

10¢ DIME



MARCH

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

BEWARE THE GOLDEN BOWL!

*UNUSUAL AND EERIE
MENACE IN A STRONG NOVEL*
by **FRANCIS K. ALLAN**



**THE DOCTOR
BRINGS
DEATH**

*A FINE MYSTERY
NOVELETTE BY*
**FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**

**GRAY • COX
AND OTHERS**

PRAISE THE LORD

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. For I discovered that when a man finds the dynamic, invisible Power which is God, that man possesses a priceless heritage. Failure, fear, confusion go out of the life, and in the place of these things, there comes a sweet assurance that the Power which created the universe is at the disposal

of all. And life takes on a brighter hue when the fact is fully known that at any hour of the day or night the amazing Power of Almighty God can be thrown against any and all undesirable circumstances—and they disappear.

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Founder "Psychiana"
Moscow, Idaho

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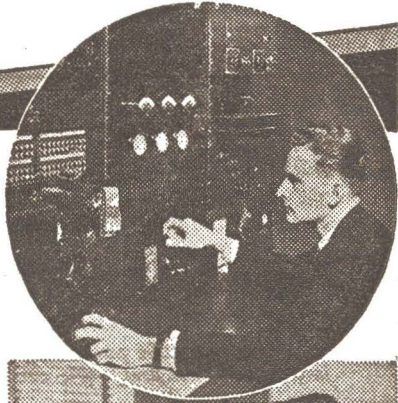
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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE MARCH 10th!

Volume 28

March, 1943

Number 3

A BIZARRE, FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL

BEWARE THE GOLDEN BOWL! Francis K. Allan 10
To save his sweetheart from worse than madness, Joe Danton rode the Smiling Zombie's trail to Death—served from a Golden Bowl!

TWO SPINE-TINGLING NOVELETTES

THE DOCTOR BRINGS DEATH Frederick C. Davis 48
No matter what he prescribed, Dr. Latimer's patients died—until he called murder into consultation and wrote out a cure for the invisible killer!

DRAW ONE—TO DEATH! William R. Cox 90
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She came back—twenty years after her death—to win a beauty contest—and to find that dying was something she had to learn about!

SECOND-HAND COFFIN John Parkhill 68
The slightly-used corpse of Chauncey Smith faithfully concealed the secret of his killer—for Chauncey had always been a kind and generous man! But those who had loved him: the educated barber and the drunken doctor—had no such scruples!

MURDER NIGHTMARE Joe Kent 78
She was human and she was lovely—but in some dim corner of his fear-maddened mind, Frank Cross knew that she was also—death!

—AND—

THE LIVING—AND THE DEAD! The Editor 6
The cop who lived with a bullet through his brain, became a terror to the underworld!

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The Living—And The Dead!

THE woman in the black coat drifted into Mike Holcomb's vision out of nowhere, and he slammed on his brakes, just in time. His cab nosed to an abrupt stop, and his startled face relaxed into a twisted grimace of relief.

You didn't get credit for it, he thought, when you scared an inch off your precious rubber to keep from hitting someone—but there'd have been hell to pay if he hadn't! It would have meant a law suit for the company, the possible loss of his job, the depletion of the savings he and Millie had so carefully built up. He might even have lost his license.

He threw a final, oblique glance at the woman pedestrian. She was hurrying along now, in the safety of the sidewalk. Then, urged by the blaring horns behind him, he slammed his hack back into gear and merged with Manhattan's mid-morning downtown traffic stream. Beyond the fact that both he and the scurrying figure in the black coat had been lucky to escape a disastrous introduction, he didn't give the matter another thought—until he saw the afternoon papers.

Then he realized that, on the whole, it might have been better if he had struck the woman in black. He might not have killed her. She might have been in the hospital now, with a couple of broken ribs, maybe, and a swell chance of getting home—instead of being in the morgue. He and Millie would have managed somehow, even with the loss of his license. . . .

Mike Holcomb is one of this magazine's readers. He told us his experience would make a "swell" basis for a story for us, particularly in the light of the further details in that afternoon's newspapers. You may have read them, because they occupied considerable headline space less than a year ago.

The woman whose description Mike thought he recognized was a maid-by-day, on her way to work. Some time after Mike had seen her, she rang the bell of an apartment she had come to clean. It was her last conscious act.

The mistress of the apartment, who should have answered the bell was dead

—a gas suicide. For the past nine hours, according to police estimate, gas from the open jets had been pouring into the rooms. The unsuspecting maid's finger on the bell set off an electric spark, igniting the highly combustible air, and the result was an explosion which killed her instantly, wrecked several other apartments in the building—and, besides injuring more than a dozen persons, made people who lived miles away think that New York was under an air raid.

But the thing that intrigued Mike was the paragraph in the papers which said that the unfortunate maid had not been expected for work until the following day! That made two doors to life of which she had been powerless to avail herself. And there may have been others, Mike said.

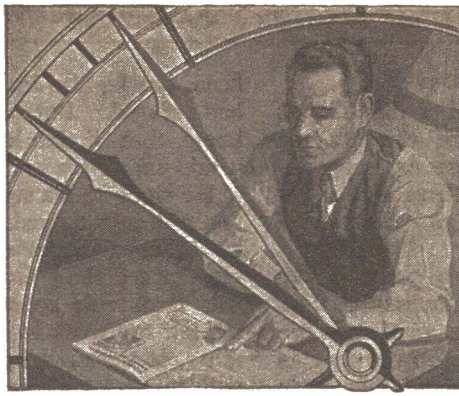
Up to a certain point, Mike is right in his definition of our type of story. The stuff of good mystery is the stuff of life; and the thing that caused the unlucky woman to report for work on a day when she was not expected, was probably as humanly simple and deeply rooted in her existence as the thing that made Mike slam on his brakes just in time—his thought of Millie, his savings, his job.

We were happy to hear from Mike, because he proved that at least a few of our objectives have been reached. Mike felt that his experience had been unusual—and the unusual story is what we try to achieve. We admired, too, his dramatically simple evaluation of his relationship to a woman he did not know—the spontaneous tie-up he made with his own good fortune and her tragedy.

In fact, Mike's story suggestion suffers mostly from the lack of an ingredient on which there seem to be no priorities at the moment—criminal menace. There is no villain in the story, but if he should like to draw one from real life, his choice is plentiful, ranging from Heindrich Himmler's gang of fetish-worshipping, international cut-throats to the members of Murder Incorporated—or even an "honest" man.

All he would have to do then is to tie the explosion at the apartment and the

(Continued on page 8)



How Do You Use The Most Important Hours of Your Day?

The most important—and they can be the most profitable, too. Men—ordinary men in ordinary circumstances—have had returns of as high as \$5, \$10, \$25, even in exceptional cases \$50 per hour for these hours.

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These can be your growth hours, the time when through training you can prepare for more efficient service on the job or for the job ahead. During your working hours, you are usually buried in routine details, growing slowly if at all. But in these spare hours, your mind can reach out to absorb the experience of others, to learn the principles and methods behind your job and behind your field. The next day on the job, you will find yourself using something of what you learned the night before to the benefit of your job and the pleasure of your boss.

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—make them more interesting.

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(Continued from page 6)

maid's inopportune arrival to the villain's scheme—and send himself through the story, as humanly spontaneous, appreciative of the tragedies of others and of his own relationship to them as he is in life!

WE'RE often, all of us, closer to the unsuspected and the incredible than we realize. There is one gentleman we would always have liked to interview as we interviewed Mike—though his story probably would be too incredible to be fictionized. His name, as it has come to us was Frankie Wells, and he was one of the less known crooks-of-all-trades in an older and wilder era of New York City.

Together with his gigantic partner whose name history has failed to record, Frankie plied his trade from one of those ingenious nests slung under the pierheads of the waterfront, which were then in favor because in them a single armed crook could successfully hold off a battalion of police. Without achieving criminal immortality, the pair finally became pesty enough to warrant the attention of the fairly lax police force. Their lair was tracked down—and there remained only the problem of getting the two men out.

Since these "nests" were generally well-stocked with food, a siege was considered impracticable, and finally one Officer Hendricks volunteered to go under the pier. The move proved unexpected, and Hendricks surprised and overcame Frankie's large partner in fairly short order.

While he was getting ready to take his prisoner out, a voice called to him to turn. Hendricks did, and fired at the dimly seen glint of a gun-barrel some distance away in the gloom—just as the other's gun roared.

Hendricks knew he had been hit in the

head, but he also knew that his own slug had scored. But, most important, he knew that if he lost consciousness, it would mean his end.

He clung to his senses and his gun, and finally began to make for the spot where he believed Frankie Wells lay hidden. He reached the gunman just as the other was recovering consciousness, and found himself too weak to attempt to tie up the other, to do anything but gesture weakly with his gun. There was a peculiar roaring in his head, and his mouth kept filling with blood, so that he couldn't speak.

To his mild surprise he saw Frankie Wells cowering abjectly away from him, his strained face terror-stricken, his eyes staring as though he were looking at the devil incarnate. Again Hendricks gestured, and Frankie scrambled to obey. Frankie's giant partner was similarly impressed and Hendricks herded his prisoners to the pier above, where they seemed only too happy to be transferred to the care of his fellow-officers.

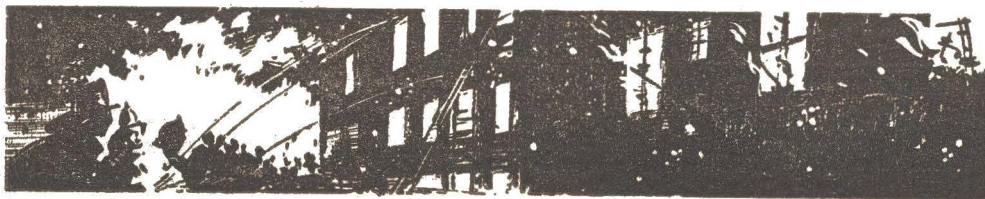
Only then did Hendricks discover that he had been shot between the eyes, and that the bullet had, to all appearances, gone right through his head. Frankie and his friend swore they had been caught by a dead man!

Perhaps the most incredible part of the story is that Hendricks lived.

Because of the angle of Frankie's shot under the cramped pierhead, the bullet had gone downward, through Hendricks' mouth, and finally lodged near his spine. He carried it there always—as he carried the scar between his eyes, symbol to the underworld of the cop who couldn't be killed.

Yes, we would have liked to talk to Frankie—the only man we ever heard of to be captured by a Zombie!

—The Editor.



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BEWARE THE GOLDEN

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Bonlein was firing with a deadly, slow precision.



BOWL!

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

CHAPTER ONE

"Bring Me Their Questions. . . ."

THE WIND came down the dark street, and the papers in the gutter swirled in frantic circles. The wind was like an unseen cold hand, stirring a path down the pavement, then vanishing into nowhere. It flicked at the tail of Joe Danton's coat as he stood in the vacant doorway.

Joe Danton struck a match and looked at his watch. It was after eleven. Then he stared back at the square of light in the third-floor window across the street.

Ann was there. He knew she was there. He could see her from time to time, moving about her room; slowly, sedately she moved, like a mannikin on a slow-motion track.

"It's crazy! Insane!" Joe told himself. "But I've got to know why! I'm going to know tonight!"

He left the dark doorway from which he'd been watching. He crossed the street and entered the hallway of the apartment building. Up the steps he climbed to the third floor, and down the hall to the door at the front. He started to knock. Then the strangely-cadenced soft voice seeped



out to his ears, the voice of Ann, speaking in a tone he had never heard before.

"... bring me their questions, Ann... Bring me their fears and troubles, and I shall lend them my mind... Bring them, Ann..."

And as an overtone to the cadenced words, Ann's slow steps ceaselessly circled the room. Joe could hear them, nearing the door, passing the door, continuing away—and monotonously returning. And the listless words were revived.

Silently his hand touched the knob and turned. He opened the door quietly and stood on the threshold. He stared with unbelieving eyes—stared at the girl he wanted to marry.

Her hair was gold and her eyes were deep blue. But now they were focused miles away; they did not see him. Oblivious to the room and the world about her, she chanted on:

"Bring me their questions... All their fears and their sorrows. Bring them to me, Ann..."

And stranger than the words were her movements—and the bowl.

It was merely a large gilded bowl, such as might be used for flowers. It was golden in color and semi-spherical in shape. It was nestled in the crook of her left arm, and as she slowly paced the room, her right hand reached gracefully into the empty air and there the fingers closed—closed upon nothing! And then they moved to the mouth of the bowl and gently opened, as though they were dropping the handful of emptiness into the golden bowl.

"Ann!" Joe exploded. "What are you doing?"

For a long moment she stood very still, as though listening to his words drift through from far away. Then she blinked, and the distant veil left her eyes. She trembled abruptly and turned.

"Oh! Oh, no..." she sobbed. And the golden bowl slipped from her grasp

and fell with a crash to the floor. She stumbled backward, her hands covering her eyes. "You... you... Get out!" she begged.

"What in hell is the matter?" Joe tried to follow her, as she retreated blindly from him.

"Don't! Leave me alone! Why won't you leave me alone!"

"Something's the matter with you! For God's sake, Ann, talk to me! Stand still! Let me touch you! Let me—" She broke from his grasp and struck at him frantically.

"Let me alone! Get out! I told you I— I didn't want to see you! Can't you stop following me! Can't—you! Please, please leave!"

He stood, rooted where she had hit him. He stared at her wide blue eyes; he watched her face, now stained with whiteness. He could hear the hard rush of her breath, could see the pounding pulse in her temple.

"Ann," he tried very quietly, "what's happened? What's been wrong the last two weeks? We didn't fight about anything. There wasn't a reason why we should stop seeing each other. Where have you been going at nights when I couldn't find—"

"Get out!" she screamed. "Get out or... or... Get... out!"

The hysterical fury of her words echoed away through the walls. Joe watched a long moment more, then turned. He closed the door behind him and went slowly down the steps. As he crossed the street, he looked back to the window. He saw Ann, kneeling down. He knew what she was doing.

He knew she was gathering the pieces of the shattered golden bowl.

AT TEN o'clock the next morning, Joe Danton entered the apartment house again. Quietly he climbed to the third floor. He had purposely

waited until after Ann would have left to go to work. He tested half a dozen keys until he found one that turned the lock. He closed and locked the door behind him, then turned to survey the room. At last he moved to the dresser and opened a drawer. There were a few stray hair-pins and an empty powder box. Nothing else.

He opened another drawer. It was empty. Abruptly he jerked at the closet door. There hung the rod with its assorted hangers. Nothing was there save one worn jacket. The clothes were gone. He turned and stared blankly at the room.

The wave of silence seemed to flow slowly out of the corners. A dozen tiny realizations came swarming into his mind: the picture of Ann's mother and father was gone; the bottles of perfume were missing from the dresser; the little clock that had always been on the radio—all those things were gone. The room was stripped and deserted. Nothing was left.

Nothing but the fragments of a golden bowl, carefully gathered and placed beside the waste-basket.

Joe knelt down and touched them. As he did so, he glanced into the waste-basket. There were half a dozen scraps of paper. He lifted them curiously and spread them on the dresser. He began to fit the torn edges together. Presently the pattern was complete; it was a sheet of white paper, about six by eight inches. It was the inner sheet from a menu-folder. Joe read:

	The Golden Bowl Dinner	
	Shrimp	
	Celery and Olives	
	Soup	
	Prime Beef	
Potatoes		Peas
	Green Salad	
	Dessert	
	Coffee	

"The Golden Bowl," he repeated slowly. He searched the sheet for a name; there was none, nor was there clue to the identity of the printer. There were merely

four other words, printed in very small type at the base of the sheet: "Tear along this line."

And the bottom edge of the sheet was rough and fuzzy, as though it had once been perforated for tearing away a lower part. Joe looked again in the waste-basket. The other part was not there.

Carefully he folded the scraps into his pocket. He stared a last time at the bare room, then opened the door and went slowly back down the stairs. In the lower hall he passed a man he recognized as the building superintendent.

"You—Miss Ann Hamilton hasn't told you she was planning to move, has she?" he asked.

"Miss Hamilton? No." The man shook his head.

"You haven't seen her go out this morning?"

"Nope," the man reiterated methodically.

Joe frowned. He walked slowly toward the bar at the corner.

"Rye, straight," he ordered. He tried to retrace back to the night two weeks before. It was the last night he'd seen Ann—normal. They'd eaten and danced. He'd told her about his raise; they'd moved their wedding date up a month. Everything had been all right when he left.

"Then she didn't meet me the next day," he mused dully. "I didn't see her for four nights. She wasn't home those nights. She never would tell me where she went; she wouldn't see me again. And then, last night—"

He threw the rye down his throat and coughed. He looked at the clock, sighed, and spun a coin across the bar.



IT WAS after eleven when he entered the Herald-Star Building and wandered into his office. Archer, the dead-pan re-write man, peered over his

glasses from his side of the room and grunted.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Danton," he greeted sarcastically. "Did you sleep well this morning?"

"No." Joe sat down, pushed back his hat, and glowered at his typewriter.

"You know, the boss has been inquiring after you. He wondered if you were still with us. If so, he asks that you step around and get fired."

"He's sore?" Joe asked.

"Oh, no. Oh, no!" Archer echoed. "Nothing's happened around here this morning! Nothing much, unless you call the Shaler Building something. It just blew all to hell this morning!"

"What!" Instinctively Joe's feet crashed down from his desk. In the same motion he bolted upright, his eyes alive. "The Shaler! That old six-story job down on lower Fourth?"

"Yeah," Archer agreed dryly. "Everybody and the office-boy's been out there. The damn thing went up like a volcano about eight-thirty, just when the offices were filling up! The last count had the dead at five and God knows how many injured. And where was Danton, that Ace of all ace reporters?"

Joe turned and slammed out the door. He plunged into the city-editor's office.

"Where's Cobb?" he snapped at the secretary. "I heard he wanted—"

"Indeed he did, Mr. Danton," the secretary announced coldly. "To fire you." She thrust a sheet of paper into the typewriter roll and glanced up archly. "If you'll look hard, you'll find him at the morgue. Be careful or you'll stay."

Joe cursed and hurried back down the hall and to the street. He caught a cab and gave the address.

JOE found Cobb in a huddle with a group of other men in a large office. Inspector Wade was holding a second huddle off in one corner.

"Every dick and newshound in town," Joe said sourly. He took a deep breath and pushed his way through the first crowd. "Hello," he said, "They told me—"

"You're fired!" Cobb barked without turning. "Get out!"

Joe lit a cigarette and moved on to Captain Paula. "I'm on the fire. What happened, quick and quiet—" The other gave it to him, tersely.

"The old Shaler Building blew up at eight-forty. Seven people are dead, a couple of them big shots who had offices there; the rest are elevator operators, stenographers, and a passing pedestrian. We sent forty-nine injured to hospitals; some of them are going to die. They'll have to dig out the wreck to find the rest."

"What caused it?"

"Maybe the boiler, but Inspector Wade's got another idea." Paula leaned closer to take a light from Joe's cigarette. "We picked up Lefty Lusine half a block from the place about ten minutes after the pop-off. He was dying in a doorway."

"He was . . ." Joe caught his words. Then he asked, "Dying of what?"

"He looked like a steak that got left in the oven; half his clothes were gone; he couldn't talk or see. There was a trail of blood behind him that went back to the Shaler. He was dead before Emergency got there."

"How did you know it was Lusine? Nobody's seen him for five years. The boys say he's had his mug lifted."

"I didn't have to see his face; it wasn't there if I'd wanted to. I took a look at that bullet crease in his hip. I put it there seven years ago, and it was still there this morning. His fingerprints verified that. It was Lefty all right."

"Anything else on him?" Joe asked softly.

"Nothing that mattered a damn. All

his upper clothes were burned off. There was a book of matches and a couple of keys in his pants. And there was a piece of paper that didn't tell us a damn thing. Just a menu from some place. No name or—"

"A what?" Joe breathed. "What kind of a menu?"

"Oh, you know—one of those plain inside sheets that have the day's special on them. This one was something about a Golden Bowl Dinner, whatever the devil that means."

CHAPTER TWO

Death-Haul

AT THREE o'clock Joe Danton walked into Kitty Linda's dressing room at the Piedmont Theater and closed the door behind him.

"Hello, honey," he greeted the tall

brunette at the dressing table. She turned. Kitty was pretty, as girls in the Piedmont chorus-line went; her brows were high and curved, her mouth was small and curved. Kitty herself was curved.

"Joe! Sit down! You've been staying away," she accused poutingly.

"I'm dumb," he said. He lit a cigarette and sat down on the edge of the dressing table. "Seen any of the old crowd lately . . ." He waited a pointed moment. "Like Lefty, for instance?"

The smile almost faded; the eyes dulled slightly. Then Kitty shook her head. "Gosh, no! Lefty's been gone for ages!"

"When did you see him, honey?" Joe turned a curl of her hair in his fingers. "You're not talking to the cops now. I know he came back; I know he'd see you. You tell me and I'll tell you."

"What? What do you mean, Joe? Has something hap—" She stopped.

"When did you see him?"

**The man who's conservation-wise
Says Thin Gillette's the blade he buys!
It's thrifty, longer-lasting, keen—
You sure look slick—shave fast and clean!**



**Easy Way To Get Even
More Shaves With
Every Gillette Blade**



1. WASH FACE thoroughly with hot water and soap to soften beard and eliminate accumulated grit that dulls shaving edges



2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently



3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves



4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

"He—he called me night before last. He said he'd just come to town. He wouldn't say where he'd been, only that it was out of the country. He wanted to see me. At first I said no. I didn't want . . . Oh, you know, Joe! I'm getting somewhere now; Lefty always meant trouble! I tried to tell him I couldn't, but he kept saying—"

"I know. So you saw him. Where? What was he doing?"

"He acted so mean and—I finally agreed to meet him for dinner at his hotel. He's staying at the Clifton under the name of John Parker. I met him that night. He was—was awful!" Kitty said tensely. "He's had something done to his face; he doesn't look the same. And he doesn't act the same, Joe! You know how he used to laugh and crack jokes, even when he was mad inside? Well, he's not like that anymore! He's mean, now! Real, dirty mean and kind of—kind of almost insane!"

"What was he doing?"

"He wouldn't say. And that was funny for Lefty! You know how he used to always brag about his rackets? Now he wouldn't talk at all. And he kept thinking I was trying to pump him! Every once in a while, he'd turn on me real quick and grip my arm. 'What are you watching me for?' he'd breathe. 'What are you trying to get on me?'" Kitty gestured blankly. "And I wasn't doing a thing! It was just like he was a different guy! Like he was wild inside, and on fire some-way! Just once in a while there'd be a little something you'd remember, and then he'd be crazy again! I—I left about ten o'clock. He hasn't tried to call me since."

"Thanks, Kitty. And he won't be calling anymore." Joe mashed out his cigarette and stood up. "Lefty died this morning."

"He . . . died!" the girl choked.

"He was mixed up someway in a building-explosion downtown. He was burned.

He crawled half a block. He died in an ambulance."

"Oh . . . He . . ."

"Maybe the boys will remember you and drop around; maybe they won't. If they do, forget I was around asking. Okay?"

"Sure . . . sure, Joe," she agreed shakily. She kept staring at the wall with wide blank eyes. "Burned to death—Lefty—I wonder why? I wonder what he was doing?"

"Me and you, honey." He walked out.



AT FOUR-THIRTY Joe Danton crossed the shabby lobby of the Clifton Hotel and picked up a house-phone.

"John Parker's room?" he asked. There was a pause. "1106 . . . Thanks." He hung up. As he moved toward the elevators, his eyes played over the lobby. Near the cigar-counter, two men were idly talking. A bell-boy was waiting beside the desk with two bags. In the various chairs were two elderly women and one lean grey-haired man. Joe noticed him first because of the grey eyes that watched across the top of the man's newspaper.

There were keen, half-slanting eyes that were partly veiled by the smoke of the man's cigar. The face was lean and almost fragile in its delicate features. There was a grey moustache, a black hat with a grey band, and a black suit that was pin-striped in grey.

Without the eyes, he might have seemed an ordinarily successful business man—a doctor, or perhaps a musician if you considered his strong yet delicate features. But the deep slate-grey eyes were hard and metallic, yet hidden and obscured.

Joe felt their unblinking hold follow him across the lobby.

On the eleventh floor, he found room

1106. He waited until the corridor was deserted, then took out his keys. An ordinary pass-key moved the lock, and he stepped into a large room. He locked the door behind him and surveyed the room. There was a dresser, two chairs, a bed, a writing desk, and a small bath that opened in the distant wall. There were two windows, one of which opened onto a fire-escape.

Joe moved quietly across the room. He stopped at the desk. There was a folded newspaper. He opened it curiously. It was a Pittsburg paper of the day before. And on the folded page was an announcement:

The Palace Room of The Jarley
announces

Salzo
Of The Golden Bowl!
Adrian Salzo, the
MYSTIC

Opening in the Palace Room
Saturday

Make your reservations now!

"The Golden Bowl!" Joe breathed. "Saturday—that's today!" He stared at the wall, thinking, computing distance and time; and through his mind whispered the phrase, over and over: Golden Bowl. Golden Bowl.

He started to say something—stopped. He reached forward and fished a crumpled slip of paper from the ink-well of the desk. He spread it carefully. Most of its printing was obliterated by the ink. Yet enough remained to identify it as a receipt given by the Haul-All Trucking Company to John Parker. It was dated the day before.

He picked up the room's telephone directory and found the Haul-All Company's address. It was on Loraine Avenue. Quickly he opened the door and stepped into the hall. Just as he closed the door behind him, the tip of a hat vanished behind the far turn of the corridor—a black hat, banded with grey.

Joe used the elevator from the ninth floor to reach the street. He dumped himself in the back of the first cab and gave the address on Loraine.

THE Haul-All Company was a long, low, weathered building situated half a block from the piers of the lower Hudson. The building was ugly and dirty. The huge trucks that ranged themselves along the loading-dock were battered and old. There was little sign of activity as Joe paid the cabby and heaved himself up on the loading-dock.

He moved to a huge door and peered into the dim interior of the storage house. Beyond distant crates burned one sickly-yellow light globe. From that direction came the lazy murmur of men's voices.

"What a rat-trap!" Joe announced as he moved toward the light. A few fat cock-roaches hurried before his feet and vanished into a pile of sawdust. He rounded the stack of crates and saw three men, sitting and smoking on a box. They looked at him and stopped talking. Glue-like their eyes lay on him as he advanced and stopped before them.

"Looking for something, friend?" one asked.

"I've got a receipt here for a box my brother left. I want to check up on it." He held out the ink-stained slip of paper. The man who had spoken looked it over slowly, then stared at Joe.

"Well, what about it?"

"Has it gone out yet?"

"It's going out tonight. What the hell! You think we was going to run a truck to Arizona on a two hundred pound load? We had to pick up some more weight."

"Sure, I understand," Joe agreed easily. "I'm glad you haven't sent it. You see, my brother and I got worried about the packing. I'd like to take another look to be sure."

The man sighed wearily, then jerked his head at a smaller man.

"Take him over and let him see, Nick."

The little man got up, picked up a flashlight from a bench, and led the way through a maze of crates. He stopped finally.

"There she is." He indicated a solid heavy box, about five feet long, about two feet wide and high. Joe looked at the address:

Sunshine Rest Camp
Warner, Arizona

There was no return address. Joe gripped the edge of the box. He could scarcely budge it. The boards were bevelled and thick. There was not a crack anywhere.

"Got a bar? he asked the man named Nick. The man peered around, moved away, then returned with a heavy crow-bar.

"What the hell? You gonna open it?"

"Yeah. You hold your flashlight. It'll be a ten dollar job for you to nail it up again."

Nick held the light. Joe set the bar and pried. The sixteen-penny nails gave with a straining whine. Again and again Joe pried until the boards of the top were loose. He threw them aside and tore out a padding of shredded paper. Beneath that was a heavy rubber bag of large size.

Joe felt the rubber; he pushed, and beneath there was something angular and hard. He waited a long moment, then took out his knife. With a hard slash he ripped the bag open. The flashlight played into the hole.

"I . . . I . . . Oh, good God! She—" Nick gurgled in terror.

For an instant Joe could not feel or think. Then a wave of hard hot nausea foamed from his stomach. Yet his eyes were locked and they would not move. They stared.

There, within the bag, were the remains of what once had been a beautiful black-

haired girl. Joe was looking at the face. There were the eyes, set and blind. There was the mouth, open and frozen. There was the blood. And there, in the temple, was the bullet hole.

"Dead! She's dead!" Nick suddenly strangled. The flashlight fell from his paralyzed fingers and rolled across the floor.

Then Joe turned. He looked in the direction from which a soft sound had come.

Around the corner of a huge crate appeared a lean and thin-faced figure. The eyes were black and gleaming. The hand was holding a gun. It was the grey man, quietly stalking forward. His hand straightened. The gun leveled.



I NSTINCTIVELY, desperately Joe ducked. His fingers clutched the heavy flashlight. He threw himself to one side and hurled it at the gleaming eyes. The gun thundered, and lead spanged into a heavy timber above Joe's head. Then came a softer, more soggy sound as the flashlight crashed into the man's forehead. Joe watched him start slowly down.

He lunged for the man's gun, shoved it into his pocket, and raced through the labyrinth of crates toward the door. Three blocks from the warehouse he caught a cab.

"Pennsylvania Station," he panted thickly. He sank down, trying to get his breath.

"She'll be at home! She's got to be at home!" he kept telling himself. "She's not in this insane nightmare! Oh, God, don't let Ann be in this. . . ."

At the station, he entered a telephone booth and dialed Ann's apartment house. A strange voice answered.

"Is Miss Ann Hamilton in?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Miss Hamilton is not

here. We don't know where you might find her. Is there any message in case she does return?"

"No," Joe said stonily. "No message." He put down the receiver, and went out of the telephone booth.

Ann was now a part of whatever the dead girl had once been. Murder had been the fate of one—murder would be the fate of Ann—unless he somehow managed to solve the riddle of the Golden Bowl!

Slowly he crossed the station to the ticket window. "One. For Pittsburg. As soon as possible." "Is ten minutes from now too soon?" the agent wondered. "It could be too late," Joe answered hopelessly.

CHAPTER THREE

Have a Grand—Have Fifty!

IT WAS eleven-thirty when Joe entered the swank lobby of the Jarley Hotel in Pittsburg. He registered and turned toward the elevator. He stopped as his eyes found a glittering poster. The face of a man covered the huge square of glistening cardboard, monstrous somehow, as enlargements often are.

The face was long and almost triangular. The top of the head was large and covered with black, short curls. Beneath the curls was a wide concave forehead, punctuated by two arching black eyebrows. Below the brows were the slanting slit-like eyes of depthless black, and between them extended the thin and bony nose. Then came a mouth—a small mouth, almost child-like in its hint of naive laughter. And yet, behind the hinted laughter lay the grimness of deep-etched lines that gave the lips a twist of sardonic obscurity. That was the face; the chin was hidden by the tapering length of a black beard.

Over the entire face was glossed the printed announcement:

NOW APPEARING IN THE
PALACE ROOM

ADRIAN SALZO!!!

See and hear this world-famous Mystic during the Palace Room's floor-shows.

At Midnight and
Two P.M.

Couvert. \$3.50

Joe glanced at his watch, then looked about the lobby. He found the neon arrow that pointed the way to the Palace Room. He took the elevator to his twelfth floor room, washed and combed his hair, then returned to the lobby. He followed the arrow to the velvet-curtained door of the Palace Room. From within came the muted music of an orchestra, blending with the whisper of dancing feet on the polished floor, the tinkling of ice and glasses, the murmur of many voices.

"A table, sir?" A waiter bowed and gestured toward a distant corner. Joe looked at the dance-floor, then took out a five-dollar bill.

"How about something closer?"

The man felt the bill against his palm. "Certainly, sir." He changed direction and led Joe to a small table about ten feet from the bandstand. Quickly he pocketed the bill, whipped away the Reserved sign, and produced a menu.

"Scotch." Joe opened the menu-folder. There was an inner sheet. At the head was the title: The Golden Bowl Dinner. Below were the choices of food. Then, four inches from the bottom of the sheet was a perforated line. Tear here—Joe read the instructions on the four-inch section at the bottom:

You, our patron, are invited to ask the Famous Salzo one question. Print or plainly write your question in the blank below. Sign only your initials. Salzo needs nothing else. Your blank will be collected by Margo. Perhaps your question may be one of those Salzo answers.

The waiter brought the drink. Joe ordered dinner. The waiter nodded and went away. Presently the orchestra

stopped. Its members filed out through a door at the back of the bandstand. Conversation hushed. A minute passed. Then one member of the orchestra returned. He seated himself at the harp. His fingers flashed in the muted light. The singing chord electrified the silence, then muted into a taunting and monotonous melody of India.

The velvet curtains of a side-door opened and a girl appeared. Slowly and dreamily she moved toward the cleared dance-floor. Her hair was shining black. Her dress was pure white and long. And in the crook of her left arm she bore a gleaming golden bowl. Joe watched her fixedly. His eyes narrowed; his breath drained away. He leaned forward, his fingers locked on the table's edge. Then his whisper exploded:

"Ann!" The word was lost in the surf-like music. Slowly Ann moved on until she reached the middle of the dance-floor. There she stopped. Her hazy, dreamy eyes roamed over the room; and yet they seemed to see nothing; she seemed aware of nothing save the Golden Bowl in her arm.

THEN, from the same door, a tall slender figure appeared. The figure was that of Salzo. The face, in flesh, was even more gently child-like, yet even more Satanic than had been its picture. He marched gracefully to the place where Ann stood. He bowed low, then closed his eyes. The harp hushed into stillness. The room was frozen to silence. Then, with poetic rhythm, Salzo spoke:

"Dear Friends . . . Tonight you have come with your problems. All problems of the Universe. To my humble mind you have come, seeking some peace, some hope, some answer—" He paused, and his face was sad. "Ah! Great is the weight upon my weak shoulders! To know the unknown! To guide the lost!"

Again he paused and stroked his bulging temples softly.

"My mind is yours for this moment. Bring me their questions, Margo—Bring me their troubles and fears. . . ."

Slowly, still in the dreamy-trance, Ann turned. Among the tables she moved, pausing at each to receive the slip of paper; she dropped each slip into the Golden Bowl, then moved on. Joe watched her fixedly as she neared him. Then she was at his side. Her fingers—fingers he had held and kissed—were reaching down, touching him.

"Ann! Ann, speak to me!" he whispered. "Don't you remember me?" There was no answer—not the slightest recognition as her cool fingers touched his coat, his hand, his fingers—they took his blank slip and dropped it into the bowl. She moved away.

"Oh—God!" Joe breathed. He watched her, stranger than the most remote stranger, moving away. At last she returned to Salzo.

"Ah, now," Salzo chanted melodically. He reached into the bowl and took out a slip. "My first question comes from C. G. . . . The question asks, 'When should the next big rain come?'" Salzo closed his eyes and stroked the dome-like forehead slowly.

