forget it, ever. One mo-

A baffling crime mystery of a man who preyed horribly on the most sacred human emotions!



bed of rare bird-of-paradise blossoms. "Idiot!" Weatherby roared. "Watch where you're going!"

The chauffeur's square jaw slacked

ment there was the patio peacefully drowsing in the California sunlight—and the next, the searing flash, the eruption, the ear-shattering crash!

The earth whirled. . . . No, it was Sarah Weatherby who reeled as the concussion blew her off her feet. On her hands and knees, she peered bewilderedly over her father's prone figure.

"My God!" Her head swam. The blood in her veins seemed to congeal in cold, queasy clots of horror. The car, streamlines twisted out of all recognition, was a flame swathed bier. Roberts!—she thought. The chauffeur was in that holocaust of roaring gasoline. . . .

And then she knew he wasn't.

A gasp knifed through her pallid lips. Cold ripples tingled through her young body. Around bulging, fear-fascinated eyes the girl's face tensed to a stark, sheet-white mask.

There on the driveway, balanced by a gruesome jest of gravity a puttee clad leg stood by itself!

Roberts had been blown to bits, and the ghastly fragments were scattered all over the lawn. Hardened soldiers would have blanched at the sight.

"The lightning—!"

Sarah's sob sounded far-off and reedily thin in her shock-stunned ears.

"A bolt of lightning out of the blue sky. . . ."

It was the Death which had been prophesied for her father!

THEY called him Ghostly Jones.

There was unsmiling, grim humor in the nickname. He specialized in ghostology, all right—in unmasking fraudulent mediums, sinisterly spurious spiritualists, the whole hodge-podge and claptrap of a rotten, bloodsucking racket.

He didn't *look* ghostly. He was tall, red-haired, and freckled. Thoroughly unhandsome, he had moodily twisted lips and coppery eyes as bright as fresh minted pennies. The strangely colored eyes were penetrating, almost psychic in their probing stare.

Some insisted he *was* psychic—that he

turned mesmeric, clairvoyant powers against the scoundrels who only pretended to possess supernatural gifts!

Seated behind the shabby desk in his shabby little office, Ghostly Jones studied the girl.

"I came," Sarah Weatherby was saying, "because Dad kept muttering your name."

"Muttering?" Ghostly Jones said. "Was he hurt, then? That wasn't in the papers!"

"Shock," the girl explained. "His heart is weak, anyway. He was terribly shaken by the explosion . . . if it *was* an explosion."

Jones stared. "What else could it have been?"

Sarah said, "The police couldn't find any fragments of a bomb. They think defective wiring sparked and exploded gas fumes from a flooded motor. But that doesn't explain *this!*"

She took a scrap of paper from her purse, passed it across the desk.

Ghostly Jones focused a coppery glance on the object.

It was cheap brown wrapping paper, scissored to postcard size and crudely daubed with watercolors. A lot of blue smeared across the top represented the sky. Underneath appeared a raggedly shaped, lop-wheeled automobile. An angry zigzag of crimson paint streaked out of the blue sky and burst on the roof of the car.

Sarah said, "This is the second one. The first came yesterday, and we gave it to the police. I suppose the first was a warning, and this must be a kind of follow-up, a way of saying I-told-you-so!"

Ghostly Jones fumbled with the paper—in reality, his glance scanned and appraised Sarah Weatherby.

He saw that the sculpture of her figure was nubile, the mould of her bosom young-ripe. She had a woman's body, and a woman's intoxicating femininity.

He said, "What made you so sure it

was a warning? Yesterday, when you ran out into that patio?" His sinewy finger tapped the watercolor. "This looks silly, kid stuff. A child could have painted it. Most people wouldn't be frightened; they'd be amused. It terrified you. *Why?*"

She answered unsteadily. "You know about my father's hobby—as he call it," and swallowed uneasily. "It makes him a target for cranks. He's had threatening letters before. I didn't want him to risk driving through the streets in the car—someone might take a shot at him."

Ghostly Jones said, "I see."

He mused. In Jones' boyhood, a glib occultist had victimized his widowed mother through a series of crooked seances. The grief shaken widow had no business training, nothing but a blind faith in the "seer's" cleverly framed messages from the Beyond. The widow really believed she was getting help from her husband in the other world, and like many another credulous follower had poured her modest fortune into phony bonds peddled by the occultist's accomplices. The end was inevitable: cruel disillusion, ruin, and despair.

Ghostly Jones had sworn to put that man behind bars, and he had done it long since.

But in the doing, he had looked deeply into the noisome, unclean racket . . . had seen too many other pitiful victims cheated in the toils of other schemers. His quest for personal vengeance flamed into a life-long, single-handed battle against the whole dirty business.

It was more than a career with Ghostly—it was a crusade!

IT WAS inevitable that he should eventually meet John Weatherby. For Weatherby's "hobby" was spiritualism. At one time the man had been a devout believer. He wrote a book on the subject. He backed the notorious Henry Pagg, then one of the most famous "readers."

Until Ghostly Jones took up Pagg's trail, exposed his fakery, and convicted the man of blackmailing half a dozen wealthy women!

Whereupon, John Weatherby saw the light. He renounced his faith publicly. He bought up and destroyed all available copies of the book. More, he posted a tremendous reward—fifty thousand dollars in cold cash—to any medium whose "spirit" or "power" could get into a downtown safety deposit vault and read a sealed message Weatherby had placed there.

In the newspapers, in the Personals columns along with the blind ads of the mediums, Weatherby inserted his challenges—why should any legitimate "reader" answer a client's questions for a mere five or ten dollars when he could just as easily claim that fifty thousand dollar reward?

So far, no one had accepted the challenge.

Thinking of that, Ghostly Jones repeated:

"I see. You found this watercolor on top of your father's mail, and you decided the racketeers were out to get him?"

Sarah nodded. "Why not? After all, it *is* a million dollar racket—and he was hitting it hard."

"Through his newspaper advertisements?"

She said, tight-lipped, "Yes, partly. And also because I happen to know he financed some of *your* investigations, Mr. Jones. He was preparing a new book exposing fraudulent mediums, and I happen to know that you supplied a lot of the data."

"So they tried to kill him?"

Sarah wet her lips.

