Street & Smith's

DETECTIVE

Story Magazine

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

AUG. 7TH

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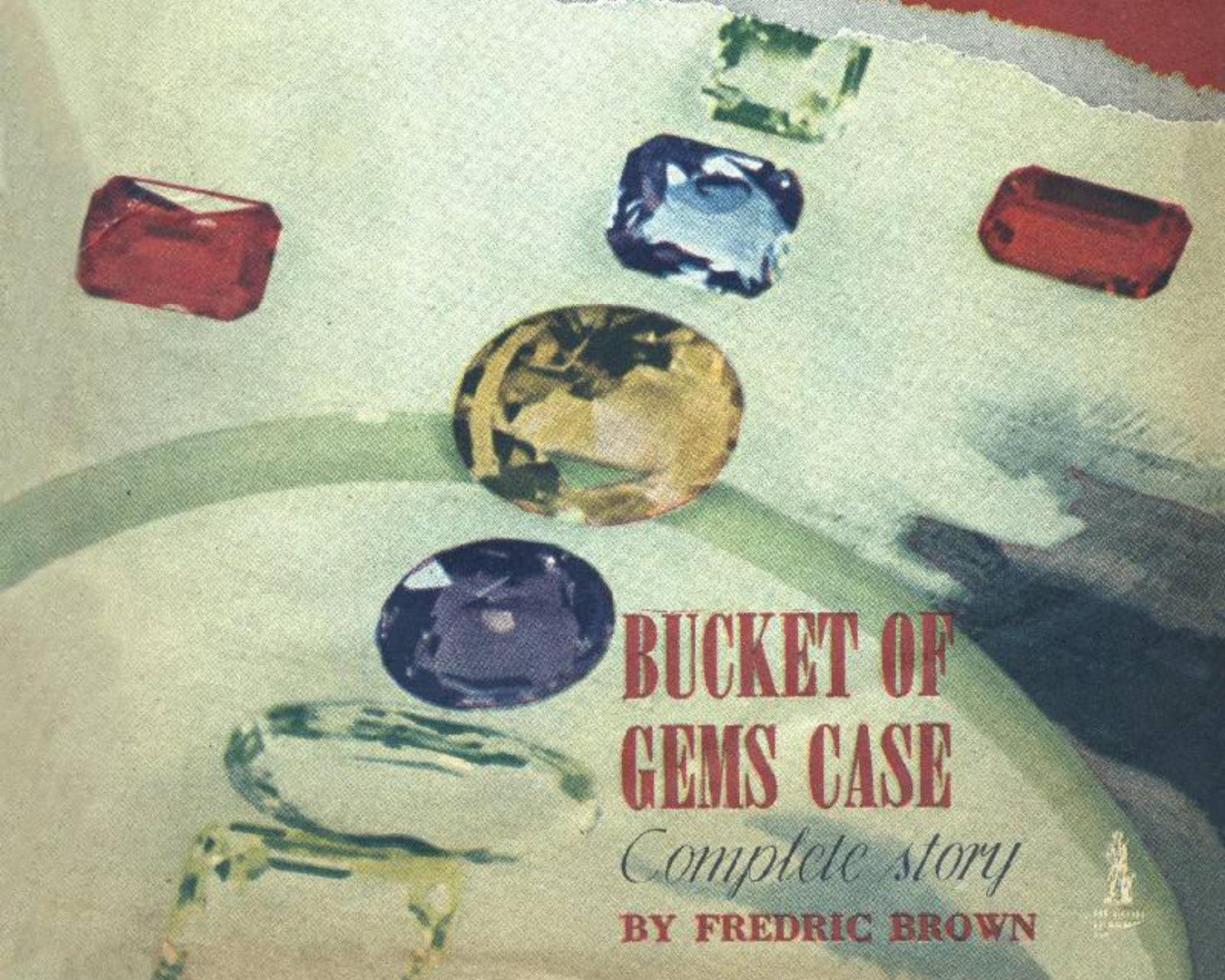

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Complete story

BY FREDRIC BROWN

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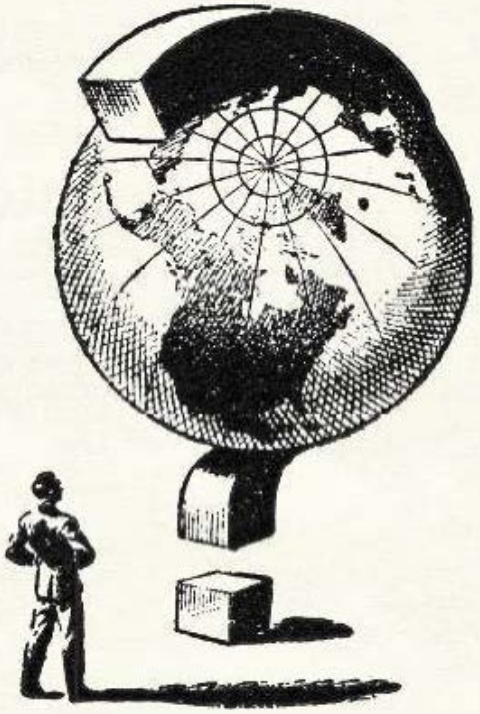

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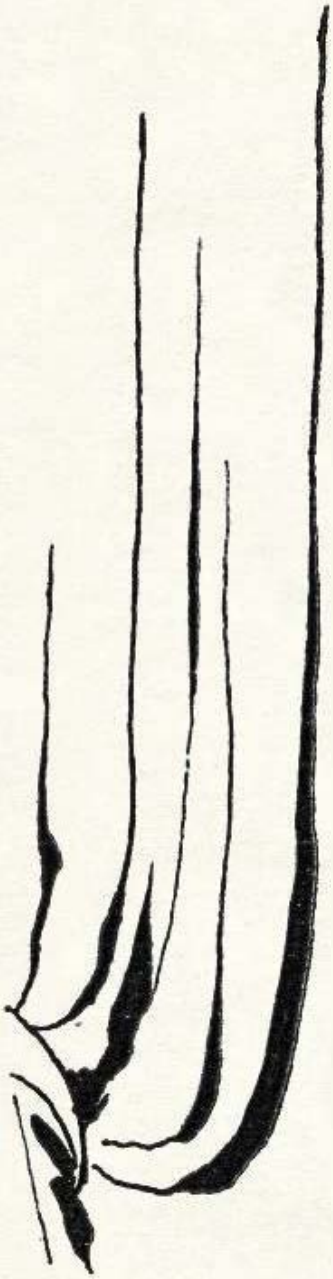

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AUGUST, 1944 VOL. CLXVIII, NO. 4

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DAISY BACON

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THESE ALSO DIE

A Short Novel

BY HENRY NORTON

Absent-minded Ambrose Rountree stops in his favorite tavern for a glass of beer and then all hell breaks loose around him!

I.

FROM where he stood, there were two routes to the hospital on the hill. Both were steep and dark, but the left one was more dangerous, for it led past two beer taverns. Ambrose stood for an undecided moment, then started along the path to the left. He tried to convince himself that he was going this way absent-mindedly, but the thought of what lay ahead made him quicken his steps.

"What the hell!" he told himself defensively. "The taverns are in your sales group. Can't tell when you're gonna sell one of 'em a spot announcement. Just because the wife has a baby is no reason to neglect business. The opposite, if anything. Hundred-fifty bucks just for the doc and the hospital, not to mention all the junk the kid's gonna need."