"C.G., I see you as a man. A small man. Your hair is red . . . And as to your question—ah, yes—You own a great deal of land; many things are growing there. You must know when you may expect rain. . . ." Salzo smiled. "Rain will come soon. It will come in the morning, else it will do you no good." The dark eyes began to gleam beneath the arched brows. "Yes! Rain in the morning! Before dawn! It will first rain in your East fields!"

Salzo's shoulders slumped wearily. He closed his eyes. At last he selected another slip.

"My next question comes from L.O. . . ."

I am asked: 'Is Katherine's throat trouble serious?' " Again he paused to stroke his temples.

"L.O., you are a woman. I see you as plump and strong. There is a scar on your left cheek. And as to your question: Yes! Katherine's trouble is serious! More serious than you suspect! I regret to say that she will die! But have courage! It will save much pain. Do not be sad. . . ."

A flurry of quickened whispers raced through the room, then choked into abrupt stillness. Salzo selected another slip. On and on murmured his cadenced, melodic voice. Sometimes Salzo refused to answer the printed questions. Instead he informed the person of a greater problem that was approaching, a more important fate.

For half an hour Salzo spoke. The Palace Room grew brittle with silence. The poetic words left their echoes lingering in the smoke-haze. At last Salzo paused for a long moment, then drew himself to full dignity.

"And now! Now, to one person in this room, I will grant five minutes. During this time I will dwell in his mind. I will share his unspoken fears and secrets. For five minutes, now! Who?"

"The pay-off act," Joe whispered sourly. Yet his eyes narrowed; his cigarette was forgotten. "The damn guy's racket is plenty smooth, whatever it is."

"I—I'd like to talk." A small, wry-

facéd man rose at one table. A murmur spread through the room. The man next to Joe winked.

"That's old Carvell. Got enough dough to buy out the bank."

Joe lifted an eyebrow. He looked back to Salzo. The Satanic face was cloaked in a distant veil. The eyes were closed.



"A H, YES—I know you now. Your name is Emanuel Carvell. You are a lawyer. I see you exerting power, political power in this city and state. You are wealthy—more than people imagine. And you are afraid! Are you not afraid, Emanuel Carvell?"

"I—I'm afraid," the man answered huskily.

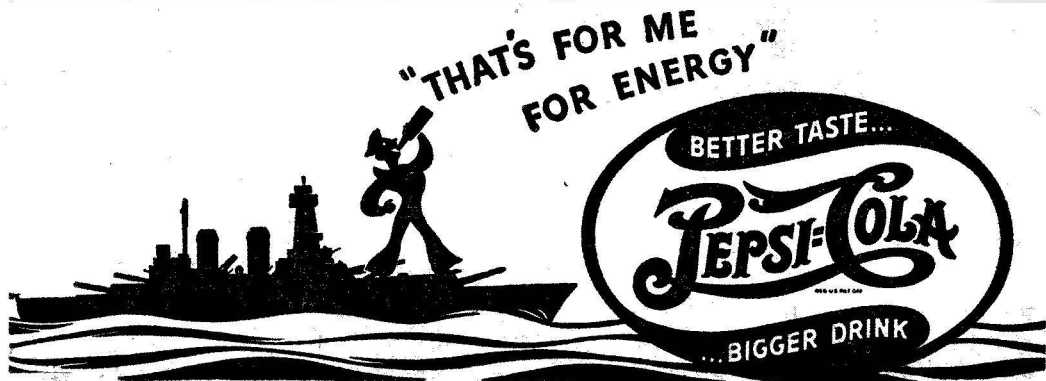
"Someone is planning to kill you. Need I tell you why?"

"No! No, don't tell—don't say what—" Carvell struggled, trying to release himself from Salzo's hypnotic grasp.

"No, I need not tell you," Salzo murmured softly. "You know quite well. There is only one way I can aid you."

"What—what must I do?"

"Call him—this man who plans to kill you. Call him tonight. Call him at three o'clock. He will agree to meet you. Go to him. Give him what he is asking. Do you understand, Emanuel Carvell? Give



him what he wants from you! Or you will die before this week is done!"

"I—I understand—I will—" Carvell answered thickly.

Salzo bowed, then smiled wearily at the audience. Slowly he turned and moved from the room. The harpist ran the screaming chord again. Ann turned and followed Salzo through the velvet curtains. With the final exit, the voices of the room rose in an excited crescendo. Eyes focused on Emanuel Carvell as he rose from his seat, threw a bill on his table, and stumbled swiftly out.

Joe watched the curtains through which Ann had vanished. He took a bill from his pocket and rose. As he did so, he noticed for the first time the bottle of champagne that sat on his table.

"That's not mine," he snapped at a waiter-captain.

"I beg—" the man started sharply.

"And don't let it happen on my bill! It's not my fizz-water." He hurried through the maze of tables toward the door. Behind him rose the excited whispers of the waiter and the captain. He passed the curtains and entered a narrow hallway. At the far right end he saw Ann, waiting before an elevator door.

"Ann! Ann, wait!" he called. "What are you doing in this—"

"Leave her alone," came the blunt command. In the same instant, a vise-like hand locked on Joe's shoulder and jerked him around. He stared into the granite-like face of a squat, squareheaded man. The odor of garlic and onions was heavy on the man's breath. And the shining barrel of a gun gleamed in his hand.

"But she—I know that girl!"

"No. You do not know her. Get out."

The sound of the elevator door reached Joe's ears. He turned in time to see it closing—taking Ann away.

"Get out!" the man again commanded. His frog-like eyes blinked dully.

"That's what I thought you said," Joe

sighed. He turned back to the Palace Room, and from there to the lobby-elevators. He went up to his room and locked the door behind him.

He pulled off his coat and sank down. He tried to think, to understand. . . .

Whatever the racket was, Ann was in it now—and with a firm conviction, Joe knew that Ann was filling the dead girl's shoes. Once the beautiful brunette had carried the Golden Bowl—then something had happened to cause her murder. When would it happen to Ann—?

"Why not now?" Joe raged aloud. "She was due to get it some day! Now I've walked in and gummed the oil! That'll move up the deadline! To when—?"

He groaned helplessly and reached for a cigarette in his coat. As he lifted it, the contents dropped from his inner pocket. There was his pen, his bill-fold; and there was a plain white envelope.

"I never had that before . . ." he said strangely. He picked it up and turned it about. The flap was sealed, but there was no name or address anywhere. Curiously he slit the flap.

"My, God!" he gasped. There in his hand were fifty bills! Fifty one-thousand dollar bills. And with them was the one typed line:

The Smiling Man. The Argyle. Three

That was all.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Smiling Man

JOE sank back in his chair and stared. "Fifty grand!" he said incredulously. He read the single line again. For no reason at all his fingers trembled as he lit the cigarette.

"I think I've walked into a big game," he told himself softly. Then he began to think, to retrace each movement: He'd

taken out his bill-fold when he'd paid for the room at eleven-thirty. The letter hadn't been in the pocket then. From the cashier's desk, he'd come to this room, washed, and returned to the Palace Room. Not one hand, not one person had been near enough!

"Ann!" He realized it with a hard shock. He recalled her fingers, straying over his coat as she'd reached for the blank-slip. He looked at the envelope again. It was pure white; and he remembered Ann's dress—pure white!

"A perfect shield in that dim light!" Then he forced his mind to be calm: It wasn't Ann's money, that was certain. It had not been intended for him, that was certain—which left him with fifty grand and a strange message.

He crushed out the cigarette and stood up. He fitted the money securely in his pocket, put on his hat, tested the gun he'd taken from the grey man, and left the room. He used the emergency stairs to reach the lobby. After a study of the various corridors, he chose one that seemed likely to lead to the elevator Ann had used. Only one red fire-bulb burned in its long length, casting a haze-like glow on the worn green carpet.

Joe moved quietly forward. As he neared an L, the sound of quieted voices reached his ears. He paused and listened; they came from beyond the turn. One was familiar—soft and poetic—the voice of Salzo, Joe realized.

"You have been of great assistance. I trust we shall meet tomorrow? Shall we say, a half-hour before the floor-show?"

"That's one-thirty," came another voice. "Sure. Okay."

"And here is your—shall I say, token of my appreciation."

"Thanks." Joe heard the crisp crumple of paper.

"Now, I must retire. Good-by." Joe listened as Salzo's footsteps faded in the distance. Eventually the elevator opened

and closed. Then, from around the L of the corridor came a plump, moon-faced little man under a shining derby. Joe blinked. He stared as the moon-face grew more distinct in the hazy light.

"Moore! Ben Moore!" he exclaimed. The little man stopped.

"Who are—well, damned if it's not! Hello, Danton!" He stuck out his hand. "What're you doing away from New York?"

"Come on! Let's get out of here. I want to talk to you!" Joe gripped his arm and pulled him back down the hall. At a steel door marked Emergency Exit, he shoved. They stumbled out on a dark side-street and the door locked behind them. At a far corner winked the neon sign of a bar.

"Down here!" Joe snapped, still clutching Ben Moore's arm.



"NOW, when did you quit being a society-editor and start working for Salzo?" Joe demanded when they were seated.

"Who said I'd quit? I was still on the staff at five o'clock."

"I heard you and Salzo talking. Money changed hands."

"Okay. So what," Moore grinned sheepishly. "You play your racket, I'll play mine."

"You tell me what yours is," Joe demanded harshly. Moore blinked uncertainly.

"Well, hell! It's nothing to get hot about! I'm just spotting for the guy. It's an easy way to pick up twenty bucks a night. You see, he moved in here with his act tonight; came from New York, by the way. I dropped around to his suite to see if there was anything for the column. He found out I'd been around town for a long time and knew a lot of people. He said I was the man he'd need

while he was here, to show him around."

"To do what?"

"Don't be dumb, Danton! These mystic boys are all alike! They all get somebody, like me, and I look the crowd over and spot a few folks I've got a little dope on. Then Salzo gets that girl, Margo, to put their questions in a side compartment of that bowl. Then when the right initials show up, Salzo spills the dope I gave him and everybody thinks 'What a genius this guy is!' He gestured and emptied his glass of beer. "It's the same thing on the climax interview. I pick the most important person I know anything about. I give the dope to Salzo, then drop around to the person's table and kind of hint that Salzo would like to have them stand up because they're so damned important. They suck in every time. People like to be talked about."

"So the whole damn thing's a fake!" Joe said slowly. "Salzo is using your dope when he refuses to answer the written questions, and talks about the other problems instead?"

"Sure. Because maybe they don't ask what I told him."

"What about the straight questions that he does answer?"

"I wouldn't know. Stooges, maybe." Moore shrugged.

"Maybe." Joe murmured distantly. Then he faced Moore squarely. "Did you ever hear of anybody called The Smiling Man?"

"The Smiling Man? No, I never heard of—" Suddenly he stopped, blinked. "You don't mean Bonlein?" he gasped.

"Who is he? What about him?"

"He was a doc around here—supposed to be a devil with the x-ray. Only something happened about four years ago and Bonlein hasn't been heard of since. There was a stink, but nobody—"

"What happened?" Joe interrupted tensely.

"I never got the whole story. It seems a

couple of dicks were out at his rest-hospital a couple of miles from town. Why they were there I wouldn't know. Anyway, when they tried to open a room or door or something, the whole damned place blew up. They never found enough of the dicks to bury. They never found Bonlein at all—" Moore shook his head reflectively. "He was a pretty picture if I ever saw one. Got that 'Smiling' name from a long scar down one cheek; it blended into his lips. Seems a test tube or something blew up once and c t him."

"I see . . ." Joe took a deep breath. "One more thing: Know anything about a place called the Argyle?"

"The Argyle? Yeah! It's the rattiest, lousiest dive in Pittsburg. You wouldn't go there with your dog."

"You might go there with me," Joe corrected. "At three o'clock." He looked at his watch. It was almost two. He downed his beer and stood up. "Let's go."

"But what's at the Argyle, Danton?" Moore protested. "Why—"

"I've got a hunch Bonlein's going to be there. And I've got another hunch: that twenty bucks you picked up tonight has blood on every penny."

"What—what do you mean?"

"I think you've been spotting for murder!"



REMEMBER," Joe told Moore before he left him outside the Argyle, "come in in ten minutes. I'll be in one of those booths at the back. You stay at the bar. When Bonlein comes in, blow your nose."

Moore nodded. Joe pushed the swinging door and entered the long smoke-filled room. To the right was the bar, and beyond was the mirror, reflecting the dismal room in silent depth. Along the bar were ranged perhaps a dozen men; nondescript in dress, nondescript in purpose. Their

low conversations ceased as he passed them by, and their unblinking eyes followed him until he sat down in a dim booth of the back alcove.

"Rye," he ordered. It was two-thirty. He lit a cigarette.

At ten minutes until three, he saw the white handkerchief come out of Moore's pocket. The little man blew loudly. Joe stared.

Down the long room a man was walking, slowly, deliberately. He was a large man, with thick, sloping shoulders and big feet. His body was concealed by the long black slicker he wore. His long face was shadowed by the down-turned limp felt hat. Yet Joe could sense the man's alertness; he could feel the search of the eyes he could not see. Then the man reached the archway into the alcove room. There he paused. Joe took a breath and half rose. He gestured slightly.

The man's head tilted, and in the movement a tangent of light painted his face. In the first instant it seemed that the massive face was caught in a full wide laugh. The mouth seemed to open wide in its mirth, from the lips on into the cheek. Then, with the passing moments, the first appearance vanished. The fixity of the smile destroyed its humor. The suggestion of mirth became a sardonic permanency. And the laughter was a red and ragged scar, from the lips to the point of the cheek-bone.

Bonlein came slowly forward, his hands held deep in his pockets, his face still tilted cautiously.

"I don't know you," he spoke as he stopped at the booth.

"I'm new. Sit down."

Bonlein shifted himself as he slipped into the opposite seat; his hands stayed in his pockets; his alertness continued.

Joe had had time to think. He knew he was working on a slender bluff, on which depended his life and Ann's—and the weight of fifty grand. Now he had one

break he hadn't figured: the ten extra minutes before three o'clock. He had to work fast. The set up would have to pay-off . . .

He leaned forward. "I've got it on me," he said quietly.

"Put it on the table," Bonlein said softly.

"What have you got?"

THE scar twitched in a mock smile. One hand left the pocket and laid itself, palm down, on the table. The eyebrows waited, questioning, challenging Joe.

Joe took out the fifty grand, flashed the edges, then pushed it across the table. Bonlein picked it up, leaving a small brown envelope where his palm had been. Joe slipped it into his pocket. He leaned across the table and spoke softly:

"He wants to see you. Where are you staying?"

Again the scar twitched. "I've just visited Katherine," he said slyly. "So I don't think I want to see *him*."

Katherine . . . the name worked back into Joe's memory. Then he recalled: Salzo had mentioned a Katherine in one of his answers. Katherine was to die of a throat trouble. . .

"And how did you find her?" Joe wondered.

"She had been dead half an hour. So that," he studied Joe intently. "I am wondering if this is to get contagious . . ."

Joe shrugged and repeated. "He wants to see you at once."

"No!" Bonlein answered harshly. "If he wishes to come to Arizona, he can see me there. I am returning tomorrow. Until I do, I am seeing no one."

Joe recalled the address on the corpse-box. "You'll be at the Sunshine Rest Camp?"

Bonlein blinked. "You ask strange questions."

"As I said, I'm new." Joe looked at his

watch. It was exactly three. His eyes flicked toward the front door; then he looked back to Bonlein; the man was watching him fixedly.

"Is someone coming?" came the slow question.

"I think so. He wants to see you. He didn't think you would come easily."

"I see," Bonlein murmured. And then the front door opened. Two men entered. They stood side by side, their hands in their pockets, their shoulders leaning the least bit forward. Their eyes searched through the smoke haze of the room. Joe felt Bonlein stiffen, then the man shifted his large body so that he faced the door. He did not breathe or move again as he waited.

Slowly two men came down the long bar-room. They stopped at the edge of the alcove. They saw Bonlein and nodded.

"Looking for me, Henry?" Bonlein asked carefully.

"Yeah. Something's gone wrong." The man's hand moved a fraction.

"Not yet!" Bonlein rasped. Then the gun in his pocket roared. In the same instant Joe threw himself on the floor and rolled toward the far wall. Behind him the gun roared again. Then came the thunder of a louder gun. There were screams and the shatter of glasses. Joe hit the wall and twisted to look back.



NOW Bonlein was on his knees beneath the table. The gun had blasted a hole in his coat, through which it now protruded. His hat was off, his face was dead-white and rigid. Yet the strangely mirthless smile lay wide upon the face, and the nerves twitched with each deliberate, spaced explosion of the gun. Bonlein was firing with a deadly, slow precision. In the doorway one figure lay crumpled. The other was hunched forward. In his hand a gun was spitting its

red tongues through the swirling smoke.

Then suddenly the man seemed to leap backward. The gun was left in mid-air one split instant, sustained by its recoil. Then it fell. And a strangled scream raked the ceiling. Stumbling feet threshed, tangled, and locked. There was a soggy fleshy sound—the sound of a body falling.

The last roar died away. The front door slammed . . . slammed . . . and again, as terrified bar-hounds fled to the street. A silence grew to mock the vanished turmoil. Somewhere a bit of broken glass fell and shattered. That was all.

Joe looked at Bonlein. Now the man was on all-fours. Animal-like his massive head wagged down between his arms. From the points of his chin and nose, slow drops of blood dripped to the floor. Then the arms began to buckle. The man doubled forward. His face slid along the floor until he lay flat. His fingers twitched once.

Joe stood up.

"My, God!" came the terrified announcement. Moore's head came out from behind the bar. "What a party to invite a friend—"

"Get up! Quick! We're using the back way!" Joe ran to the body of the gunman who lay in the alcove arch. Swiftly he emptied the pockets. He emptied the pockets of the second man who lay half way to the front door. He did the same for Bonlein.

Through a narrow hall-way, past the rest room he fled with Moore behind him. They stumbled through a rear store-room filled with kegs and crates and at the back they found a door. It let them out into the dark service alley.

"Somewhere—somewhere where we can get a phone quick!" Joe panted. Moore jogged his short legs along a couple of dark blocks, then turned into a wider avenue. At last he stumbled to a halt before the door of a lighted cafe.

"This—this stays open all night."

"Okay . . . Now! What's the name of somebody in the local police department who can think and be trusted. Quick! Who?"

"Old Collie—Inspector Collie. He's a sour-puss but he's smart if he thinks the case is big enough to—"

"Come on." Joe entered the shining, quiet cafe and nodded Moore to a table. He continued on to the telephone booth, looked up a number, and dialed. Presently he spoke, quietly.

"Hello, is Inspector Collie down there? What—What's that number?" Joe's lips moved silently, memorizing; then he hung up. Again he dialed. It was over a minute before a sleepy voice answered.

"Is this Inspector Collie?"

"This is Collie. Who're you? Don't you know what time it is?"

"I know damn well what time it is. It's fifteen minutes after Smiling Man Bonlein killed two men."

There was a fragile pause, then Collie's voice, cleared of sleep, spoke again. "What did you just say?"

"I said Bonlein just killed two men. Bonlein himself is dead or dying. Does it sound important enough for you to come to town for?"

"Where are you? Where was the killing? I'll be down at once."

"Will you give me one break on credit until I can talk to you?"

"Like what?" came the hard question.

"Hush the killings. Keep the newspapers off until tomorrow. If you'll do that, you'll get the big haul tomorrow."

Collie waited one moment. "All right!" he snapped. "Talk!"

"The blow-up was in the Argyle, a dirty bar on—"

"I know where it is! And where are you?"

"I'm in a cafe called Duncan's Number 6. My name's Joe Danton. When you get the Argyle sealed, I'll be waiting for you."

There was a metallic click as Collie slammed down his receiver. Joe hung up, returned to the table where Moore was sitting, and emptied his pockets. On the top of everything else he placed the plain brown envelope from Bonlein.

"Coffee," he ordered wearily. He looked at his watch: it was three-thirty. For a minute he allowed his tired eyes to close. Through his mind she came—slowly, slowly walking; her once-golden hair now black; the long white dress sweeping the floor behind her. In the curve of her arms rested the Golden Bowl.

"Where is she now?" he asked himself silently. "Dead or alive?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Hail the Rain

AT FOUR o'clock Inspector Collie walked in. He was a thin tubercular looking man. His face was almost apologetic in its hang-dog expression; a limp grey mustache was strung beneath his nose. He shuffled instead of walking and his thin shoulders shook with the motion. Only his eyes were alive. They were sharp and grey-blue. They seemed to dance incessantly in their deep sockets.

He looked at Moore and nodded vaguely, then the eyes peered at Joe. "You're Danton?" he asked. The depth of his voice belied his frail figure.

"I'm Joe Danton." He nodded to a chair. "You hushed that Argyle mess?" he asked quickly.

"I told you I would. Talk fast."

Joe took a deep breath, washed the hot coffee down his throat, and started talking. He began with the time he'd walked into Ann's room and witnessed the strange routine of the Golden Bowl. Collie did not utter a word through the account. He sat, hunched deep in his chair, methodically smoking a battered pipe and watching Joe's face.

"And there's the loot so far," Joe said at last, gesturing to the contents of the pockets. "I thought it was just a case of finding my girl when she was angry with me, or ill. Now I know it's something big; too damn big for me to play with alone."

Collie nodded. He picked up one battered bill-fold and looked the identification over; there was none. He searched another bill-fold. Again there was no identification. Plenty of cash in both; nothing else. Then he searched Bonlein's morocco wallet. There was an ordinary name-plate, identifying the bearer as Dr. Fitzhugh Samms, chief-consultant at the Sunshine Rest Home, Warner, Arizona.

"And now we'll see what was worth fifty grand." He picked up the brown envelope and slit the flap. Onto the table fell six sets of pictures, two in each set and carefully clipped together. Joe picked up one set.

The first picture was the face of a man. The cheek bones were wide, the chin was heavy. The eyes were black beneath arching brows. The nose was flat and wide, the ears were lopped.

Joe looked at the second picture. It was that of another man. The brows were negligible; the nose was thin and pointed; the ears sat close to the head. The cheek bones were wide, the chin heavy.

"Let me see those!" Collie suddenly rasped. He snatched the pictures from Joe's hand. For a moment he stared, then he exploded.

"Hendrell! It's Hendrell! His mug's been worked on! His ears and brows and nose have been changed, but it's still him!"

"Who is Hendrill?"

"He's wanted in four states for arson and murder! He's been out of sight for a year! And these pictures here!" He held out another pair. "That's a guy named Chass, or I'm blind! They're wanting him in San Diego for a dynamite-

job! And his mug's been prettied up, too!

"So those were the operations that made Bonlein fifty grand," Joe digested.

Collie rose abruptly.

"Where are you going?" Joe asked sharply.

"To get the boys! We're going to clean house at the Jarley!"

"No! Sit down," Joe snapped. He hauled the Inspector back in his seat. "Just sit still a minute . . . I've had time to think all day! Just give me another minute and I'll—"



"THERE'S one card that doesn't fit," he mused after a long moment. "That climax-interview with Emanuel Carvell!" He turned on Moore. "That was your dope Salzo was feeding Carvell?"

The little man nodded immediately. "But, God, I didn't—"

"Remember what Salzo told Carvell to do? He told him to meet the somebody who planned to kill him; he told him to give them what this somebody wanted! Now," he leaned forward, his eyes alight, "What dope did you give Salzo on Carvell? Did it involve money?"

"Why—why yes," Moore admitted. "It's no secret around town; Inspector Collie knows about it, I'm sure . . . You see, Carvell is sort of a gilt-edged racketeer. A few months ago he and his men move into the North Side dice territory. And that section has been Sam Hanlon's gravy-train for years. Everybody in town knows that Hanlon's sent Carvell his proposition: Get out of the North Side or pay a hundred grand to stay in. Or get killed!"

"That's what you told Salzo," Joe murmured. "And he told Carvell to get to Hanlon by three o'clock and pay off or get killed—is Carvell gullible enough to swallow that order?"

"Hell! That's why I picked on Carvell for the interview! He's so superstitious he won't go out on Monday because his brother was killed on a Monday, once," Moore said.

"Moore," said Joe quietly, "you can remember this as the night when you played pure hell!" Then he turned to Collie.

"You took me up on the Argyle hush-up and you got those pictures. Will you carry me one more lap?"

"On what?" Collie asked testily.

"Leave Salzo alone until we test one more hunch of mine. Okay?"

"And this big hunch?"

"Let's go." Joe rose. "It'll probably turn up at Hanlon's place, wherever that is."

"He lives in an apartment in Christopher Court."



THEY moved silently along the thick carpet to the door of Sam Hanlon's apartment. Joe pointed mutely to the floor. There, beneath the door, shone a slice of light from within.

"Use your keys," he whispered to Collie. "Keep it quiet."

The Inspector frowned, produced a ring of keys, and tested one silently. On the fifth fitting, the lock moved softly.

"Okay," Joe said. "And don't get excited." He pushed open the door and walked in. The hinges whined. In some room there was the sudden scrape of a shoe, then a metallic click. Presently, very slowly, the door across the room opened.

There stood a large well-dressed man. His face was wet with sweat and flushed. In one hand he held a rope. In the other was a gun.

"Hello," Joe greeted him quietly. "Don't shoot that damn thing."

Hanlon didn't move. He didn't breathe. He watched and waited.

"Where's Carvell's body?" Joe asked pleasantly, smoothly.

A nerve twitched in Hanlon's sweating temple.

"This isn't a gag, Hanlon," Joe went on slowly. "I know you've found Carvell's body; and the set-up fixed you as the killer. Right?"

Hanlon's tongue wet his lip. "Quit stalling on me. Get those hands away from that pocket." But the voice lacked the depth of certainty. The eyes flicked to Collie, then back to Joe.

"I'm not stalling, Hanlon. I know you're framed for murder, and I know you didn't do it. Put down your gun and talk. You don't think we'd walk in here empty if we were hunting a killer?"

The fog of uneasy doubt played through the eyes. The gun started down, halted, waited, then finally lowered. Hanlon broke.

"I didn't! Nobody's going to believe me, but I swear I didn't kill him!" he choked.

"Where is the body?"

"Here—in here—I was getting ready to move it." Hanlon stood away from the door. Joe and Collie moved forward. On the threshold of the bedroom they stopped.

On the floor lay the wry-faced figure of Emanuel Carvell. He lay face down. About him were ropes, weighted with iron skillets, tire-tools, anything Hanlon had been able to find, apparently. On Hanlon's desk lay a long letter-opener, its blade coated with blood. And between Carvell's shoulder-blades was the slot-like death wound.

"So you were going to give him a ride to the river," Collie surmised. "All right! What happened, and make it straight!"

"I got a call. It was about one-thirty I guess. The guy said he was Carvell, and would I meet him at his South Star club; he said he was ready to kick in a hundred grand for the North Side dice territory—

so I went to the South Star club, and nobody there had seen Carvell tonight. I waited maybe an hour, and got tired. I came on back here. When I opened the door, there he was! My letter opener in his back! Hell! Who was going to believe me when I said it! A hundred people in town would swear I pulled it! They know I was having trouble about the North Side take!"

"I'M GOING to believe it," Joe said. He turned to Collie. "It works, see. . . After the floor-show was over around one, Salzo called Hanlon and said he was Carvell; he arranged the meeting to get Hanlon out of here. Then he came in, took Carvell's real call, and invited him to come up with the money. Whereupon he killed him, made Hanlon look guilty as hell, and left. With the hundred grand, naturally."

"All right! So this is your hunch!" Collie barked. "Now what?"

"Now," said Joe softly, "you're going to arrest Hanlon and charge him with murder. You'll play it to the morning papers—"

"You damn double cross—" Hanlon leaped for his gun.

"Get back there, you fool!" Joe raged. "Let me finish; nobody's crossing you!" He turned back to Collie.

"This Carvell job is accidental gravy for Salzo. His steady racket is in those straight-answers from the Golden Bowl. I'll tell you about those later—when I know. Tonight he said a woman named Katherine would die—tonight Bonlein told me he had killed her, on orders. He predicted other things. He predicted rain—I don't know what that means, but that's what we've got to nail! Play it right, and we take the whole mob to the wringer! Muff it, and we pull a dry-haul! We don't have a damn thing tangible to tie Salzo to this murder here! And most important, on the answer-racket of the Golden Bowl,

Salzo has absolutely no personal contact with his mob! That's his ace-card if anything slips! He's clear! He doesn't know the guy! Why, hell, he never met him! His nose is clean! That's the beauty of his set-up, understand?"

"So what do we do? Sit back and admire it?"

"Don't be a fool! Right now you arrest Hanlon and charge him with murder! Play it big to the papers this morn—"

"Damn it! I told you I never—" Hanlon shouted furiously.

"Then get on the telephone and get the best psychiatrist in town! Get him in his office and ready to work. I'll meet you there in an hour, I hope—"

"And just where are you going?" Collie asked bluntly.

"To the Jarley. Alone! It's got to be that way! You show your face and we lose the whole pot! Now—what doctor are you going to use?"

"I—Lansing, I guess. In the Medical Center, but—I don't like the way you're going about this, Danton! You're stringing your luck too thin when you leave Salzo free to—"

"Don't tell me how thin I'm playing it! I know damn well! But I know it's the only way to cut the bottom out! I've got two more details to check: the New York Business Directory and the morning papers. If they fit the pattern, I'm going to have to send my girl back into a murder nest at two o'clock tomorrow. And don't think that isn't thin!" He turned and walked out.

CHAPTER SIX

Drown in the East Fields!

IT WAS five-thirty when Joe left the cab at the side of the Jarley Hotel. He entered by way of the dim side entrance; silently he crossed the rear of the lobby. The place was almost deserted. There was a light at the main desk. One

elevator was open, and within dozed the boy. In the deep couch against the distant wall a man was sleeping, his face covered by a newspaper. At the huge front entrance, the first dirty splotch of grey dawn hovered.

He left the lobby and moved down the narrow corridor toward the elevator that Ann had used earlier. He searched for a stairway. He found it at the extreme end of the hall. As he began to climb, he oriented himself. He was in the north wing of the hotel; it was an older section—perhaps the original hotel, not so tall.

He stopped at the second floor corridor and peered down its length. He took a deep breath; his fingers fitted about the gun in his pocket. Then, with heavy steps, he walked the full length of the hall. At the far end he stopped and listened. Then he returned and listened again. There was no sound. He climbed to the third floor and repeated the process. Again there was no sound. He went to the fourth floor. Down the hall he walked, slowly and heavily. At the far end he stopped to listen. Then he heard a sound—a footstep. Quickly he drew himself around the corner. He heard a door open softly. There was a long wait, then the footstep moved again. The door whined as it closed. Joe looked around the corner. He saw the narrowing door—the third from the opposite end, on the left.

When its latch c icked, Joe took out his gun and removed the safety. Silently he crept back down the hall to the door. He pressed himself against the wall at its blind side. Then, softly, he tapped the wall.

After a minute of silence, he heard the creak of bed-springs. He heard the slow padding of footsteps again. He watched the knob revolve. The door opened and the thick head of the garlic-scented man appeared.

“Hold it! Don’t move!” Joe rammed the gun into the man’s stomach. Then,

with the force of the barrel, he pushed the man back into the room, switched on the light, and closed the door.

“I’ll talk fast—you can believe me or not,” he spoke quietly. “The two gunmen that went after me tonight are dead. That’s the way you’ll be if you don’t talk quick! Now—which is her room?”

The man looked at the gun, then shifted his eyes to Joe’s face. In them was uneasy doubt, and fear. Joe rammed the gun deeper into the stomach. The man grunted thickly.

“Where?”

“Next room!” the man answered thickly.

“Walk in there! And don’t make any noise.” Joe shifted the gun to the man’s spine. Slowly the man moved into the hall and to the next door. He took out a key and turned the lock. Joe followed him into the darkness and snapped on the light. There lay Ann, asleep in the bed.

“Now, listen . . .” Joe ordered. “Move to that bed. Use your handkerchief. Gag that girl. Don’t make any noise. When she’s gagged, pick her up. We’re leaving.”

“I don’t—”

◆

“**M**OVE!” The gun bit at the spine. The man moved. At the side of the bed he took out his handkerchief. He reached down. There was a brief struggle as Ann fought blindly against the heavy hands. A cry choked in her throat. Then the man lifted her and turned. Joe nodded toward the hall. He waited until the man passed him, then snapped off the light, turned the key and dropped it into his pocket, and followed the man to the end of the hall. There he raised the window that opened onto the fire-escape.

“Start down. And I’ve still got the gun. Remember that if you start getting ideas.” The man merely grunted. He

climbed out on the fire-escape and started down through the grey mist of morning.

Just as Joe started to follow, a sound reached his ears. He listened. It came from the stairway. It was the sound of soft steps. Quickly he tip-toed to the railing and peered down.

Two flights below a man was climbing, searching, listening as he came. A thin man with a grey-ribboned black hat. His suit was black and grey striped. Across his nose was a patch of adhesive tape. In his hand was a gun!

"That guy again!" Joe breathed. He shifted indecisively, then made up his mind. Quickly he returned to the window and climbed out. He tried to lower the window; the sash grated. He cursed hotly and began to stumble after the big man who was carrying Ann. He knew the grey-man had heard the sound! He knew he would see the open window!

"Down!" he snarled at the big man. "Go on! The last span gives down with weight! Hurry!"

The man went on. The weighted last span of the escape went down and touched the side-walk. Joe followed the big man off.

"That street! Down there! There's a cab!" he breathed. As he drove the man on with his gun, he peered back upward.

He saw the thin, grey-faced man! He was coming down the escape! Following!

Joe shoved the big man into the back of the cab and plunged in beside him.

"Medical Center!" he rasped. "Hurry! There'll be a cab following you! It's worth money for you to lose it!"

In answer, the driver slammed in the gears. The cab leaped strickenly and swayed drunkenly around the corner. Joe looked back to see the tall man gesturing furiously at another taxi. Then his arm straightened. Joe saw the hand kick upward. Before he heard the gun's roar, he felt the leaden spang of the bullet as it buried itself in the back of the cab.

The driver cursed. "And I left Chicago for this!" He took another curve on screaming rubber; the speedometer climbed.

INSPECTOR Collie was waiting with the sleepy-eyed and angry Dr. Lansing when Joe prodded the big man through the office door.

"Put her in that chair," he ordered. "Take off the gag." He watched the man do as directed, then gestured him toward the far corner.

Ann stared at him, at the room and its other occupants in blank uncertainty. No sign of recognition penetrated the vacant glaze of her eyes. Her lips moved soundlessly.

Some of Dr. Lansing's frown left his face. He moved to her and bent over. He lifted the lids of her eyes. She pulled away and blinked. Her throat moved, but still she did not speak.

"This girl is thoroughly hypnotized!" he said suddenly. "I can't recall having seen such a total inertia of—"

"Save what you can't remember!" Joe snapped. "Can you crack the hypnosis?"