"That's what I thought yesterday," she said. Her voice thinned. "But, when the police failed to find any trace of a bomb—! When the car seems to have been destroyed by *a bolt out of a blue sky—!*"

Ghostly looked fixedly at the girl's strained face.

"You don't believe that," he said flatly. "You don't think there was an actual flash of lightning followed by a clap of genuine thunder. You know no medium has any such control over Nature. It's impossible."

"Well—!"

"You didn't *see* any bolt of lightning, did you?"

She said, "I saw a blinding flash of light."

"You saw an explosion, not a stroke of lightning."

Sarah twisted in her chair. Her voice choked, "Oh, what difference does it make! I don't care whether it was real thunder and lightning or a man-made imitation! That's beside the point!" Her clenched hands trembled. "All I care about is that someone means to kill my father! Supernaturally or not, that person has devised a ghastly form of murder which the police can't possibly trace. And I'm helpless to stop—"

The sharp, glassy crash snapped her words in mid-sentence. A heavy oblong hurtled through the transom and thudded on the floor in front of the desk.

Sarah Weatherby sprang from her chair, startled hand flying to her slimly rounded throat.

Ghostly Jones came slamming around the desk. Running, he barely glanced at the thing on the floor. An ordinary red brick with a bit of paper tied to it. . . .

He wrenched the door open, leapt into the hall.

It was empty.

Eyes jetting to the elevator indicators, he saw that both cages were at ground floor level. Whoever tossed that brick had darted to the stairs, or taken refuge in one of the other offices along the hallway.

Behind him Sarah Weatherby's exclamation choked with panic and fright.

He whirled.

"This!" she gasped.

Ghostly Jones snatched the bit of paper

from her hand. There was the same water-colored sky, the same zigzag of crimson lightning.

This time it ended in a blob floating over a bed!

"Dad!" the girl moaned. "It means Dad will be killed in his bed!"

Ghostly's fingers curled into fists. "Wait until I find whoever tossed that valentine in here!"

She seized the lapels of his coat. Her eyes brimmed entreaty. "No! There isn't time! We've got to hurry, hurry!"

CHAPTER TWO

Ball of Fire

GHOSTLY JONES shoved a banknote to the cab driver and opened the bolt-studded door for Sarah. She hurried into the patio, toward the house.

There was no warning. Except the almost clairvoyant prickle of Ghostly's sixth sense of danger!

He yelled, "Look out!"

His leanly muscled frame moved in a greyhound leap. His arms encircled the girl and dragged her close. He spun, shielding her with his own body.

Sarah screamed. She saw it, too!

Something arced through the air toward them. It was spherical, the size of a baseball, but mantled in blue flame!

Ghostly felt the fear-driven thrust of the girl's soft body pressing close to his chest. The skin of his cheekbones felt tight, his lips peeled in a hard watchful grin.

The ball of blue fire struck the lawn, bounced lightly, rolled. It seemed to skip on the top of the grass. It vanished under the low branches of a squat rose bush.

Ghostly Jones waited, muscles locked in the grip of tense nerves.

Cr-r-ssh!

The detonation staggered him.

Skull still ringing with the thunder-clap,

he released Sarah and rushed across the patio. His coppery stare veered, searched. There was nothing! Nothing except a fat splash of seared black where the fire pellet had erupted against the stuccoed garden wall. . . .

Dr. Elon said, "I was at Weatherby's bedside when it happened! I saw the flash and looked up—"

He used a damp handkerchief to towel his moist, plump cheeks.

"It was on the windowsill," he continued hoarsely. "It jiggled there a moment. I thought surely it would fall into the room. Then it dropped outside."

"Weatherby?" asked Ghostly Jones.

The doctor shook his head. "He was in a sedative induced sleep. Luckily! The shock would have killed him, undoubtedly."

"The nurse?"

Dr. Elon said, "She's been with Mr. Weatherby constantly all day. She'd gone downstairs for a bite to eat. Anyway, I'd trust her farther than I'd trust myself."

They were in the library. The third man in the room said, "I saw the same thing years ago, when I was a kid. It happened during a thunderstorm. It came down the chimney, rolled across the floor, and bounded out a window. They call it ball lightning."

"Lightning!" Sarah Weatherby echoed. "Lightning out of a blue sky!"

Blood drained from her cheeks and lips, left her ghastly pale.

Elon appraised the girl with a professional glance. "Quiet, Sarah," he advised. "You'd better let me fix you a draught o' something—"

Ghostly Jones said that was a good idea. "You might even take a shot of it yourself, Doctor."

He waited until Elon and the girl had left the room. In the interval, his gaze estimated the other man.

The other was Charles Byoir, employed as John Weatherby's secretary. He didn't

look secretarial, though. He looked a bit matinee-idolish; the type who hated to grow old, or even middle-aged.

Ghostly Jones began indirectly. "What about Elon?" he asked.

Byoir lifted smoothly tailored shoulders in a shrug. "He was the family doctor long before my time."

"And your time started—?"

Byoir's voice was silky. "I've been associated with Mr. Weatherby during the past eight years."

"Associated?" Ghostly's tone prodded.

BYOIR'S tone wasn't quite so silky. "Employed, if you want to put it that way!"

Ghostly Jones said, "I work for a living myself, and I'm not ashamed to admit it." The unveiled insult brought color to Byoir's smoothly shaven face.

"I suppose you do a little work yourself?" Ghostly continued. "Such as opening the mail?"

"Naturally!"

"Then you opened both these envelopes with the watercolors in 'em. What did you think?"

Byoir said, "I thought the first one was a practical joke. I put it on top of the other mail, but Mr. Weatherby didn't say anything to me about it. When the second came, of course I went straight to Sarah. I wanted her to call the police, but her mind was set on going to you instead." His lips made an unpleasant smile. "Sarah is young, impulsive, and doesn't always use the best judgment!"

Ghostly Jones decided to ignore the thrust.

"Do you know," he asked, "where Weatherby intended going in the car yesterday?"

Byoir said, "You probably know by this time that Mr. Weatherby has a bad heart. Elon made him give up golf. Instead, Roberts drove him daily to the park at Thirty-first Street. Mr. Weather-

by got out there and walked slowly up to the Zoo Road, where Roberts was waiting with the car."

"He went alone?"