Light made a dirty yellow splash on the sidewalk in front of Joe's Tavern. Ambrose Rountree slowed to peer through the window. There were no customers in the tavern and Joe was busy back of the counter. Ambrose pushed through the doors and climbed up onto a bar stool.

He said, "Hello, Joe; what d'ya know?"

"Well, all right!" Joe said automatically, and then looked up to see Ambrose's beaming round face. A curious look of defensive embarrassment came over the counterman's features; his eyes flicked toward the door to the kitchen, and returned reluctantly to Ambrose.

"Hello, Mr. Rountree," he said

soberly. "Say, I been figurin', and I don't think I'll be able to take any more radio announcements this—"

Ambrose laughed. It was a good laugh, starting deep in his middle and booming with genuine amusement. "Forget it, Joe," he said. "I'm not working tonight; I'm celebrating. I—my wife, that is, just had a baby girl up at the hospital."

Joe said, "No! Well, ain't you the lucky guy!" His glance rested for a flick on Ambrose's shining bald head. Ambrose put on his hat, and some of the pleasure went out of his laugh. Joe pulled a tall glass of beer and slid it across the counter. "On the house," he said. "Is it your first?"

Ambrose cupped loving hands around the glass.

"I had a couple for lunch," he replied.

The barman thought about that for a minute.

"Yeah," he said finally. "Sure. Any other kids?"

"Two," Ambrose replied heavily. "Girls." And the laughter was completely gone from his voice now. He was a middle-aged man who drooped in all directions, whose blue eyes were tired behind rimless glasses, whose pleasant, heavy face seemed to want to fall into lines of least resistance. He wore a gray, rumpled suit that once had been smart and well cut, but now was too tight by two years.

Joe tried again. "'S'a nice little family ya got there, Mr. Rountree. Missus doin' O.K.?"

"Bringin' her home—"

The rest was lost as the door crashed open. A spry little man stood in the doorway, fighting each return of the swinging door as if it were a personal affront. Any clue to his age was lost in the wise, alcoholic twist of his long face. His mouth opened as if on sliding joints, to present a square of mouth instead of a crescent.

"Take down that door," he ordered.

"Take it easy, Butch," said the barman.

"Name's Irontail, an' I never took it easy in m' life," the little man declared.

"Your name's Butch Foster, and you'd better start takin' it easy right now," the bartender told him. Behind the cover of the rail, his hairy hand closed on a sawed-off section of a baseball bat.

Ambrose offered, "Have a beer on me, partner. I'm a new father."

The little man's face softened, came brilliantly alight with a friendly grin. His mouth was still an odd square, as if the muscles of his cheeks were reluctant to join in the fun.

"That I'll do," he said, "an' then I'll buy you seven or eight."

"One's enough," Ambrose told him. "I gotta be at the hospital."

"Send you up in a cab," Butch Foster said happily. "Nothin' too good for a new father. Hey, whyn't I got a cigar? Where's my cigar?"

Two or three others had come into the tavern, and taken stools along the bar. Ambrose put his

hand in his pocket, ran the change there through his fingers.

"I got it figured different," he said slowly. "I'm the one's being congratulated. Anybody buys cigars for anybody, it oughta be somebody buying me one."

The little man with the square mouth threw back his head and laughed. "You're all right, Mac," he said. "You'n' me'll get along fine. Joe, give papa a cigar." His face sobered and he swung around on the bar stool to grip Ambrose's knee with sudden, fierce intensity.

"I don't get along with most people," he said grimly. "Th' world's fulla stinkers. I like simple guys, with no angles to 'em, guys you c'n figure."

Ambrose said, "There's a few left."

Butch scowled. "Not many." Part of his attention had strayed down the bar, where a conversation was gradually building in pitch and heat. Butch seemed to be trying to follow it, and listen to Ambrose at the same time. His eyes came back unwillingly.

"I like to have me some fun," he said. "I pay for it. I c'n afford to, Mac. I'm makin' three hundred a week, see?"

"You do all right," Ambrose murmured.

"I do fine," the little man corrected. "I'm a construction man, see? I been with Henry ever since Gran' Coulee. Never saw no ships before, but Henry says, 'Irontail, come over to th' coast'. So I come."

"Henry himself, eh?"

"Sure," said Butch. "What's your line?"

"Me?" Ambrose said thoughtfully. "I sell radio announcements."

And for a moment his eyes held a trapped, bitter look. That had sounded pretty good a few years ago. Few? Well, not few enough. But there'd been a time he could've put some punch into it. "I work in radio," he'd say. "That must be fascinating!" was the customary response, and Ambrose would try his best to look like a highly paid man who knew all the radio greats intimately. "Never a dull moment," he'd say.

And that was no lie. Not when your weekly paycheck was forty dollars and you had a wife and two growing kids to support. Never a moment when the landloard or the fuel man or the grocer wasn't breathing down your neck; when the wife wasn't getting some new idea about needing an electric washer or ironer or mixer or how-the-hell many things electric did they used to make, anyway? She wanted them all, and she got them, by the way of the five-a-month route.

And what could a man do but get tired of it, and keep on doing it, anyway? Taking the lip of a fresh-faced sales manager, and scratching for the occasional dime to buy a beer. And now, when prices were higher than a scared cat's back, that forty a week looked mighty small. So you stalled to keep from buying a man a cigar, and you turned down his beers because you

couldn't buy in return.

"'Course I don't make anything like you do," he heard himself saying. "Like that war plant money. But it's a good job, and it's steady." He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. Steady! Hell, it was motionless!

But it didn't matter, for the little man with the square mouth wasn't listening, anyway. The kid with the late extras had come in from the street, and made a dive for Butch's elbow.