"Why, certainly! Unless, of course, some drugs have been employed." Lansing turned to Ann and took her hand. Child-like, she followed him into an inner office. Joe turned to the big man.

"What's your name?"

"Hoffman," the man said thickly.

"All right, Hoffman: what's Salzo's game?"

The man blinked stupidly. "He reads people's minds."

"Hell!" Joe glared. The man merely blinked back; there was no secrecy in his eyes, only fear and confusion.

"What was your job with him?"

"Keeping people away from the girls—girl," he corrected hastily.

"So there have been other girls? And what happened to them?"

"They—went away I guess," he re-

sponded dully, his face expressionless.

Joe shook his head wearily. "He doesn't know anything," Collie said irritably. The door of the inner office opened and Lansing stuck his head out: "She's ready now."

Then Ann appeared. Where once she had walked with dream-like grace, now she seemed to stumble, to feel her way from wall to chair to table. The bright light-globe seemed to blind her eyes; she blinked. Then her vision focused for the first time squarely. She looked at Joe. For a full ten seconds she did not move or speak. Then her throat corded with a swallow. "Joe!" she cried.

"Ann!" He caught her in the center of the room. He kissed her, unmindful of Collie, Hoffman, and Lansing. Then he held her away and looked at her in the hungry stare of relief. Then, as abruptly he released her and turned to Lansing. "Can she remember what she did when she was hypnotized?"

"She may. Not everything of course."

He nodded. "Ann—now listen carefully, Ann, and try to remember—Golden Bowl! Slips of paper! Do you remember?"

"Golden Bowl. . . Slips of paper. . ." Then she trembled visibly as some fragment of nightmare raked back through her mind. "The Golden Bowl. . . The bottles! Him! His voice! Oh, God. . . I. . . I can't forget!"

"What about the bottles, Ann? What bottles?"

"The black-colored champagne bottles on the tables! That's where I leave the envelopes! Where I get the other slips that go in the side of the bowl!"

"Oh," Joe murmured. His mind began to click. He recalled the bottle of champagne on his table—a bottle he had not ordered! And then his mind went further back, to the bill he'd handed the waiter; and to the Reserved sign the waiter had taken from the table. "So I got a table

that was set for one of Salzo's boys! And that's why I got the fifty grand! And you're supposed to leave envelopes at each table that have a black-colored champagne bottle?"

"I slip it in the pocket. The pocket of whoever has the bottle before him. Salzo taught me how. He. . . Oh, all those times in New York when—I couldn't break away! Every night I'd go back—"

"And there's a pocket inside the bowl for the questions you get at those tables?"



SHE nodded. "I don't put them with the others. . . I mean, I didn't!" She covered her eyes and trembled again. "I—I'm never going back! I can't ever see him again! He'll kill me! I know! Every night he'd try me out again in my room! Trying to see if I was waking up yet! I knew that's what he was doing! I knew if I ever really woke, he—he'd do something! That was the horrible part! Just like a little corner of me knew, but the door wouldn't open to let the light into the rest of my head! It was. . . was a nightmare!"

Joe swallowed. His eyes shifted to Collie's. The Inspector suddenly realized Joe's plan, even before Joe spoke. His eyes shifted uncomfortably away and he began to work with his watch chain. Joe swallowed again, but no word came.

"Maybe—maybe we won't have to," he said distantly. He moved to the telephone and got the central telephone office.

"I want to know the location of the Aberdeen and Smith Co., Industrial Architects, in New York," he said slowly. He waited.

"The Shaler Building—no—that's all." He hung up. Again he looked at Ann. The tension of the room had penetrated to her. She blinked.

"What is it, Joe?"

"Listen," Collie started bluntly. "May-

be we can handle it some other way. If we got another girl who looks like Ann—"

He stopped, realizing the hopelessness of working the fraud on Salzo. Again he began to fiddle with his watch-chain. Joe looked at his own watch. Then suddenly he moved to Lansing's desk and snapped on the small radio. He twirled the dial. At last he found what he wanted.

There was a summary of the war-bulletins. There was news from Washington. There was local news. Then the announcer's voice tightened:

"A bulletin just received! From Marville! At dawn this morning the East locks of the Marville River Dam were the scene of a violent explosion. Ten minutes later the thirty-mile lake-head roared down into the valley. It is still too early to offer any estimate of damage or loss of life. It is known positively, that the Marville power-plant is inundated; likewise the Valley Steel and Rolling . . ."

Joe's wrist moved. The voice ended abruptly. He looked at Collie. "There's another order from the Golden Bowl," he said emptily. "Salzo said there would have to be rain in the East fields before dawn." He paused and gestured. "East fields—East locks—All before dawn."

Collie only nodded. Joe looked at him and then he looked at Ann. He took a deep breath and faced her squarely.

"Honey, I—I'm sorry, but—but you've got to go back! You've got to give one more show. I'll tell you why and what to do."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sit Tight—and Die!

TWO o'clock in the Palace Room. Every plan was made, as well as plans can be that rest on the sands of danger. From the door behind the bandstand, the harpist came. He seated himself and the shrill singing chord raked

the room. The audience stilled. From the velvet-curtained door, the slender figure of Ann appeared. From his table in a distant corner, Joe watched.

She moved in the same dreamy haze, her steps slow and rhythmic. She wore the pure white dress, and she carried the Golden Bowl. To the center of the cleared floor she moved, then stopped.

Salzo entered and walked with stately stride to his place beside her. The harpist ended. A hush descended from the ceiling. Joe's eyes played about him. At a table to his left he recognized one of Collie's detectives, seated with his wife. The man nodded imperceptibly. At another table, farther away, was another detective, seated with a police stenographer. In all, eight detectives were scattered through the room, each innocently drinking and dining with a companion.

Salzo started to speak in his spaced, poetic tone. Joe's eyes kept roaming on. At a table down the room he noted one of the tip-off black champagne bottles; it sat before a small, sharp-nosed man. Across the room, Joe could see two more of the bottles on other tables.

Joe lit a cigarette to calm his taut nerves. His eyes returned to Ann. She was moving among the tables, now; gathering in the question-blanks. He watched her as she stopped at the first champagne table. His trained eyes, now alert, saw the white envelope slip from the loose sleeve of her dress and vanish into the man's pocket. Again Joe breathed deeply. Ann was making it good . . .

He looked a last time at his own question blank. There he had plainly printed his question:

Where are Emanuel Carvell's one hundred thousand dollars?

J. D.

Ann stopped at his table. As he folded the slip, their eyes met one moment. Then her cool fingers touched his.

"Good-luck, honey . . ." His lips formed the silent words. She almost smiled, then moved on. At last she returned to Salzo. He bowed once more, then reached into the bowl.

Just as Salzo started to speak, Joe's table moved slightly. He turned.

"I have a gun under the table," spoke a quiet voice. "Sit very still. Leave your hands where they are." The speaker was the man with the grey face and the adhesive-plastered nose. He had slipped into the chair beside Joe. His slate-grey eyes

dol—" Salzo stopped; or rather, his voice simply broke into a soundless silence. For a long moment he stared at the note. Then he turned on Ann. Joe watched the lips move in a furious question. His body tensed. Sweat began to pour down his arms. He saw Ann's cheeks pale. Her head shook stubbornly.

Out of the confused stop, the voices of the audience began to rise—sensing the unusual, the unplanned! Salzo was stalled!

The rising wave of noise jerked Salzo

Francis K. Allan, the versatile author of the story you are now reading, has a bang-up detective yarn—"Photo Finish"—in our companion magazine DETECTIVE TALES. Don't miss it!

were hard and cold on Joe's face, and his right hand was under the table.



AT LAST Joe sighed, emptyly. Distantly he heard the voice of Salzo murmuring. Silently he cursed himself for his one mistake! He'd forgotten completely the grey man!

"When the show is over," the man spoke in an undertone, "wait until the crowd leaves. Don't move until I order you."

"I know—then we'll take a little walk, you and me . . ." His eyes left the grey man. They played anxiously toward the nearest detective. The man was carefully watching the table where sat a black champagne bottle.

"Don't try to signal," the grey man ordered bluntly.

"My next question comes from J.D." The words of Salzo broke sharply into Joe's consciousness. Instinctively he looked at the Satanic-faced mystic. There was the slightest frown playing over the triangular face. "I am asked, Where is Emanuel Carvell's hundred thousand

to attention. He faced the room stiffly.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I regret that I—I must interrupt the program for the present. I—I am not well." Then he turned. But he did not leave the room alone. His long fingers grasped Ann's elbows. He forced her to precede him to the velvet curtains.

Joe started to rise. The hard jab of a gun knocked the breath from his stomach.

"I told you!" the grey man snarled. "Don't move again!"

In futile silence Joe watched the velvet curtain close on Ann and Salzo.

About the room, tables began to empty. Voices mingled in sharp curious questions. The tables where sat the black bottles emptied. Immediately the detectives rose and quietly followed, leaving their companions. Everything was moving smoothly—

Everything but the most important and dangerous thing of all! Salzo was getting away! And he had Ann!

"Now—get up slowly," ordered the grey man. "Very slowly."

Joe took a last look at the velvet curtains. And he thought again: I sent her back here—it was my plan! When she

dies, it's still my plan—because I didn't think . . .

THEN slowly his lungs filled. His muscles tightened. He began to rise. Slowly. Slowly until his knees touched the edge of the table. Then he kicked and leaped. In the same instant the gun exploded. Even as he plunged at the grey man, the hot needle of fire seared through his shoulder and brought its warm flow of blood. Then the same shoulder drove home into the thin body. The man grunted explosively. A chair crashed and splintered. Glass shattered.

Through the room the crescendo of frightened cries welled up. Feet stumbled and fought toward safety. The fist of Joe's good arm fell in a sledge-like blow upon the fury-stained grey face. The man choked sobbingly, still his hand kept clawing and fighting to free the gun.

Joe couldn't whip him. He realized it sharply, even as the back of his brain kept screaming Time! Time is passing! You can't wait here to be killed!

His fist fell once more—then he jerked away and began to run for the velvet door. He heard the scramble of the man's feet behind him. Then the gun roared again. A slug sang over Joe's head. Again the gun roared. This time the slug did not sing. It slammed into Joe's back—he stumbled. A line of shimmering blackness began to weave before his eyes.

He fell sprawling on his face as he plunged into the hall. Behind him pounded the steps. He dragged himself up and raced the endless distance to the stairs. Up he began to climb, fighting the mounting weakness and the spreading blindness in his eyes.

He fell past the second floor hall and struggled on toward the third floor. The pounding steps were closer now.

As he saw, vaguely, the fourth floor swim up before him, his hand dragged at his gun. His knees began to buckle as

he reeled toward the door of Ann's room. Just then the door opened and Ann appeared abruptly. Behind her was the figure of Salzo, holding her as a shield.

A gun spat out its red tongue. Joe knew, dimly, that the bullet had hit him. He knew it was over. He couldn't fire; he would hit Ann. He couldn't see clearly.

His buckling knees went out beneath him. He sat down. He began to twist and fall, helplessly. From far away he heard Ann screaming.

On the foggy rim of his vision, the grey man appeared. Joe saw his arm lift. He saw the gun shining there. He heard it roar.

He waited for the bullet and the pain. It never came. Nothing came at all for a long moment. Then a cry strangled in the hall. Ann? His fear gave him a last strength. He looked. Then he knew he was blind, that he was in the insane realm just before death.

For Ann was still standing. She was standing alone.

And Salzo lay still on the floor.

Slowly Joe slumped down.



ON THE morning of the fourth day, the doctors let Collie see him. The Inspector stopped at the side of the hospital bed and grinned.

"Hello, sieve," he greeted. "I've brought you some recent papers." He laid a bundle of newspapers on a chair and selected one. He spread it to the first page and held it before Joe's eyes. Joe blinked, then the headline took meaning in his vision:

MASTER-SPY TRAPPED AT LOCAL HOTEL!

Salzo, Alleged Mystic, Shot! Police Snare Mob!

Joe read the date-line. The paper was three days old. Collie grinned and laid it away. He held up another paper.

NATION-WIDE SABOTAGE RING
SHATTERED!

Dying Spy Talks! Reveals Extent of
Crimes!

The paper was two days old. Collie laid it aside, searched through the others on the chair, then held another sheet before Joe's eyes. It was a feature-story, dated the day before:

As dawn turned to crimson morning, and the weary steps of the police-guard echoed in the hospital corridor, Adrian Salzo, alias Fritz Werzell, answered his last questions. At eight o'clock he was dead. Thus ended a career that, for sheer ruthlessness and cunning, has no equal in the annals of espionage. The damage and death that this man willed and ordered cannot be measured. For his activities defy total retracing.

Salzo himself, in his last hours, revealed something of his history. Born fifty years ago in Essen, son of a doctor, he attended the schools of Germany, and was at one time an exchange scholar in this country. At the age of twenty-six, he abandoned his profession of medicine, and undertook the study of abnormal-psychology and hypnosis. The next years he spent in obscure poverty. It was in the social and military revolution of the early 30's in Germany that Salzo, then known as Fritz Werzell, came into prominence as an international spy. He rose rapidly. Four years ago he was chosen for his greatest mission, a tour of the United States. Calling upon his particular talents, plus a flare for the dramatic, he assumed the role of Adrian Salzo, famed European Mystic. As such he came and stayed and worked. For four years. Until he died.

In these years he moved the length and breadth of this country, always as the soft-tongued Mystic. He defied detection, so divorced was he from the actual commission of the crimes he ordered. For he maintained no personal contact with those who executed his orders. No evidence existed to enmesh him in the bonds of the law. This, together with the open and public manner of his operations, contrived to leave him untouched.

Salzo ordered the destruction of docks, of power-plants, or buildings housing institutions of defense. He ordered murder sometimes for his personal profit. He planned with methodical coolness. He used no assistant too long.

And yet, his ultimate collapse and death has its cause in the cornerstone of his selfish philosophy. He might have escaped had he not been seized with the lust for personal gain. Thus it was that he devised the death of Emanuel Carvell; from Carvell he stole one hundred thousand dollars. He was shot as he tried to flee from the Jarley Hotel,

with the hundred thousand dollars in his pocket. Salzo could not be satisfied! He wanted more power; more money! His greed was his destruction.

The ultimate credit for the cracking of this nation-wide network must go to a young newspaper-reporter of New York, Joseph Danton. It was Danton who, six days ago, put the first slender clues together and began to slowly unravel the riddle of the Golden Bowl. On that day, Danton's fiancée vanished, leaving but the torn menu of the Golden Bowl Dinner. That same day an old-time racketeer, Lefty Lusine, was killed in the explosion of New York's Shaler Building. At his death, Lusine was carrying a Golden Bowl menu page. Lusine, we now know, had dynamited the Shaler Building on Salzo's orders, thus destroying the offices of Aberdeen and Smith, Industrial Architects who were then on the eve of completing plans for the huge tank-assembly to have been erected in New Jersey. And it was this same Joseph Danton who trailed his fiancée and Salzo from New York into the Jarley Hotel. It was Danton—

Joe looked up at Collie and grinned vaguely.

"That's a hell of a lot of Danton's in there," he cracked weakly.

"Yeah." Collie tossed the paper aside. "I'm also instructed to offer you the pick of three jobs," he said. "Cobb wants you back on the paper; at a raise."

"Damn," Joe mused. "And what else?"

"Frank Tolle says he can use you on the Federal pay-roll. Tolle was the grey-haired man who figured you for the wrong team. He's been trying to tie up the Salzo outfit for eighteen months."

"Then . . . then you mean, he . . . Then . . . That's why he didn't shoot me up there in that hall . . ." Joe stammered.

"That's why. It was just then he got the real angle. He's sorry as hell Joe. About shooting you full downstairs there."

"And that other job?" Joe asked blankly.

"Matrimony. Ann wonders if you'd like to get married . . ."

"Tell her," Joe grinned, "I think I'll take it."

THE KILLER WAITS

By RUSSELL GRAY

Police Captain Sam Cameron pursued his dream of a woman who had died twenty years ago—to find the patient killer waiting—ready to destroy her once more!



She started to get out, but Hal grabbed her...

THE FACE was always there, in every one of the subway cars in New York City. The face out of the past—the dead face he had known so well. “Meet Miss Subway,” the placard read. And under those words was the photo of Eileen Burgess, as young and beautiful as he remembered her.

Except that Eileen Burgess was dead,

eighteen years now. And the name of the girl of that photo, the Miss Subway for this month, was Amy Burns.

"Gorgeous Amy Burns is a dress model," said the placard. "Her home—Forest Hills, Queens. Her hobbies—John Steinbeck's novels, Gary Cooper's pictures, the United States Army Signal Corp. Her ambition—to be a dress designer."

Eileen Burgess' daughter might have looked like that. But he knew her daughter—at least, he saw her pictures constantly in the society pages. She was Annette Burgess, now the socialite Mrs. Spencer Wilcox, dark-haired and black-eyed like the girl in the photo, but not nearly as beautiful.

It was strange, though, how much this Amy Burns looked the way Eileen Burgess looked twenty years ago. It was more than strange. It was—frightening.



WHEN she reached the two dark, empty blocks between the subway station and her home, Amy Burns was sure that she was being followed. She had worked late. It was close to midnight, and houses and lights were sparse in this section of Forest Hills.

She was almost running now, her sharp heels clicking like pistol shots on the sidewalk. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that he was scarcely a hundred feet behind her—a tall man huddled in his overcoat with his hat hiding his face.

He had been sitting opposite her in the subway, staring at her with burning eyes from under the brim of his hat. She was used to being stared at, especially since her photos had appeared in the trains. Sometimes men had spoken to her, getting fresh, but this was the first time she had been followed.

Amy Burns rounded the corner. For thirty breathless seconds he was out of

sight, though his footsteps, heavy and urgent, filled the night. Then he was there again, closer behind her, taking long loping strides. He would be up to her before she went another block. And if she ran, he would run also, so there could be no shaking him off that way.

Suddenly there was a second man in front of her. He had stepped out of a coupe; his head was dipped away from her as he casually lit a cigaret. She could not see his face, but she could see the great width of his shoulders and the deepness of his chest. He wore no hat; his hair was grey.

She did not know him, but there was something kindly about the grey hair, and he had the powerful build of a protector. She went up to him.

"A man is following me!" she gasped. "Would you please see me home? It's only a couple of blocks."

He straightened up. She was tall for a woman, but her eyes were below the level of his shoulder.

"That man?" he said. "Maybe he has a gun in his pocket."

She glanced back. Her pursuer had slowed down, but he was still coming with his head forward, and his hands were sunk deep in his coat pockets.

"A gun?" she muttered. "No. Why would he—"

The grey-haired man touched her arm. "Get in the car. I don't like to take chances. I'll drive you home."

He opened the door for her and she got in. Her pursuer was moving very slowly now, practically sauntering. Probably he would simply walk past, pretending that he had merely been going in the same direction.

The big man squeezed his bulk behind the wheel and settled beside her. The glow of the dashboard light touched his face, and for the first time she really saw him. The sight was like a physical shock. The face was the ugliest she had ever seen—

hideous. It was loose, pasty flesh in which the features were bunched up in the center, as if squeezed together by a giant hand.

Instinctively she cowered away from him. But his voice, when he spoke, was gentle. "Haven't I seen you somewhere?" he asked.

Everybody who rode the subways had seen her photo. But there was no time for explanation. Why didn't he start the car? He was taking an eternity to press the starter.

She glanced past his immense shoulders to the sidewalk. Her pursuer was no longer there. Where could he have disappeared to?

The door on her right opened. She twisted her head and uttered a shrill cry. The man who had followed her was standing there, peering down at her with his burning eyes.

"Hello, Hal," the ugly man said.

"Hello," the other replied. "You going my way?"

Amy stared from one to the other. "You know him?" she asked the ugly man.

He laughed. "Hal is a friend of mine. Funny, your being scared of him—come in, Hal. I'll drop you off."

Amy said anxiously: "I'll walk, if you don't mind."

She started to get out, but Hal grabbed her, pushed her back into the car. "There is plenty of room for three," he growled softly.

Panic gripped her. She was squeezed in between Hal and the huge grey-haired man, and the car was rolling. She lunged past Hal, clawing at the door.

"Let me out! How dare you—"

Hal's hand came out of his pocket. "Sit still, sister," he said softly. "Or this will make you still forever."

A big black pistol rested nonchalantly on Hal's knee. Amy stared down at it in horror. Against her left side she could

feel the ugly man's big body shake with silent laughter.



ON CLEAR afternoons Spencer Wilcox took his brace of prize cocker spaniels walking along Madison Avenue. He was a little, dandified man with a beaked nose and no chin.

Today the sight of so many uniformed men strolling by made him particularly lonely. He was the scion of a first family of New York, rich in his own right, but nobody wanted him—not his wife, not even the Army. The doctors had turned him down. Something wrong with his insides.

Spencer Wilcox hadn't particularly wanted to marry Annette Burgess. His parents had insisted, because the Burgess blood was as good as the Wilcox, and as usual he had taken the line of least resistance. It was only after the ceremony that he learned that Annette was interested chiefly in his money. She hadn't much heart and less soul.

He supposed it had happened during those years of her childhood spent God knows where. When she had come back to claim the Burgess fortune, she had been eighteen. She had had a tough time of it before that. And the fortune had been whittled down considerably by the depression. Which was the reason, Spencer knew now, that she had married him.

He turned off Madison Avenue, dawdling as the prize spaniels paused at every pole like any mongrel. A taxi pulled up in front of his house halfway up the block, and Jasper Kipper got out. Spencer did not have to see Kipper's face to recognize him. Kipper's enormous bulk and shaggy grey hair could be recognized at a far greater distance.

A flush of jealous anger swept over Spencer. Annette spent more time with Kipper than with himself, her husband.

And what was Kipper besides being the ugliest man in the world? A lawyer who had stopped practicing years ago. Rumor had it that he had quit the law one step ahead of disbarment. Yet he seemed to have plenty of money available.

As Spencer Wilcox mounted the steps of his house, dragging the dogs after him, he simpered foolishly. Imagine being jealous of a man old enough to be Annette's father and with a face that could frighten children. No, Annette wouldn't

but that didn't mean that his home should belong to Miss Morton. Officially she received a lavish salary as housekeeper. Actually she ran the household like an ancient evil queen.

Spencer's hand reached for the door-knob. But he didn't turn it.

Jasper Kipper's voice had risen suddenly. He was saying: "—but *murder!*"

"What other ideas have you got?" Annette's voice replied.

Kipper said: "Miss Morton, you ought

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go for a man like that. She wanted money, and she had it through being Mrs. Spencer Wilcox, Third.

Smythe, the butler, took Spencer's coat and gloves and the dogs' leashes.

"Mr. Kipper is in the library with Mrs. Wilcox," Smythe reported. "Mrs. Wilcox said that they were not to be disturbed."

"Meaning me, I suppose?" Spencer said bitterly.

Rage flared in him. He was sick and tired of Annette ordering him around in his own home. He'd go anywhere in it he damn well pleased.

The library door was shut. As he neared it, he heard their voices, whispering urgently. Miss Morton was in there with them.

HE HATED the cadaverous looking spinster. In jest he often told his drinking companions that he lived in a haunted house—haunted by a spook called Miss Morton. It was true that Annette owed Miss Morton a debt of gratitude for having brought her back;

to know. Is there anything she has—"

"I told you," Miss Morton said irritably. "Those things. That mark on her face."

"You bungling fool!" Annette exploded. "You're both too squeamish. Now you'll have to kill anyway."

"I don't like it," Kipper complained. "Murder's the one thing—"

He broke off as the door swung open.

Spencer's hand was sweating on the doorknob, but he forced himself to push the door all the way in. Then he was in the room, and the three of them were gawking at him—Jasper Kipper, immense and hideous; Miss Morton, as thin as a living skeleton; Annette, sleek and dark-eyed.

"Spencer, you were listening!" Annette cried.

Softly Spencer closed the door. He was no longer a meek little man kicked around by his wife and his housekeeper. He had them now where he wanted them.

"Were you planning a murder?" he said mockingly. "Go right ahead. Don't

mind me. You never do." He smiled.

Annette's arms crossed on her agitated bosom. Her black eyes were the size of pinheads.

"Don't be an idiot," she said. "We were discussing a play we saw on Broadway."

"Were you?" Spencer felt fine. It was wonderful to feel such a sense of power.

Jasper Kipper's bulk was drifting toward him. It came as vast and indomitable as a tank. Looking up at that hideous face, Spencer was suddenly afraid.

"So you heard us," Kipper said. "Now isn't that too bad?"

And silent laughter shook his big frame like jelly. A monstrous hand reached out.

Spencer Wilcox opened his mouth to scream.



THE UNIFORM of the slim young soldier bore the insignia of a corporal in the Signal Corps. He was speaking in urgent tones to the desk sergeant when police captain Sam Cameron returned from lunch. Cameron heard a name uttered and swung toward the desk.

"Did you say Amy Burns?" he asked the corporal.

"That's right. I'm afraid she's missing and—" He gripped Cameron's arm. "You didn't get word that anything's happened to her?"

"No," Cameron said. "I happen to be interested in her. Come on into my office."

As Cameron strode down the hall, he gave an impression of being considerably younger than he was. His body was straight and lean, without an ounce of surplus fat; his straw hair was as disheveled as a boy's. Only his blue eyes showed a hint of a tragedy which the years had not healed.

In the captain's office, the corporal blurted: "Maybe I'm being foolish, but

I don't like it. Amy worked late last night and never got home."

"Does she live with her parents?"

"She's an orphan. She shares an apartment here in Forest Hills with two other girls."

"Where do you fit in?" Cameron asked.

"I'm Richard Payne," the corporal told him. "I'm on furlough. Amy's been looking forward to spending the day with me. A week ago she made arrangements to get off from work. That's why nobody else missed her. But I've been in New York three hours already, and I have only five hours left."

"Maybe you got your signals crossed," Cameron suggested. "She might be waiting for you somewhere else."

Payne shook his head. "It was definite in our letters I was to call for her at her apartment. She wouldn't disappoint me. She—well, we're engaged, and this may be the last time we'll see each other before I'm sent abroad."

The boy put both hands flat on the desk. His youthful face was drawn. "There is another thing. Some of her friends sent her picture in for that Miss Subway contest. You know, the prettiest commuter is chosen each month and her photo is plastered all over the subway. Well, Amy's been annoyed by fresh guys since then. Nothing much—at least she wrote it was not. But I don't know. She should have been there to meet me."

Cameron reached into a drawer and pulled out a large photograph. His face was impassive as he slid it across the desk.

Payne scarcely glanced at the photo. "Yes, that's Amy all right. How'd you happen to get her picture?"

"Are you sure that's Amy Burns?" Cameron's voice was very low.

This time Payne studied the photo. "I'd stake my life that's Amy. There couldn't be—" Payne dipped his head; his eyes crinkled with bewilderment. "What is this? There's an inscription on here. It

says: *'To Sam—the best friend I ever had.'* And it's signed: *'Eileen Burgess.'* And the date is 1923."

Cameron reached for a cigar. He had faced armed gunmen with a steady hand, but now his hand shook.

"I'm Sam," Cameron said. "That photo of herself was given to me by Eileen Burgess twenty years ago. She was married by that time. She passed up a police sergeant for George Burgess, who was in her social class and very rich, but Eileen and I remained friends."

"You were the police sergeant?"

"Yes," Cameron said.

"But I tell you, this is a picture of Amy Burns."

Cameron went on as if he were alone in the room. "Eighteen years ago Eileen Burgess and her husband and their infant daughter Annette and the child's nurse went on a motor trip upstate. Their car was found smashed up against a tree in a sparsely settled valley. There were two dead bodies in the wreckage—Eileen and George Burgess. The child and the nurse were gone."

"Then you think Amy is the daughter?" Payne asked.

"The daughter was eventually found," Cameron said. "She is now Mrs. Spencer Wilcox."

"Then what are you driving at?" Payne demanded in annoyance. "Look, a girl named Amy Burns is missing. That's all I care about. I want the police to help me find her!"

Cameron put the photo away, carefully restoring it to its tissue paper cover. "Did Amy Burns have a birth mark on her face?"

"Birth mark? Well, there's a little one right in the corner of her mouth. Hardly more than a dot." He stared at Cameron. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm not sure," Cameron said. "Let's have a look at her apartment. Maybe that'll tell us something."

THEY drove there in the captain's car. Cameron got the pass key from the superintendent, but he didn't need it. The door was unlocked, and in the living room a woman was down on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor.

She did not rise as they entered. She threw one quick look at them over a boney shoulder, then pushed back her hair with a matchstick forearm and resumed scrubbing.

Cameron stood over her. "How did you get in here?"

"I clean up for the girls twice a week," the thin woman muttered. "They gave me a key."

"Have you seen Miss Burns?"

The woman scowled down at a spot on the floor. "I don't see them girls for months at a time. They work during the day. My money is sent to me."

Payne had entered one of the bedrooms. He was looking glumly at the disorder of unmade bed and drawers pulled out.

Cameron followed him, standing just inside the doorway so that he could watch the living room through the short foyer.

"Is this her room?"

"Yes," Payne said. "I never saw it so messy. Now that we're here, what do you think you'll find?"

"Somebody seems to have beaten us to it. This room has been searched."

Cameron returned to the living room. The cleaning woman had worked her way nearer to the hall door. She saw Cameron's feet approach her and stop, but she did not raise her head.

"Remember me?" Cameron said.

The woman became very still, remaining on all fours like some long and emaciated animal. "I know lots of cops. In my day I cleaned hundreds of houses."

"You weren't cleaning then," Cameron said. "You were a child's nurse for a rich family. I used to come around evenings to visit the Burgesses, and you used to bring little Annette in to kiss me good-

night. Annette called me Uncle Sam."

She looked up now, and her eyes were dull hollows in her gaunt face. "You got me mixed up with somebody else. I was never no nursemaid."

Cameron shook his head. "You're nearly twenty years older, Miss Morton, but you haven't put on any weight."

She picked up a rag and started to rise to her feet. When she was erect, the rag fell away and there was a squat little automatic in her hand.

Cameron moved forward, knowing in that split-second that he couldn't reach her in time. Knowing, too, that she would shoot, for her skeleton face was mad with fear.

PAYNE came out of nowhere. He seemed to skim a foot over the ground, and his shoulder struck the woman just above the knees. She fell heavily on her side. Then Cameron was on her, wrenching the pistol out of her skinny fingers.

"Thanks, Corporal," Cameron said.

Miss Morton huddled on the floor, gasping raggedly, watching Cameron like a trapped animal. He had never before seen such naked fear.

"What did you find here?" he snapped.

She dug yellow teeth into her lower lip and was silent.

"Here's a bag," Payne said.

It was standing near the door, a small, cheap, paper bag, the kind a cleaning woman would bring for her change of clothing. Payne swung it onto a table and opened it.

"Funny," he said in bewilderment. "It's filled with children's clothing. And here's a ring and—Hey, this is Amy's locket!"

Cameron strode to Payne's side and took the locket from his hand. His mouth became a thin line.

"You're sure this is Amy's?"

"Positive," Payne said. "She never wore it because the chain was too small,

but she thought the world of it. It's one of the few things she has left from her childhood. See, there are her initials—A.B. Amy*Burns."

"Not Amy Burns," Cameron said quietly. "Annette Burgess."

Payne stared at him. "What the hell is this? Things have been happening too fast for me. You said Annette Burgess is married and—"

"I know I said that," Cameron cut in. "But I also know that I gave this locket to Annette Burgess on her second birthday." He swung toward Miss Morton. "Where is she?"

The gaunt woman lay on the floor whimpering.

Cameron bent over her and gripped her arm savagely. "There's only one reason why you're so crazy with fear that you'd try to shoot a police officer. Because you know that you're headed for the electric chair. Because you're up to your neck in murder."

Miss Morton shrieked then—a single strident sound that crumbled.

Payne's white face bobbed close to Cameron's. "You—you think Amy's dead?"

"I don't know," Cameron said miserably. "There's a chance that they held off until Miss Morton got the locket."

"Then make her talk!" Payne cried. "You cops have ways."

"There's no time. Call the police and stay here with her until they come."

"I'm going with you," Payne said.

Cameron turned at the door. "I know how you feel. But somebody has to watch this woman until the police come for her. And this is my job, just as fighting is yours."

THE BUTLER was not impressed by Sam Cameron's uniform. He wasn't the same as the one who had admitted him when he had called on Annette shortly after her marriage to Spencer Wilcox. In fact, he didn't look

like a butler at all. His shoulders slouched. His eyes were not impersonal.

"Mrs. Wilcox," he declared stiffly, "is not at home."

"Not in the house, or not at home to see a cop?" Cameron asked.

The butler gave him a scowl. "You heard me," he growled.

Cameron moved behind his left shoulder. The shoulder caught the butler's chin and knocked him aside, and Cameron found himself in a foyer the size of a barn. The butler was coming up fast behind him, one hand thrust inside the coat.

Cameron knew the gesture. "So?" he said softly. "You carry a gun?"

The butler's hand fell to his side in confusion. He said haughtily: "I do not know what you mean, sir. You have no right bursting in here."

Cameron went through the wide arched door on his left. Annette Wilcox was hurrying toward him. She stopped dead at the sight of him. A shadow flitted across her rather pretty face and then was gone. She smiled and thrust out a hand.

"Why, Sam, this is a surprise. You haven't come to see me in a year— Hal, you may leave us."

The butler bowed awkwardly and vanished. Cameron moved his back against a wall.

"You're getting to look more like your mother every day," he said.

She looked sharply at him; then the smile returned, rapidly, stiffly. "You were fond of mother, weren't you?"

"Very fond. And of you too, when you were a tot." He stepped close to her. "That birthmark at the corner of your mouth—it's as charming now as ever."

"You think so?" She fingered the mark. "I can't make up my mind whether or not to get rid of it with violet ray treatments."

"There's an easier way. Like this."

His handkerchief was in his hand. He leaned toward her. She shrieked.

"That needn't worry you," he said, grinning. "I think it's too good a job for just a handkerchief to rub it off. But it'll come off at headquarters."

She kept backing away from him, her dark eyes bulging.

"You're crazy, Sam! Why are you looking at me like that?"

He followed her relentlessly. "Where's Annette Burgess?"

"I'm Annette Burgess. Have you lost your mind?"

She had backed as far as she could go. He caught her arm.

"If she's still alive," he said, "you had to have her taken somewhere. Maybe this house. Why else would you fire your regular butler and have a mug take his place? You and I are going to have a look."

Clinging to her wrist, he led her out of the drawing room. She went with him docilely, although her flesh under his palm was as cold as death.

THE MUG named Hal was in the big kitchen, seated at a table and drinking coffee. He raised his brows when they entered, then lifted the cup to his mouth and drank deeply.

"Where's the pantry?" Cameron asked.