Byoir said, "Yes, alone. Sarah would have gone along, gladly, but he wouldn't let himself be a burden on her time. Of course, I was busy getting out the correspondence he dictated earlier in the day." His pale eyes snapped. "As you put it, I work for a living."

Ghostly Jones shrugged. "The letters Mr. Weatherby dictated yesterday—he couldn't have signed them?"

Byoir glanced downward. "They're still in my notebook," he admitted. "With the excitement here, I haven't had time to transcribe them yet."

Ghostly grinned. "I'll have a look at your notes."

Byoir nodded. "In here."

The secretary's office was a smaller chamber adjoining the library. Byoir opened a desk drawer, took out a steno pad the pages of which were snapped open and held by a rubber band.

"Here it is—if you can read my Gregg." His voice sounded indifferent. "It's all routine stuff, I assure you."

Ghostly Jones was inspecting the framed diploma over the desk.

"School of science?" he mused.

Byoir flushed slightly. "My uncle did research at that university. He wanted me to follow in his steps. I didn't have the gift, though. All I got out of it was the secretarial training by helping him whip his notes into shape—"

"Chemistry," Ghostly Jones said. "And you mean to say you *believe* in ball lightning dropping out of a clear sky?"

Byoir's flush got deeper.

"No-o, not exactly. But it might have been some kind of electrical manifestation. Perhaps a violent form of *ignis fatuus*..."

"Fool's fire?" Ghostly laughed openly. "Baloney!"

"I told you," the secretary said im-

patiently, "I never had any real scientific gifts!"

"You haven't, huh?" Ghostly's voice was as dry as the snap of the notebook's rubber band plucked by his muscular fingers. His glance dropped to the desk drawer from which Byoir had taken the steno pad. "What the devil's that?"

Byoir swallowed. "It's a book. The book Mr. Weatherby wrote about spiritualism when he still believed in Henry Pagg."

GHOSTLY wondered what brought the brick-red flush into Byoir's face. The secretary continued hastily, "You know, Mr. Weatherby grew ashamed of the book afterward. He's been buying up and destroying all the copies he can lay his hands on. We've been running an ad in the so-called 'psychic' magazines offering fifty dollars a copy for it."

"Fifty dollars!"

Byoir said, "The book is very scarce and rare now. That makes it a collector's item. Mr. Weatherby was glad to pay that much to get possession of the few remaining copies."

Ghostly Jones asked softly, "And where did this copy come from?" He lifted the package from the drawer as he spoke, stripping off the paper wrapping and wadding it to a small ball in his fist.

"I—I'm not sure," Byoir hesitated. "Three or four copies came in during the past few days. Mr. Weatherby dictated letters to go out with the checks, and by consulting my notes I could tell you who sent—"

Ghostly grunted, eyes narrowing over the title leaf of the book in his hands. *To Bea*, someone had written there, *with love from H. P.* "Here!" He pushed the steno pad to Byoir. "Never mind what the letters say. Just the names and addresses!"

The secretary peered unhappily at his notes. Unhappily, in a strained voice, he started mumbling names. There was a

Mr. Edmunds, a Mr. Glee, a Bea Avalon—”

“Yeah!” muttered Ghostly Jones. Bea Avalon! For a moment he stood staring at the string with which that book had been wrapped. White string, it was, with a blue thread in it.

“Okay, that’s all!” Ghostly snatched the steno pad from Byoir’s reluctant fingers. As he strode from the room, he pulled from his pocket the second watercolor warning. It had been tied to the brick with string—white string with a blue thread in it!

AT THIRTY-FIRST Street, Ghostly Jones got out of the cab. He didn’t enter the park, though. Instead he followed a sidestreet, looking at the old red brick and frame houses.

The third house from the corner had a red lettered card stuck in its bay window: *Madame Avalon. Helping Circle. Readings, Advice, Personal Power. “You Can Be Helped!”*

Ghostly eyed the placard grimly as he thumbed the doorbell. He knew that “Madame Avalon” was in reality an ex-badger game moll who had somehow or other got linked up with the unsavory Henry Pagg—had learned a little card-reading and crystal gazing from him.

The coffee-colored maid—mulatto, maybe—opened the door and greeted Ghostly without recognizing him. “Moddom will see you in a moment,” she promised, and left Ghostly in the gloomy, old-fashioned parlor. Presently heavier footfalls came down the hallway outside. “Moddom” entered the parlor door and stopped short. “Jones!”

Bea Avalon had been handsome—once; with a figure to tantalize the imagination. The figure had grown broomstick-y, and her face had deep lines in it. She looked gaunt, juiceless, weedy, and scarred by the life she led.

“Take it easy,” Ghostly said. “This isn’t

a pinch or—” and he looked thoughtfully into her lambently bright eyes—“a dope raid!”

A corner of the woman’s sharp mouth jerked. “Whatta you want, Ghostly?” she whined.

“It’s about Pagg.”

“*What* about him?”

Madame Avalon didn’t answer. Her dope-inflamed eyes were guarded, wary.

“You want Pagg paroled, don’t you?” Ghostly challenged. Then, watching the unconscious flexing of the woman’s fingers, he laughed:

“So that’s it! You don’t want him out! Pagg can rot in the pen for all you care!”

She shrugged.

Ghostly said, “That means you’ve found yourself a new money man! Someone’s backing you, Bea—keeping you hopped up with poppy-juice. *Who?* What’s your racket now?”

“You’re crazy!”

“It’s true,” said Ghostly. “It’s a cinch. But what any money man can see in you—?”

It couldn’t be her looks or charm—both were hopelessly faded. It couldn’t be her talents in crime that supported her—she had never been anything more than a stooge for Pagg, and the men before Pagg.

Broken, drug-wracked, she might indeed have tried to imitate Pagg’s blackmail technique—but she would have bungled it hopelessly.

“You’re wrong!” the woman was insisting. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Ghostly met her protests with a smile of glacial assurance. He said, “I’m talking about *this*, Bea!”

And he held out his hand, palm up, with the watercolor warning in it.

Bea Avalon retreated instinctively. “No!” she gasped. “I didn’t! I haven’t set foot outside this house today—!”

Too late, she checked her babbling tongue. Checked it with the back of her

hand clapped across her mumbling mouth.

"Don't waste time lying!" Ghostly told her sharply. "This note came from this house—tied with the same string you used to wrap up that book you sold Weather-by!"