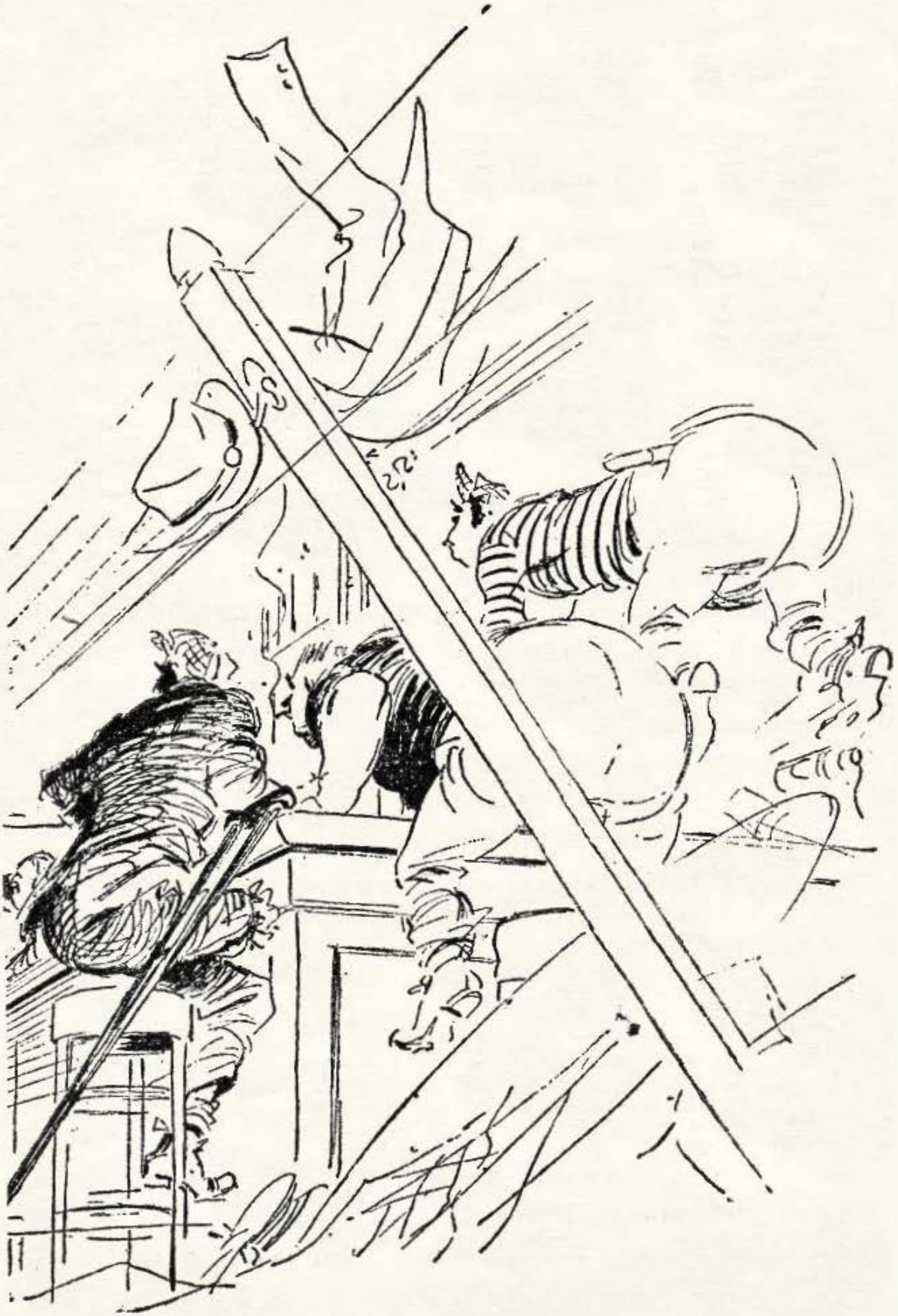
"Hey!" said the kid. "C'n you still do that, huh? C'n you do that again?"

"Can I—" Butch looked around and down at him. "Oh. Make music with my fingers? Sure, listen."

He waved his lean brown hand in front of the kid's face, running a thumb quickly across the finger ends. And suddenly there was music in the air; tiny, dancing notes that came from nowhere and hung shining for a second in the smoky tavern air. It was a child's tune, simple and sweet. The newsboy's eyes got shiny and his mouth came open. He looked at the little man and Butch said, "You can do it, kid. Just keep on tryin'."

"Show me again."

The fingers moved again, and the tinkling notes seemed odd and out of place in the half-filled taproom.



THESE ALSO DIE

The boy tried it, with a look of intense concentration on his face. He went out, finally, still moving his thumb across his finger tips.

"Neat," Ambrose said. "What's in your pocket?"

Butch grinned and pulled his other hand from his pocket. There was a tiny music box, no larger than a watch. The words, "Swiss made," were stamped deep in the metal. It was a compact, beautifully built instrument, true in tone, precise in workmanship. There was a milled wheel for the thumb, a set of cogs that turned the cylinder and struck sharp clear notes from the tuned metal.

"Guy gave it to me to fix," Butch said. "The cogs was jammed. He thinks a lot of it, too. But he ain't so dumb. He knows ol' Irontail c'n fix anything."

Again Ambrose was conscious of a slackening in the little man's interest. It was as though a part of his attention had gone away, drifted from the conversation. There was a sidelong look in his eyes. He stood up abruptly. "I just heard somethin'," he said.

The conversation at the end of the bar was following a not unusual course. It had started with the war, and now one of the men said loudly, "I still think Hitler's right about a lot of stuff!"

Butch Foster's hand was on the man's shoulder before the words were hardly out. The speaker was heavy, twice the weight of the little man. But there was a deadly quality in Butch's serious voice as he said:

"I didn't like that last crack."

"It's none of your business," the heavy man told him.

Foster said, "I think it is."

"Beat it, bud," the heavy man ordered.

"Come off that stool!" said Butch.

The heavy man came, fists swinging. Butch got one sharp blow to the man's face, then went flat on his back from a roundhouse swing. His cargo of drink had as much to do with taking him down as the blow, and he bobbed up unhurt and interested. They slammed through the swinging doors, still striking at each other. Ambrose followed them out.

Butch was down again as Ambrose reached the sidewalk, and this time there was crimson on his mouth. He came to his feet and threw himself like a spear. His head smashed into the big man's stomach, and they both went down.

The sidewalk was crowded now, and Ambrose was shoved aside. When he could see Butch again, the little man stood alone, breathing heavily through his nose. He grinned at Ambrose triumphantly and said, "Well, he went home."

"Look," Ambrose said, "I gotta go."

"Getcha cab," Butch Foster said unsteadily.

He did, through some miracle, and Ambrose saw Butch last through the rear window, with one arm across Old Barney's shoulder. He's probably decided Barney's a war hero, Ambrose decided. Crazy people, he thought. A high-priced

construction man, spoiling for fight or friendship. A big loudmouth, licked and gone home. Old Barney —Funny how many people thought he was a wounded soldier. Ambrose knew how Barney had lost that leg; by getting drunk and falling under a street car. He'd been a familiar sight in the city's taverns for years. But it was common now to think that anybody with a crutch was a war casualty. Butch would probably buy the old sinner a lot more to drink than was good for him. But then, Butch was determined to buy somebody a lot of drinks, and it might as well be Barney. It can't be me, Ambrose thought. I'm late enough now. The missus'll give me hell as it is.

Mrs. Rountree was no more grim than usual. Ambrose sat through the visitor's hour with her, hearing in full detail how her recovery was progressing, and how silly she felt to be having a child at the age of thirty-seven, when the other girls in the ward were eighteen and twenty. Had he paid the light bill, and was he keeping the house dusted, and was he sure he wasn't up to anything? Ambrose wondered if the other visitors left the ward with that same slight, guilty feeling of relief.

He walked back down the hill, through the dark streets. He hurried a little, thinking of Joe's, and the easy hospitality there. No harm in having a few beers, as long as they were to be had. If he hurried, maybe he'd find Butch.

Ambrose need not have hurried. He found Butch in the alley back of Joe's. Face down, with the back of his head caved in from a savage blow. He was getting cold. Ambrose knelt beside him, and for a moment he felt no horror because he could feel no belief. He searched the little man's pockets, not looking for anything in particular. Butch's wallet was still there, fairly well stuffed with money. But the music box was gone.

Ambrose stood up, and the full impact of the tragedy enveloped him. There were things to be done, he knew. He'd have to call the police, tell them he'd found a murdered man. He'd be asked how well he knew the man, and about any enemies Butch might have had. Ambrose thought about the fight. Maybe Joe'd know who the heavy-set man was. That looked like the answer. Had to be.

Ambrose headed for Joe's. There was a phone there.

The place was a shambles. Ambrose paused at the door in blank astonishment. Broken glass littered the floor, and one of the doors had been broken from its lower hinge so that it sagged crazily. A pinball machine lay on its side. Joe looked up from his sweeping, and his face was grim and dark.