He felt a shudder go through her then, and he knew he had hit on it. A pantry would be the biggest storage space in a place like this.

She recovered almost at once and nodded toward a door. Cameron took her with him. The door was locked.

"Where's the key?"

"The housekeeper has it?" she said.

"What about the cook?"

"She left this afternoon."

Cameron grunted. "Cook and butler gotten rid of in a hurry. And a pantry—that's used all the time—locked."

"I am the butler," Hal asserted.

"Sure. And you don't stand up when your mistress comes into the kitchen."

Cameron took out his gun. "Well, there's one way of opening a locked door."

With a stifled cry, she tried to yank away from his grip, but he held her fiercely and put the gun muzzle against the lock.

Hal put down his coffee cup and rose languidly to his feet. He scratched his face and then his shoulder. Miraculously a gun appeared in his hand.

Cameron's wrist twisted. His gun roared. A look of astonishment passed over Hal's face. Slowly he dropped back into the chair from which he had risen. His gun clattered to the floor. His head dropped; his chin hit the table edge—he rolled off the chair and lay motionless on the floor.

"You killed him!" Annette shrielled.

His gun belched lead again, this time against the lock, shattering it. He kicked the door in.

"No!" she moaned. "Don't make me go in there! I couldn't stand it!"

Cameron's heart was empty as he pulled the switch near the door. Light flooded the pantry, but he saw only rows of shelves bearing groceries. He dragged the limp woman in with him.

"Where?" he demanded.

She did not answer. She was carefully looking at the shelves, away from the broom closet. He pulled her over there and jerked open the narrow broom closet door.

Annette's shrill shriek filled the pantry as a dead man tumbled out and fell at their feet.

"Hal did it!" she whimpered. "I knew nothing about it! You can't prove—"

He thrust her against the farther wall, so that his body blocked her from escape, and bent over the dead man. It was Spencer Wilcox, her husband. The marks of fingers were livid on the throat—fingers so powerful that they had broken the neck as they strangled.

"He was killed here in the house some

time today," Cameron muttered. "You and your pals couldn't get the body out in daylight. You got rid of the servants and stuck the body here, waiting for tonight."

He stood up, his hands claws, his eyes bleak. "Where's Annette?"

But she couldn't answer even if she wanted to. She was an unconscious heap in the corner of the pantry.



AMY BURNS heard the door open and then light came on. It was only then that she realized that it was night again, that a night and a day had passed. Lying there bound and gagged under the bed, sight was limited to an eternal grayness.

Turning her cheek against the dusty floor, she saw the enormous feet approach. Then sheer nightmare, which she had dreaded more than anything else—the hideous, bloated face with the bunched up features peering at her under the bed. Hairy paws reached under and dragged her out.

This is it, Amy Burns thought. The horror is only beginning now. Or ending, along with everything else, forever.

Jasper Kipper lifted her as if she were a baby and carried her across the bedroom. She saw the trunk then, yawning open and empty. He placed her in it.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, "but what could I do? It would have been easier to kill you before—but we had to be sure about the locket—"

The hairy paws reached down, touching her neck. She screamed soundlessly.

"You're wrong," another voice said in the room.

Kipper jerked himself erect and turned toward the door.

She fought her head up to the edge of the trunk, and she saw the newcomer—a lean, middle-aged man in the uniform of a police officer.

"It had to be you, Kipper," Cameron said. "Somebody strong enough to break Wilcox' neck without effort. Somebody who went far back to the time when Annette was a baby."

Kipper kept his arms dangling ape-like at his sides. Amy knew that he had a gun in his pocket.

Cameron was saying, "You're a patient man, Kipper. You could wait many years to get your hands on the Burgess fortune. Miss Morton was to dispose of the child, after the accident had killed its parents. She didn't kill it. She couldn't stomach murder. She abandoned it, but made a mistake. She forgot to remove the locket.

"You waited until the child would be old enough so that you could ring in somebody mature, someone who would play ball with you. It wasn't hard. The nurse herself brought her back. That counted most. And the girl had that phony birth-mark. You had time to get your hands on other evidence.

Kipper said tightly: "Everything was fine. She and I had the Burgess money and married the Wilcox money. Then this girl had to win that Miss Subways contest."

Cameron nodded. "That must have been a bad shock when you first saw the photo in the subway. Seven million people seeing it and a few of them wondering how it was that she was a dead ringer for Eileen Burgess. You investigated Amy

Burns. Maybe from her roommates you learned of the locket and the clothes which she still kept. And she had that tell-tale birth-mark. All that would mean a lot to those of us who had known Eileen well."

The gag jammed Amy's cry back down her throat. She saw the quick movement of Kipper's arm. She saw the gun come out of his pocket. And then there was the shot.

When she opened her eyes again, Kipper was a mountain of still flesh on the floor and the police officer was coming toward her, smiling broadly, a gun held loosely in his hand.

"The second guy to try that on me within an hour."

When she was untied, she leaned weakly against him. "You did that on purpose," she whispered. "You wanted to shoot him."

He pressed his lips together, not answering her question. Then he said: "Listen. There's a lot of red tape, but I'm taking you somewhere first. There's a corporal who has only a couple of hours of his furlough left."

"Dick Payne?"

"That's the lad."

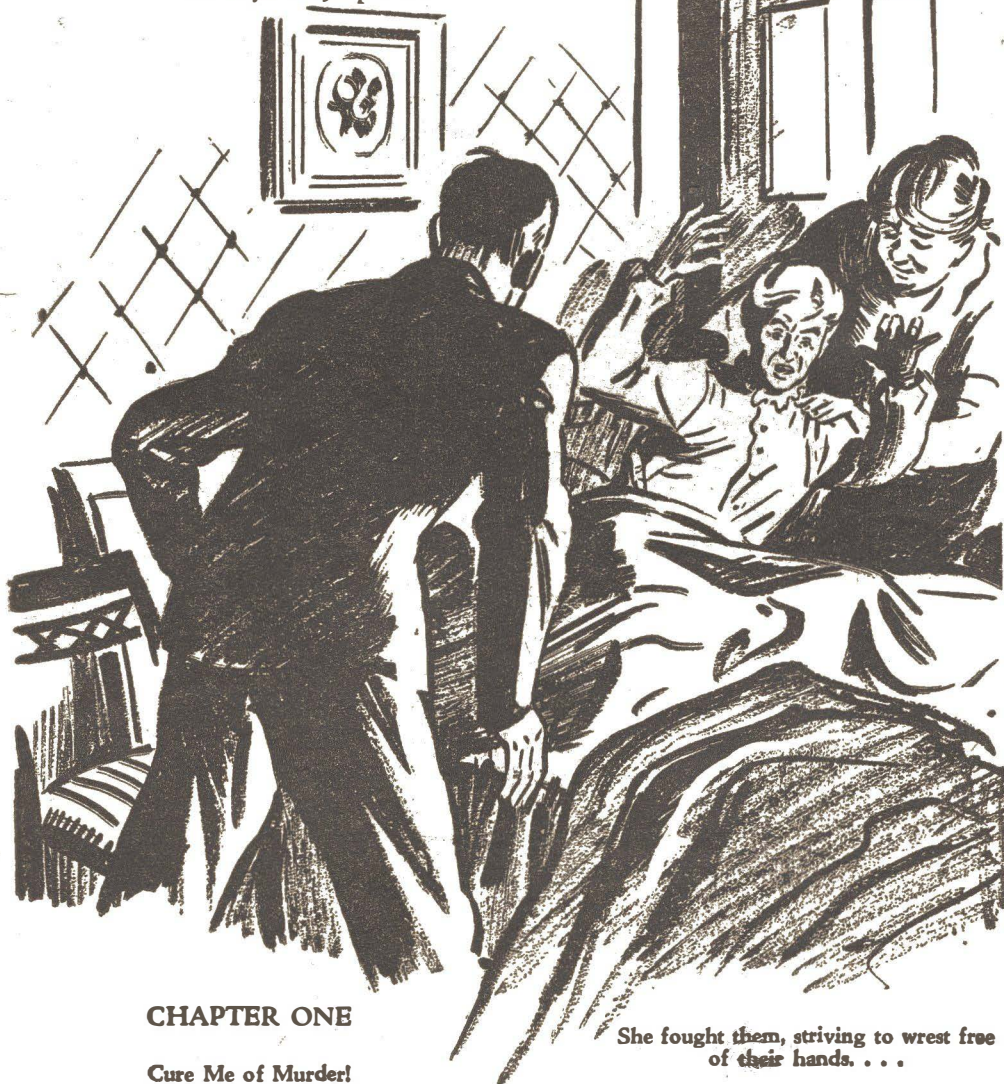
Amy threw her arms about his neck. "How will I ever thank you? And I don't even know who you are?"

Cameron beamed from ear to ear. "Call me Uncle Sam," he said. "That's what you used to call me."



The Doctor Brings Death

From over the seas the terror came, and settled in Dr. Latimer's little black bag. Unseen and unsuspected, it brought swift, screaming death to the doctor's patients — till a dead man finally spoke!



CHAPTER ONE

Cure Me of Murder!

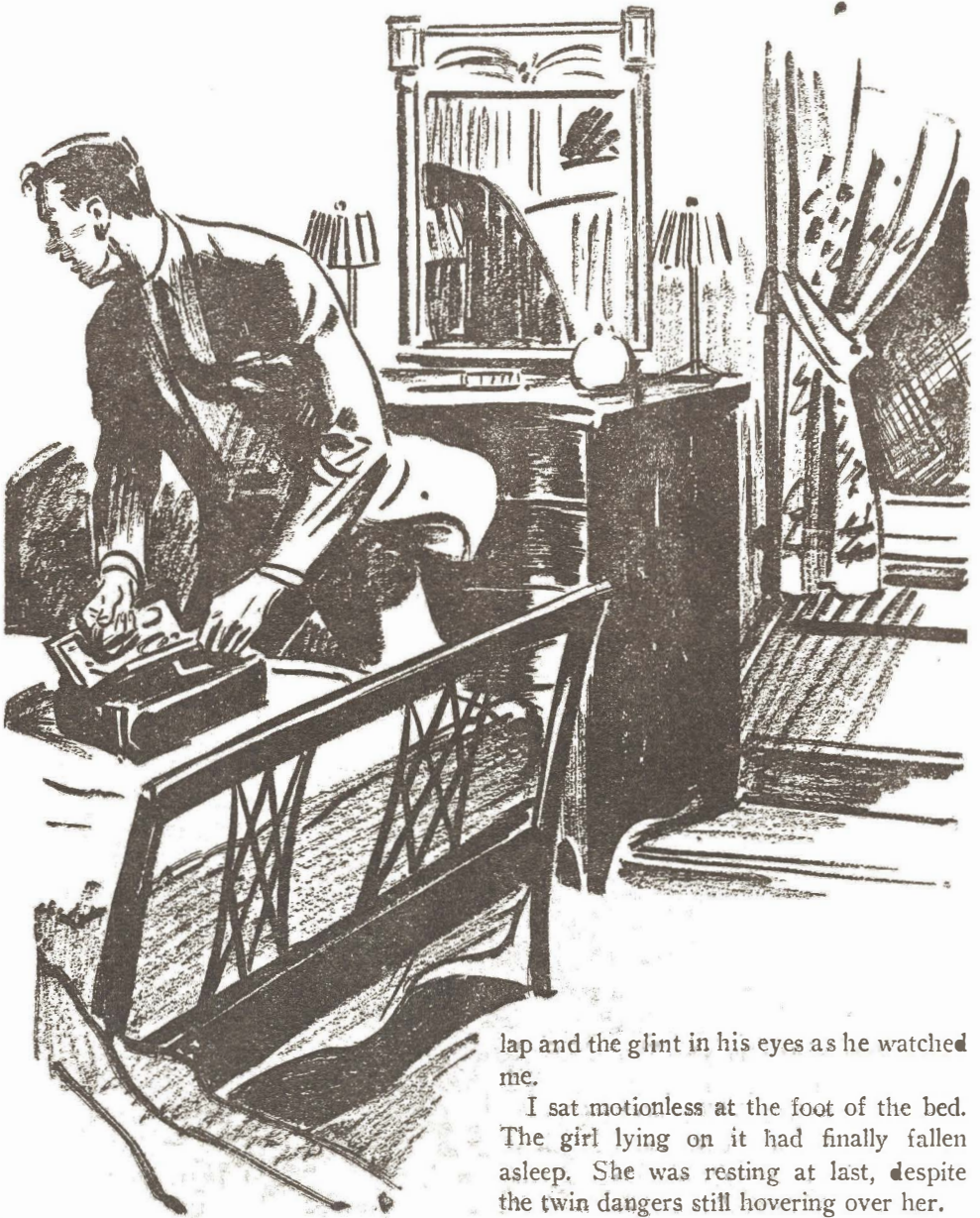
She fought them, striving to wrest free of their hands. . . .

HE SAT very still, with his back against the closed door, gun in hand, watching me. He held himself alert and ready to lift the revolver the instant I moved. He wouldn't hesi-

tate to fire, I knew, if he should feel it necessary to shoot me in order to keep me from killing again.

The room was dark except for the faint star-shine at the windows. He had

A Novelette of Eerie Mystery
By FREDERICK C. DAVIS



placed my chair between himself and the windows in the opposite wall, so that he could see me outlined against the dim glow. I could see nothing at all of him except the steely glitter of the gun in his

lap and the glint in his eyes as he watched me.

I sat motionless at the foot of the bed. The girl lying on it had finally fallen asleep. She was resting at last, despite the twin dangers still hovering over her.

She was twenty, lovely and exhausted. For hours I'd labored to prevent the venom from spreading through her body. The tourniquet remained tight below her left knee, just tight enough to dam the flow of the lymph without stopping the

circulation of the blood. A wet compress covered the many criss-cross incisions I'd made in her calf with a razor blade. She was on her way to recovery now, but a different and greater danger remained—the unseen, soundless destroyer that had already struck three times, killing three others of my patients ruthlessly, without warning, without any apparent purpose.

The man sitting with his back to the door, shutting me inside the dark bedroom, was Tom Carmarten, the county detective. Tonight he had placed me under arrest for those three murders. I would have been locked in a cell now, except that unforeseen circumstances had intervened.

He'd been forced to let me answer this emergency—but he'd followed my every move with hawk-sharp eyes while I'd treated the patient. He still fixed me with a steady stare, so that I wouldn't dare attempt to make her my fourth victim.

I knew he was thinking that it was very strange that I, a man of medicine to whom the sick must appeal for relief—was at the same time a killer. It was my task to restore health to my patients and yet—he was sure—I had also robbed some of them of their lives. He had seen me work without a moment's rest for four hours over this girl who now lay asleep on the bed, and yet he feared that, having saved her life, I might suddenly kill her. It was very strange, he thought—inexplicable except on the grounds that I was a madman.

Tom Carmarten had scarcely listened to my protests of innocence. For the evidence against me was overwhelming, and he was a stern-minded enforcer of the law. Though he strongly doubted me, I knew now why my patients had died in such frightful, violent agony; but still couldn't guess who had killed them, or exactly how. And I didn't know, at this moment, how I might detect the invisible approach of the killer, or how I might

stop the silent attack. I could only wait and play a long-shot gamble with time and darkness—a gamble whereby tonight I might learn the deadly answer.

I hoped, even prayed, that the killer would try to kill again—and fail—and thereby prove, at least, that I was not the guilty one.

It was a vague, grim hope. It chilled my blood to think that at some moment during this long vigil the destroyer might wipe out another life despite my keenest watchfulness.

But, on the other hand, nothing at all might happen. The whole night might pass without revealing a single glimmer of the truth—and in that event dawn would find me still facing a triple murder charge—branded a homicidal maniac!

The minutes were endless while we waited silently in that dark room, Tom Carmarten watching me with the gun in his ready hand, I in turn watching the sleeping girl over whom a twin death hovered.



IT HAD rained that evening. The drops fell thinly against my office windows, warm with the heat of the midsummer. Linda, my wife, not feeling her best since the birth of our second baby, was waiting in our apartment on the second floor of the house, as she always did, for me to come up as soon as I was free. Hal, who'd celebrated his third birthday only last week, was in his two-decker bunk, and Ellen, just four months old, was in her crib—both were sound asleep.

It was shortly after nine o'clock and I had the sleeve of the sphygmomanometer inflated around the bicep of Stewart Warden, my last patient of the evening.

"Blood pressure's still a bit too high," I said, unwrapping it. "Sure you're following orders—laying off stimulants?"

"Not a drop, Phil; not even coffee," he answered, grinning. "Must be because I'm working pretty hard, but I've got to keep on turning out the best stuff I can, you know."

He meant his paintings. Eight months ago, he'd told me, he'd been granted an Artists' Guild fellowship, and now he was hoping for a renewal. He'd produced so little, though, that he knew the committee would certainly refuse the renewal unless he got busy and was able to show them some creditable results. Getting away from all the distractions of New York City, he'd come to spend the summer working in Devon. Since houses and rooms to rent were practically unobtainable, he'd moved into an unused barn on the property behind my office and had fixed it up very attractively as a studio. There, making up for lost time, he painted day and night. He was a genial sort, and after his first several visits we'd become personal friends.

"Keep on taking the same medicine, Stewart," I said, "and somehow you'll have to have more rest than you've been getting. Let me check on you again in a few days."

He paused at the door to say, "You know, Phil, you're too good a doctor to be stuck out here in the sticks. It's idyllic, and all that, but why ever did you decide to practise in Devon?"

"I was born here," I explained, "and I'd always planned to set up shop in the old home town. Linda's a big-city girl; she'd love to be in New York. But she realizes there's a fine opportunity here—no other doctor within fifteen miles, you know. We're doing very well."

"I still think you're wasting your talents." Warden stepped out carrying his creel and his fly-rod in its case—he'd just come back from an afternoon's fishing. "Well, good night."

I looked around the office, smiling to myself. It still had the clean smell and the

good feel of newness. The paint gleamed and the floors shone. I'd returned to Devon from my internship about a year ago and had found this house in pretty bad repair, but it was the only one available in town—a big, rambling house—so I'd bought it. I'd had a great deal of remodeling done, and now it was thoroughly modernized, complete with a substantial mortgage. I was proud of it; I felt solidly established.

I started up the stairs, anxious to see Ellen. We'd almost lost the baby at birth, and she was still not out of danger. She needed constant care, and Linda, of course, watched over her day and night, never stepping outside the house. Always my first act when returning from a sick call, or finishing my office hours, was to make sure of Ellen's condition; but tonight I was prevented.

IT WAS then, while I was hurrying up the stairs, that the urgent call came from the Wickham home. "Dr. Latimer!" A woman's voice almost screeched over the wire—the voice of stout Bessie Wickham, who was usually as placid as a cow. "Something terrible's happening to Aunt Henrietta! It's like she's gone crazy all of a sudden—fighting and scratching so, we can't keep her in bed! You got to come right over, Dr. Latimer!"

"Be there in two minutes," I promised.

Grabbing up my medical case, I went out at a run—and felt a chill. A mournful, wailing note trailed through the wet night. Rex, my big mastiff, chained for the night to his house beside the garage, was howling. His huge muzzle lifted to the black sky, a cry of lament swelling from his throat.

I hurried on, not understanding what could have happened to Henrietta Wickham. She was seventy and feeble. Really nothing was wrong with her except the natural debilities of her years. Being a

hypochondriac, however, she'd spent a fortune in the past thirty years on hocus-pocus treatments in the city. None of them had done her any good and finally, in disgust, she'd tried me.

I'd given her simple tonics and vitamin concentrates and had cajoled her out of a lot of needless fretting. Feeling better for it, she'd insistently proclaimed to anyone who would listen that she considered me a better doctor than all the specialists she had ever seen. I felt I deserved some small part of this adulation, because she never hesitated to rout me out of bed in the middle of the night whenever she thought she felt a new twinge somewhere. This evening's call, however, was plainly a real emergency. As I strode to the door of the house, which stood just around the corner from my office, I heard the wild, strangling screeches of Henrietta Wickham.

The old lady's bedroom was full of turmoil. Bessie was struggling at one side of the bed and Willis Wickham, her husband, at the other. The strength of both was not enough to restrain Miss Henrietta. She fought them, striving to wrest free of their hands and rise, and her eyes were staring, wildly brilliant.

As I helped them, bewildered and hoping for an early opportunity to administer a hypnotic, Bessie gasped in my ear. "She was all alone in here, and asleep, Doctor, and suddenly we heard her cry out! Willis and me found her all excited, trying to get out of bed. She's been fighting us ever since, getting crazier every minute. She's never been like this before, never!"

"Miss Henrietta!" I snapped. "Lie quiet!"

Though she was usually docile under my orders, she seemed possessed by a belligerent demon. For another minute she battled us with astonishing strength—and then, with shocking abruptness, it ended. She fell back stiffly, as if she'd been struck a powerful blow in the face.

The room was very still, except for aroused breathing of Bessie and Willis.

"Doctor!" Bessie blurted. "Is she dead?"

I was pressing my fingers to her thin old wrists; and felt no pulse. "Yes; she's dead."

"But what happened?" Willis demanded in a dazed voice. "What in God's name happened to her?"

I shook my head. I didn't know why Henrietta Wickham had died with such violent suddenness. I had no reason at all to think, then, that she had been murdered. Still less did I dream that anyone would begin to suspect that it was I who had murdered her



NEXT evening, at ten o'clock, after I'd sent all my patients on their way, I heard the outer door open quickly. I'd been pacing from room to room of my office suite, trying vainly to reason out a possible cause of Henrietta Wickham's death. Halting to gaze intently at the man who hustled in, I hoped he had brought the answer. Dr. March had come from Kennington, the county seat, fifteen miles away; and he was the coroner.

"Dr Latimer," he began, when he'd taken the chair beside my desk, "you've known Henrietta Wickham for a long time, have you not?"

I smiled reminiscently. "She used to give me lemon drops when I was a kid."

"Her health was good?" coroner March asked.

"Excellent. Much better than she thought."

"You called at her home yesterday afternoon, about four hours before you received the emergency call from Bessie Wickham?"

His manner was unfriendly, officious. I couldn't imagine why he should stress this

question, but I answered, "I made a point of dropping in every day."

He nodded as if he'd gained a damaging admission. "Now, then. "You're aware that Willis Wickham requested a post mortem?"

"I suggested it—urged it."

"I've completed it, Dr. Latimer," Coroner March said gravely. "Here is a copy of my report."

I scanned it with a frown. "The only distinctive findings at autopsy are two," I read aloud. "First, the heart locked in systolic spasm." I eyed him. "That's very odd. Her heart was sound as a dollar."

"Notice the next paragraph," Dr. March suggested.

"Second, a small bruise, circular in shape, about half an inch in diameter, on the side of the right thigh. In the center of this bruise a puncture possibly made by a needle, which may indicate a hypodermic injection administered against the victim's will and with considerable physical force."

"When you attended Miss Henrietta yesterday afternoon, did you give her an injection, Dr. Latimer?"

"I did not."

"Was either Bessie or Willis Wickham present in the bedroom all the while you were with Miss Henrietta?"

"I was alone with my patient."

"I've searched the house. There's no hypodermic syringe anywhere. Besides, as everyone knows, both Bessie and Willis were completely devoted to Miss Henrietta."

"Look here. This is a serious matter, justifying an investigation, but I can't say I like the suspicious tone of your questions."

"Hmm." Coroner March took the report from my hands and pocketed it. "I've made certain that Miss Henrietta had no visitors. That is, no outsider entered her bedroom yesterday and last night

—absolutely no one entered it except the immediate members of her family, and you, Dr. Latimer."

"Well?"

"You knew, of course, that Miss Henrietta had named you in her will?"

"Her will!" I stared. "I knew nothing of the sort!"

"Having known you since boyhood, and feeling grateful to you as a doctor, she bequeathed you the sum of ten thousand dollars."

"Then thousand—! Good lord! I had no idea. She was much too generous!"

Dr. March rose impressively. "I shall continue the investigation, of course." At the door he paused, peering back. "Being a country doctor myself, and remembering the lean years when I was just beginning to build up my practise, I can well appreciate how welcome ten thousand dollars must be."

Then he was gone, leaving me with my fists clenched, fuming with resentment at the hard innuendo in his words—the insinuation that I alone could have had both the desire and the means to destroy Henrietta Wickham's life.

CHAPTER TWO

You Know You Killed Her!

THROUGH the closed door we heard the grandfather's clock bonging the hour of midnight. County Detective Carmarten continued to sit with his hand ready on his revolver, watching me. From my chair at the foot of the bed I watched the sleeping girl, and I listened. Was it possible, I wondered, that the killer might even now be creeping toward this dark room, might even now be poisoning in some unguessable but merciless manner to strike the life from this lovely young woman? I listened with straining ears, but beyond the tolling of the clock there was no sound.

If Henrietta Wickham had not bequeathed me a small fortune from the goodness of her soul, I might not have been suspected—at least not so quickly. But now it was done, and I couldn't refuse the money. To Linda and me it was enormous wealth. We could pay off the mortgage, have a substantial backlog and keep something aside for Hal's and Ellen's education.

But already I was learning the cost. Coroner March's suspicions were only part of it. There was talk in Devon. I heard it buzzing and when I passed on the street people glanced at me with curious aloofness. Perhaps I only imagined it, but it seemed I was receiving fewer calls now, that fewer patients were coming to my office.

Sitting alone at my desk on an evening a week later, with my waiting room emptied earlier than usual, I tried to find a thread to follow. In a village like Devon life is uneventful; not many unusual things happen. So it was that I found myself trying to trace some obscure connection between Henrietta Wickham's strange death and two other mysterious incidents which had occurred since I'd hung out my shingle.

The most recent involved Linda and the children, and it carried more than a hint of lurking, unseen terror.

On a night only a month ago, at two o'clock in the morning, I'd received a call to come in a hurry to the Higgins farm, located miles to the north of Devon. I gulped down the black coffee that Linda quickly made for me while I dressed—she was as accustomed as I was now to getting routed out of a badly needed sleep at any weird hour of the night—and rushed off. Mrs. Higgins' third baby girl was born without incident, and it was almost dawn when I drove wearily back to town. The first sign that something was wrong was the lights glaring from my home. Not only the windows upstairs

shone, but also those in the basement.

I ran in, calling, "Linda!" She didn't answer. Rushing up the steps, I found her in the living room, lying helpless in the center of the floor, gagged and bound hand and foot with lengths of old rope.

She revived as I untied her. Though breathlessly frightened, she protested she was unhurt, and hurried at once into the children's room to make sure that Hal, and especially Ellen, were all right.

Nothing seemed to be disturbed. I hurried down the stairs and found that now the lights in my operating room were on, though they hadn't been burning a few minutes ago. Someone had prowled through the whole house, and the front door was left standing wide open, showing that the prowler had fled only after I'd returned—my arrival had scared him off.

After going down into the basement, making sure nothing further was wrong there, and turning off the lights, I hurried back to Linda. Though still stunned, she was getting a grip on herself. I immediately phoned Tom Carmarten in Kennington to report the crime, and then Linda was able to talk.

"I was there in the easy chair. Ellen was restive and feverish, so I'd decided to wait until she fell asleep again. Suddenly a hand reached around from behind me and clamped itself over my mouth. That's really all I saw. I tried to break away and couldn't, and then I fainted. There isn't anything more I can tell!"



"NOTHING'S been taken, so far as I can see," I said. "There's money in the drawer of my desk, but it wasn't touched, so robbery wasn't the motive. Then what was? Why should anyone sneak in here and do this?"

"I can't understand it either, Phil," Linda said. "We're all right now, but—"

"But it might happen again. Whoever

came in here, for no apparent reason, must be crazy. I'm not taking any chances, honey. Damned if I'll leave you and the kids here unprotected any more. I'm going to get a gun, and a dog too—the fiercest watchdog I can find, so nobody'll dare try it again."

Next day an automatic lay in a drawer upstairs, and Rex was chained to the garage, near the back door which the prowler had entered. I'd bought him from a kennel in Kennington. He filled the bill—a savage-looking mastiff, with great powerful jaws and fearsome fangs.

I trained him so that he would accept food from no one but me. While I was at home he was gentle and quiet, but Linda kept him inside the house while I was away, and anyone's furtive approach would stir him to a frenzy; his snarling and barking would arouse all the neighbors. But since that night there'd never been a stealthy step or a sneaking presence to arouse him—the prowler had not returned.

As I sat alone in my office I wondered what possible connection all this could have with the strange death of Henrietta Wickham. I could find none, except that in both instances, suddenly amid the placid tenor of Devon, terror had struck out of the night . . .

And then I remembered the Dutchman.

The episode of the Dutchman occurred soon after I'd settled in Devon. Our newly bought house was being remodelled at that time, so we'd taken rooms in the Inn, including one to serve as a temporary office. In the afternoon of a day in late May the proprietor, Ike Folkstone, stepped in.

"A man has just taken 205 at the end of the hall upstairs, Doc," he said. "He was put off the train a few minutes ago on account of he's pretty sick. He's asked for you to come up."

I knocked on the door of Room 205 and a heavily accented voice inside asked with

breathless quickness, "Who—who is it?" "Dr. Latimer."

A key squeaked in the lock and the door opened a crack. One blue eye peered out at me through a thick, gold-rimmed spectacle lens. It was a wary, scared eye, yet very keen too. For a moment the door opened no wider. The man was bracing his foot against it.

"How can I be sure you are the doctor?"

"I'm the only one in Devon," I said, deciding on the spot that this foreigner was suffering from a bad case of nerves. "Ike Folkstone will introduce me, if you'd like."

Scanning me from head to toe through the crack, he finally took a chance that I wasn't misrepresenting myself. Going in, I found he'd brought half a dozen heavy leather bags bearing the labels of several steamship lines and hotels scattered over half the globe. He was stout, with bristling straw-colored hair; he held himself tense in his chair as I examined him, and squirmed every time my fingers moved.

AT FIRST he declined to answer my questions, but soon he was reassured and I drew him out. He was a refugee, his name Willem Van Vreer. Fleeing Holland just before Hitler's hordes blasted through, he had traveled constantly since. He had gone by train through Paris to Marseille; had proceeded by boat to Rio de Janeiro, Havana and Miami, and he had been hurrying by train again to New York City when his overwrought nerves had balked at carrying him farther than Devon.

"You see, I do not sleep," he said. "Not in many nights have I slept."

"Why not?"

"I—I cannot permit myself."

"See here! Small wonder you're worn out. Unless you get plenty of relaxation right away you'll collapse. This is a very good place to recuperate. A few weeks

here will make a new man of you. I'm going to put you on a diet and give you a tonic and some sleeping pills."

A shrewd light came into his eyes as he answered, "Yes, this place is excellent for me to stay. No one will know I am here. Doctor, I trust you, but what I have told you about myself you will not repeat?"

"I won't repeat it if you don't want me to. Now take two of these pills, crawl into bed and forget everything except that you're going to have a fine long rest."

When I saw him the next day he was better, though he still seemed full of a haunting fear. At the end of a week he'd improved considerably; and then, abruptly, he suffered a relapse. Overnight he'd again become a victim of raw nerves and inescapable dread.

"But what's caused this?" I demanded. "What's happened to do this to you?"

"I should have known, Doctor," he said cryptically, his voice crackling. "I should have known I would be found."

It meant nothing to me, but he would say nothing more. Again he was sleepless, but he no longer stayed in his room. He took to wandering about Devon on long walks. I had a hunch he went armed. He said nothing to anyone; he seemed to be hunting for something, searching ceaselessly. For what, I couldn't guess. I might have put him down as a psychopathic case, except that—

I'd seen him hurry into the Inn rather late that evening. His expression was peculiarly elated, as if his strange quest had somehow been rewarded. After a while, when I'd finished with my other patients, I decided to look in on him. As I climbed the stairs I heard his cry—a hoarse, enraged squeal of insufferable agony.

His door stopped me. It was locked. I banged on it and called his name. Though I heard quick movements inside the room, he did not answer. I kept rapping so in-

sistently that Ike Folkstone came running up to see what was wrong.

"Use your pass-key, Ike!" I urged. "Open this door!"

In a second it was opened. We halted just inside, staring in horror.



WILLEM VAN VREER sat slumped in a chair, entirely stripped of his clothing. His face, his neck, his chest, his paunch—all were spotted with many raw burns. They oozed and bled. The coals of cigarettes had been pressed repeatedly into his flesh. A score of crushed butts lay on the floor around him. One brutal blow after another had bruised him. Adhesive tape was plastered thickly over his mouth, and he was bound helpless in the chair except for one hand. Near that limp hand lay a pencil and a scratch-pad on which nothing at all was written.

The room was a shambles. The contents of all Van Vreer's suitcases had been dumped on the floor. Their linings had been ripped out. His clothing was torn to tatters. Every inch of the room had been searched. An open window and a ladder—stolen from the old stables behind the inn, we later learned—told how the perpetrator of this barbaric attack had come and gone, leaving Van Vreer dying of shock and torture.

As we transferred him gently to the bed consciousness flashed back to his mind. With it came a frantic spasm of fright. Van Vreer clutched my arm.

"Look out for them!" His words were hoarse, breathless. "They stop at nothing. They will kill you too—those fiends! Watch out, watch out!" Then in a ragged screech, he forced through his throat, "The border—*behind the border!*"

Despite his frenzied effort to impart some sort of warning to me, I could not guess his meaning. These words, more-

over, were the last he was ever to speak. Shock rendered him utterly helpless again; and within half an hour he was dead.

Though we knew of no one to notify, several Dutch-speaking men from New York—friends of his family they said they were—came to claim his body. County Detective Carmarten questioned them at length and learned nothing. Inquiries wired to the New York police were answered with the assurance that these were business men of high repute. Presently the investigation petered out. It was not

with a frown as I went into the bedroom. I felt that his wife had phoned me against his wish that some other doctor be called from Kennington.

Barbara's eyes, too bright in her wan face, looked up at me without a smile. Usually she was glad to see me; but tonight she wasn't glad. Sick as she was, she trembled as I took her temperature and her pulse. This little friend of mine actually shrank from me in fear!

She'd heard the things people were whispering about Dr. Phil Latimer and the death of Henrietta Wickham. She'd

While our fighting men on all fronts are showing they can dish it out as well as take it, we must do our share—now more than ever—to hack them with all we've got! War Bonds help to pay for bombs, planes, tanks and guns! Buy a Bond Every Pay-Day!

only Devon's first murder in twelve years, it was also the most inexplicable crime in all the town's history; and it went unsolved.

Could this, I wondered, as I sat alone at my desk—could the brutal and baffling death of the Dutchman be in some way connected with the prowler who had later broken into my home, and also with the death of Henrietta Wickham? These three events had an element in common. All showed the same terrible ruthlessness, the same apparent lack of purpose. I felt there must be a mercilessly daring plan at work—and even as I became sure of it, the telephone in my office shrilled again.



THE call took me to the cottage where Jim Taylor, our radio repairman, lived with his wife and daughter. Meeting me at the door, Mrs. Taylor told me with quick anxiety that it was Barbara who was sick. Jim stood aside

heard her father and mother arguing as to whether they dared call me.