He took a step toward the terrified woman, whirled as he caught the sharp angle of her upturned eyes. There was a light swish of sound, a scarcely felt ripple in the air.

A rope from the ceiling looped around Ghostly's shoulders. It tightened, noosed savagely on his throat, and hoisted him kicking aloft!

CHAPTER THREE

Thunder God!

GHOSTLY Jones fought desperately for the life that was being snuffed out of him. The trick happened so swiftly and unexpectedly that he found himself strangling in mid-air before he could lift a hand in self-defense. Even then, with death gripping his throat, he told himself that he had been a fool! Seance "parlors" were always supplied with openings and trapdoors through which the phoney spirits entered the "circle"! He might have been more wary . . . but it was too late to make amends for that, now. He had to act quickly, surely, or the thunder of blood pounding in his ears would be the last sound he would ever hear in this world!

His left hand whipped upward, fingers winding fiercely onto the rope over his head. Ghostly Jones was athletic, despite his thin build. He could chin himself with one hand. But that was when he had a bar to grasp . . . not a taut, slippery length of manila rope! He strained the muscles in that left arm almost from their moorings as he dragged his body upward. It loosened the bite of the hemp at his throat, let welcome air trickle into his heaving lungs.

It would have been easier to use both hands—but he had other employment for

the right. It knifed inside the lapels of his coat and seized the butt of a shoulder-rigged Police Positive. He heard Madame Avalon scream as the gun cleared into sight. But Ghostly wasn't interested in Bea Avalon now. Flopping like a hooked fish at the end of the rope, he managed to twist his head back and look up.

He could see the square hole in the ceiling—and through it, he glimpsed two huge bronzed, blue-tattooed arms and a contorted, coffee-hued face. Ghostly jerked the Police Positive aloft, squeezed its trigger. He only hit the ceiling. And the man didn't release the rope! He merely jumped back from the trapdoor opening—and the jump yanked the manila hemp through Ghostly's constricted fingers!

There was a neck-jarring jolt, fresh agony compressing Ghostly Jones' windpipe.

He tried to use his left hand to gain a new grip, and couldn't. The paralyzed fingers refused to obey his will. They were stiff, useless.

He dangled, twisting and twirling, the crimson mist of unconsciousness forming before his eyes. Blindly, he manoeuvred his hand—the right one. Guided only by failing feeling, he flailed the revolver until its barrel struck the rope. He dragged the gun along the manila until the hemp slipped past the gun's snout.

Praying for the luck he needed horribly, he squeezed the trigger again. The boom of the exploding cartridge thundered through his pain-riven skull. He kept shooting. Some of the bullets had to find that rope!

Suddenly the hemp snapped. Ghostly's feet were numbed as they clattered on the floor. His legs melted weakly. He landed sprawling, on his spine.

But he could breath again. The crimson mist cleared from his eyes—and he saw the brown, tattooed man crouched over the trapdoor. Gnarled, lumpy hands grasped the sides of the opening. He was poised

to jump—to crash down onto Ghostly Jones.

Ghostly's coppery stare glittered. He whipped up the gun and triggered as the other leaped. There was only a dead, empty click from the revolver.

Jones rolled aside. He came up on his knees, poised the Positive for a hammer-like blow. In front of him, the brown man landed on all-fours, lightly as an ape swinging from a tree branch. . . .

WHAT really counted was the coffee-colored maid. She had darted into the room past Madame Avalon—and Ghostly didn't see her.

He didn't see the downward arc of the chair the girl snatched and whirled overhead.

But Ghostly heard it, and he heard the exhaled gasp of the girl's effort. He rocked sidewise, but one of the chair legs glanced crisply off his head. The blow stunned, and Ghostly knew he was going out. . . .

In reality, he was down for "no count." The poorly glued chair burst apart as it struck, and it took more than that to finish Ghostly Jones! He had gained his feet while the sound of flying steps still echoed in the hall outside this room.

Ghostly's hand flew to his coat pocket. The steno notebook with Weatherby's last dictation in it was gone!

They had got that, but they hadn't bothered to purloin the handful of thirty-eight cartridges Ghostly carried in that pocket.

He flipped the gun open, and crowded the yellow jacketed bullets into the chambers. He was legging it toward the hallway as he did so.

Diving through the door, he was in time to glimpse Madame Avalon frantically stumbling down the hall. Her aged body moved more slowly than the others—or perhaps it took her drugged mind longer to grasp the danger. Ghostly overtook the seeress in long, bounding strides, just as

she bolted through the doorway under the stairs.

"Where'd they go?"

He yelled the question.

Madame Avalon's lips were obstinately frozen.

Ghostly's stare veered past the doorway, gripped the descending tiers of plank steps into the basement.

"Down there?" he jarred.

The woman's eroded face convulsed. "No!" she gasped.

Her lie was answer enough!

Ghostly slammed the loaded cylinder into place, cocked the gun. It was deathly dangerous . . . but he was going after that notebook. Its pages held an answer he was determined to find. The theft of the thing proved its value—and it would be so easily destroyed!

He sprinted down the steps. They must know they were being followed, and he preferred the role of a rapidly moving target to that of a cautious, stationary one.

Milky, dust and cobwebbed dimmed daylight flowed through small oblong windows high up in the foundation of the old house. Ghostly leaped from the steps to the basement wall, his coppery eyes flashing swift inspection about the premises.

He said bleakly, "Hell!"

If the brown-skinned pair had taken refuge here, they had done it by melting into thin air! The basement was empty. The smooth concrete walls and floors showed no hint of an exit. There were packing boxes scattered about, beer bottles piled in a corner, but nothing large enough to hide a human being—let alone two of them. . . .

"Hell and high water!" Ghostly Jones erupted. He turned and started back up the steps, fast. His wide mouth was a saber-sharp line across his freckled features. Madame Avalon would have to talk now! She could tell—and would! He's see to that!

He reached the landing square at the

head of the stairs. Facing the doorway. But he hadn't stepped through the door. Luckily!

He braced himself to a quick halt, warned by the thin hiss of sound.

It blazed before his eyes—an incandescent streak, a ribbon of living fire! Momentarily, it blinded Ghostly Jones. He blinked, muscles tightening in instinctive recoil from the thunder-clap.

It came, crashed.