"That louse," he began. "That trouble-makin'—"

"What happened?"

"What didn't?" Joe said sourly. "That Butch Foster. He got into three fights here, an' the last one was a mess. He picked some tough boys."

Ambrose's throat was dry.

Quick caution moved in him. "Where's he now?" he asked, trying for unconcern.

Joe swept vigorously at a puddle of splintered glass. "Probably dead in a gutter someplace," he said. "He didn't like the guy that was servicin' the pinball game, so he tips it over. An' those guys don't take a thing. They're workin' for Jack Flora. They got protection."

Jack Flora! Ambrose winced at the name, and an idea began to form in his mind. It hadn't always been that way in town, but the pinball business was a big one now. Jack Flora ran the west side, and Tom Surber took care of the cross-river trade. If Butch had got himself mixed up in part of that, there was no great surprise in his death. And there was more. If Flora's boys had taken care of Butch, they'd be most happy to take care of anybody who guessed too closely about it. Ambrose would be very smart to forget the whole thing.

Ambrose said. "Did he leave with them?"

"I wish he had," Joe said. "He sparred with 'em, an' one of 'em knocked his ears down. But he was back after that, buyin' beers for Barney."

"Then who—" Ambrose began, then left it there. The question was clear in his mind, but there was no answer. Not yet. Joe might have felled the little man, using that section of baseball bat. Joe had done time, Ambrose knew. Or it might have been the Hitler sympathizer, or Jack Flora's men. It was none of Ambrose's business. It was a fine thing to stay out of.

The thought of Butch Foster came to him. A tough little guy, too cocky by far, but a guy who could take time to please and dazzle a newsboy. A guy who'd take on anybody, big or little, who talked out of turn. He'd buy you a beer or break your arm with equal pleasure, and he liked simple people.

Slowly, Ambrose said, "Well, guess I'll go home."

II.

Ambrose Rountree lived in the south part of town, but the street car he caught a block from Joe's was headed north. It rumbled down a long dark street, lurched out around a bend and came to the head of the business district. Ambrose got off close to the heart of town and went up to the newspaper office.

The radio station was on the eighth floor of the newspaper building, owned by the paper, with a general acquaintance between the people of news and radio. Ambrose nodded to four or five men in the city room, and sat down across the desk from Ben Harris.

"Gimme a cigarette, Ambrose," Ben said. Then, "What're you doing around here this time of night?"

Ambrose tried to look devilish. "Fellow has to cut up a little while his wife's in the hospital," he said.

"Yeah." Ben Harris took it calmly. "I bet."

"Hey, I was talking to a guy a little while ago," Ambrose said. "Is this pinball-and-slot machine racket

in town really as tough as they make out?"

"Are you kiddin'?" Harris asked sharply.

He flipped a still damp paper across the desk, and Ambrose's startled eyes took in the banner head. "GANG LEADER SLAIN." It was a story that could have been written in the crackling days of prohibition and the lords of gangland. Tom Surber, east-side king of the coin machines, had been killed in his office back of his big beer parlor near the shipyard. His safe had been opened neatly, and gutted. It was reported that Surber had about one hundred and ten thousand dollars in the safe to cash shipyard checks, for the following day was a bank holiday. The account went on to say that the identity of the killers was not known, but that parties in the opposition pinball crowd were being rounded up for questioning. A boxed editorial on the front page expressed disapproval of the whole business.

"Looks like the town's growing up," Ambrose said.

"But fast," Ben Harris said soberly. "Where there's plenty of dough, you get the fringe that wants it, plans to take it any way they can. This's just a start."

"Hundred and ten G's," Ambrose murmured.

"Sure, Surber's dough," said Harris. "And what'd it get him? A guy walks into his office and tells him he's out of business, as of now. Surber's tough, but a .45 talks big."

"That how they killed him?"

"As a matter of fact, no. They smashed in his head with the traditional blunt instrument. Quieter that way. They didn't blow the safe either, they opened it."

"Doesn't sound like a gang killing," Ambrose said. "I thought they went in for tommy guns."

"The end's the same," Ben told him.

Ambrose said almost angrily, "I don't give a damn how many of those torpedoes and hot shots knock each other off. But there's other guys get hurt. Little guys havin' some fun and doin' a job. They die, too! And that's not right, Ben."

"What's eating you?" Harris asked.

Then, somehow, Ambrose Rountree was telling Ben all about it—the meeting with Butch, the overturned pinball machine, and the huddled figure in the alley back of Joe's. He told it while the night city editor sat quietly listening, studying Ambrose with intent eyes.

And then Ben Harris said, "Sometimes this happens, Ambrose. Sometimes people like you and me walk right into a mess like this. It's like you're walking past a smart, clean building and all of a sudden the sidewalk elevator opens and you see the dark, dirty part of it, instead of the shining front." Ben stuck a cold pipe between his teeth and bit on it. "You know that part's there, but you don't have to look. There's nothing to keep you from walking right on past. You can go on and forget it, can't you?" He aimed the pipestem at Ambrose. "Can't you?"

"Sure. Sure," Ambrose said. "What makes you think I was gonna do anything else?"

"O.K.," Harris said. "Just remember that murder's a bad business. People get killed that way. You got a family, remember? Keep your nose clean."

"Hell, I'm going to," said Ambrose. "I'm going home right now."

The car he took went still farther to the north, and crossed the river finally to run out to the east side of town. The car was crowded with men in tin and plastic helmets, in heavy clothes, carrying lunch buckets. It was the graveyard shift, headed to the yards.

Ambrose stepped off the car a few blocks short of the shipyard transfer. He was in a suburban shopping district, alive with people, bright with neon, though the hour was close to midnight. There was a sign about midway down the block that said, "Tommy's," and Ambrose pressed through the crowd on the sidewalk to enter.

There were a half dozen men along the bar, silent and alone. There was a grimness about their drinking, an odd sense of expectancy. Ambrose ordered bottled beer. He finished half the bottle before he turned and spoke to the man at his right.

"Too bad about Surber," he said.

The man's startled face turned to him, and away. It was a young face, bleak with a toughness that could only have been cultivated. The lips were thin and cruel, the face as hard as if it had been cut from rock. He looked at Ambrose for a moment, then turned back to his glass.

"Now the way I got it figured," Ambrose said conversationally, "Surber must have been slipping. This job came off too easy. Somebody must have had a line in to him and it must have been a dandy."

"All right," the man said. "Go on back."

He gave no visible sign, but in the instant of his talking, there was another man at Ambrose's left elbow, a big man with big hands that took Ambrose by the elbow.

"My beer," Ambrose said.

He reached for it, and was spun away from the bar by the hard-faced one's quick movement. Ambrose turned, and made another vain grab for the beer bottle. "By God, I paid for that," he said.

"No, you don't, fat boy," said the other man. "There's too many tricks a smart guy can do with a beer bottle. Come on back where we can talk."

Their going seemed to attract no interest. The stolid men along the bar did not turn or raise their heads as Ambrose and his convoy passed them, went into the big office at the rear of the hall and closed the door. The men released him then, and the bigger of the two pushed him down into a chair.

"What's your name, fat boy?" he said.

Ambrose said, "Hey, you can't—"

The thin-lipped man slapped him on the mouth.

"Talk," he said.