"How long has she been like this?" I asked Mrs. Taylor.

"Since yesterday morning, Doctor. Jim thought it was just another sore throat, so we—we didn't—"

"She should have had attention at once. If you'd delayed any longer it might have been too late. A child can die of diphtheria in four or five days, you know."

"Diphtheria! Doctor Latimer, what can you do?"

"I have the serum in my case. It acts quickly—brings wonderful relief. I don't believe you need to worry."

Jim came warily into the room to watch. I could not suppress a feeling of acute uneasiness as I drew the serum into a hypodermic syringe. For a moment I thought Jim would try to stop me. I carefully made the injection into Barbara's arm, then sat at her side to make sure there was no adverse reaction.

"She'll be much better by morning, I

think," I said, going into the living room and closing the door behind me. "I'll be back then. Meanwhile get these prescriptions filled."

Writing them, I talked with Jim and his wife about the care Barbara must have. When I said good night at the door I sensed that Jim was relieved. I started to walk back to the office, realizing that I had a formidable job on my hands to overcome the subtle distrust which Henrietta Wickham's death had aroused; and then I heard Barbara's sharp, quick wail.

I turned about, thrust back into the house without knocking and found that both Jim and Barbara's mother had rushed into her room. She lay quietly, but there was fright in her eyes, as if she'd wakened from a bad dream.

"What's the matter, Barbara?" I asked quickly.

"I don't know," she sighed through her painful throat. "I was just going to sleep and then I felt a pain and woke up."

"A pain where?"

"I don't know. I feel so bad all over."

"I'll watch her," I told Jim. "Try to go back to sleep, Barbara. Try to sleep."

They stood anxiously at the foot of the bed. I sat beside Barbara, alert for any untoward symptoms. They knew almost as soon as I that something was actually wrong, seriously wrong.

Barbara could not even try to sleep. Her breathing quickened. Her pulse began to race. She squirmed and writhed under the blankets with a growing, uncontrollable restlessness. Then she tried to sit up. When I gently pushed her back to the pillow, she was suddenly up again, fighting me.

The sick little girl, burning with fever, became wild-eyed, possessed with a frenzied madness!

God above, I knew nothing I could do for her! All my long, arduous medical training had taught me nothing with which to cope with the insane paroxysms

of the stricken child. The cause of it was unknown to me; she became so violent that all our efforts were needed to control her. Then abruptly—exactly as in the case of Henrietta Wickham—it ended. As if in complete surrender to an unbearable ordeal, Barbara fell back inert.

"She's dead!" Jim blurted.

In scarcely more than a stunned whisper I echoed, "She's dead."

"What killed her?" Jim grabbed my arm. "I'm asking you, Doctor—you!"

"I swear I can't tell you that, Jim."

"You shot something into her! I saw you—that needle! That's what killed her! You *knew* the stuff you shot into her would—"

Jim! Good lord, man, realize what you're saying! You can't believe I'd do anything to harm Barbara. She was my friend! The serum would have saved her. It couldn't possibly have caused—this!"

"But she's dead." Jim stared, mumbling it. "She's dead, and something killed her."

"Yes, something killed her—and if it's within my powers, Jim, I'm going to find out what it was."

I turned back to the lifeless little girl on the bed. A tiny red mark was left on her arm where my hypodermic needle had pierced. I looked farther, and at once found the ominous blue-black bruise. Midway between the knee and the hip, on the side of the thigh—a small dark circle, and in its center another tiny prick-mark.

A mark of death left on this little victim by a murderous being that could not possibly have entered the room!

CHAPTER THREE

Borders of Death

THE last note of the grandfather's clock vibrated through the dark house. It seemed I had already been sitting in that lightless room for an eter-

nity, watching the girl asleep on the bed while the county detective guarded the door with his hulking body and his gun. The night was endless, yet it would be all too short. If it should pass uneventfully, then dawn would see my last chance gone—my last hope of proving I was not a murderous madman. I could do nothing but continue to wait—wait, while the girl slept, while Carmarten eyed me with grim determination to stop me with his gun if I should make a single treacherous move, while the reverberations of the clock's song faded away in the empty darkness

* * *

The third emergency call came on the night of the day when little Barbara Taylor was buried.

"It's Terry, Phil!" a girl's voice said rapidly over the wire. "Dad's had another attack—a really bad one. Please come over right away!"

"Coming!" I promised.

A moment before the phone rang I'd almost forced myself to an impossible decision. Dreading that the inexplicable death might strike down more of my patients, I'd all but resolved that I would answer no more calls, would see no more patients. But I realized now that I couldn't refuse any appeal for help—certainly not this one. Terry Bray was my sister-in-law. The man for whose sake she'd summoned me was her father, and Linda's.

Without telling Linda—it would only worry her, so I'd wait until I returned, when, I hoped, I could report her father out of danger—I hastily made ready to go. Being thoroughly familiar with Grover Bray's heart condition, I knew he would need a cardiac stimulant. Stepping into the little room where my drugs were stored, I reached to the shelf where I kept a solution of *Atropinas sulphas*. My hand froze in midair.

The bottle was gone!

Its absence stunned me. I hadn't used it in weeks, but it should have been in its place. It was a powerful drug, the proper dosage being from one two-hundredths to one one-hundredths of a grain. A dose much heavier than that would act as a swift, potent poison. Then I realized, and the realization rocked my mind.

The symptoms of poisoning by atropine! Wild, brilliant, staring eyes—marked excitement—belligerence—the heart paralyzed in systole! Traces of the drug itself were extremely difficult to detect by post mortem examination, but these symptoms were exactly those with which Henrietta Wickham and Barbara Taylor had died!

I spun about to my instrument cabinet, jerked open a drawer and stared at a row of hypodermic syringes. How many had I usually kept there? Five or six? I couldn't remember! Five lay in the drawer now, but there might have been six a short time ago. One might be missing—stolen!

I had no time for conjecture. Quickly I mixed a fresh solution of *atropinas sulphas*, weighing out the powder with the utmost care, checking and rechecking, finally dissolving it painstakingly in distilled water. Then, with the bottle and a syringe in my case, I unchained Rex, turned him into the house and hurried to my car.

It was miles to the Bray farm. Linda had lived there with her father and Terry until going off to the city to take her training as a nurse. Terry still remained there with Grover Bray. A pert, red-headed girl of twenty, she hurried from the door with a flashlight as I drove into the yard.

"Watch your step, Phil!" she called as I got out of the car. "There are lots of copperheads around—more this year than ever before—and sometimes they're out after dark. Take the light."

She followed me in, and when I opened

the door of the bedroom on the ground floor, Grover Bray's voice lifted at me.

"You get back out of here, Phil Latimer! I told Terry not to call you. I won't let you touch me!"

I was used to this man's brusqueness. Though he'd never quite forgiven me for marrying Linda—he'd jealously wanted to keep both his daughters with him all his life, it seemed—I'd learned his bark was worse than his bite. But there was a new, sharper ring in his voice tonight. He really meant it.

"TAKE it easy, Grover," I said, going to his bed, "or you'll bring on another attack. I've already explained to you how to take care of your angina, so why did you let this happen? Weren't you carrying those amyl nitrite pearls I gave you?"

He glared at me. "How do I know what's in those pearls? Crush one and inhale the fumes, you said—but I don't trust you, Phil Latimer. Not any more! You'd better understand something right now. You're not going to get anything out of *my* will!"

"Dad!" Terry gasped. "How can you say such a terrible thing!"

I felt my whole face turn white, but Grover Bray didn't back down, didn't spare me.

"I'm telling it to you straight! What little money I've got is going to Terry. You won't have a cent of it. Now you get out, do you hear? Don't you dare touch me—and don't ever come back!"

"Phil, I'm sorry!" Terry said quickly. "He doesn't realize—"

"Under the circumstances there's nothing I can do for him, Terry. Just be sure he carries the pearls. Give him something to calm him down—warm milk with a good shot of whiskey in it." I turned again to her father. "Grover, you're a cantankerous old hellion, but you mean a lot to me just the same. Linda will give

you a piece of her mind for this, and I hope it'll bring you back to your senses. Well, good night."

"Fah!" he snorted. "Go on, get out!"

I left Terry painfully embarrassed. With every turn of the wheels, as I drove toward Devon, I became more concerned. I shouldn't have let Grover Bray send me off. Abruptly I switched the car around in the road, determined to make him listen to reason if only for his daughters' sake.

Pulling into the yard, I caught Terry's voice, high-pitched, strained. She was speaking over the telephone to Linda. She was crying, "Send him right back, please send him right back!"

Already knowing, with a crushing sense of dread, what I would find, I strode into the house. Terry turned from the phone to seize my arm, her eyes flooded with tears.

"Just after you drove away, Phil—I was warming the milk in the kitchen—I heard him shout. I couldn't do anything with him! He fought me—then, all of a sudden—"

In the bedroom door I stood stiffly still. Grover Bray had struggled out of his bed; he lay huddled on the floor. Hopelessly I felt for his pulse, knowing he was dead. Then I searched for the mark, and found it—a small round bruise only faintly discernible, centered around the tiny mark of a puncture, this time in the flesh of his shoulder.

And this time, with grim intensity, I searched further. The open window revealed the only detail that might be significant. Although it was five or six feet from the bed, I discovered a hole punched through the screen. A round hole, scarcely more than half an inch in diameter, it seemed to have been recently made.

"Call the county detective, Terry," I said, quickly turning away. "Then tell Linda. I'll be back."

There was such an unquenchable urgency in me that I left Terry alone there

with the dead body of her father. Not at all certain of my own reasoning, I drove rapidly into Devon and turned to the Taylor home. Without making any sound that might disturb Jim and his wife, I crept to the window of the room that had been Barbara's. In the brief light of a match I found a hole punched in the window screen, exactly like the other.

With burning eagerness I drove on. Again, after rounding the corner of the Wickham home, I prowled soundlessly into the yard to examine the windows of the room in which Miss Henrietta had died. Yes, it was there, in the screen six feet or so from the side of her bed—a third hole!

Were they merely a coincidence—simply holes worn or accidentally punched, such as might be found in the screen of almost any house—or were they a link between the sudden deaths of my three patients? If so, what did they mean? At the moment they seemed to be merely three holes, three ciphers adding up to nothing.



CONSTANTLY I was aware, as the rest of that night passed, and most of the next day, that the coroner and the county detective were leaving me strangely alone. Neither came to ask questions; ominously they avoided me. They were deliberating on a course of action, and when they finally came, I knew, it would be the beginning of the end.

Following the death of Henrietta Wickham I had sensed suspicion in the town. When Barbara Taylor died it had grown stronger. Now, with my own father-in-law struck lifeless in the same ruthless way, Devon's reaction was unmistakably hostile.

Men who had been my friends scarcely spoke to me as I walked to the drugstore that afternoon. Women on the corners,

buzzing out their gossip, grew tight-lipped as I passed. Mothers grasped their children's hands and turned aside when I neared. Bill Bickel, the druggist, instead of chattering with his usual good cheer, gave me what I asked for without a word, then disappeared behind his prescription counter, shunning further contact with me.

As I stepped out, feeling like an unclean pariah, Stewart Warden came from the soda fountain.

"You don't have to take all this, Phil," he said quietly. "It's so damned unfair! Let 'em all go to hell."

Preoccupied, I pointed to the small, white-wrapped bottle he'd just bought from Bill Bickel. "What's that stuff?"

"Benzedrine tablets. They keep me from falling asleep when I have to work late at night. Look here, Phil—"

"Then no wonder your blood pressure's up!" I exclaimed. "That stuff does it. You work late practically every night, so you've probably taken far too many. Cut them out, Stewart, and your hypertension will disappear; you won't need me any more."

"I didn't realize that." He put the bottle into my hand as a gesture of compliance. "Now look. You're getting a raw deal here. You don't deserve such lousy treatment. There happens to be a shortage of doctors in my neighborhood in the city. I'll be moving back soon, so how about coming with me? You owe yourself a good break, Phil."

"It's tempting," I admitted, "but I can't quit in the middle of a fight. I've got to see it through."

As I left him he said, "Just keep it in mind. You'll see the wisdom of it. You're too good a man to let this town wreck your whole career for no sensible reason."

I might have mentioned Stewart's idea to Linda at dinner except that she too seemed unnaturally aloof. She was still shocked by her father's death, of course,

but her quietness was deeper than that. Gazing at her, I wondered—God above!—had my own wife's faith in me been shaken? Linda's father was dead and I had been his doctor—was it possible that even she doubted me? She tried to smile, to be her old poised self, but somehow she couldn't quite manage it. Abruptly I pushed back from the table.

"I guess I'm not very hungry tonight. I want to watch Ellen for a while, and my patients will start coming soon."

No patients would come, I very well realized as I went into Ellen's room. Every night had brought fewer. Last night there had been none. Tonight again there would be none—there would never be any more. Those in Devon who needed a doctor's care were going to Kennington now.

I sat, disheartened, beside Ellen's bed. Her condition was improving, though she would need the best of care for months to come. Linda, I thought bitterly—adding to her constant worry about the baby, Linda would very soon see her husband and her children's father formally accused of murder.

What would she do once I was convicted? All the good life I'd so hopefully built up would then be relentlessly torn down.

TIME was short. Before very long, inevitably, the coroner and the county detective would come. I had only a few hours left at the most. My mind groped in the dark as I told myself there must be something I could take hold of, some answer that must lie within reach.

I found myself pacing back and forth across Ellen's little room. I noticed the thudding of my heels on the linoleum. I saw, too, that one of the composition tiles at the base of the wall near the door had come loose. On this most momentous night of my life these trivial details crowded in on me. I faced the prospect of arrest and conviction as a killer; my

career was on the point of being wrecked; my family was about to be broken up, and as if all this was too much to grasp I noticed trivialities—the tapping of my heels as I strode, and a loose tile in the linoleum border of the room.

The border!

Willem Van Vreer's voice spoke abruptly in my mind, like the voice of a ghost: "The border—*behind the border!*"

Suddenly the Dutchman's dying words took on a startling meaning. They kindled a spark in my mind; a light flared up. The next moment I was down on my hands and knees, ripping the tile out of the wall, staring into the small dark cavity.

Something was wedged in there. It unrolled as I drew it out. Made of canvas and leather, it was four feet long and six inches wide, a series of pockets fastened with little buckles. It was a money-belt to be worn under the clothing, around the waist, and every one of the pockets was stuffed fat. I fumbled one open and pebbles poured out into my moist palm—gray, irregular pebbles that shone with a faint, hazy glitter.

It was then that I heard the knocking at my door—the stern, insistent rapping of hard knuckles.

IHURRIED up, carrying the heavy money-belt. Leaving it on my desk, I stepped into the waiting room. Exactly as I'd feared, Coroner March had come with Detective Carmarten.

Eying me from a distance, feeling that this was a nasty business to be finished as quickly as possible, Dr. March said, "I have here my autopsy reports on Barbara Taylor and Grover Bray. My examination was most thorough. I have concluded that both of them, and Henrietta Wickham as well, were killed by the injection of a powerful dose of belladonna or atropine."

I did not dare mention that the poison had come from my own shelf, that it had been administered through one of my own hypodermic needles.

"You must understand, Dr Latimer, upon what basis we have felt forced to act. Only one person was present just prior to the sudden death of each of these victims. Whatever the motive may have been, only that person, and no other, could have acted upon it. For that reason I have had no choice but to ask for an indictment against you."

Tom Carmarten said, "Here it is. You're under arrest. I got to take you along."

"The matter is out of my hands now," the coroner added, "except for the testimony I must give at the trial."

He turned and hurried out. Carmarten eyed me narrowly, bracing himself in case I should resist. A pent-up breath left my lungs and I gestured toward my desk.

"Sit there. For just a few minutes. I've something to tell you before I go," I told him.

He complied warily, seeming to feel that to deny this request might arouse me to a dangerous pitch. I pushed the money-belt toward him. He blinked at the gray pebbles with their frosty sheen.

"You know what they are, Tom? Uncut diamonds."

"Diamonds?"

"Listen. The Dutch are a canny people. They knew in advance that their country would be invaded. They took precautions. You must have read in the papers, as I have, of valuables removed for safekeeping to other parts of the world—art objects, private wealth, all sorts of precious things, like this store of diamonds. There are hundred of thousands of dollars worth of uncut diamonds here, Tom—perhaps a million dollars worth or more—a fugitive fortune!"

He frowned.

"Willem Van Vreer fled from Holland

with this store of stones on his person. Undoubtedly he was acting as the trusted emissary for a diamond-cutting house in Amsterdam. His purpose was to bring these gems safely, by a round-about route, to New York, the new diamonds center of the world. Guarding them day and night, he couldn't permit himself to sleep; he exhausted himself. He knew that espionage agents of the Axis were trailing him, anxious to seize them, not only because the Axis needs secret purchasing power in this country, but also because diamonds are essential to the making of machine tools, to mechanized warfare. Stopping here in Devon, Van Vreer hoped he could throw the Axis agents off his trail—but after a week he found that one of them had tracked him down regardless."

Carmarten was impatient to take me off to jail, but I persisted.

"Somehow he learned that an Axis agent had traced him to Devon. He feared he might be killed and robbed of the diamonds. He decided to hide them somewhere in Devon, then to pass the word to his associates in New York as to where they could find them if anything should happen to him. He did that—hid them securely—and none too soon. Before he could notify New York, the secret agent trapped him in his room at the inn, and tortured him in an attempt to make him reveal the hiding place—but Van Vreer died without betraying his trust.

"I don't see what this has to do—"

"He'd hidden them here in this house, Tom! This place was then being remodeled. The linoleum in the baby's room had just been laid. Van Vreer removed one of the tiles of the border, crammed the diamonds into the wall behind it, then cemented the tile in place again.

"His killer reasoned that the diamonds must be hidden somewhere inside this house. He followed Van Vreer's logic. That's why the prowler broke in that

night about a month ago, soon after the Dutchman's death. It was an attempt to uncover the hoard of diamonds. He failed because I came back too soon—and now—"

"Well?" Carmarten said. "How does all this connect up with a dead old lady, and a dead little girl, and your dead father-in-law?"

IMAGINE yourself in the killer's place, Tom! He tried just once to sneak in very late at night, and realized how dangerous that was—how likely that I'd surprise him at work. Being a doctor, I might be aroused at any moment, regardless of the hour, to answer a call—I might see him. And after that there was Rex, a savage brute of a dog, on constant guard. At the very least Rex would raise such a furore that all the neighborhood would be alarmed—the agent—the agent would be seen if not actually caught. He didn't dare come back again to prowl and search! All these circumstances combined to make the diamonds unreachable, Tom—and no thorough search could be made *as long as my family and I occupied this house*. You understand that?"

Tom's frown darkened.

"What could he do—what, possibly? How could he get us all out for a long enough period? Kill me and Linda and the two children, and the dog as well? But that would have involved risk of discovery, and might have brought Van Vreer's associates from New York. Afterward the house would swarm with police. There'd be a thorough, prolonged investigation. This way, he would provide a prime suspect for his killings."

Carmarten said slowly, "It ain't my part to hear you defend yourself, Doc. I got a warrant here. I got to take you in."

"You know I couldn't have killed three of my own patients! It's beyond all reason! . . . Good lord, Tom, why do you

sit there staring at me? What are you thinking?"

He stiffened in his chair. "I been doin' a bit of investigatin', Doc. About your father, now. He practised here a few years, then he moved to the city. Before long he was in serious trouble. The papers made a lot of it—called it a mercy killin'. They sent your father to an asylum, and he died there."

Flung so bluntly into my face, it stunned me. It was worse than useless to attempt to justify that case now, after more than twenty years, even though I'd always felt vehemently that the verdict was a tragic injustice. I could only say, "That man was not my father, but my fo ter-father. He adopted me when I was only a few months old."

The moment I spoke the words I realized that even this argument could be turned against me. Having been adopted, I did not know who my real father and mother were. I could feel Tom Carmarten conjecturing, as he sat still silent, that my parents might have been depraved criminals—and the damning suspicion of inherited insanity remained.

"I can't do anything else, Doc," he said finally. "I got to take you in. Are you comin'?"

Utterly disheartened, overwhelmed with a sense of futility, I rose and sighed, "Yes—yes, I'm coming."

We had gone as far as the door when the telephone bell suddenly spattered out its sharp, shrill sound.

CHAPTER FOUR

Send for the Killer!

TERRY'S voice carried like a strained breath over the wire. Following her father's death she had planned to come to live with Linda and me, but she was still entirely alone at the farm, and the raggedness of her first

words warned me of a real emergency.

"Phil—please come! I—I've been bitten—by a copperhead. It was—almost half an hour ago—I fainted. Please, Phil—"

"Be as quiet as possible, Terry!" I urged her. "Don't let yourself get excited—that will spread the venom faster. I'm coming right over."

I turned from the phone to meet Carmarten's forbiddingly dark frown.

"Warrant or no warrant, Tom, you can't keep me away from that girl. There's no time to bring another doctor from Kennington. She's in serious danger. If you insist," I added quickly and bitterly, "you can come with me—watch me to make sure I do her no harm."

Giving him no chance to argue, I checked the contents of my medicine case. Again without telling Linda, so as not to worry her unnecessarily, I hurried out to my car. As Carmarten ducked in I noticed, for the first time, the bulge of the gun in his pocket. He was prepared—he considered me a madman who might go berserk. As I drove, jouncing over the rough dirt road, he clung to the door with one hand, leaving his other free to grab his gun if necessary, and he alertly eyed me.

Braking in the yard of the Bray farmhouse, I let the headlights shine directly on the door. As I hurried, with Carmarten pacing warily at my side, I spied the coiled thing near the steps. The snake was dead, hacked in two. After having been bitten, Terry had taken time to kill it, which she shouldn't have done—using an axe that now lay beside it. It was the biggest copperhead I'd ever seen; and at this season their venom was at its greatest potency.

Carmarten tramped after me into the bedroom on the ground floor. This was the room where Grover Bray had died only yesterday, and now Terry lay across the bed, deathly pale, her eyes wide with dread of impending death. The marks of

the snake-bite were in the calf of her left leg. The fangs had sunk deep, and the flesh was badly swollen, showing that the venom had already spread to a dangerous extent.

"Lie there easily, Terry." I spoke quietly, so as not to arouse her further. "This won't hurt. I'm sure I can stop it. Quietly, Terry."

Tom Carmarten watched my every move. First I applied the tourniquet, tightening it just enough, and asked him to hold it. With cocaine I anesthetized the area around the bite. Using a fresh razor-blade, sterilized, I quickly made the criss-cross incisions around the spot the fangs had pierced, then applied the suction cup. The poisoned lymph and blood flowed out; and that was only the beginning.

This method, I'd learned from experience, though it did not include the use of antivenom, was the most efficacious. I continuously sucked out the toxic fluids, widening the area of treatment by means of more and more incisions. At intervals I applied a compress wet with a solution of epsom salts. All the while Terry lay admirably quiet; and Carmarten watched suspiciously at my elbow.

The treatment must be kept up until I was certain Terry's life was no longer endangered. The first and second hours were constant work; the third and fourth were no less of a strain. When I paused at last I saw wearily that it was well past eleven-thirty. Terry was breathing more easily now; the venom had been removed and the affected area confined, and she would be all right. But in this case, of all the cases I'd ever handled, I felt desperately compelled to make double-sure.

"IF TERRY should die," the thought kept haunting me, "the money left her by her father will pass to Linda. If Terry should die they'll

say that was my motive for killing her—that, the money, and my madness.”

“I’m staying,” I told Carmarten.

“I got a warrant here—”

“Damn your warrant! I’m going to watch this patient all night. Do whatever you damned please about it, Tom; I’m not leaving here until I’m absolutely certain she’s safe.”

I went to the phone. First I called Linda, to explain my prolonged absence, to assure her that I expected Terry’s condition to improve rapidly, and to make positive that Rex was on guard inside the house. Next, on a quick decision, I phoned Stewart Warden. In order to receive calls from the New York syndicate office, he’d had a phone installed in the barn he used as a studio; and he answered at once.

“Please come over to the Bray farm. You can help me here, in a very important way.”

“Be right along,” he promised.

After ten minutes his car turned into the yard. I met him at the door. Carmarten, doggedly sticking close, listened to every word.

“Please stay outside, Stewart. Put yourself at a spot where you can watch this side of the house. I can’t tell you what to expect, exactly—nothing at all might happen—but keep an eye out for a prowler.”

He nodded.

“We’ll put out the lights and wait.”

“I’ll do my best, Phil.”

Carmarten waited while Stewart Warden trudged off. He effaced himself beside the old well near the barn. The darkness covered him.

The county detective and I went back into the bedroom where Terry lay. I snapped off the lights. Carmarten placed a chair for me at the foot of the bed, where he could watch me against the faint star-glow at the windows. His own chair he put against the closed door,

shutting me inside the room. We sat, neither of us speaking. The darkness aroused his apprehension of me, and presently I caught the steely glitter in his hand. He’d dragged his revolver out of his pocket, and was holding it ready.

I reminded myself grimly that no one except Carmarten knew I’d found the cache of diamonds in my house. The phantomlike killer of my patients was not aware they were uncovered. To his mind his situation remained the same; he was unsuspected; his purpose was still to drive me out. The death of another of my patients would get rid of me all the more quickly. He might strike again, then—might try to destroy the girl who had begun to doze on the bed.

Here in this room he had already murdered a man. There in the screen was the little hole which somehow had enabled him to kill. And Terry lay sleeping, unconscious that the ghostlike destroyer might even now be creeping closer, with uncanny sagacity, past all my defenses.

Terry did not stir while the grandfather’s clock tolled off the hour of midnight. I watched her, alert for every slight sound beyond the bonging of the gong. Carmarten in turn kept me under a hawklike surveillance, his gun and his eyes glittering, as the clock’s last note vibrantly faded into the stillness. . . .



THEN the starlight, too, was gone. Clouds drifting across the night sky blotted out even that feeble glow. I could no longer see the glitter that marked the county detective’s position. I sensed his tenseness as he listened, to make sure I did not move. The darkness was oily-thick as we waited, breathlessly still. And at last—

It was the faintest of sounds, like that of some small night-thing stirring minutely in the grass. But it had a certain reso-

nance, a certain muted twang—a metallic quality, as of harp-strings strummed discordantly far in the distance.

The screen! Something was invisibly entering the room through that small hole in the screen. I strained my eyes and could see nothing. It continued, slowly and furtively, as if the presence at the window was striving to avoid even that small noise. There *was* a presence—I could feel it lurking outside, and at the same time I felt it invading the room.

It was here, with us within these walls—something unseen reaching closer to the girl lying asleep on the bed—something horribly deadly.

Tom Carmarten strained toward me. I sensed that he'd lifted his gun. He was gripping it, ready to fire—at me! I scarcely dared lift a finger; and yet I must move. Very slowly I reached to the lamp sitting on the table at the foot of the bed. My fingers found the switch, and I poised, ready to leap up.

At the snap Carmarten sprang erect. For a moment the dark blinded us. We saw, then, something wavering in the air—something slender and long, like a pencil-streak in the air, whipping gently, and on the end of it a bright glitter. The glitter was the glass and the steel of a hypodermic syringe.

Before I could make certain of its nature Carmarten's gun roared. The bullet smashed out through the screen of the open window, and now there were two holes. The slender switchlike thing dropped. A gasp sounded at the window, then swift footfalls raced away. Carmarten was suddenly at the sill, stooping to press his set face against the screen, his revolver blasting and blasting again.

Terry sat, terrified but silent as I pushed out of the room. In the driveway I stopped. The inert body of a man lay there, dropped by the county detective's bullets, his blood flowing into the gravel.

When Carmarten trudged up he was carrying the thin, flexible rod.

"Fly-rod!" he said. "The thumb-piece of the plunger is filed down so it fits into the ferule of the last section. One quick, hard push would sink the needle and drive all the poison out. . . . Who's that man lying there?"

"He's not the man he seemed," I said. "Everything we thought him to be was a front. Actually he was a secret agent playing ruthlessly for tremendous stakes. You'll remember now that Van Vreer's nervous relapse occurred on the very day this man came to Devon, ostensibly to spend the summer working. Whatever his real name is, his purpose drove him every minute, fanatically. He took tablets to shoot his blood-pressure up, so he could keep in closer touch with me; even today he tried to persuade me to move to the city.

"I see it now! I guess you don't need to worry any more, Doc. I'll tear up the warrant, and gladly. But who is that man?"

"Stewart Warden."

I was glad when I placed the consignment of diamonds in the hands of the representative of the diamond-cutting house sent from New York. I was even happier when I again found my waiting room full of patients every day—including, at times, Willis Wickham and Jim Taylor. The nightmare was over, and Tom Carmarten had said, "You don't need to worry any more, Doc"—but, sitting here alone at my desk, typing these last words, I wonder.

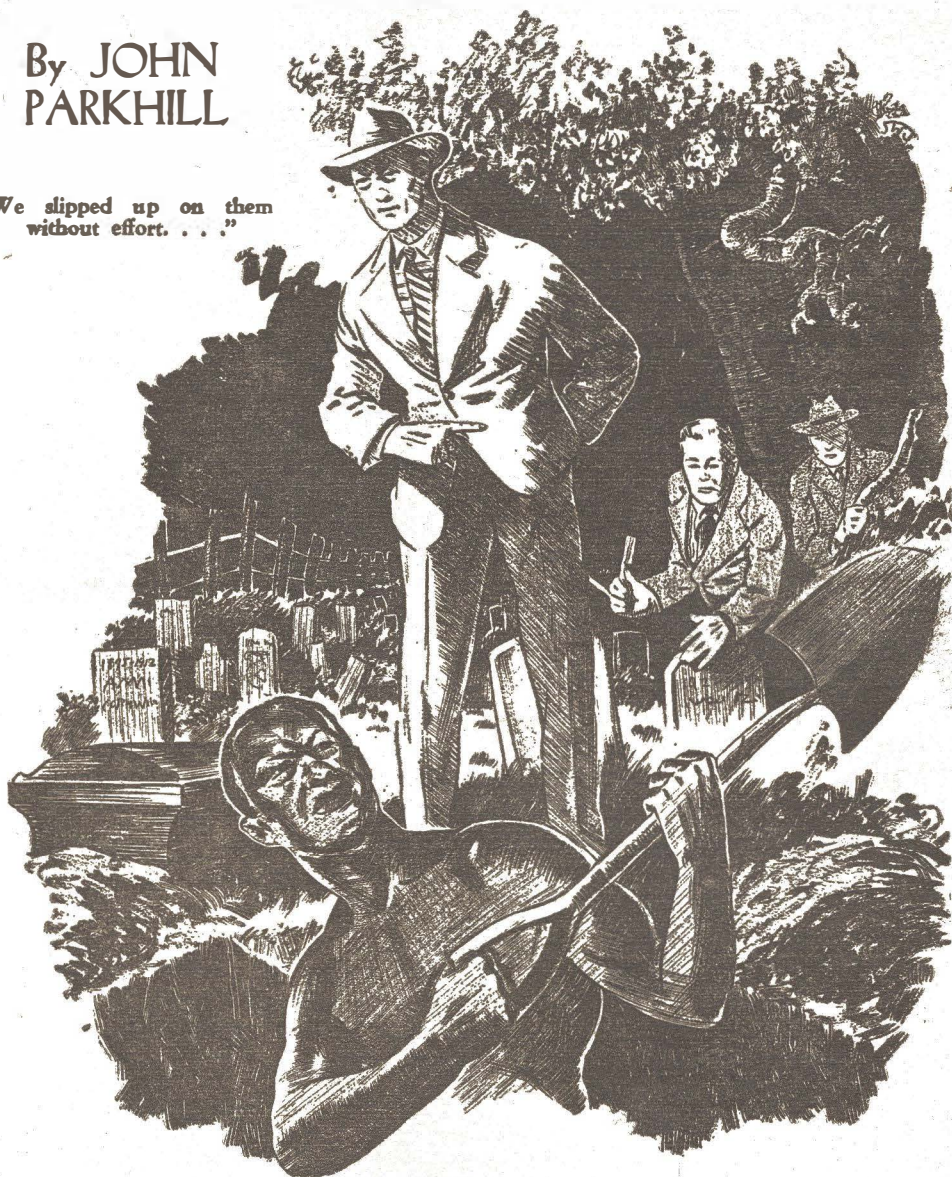
Terror is not a thing to be so easily wiped out. At times, almost unconsciously, I've found myself checking the bottles on my shelves, or counting the hypodermic syringes in my cabinet drawer. Always there is the haunting possibility that all of the Dutchman's diamonds have not been found. . . .

SECOND-HAND COFFIN

The educated barber and the drunken doctor followed the clue of the second-hand corpse—until Doc Bellew found the needle in murder's haystack—and Mack gave the death-peddler his final shave!

By JOHN
PARKHILL

We slipped up on them
without effort. . . .”



THREE of us stood and looked at the face of Chauncey Smith. It was a familiar face and it almost seemed that Chauncey would open his eyes and say, "Who's got all the cards *this*

time?" He wore his gold stickpin and his dark tie and his blue serge coat was neatly pressed. Doc Bellew and Levi Robinson and I stood there and stared, and there was something about Chauncey's

mouth that made him a lot different.

But of course that was only my imagination again. Chauncey was dead. He was in his casket, surrounded by flowers, and Betty Lou Smith was in the other room, silent and stricken. In a little while the preacher would come, and after that they would take Chauncey up to Willow Hill and bury him in the family plot.

Doc Bellew was getting old, and he drank too much since his son was killed at Pearl Harbor, but he frowned and shook his head over the body of our friend. He said, "Strong men like Chauncey shouldn't die of measly old stomach trouble. I feel like it was my fault."

"That's plumb silly," rumbled Levi. "Chauncey was taken, that's all. Never blame yourself, Doc."

Still, it was strange. Chauncey's mouth didn't look right. It wasn't peaceful. Everybody always says I've got too much imagination, and I've learned to be careful about what I say in our town of Alletto. This is really no place for a man who prefers books and music and good paintings, even if they are reproductions, to soap opera and corn likker and wenching catch as catch can. This is tobacco country, and Alletto is a market town.

Chauncey Smith was my cousin and he married my only girl—Betty Lou Clark. In the back room, Betty Lou was mourning him, and here was I, the puny one, left to stare at what was left of Chauncey and honestly wish him alive, for he was a good man, always. I went outside with Levi and Doc and we sat under the tree on Chauncey's lawn and gloomily watched the undertaker from over at Cartertown greet the later arrivals.

Levi Robinson watched closest, because, I knew, he wondered if he was missing a bet by not opening an undertaking establishment himself, here in Alletto. Levi was one of those strange men who happen in backwoods communities now and then. Without education, he was smart. With-

out effort he acquired money, and held it. He was a big man, florid, deep-chested. He ran a strange store known as Levi's Emporium, where you could buy anything from a piano to a stuffed alligator, new or second-hand—and be sure that Levi was making a profit on you.