THE force of it slammed Ghostly Jones back. He struck the wall, felt that splinter. Plaster rained down on his head and shoulders. More plaster came thundering down in the hallway. Acrid, bluish fumes coiled past the doorway.

Ghostly stuck his head out, peered into the debris and wreckage. He swore, a thick oath. The blue fumes came from the parlor. That was where the "lightning" had struck. . . . And he was supposed to be there, unconscious on the floor!

The ribbon of fire had been an illusion—rather, a reflection seen in the mirror in the hallway. Only the mirror was shattered now, in jagged pieces scattered all over the hall.

Ghostly felt the hair moving on the back of his head. It wasn't nervous reaction. A cold, damp draught flowed against his neck and spine.

He jerked around, eyes blazing as he saw the reason.

Slammed back by the detonation, he had struck and splintered a panel in the wall across the landing. Ghostly's lips twitched. The coffee-colored girl and her male accomplice hadn't taken refuge in the basement at all. They had used this panel, and that had been Madame Avalon's goal, too. Probably she fled through it the moment he went plunging down the stairs.

Ghostly probed his fingers into the splinter in the wood, wrenched the panel this way and that—until he discovered that it slid up.

The fountain pen in the upper pocket of his coat was really a small flashlight. He aimed its pencil beam into the darkness back of the panel.

A secret passage through the thick wall of the old house! He followed it, shoulders brushing against naked lath and scantling timber. There was a ratty smell in the dank air. Turning a corner, the pencil of light caught a pelted rodent scampering up a two-by-four.

He was in the outer wall of the house now. The floor of the passageway had a steep downward slant. The air got damper, colder. Instead of lath and plaster, the sides of the passage were of sweaty concrete. Ghostly knew that he was down on the other side of the basement wall.

He crouched as he advanced, holding the flashlight well over his head in his left hand. Being bent double might save his life—if a bullet were fired high enough, aimed at the light! He pushed the Positive ahead of him, right hand jutting at chin level.

He slowed. . . .

The passageway widened ahead. The flashbeam splashed on a brick wall. An old, subterranean cistern perhaps? Ghostly went down on his hands and knees. Creeping, he spotted the light swiftly around. This underground stuff couldn't go on forever. . . . The cistern was probably the end of it, and the quarry would be waiting for him there!

He checked a gasp.

Now the flashlight found a face. His finger strained on the thirty-eight's trigger before Ghostly realized the face wasn't human in its leering, bulbous grin of triumph.

Carved, brown polished wood!

Ghostly Jones waggled the light over the figure. The lips dried against his tightly locked teeth as he traced out the four snaky arms, the four legs. Fingers and toes of the idol ended in crimson serpents.

Sweat formed on Ghostly's forehead.

He shifted the flashlight again, dwelling this time on the bulbous wooden face. An idea came to him, dredged from his study of primitive magic and witchcraft. The fat, swollen cheeks of the grinning idol confirmed his suspicion.

The brown-skinned maid wasn't a mulatto at all. That had been a natural, hasty, but entirely erroneous conclusion. Ghostly knew now that she came of the bronzed folk of the southern archipelagoes—Javanese, perhaps, or the related folk of Bali.

The brown, tattooed man, too!

Ghostly felt sure of it. The carved, obese idol was typical—and he knew its meaning. The crimson tipped fingers represented streaks of lightning, and the bulging cheeks held the grumble of thunder.

Sweat from his forehead trickled down Ghostly Jones' cheeks. His hand braced itself on the butt of the gun.

Then he snapped off the pencil of light. In darkness, he wriggled down the last few yards of the sloping passageway. When he felt bricks under his exploring hand, he knew that he had reached the thunder-god's cavern.

CHAPTER FOUR

Crack of Doom

STEALTHILY, Ghostly Jones crept toward the idol. The others were not far away—he could hear suppressed, guarded breathing. But the acoustics of the underground chamber made it impossible to detect the source of the sound.

He almost missed the idol! It was farther to the left than he remembered. . . . The tips of his fingers just grazed it as he cautiously pawed the inky dark. Had he gone past it, he would probably have lurched right into the arms of waiting trouble.

In utmost silence, he worked around behind the squat wooden figure. Ghostly tested its weight with an outthrust palm. It was heavy, unmovable.

Sheltered there, he flicked on the flashlight. He raked its beam over the ponderous wooden shoulder, splashed light into the cavern ahead.

"Don't move!"

Ghostly's voice boomed hollowly off the circular brick walls. It was answered by Madame Avalon's frightened wail.

A long, bench-like table extended down the middle of the chamber. Glass retorts and test-tubes glimmered in the white pencil from the flashlight. Madame Avalon hunkered down under the table, her eyes those of a terrified animal.

"Don't shoot!" she implored sobbingly. "My God, don't shoot!"

The brown-skinned girl huddled against the brick wall beyond the table. Like Bea Avalon, she was terrified.

But Ghostly's stare barely grazed the two women. His gaze riveted on the tattooed man. He stood over to one side of the cavern, a creature so gigantic that his bushy hair almost brushed the seven-foot ceiling.

"You!" Ghostly Jones snapped. "Hand over that notebook, or by the Lord, I *will* shoot!"

The man's eyes, buried in wrinkles, darted Ghostly a look of hatred.

"He doesn't understand you!" the girl gasped. "I'll tell him!"

She spoke swiftly. Her voice was liquid, some of the syllables almost like bird cries.

Ghostly Jones wet his lips. He couldn't understand a word of it, of course. Was the girl demanding the return of the notebook—or plotting a scheme of action against the interloper?

GHOSTLY'S suspicions flamed as the tattooed man made no gesture to return the steno pad. Instead, he stood there grumbling in the incomprehensible tongue to the native girl.

In turn, she spoke to Ghostly. "He hasn't got it!"

"The hell he hasn't!"

"It's true! He gave it to—" Her voice broke off sharply.

"Well?" Ghostly Jones challenged.

The girl's lids veiled her eyes. "I can't tell you that!"

Ghostly laughed shortly. "You can't, because it's a damned lie! I'm coming after that notebook, and I'm going to get it."

Again the girl spoke swiftly. Ghostly Jones stepped in front of the idol. He needed both hands for this job, so he parked the flashlight in the open mouth of the thunder-god.