"Go to hell!" said Ambrose Rountree. It was not what he had meant to say, the words seemed to form themselves, but before he could amend them the large man had pulled a chair to sit facing him.

"Lay off him, Cal," he told the hard-faced man, and there was something in his bluff and readily assumed friendliness that was infinitely more threatening than the other's frank enmity. "Now look, fat boy. We don't want to have no trouble. You came in here of your own free will and started sounding off. All we want to know is, what's your name, and what's your pitch?"

And Ambrose began to see what it was, now. Those stolid men along the bar were part of a careful bit of stage dressing. Bait for a trap—and Ambrose had stuck his foot in it. Tommy's men, waiting for a sign from the foe, hoping for Jack Flora, probably, but willing to take any smaller game that ran before their guns. "Smarten up, Rountree," he told himself. "You're in a jam. You're right in the middle of a gang war!"

He narrowed his eyes. "Suppose I was a cop?"

The man called Cal said, "See, Jack? No use."

Jack shook his head. "You're no cop, fat boy. What would a cop be doin' here?" He laughed, and the sound and the motion of his head and lips conveyed no merriment. "A cop, he says!"

"All right," Ambrose Rountree said, and there was sudden anger in his voice. "So maybe you've bought all the cops. But you haven't bought the decent citizens! That's all I am, just a salesman. I don't make a dime while you're makin' a dollar, but there's enough guys like me to put a stop to your killing and robbing if you push us far enough. And I mean that!"

The amusement left the big man's face as though a sponge had wiped it clean. For a moment he seemed to fumble for something to say, and a little tingle of pride went along Ambrose Rountree's spine. "By the Lord," he thought, "I think I got him told."

Cal moved uneasily.

The man called Jack said, "Well. You got it all figured out, haven't you? I suppose you could tell us who bumped off Surber and cracked that safe."

There was a place here for caution, but Ambrose's new pride left him no time for it. "Sure," he said. "The safe was opened by somebody who knew the combination. It was one of Surber's own men double-crossing him."

"Got any idea who?"

"The cops could find him, if they weren't so busy going after Flora," said Ambrose. "It's as plain as the nose on your face."

A genuine grin came over the big man's face, and even the dour-faced Cal let his mouth relax. The big man stood up and clapped Ambrose on the shoulder, lifted him to his feet and gave him a friendly push. "You're all right, chum," he boomed. "You get right after those cops. Give 'em hell for bein' so dumb!"

Ambrose turned at the door.

"You won't be so damn' smart when Flora's men come round to take over."

The big man chuckled. "I thought you knew, fat boy. I'm Jack Flora."

If I'd made this many trips across town in a working day, Ambrose thought, I'd be complaining to the boss about being overworked. He was headed crosstown again, and he wasn't going home.

Something nagged at him; kept him from letting the thing alone. As the street car clattered through sleeping streets and came at last to the bridge across the river, he busied his mind with the problem. There was small reason to connect Surber's death with the killing of Butch Foster. Only that they both had been killed in the same way, by a smashing blow from behind. That, and Butch's fight with Jack Flora's men. And the more Ambrose thought about it, the less it seemed like a gang killing. There was a point there that eluded him, he was sure.

Even more puzzling to Ambrose was his own unwillingness to let the thing alone. It was none of his damn' business; he had a wife and kids; he'd already spent—he figured rapidly—forty-five cents for beers and carfare that he had no right to spend. He'd tried to tell off a gangster, and got laughed at. And he couldn't convince himself he was doing it for Butch Foster, he seen the man alive once.

Still, that was the closest to the truth. The thing that was moving him was the knowledge that crime knows no boundaries; that in the grip of gangdom these also die; the little guys, the innocent, the careless ones. And maybe in stalking Butch's killer, he was striking a blow for all these. For his wife and kids, and everybody's wife and kids.

He got off the car in a district of cheap hotels and rooming houses, and found the one that matched the address he'd got from the shipyard office. The dark windows made him conscious of the lateness of the hour. He'd feel like hell tomorrow, with no sleep, he thought, and went wearily up dark stairs to the second floor. He knocked softly on Butch Foster's door, expecting no answer, getting none. He tried the door and found it locked. There was no trouble about that. Ambrose's back door key was a skeleton; it turned the old-fashioned lock on the first try.

He drew the blinds carefully before turning on the lights, and his first startled thought when he saw the room was that he had mistaken the address. Certainly, it was a poor place for a man who made three hundred a week.

There was a threadbare rug on the floor, an iron bedstead with a clean white counterpane, a dresser and a desk by the solitary window. It was clean, but it was far from luxurious. There were tools scattered about, tiny, precise tools that called for unusual skill in handling. The cramped closet held work clothes, a pair of slacks and a jacket.

Ambrose opened a dresser

drawer. He found a neat pile of paycheck vouchers, and a sort of grim pity came to his face. The vouchers were in the amount of fifty-seven-fifty a week. There were other things there, too, an official looking paper, a couple of business letters. The story was easy to read.

Butch Foster had been a construction push a year or so ago, and he'd been making good money. That much was evident. But this was just as plain; the interlude with the Seabees; an interlude in the Solomons. And when Butch Foster came back, there was no strength in him for construction. There was the same skill in his hands and in his mind, but wounds and fever and suffering had seared out the drive and the fight it took to lead a gang of men. The pay vouchers told the story. Butch Foster, clean-up helper.

Ambrose put down the last of the letters. "I know you now, Butch," he said aloud. There was something else he knew. No matter how tough the trail got now, Ambrose would never stop, until he got Butch's killer. Or until the killer got him.

It was then he heard the pounding on the door, and realized he had been hearing it for the past few minutes. There was no stealth in it, it was loud and brazen and threatening, the demanding clamor of someone who had nothing to fear, only something to threaten.

A hoarse voice said, "C'mon, open up!"

Ambrose crossed silently to the window. Below, the street was still and dark, and it was a sheer drop from the window to the pavement; thirty feet, and that was too far for a middle-aged, tired salesman of radio spots to tumble. Mouse-trapped, he thought, and turned wearily to the door. He turned the key, and stepped back, leaving the door closed.

"It's unlocked," he said.

The two men hadn't waited for that. They'd slammed the door aside and come in as soon as the key grated. They were advancing threateningly upon Ambrose Rountree as his lips still framed the words. One of them carried a gun, but the sight was a pleasant one. Ambrose grinned.

"Well," he said. "Policemen!"

"You Rountree?" asked the short, black-haired one.

"You bet," said Ambrose. "An' I've got something here, boys."

The taller of the officers, the blond one with the Police Positive in his hand, looked incredulous. "You hear that, Jonesy?" he demanded.

Jonesy said, "Yeah. A murder rap, an' he's tellin' us he's got somethin'."

"Flora's taken over at Tommy Surber's place," Ambrose said, "and he wouldn't have dared do that if he'd had a hand in either of the killings. The only way to tie it up is to find the men Butch Foster fought with at—" He stopped.

The cops were looking at him oddly. As if they thought he were crazy. The silence went along, until Jonesy said finally, "Anything

you say may be used against you, Rountree."

"Against me?" Ambrose said. Then, more threatening than the officer's blunt warning came a sudden thought. "You called me Rountree. How'd you know my name?"

Jonesy said, "Ambrose Rountree, radio salesman. A little short on dough lately. We were told we'd find you someplace in the picture, bud. After Foster's body was found, we got a call that you'd found it first and failed to report it. So we waited for you here."