He was the tightest man in the County, and one of the richest. I guess Chauncey had made more money, but Levi had more. Chauncey was always generous in the bank, loaning on a man's head rather than his bond. Levi and Chauncey had always felt the attraction of opposites, I guess. They were close friends all Chauncey's life.

I'm just the town barber. Betty Lou had made no mistake in choosing Chauncey, years ago. Somehow I got to reading too many different things—time slipped away and I found myself in strange places and learned the barber's trade. I came back, found Betty Lou married, bought a fine phonograph, a thousand records and began acquiring a library. I'm Alletto's only promise which failed to materialize—her only failure.



W E HAD all four played cards each week, and Doc Bellew was the leavening among us. He was a fine country doctor, except for the liquor, and a man of wide learning and tolerance. He was past fifty, but spare and tanned and all the county loved him—and owed him.

After awhile, I said foolishly, "Chauncey don't look right."

"He looks dead," said Levi flatly. "Did you all know that Chauncey was 'most broke? He went overboard on some loans lately."

"Why, he was rich!" I said.

Levi shook his big head. "I'm in the bank, too. Chauncey made some mistakes. Honest, but bad business."

Doc said, "Betty Lou needn't worry. A year ago I examined Chauncey for a fifty thousand dollar policy. He was sound as a dollar—a year ago."

"I never knew that!" said Levi sharply.

"Wasn't a thing wrong with him," said Doc moodily. "I ought to perform an autopsy . . . wish Betty Lou would let me do it. I feel rotten about it. Chauncey wasn't that sick."

I shivered a little. I do not like to think of autopsies. Doc once let me see him perform one upon a negro who was murdered. I said, "No, Doc! Betty Lou would die!"

Levi said judicially, "I don't reckon it would do any good, Doc. You know how people are. Just cause a lot of talk."

"You're the coroner, Levi," said Doc. "Would you stand by me if I asked for an exhumation after the funeral? It means something to me, you know."

Levi pursed his lips, considering. He almost never gave a straight answer to anything. The preacher arrived and Levi's eyes were slitted, gazing into space. He said, "If you put it in writin', I'd have to allow it. But I'm askin' you not to—on account of the widōw."

Doc said stubbornly, "If someone slipped poison into Chauncey's food or drink, wouldn't you want to know it?"

Levi stood up and looked down at us. He was the biggest man in town, with a chest like a barrel. He said solemnly, "Mebbe. But did you ever stop to think who'd be the first one suspected?" He waited a moment, then went slowly up to the house and stood talking to the undertaker.

Doc said, "There's a smart man. But hard—and miserly. I still thing Chauncey shouldn't have died. I left him the other morning, and he was ill, but in good spirits. I came back—he was dead."

I said, "Levi's right. Chauncey's gone—we can't bring him back. A post mor-

tem would cause gossip and Betty Lou has enough to bear."

"Yes," said Doc quietly. "Betty Lou. Well—I'll think it over. I'm not convinced. I'll let you know, Mack."

He wandered away, tugging at a pint bottle in his hip pocket. I wished I was a doctor and didn't have to go to funerals. I remembered that I could have studied medicine, or law, or anything else, and that I didn't, and it was all my fault. I went up to the large, gracious house which had been Chauncey Smith's and sat at the rear, near the door. I could see Betty Lou plainly, and she was scarcely a year older than long ago, when we had all been kids. She had ash-blonde hair which she never seemed to touch up. Her skin was transparent, white as marble, but warm even in its pallor. She was calm, even in her grief, even in the face of death and the preacher. Levi sat next to her, seeming to lend her strength from his big body. He had it to spare, I thought, knowing my own frailty.

I thought about us—Doc and Levi and Chauncey and me. Chauncey had been strong too, beneath his good humor. He had been gentle, but the iron was there to make him successful, and I could hardly believe that he had weakened, even since his illness. He and Levi had been a pair.

Doc and I were different. Doc had his liquor and dreams of the past. I had music and books and barber shop talk, and maybe some pieces of stray information tucked away to amuse and confound the customers. But neither of us seemed to acquire worldly goods, Doc because the godly people who howled for him when ill, could sneer at his bibulous habits when well, and withhold payment because he "would only spend it fo' cohn"—I because it never seemed worth the trouble to gain more than I could use from day to day.

Levi and Chauncey, being strong men, did not sneer at Doc nor lord it over me. They treated us as their friends and

equals, consulting us about affairs of the world, meeting us on common ground over the card table.

Of course Chauncey had been my cousin and Doc was his physician. There would be no one to take his place, and Alletto would be a sorry place. Perhaps I would move on. . . .

The preacher droned interminably. Betty Lou drooped, but Levi sat straight and still, like a rock. I took advantage of my seat near the door and slipped out. The undertaker was piling some flowers in the car to go to the grave, and I espied a small bunch, quite the cheapest of all the offerings. I looked, and Levi's name was upon them. It was typical of him—not even death could alter his penury. He would lend his strength to Betty Lou—but he would cinch on the flowers. I smiled to myself and walked down to my rooms behind the shop and played "Tristan and Isolde" and unashamedly wept a little for my cousin, Chauncey Smith.



THEY made Levi president of the bank in Chauncey's place, of course. We had a conference in the spacious office, Betty Lou and Doc and Levi and me. Betty Lou said, "Chauncey left money to you, and there is only the insurance. I want to give you each a check."

I said, "Nonsense! What would we do with money?"

Doc said, "Wouldn't touch a penny of it. The insurance is yours. Chauncey thought of us—that's enough."

Levi was dressed in store clothes, looking uncomfortable. I wondered if they were from his second-hand stock, over at the Emporium. He said, "You see, Betty Lou? I can take care of things—the bank won't lose. I'm tellin' Betty Lou she should take a trip—come back fresh and purty as ever." He smiled upon her

in such a way that my stomach turned and a light began to dawn upon me. I could see that she leaned upon him, just as at the funeral. I felt horribly inept, staring at them, my mouth half open.

Doc had relapsed into the gloom which had enveloped him since Chauncey's death. He muttered, "Good idea—I'd still like to do that autopsy."

Betty Lou turned pale and Levi arose hastily, saying, "Well, there's things to be done. Run along, Betty Lou, and look up that bus schedule. Miami would be all right!" He beamed and nodded at her and she went away.

Levi said shortly, "Got to go over to the store and see about a shipment of stuff from Jax. . . . Doc, I wish you'd forget that autopsy business. Makes the girl nervous."

He got us out of the bank and went into the madhouse which was the Emporium—a large store and warehouse full of the most amazing collection of junk in the world. Doc said, "From a needle to a haystack—and a profit for Levi in every item. You know what? Since Chauncey's gone, I don't care for Levi so much."

I said, "Let's hear some music."

We went to my rooms and I played some Sibelius, hoping that the simplicity and ruggedness of the music would give me peace and courage. Doc browsed among the books on my fact shelves, as I called them. After a while I couldn't stand it any more. I turned off the machine and said,

"He's after her. He wants Betty Lou."

Doc got out a bottle and took a quick drink. He said, "Of course. He's after everything in sight."

I said, "Chauncey could have been killed."

"Arsenic," said Doc. "I'm almost sure. He had symptoms—colic pains and so forth."

"Betty Lou!" I whispered. "They could be in on it together. Fifty thou-

sand dollars—and Levi has the bank. No one here is smart enough to catch up on Levi.”

“He’s Justice of the Peace and Coroner,” said Doc. “Of course, there’s the County Police. But I’ve hesitated. . . .”

“Because of Betty Lou,” I nodded.

“Exactly,” said Doc. He took another drink. He went on, “Chauncey was my friend. He had no right to die. But you’re my friend, too. Levi is different. But you’re more like me.”

I said, “You’ve got to do it.”

The silence hurt my ear drums. Doc recorked the bottle and stood up. “He said, ‘I thought you’d come around to it. Looks to me like there’s no other thing we can do.’”

I said, “Leave me the bottle, will you, Doc? You can get another at the drug store.” There is a phone at the drug store. Alletto hasn’t any other public phone—and very few private ones. Doc dropped the bottle on the phonograph top and went slowly out.

I sat and played “Finlandia” and the bass notes rumbled with the liquor in my belly. I have not much head for whiskey. My thoughts tortured me too much and I had to turn off the instrument and go outside into the night air.

Alletto is tucked away in the backwoods of the County. It is on no main path to north or south, it is a byway. After dark there are not many about, and I walked unnoticed out into the country. I tramped along in the starlight, thinking of Betty Lou and all the wasted years and fighting against self-pity over things which were no one’s fault but my own. It was a battle important to no one but myself, and I won it after awhile and walked home, past Willow Hill where Chauncey lay with the others who had been part of Alletto, down to Main Street, where it was midnight and only the single light of the drug store showed the way.

I saw the truck from Jax which had

brought the crates of merchandise down for Levi and remembered that he had been up to the city and bought a lot of odds and ends at auction. It didn’t make any difference what it was, Levi could sell it to the tobacco growers—he had a genius for selling.

THERE was a dim bulb glowing in the rear of the Emporium, and I saw that Levi had been busy at his window, so I stopped to see what new bizarre goods was for sale. There was, sure enough, a crudely lettered sign. I blinked, brushed a hand over my eyes and stared again. It said,

“Levi Takes Care Of You From Cradle To Grave!”

There was an old cradle, roughly built in the backwoods style, set upon crude rockers. And behind it, opened to show its silk lining, was a mahogany casket!

I am a small man, slight in stature, and without personal courage. But the stark symbolism of that exhibit sent me to reeling, cursing. In my pocket is a razor which I always carry, just for the homely clean feel of the tool. Had Levi been there, I would have attacked him with it, and big as he was. . . .

The feeling left me as suddenly as it had come. All in due time, I thought. Doc called the County Police, there will be an exhumation. Betty Lou will be called when it is determined that arsenic caused Chauncey’s death. I had no doubt that Levi would then be into it, up to his neck. He had visited Chauncey every day during his long illness. Plenty of opportunity to administer poison, I thought, clutching at straws. Perhaps Betty Lou knew nothing about it—perhaps it was all Levi’s work.

I began to believe that, then. I walked towards my shop, considering it in that light, purged now of the personal feeling which had haunted me to my long walk. It is difficult to think of a man you know,

an everyday person, of your own town, as a cold-blooded killer. Those things happen to others, you read about them in the paper. But they can't happen to you, to your friends or relatives.

They can't—and then they do, and it is very hard to see it objectively. I tried, with my head aching, to see how and why Levi Robinson had killed Chauncey Smith.

The motive was easy. Money—and Betty Lou. Money he had somehow managed to wangle about at the bank. Betty Lou—I chose to believe he was merely trying to get her. I discarded my earlier belief that she had been guilty. The thought was so new and shiny that I

crafty, calculating. He said, "How do you know he didn't already call 'em?"

"I don't," said I. "But I can ask, can't I?"

Levi said, "Did he call them, Mack?"

I scratched my head, weaving a little. I put my hand in my coat pocket, fingering the razor. I said, "It was early. Maybe he did. "I—I dunno."

Levi said very softly, "Go ahead, Mack. Go down and try to convince him. It would be very bad for Betty Lou. Go ahead, Mack."

I nodded and started for Doc's, not forgetting to stagger a little. I got to the corner and looked back. Levi was not in sight. I ran swiftly down the street and

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Your War Savings Bonds and Stamps Will Do It!

Let's top our 10% quota by New Year's!

wheeled about, intending to go over to Doc and wake him and discuss it. I stumbled and would have fallen, except that a big hand caught my elbow and steadied me.

I looked up into the broad face of Levi Robinson. He said, "You been drinkin', Mack? You know you can't handle the stuff. What you doin' around this hour of night?"

I stared at him with panic surging inside me. I was helpless in his grasp, trying to get my footing. I mumbled, "Going over to see Doc." On the spur of the moment, I played drunk, knowing he had smelled the liquor. Past his bulk I could see the casket and the cradle. In that moment the inspiration was on me. I said, "Doc wants to call the County P'lice. Get Betty Lou in a jam. Got to stop him."

Levi let go of me and stepped back and the starlight fell on his face. It seemed

into Doc's house—he never locks a door. I got into his bedroom and turned on a light. Doc woke up and yawned and said, "You drink all of that bottle?" He was quite calm, being accustomed to waking in the night.

I sat down, realizing that my knees were weak. I said, "Did you call the County Police?"

"Yep," said Doc. "Had to do it, you know."

"Sure, I said. "Sure, you did. I've got a big hunch, Doc. It isn't sane. It can't be possible. But you and me are going to play it out."

He said, "You *did* drink the whole bottle!"

"Yes, and took a ten mile walk on top of it," I said. "Get dressed, Doc. I may be screwy, but I think I'm looking at this from a new angle, and I think I'm right."

I talked to him about what I had seen,

and what had occurred to me. He told me I was out of my mind, then he listened awhile, and then he said,

"I'd give anything if you were right. But I can't see how you can deal out Betty Lou. She had motive and opportunity. Perhaps she knew about Chauncey's losses—you and I may not believe that, but the authorities will!"

He was dressing, even while he talked. He found an electric torch and put it in his pocket. He said, "We ought to have a gun." We looked at each other helplessly—in that whole county we were probably the only two men without some sort of firearm. Doc laughed shortly and said, "We'll go armed in righteousness—or insanity!"



IN THE daytime, Willow Hill is a pretty place, a cemetery among live oaks hung with Spanish moss, overlain with blossoms of every hue. At night it is—a place where the dead are buried. To an imaginative person, all graveyards are uncanny at night. I crouched behind the tombstone of Amos Cornwall, 1845-1912, and shivered. Time was passing, and there was no sound of living things upon the little hill, although it seemed to me that the dead moaned in their graves.

Doc said, "I reckon you were on the wrong track, Mack. Can't blame you, of course. You and Betty Lou. . . ."

I clutched him and said, "Shut up!"

There was something moving at the gate of the cemetery. We watched, holding our breaths. Heavy feet sounded unbelievably loud, crunching sticks and stones beneath them. A bird awakened and fluttered from the tree above and we almost jumped out of our skins.

The figures came closer, bearing a burden between them. The first was a colored man named Henry, a giant who sometimes worked for Levi Robinson. He was hold-

ing one end of the object, which was wrapped in blankets. Levi came along behind and both men, despite their size and strength, were breathing heavily.

Levi said hoarsely, "Put it down!"

"Yassuh!" said the negro gratefully. "Mist' Levi, this jest doan' make sense."

"Dig!" said Levi. His voice was harsh, gaining strength.

The negro sighed and took a shovel from the blankets. Levi unwrapped the long package. It was a mahogany casket. It did not seem possible, it did not seem to make sense, but there it was, and within it, I had no doubt, was the body of Chauncey Smith.

We waited. The hole grew deeper. I remembered that Henry, the colored man, had a reputation for bravery and recklessness, and that only Levi's influence had kept him from the county jail on more than one occasion. The clods of dirt flew up and made a great pile, then they stopped and Henry said, "Boss, Ah'm bushed!"

Levi said impatiently, "Dig! We'll have to tromp it down yet. And the sod. It's got to look right."

The shovel went back to work again. Doc said, "We'll have to chance it, while Henry's in the hole. Can you bluff?"

"If my teeth don't chatter out of my head," I whispered.

We slipped up on them without effort, so deeply were they concerned about their task. I came behind Levi and thrust the end of my razor against his back and said,

"Don't move! You're covered!"

Doc had seized a fallen limb and was brandishing it over the open grave, ordering Henry to stay where he was on pain of a fractured skull. For a moment there was complete inaction.

Then Levi said suddenly, "You're not cops: It's Doc and Mack! You've got no guns!" He wheeled, coming at me.

I slipped away. Doc had to hold the

negro in the hole. I dragged a foot, an old kid trick, doubling in my tracks. Levi, lumbering after me, tripped and fell. I leaped on his back like a cat and held the dull edge of the cold steel blade against the back of his neck. I said,

"With one twist I can cut off your head, Levi. You know me and razors. Hold still."

I PUSHED against the back of his head with my left hand, thrusting his face into the dirt. He must have been dazed, for he did not even seem to breathe. Henry tried to take a cut at Doc with the shovel, but he was too deep in the hole. I saw Doc slam down with the oak limb, heard it break. Doc grunted, "That'll do for Henry."

Doc came over quickly, taking a roll of adhesive tape from his pocket. He wound it around Levi's ankles, then jerked his wrists behind him and secured them. I got up and we rolled Levi over. He lay there, staring up at us out of his shrewd eyes. He said slowly, "You-all are makin' a mistake, ain't you?"

Doc was dragging the shovel out of the hole. He turned his flash down, stared. He said, "Come here and hold this light, Mack. I think I've made a mistake, all right."

I held it while he climbed down and examined the crumpled body of Henry. In a moment he scrambled out and said dolefully, "I broke his damn neck. Now we haven't any witness."

"We've got Levi," said I.

Levi spoke steadily, "Henry and another man robbed Chauncey's grave. Henry is a favorite of mine, so I made him bring it back. That's my story."

Doc said, "And it's a good one. Only Mack saw the casket for sale in your window."

"That's a lie," said Levi. "And I'll stick to it."

The coffin lay upon the ground and

Chauncey was now in it again. The implications of what had gone before were making me ill. I said, "Perform the autopsy tonight, Doc. We can carry it down to your place—the hell with legal procedure. If it looks as if he'll get off, I'll kill him myself."

Doc said, "Oh, we won't have any trouble about procedure. Just roll him under a bush and we'll take Chauncey on down. Levi never stood on ceremony—do you give us permission to perform a P.M. upon this body, Levi?"

"Yes," Levi spat at him.

"If you had said 'no' it wouldn't have mattered," said Doc cheerfully. "I'll only need the stomach, I think. The hair—many things will contain arsenic."

Levi said, "You'll regret this. You murdered Henry!"

We gagged him with more of the adhesive, and put him beneath an azalea bush. We lifted the heavy coffin. Neither of us were very strong and it took an age to get the thing down and into Doc's operating room. We pried off the lid, and Chauncey did not look so good. . . .

I found myself sitting on a chair, with Doc applying smelling salts to my nose. He said soothingly, "Go up and guard Levi. The rascal may get loose somehow or other. This is my job here. Go along, like a good lad."

I had to go. I just couldn't take it. I walked slowly up the hill, knowing that Levi was tied well enough for a year. I was nauseated and disconsolate. All my roseate hopes were dampened by the sight of poor Chauncey mauled in his casket.

I wondered weakly if I was wrong about the whole thing, if Levi's strength and ruthlessness had bound Betty Lou to him in some strange fashion. She had always been a gentle girl, calm and even-tempered. Could he have gained an influence over her which she was powerless to resist?

I determined to ungag Levi and talk

with him. There were certain points where I thought I had him. I supposed he had burned the sign "From the cradle to the grave" and was covered that way. His word was, of course, better than mine. He was a success—I was a failure, and people will always listen to the top dog.



I CAME to the azalea bush and bent down, flicking Doc's flashlight. Levi was gone. Pieces of adhesive tape lay about. I picked one up and examined it. The curved edges told a story which stabbed my heart. They had been made by manicure scissors! My last vestige of hope for Betty Lou's innocence died then.

I went back to Doc's as fast as I could run. I went in at the front and skidded all the way into the operating room at the back, reckless of what I might see there, intent only upon warning Doc that Levi was loose and dangerous.

I almost ran into Betty Lou. She was standing just within the door, her back to me. Doc was leaning against the wall. The casket was covered, and there was no sign of poor Chauncey. Levi Robinson stood in the center of the floor, his hands half-raised.

Betty said, "Is that you, Mack? There's something terribly wrong!"

I saw then that she held Chauncey's old Colt's revolver, and that it was pointed at Levi and my heart leaped up again.

Levi said, "There's nothin' wrong. Ask Doc."

Doc looked queer. He said, "There's arsenic in the body, all right. But not enough to kill him. Enough to make him ill. But that's all, I think."

"If there's arsenic in Chauncey, Levi gave it to him!" said Betty Lou. "He often gave him his medicine. Why, Chauncey was taken sick right after a meal Levi cooked in our kitchen—a barbecue with hot sauce!"

"Ah!" said Doc. He stared at Levi.

"Ah!" said I.

"That's plumb foolish," said Levi. "Where would I get any poison?"

"Jax!" said I. "Any time you went!"

"The day Chauncey died, Levi was with him. I left Chauncey sleeping. When I came back, his mouth looked—funny, and he was dead. Levi had gone. I got to thinking about it after Doc asked for an autopsy. That's why I was so nervous—not because I was against having one. Levi tried to scare me about it—scandal and all. But it worried me. Tonight I was so restless, I dressed and walked up to Willow Hill. I found Levi under the bush and the—the dead negro. I unloosed him and he told me some cock and bull story and brought me down here. When I saw the coffin, I knew what to do. I've been carrying Chauncey's gun in my bag ever since he died. . . . I've been frightened, Mack." She seemed to be talking to me, even though I was behind her, frozen in my tracks, my mind racing over probabilities.

I said, "Doc! You only looked at the stomach, eh?"

"Yes," he said. "No time for more."

"Doc!" I said. "We'll go into the other room. You look all over him. Remember about his mouth—Levi probably held one hand over it while he—did what he—"

Levi seemed to explode. That is the only way I can describe it. It was impossible for him to move so fast, but he did. Betty pulled the trigger and the gun went off, but he was on top of her too quick and she missed. I thrust her aside, just in time. Levi fell upon me, his bulk smothering me, his fingers clawing at my throat.

He got his hold, and I knew it was all up. He could break my neck like snapping sticks. I thrust my hand into my coat pocket. The razor came free and I counted the tenths of seconds before he could kill me and slashed at him, at his

thick body, feeling the blade cut keenly and true. Then I went out, completely and thoroughly.



I WAS in my own bed. Doc was taking a big drink out of a glass. Betty Lou was sitting in my comfortable chair, looking at Doc. Doc said, "He'll be all right."

"You're sure? Levi choked him!"

"He'll be hoarse and his neck will be stiff," said Doc, taking another drink. "You know, Mack figured this thing out from law. That business about Chauncey's jaw . . . then the coffin in Levi's window . . . put the right angle in his mind. Coupled with Levi's penury, his nerve, his ingenuity, which all of us recognized in the card games and in Levi's business life, Mack's glimmer set him off on the trail.

"Levi dug up the body because he knew arsenic would easily be detected in an autopsy. Given time to dispose of it, who would have accused him of grave-robbing? Chauncey was buried with his watch, his lodge pin—temptation enough for a field hand like Henry.

"But when Mack got his idea, pretended to be drunk and informed Levi that we had sent for the Police, Levi did not have time to dispose of Chauncey! Up until then he had thought to burn the

body, perhaps, in that big oven of his.

"It seemed logical to Levi to offer the coffin for sale—it was not out of place in his conglomerate stock! But with the police coming, and Mack already aware that the casket was in his possession—"

Betty Lou said, "Chauncey always said that Mack had the most uncluttered mind in the State!"

Doc said grimly, "I remembered one thing in his vast stock which Levi never could peddle. They were women's hatpins, 1907 type. He showed them to me as a joke on him. Well—Chauncey's jaw was dislocated. I reckon we'll find a crisis was taking place at the bank, and that Levi had to act fast. Chauncey didn't succumb to the poison quickly enough. Levi must have held his jaw while he inserted one of those hatpins beneath the eyelid, piercing the brain—a tremendously difficult thing to ascertain unless a doctor has the clue. . . . I'm sorry, Betty Lou—this is gruesome for you!"

She said steadily, "Sometimes it is better to know than to wonder. . . ."

They talked some more, but I found myself sleepy. I dozed off thinking of what Chauncey had said about me—that my mind was uncluttered. . . . that was kind of Chauncey. It washed away the horror, leaving only the void which his absence had already caused. I was always in love with Betty Lou—but I guess I had been equally fond of Chauncey.

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MURDER NIGHTMARE

By JOE KENT

"There—there she is again!"
he whispered.



Frank Cross thought he was going mad—till a night in hell took the creeping, ugly fingers from his body—and doomed him to a traitor's shameful death!

HE SAT beside the window in the small, cold apartment. Before him was a cup of coffee. Beyond the window was morning, black and still in the hour before dawn. Across dark roof-tops, distant and naked street-lights pock-marked the unseen horizon. A cigarette smoldered, forgotten in its tray, as the man stared out.

He knew that he should be sleeping; he needed sleep. But he could not rest.

Not this morning—or the morning before . . .

It wasn't the loneliness, Frank Cross knew, for he was used to that. It wasn't the months of long and dangerous work, for he was used to that. Nor was it the strangeness of an unfamiliar city.

"It . . . it's those . . . things!" he told himself for the countless time. His hand moved over haggard eyes. "Like shadows around me! Fingers touching me! Those insane things without reason—so little yet so many! Little things can drive you crazy! They—"

The mounting frenzy of his own voice broke upon his ears. He clamped his teeth. His sweating fingers clenched. He forced himself to breathe deeply, then stood up.

The far, jagged skyline was forming a dirty outline against the greying horizon. The street-lights were fading to a wan series of yellow balls. Dawn was breaking.

Frank Cross stared down from the kitchen window; down to the old-fashioned wide ledge beneath the window, to the drab grey concrete courts at the back of other buildings. And he thought again: Dirty . . . This city is dirty . . . But my work will be done soon. Then I'll go back home.

He turned away from the window. "Maybe today will be better. Maybe those things won't happen, today . . ."

IT WAS nine o'clock that morning when he passed the guards at the only door of the ugly, one-story building that housed the Defense Research Laboratory. He moved down the gloomy hall and paused at an open door. Within the large room, a tall and long-faced man stared up.

"Morning, Cross," he greeted. "Feeling better?"

"I won't feel better till we're through and I'm gone. I'm glad it won't be long."

His research-associate, Irving Simler, grinned vaguely and returned his attention to the continuous-extractor. Frank studied Simler as the man worked. He wished that he had Simler's utter detachment. Nothing—no discomfort or anger had ruffled the tall man's serene calm through the ten months of driving work.

Suddenly Frank turned, crossed the hall, and entered his own laboratory. He shut the door angrily, shook off his coat and put on his stained lab-smock. He went to work.

At noon he left the lab and crossed the street to the small cafe. He ate in a mechanical silence, paid the bill, and started across the street again. At the curb he paused. He saw the two men, half-way down the block. One was lean and wiry, and small. The other was huge and bear-like. He caught just a glimpse of the huge man's face before both men turned quickly and entered a black coupe. As the coupe moved swiftly away, Frank's puzzled eyes caught the X series of the registration-plate. A police car—and both men had been watching him, carefully, yet covertly. But most strange was the huge man. Frank knew it had been William Handon, the National Director of Research.

Slowly he continued across the street and into the gloomy corridor. Irving Simler was just leaving for lunch when Frank stopped at his door.

"Handon's in town. I just saw him outside."

"The hell you say!" Simler looked up curiously. "What's he doing?" He glanced at his watch as an airplane droned distantly.

"I don't know. I—I didn't speak to him. He was with a thin man; they got in a police car and drove away when they saw me."

"Probably wasn't Handon, then." Simler stuck a cigarette in his mouth, then tore a match from his book-folder. Ab-

sently he cleaned his finger-nails with the plain end while his eyes roamed over the lab-equipment. "Handon's supposed to be in Iowa."

"It was Handon!" Frank snapped bluntly. "I haven't known the man ten years for nothing! I just—just can't understand why he's here. Or why he didn't speak." Frank frowned at the floor. Then he continued slowly. "I know when he made a surprise visit to the New Jersey laboratories, there was a hell of a house-cleaning! When he dropped in on the San Francisco outfit, two engineers packed up and went to prison for walking blue-prints out. I—"

"So you think he smells something wrong with our work?"

"I don't. I know there's nothing wrong! We've solved our problem! We're almost through, but . . . but that was a police car," he recalled pointedly.

"I still say it wasn't Handon." Simler flipped away the broken match and used a new one to light his cigarette. "What you need is a loig vacation, Cross. Your nerves are shot to hell." Again he looked at his watch as the airplane droned, far to the south-west.

"I suppose they are getting—" Suddenly, furiously, Frank turned, entered his own lab, and slammed the door behind him.

"My nerves . . . My imagination . . . My sanity!" he raged softly. "Have to be soothed by a research-assistant! Can't take the hard work without cracking! I . . . Damn Simler!" he cursed hotly. "Damn his soft long smile! Telling me about my nerves . . ."



AT SIX that afternoon, he and Simler passed the night-guards at the door, and walked along the darkening street. Simler was humming softly and rattling the coins in his pockets.

Frank Cross was waiting—waiting to see if it would happen again. It was always the next corner, he knew; whether he passed at six o'clock or midnight. For the last two weeks it had happened. . .

He waited until they passed the corner, then he looked back.

"There . . . there she is again!" he whispered. Simler stopped humming and stared at him.

"There is who?"

"That woman! The one who follows me home every day! She's been doing it for two weeks! She's behind us now!"

Simler turned. As he looked back, the slender figure of a woman vanished into a doorway. Simler frowned at Frank.

"She was just going in there," he said irritably.

"No! She's following me! She never catches up until you turn off at your street! She always waits until I'm alone."

Simler looked again. The woman was not in sight. The man shrugged, peered at Frank strangely, then began to walk on.

"I—I tell her to get away! I ask her what in the devil she wants! And she won't answer! She won't leave me alone! And she—she's not a tramp! I could have her arrested, but she's not that kind. She's quite attractive. I— She makes me nervous."

"Forget it. She just likes your looks and—" Simler stopped. His eyes stared down the dusky street. "Is this the car?" he asked suddenly. Frank looked. From the gathering darkness, the shape of a black coupe approached, moving slowly past them. The dim figures of two men were outlined behind the windshield. It passed.

"That's it! The police car! And that was Handon and the—" He stopped. He and Simler had both turned to watch. Just as the coupe passed the doorway behind them, the woman started to step out. In the brief moment, a flash of blue-white light exploded inside the coupe.

The woman half-screamed, turned, and stumbled back into the doorway. The coupe rolled slowly on and away.

"That . . . they . . . they shot her!"

"Don't be a fool!" Simler snapped tensely. "They took her picture with a flash-bulb."

"But . . . but why? And Handon saw us! He didn't stop! Why?"

"I wouldn't know." Now Simler was frowning. His humming was forgotten as he began to walk again.

At a street two blocks on, they parted silently. Frank went on his way. Half a block. Then the muted staccato of clicking heels reached his ears. From behind they came, and they drew swiftly nearer. Then an elbow brushed his. In the gloom, a face—attractive and youthful despite its age—smiled up at him. The heels fell in rhythm with his own.

"Hello," the woman spoke. Her voice was low and husky.

"Who are you? Why do you follow me! I've told you I don't—"

"Please . . . It is only a little bit farther. I will leave then."

"But why the devil must you—" He stopped and sighed hopelessly in the face of her half-taunting smile. He set his lips and began to walk swiftly. The woman continued, just as swiftly. She did not speak again. Frank turned to the right at Cornell Avenue. Three doors from the corner, he turned into the doorway of the apartment building where he lived. As he closed the door behind him, he glanced back.

The woman smiled, waved slightly, then turned away. She vanished in the gathering darkness. Frank leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette. "Those . . . those things! Driving me crazy!"

HE CLIMBED the steps to reach the fourth floor, then opened his door at the rear of the dim-lit **musty** corridor. He moved **straight** to his

bedroom and the dresser. He snapped on the light and opened the drawers. Anxiously he counted his handkerchiefs, shirts, ties, underwear, socks. When he was through, he took a slip of paper from his pocket and compared the results.

"Two handkerchiefs gone! One tie! One shirt!" He counted again. The results were still the same. "That makes the fifth straight day! Every night! Something else missing! Worn, simple clothes! When there . . . there's a lot of more valuable stuff. . . ." He stared about the room. His typewriter was undisturbed. Some change on his desk was still there. And then he saw the strange key.

He walked over and picked it up. It was a crude, cheap key. On one side were the letters U.T. On the other were the numbers 962. Frank knew it was not his. He knew he had never seen it, nor did he know from where it had come. He couldn't guess its purpose.

"Just a key, in trade for some old handkerchiefs and a shirt!" he murmured slowly. He raised his eyes and stared about the room.

"I . . . I must be going mad," he told himself very quietly.



THE bells of the distant church had just sent four slender notes through the dark early morning. Frank tossed sleeplessly in his bed. Then he heard the soft, quick footsteps. They were climbing the stairs. He heard the boards of the landing creak. Then came the knock, quick and sharp, at his front door. He waited. Again it came, harder, imperative.

"Who the hell—?" He snapped on the light and crossed the front room. He slid the bolt free and opened the door. Quickly she entered and shut the door behind her—the woman he had seen on the street. Her eyes were wide and dark;

her cheeks were flushed, yet pale. Her breath whispered swiftly over her parted lips. One hand slipped into the pocket, then extended a white envelope.

"For you!" she said breathlessly. "Keep it, please!"

"What?" He stared, first at the envelope, then at the woman.

"I have no time! I must be going! You must keep the envelope! Perhaps I shall return." She opened the door and listened down the stairs.

"Why? It's not my letter! I don't know you! Why should you—"

"You will keep it!" she whispered challengingly. Her eyes flashed furiously. She backed into the dark hall, paused once more to listen, then quickly turned and ran down the stairs. Frank heard the main-floor door slam shut behind her.

Slowly his own door closed. He stared again at the plain blank envelope in his fingers. It was heavy and thick. He lifted it to the light. Then his finger slashed the flap. Down to the floor they showered—bills! Hundred-dollar bills! He counted them dazedly. There were fifteen.

"Fifteen hundred dollars . . ." he choked. "Why? What in the name of—" He never finished.

Through the stillness of the dark morning came the harsh, blunt thunder—not a thunder from distant skies. It was the earth-slamming blast of a thunderous explosion, jarring its path through the earth—jerking foundations and walls, shattering and splintering glass and walls. It faded away, like a wave melting off on a shore. A long moment of frozen silent rose. Then Frank awoke.

"The lab! That . . . that was the lab. . . . The cyclonite going off!"

As if in answer to his words, a siren gurgled sharply, then wailed into a frantic scream. Another siren joined in. Through the house, startled voices rose. Windows slammed up. In the street feet began to

run. Frank raced to the kitchen window. Across the blackness of roof-tops he stared. There, high in the sky, was a crimson patch of fiery cloud—nothing else.

It was the lab! The direction told him that. Then the full implication crashed through his mind. The guards! The equipment—all the defense material. . . . That blast must have wrecked everything.

He plunged toward the bed room, stripping off his pajamas. He jammed his feet into his shoes and jerked on a shirt and pants. He ran for the front door.

THE block where the Defense Research Laboratory had been was the scene of confused turmoil when Frank Cross arrived. The streets and walks were packed with a milling, silent mob—people in night-clothes, covered by coats. People whose faces still held the stain of sleep, yet whose eyes were wide and sharp. A cordon of police struggled to break the mob. From the various streets leading in, the screaming sirens wailed nearer. Police cars, fire-equipment and ambulances bulled their way through the mass of humanity.