"Tell him to brace both hands on the ceiling," Ghostly snapped at the girl.

He stepped closer warily, knowing full well what his fate would be if the brute's powerful hands ever closed on him.

The fellow wore denim trousers, an ancient and disreputable sweater. His pockets were empty.

"Damnation!" Ghostly Jones exploded.

The cavern had gone utterly dark!

He spun around, cursing his lack of foresight. He wasn't the only one who could follow the passageway down to this chamber.

There was a long, hopeless moment, darker than the blackest midnight.

Then, a blade of light jetted through the arms of the thunder-god.

"Drop that gun!"

Ghostly could not see the speaker. There was only the ugly snout of a forty-five automatic pushed into sight between the idol's elbow and fat belly.

"Drop it!"

Ghostly dropped it.

He heard the girl laugh, and felt the big man's hands fall crushingly on his throat. Ghostly Jones was lifted like an infant, his head battered against the brick ceiling. The first time he saw stars. After that, darkness—nothing. . . .

SOFT, padding footsteps approached Ghostly Jones as he lay in darkness. Time had passed—how many hours, he

could not guess. He knew that the pain in his battered skull had subsided to a dull ache, that the blood which matted his hair was dry. His mouth was cottony.

He lay quiet, feigning unconsciousness as the footsteps drew nearer. A match raked, spluttered. Through the screen of almost closed eyelashes, Ghostly saw a candle take a tip of timid, wavering flame.

The face over the candle was Madame Avalon's!

A long, keen knife flashed in her hand.

She crept behind Ghostly Jones and slashed the cords which held his wrists and ankles!

Ghostly sat up slowly. He blinked bewildered eyes. Why should Bea Avalon come to his rescue?

She seemed to read the thought.

"Keep still!" the woman breathed hoarsely. "I'm trying to help you! I've been a crook all my life, but I draw the line at *murder!*"

"Murder?"

Bea Avalon's wrinkled face was set in grim, haggard lines. "You and the girl both!"

Ghostly Jones jerked his stiffened, lame figure erect. He snatched the candle from the woman's claw-like fingers, and staggered to the table in the middle of the chamber. One glance at the slim, blonde-haired figure stretched there was enough.

Sarah Weatherby!

Ropes wound around and around the girl bound her to the table. Over the handkerchief whipped around her mouth, blue eyes strained toward Ghostly.

"What the hell!" His voice jangled discordantly. He glared at Madame Avalon. "Who brought her here? What's behind all this?"

"Later, you fool! You're wasting time!" Bea Avalon pressed the knife into his fingers. "Fod God's sake, hurry! I've got to go now!"

Ghostly Jones shot a swift glance around the cavern. His arm stretched out

Shrine of the Thunder God

and seized one of the empty glass retorts. He jabbed the candle down into the neck of the vessel. It made an impromptu candlestick, sparing both hands for the task of freeing Sarah.

He wielded the knife, slashing at the ropes which encircled the girl.

The scream was thin, bleated—Madame Avalon's! Ghostly spun on his heel.

A voice boomed from the mouth of the passageway! "You're covered, Jones!"

Ghostly's lips wrenched apart. He stared at the pistol, at the man behind the gun.

"Byoir!" he exclaimed.

"Don't move," the secretary cautioned. "I'm not a very good shot, Jones. I might miss you—and hit Miss Weatherby! You'd better toss that knife on the floor."

Ghostly detected the nervous wavering of the blued steel snout of the forty-five automatic. He could see that Byoir's face was pallid, filmed with a dew of sweat.

HE DIDN'T toss the knife on the floor. He smiled coldly. Lying in the darkness, Ghostly Jones had sniffed a peculiar odor in the damp air—and identified it!

"Baloney!" Ghostly scoffed. "You won't shoot at all. You don't dare! This place is stocked with high explosives. A shot would blow everyone here to perdition—yourself included!"

Byoir gasped. "You know that?"

"More than that," Ghostly Jones affirmed. "Surely you didn't expect me to fall for that 'lightning' gag! I know that Weatherby's car was destroyed by a master cylinder packed with explosive, exploded by a mercury fulminate cap when Roberts tramped down hard on the brake. Look here!"

Utterly indifferent to the gun in Byoir's hand, Ghostly wheeled around to the head of the table. He snatched up a small composition sphere, rapped it with his knuckles. It gave a hollow sound.

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 105)

"Ball lightning!" Ghostly jeered. "All you had to do was pack this with a charge of the nitramon type. It's one of the least explosive explosives known. This ball, saturated with alcohol, would burst into blue flames when lighted. But it would burn for several seconds before reaching a temperature high enough to ignite the nitramon! The stuff is so inert they use a booster charge when blasting with it."

Byoir wet his lips. "Go on," he said morosely.

Ghostly Jones shrugged. "It's your turn to talk. But first, I'm coming after that gun!"

Ghostly walked toward the secretary. His gait was slow, unhurried. The level stare of his coppery eyes held the secretary as in a hypnotic grip.

"There!" Ghostly balanced the weapon in his own palm. "Why did you do it? You can explain while I finish freeing Sarah."

He swung back to the table. With swift flashing strokes of the knife, he hacked through the ropes. Lifting the girl with one arm, he untied the handkerchief which kept the gag in her mouth.

Byoir watched, silently. "Well?" Ghostly challenged.

"Weatherby named me in his will," the secretary muttered. "He'd been dying of heart trouble for years. I got tired of waiting!"

His voice was sullen, reluctant. "The watercolors?" Ghostly demanded.

"I thought the police might figure out how the car blew up. I just wanted to make it look like an outside job."

"Keep talking!" Ghostly told Byoir. "What's your tie-up with Madame Avalon? Why did you bring Sarah here?"

Byoir said, "Bea Avalon came to me a year ago—she was trying to get Pagg out of prison then. She wanted to bribe me to influence Weatherby. I brought Sarah here so I could rescue her after I killed

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you. She'd be impressed—maybe, later on, she'd marry me. I'd come into all of Weatherby's money—"

Sarah's lips moved again.

"He's lying!" she gasped. The words came thinly from the girl's parched throat. "I don't know why, but he's lying!"

BYOIR leaped in frenzied haste, clapped a hand over the girl's mouth. "God!" he cried stranglingly. "She'll be the death of us all!"