"Who called?"

"It's the truth, ain't it?" Jonesy said.

The other cop broke in, "What's all this about Jack Flora. You know him?"

Ambrose thought about that. "What the hell!" he thought. "It didn't work the other way, maybe it would this way." He said arrogantly, "What do you think?"

It brought a flicker of indecision to Jonesy's dark face, and Ambrose moved in on that. "You boys had better take it easy, runnin' down fake phone tips," he said. "You're liable to wind up on the wrong side of the fence. How'd you like to get assigned to a school crossing?"

"Now, look, buddy—" the tall cop began.

"Call him up," Ambrose said impatiently. "Call Flora. Tell him Rountree said the cops are gettin' dumber than ever. An' give him your badge number."

Jonesy said, "We can take this a little easy."

"You know where you can find me," Ambrose said.

He walked out of the room, fighting the desire to run. Neither of the officers moved to stop him. His steps were hollow on the stairs, but no louder to Ambrose than the pounding of his heart. Then he was in the dark street, and still there was no pursuit. He rounded the corner at the end of the block and broke into a lumbering run.

III.

There was an all-night lunch counter about a block from the newspaper office. Ambrose made that his first stop in town. He knew, when the proper approach was made, the counterman could manage to lace the coffee with a big shot of brandy. Ambrose felt he needed that, although the fifty cents it cost would make him short on cab fare to take his wife home from the hospital. He was finishing the first and considering a second when Ben Harris came in. Ben squinted at Ambrose in quick concern.

"My Lord, man," he said. "Get out of here!"

"What's this?"

"Everybody in town's looking for you, you idiot. The cops've got a pick-up order, and Jack Flora's been calling all over town for you. What in hell have you been up to?"

Ambrose Rountree's chin, somehow, managed to find a stubborn plane. "I haven't done anything wrong," he said. "I'm going to find who killed Butch Foster."

The night editor let his breath

go out in a sigh of exasperation. "You haven't done anything wrong," he repeated, "except failure to report a murder, impersonating an officer, resisting an officer by trickery. They'll put you in jail forever."

Ambrose choked on his coffee. "I been framed."

"What did you expect?" Harris demanded. "What'd you declare yourself into the game for, anyway? You had no stake in it and yet you had to start playing cops-and-robbers!"

That was painfully true, and yet—

"That Butch was a good little guy," Ambrose said.

"Even good little guys get murdered," Harris told him. "The cops got the boss out of bed; there's a damn' good chance you'll get fired, even if you don't get jailed. Look"—he put a hand on Ambrose Rountree's arm—"go on home, pal. The cops'll pick you up there. Don't talk! I'll get the company's lawyer to work for you. But go straight home, and no more wild pitches!"

Ambrose was suddenly very tired and very old. The night seemed like a particularly impossible dream. This was not for him, this dashing, story-book hero stuff. He looked at Harris, feeling a little silly and apologetic.

"O.K.," he said. "Right now."

He started out and then turned to come back. "Did they find out what killed Surber and Foster?"

Harris said, "They were both brained with a chunk of wood. They found tiny splinters in both skulls."

"Ask 'em to check and see if the splinters came from the same piece."

"Oh, lay off," said Harris. "You think the guy is going from one murder to the other carrying a chunk of stove wood?"

"Ask 'em anyway," Ambrose said.

He went home. There was growing up within him now a curious coldness, as though something vital had been taken out of him. There was a listlessness in the way he came to his own front door. He put the key in the lock and stood a moment before turning it. It'd be cold. He'd let the furnace go out with all this crazy running around town. Good thing his wife wasn't home, or he'd catch forty assorted kinds of hell.

He would anyway, he supposed. She'd be sure to find out if the police picked him up for questioning. She'd certainly have to be told if he lost his job. He wasn't worried about that, he could get some kind of job in the yard. There was an opening for a clean-up helper.

He went to the door and walked through the dark house to the kitchen. He found the light switch and stood blinking in amazement.

Jack Flora said genially, "Time you were gettin' home, fat boy."

Cal didn't look so genial. He stood by the kitchen door, in an angle that shielded him from windows and doors alike, and he held a large black automatic in his hand.

"How did you get in here?" Ambrose demanded.

"D'you hear that, Cal?" Jack Flora said. "The guy spends twenty dollars on a front door lock, and ten cents on the back door, and then he wonders how we got in. How'd you get in to Butch Foster's room, fat boy?"

Ambrose nodded acknowledgement of the thrust. He was caught in the working of an idea that lifted him from his present danger. Flora's presence here could mean but one thing. There was a connection between Butch's death and the killing and robbery of Tom Surber. In going to Butch Foster's room, Ambrose had stepped somewhere near the truth. That's what had smoked Flora out, that's what had brought the cops swarming. The truth was there, somewhere. He wished he knew as much as they thought he did.

"You tipped the cops I was going to Foster's room," Ambrose said. "But, unless you killed him, how did you know he was dead? How did you know I'd found the body? And how did you know I'd go to his room?"

Cal's eyes were steel-gray.

"What did you find in Butch's room?" Flora asked.

"I didn't find the hundred ten grand."

"You want to play tough, fat boy?"

"Answer some of my questions," Ambrose said.

Jack Flora said reluctantly, "I got a phone call from somebody, I don't know who."

"The cops got one, too," said Ambrose.

"I called the cops," Flora admitted. "But I didn't know they were going to send Jones."

"So there's still a cop you haven't bought?"

"Let's level," Cal said roughly. "What we want to know is, do these two kills tie together? An' we don't wanna wait all night to find out."

Jack Flora said nothing, and that was surprising. Ambrose studied the point a moment, and drew a far, deep conclusion.

"Where do you go from here, Flora?"

The big man made a distasteful grimace. "Hell, I don't care about that," he said. "I can't bid against a hundred G's. I want to come out alive. And if you're smart, you'll figure the same way."

Cal said roughly, "I think we rub him."

The phone bell shrilled.

"That'll be Harris," Ambrose said. "He knows I'm here. You'd better let me answer it."

The big man hesitated, and then nodded. Cal thrust down his hand in an angry gesture as Ambrose went past him to the phone. Ben Harris' excited voice was audible in every corner of the room.

"You were right, Ambrose." he said. "Both men were killed with the same chunk of wood. The police think it was a piece of hickory."

Relief made Ambrose silly. "Hickory, dickory, sock!" he said to no one in particular.

"You better sober up," said Ben Harris. "The cops are interested

in that guess you made. They're on their way out there now."

"Boy, will they get a surprise," said Ambrose.

"Ambrose," Harris said, "I wish you'd buckle down and face this thing. You're in a—"

Ambrose cradled the phone softly and turned to grin at Jack Flora. "When those cops get here," he said, "you tell 'em about me trying to tie those murders together. Get right after them, big shot."

Flora's face got a little greenish. "Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here."

"You own the cops," Ambrose said mockingly.

"Damn you, get going!" Ugliness was naked in the big man's face, and he brought his arm up viciously. Ambrose lost all enthusiasm for his joke. He turned and preceded Flora into the front hall. Cal was already there, his face against the window of the door.

Cal said, "They're here."

"Back way!" Flora snapped.

"Two of 'em started around," said Cal.