As a path opened, Frank saw the site where once had been the squat, solid Research Building. Now there was only a grey, still fog of dust and smoke. There was no fire. There were no walls. Weirdly, the tangled tendrils of pipes stood, twisted and alone. The outline of the concrete foundation was vaguely discernible. The dense, burnt odor of fumes was heavy in the cold morning air. And, as from some far and unreal stage, the hard shouts of the police tangled with the crash of tumbling bricks, the wail of more sirens, and the growing, raw chorus of the voices of the crowd. Then, from a parked squad-car, came the brittle radio-order:

"Attention! Attention. . . . All cars and patrolmen. . . . An urgent pick-up! Urgent pick-up. . . . Be on the alert for

a man and a woman, believed to be fleeing together. Description of man: slender, about 160 pounds, brown hair and eyes, 37 years old, name is Frank Cross, may be disguised; clothes unknown. . . . Description of woman: slender, about 120 pounds, 35 years old, black hair and eyes, dimple in chin, last seen at 4:10 a.m. wearing brown skirt and sweater under dark sport-coat. This woman is Neda Villena, has been identified as a foreign agent. . . . This is an urgent message! The characters described are desperate! Cover all highways and transportation centers! Approach with caution! These characters are wanted in connection with the Research Laboratory explosion! That is all. . . ."

The voice chopped into silence. The hash of sounds drained back into Frank's ears. He could not move. He could not think. He could only hear the message again. "Wanted . . . Frank Cross . . . desperate . . . in connection with the explosion. . . . And the woman. . . . She was the same one. . . ."

"They've found parts of the bodies!" a man shrilled highly. "Two guards and somebody else! Everything's in little pieces!"

"I heard the Chief!" another clamored. "The other guy's name was Simler, the Chief said! Worked here!"

"Three people killed! Can't even find the pieces much!" a third voice rattled. "They've found a part of a watch."

The guards . . . and Simler! Frank breathed harshly. "And they . . . they think I did it! They're hunting me! They. . . . Oh, God, I . . . I am mad!" he choked. "For two weeks I've known . . . known something was happening . . . I . . . I'm insane. . . . This can't. . . ."

The radio began again, with the same message:

"Attention! All cars and patrolmen. . . ."

Frank trembled. Suddenly, blindly he

turned and broke back through the crowd. Going. . . . Somewhere. . . . He didn't know where. . . . Just somewhere to think for one quiet minute. . . . Somewhere to stand very still and find that this nightmare has ended, he told himself blankly. Frantically his feet moved faster, leaving the low murmuring chaos behind, the scent of burnt fumes. . . .



HE REACHED the corner. He passed the same newsstand he had passed a hundred times before. He saw the same fat, smiling Mr. Binney, standing beside his papers and staring toward the crowd. Then, in one fleeting instant, Binney's eyes hung on Frank's face. The fat man's jaw sagged laxly. His throat seemed to move, silently. Then he screamed:

"He. . . . Hey! Here. . . . Here he is! That's him! That's Cross—"

"There!" A voice behind Frank yelled. "Copper! Get out your gun! There he goes!" From behind, feet began to pound on the walk. The shout was relayed in a mounting crescendo. A wave of excited fury broke upon Frank's ear.

"A gun. . . . They'll shoot. . . . They" His feet leaped. He began to run, without thought or reason, plan or purpose. As an animal might run, blindly from its tormentors, he stumbled down the street. Behind him the shouting thinned, then a siren gurgled into life. Tires of a car screamed on the concrete. The siren rolled nearer. Frank plunged into an alley and raced out on the next street. For moments the siren was dimmed, then it screamed into the open again. Again Frank plunged into the momentary seclusion of a dirty alleyway. He heard the car take the sharp turn behind him. Just ahead was the open back door of a building. He leaped up the steps and dashed through the kitchen of

a cafe. A cook yelled. He plowed through the maze of tables at the front and plunged out onto the sidewalk again. Now the siren was hushed, but the growing surf-sound of excited voices rose close behind. The cafe door began to slam and slam again. Feet took up the chase. Then Frank froze.

Ahead, dead ahead, waited two cops—guns drawn, they were deliberately converging. Frank turned and started back. Out of the cafe broke three more cops. They saw him and spread, blocking the street and walks.

Trapped! Frank felt a dim blur haze his eyes—the blind and senseless confusion of fear. He could not move. He stood and the net closed. He saw the hard face of a cop. The man's lips moved.

"Get tired of running, maybe?" Then an iron grip locked on his shoulder and twisted. He screamed. Every nerve and muscle in his arm grated painfully. Then an open palm slammed across his teeth, knocking the scream away. Again the vise twisted. Frank felt himself falling. Dream-like, he seemed to fall forever through black nothingness. He ceased to remember. . . .



“WERE covering every road and station! She'll have to be invisible to slip through!”

The heavy voice wore through Frank's dulled ears. He shook his head; the pounding throb beat on. He opened his eyes and stared dazedly at a strange room. There was a bed, a dresser and two worn chairs. In one chair was a pair of women's shoes. On the dresser was a small collection of perfume and powders. As his vision cleared, Frank saw the other occupants of the room.

There was a thick-set man in a policeman's uniform. Leaning against the wall was the same man Frank had seen with

William Handon; the man was thin-faced and grey-haired. His eyes, too, were grey and his mouth was hard and angry now. In the other chair sat the bulky, obese figure of William Handon, the National Director of Research. The perpetual dead cigar clung to the man's teeth; his loose-jowled face was damp and faintly bearded. His eyes were hot and livid with fury. And he was looking at Frank—watching him return to consciousness.

He heaved himself up and crossed the room. "Where's that damned woman?" he thundered.

"I . . . I don't. . . ." Frank struggled to rise. "I don't know! I don't know her! It's wrong! The whole thing's wrong! I haven't—"

The thin grey-haired man crossed the room. "Get up, Cross," he ordered flatly. Frank pulled his aching muscles together. He rose weakly. The man nodded silently to the bed. Frank's eyes followed the gesture. They widened. There lay his missing shirt; his tie and handkerchiefs! There lay all the shirts, the ties, underwear, and socks that had vanished from his room in the last two weeks!

"So you admit they're yours," the man supplied slowly. Then he held out a key—the same key with the initials U. T. "And you know where this belongs?"

"No! No, I swear! I've seen it—just once! But I don't—"

"He's lying, Inspector Rand!" Handon raged. "You have the proof!"

"This is the key to luggage-storage box 962 in the Union Terminal Station. We found this key in your room. We opened 962 and found a bag, packed with clothes we have proved are yours. In that box we found a second bag, packed with Neda Villena's clothes—" The grey-haired man, Inspector Rand, paused pointedly. "We have jumped at the wild conclusion that you two were leaving town."

"But I . . . I never put any bag. . . . My clothes have been stolen!" Frank stammered. "Every day something else was missing! And I didn't know any Neda Villena! I swear I didn't know—"

"You've been meeting Neda Villena every afternoon or evening on your way from the lab to your apartment," Rand corrected flatly. "I've followed you for a week. I called Handon down here from Washington. We took Villena's picture when she was following you last night. It checks with a picture on file in San Francisco."

"But I didn't know her! She just—just came up and. . . ." Frank stopped, realizing the insanity of his only explanation.

"Furthermore, she visited you this morning—twenty minutes before the lab blew up. She paid you fifteen C's on your cyclonite sell-out. We've found the money. We trailed her to your place."

"But she. . . . I know she came, but it . . . I . . . that money—" Again he stopped, realizing again the futility of his words. Nervously he fumbled a cigarette from his pocket and struck a match. He dropped it into an ash-tray.

"LISTEN. . . . You've got to listen! For two weeks things have—" His words were broken by a spitting hiss from the ash tray. There a small fire blazed. Instinctively he blew it out, scattering stubs and match-sticks across the table. "I didn't sell out the cyclonite investigation! You've known me a long time, Handon! I—"

"That is precisely why you were called on the job," the man countered furiously. "Because I believed you were a good chemist! Because I believed you could be trusted! You knew how important your project was. Any explosive so volatile and powerful is a tremendous force! In the hands of enemies it can—"

"But I didn't sell it out! I did my work! I was almost—"

"You were almost through, yes!" Handon supplied acidly. "You had succeeded in making the explosive more stable—more usable with safety! It was ready to go to work. So you sold! And as though that was not enough, you murdered to seal your tracks! You set up an explosion to destroy the traces of your theft! You called Simler to the lab, to trap him! To



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destroy his knowledge of your results! You planned to run! To flee! The proof it is here to show—”

“I didn’t call Simler! The last time I saw him was yester—”

“No, thanks, Cross,” Rand smiled bleakly. “We’ve got the dope on that too. You called Simler at 3 a.m. When he didn’t answer, you asked the switchboard-operator at his place to take the message to him. The elevator-boy got him up and gave him your message. He also gave it to us—at four-thirty, when Simler was dead. You told him to meet you at once at the laboratory!”

“But I did not!” Frank raged frantically. Angrily he jabbed out his cigarette in the tray. “I don’t give a damn what proof—” Again the hiss of a tiny explosion broke his words. Another fire fumed up in the ash-tray. Frank blew impatiently. He started to face Handon again, then his movements stilled. He stared at the ash-tray, then at its contents, scattered across the table. There were stubs, ashes, burnt matches. And there were the causes of the tiny fires. . . . Half a dozen unlighted paper-matches from a book. There were their heads, fresh. And their plain ends were soiled and broken. Frank stared at them a long moment, then looked up.

“Whose . . . whose room is this?” he asked.

“Neda Villena’s. You should know,” Rand snapped. “And now you can tell us just where she is. Where did you plan to meet?”

“Quiet!” Frank snapped abstractedly. For the first time his face had lost its abject confusion. His eyes were distant and hard. They moved from the matches to the window, and far away. Suddenly he spun to Handon.

“Pick up these matches! The unlighted ones! Wrap them in your handkerchief. We’re going to look at a telephone.”

“You’re not going anywhere!” Rand

barked flatly. He took a step forward.

“Do you want to lose a killer! And the cyclonite information?” Frank raged back. “I thought I was the only fool! They’ve made two more out of you and Handon! And it may be too late! Come on!”

TWENTY minutes later Frank pushed his way past Rand and crossed Irving Simler’s apartment to the second door. “Look! Look where that telephone is!” he shouted. Rand and Handon stared. The black instrument sat on a table—a table beside the bed.

“He couldn’t hear it!” Frank rasped. “But he heard the elevator boy knocking from the other room! So he wanted that message taken by others! He wanted proof against me! Hell! Can’t you see that he had someone else make the call? The woman had a husky voice! She could have faked it. Would I have been such a damn fool—”

“And you trying to say that a dead man fixed a frame—” Rand snapped sharply.

“How do you know he’s dead? You’ve found evidence in the debris! Evidence! Couldn’t it be planted? The explosion didn’t leave any part of a body large enough to recognize, did it! Not cyclonite!”

Rand’s grey eyes traded briefly to Handon’s. The huge man blinked slowly and shifted his cigar. Frank plunged on.

“It fits! Simler pulled the sell-out. He entered the lab; the guards allow us freedom. He set up the explosion and left, knowing it would destroy traces of his theft and kill the guards; they were the only witnesses to his visit. He framed evidence to play himself dead—what could be better security against a search? Simler’s the one who’s gone with the information and the girl!”

“No. . . . No, thanks,” Rand said softly. “I don’t think I’ll bite.”

“All right!” Frank snapped. “Take

out those matches, Handon. Look at them . . . see the plain ends? All dirty and torn." The man studied the matches. "Now, look around here in Simler's own tray!" Frank suggested bluntly. Curiously Handon peered. His fingers dug out five more unlighted matches—all with the plain ends soiled and torn.

"That proves Simler visited in the woman's room!" Frank charged. "If you've ever watched Simler, you know he has a habit of tearing out matches and using them to clean his finger nails."

Handon pursed his lips. "Don't other people?" he wondered.

"I'm gambling on one little difference. . . . When you drafted Simler and me for the research, you divided our work. I was to experiment on stabilizing the finished cyclonite. Simler was to make the cyclonite for me from its urotropine base. . . . Right?"

Handon nodded, watching Frank's face.

"Now . . . what does urotropine taste like? How does it taste?"

"Why—it tastes sweet," Handon said slowly. Then a light of understanding came into his eyes. He looked at the match again. "And you're saying that, since Simler cleaned his fingernails with this after handling urotropine, this stick is going to taste sweet. . . ."

"Taste it!" Frank challenged. Slowly Handon put the plain end to the tip of his tongue. He licked. He waited. Then he looked at Rand.

"The—the damn thing is sweet!" he exploded.

"And I've never fooled with the urotropine!" Frank wound up. "They framed me! Simler and the woman work together! And they're fleeing together now! The cyclonite information wasn't lost in that explosion! It's with them—"

"And where are they?" Handon rasped. He stared at Rand. "Do some-

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thing, man! Get on that telephone! Send out another—”

“Every cop in the town is looking for that woman,” Rand bit back. “If Simler’s with her, we’ll get him! Everything’s being done that’s possible! I’m no magician!”

“Those airplanes! He always listened and timed them in that certain direction. . . .” Frank remembered sharply. “Rand! Is there an airport south-west of the laboratory—say, two miles?”

“No! The only airport is five miles

fields fled past the car. The road turned to a narrow, weed-choked dirt lane. It snaked treacherously, its destiny obscured by wild hedges and trees. Then suddenly it broke into a clearing.

“There! There’s a plane!” Frank shouted above the roaring motor. On the far side of the field, about a hundred yards from a tumble-down house, sat a small, flat-nosed plane.

“Look on that porch! She’s got field-glasses on us!” Handon barked. Frank and Rand looked. On the porch of the dis-

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north of town. It. . . .” Rand stopped and a strange veil of self-astonishment crossed his face. “There—there *is* an old abandoned private field out—”

“That’s it! That’s why he always listened!” Frank shouted. “He’s been stealing my results and copying them all the time! He’s been sending them out on planes from that old field! And they’ll leave from there, if they haven’t already! We—”

“For God’s sake, let’s go!” Handon thundered.



THE police sedan careened down the wide boulevard. It roared past the debris of the laboratory building, its siren open, its tires leaving a high whining song on the concrete behind. It swayed into a chug-holed road at the end of the boulevard and leaped drunkenly. It straightened. The houses of the city were gone now. A few straggling half-farms dotted up. The barren

tant house stood the woman—Neda Villena. Her hands were lifted, holding a pair of black binoculars to her eyes. Then suddenly she turned and ran into the house.

“Warning him!” Rand said softly. The car plowed across the field and slid to a halt before the porch. Rand threw open his door and drew his gun in the same motion. Handon stumbled out the other door. Just as Rand was half-way across the porch, a high choked scream tore the air. Then Neda Villena appeared in the door.

Her face was contorted and wild. Her arms were fighting frantically. And behind her was the long-faced Irving Simler. At her back he held a gun. His arm was about her throat, holding her before him. She choked wildly again. Rand shifted to fire.

Then Neda Villena plunged forward, thrown by Simler. Straight into Rand’s gun she fell, and in the same moment, Simler fired. Rand coughed sharply. He tried to fire. The gun fell from his fin-

gers. He doubled forward convulsively. Simler threw a slug at Handon and leaped from the porch. Across the field he raced—toward the plane.

"God, he—he's going to get away!" Frank gasped. One long instant he sat, frozen. He watched Simler clamber into the plane. He heard the cough of the motor. The prop twinkled in the sunlight as it spun. The dust clouded up behind.

Then Frank woke. There was one chance—one more chance! He threw the sedan into gear and stomped the accelerator. The car leaped across the field. The speed mounted. The plane began to move—down the field—away. Its speed mounted, too. Frank could see Simler look back. He read the realization on the man's long face. He saw the hand lift; he saw it kick with the gunfire. A web suddenly appeared in the windshield beside him.

He ducked and threw the sedan into second. The plane was only ten feet ahead now. He could see daylight forming between the wheels and the earth—one more moment was all he had.

He kicked a last desperate time at the

accelerator. He was vaguely aware of the new webs, springing into the windshield. The plane began to lift. Frank threw the wheel full to the left—dead into the plane's tail. There was a ripping of wood and metal, the tearing of cloth. Then the sedan smashed off the field and into a tree. Frank crumpled against the wheel. The plane rose on—free and fast—for perhaps five seconds, while he watched it—impotently.

Then it slipped sharply. The nose kicked down. There was a distant scream. Simler tried to fight his way free. Too late! There was a shattering crash as the plane dove into the ground. There was a long, strangled wail from the trapped and injured Simler. Then came the long, hissing sneeze! The finger-point of flame that instantly burst toward the sky. The plane was lost in its redness. The futile fighting of Simler was cloaked within the pyre. There was only the fast, hard crackling of the flames shooting skyward.

Diabolically they parted for a moment. Through the path of fire, the figure of Simler lay crumpled—half in, half out of the plane. The fire closed.

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As the agile fingers of the old-time muck-raking reporter tapped out his own obituary, Tom Kincaid and Matt Durkin followed his vengeance trail, to blast a gambler's grip from a war boomtown—and place their names on a voucher signed by death!

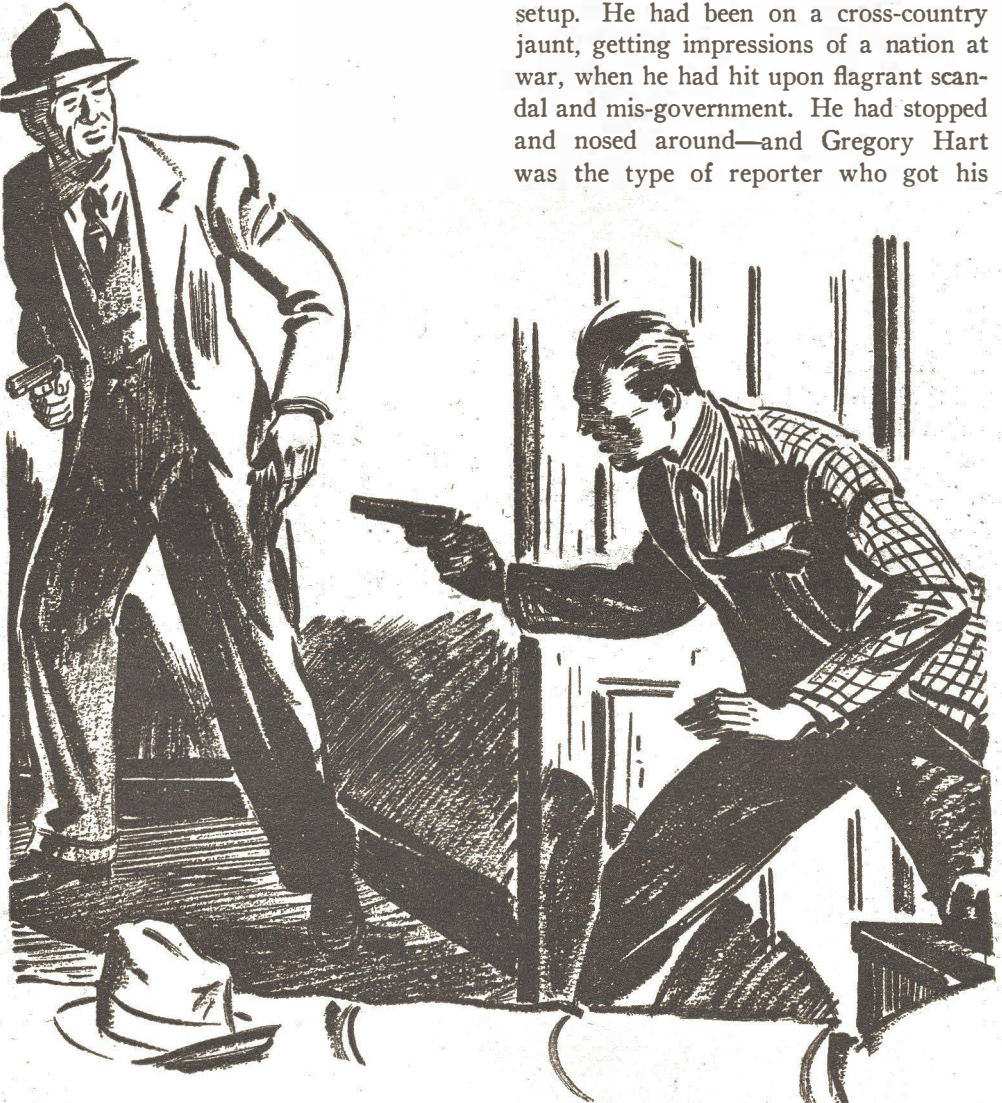
CHAPTER ONE

The Last Report

THE nimble fingers which had squelched a hundred phoney, national reputations danced on the keys of the old portable. The lean man, his gaunt face afire, hunched over from his perch on the straight chair; the ma-

chine was placed upon the bed of the hotel room. Gregory Hart always wrote in this fashion—a holdover from his days as a sports reporter, when hotels were his home and his workroom.

Here in the rawness of Newstate, Gregory Hart was a comparative stranger. The surge of war contracts coming into this part of the United States had made important changes in the Newstate setup. He had been on a cross-country jaunt, getting impressions of a nation at war, when he had hit upon flagrant scandal and mis-government. He had stopped and nosed around—and Gregory Hart was the type of reporter who got his



An exciting Tom Kincaid
Novelette

Matt growled: "It's your play
—start shootin' if you want!"

story, never mind how. Now he had only to type out his dispatches. He could do the first of his columns tonight from the material at hand, take one more look at the capital, Hope City, and leap aboard a train for New York.

He was weary—he had been in many places gathering his facts, his proofs. He wrote, "Governor Hamilton 'Ham' Spelton came up from the ranks. He should have remained where he was—slaughtering hogs in the hinterlands. He is a rabble-rousing jug-head. His vocabulary is unprintable. His appearance is revolting. His morals are non-existent.

"Ham has a bodyguard, designated as his secretary. This man, Max Worden, has been a labor agitator whom the unions could not stomach, a gambler who was too crooked for the underworld, and a political fixer who was asked out of four states before finding his proper niche under Ham Spelton.

"Between them, Ham and Max have placed Newstate in the well-known cut. Every sort of vice is rampant, anything can be fixed, the war effort is impeded by every known chicanery which will benefit these politicoes or their numerous friends."

There was a chilly highball at Hart's elbow. He sipped slowly of it, drawing strength from the biting whiskey—some of Max Worden's bootleg. He winced and went on, "I was present the other day, disguised as a reporter of the 'Clarion Call', Ham's own paper, when a typical fix was in. An old countryman wanted his son out of the pen, where he was justly incarcerated for mayhem. The backwoodsman's name is Jim Dally. His son is named Sam.

"Max Worden brought this man to the Governor, our Ham. They talked of this and that, and the Governor invited Jim Dally out to take a look at his farm. Jim demurred, being interested only in his son's release. Max insisted upon a

journey of a few miles outside Hope City where he has a big, model dairy and vegetable acreage."

Hart stopped and counted words. It would run a little long, but Joe Leary was a damn swell guy. . . . The quick fingers tapped on, "After a tedious bit of sight-seeing, while Max winked at me, still thinking I was one of his own stooges, the Governor pointed to an ordinary cow and said, 'Now there's an animal I could spare.'

"Jim was disinterested. The Governor went on in his fake drawl, 'Yep. I could let that cow go for a thousand dollars!' Dally, knowing he could buy such an animal for forty bucks, blinked and started to yammer. But Max grabbed his elbow and hissed quite audibly. 'You want Sam out of the can, don't you?'

"Jim took a moment or two, but he got it. And, in all justice to Governor Ham Spelton, the cow was actually delivered!

"Sam Dally gets out of jail this week. . . ."

HART stretched his aching muscles. He had almost been nailed when the real reporter broke loose from his hangover—drinking the lad under had nearly killed Hart. He had to turn in. He folded the copy paper, stuffed it carelessly into his coat, hanging over a chair near the open window. It was a nice, cool autumn evening. He snatched at his sheets, avid for sleep.

The door of the room seemed to open by magic. Hart did not hesitate, he dove for the coat. He got the short-barreled gun out of the special pocket, he tossed the jacket itself out of the window, wasting a precious second in so doing.

Something hard struck him alongside the head. He tried to pull the trigger, his glazed eyes seeking the three men who had come into the room. He recognized one of them very plainly, even as his lights grew dim. . . . He couldn't make his

trigger finger behave, try as he might.

It was sort of silly, he thought grimly as they came for him, blackjacks dangling, their faces hard and cautious, death in their pale eyes, so much alike. He had fought the labor goons; before that the racketeers and hard guys of America, and he had never been pushed into a corner like this. He had been attacked, but always he had triumphed.

Newstate must be a harder nut than he had thought. . . . Ham Spelton was mean underneath that drawl and his homespun exterior. He tried hard to get the gun up, to use his arms. Horribly, he was aware of the first kick at his body, the second.

He was being beaten to death and he could not even fold his arms over his head, as he had in New Orleans that time, when another mob had nailed him. . . . It did not hurt, but the indignity of it and the sure knowledge that his work was done before he got this last job started, made it sheer hell for a great reporter. . . .



TOM KINCAID was a big man in a rumpled tweed suit, but he could move with smooth swiftness. He said to Matt Durkin, "The back way! Quick—there's Worden!"

The lobby of the Hotel New Hope was crowded. Worden was alone, a giant with beetling brows, a thick nose, but with the thin mouth and sharp eyes of a man with a cruel brain. He did not look to either right or left, but made for the revolving doors, and a muscle in his left cheek twitched. Kincaid and Durkin threaded their way among the mixed clientele of the garish new hostelry, ducking ship-yard workers in their new finery, business men gathered to spread word of the latest big contract, hangers-on, crooks, blondes about whom there was some

doubt and brunettes about whom there was no doubt at all, gamblers whom they recognized very well. . . .

Kincaid and Durkin had been a team of gamblers known from coast to coast for their cleverness—and their success. Once Kincaid had owned a string of gambling houses, all on the level, and even the authorities had winked at them. It had been an experiment of Tom Kincaid's, and it had worked, giving people a run for their money, taking a legitimate 20% back for profit. It had been hugely profitable, until something had happened.

Durkin was a small man, dapper, wispy-moustached, terrier-like. He followed on Tom's heels, searching for a rear stairwell. They could not locate one, so they went into the back alley.

It was dark out there. Matt complained, "We came out here to gamble with Max Worden and locate George Grey. Now, when you see Worden, you do a quick mope. How come?"

Tom moved restlessly in the alley. He said, "I know Worden. He has a terrific temper. He was in a cold, murderous rage—I could tell by that telltale muscle which jumps in his cheek when he is aroused. That man is a murderous crook—and he is Governor Spelton's right hand. I want to look around before I jump."

Matt said, "Worden's an old labor goon! I can handle muggs like him with this." He tapped the flat, automatic .22 beneath his arm, a weapon which did not disturb the set of his smart, double-breasted jacket. "You could break him in half with your bare hands—I don't get this, Tom, I tell you—if the Governor and Worden run Newstate, why are we here? I want George Grey in the sights of my gun!"

Tom walked down the alley on his long legs, all tight inside, keyed like the string of a violin. George Grey had broken his empire of gambling houses,

murdered many of his men. George Grey was an ex-banker, gone mad with the lust to rule through the underworld. A dozen times Tom had clashed with George Grey—only to lose the canny arch-crook in the final showdown.

Yes, Matt wanted Grey. Tom wanted him. But they were running short of cash—and Newstate was turbulent and the police venal. And underneath the foam of war hysteria and quick money in Newstate, and its capital, Hope City, ran something that was like the scent of the chase to a hound dog's sensitive nostrils—something dirty and rotten, something which Tom might get to and smash.

HE BROUGHT himself up short at the end of the alley. He was probably imagining things. His long conflict with Grey had made him super-sensitive to underlying values—he was too quick to see sinister shadows upon walls. He was greying under the war with the ex-banker. If it did not end soon. . . .

He saw the coat sprawled awkwardly on the top of the high fence which bordered the alley. Someone had forgotten it, he supposed. It was pretty dark, but his eyes were getting accustomed to the lack of light, and he could distinguish that it was a suit-jacket. He went idly towards it, meaning to rescue it and turn it in to the hotel for a claimant.

He had it in his hand. There was a heavy roll of paper in the side pocket. He thrust his hand in, pulled out the folded copy. He was about to return it and move back to where Matt at that moment struck a light for his cigarette. The two figures came from nowhere, silently, striking with their weapons.

The first blow of the blackjack drove Tom to his knees. He tried to shout to Matt but his vocal chords were para-

lyzed by the clout on his neck. The second downswing he evaded, reaching out his big hand to seize one of his attackers.

For one moment his strength clamped on a man, throwing him against the wall, so that the unknown assailant gasped and bounced about the alley. The second figure, however, was sturdier. It dove down and under, and when Tom tried to use the coat, still on his knees, in fending away the charging man, the other stopped dead, displaying the muscular control of a halfback in a broken field.

Befuddled, Tom still gasped for breath, seeking a moment to get his feet back under him. His gun was in his pocket, but so sudden had been the attack and of such physical violence, that he wanted only to clutch these two footpads and crunch their heads together. . . .

There was a quick movement by the second man. The first came off the wall and said hoarsely, "Get it—and run!"

The coat was snatched from Tom's arm, where he had hastily wrapped it against a possible knife thrust. The first man had already melted into the deeper shadows. The second, running swiftly carrying the coat on his extended arm, swerved and sped out of sight.

By the time Tom came to his feet, he was alone, and upon the ground lay the wadded pieces of paper, and up the alley, towards the street, Matt was beginning to stroll towards him, puffing on the cigarette. Tom bent and picked up the paper. The clout which fetched him to his knees had been a tremendous one. He steadied himself, knowing that his left shoulder would be stiff and sore for days.

He went forward, wondering about the swiftness of the attack and why the two men had been so anxious to get back a mere suit coat. He wondered what it was all about, and whether he could deal cards with one arm not working properly.

He took Matt inside and they went up to their room. He told his story and

Matt stared, open-mouthed at the wadded copy paper. And then they read through the last, unsigned story of that great journalist, Gregory Hart—knowing without a signature who had written it, and knowing every word was true.

CHAPTER TWO

Voucher for Doom

THE wire came two days later—allowing for the time which it took for air mail to deliver Gregory Hart's last copy to Joseph Leary. It read,

THIS IS A WAR WE'VE GOT TO WIN!

And it's a job for all of us. While our fighting men are doing their part, night and day, to insure our safety from Axis slavery, it's up to us to see that they get the tools to fight with—guns, planes, bombs! Invest regularly every pay-day in U. S. War-Savings Bonds and Stamps! It's an investment in Freedom! Increase our 10% purchase by New Year's!

"Can't use shipment for lack of priority voucher. Please substantiate. J. L. Co."

Tom said, "Thanks" to the weasel-eyed clerk who handed him the wire at the desk of the Hotel New Hope. He went into the dining room where Matt was already eating. He said,

"Leary can't publish the story for want of proof, which Hart always had, but often concealed. Leary wants us to stick and take over."

Matt fretted, "We're not coppers, Tom! This is no racket for us! We want a hunk of moola and a crack at Grey."

Tom said, "I went down and took a look at Hart's body in the morgue." He didn't feel like eating, remembering. His broad face hardened, setting out the high cheekbones in bold relief. He said, "They found it outside a house of ill repute, and it was saturated with whiskey. The Clarion Call is making up a big story on Hart's secret dissipations, discrediting his name for all time, throwing suspicion on

anything he may have turned up here. There are a dozen characters to swear he was gambling, drinking, raising hell in Hope City. Hart was a good guy—a fine and game newspaperman."

Matt said, "But Tom, we're not dicks! We got no authority. And Grey might be somewhere where he can get a crack at him. . . ."

"Quiet!" A tall man came across the brightly lighted dining room, nodding to a dozen acquaintances, stopping to allow another, bigger man to catch up. The tall man had the face of an itinerant drummer, the theatrical, wide mouth of a

medicine man tent show barker, the string tie and black habiliments of the backwoods. The other was Worden.

They passed Tom and Matt. Worden hesitated, gave them the double-take. He seated the Governor, spoke briefly to him. The wide mouth grinned, but that didn't mean anything. Governor Ham Spelton had cold, grey eyes which never smiled.

Worden came right over. He extended his hand, saying, "Tom Kincaid! Haven't laid eyes on you in years! Know you anywhere, though, you big card and dice athlete!" He seemed openly friendly, thoroughly frank.

Tom said, "You know Matt, my partner."

Worden sat down, lit a thick cigar. His shrewd eyes went between Tom and Matt. He said, "You sure came to the right place to toss a few. You name the game—we got it."

Tom said, "I've heard."

Worden became pontifical, orating a

memorized speech, "It's the last frontier of America! Newstate was always agricultural—the discovery of ore, the flocking in of manufacturing has over-boomed us. But we'll pull out, resume the norm—" He grinned and said, "Meantime, it's wide open and damned good fun!"

Tom said, "What's your proposition?"

Max Worden's hand slapped upon the table sharply, "By Gawd, that's what I just told the Governor! I said, 'There's my man, if he'll play ball! There's a man to start a high class joint for our pals—strictly on the level! One we can gamble in ourselves! He's done it before and he can do it for us!'"

Tom said, "That sounds good to me."

Worden arose, his dark face glowing. "You bet it does! After dinner, then. What's your room number, Tom?"

"908," said Tom.

"We'll be there!" said Worden. "It's a swell deal for you, Tom. I hear you had hard luck—this is your turning point!" He nodded and winked and went back to where the big-mouthed Governor whined in his fake dialect to a couple of patronage-eager constituents, whom Worden brushed off as though they were flies. He spoke again to Spelton, gesticulating, eager, and the Governor nodded indifferently.



MATT said, "Holy Jumping dice! Right into our hands! Hey—Tom! Maybe he's on the level. Maybe with a start here we could come back, establish some other decent joints, get on our feet again!" Under Tom's calm, level eye, Matt's elation disappeared. He muttered, "No. Can't do it. Even if it was possible. Got to get that damned Grey!"

Then he stared at Tom and said, "But why did you tell him we were in room 908?"

"We will be," said Tom imperturbably, "as soon as I can go and register us in 908!"

They went out into the lobby, not seeming to hurry. Tom said to the shifty-eyed clerk, "I want the room next to mine to the south. I may have some friends come in, and it's on the corner."

The clerk said, "908? Yessir."

Tom registered, walked away. He said, "Go up and put our bags in the new room. Then unlock the doors between and stay in our old room, where you can hear everything that goes on—but you don't show."

Matt said, "I get it." He went to the elevators, and Tom entered a phone booth, looked up the number of the penitentiary and dialed.

He got a wire through to the warden, finally, and said, "This is Max. Did the Dally boy get out on schedule?"