He threw a frenzied, appealing stare at Ghostly Jones. "You're right! This place is full of explosives, and we've got to get out before—"

Ghostly shouted, "Look out!"

He brushed Byoir aside with an out-flung arm. Ominous blue light brightened in the passageway. Ghostly sprang to the entrance.

A yell tore his lips apart. Toward him came a flaming sphere of incandescent death, spinning faster and faster as it rolled down the sloping floor!

The nitramon bomb!

Ghostly knew that its explosion would blast everyone in the cavern to atoms—besides detonating the other explosives hidden here!

Momentarily, he thought of meeting the blazing ball with his foot. If he could kick it back whence it came. . . .

The risk was too great! Ghostly crouched, hands outspread. Every muscle flinched in protest. The fire-ball bounced, flew up at his chest.

Ghostly Jones brought both hands in, hugged the fiery thing to his body. There was no time, no chance to protect his naked hands. A whimper of pain trickled through his clenched teeth. He heard Byoir's amazed oath, and Sarah's moan of sympathy. Then he was down, deliberately smothering the projectile with his whole body while the agony of fire stabbed through his flesh!

(Continued on page 108)

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Dime Mystery Magazine

(Continued from page 107)

"Here!" Byoir choked. "This!"

He whipped off his coat. Bending over, he hauled aside Ghostly's half-fainting weight. He pressed the coat down onto the fireball. But the flames were already extinguished, the sphere a charred and smoking thing.

Ghostly Jones staggered to his feet. With naked, bleeding hands he beat at the fire which still licked and smoked on his garments. He couldn't quit yet!

They were racing down the sloping passageway—the big brown tattooed man, and Dr. Elon. . . .

Gasping, Ghostly Jones reeled into the candlelighter chamber.

"Here!" Sarah Weatherby wailed.

Ghostly's fingers curled on the knife she offered. His strength was almost gone. Things rocked weirdly before his eyes.

The big brown man charged into the room.

Ghostly plunged forward, both hands guiding the knife as he steered it toward the giant's midriff. . . . A hoarse, horrible scream! The awful sight of a man's hot, smoking life poured out onto cold bricks!

Ghostly wrenched himself away, the blood bathed blade dripping gruesomely. He took a faltering step toward Elon. There was a gun in the physician's hand. But he didn't use it! He took one shuddering look at Ghostly's fire-charred, blood-crimsoned figure—and he fainted.

He fainted exactly an instant before Ghostly himself keeled over. . . .

HANDS swathed in bandages, with yards of gauze taped around his torso, Ghostly Jones sat propped in a hospital bed and told it to a Homicide Squad cop. "Motive?" Ghostly echoed the lieutenant's question. "Hell, there was fifty thousand dollars worth of motive. Besides being the family doctor, Elon was Weatherby's best friend—and appointed executor of the Weatherby will. He would have

Shrine of the Thunder God

had a legal right to enter that vault after Weatherby's death, read the message there, and tell Bea Avalon what was in it. She'd stage a seance, claim she contacted Weatherby's spirit, collect the reward."

The cop said, "In other words, this guy Weatherby put a fifty grand price on his own life."

Ghostly nodded. "That's the picture. Elon picked Bea for an accomplice because she was an addict, and he'd been peddling narcotics on the side."

"And that's why the doc trailed you to Bea Avalon's place?" the Homicide man queried. "So you wouldn't find out about the dope-peddling?"

Ghostly said that was part of it. "Besides, Sarah came in and noticed the string on that book wrappings was exactly like the cord on the note. She remembered it, and she told her suspicions to Elon. He had to protect Bea on that angle to shield himself, of course. The answer was to give Sarah such a powerful sedative that she passed out cold. After that, Elon got the girl into his car and pulled a gun on Byoir to force him to drive them both to Bea Avalon's house."

"Why?" the cop asked. "Why? I'd like to know why!"

Ghostly Jones said:

"Look at it this way. Here you've got Doc Elon scheming to kill Weatherby in a way that won't point any suspicion at himself. Later on, remember, he was going to have Bea collect that reward, and he was going to have money to clear up a lot of overdue debts. Therefore he had to arrange Weatherby's death so that it would look like the work of some crazy fanatic."

"Yeah," the cop said. "I follow you there."

"He mailed those insane watercolors. He chose the most eccentric kind of murder he could think of. He had to make it bizarre, baffling, and gruesome. He failed the first time because Roberts hit the brake hard before Weatherby got into the car.

(Continued on page 110)

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Dime Mystery Magazine

(Continued from page 109)

That meant another bomb had to explode in Weatherby's bedroom."

"It exploded in the yard, though."

"A ruse," Ghostly said. "Elon's story about that ball of fire striking the window-sill was a phony to make it look as if his own life had been in danger. He merely lighted the thing, of course, and then tossed it out the window. He was paving the way for a third bomb to blow up when he *wasn't* in that room."

"Okay so far," the cop said.

Ghostly told him, "He was on a worse spot when Sarah discovered the evidence about the string. Probably that's when he decided to throw the guilt onto Byoir. It wasn't hard. Elon stood in the passageway under Bea's house and forced Byoir to walk into the cavern and confess."

And Ghostly waved a bandaged hand. "You see? That set the stage for Elon to rush in with a gun, kill Byoir, and rescue us. If we believed Byoir's story, Elon would have been cleared entirely."

The cop shrugged heavily.

"What's the angle on that thunder god down in Bea's hide-out?"

Ghostly said, "It's the dope angle, fella. The Javanese dame and her boy-friend represented a dope ring in the Orient. They shipped that idol through the Customs with its belly full of drugs. And maybe it unconsciously helped Elon figure out the lightning twist to his bomb warnings."

"I guess," the cop said, "that's all. Only I wonder what the secret message in that vault could have been?"

"I could think of a good one. *Crime doesn't pay*," said Ghostly. He closed his eyes. "Now go away. I'm burned up over the whole thing, see?"

Sarah bent over the bed. "To make it well," she said.

Her lips were cool against his startled mouth.

THE END

The River Styx

(Continued from page 9)

the clubbed rifle with terrific force on the creature's metallic skull. It staggered with the shock of the blow, lurched awkwardly in its stride—and came on again.