"They want you pretty bad, fat boy," Flora said. "And so do I. Come on, Cal, we're crushing out of here. And if anybody stops a bullet, it better not be fat boy. We need him, but bad."

Cal opened the front door softly. They were down the steps before the two advancing cops saw them. There was an astonished shout; then Cal's gun made a ruddy spot of flame and one of the policemen yelled in pain. Jack Flora and Ambrose ran, bending low, scooting for the car that was a dark blur down the street. The other cop's gun was in action now, and Cal fired again from the cover of a holly tree on the lawn. Something cracked on the sidewalk by Ambrose's feet and went whining into the dark. Then Jack Flora was shoving him into the back seat of the car, tumbling in behind him, and the car was in motion.

Ambrose pulled himself up, sitting on the floor of the car. The roar of the motor covered all sounds of pursuit. He asked, "What about Cal?"

"We'll take care of him if he doesn't get killed," Flora said. "Bnt we had to get away."

"I get it," Ambrose said. "Cal was expendable."

Jack Flora said, "You talk too much."

The get-away man at the wheel sent the heavy car rocketing through the dark streets in a series of sharp turns till they were sure they were not followed. Then Jack Flora sat up and looked at the salesman.

"What are you shakin' about?" he asked.

Ambrose said feebly, "I been shot at!"

They went to a modest hotel on the west side, up a rear stairway, and into a pleasant suite of rooms that smelled musty and airless. The driver, Dippy, turned on the radio first, then opened a window. There were tins of food and bottles of liquor in the big bathroom. There was a well stocked arsenal in the bedroom.

Jack Flora stuck his head out of the bathroom. He had a tall glass in his hand. "What'll you take?"

"Rye," Ambrose said, "with a Scotch chaser."

He was beginning to forget the ominous whine of that bullet in a new worry. Jack Flora had brought him here expecting him to clear up the mystery that tied Tom Surber's death to Butch Foster. Or—and this made no more pleasant thinking—Jack Flora was guilty of both, and had decided to eliminate Ambrose as a threat to his safety. On either count, there was trouble ahead.

He took a pull at his drink, and swallowed again quickly to catch the fiery rebound. He looked down at his stomach, half-expecting to see it glow through his clothes. A sort of desperate calmness came over him.

"Well," Flora said, "let's get at it."

Not a bad-looking guy, Jack Flora. Big, husky, with crisp black hair in waves across a well-shaped head. You'd take him for a prosperous produce merchant or something like that, if you hadn't seen the chill light in his eyes as he sent Cal out to trade shots with the law.

"The hell of it is," Ambrose said, "I don't know anything more about it. If you've brought me here expecting me to solve the damn' mess, you're crazy."

Flora made an impatient gesture. "I'm no dummy," he said. "I've got you figured now. You're just a guy who managed to be on the spot when things happened. You made a good guess on that club. Maybe now you can make another good guess on who swung it."

Ambrose said, "I've shot my wad."

"No," said Jack Flora, and leaned forward. "You must know something more. There must be something you've seen that adds up, something we can go on."

Ambrose shut his eyes. It was pleasant to sit in this big soft chair, warmed by a hefty drink. Dreamily, he said. "Butch had a music box. He was pretty drunk. He had a fight with a guy that liked Hitler. Then he started buyin' drinks for old Barney."

"That one-legged barfly?"

"Yeah. Hangs around Joe's."

"Hangs around everyplace. I've seen him over at Tommy's, too, lots of times."

"Anyway," Ambrose said, "Butch got me a cab an' I went up to the hospital. When I came back, I found him in the alley."

"How about the pinball machine he busted?"

"I didn't see that; I heard it from Joe. It was while I was gone. He tackled a couple of your guys, an' they lowered the boom on him."

"They told me about it. I don't think they killed him, or they'd have said so. Had he been robbed when you found him?"

The words seemed to float in front of Ambrose. "He still had his money, but the music box was gone."

Flora said angrily, "It's screwy. I think it's a cop frame. Both them guys bashed with a hickory club—

It's a night stick, sure as hell. Did you see any cops around Joe's?"

Ambrose snored gently.

Dippy said, "Shall I wake him up, boss?"

"Let him sleep." Jack Flora looked at the pudgy little salesman and shook his head in slow wonderment. "Let him sleep. Fat boy's had a busy night."

The windows of the room were dark again when Ambrose woke. Jack Flora was sitting on the bed, looking at him. Ambrose sat up and rubbed his jaw.

"Musta dropped off for a minute." he said.

"It's eight o'clock," said Flora.

Ambrose said, "I gotta get to work."

"Eight o'clock at night," said Jack Flora. "You slept all day."

"I'll get fired!"

Jack Flora grinned without amusement. "You'd play hell goin' to work. The cops want you worse'n MacArthur wants Manila."

"But jeepers, my job—" He stopped.

Bad as that was, Ambrose Rountree thought of something worse. "My wife! I gotta take her home from the hospital tonight. I oughta be there now!"

Jack Flora said, "Come on. I'm goin' that way."

The big car that waited at the back entrance was full of men and guns. There was another behind it, similarly loaded. Ambrose saw Cal in the back seat, with a bandage on his left hand. Dippy spoke to Flora.

"All set," he said. "We got the four streets covered into Joe's, an' two guys there now. I called the cops myself, but they won't be lookin' for so many."

"Let's go," said Flora.

The cars rolled out of the alley and headed west. Ambrose turned a troubled face to Flora. "I'm going to the hospital," he said.

"Sit tight," Flora told him. "Maybe we all are."

The grim caravan poured into the black funnel of West Washington street, along a way already lightless and deserted. They slammed past hurrying pedestrians who did not give them a second look, and came at length within sight of Joe's Tavern. A block from the rendezvous a parked car winked its lights as they passed.

Four men went in with Ambrose and Flora, forming a tight-packed guard around them. The others waited in the cars with motors running. Joe's face went white as the phalanx crushed in through the door. His hand moved uncertainly toward the section of baseball bat, then came up to lie flat on the bar.

"Take it easy, boys," he said. His lips were thin.

"It's O.K., Joe," Flora said easily. "You, sit down!" The last was snarled at a big man who had started to slide down from one of the bar stools.

"That's the guy that liked Hitler," Ambrose murmured.

There were other faces he knew. Old Barney was perched on a stool, with his heavy crutch leaning

against the bar beside him. He turned to look at the men, and then turned back to his bottle of beer. There were two others who had been here last night. Ambrose guessed, from their tight watchfulness, that they were Flora's men.

The big man started to climb back on his stool. "You can't keep me here," he said. "This's a free country. I'll call the cops."

"Damn' right it's a free country, an' it's goin' to stay that way in spite of you Hitler-lovin' sons—" Ambrose stopped, suddenly conscious that the voice was his.

"And never mind callin' the cops," said Dippy. "They're on their way."

Down the block an air horn blasted two sharp notes, paused, and climbed an octave. Flora swept one hand up. "They're here," he said.

It was Jonesy who entered first. but now he wore the insigne of a lieutenant of police on his jacket. Three uniformed men came in behind him. Their holsters were open, their steps wary.

Flora said, "Hi, Jonesy. Where's Bleeker?"

There was a species of triumph on Jonesy's face.

"Bleeker's a sergeant in the Bureau of Records now," he said. "I'm in charge of homicide now, Flora."

"Well," Jack Flora said. "Payday in the mines!"