"Like you said, day before yesterday, Max," the warden rejoined. "Haven't you seen him?"

"No," said Tom. "Thanks, Harry." He hung up. So they had released Sam Dally before Hart had expected him to get out. That might account for the two assailants of last night—the Dallys would be only too glad to obey Max Worden's orders.

Tom had looked up the Dally's that day. Old Jim was a truck farmer, with a reputation for selling corn liquor on the side. His son, Sam, had been a high school athlete of some renown, had begun studies at the State University, but had been kicked out for some reason not quite clear. The boy had hung around Hope City, working for the Clarion Call, getting fired from there, then had made a connection with a gambling house in the city. He had become embroiled with a politician named Hogarth and had threatened revenge for something Hogarth had pulled with a girl of the underworld of Hope City, a girl known only as "Gertie".

Hogarth was found later in a ditch with an eye gouged out—he had accused Sam Dally, and the result had been a speedy conviction for that worthy.

The whole thing seemed to Tom to be unsavory enough to tie in with Worden's activities. There was, he thought, no mystery attached to the death of Gregory Hart. If Worden and Governor Spelton, a rogue if Tom ever saw one, were aware that Hart was about to launch one of his famed attacks upon them, they would certainly take steps to do away with the newspaper columnist.

Tom left the booth and went to the elevator. He saw two men come in, separately, and go to the desk, to different clerks, and apply for rooms. He recognized one of the men as Ralph Todd, a government agent. The other was Bojack, a famed private detective. The forces of law were already on the trail of the murderers of the nationally known and respected Gregory Hart.

Well, Tom had been on the ground first. He was not a detective—he was a gambler, and adventurer. But he wanted to solve the murder of Hart and he wanted to catch the murderer before the others. He had a good reason for it.

Operating as a known gambler, a man of the deni-world, Tom had been laboring under a distinct handicap in his battle against George Grey. If he could establish himself as squarely on the side of law and order, if he could make Joe Leary, for instance, believe that he was earnest, and sell Leary the truth about the canny Grey, who was always behind the scenes, letting his stooges take the rap for him—Tom would have some help, some backing which might enable him to finally corner the arch-criminal. He was willing for this time, therefore, to put aside his breakneck race on the trail of George Grey in order to gain this support from a man he knew to be courageous and honest, publisher Leary.

He went up the stairs of the hotel to the second floor and took the elevator from there. He got off at the tenth floor and walked down to nine. He went quietly along the hall to Room 908, inserted the key and opened the door.



MAX WORDEN was already seated in a chair, smoking a large cigar. Behind him stood a middle-aged man with greying hair and a young red-head with a scar on his chin and very sullen eyes. Both these two men held guns.

Tom said, "Well, well, the Dally boys, eh? I see you are going to get tough, Maxie!"

"Don't call me Maxie," snapped Worden. The muscle in his jaw leaped once. "I'm in charge here. You threw me out of the house in Denver—remember?"

"It was a pleasure," said Tom coolly. He closed the door behind him, leaned against the wall and sought for a cigarette in his pocket, being very careful with his hands. He thought the red-head would shoot him then, but Worden said, "No! He won't start anything. He's smart."

The young man's hand was white on the gun. Tom drawled, "Sammy isn't used to this stuff. You better have him put that gat away, Max, or he'll start something. Then he'll have to kill me and you won't find out about my connection with Gregory Hart."

Worden said quickly, "Hart, that bum! Nobody cares if you knew him."

Tom nodded. "Pretty smart, aren't you? But you let Hart slip in and get the goods on you. Then you had to have him killed. Now you're in the cut and you want something from me. Otherwise, you'd have had me bumped off, too. . . ."

Worden said, "You can talk now, or take the consequences. You went down

to see Hart's body. You talked to newspapermen about Sam, here, and old Jim. Someone called the pen and asked about Sam, pretending to be me—that was you, I'm guessing. Just where do you fit, Kincaid?"

Tom looked at them for a moment. The older Dally was dour, steady. Sam was sweating, obviously ill at ease, uncertain of what to do with the gun in his hand. They would be better with blackjacks, Tom thought. After seeing the battered and bruised and broken body of Gregory Hart, he was certain that someone was good with boots and maces.

He said, "You know me. You can go to work on me and take your chances. You're in plenty of trouble now. The Government at Washington will be down looking around."

Worden shook his head slowly. "You should have come to me first. I'm going to have to round up Durkin and take you out into the country. You don't know anything—you're guessing. But I can't take a chance."

"Like a snowball rolling down hill, isn't it?" said Tom softly. "One killing, then two, then three—then the avalanche. Too bad, Worden." He raised his voice, "But when you get Durkin and me you got a bull by the tail!"

The door to 906 bounced open. In came a small, dashing figure in shirt sleeves, a .22 revolver menacing the trio. Matt's voice growled, "It's your play—start shootin' if you want!"

Tom's gun was in his hand, he had moved his position, so that he flanked the grouped three. He said, "Or get out and don't bother us any more."

For a moment no one spoke or moved. Sam Dally's gun jerked this way and that, but Worden reached out and wrenched it away from the young redhead. Old Jim put his own weapon in his pocket and started, still wordless, for the door. Worden's voice was calm enough,

resigned enough, "You always were tough, Tom. Okay, we'll lay off. I guess you ain't turnin' anybody in—with your record. But you'd better leave on the nine o'clock train—and I mean tonight!"

He got up and sauntered to the door. The redhead lingered, and the hall light fell upon his strained, white face so that the freckles stood out like carbuncles. Then all three were gone down to the elevators.

Matt said, "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle! What kind of a screwball business is this? Worden tryin' to run a show like the one he just put on! Is the guy screwy? It don't make sense!"

"It was not expert," Tom agreed. "But, I never thought Worden was real smart. Crooked—but not clever. I wonder. . . ."

Matt said, "We better get out of this screwball town. We better go look for George Grey—he's at least smart enough for us to figure on his next move! These dumb guys are like left-handed pitchers—you can never get set at the plate for fear they'll skull you with a wild pitch!"

CHAPTER THREE

No Takers on Death!

THE detective captain buttonholed Tom in the lobby the next morning. He said, "Listen, Kincaid, we don't want no gamblers in this burg, see? You're out! On the noon train."

He was a beefy, red-faced man with a solid belly. Tom said, "That's two trains I've been offered. I'm not taking either."

"Then I'm takin' you in," said the detective belligerently.

He reached out a beefy hand. Tom threw a left half-swing from in close. It was so quick that no one in the lobby saw it, not even the policeman. But the latter dropped into a convenient divan,

his mouth open, his eyes popping, gasping for air. Tom said, "That'll hold you until I get around again. Stay away from me!"

Matt fingered the brass knuckles he had slipped into his pocket that morning and said, "A real tough town. Even the cops are on us."

They went outside. Traffic was terrific—gas rationing and tire conservation meant nothing in this city of essential occupations, it seemed. Tom and Matt had given up their big coupe and were using public conveyances, and the sight of all the fine automobiles made Matt bitter.

"A war goin' on and these birds cleanin' up," he muttered. "There oughta be a law."

"There's a law," grinned Tom. "But no one to enforce it. If we find who killed Gregory Hart—"

"You mean, can we pin it on the Dallys," said Matt.

Tom said, "I thought we'd take a look at Dally's place."

He called a cab and directed the man to drive them out on Route 21. They passed through the suburbs, noting the great town house of the Governor, set upon a high hill, and next to it Max Worden's bizarre palace. They came to a winding dirt road and the driver said that the Dallys lived a mile along its way. Tom paid off, and they got out to walk the rest of the distance.

Matt worried, "We got to be quick. You can slug one copper, but the whole force'll be on us now."

Tom nodded, "I expect to be quick—or in jail, or dead, before tomorrow."

They passed between rows of trees, along a sylvan path of great beauty. They came to a fence with a gate and went through. They walked boldly up the path, but Tom had his pearl-handled .38 in his hand. The house was dilapidated but ample, and had once been a decent farm-dwelling.

Young Sam was on the porch, whittling, his head down. His father was in the yard, walking back and forth. Tom called, "Hold everything! We're coming up!"

The old man stopped walking and turned his furrowed, scowling face towards them. Sam jumped from his chair and reached for his hip pocket. Tom shot carelessly, without aim, and the whittling stick which Sam had dropped, bounced and splintered on the porch floor. Tom said, "I'm quite a shot, you know! Got prizes to prove it!"

A girl crept out and stood beside Sam, holding his arm, arresting further movement. Old Jim Dally said,

"All right. We're peaceable."

TOM and Matt came closer. Tom looked at the girl. She had blondined hair, which was growing back to a natural brown at the roots. She was small and not bad-looking, but she was by no means beautiful. Tom said, "Gertie?"

"My wife!" said Sam defiantly.

"Where's Hogarth?" asked Tom casually.

The girl shrank a little. Sam growled, "Gone! When I got out—he was gone. I never dug out his damned eye! I beat hell out of him, but I never . . ."

"Worden thinks you did, though," suggested Tom. "Worden's got you working for him on that score."

Sam's miserable gaze went to his father. Old Jim came forward and stood before the two young people. He said, "I don't know you. But you got plenty of nerve, the way you stood up to Max. I paid a thousand dollars to get Sam outa jail. He didn't belong to go there, in the beginning. But now Max says Sam'll go back unless we do what he says. That was my last thousand dollars, Mister."

Sam said, "Maybe you better shut up, Pop."

"Maybe I better talk," said old Jim stubbornly. "I paid the cops to perfect my still. I paid everyone in this stinkin' county every dime I could get—just for a livin'. I'm sick and tired of it. If you know any way to break Max Worden and Ham Spelton, Mister—"

Matt Durkin shouted, "Duck inside! Quick!"

The spang of the rifle sounded at the identical instant the bullet spat into Old Jim's body, Tom thought. Already he was sweeping Sam and the girl inside the house. Bees hummed around his head, and those were other bullets, he knew. Matt was already at the sill of the window and had his .22 ready, peering for a target.

The girl went headlong under Tom's push, but Sam was easy on his feet, slithering, maintaining his balance with skill, changing direction in mid-flight to plunge into a side room. He reappeared almost instantly with a double-barreled shotgun and a fine, heavy 30-30 rifle. He turned the rifle on the woods and fired once, twice, while Tom and Matt were still looking in vain for their attackers.

There was a thrashing and kicking in the brush behind an outhouse shed. Tom said, "Nice going, Sam!"

They waited a long time. There was no further sound from outdoors. Tom said finally, "A single watcher. He had orders to kill Jim if he seemed to talk."

Sam's face was gaunt and pinched. He looked at Tom with feverish eyes. He said, "If it wasn't for Gertie—I'm trying to enlist—but I got that thing against me. If it wasn't for Gertie. . . ."

Matt said, "You got more than that against you. . . ."

But Tom put his hand on the boy's arm. He said, "Let's go up and see what you bagged behind the shed."

He took Sam away from the others. They found the body almost at once. It was a wizened, rat-faced little man with a high-powered elephant gun under him,

which Tom immediately appropriated. Tom said, "His name is Gogo Mykle. Ever see him before?"

"No," said Sam Dally.

"He's from Chicago," said Tom. "Strange that Worden should be importing gunsels from Chi."

Sam's face twisted into something which was fear, and something different. He said, "There are others around Hope City. Tough-looking guys from out of town."

Tom said, "He's got ammunition in his pockets. Get it and take this gun back to the house."

Sam made a wry face and gingerly tumbled the little man on his back. He reached down twice, then said, "Can you do it? I'm kinda chicken-hearted—I killed him!"

Tom removed the box of shells, handing them to Sam. He said, "We'll cover him up with some dirt. Have you got an ice-house?"

"Yeah!" said Sam, startled. "You mean Pop?"

"For the present," nodded Tom. "Let them wonder for a day. Can you hide Gertie?"

"No," said Sam slowly. "I haven't got a friend."

"You mean your pals are off you since Gregory Hart was murdered?" asked Tom.

Sam closed up like a clam. He said "I haven't any pals. I've been in jail."



THEY went back to the house. The girl was regaining some composure. She was thin almost to emaciation, but she was taller than Tom had thought. But she went at once to Sam, clutching at him, staring up at his tortured face.

Tom said, "Have you any of your old clothes—too small for you now?"

Sam said, "Why—yes."

"Dress her as a boy," said Tom. "Cut off her hair. It's important."

He and Matt went out and carried the body of Old Jim into the rear of the lot, found the ice house and gently deposited the remains therein. Matt said, "Well, we got Sam. I feel kinda sorry for the gal, though. She keeps sayin' Sam's a good kid, wouldn't kill anyone."

"Women, they tell me, are often that way," said Tom. "I've never had time to find out for myself."

They went to the front of the house. The girl was attired in a loose-fitting tweed suit such as high school boys wore. She did not make a particularly handsome boy, but that was all for the better, Tom thought. He caught the fear and sullenness in her; it was in Sam, too.

Tom said, "From what your father said, you weren't aiming to stick with Worden even before this thing happened. I am after Worden and the Governor. I want to tie them to the murder of Gregory Hart." He paused and Sam Dally shifted nervously, averting his eyes.

Matt said, "What good are these kids? We got the whole State against us—they can't help."

Gertie Dally said sharply, "We know our way around. You don't have to bother with us!"

"That's it," said Tom. "You know your way—we don't. If I hide you out will you play ball with me—on the level?"

The two young people looked at each other. Some message passed between them. They moved towards each other and Sam's hand touched the girl's rough sleeve. Sam said slowly, "Yeah. We'll play 'long. They can't shoot Pop and get away with it. We're with you, Kincaid."

They had to walk back to town, over a devious route. It was late afternoon when Tom herded them in the back way of the Hotel New Hope. They bore packages of cold food and other essentials.

Tom put them in Room 908 and went next door and flopped on the bed.

Matt said disgustedly, "You and me and those no-good young soandsos against Newstate's police force and the Governor and Max Worden! Some battle!"

"I wonder," said Tom wearily, "what the odds would be against?"

"A million to one and no takers!" snapped Matt.

He double-locked the door, placed a chair against it, pulled down the shades and flopped on the other bed. In a moment, so accustomed were they to living with danger, the two gamblers were sound asleep.

But in the next room the desperate boy and girl sat close together and whispered, and were red-eyed with their hammering emotions as night came on. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Monk of Murder

NIGHT-TIME was playtime in Hope City. From all over the country sharpers, the smart girls, the tricksters came to fatten on money earned in the burgeoning war effort. Sooner or later the rabble of hangers-on, many of them actually in the pay of the enemy, would have to go. The Federal Government would have to get tough.

He had a list in his pocket, made up by Gertie and Sam Dally. He had left Matt with them, to keep up their nerve and to watch them, also, in case the fear got them down. He was very sorry for those two youngsters, caught up in the maelstrom of crookedness which had descended upon their community, but he had to be careful of them.

He went down a street and saw a house which was lighted from top to bottom. A cop sauntered up and down, but paid no attention to the place. Tom mounted the stairs and said to a half-hearted guard-

ian, "I'm looking for Max. Where is he?"

He got in without any trouble. The first floor was a bingo game, for cash prizes. He went upstairs. There was a roulette wheel, a dice table, several faro layouts—the old American game in a new American setting. He saw a man he knew from Detroit and asked about Max.

"He ain't been around," said the gambler. "Funny, too. He usually shows about this time. Ain't this some town, Tom? High, wide and handsome!"

"You dealing for Max?" asked Tom carelessly.

"Yeah!" said the gambler. "Can't see why he ain't happy. Makes a sour face every time I hand him the cut. Like it hurts him to take in all this dough."

"Funny guy, Max," said Tom. He went out and tried another house. Everywhere he saw acquaintances from various parts of the country, and some of them talked to him. Nobody had seen Max Worden that night.

But Tom had seen about everything. He had seen thimble-rigs, holdouts, markers, haymarket shuffling, Greek bottoms, and second dealing. He had seen tops and shapes and plumbed dice, he had seen slow rollers and passers. He had seen the clay ball with the mechanical roulette gadget which did more tricks than a monkey on a stick. In fact, he had seen every crooked angle known to man by the time he hit that last gaming house of Hope City, out on the way to Route 21.

The last place was rather swank. The cop in front took the trouble to walk over and examine Tom. Then he said, "Hey! You're Kincaid, ain't you?"

Tom said, "So what?"

"You're wanted. I gotta take you in!" said the cop. He was evidently a rookie and not quite sure about things.

"Okay," said Tom. "I'll just go in and see Max first."

He started up the steps of the palatial, wide-verandaded house. The cop called

after him, "Max ain't been here. I'm lookin' for him—Hey!"

But Tom was already inside. A gorilla in a dress suit appeared and said, "Kincaid, you ain't wanted here."

"So the word has gone out," said Tom. "How're you, Monk?"

"I'm fine," said Monk. "But you ain't. You better scram, Tom. The organization don't like you."

Tom said, "Max, huh?"

"Nobody's seen Max for two days around here," said Monk, wrinkling his simian features. "Gwan now, Tom. Don't make it tough for me—and yourself."

A tall man in a wrinkled black suit passed from a door under an elaborate open stairway into a back room. Tom said, "I'll speak a good word for you, Monk. You were always a pretty good guy. But I got to see the Governor."

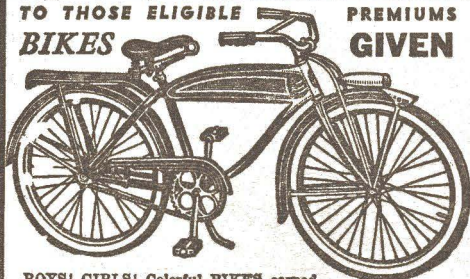
He sidestepped and pushed Monk out of the way with a straight-arm. He plunged forward, making for the door to the back room through which Ham Spelton had gone. He heard Monk shout, so he ducked and slid, grabbing the door-knob. He jerked the door open, went through, drawing his gun.

The room was small. It had evidently been cut into the spacious hall of what had been a luxurious mansion. There was no furniture of any kind, so it was more of a vestibule, Tom thought, with its entries to various sections of the gambling establishment. There were no less than four doors in it, one at each side, the one through which Tom had passed, and two straight ahead, to the back of the place.

And in the very center of the floor lay a man. He was clad in a black suit and his hands were extended, as though he had been crucified upon the parquet oak pattern beneath him. His face was turned slightly to one side, the eyes were hooded, weary. The wide, flat mouth was slightly open, seemingly in one last sigh or groan.

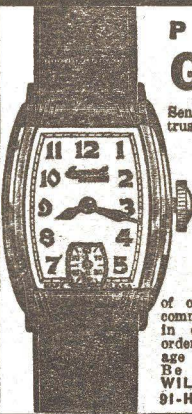
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TO THOSE ELIGIBLE BIKES PREMIUMS GIVEN



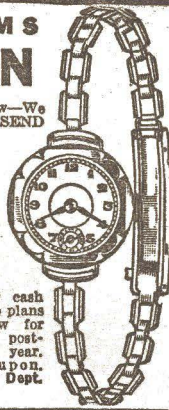
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IT WAS Governor Ham Spelton of Newstate. Between his shoulder blades was a knife haft—the blade was sunk out of sight into the flesh, and there was no doubt that the Chief Executive was very dead.

From the halls came murmurs. Monk and the rookie cop had gotten together, Tom knew. In a moment they would come crashing in and find him with the corpse of Ham Spelton. He stared at the three doors left to him for escape. As a wanted man, he would be in a hell of a spot when the inexperienced policeman found him there.

He gauged the position of the Governor's body, recognizing that a stab in the back would send a man face forward. The head of the dead man pointed at the door to the left. Tom promptly went through to the right.

His reasoning, he thought, was sound. The murderer would be in flight, and had gone this way. There was a corridor, leading to a large room. Tom went down fast, then stopped and put his gun in his coat pocket, keeping a good hold upon it, but pretending to saunter.

The room was full of flossy gaming apparatus and equally uptown people. Evening clothes were predominant. This was the resort of the *bon tom* of Hope City, the new rich and the labor bosses. Tom saw several people he knew, from all over the country. He strolled past the dice table and perceived that the same crooked bones were in vogue here as in the lowest dives in town.

A slim, dark man with an oriental cast of features went out on the terrace, through french windows which overlooked a spreading lawn. Tom went right behind, making his bulk as inconspicuous as possible. The man passed out of the light reflected from the room and melted into shadows. Tom was not five steps behind.

There was the sound of pounding footsteps on the lawn. Tom ducked behind

a low ledge and hauled out his gun. The dark man was joined by two more, who grunted something too quietly for Tom to overhear. Then all three headed for the rear of the grounds surrounding the house.

Tom wanted out, and he was curious about the man who had shown him the way. He followed along. He got as far as a higher hedge, then for a moment he could hear or see nothing. He dutifully stopped and waited. He was bent in a listening posture, close to the hedge when the avalanche struck from three sides.

The first man dived at his legs and, caught by surprise, Tom went into the hedge. There was no sound, and he found himself assailed by a man from the left and another from the right, each armed with blackjacks. The hedge protected him somewhat from the first blows. His long right leg kicked out and sent the first man reeling away, but a knife-blade ripped his trousers and scratched the inside of his calf, and he knew he had escaped death by a miracle.

The thought maddened him suddenly. He came roaring out of the hedge. The gun was in his hand, but he had no thought of firing. The rotten mess of Hope City, Newstate, had thoroughly aroused him. He began flailing with both hands, using the gun as a club—a giant of fury.

One man went sailing clean over the hedge. The man with the knife came weaseling back. Tom dropped the second man with an uppercut, and dove for the knife-bearer.

The man made an eel-like move, seemed to realize his partners had been put out of it. He stopped dead, reversed, and dove under Tom's arm, striking viciously with the knife. He missed, but Tom had to move aside to evade the thrust. In a second the man was gone over the hedge in a high dive.

Tom whirled to snatch one of his vic-

DRAW ONE—TO DEATH!

tims, at least, for questioning. Neither was available. Somehow, all three had gone beyond the hedge. From the gambling house loud sounds were emanating. There was but one thing left to do. Tom crashed through the hedge.

But there was no one waiting for him. There was nothing but a quiet street, and a slowly moving car rolling silently down a slight grade, and as Tom watched, the motor cut on, the car picked up speed and was gone. It turned the corner towards town, Tom noted, before he started to follow, afoot, as quickly as he could go, his torn trouser leg flapping, his person badly disarranged by the fight at the hedge.

His stubborn jaw was set, now. He was in full flight—not away from danger, but into it! There was now a big question mark in his mind—but he thought he could replace it with certain knowledge before morning. The sight of the dead Governor had cemented a vague and growing idea firmly to Tom's conception of the deal in Hope City.

CHAPTER FIVE

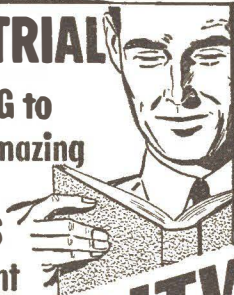
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IN THE hotel room, Tom changed his trousers and talked to Matt. Then he said, "Bring in the kids."

Sam and Gertie Dally were wary, like hunted small animals. They perched upon chairs and stared at Tom. He stated their position, told them about Governor Spelton's death. He said, "You can holler cop on me—they'll pick me up, all right. There are two men—a federal agent and a private copper—who ought to be hot on Max Worden's trail and who might have kept him from making the rounds tonight. Might have, I said!"

Sam Dally took a deep breath. He said, "Max is scared of something. I

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know it. He wanted to get you on his side, then he got scared of that, too. When Pop and I were waiting with him for you, in your room, he was nervous as a cat. He kept shifting around, telling us not to shoot unless you star ed something, but to be ready. We didn't know—"

"Call him," said Tom. "Tell him you're in my room, 908. Tell him I'm holding you, but you got a chance at the phone. Tell him you want help and quick, or you'll blow your top. . . . Tell him you've lost your father—and say you know who is responsible for it, and who killed Governor Spelton."

Sam said, "If—suppose he asks—"

"Hang up!" said Tom. "Talk fast, then shut him off. He'll come down."

Sam went dubiously into Room 908. Gertie stayed defiantly behind, watching Tom. Matt said, "Do we plant it?"

Tom had the shotgun, the elephant gun, the 30-30. He examined them, threw a cartridge into the rifle chambers, took the safety off the shotgun, which was loaded heavily. He opened the door between the two rooms and considered the layout, then went in and slipped the shotgun beneath the mattress of the bed nearest to the door in 908.

He put the rifle just inside the closet door of the same room, then came back into 906 and placed the heavy elephant gun against the wall, concealing it with a coat rack.

Matt said, "Comple e, with sidearms!" and checked his tiny, flat au omatic.

Gertie Dally calmly drew a nickel-plated .32 from somewhere about her person and began checking it over. Tom blinked and Sam came back. Sam was white-faced, but he had a blackjack in his pocket, the handle convenient to his grasp. He said, "Max says he's comin' down—"

Tom said, "Sam and Gertie—in 908. Close the door."

Matt said, "Yeah—you'll get a break

DRAW ONE—TO DEATH!

if we can crack down and finish Worden. You been pretty good kids, and maybe you can beat the rap on Greg—”

Gertie Dally's thin face was drawn, but her eyes went to Tom with something like hope. She said, “Do we get a clean chance to fight our way out?”

Tom looked deep into her in that naked moment, and something he saw there gave him pause. He said slowly, “Is that all you want, Gertie?”

She said, “I want it for Sam. I don't mind getting in the middle. I don't mind taking a chance on gettin' knocked off. But Sam—he's good. He—he's gentle!”

Tom said slowly, “I give you my word that if we come through, Sam can get into the Service—in the clear!”

Tears trembled behind the steady eyes of the girl, but she did not weep. Her voice grew hoarse. “I believe you.”

She marched, straight-backed into Room 908. Tom closed the door behind her. Matt said,

“Maybe you shouldn't have promised that. Maybe someone else'll learn that Sam and his pappy beat Hart to death. I don't see how you can overlook that, anyway, Tom! I'm sorry for them, like I said. I don't see how Sam could have got himself in such a jam. But you can't promise those kids into the clear.” He

Tom said, “We'll keep quiet and wait. Douse the lights.”

THEY sat in the darkness, and Tom turned over his theories. It was easier waiting, with something to think about.

He never heard Max Worden enter 908. There were whispers through the door, and he was aware that Max had joined Gertie and Sam, and then he knew Max would have a master key to all the rooms of the New Hope. He strained,



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heard Sam say, "They went out, I think. . . . You're scared, huh, Max?"

Worden cursed in a stage whisper. "No, damn you! What did you find out?"

"Who is behind all this killing," said Sam sturdily. "And I don't like it. They got Pop—"

Max said, "They what?"

"You ought to know," said Sam. "I killed the damn murderer, and now I know who's behind it—and who killed Governor Spelton!"

Then Gertie's voice rasped, "Don't make a move for a gun, Max, or I'll let you have it!"

Max's whisper was laden with fear. "You've just signed your own death warrants! You think you know something—and if you did, it would be even worse. . . ."

The door opened, audibly, this time. A cold voice said,

"This is a machine gun pointed at your husband, young lady. If you fire, he will be hacked in two!"

There was a moment's silence. Then Tom could hear Gertie's weapon drop to the floor, as she gasped, helplessness, hopelessness in her monosyllable.

The hall light entered through a gap and threw a sliver of pale glow across the floor of 906. Matt was crouched, waiting with the .22, which in his hands was as effective as a larger caliber gun.

Something dropped to the floor with a clink, and the door was hastily re-closed. Tom acted almost before he got a whiff of the gas which rose acridly on the air.

He said sharply, "Matt! This way!"

He jerked at the door to 908, slid around the edge, and stared into the muzzle of the machine gun, which made little, concentric circles, menacing everyone in the room. The cold voice said, "Well!"

The man holding the light tommy gun was stout, greying, eye-glassed. His nose, hawklike, jutting, was the only sign of

DRAW ONE—TO DEATH!

his power. His deep-set eyes were foxy, brazen. He wore the conservative habiliments of a small town banker—which indeed had been his profession for years.

Matt said, "George Grey!"

Tom said, "We've been expecting you. Gogo Mykle was a straight tip-off. You always hire simple guns and get them killed."

Grey said, "Why don't I let loose with this weapon and destroy you now and forever, Kincaid? You keep arising like Lazarus to interfere with me!" The cavernous eyes were red-rimmed with hatred, biting deep into Tom. The ex-banker went on, more easily, "I had this State under my thumb. Then you appear and Spelton gets frightened and Worden gets piggish—and everyone starts making mistakes."

TOM said, "You made the mistake." He was thinking fast, wondering if the three men he had seen at the gambling house were in the hall—or the room they had just left. He made a small gesture at Matt, but the little fellow had his eyes on George Grey and his finger on the trigger of the automatic pistol, and there was only one obsession in his mind . . . to kill Grey. Tom talked fast. "You brought in your mob and turned them loose to kill. You got started, as usual,

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on a murder trail, and you couldn't turn off. Now Ladd, the Fed, and Bojack are both after you. If you dispose of me, they'll know who you are. That's all I ask, Grey! To bring you into the open!"

The arch-criminal said regretfully, "Look at Worden! Scared to death! If I only had you on my side, Kincaid!"

Worden was standing flat against the wall. His face was white as the sheets on the twin beds in 908. His hands were pressed against the wall, as though to shove his way out. His eyes rolled, going between Grey and Tom.

There was something wrong. Tom did not dare take his attention from Grey's trigger finger—but he knew the picture was awry. Grey never faced armed opposition alone. Grey never was unaware of Tom's .38—or of the fact that Tom never needed more than one shot.

Matt was creeping forward, and Tom did not dare communicate with his partner under Grey's watchful eye. Gertie and Sam were sitting side by side upon the twin bed, covering the now useless shotgun. They seemed completely out of it, and the edge of Tom's gaze flicked over Gertie's gun upon the floor near her right foot.

He had it! He tried to warn Matt, but it was too late.

He came around like a huge cat, leaping away from Matt, plunging for the door between 908 and 906.

Three men came in like a cortege of acrobats, never interfering with one another, but getting through the communicating door with terrific speed. The first was the dark man, and his long knife twinkled in the lamplight. The second and third were burly and carried long, limber blackjacks.

In a split second Tom knew that Grey had refused to accept the stalemate, to turn loose his tommy gun and risk detection and ultimate disaster. This was to be

DRAW ONE—TO DEATH!

clean, and Grey was taking the terrific chance on his trained mace men to clean it up in one sweep without gunfire. Grey himself stepped forward and brought the muzzle of his gun down as Matt's vigilance relaxed for a startled instant. He clipped Matt hard, driving him to the carpeted floor.

TOM'S gun hand was muffled by a thrown cloth and the grip of the first, heavy, foreign-looking thug. The second was slamming at Tom's head with the heavy weapon. Over against the wall, things were happening fast.

Worden was impaled. The knife-man, going past Gertie and Sam, had nailed Max through the throat, and the knife point embedded itself in the plaster with a crunch, so that white flakes drifted slowly downward.

But Gertie came up from the floor. Her shoulder was bathed in blood, she was reeling. She had the nickel-plated gun in her hand. As the dark man withdrew his knife and wheeled, Gertie pulled the trigger.

The gun popped. The dark man staggered, bewilderment written on his strained features.

Sam was rolling on the floor. Grey was coming in, the machine gun poised. Gertie's gun hadn't made much noise, and a

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quick finale would let Grey escape—

Tom saw the tommy gun coming down. He summoned his vast strength and threw off the second thug.

He saw a hurtling body coming past him. He saw the gun land upon a skull, heard the low groan of the victim. It was Sam Dally, risen from the floor too late to help, interposing himself. . . .

Tom went over the body of Sam before it had hit the floor. He wrenched the machine gun loose from Grey's hands. His left fist swept in an arching punch, all he had behind it. . . .

His foot slipped in blood.

Tom went down. He rolled over, knees against his flat belly. He kicked out, and came to his feet in the same motion. One of the macemen received the full force of his kick and flew over the bed, crashing on the floor.

Tom got a hand grip on the other. He came forward, seeking to pin Grey in a corner with the struggling, fighting man in his grasp.

Grey was not there, Tom brought his right hand over in a chopping blow. He sank it into the base of the man's jaw, drew it back, drove it again. . . .

He started for the door to the hall. He would track Grey down this time. . . .

He remembered the third of the trained crew of murderers. He remembered that Gertie was on the floor somewhere near the spot where the thug had fallen—that the girl was wounded, alone.

Tom stopped dead. Wheeling, he lunged back into the room. Matt was still; Sam was crawling, head bloody, trying to get to his young wife. Tom dove.

The thug's head was also bloody. Gertie was trying weakly to hit him again with her gun, whose cheap mechanism had obviously jammed, and the cut-throat was choking her.

Tom reached out a long arm. His fist cracked against the chin of the murderer.

DRAW ONE—TO DEATH!

The girl shuddered—gaped for breath.

He lifted her gently, and she stood up shakily. She went over to where Sam was trying to get up.

MATT groaned and sat up. He stared around, his face blank. He counted the three bodies, squinted at Worden. He said dully, "Grey got away!"

Tom said, "He always does."

Matt looked at the two youngsters. He muttered, "Too bad! If only he hadn't maced Gregory Hart."

"When you get fully awake," said Tom, "you'll realize he didn't. Worden and Spelton were not on the kill . . . They had gambling houses to protect, and their cut wasn't very big, anyway. Not after they paid off to Grey. Grey ordered Hart killed—by his own team."

Matt said, "So that's the way it was?"

"Worden led me to it," said Tom. "He was on the fence. He wanted to set us up in a house—then he didn't. Grey had got to him. Grey wanted us on the spot. Worden and Spelton were scared—especially when Ladd and Bojack came in . . ." Tom picked up the house phone and called police headquarters. While he waited for his connection, he said, "You were right—we're not coppers. We're not neat. We get corpses all over the place and don't use our weapons. We got guns stacked all around here and none fired . . ." He paused, then said into the phone, "Your little party is over . . . This is Kincaid, and you can turn Ralph Ladd and Bojack loose . . . Worden is dead . . ."

He hung up. He said, "I'll leave you to explain, Sam. You're in the clear—you'll be a hero when Ladd gets here."

Tom went into 906 and threw his few belongings into his bag. He said, "Out the back way and down to the main highway. We can catch a ride, maybe. . . ."

THE END

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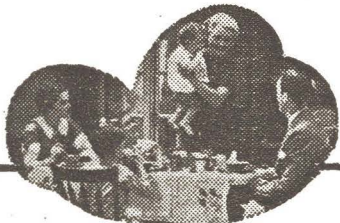
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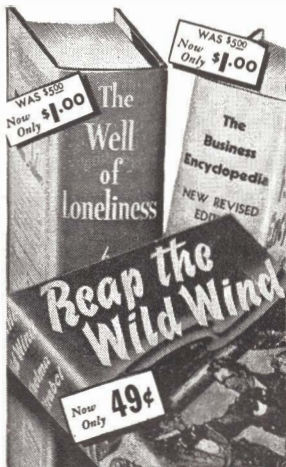
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