The dagger lifted high over the detective's head, plunged down. Jim dodged the lethal stroke as he would have evaded a blow in the ring, smashed savagely at the dagger hand, heard the weapon clatter to the floor. He picked up a leather arm-chair, hurled it feet-foremost at the monster. An army-type bayonet was hanging from a hook beside the doctor's desk. Jim seized it; lunged fiercely at the Frankenstein's legs—felt warm blood spurt on his hand!

Jim fought with redoubled ferocity. A missed jab with the bayonet brought his chin into teeth-jarring collision with that horrible head; he wrenched away with the frenzy of desperation. Again and again he struck—watched blood gush from new wounds in the monster's legs.

The mechanical man tottered, wobbled on unsteady feet and crashed headlong to the floor!

As it collapsed, with a clangor of metal like that of a toppling suit of armor, Jim heard a slight tinkle of glass. The sphere! It lay in shattered fragments on the floor. . . .

Jim got a sharp whiff of some acrid odor—his senses reeled; his vision blurred. The office whirled around him crazily; he felt as if he was falling from a tremendous height into a bottomless abyss. . . .

When Jim awoke, it was as if a fantastic nightmare had transported him to the depths of hell. What he had seen and heard up to now, was but the slightest foretaste of the things that were to come. The mad genius who controlled the fearful metal monsters had given Jim only a slight glimpse of the power he possessed—and his evil plot was of such incredible magnitude that Jim could hardly believe it, even when he knew! THE FORTY-NINE FRANKENSTEINS, a feature-length novelette by Stewart Sterling will appear in the April issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE.

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22x4.75	-72	7.65	3.85	22x4.75	8.05	3.95	22x4.75	9.05	7.05
22x4.75	-73	7.75	3.90	22x4.75	8.15	4.00	22x4.75	9.15	7.15
22x4.75	-74	7.85	3.95	22x4.75	8.25	4.05	22x4.75	9.25	7.25
22x4.75	-75	7.95	4.00	22x4.75	8.35	4.10	22x4.75	9.35	7.35
22x4.75	-76	8.05	4.05	22x4.75	8.45	4.15	22x4.75	9.45	7.45
22x4.75	-77	8.15	4.10	22x4.75	8.55	4.20	22x4.75	9.55	7.55
22x4.75	-78	8.25	4.15	22x4.75	8.65	4.25	22x4.75	9.65	7.65
22x4.75	-79	8.35	4.20	22x4.75	8.75	4.30	22x4.75	9.75	7.75
22x4.75	-80	8.45	4.25	22x4.75	8.85	4.35	22x4.75	9.85	7.85
22x4.75	-81	8.55	4.30	22x4.75	8.95	4.40	22x4.75	9.95	7.95
22x4.75	-82	8.65	4.35	22x4.75	9.05	4.45	22x4.75	10.05	8.05
22x4.75	-83	8.75	4.40	22x4.75	9.15	4.50	22x4.75	10.15	8.15
22x4.75	-84	8.85	4.45	22x4.75	9.25	4.55	22x4.75	10.25	8.25
22x4.75	-85	8.95	4.50	22x4.75	9.35	4.60	22x4.75	10.35	8.35
22x4.75	-86	9.05	4.55	22x4.75	9.45	4.65	22x4.75	10.45	8.45
22x4.75	-87	9.15	4.60	22x4.75	9.55	4.70	22x4.75	10.55	8.55
22x4.75	-88	9.25	4.65	22x4.75	9.65	4.75	22x4.75	10.65	8.65
22x4.75	-89	9.35	4.70	22x4.75	9.75	4.80	22x4.75	10.75	8.75
22x4.75	-90	9.45	4.75	22x4.75	9.85	4.85	22x4.75	10.85	8.85
22x4.75	-91	9.55	4.80	22x4.75	9.95	4.90	22x4.75	10.95	8.95
22x4.75	-92	9.65	4.85	22x4.75	10.05	4.95	22x4.75	11.05	9.05
22x4.75	-93	9.75	4.90	22x4.75	10.15	5.00	22x4.75	11.15	9.15
22x4.75	-94	9.85	4.95	22x4.75	10.25	5.05	22x4.75	11.25	9.25
22x4.75	-95	9.95	5.00	22x4.75	10.35	5.10	22x4.75	11.35	9.35
22x4.75	-96	10.05	5.05	22x4.75	10.45	5.15	22x4.75	11.45	9.45
22x4.75	-97	10.15	5.10	22x4.75	10.55	5.20	22x4.75	11.55	9.55
22x4.75	-98	10.25	5.15	22x4.75	10.65	5.25	22x4.75	11.65	9.65
22x4.75	-99	10.35	5.20	22x4.75	10.75	5.30	22x4.75	11.75	9.75
22x4.75	-100	10.45	5.25	22x4.75	10.85	5.35	22x4.75	11.85	9.85

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

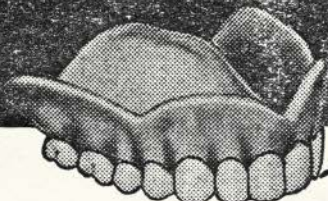
Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
22x4.75	-20	4.25	1.75	22x4.75	4.75	2.25	22x4.75	5.25	2.75
22x4.75	-21	4.35	1.80	22x4.75	4.85	2.30	22x4.75	5.35	2.85
22x4.75	-22	4.45	1.85	22x4.75	4.95	2.35	22x4.75	5.45	2.95
22x4.75	-23	4.55	1.90	22x4.75	5.05	2.40	22x4.75	5.55	3.05
22x4.75	-24	4.65	1.95	22x4.75	5.15	2.45	22x4.75	5.65	3.15
22x4.75	-25	4.75	2.00	22x4.75	5.25	2.50	22x4.75	5.75	3.25
22x4.75	-26	4.85	2.05	22x4.75	5.35	2.55	22x4.75	5.85	3.35
22x4.75	-27	4.95	2.10	22x4.75	5.45	2.60	22x4.75	5.95	3.45
22x4.75	-28	5.05	2.15	22x4.75	5.55	2.65	22x4.75	6.05	3.55
22x4.75	-29	5.15	2.20	22x4.75	5.65	2.70	22x4.75	6.15	3.65
22x4.75	-30	5.25	2.25	22x4.75	5.75	2.75	22x4.75	6.25	3.75
22x4.75	-31	5.35	2.30	22x4.75	5.85	2.80	2		

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