The cop's sharp eyes flicked to Ambrose Rountree. "I'm always gettin' phone calls about you," he said. "An' they're always right. So come along, Rountree; I'm gonna put you where you're safe."

"I'm safer now than you are," Ambrose said.

Jonesy's dark head tipped up slowly at the tone of Ambrose's voice. His dark eyes went quickly around the room. He was no fool, the new lieutenant of homicide. He read the signs correctly: the men who had moved behind him to block the door; the two who sat negligently on bar stools that just happened to command the room; Cal, close to Flora, with his right hand hidden in his pocket.

"I thought of that," he said. "Listen."

The wailing of sirens cut through the night, going low and throaty as they slowed. There were more than one, and Lieutenant Jones smiled grimly.

"Riot squads," he said. "The commissioner's with 'em, Flora. If you want a showdown now, you can have it."

"I want nothing except a chance to talk this out quietly," Flora said. "And I'm not going to jail to do it. The answer's got to be here."

"You'll go where I say."

"Watch the door," said Flora.

"If I live to be a hundred," Ambrose thought, "I'll never see anything like this—"

The street was filled suddenly with men in blue. They pressed inward around Joe's Tavern, and behind them was a great confusion of motor sounds, and darker, looming shadows. Voices rose in anger, and in command. And then the doors bulged inward. Every blue-

coat that came in entered between two men, his hands pinned to his sides. They ranged themselves along the wall with military precision. It seemed a smartly executed maneuver, until you saw the faces of the cops. Those faces were, more than anything else, bewildered, unbelieving.

"I outcount you two to one, Jonesy," Flora said.

There was strain on Jonesy's face, leaving it pale and taut. He bit his lips and said nothing.

The commissioner came in last, and his anger was a flaming thing. "By God, Jones," he choked, "what kind of thing is this? Is this your—"

"Oh, shut up, commissioner," Jack Flora said. "I called the cops. I wanted to get everybody at one place at one time, so we could figure this out. You can't blame me for wanting a few of my boys around, can you?"

"You're cooked in this town," the commissioner told him.

Flora shrugged. "I've been cooked ever since this thing broke, so far as the law's concerned. But unless I clear myself with my own men, I'm through for keeps. This is just one more town to me, copper. But if the boys get the idea I engineered this double kill, I'm a gone pigeon. So, let's be talkin'."

The commissioner said, "I don't get this."

"You don't have to," Flora told him. "I c'n take Surber—that's a business kill. The boys understand stuff like that. But if I go slapping over little punks like this Foster, they figure I'm kill-crazy. That don't work so good. See what I mean?"

"Then who did kill him?" Jonesy asked.

Flora said, "O. K., fat boy. Who?"

"God! I don't know!" Ambrose replied.

There was an ugly shifting in the crowd that filled Joe's Tavern. Ambrose thought, "It's like a chess game, with both sides moving up strength, piece by piece. It looks like a draw, and then something cracks. And I'm the object and either side could see me lose, and like it. Get scratchin', Rountree, if you want to see that new daughter again!"

Jonesy said, "Look, I—"

"Wait a minute," Ambrose broke in. He moved ahead, feeling his way. "I'd know, if I had all the facts, but you guys are holding out on me. So, nuts to it!"

Jonesy said, "Bluffin'."

"He called the murder weapon, didn't he?" Flora pointed out.

"Holding out what?" snapped the commissioner.

Ambrose turned to face him. "How was Tom Surber's safe opened?"

The commissioner said, "Combination."

"What kind?"

"Tell him, Jones."

"It was a strictly modern deal," Jonesy said reluctantly. "A sonic device. You had to whistle a tune or something, and that broke an electronic beam and cracked it."

"You had to whistle?" Ambrose demanded.

"Well—" Jonesy paused. "It was a series of musical notes, in perfect pitch, in the right order."

Ambrose reached backward to find a stool. His knees were suddenly weak. So simple, so easy, so deadly. And right under his nose all the time!

Flora read his face. He came over to stand within inches of Ambrose Rountree. "You know! So get talkin'! You think this mob turned out just to tangle with the cops? Fat boy, you and I are on the spot. If we don't come clean on this it's curtains!"

Jonesy said dryly, "You can say that again!"

"Take it easy," Ambrose told him. "I think I've got it. But I don't think I can prove it."

"Give us what you've got," the commissioner ordered.

Ambrose stood up then, and walked across the room. That bar stool was the last place in the world he wanted to be when things broke. He stood with his back against the front window, and tried to keep his eyes from stopping on any single face.

"You guys overlooked a cinch bet on this," he said. "Two, in fact. Butch Foster was a quarrelsome devil, and Tom Surber was nobody's soft touch. Whoever killed either of them had to be somebody they'd never expect trouble from. Otherwise, they'd never get close enough to swing a club."

"That lets me out," Flora said. "It's right back to the damn' cops, where it belongs."

"There's something else that makes it look like a cop, too," Ambrose said. "The hickory club. Ben Harris called the turn on that. A guy can't walk from one murder to another carrying a bloody club. Not unless he has a damn' good reason for carrying it."

Belligerently, Jonesy said, "Name some names!"

Ambrose rubbed his sweating palms against his legs. "That I will, as soon as you begin to show some signs of sense. I told you Butch Foster carried a music box when he was killed. When I found him the music box was gone. You didn't think that was important."

Jack Flora said, "Music box! "Wait a minute!"

"Getting it?" Ambrose asked. "That music box was the combination to Surber's safe. It jammed and Surber gave it to Butch to fix. Butch didn't know what it was, so he showed it around. And somebody knew!"

Silence was the answer to that; a sudden, stricken silence. Ambrose fixed his eyes on the floor, lest they betray him. He hoped one of these high-powered guys, cop or gunman, would be quick enough. He went on:

"So the guy knocks Butch Foster on the head. He's a buddy, it's easy to do. He goes over to Tommy's, and again he's a familiar, unobtrusive object. No suspicion. He slams Surber on the head, opens the safe, and off with the dough. Doesn't even bother to leave a false

trail. He knows Flora'll move in when Tom is found dead. And that's cover enough."

"Then it wasn't Flora?" Jonesy asked.

"Hell, man, no!" Ambrose said angrily. "Who'd have a better chance to snoop out that music box combination than a guy that hung around the joint all the time? Who'd be carrying a chunk of hickory around handy for murder with less notice than a guy who walked on a hickory crutch? Who could slip through a tavern any easier than a barfly like Old Barney?"

Barney got down off his stool so slowly that no one thought of interfering. He said fuzzily, "Tha's sure a pipe dream, boy. Give us another chorus."

Ambrose said, "Wait'll the cops compare splinters from your crutch with the ones from those two skulls!"

Then Ambrose saw one of those tricks a smart guy could do with a beer bottle. Barney caught his bottle by the neck and cracked the bottom out on the bar. He swung the jagged rest of it straight at Lieutenant Jones's face. Cal's hand moved in a quick blur, and a single shot cracked. The flying bottle dissolved in a spray of glass that fell harmless to the floor. And they closed with Barney.

"Cripes!" Ambrose thought. "That one-legged devil's goin' to whip the whole bunch." For the crutch flailed up, then down, and two men staggered back to drop on the floor. Barney's face was contorted and purple with rage. He got a glimpse of Ambrose over the shoulder of a lunging cop, and he yelled furiously. The crutch leveled in his misshapen hand, and came hurtling like a harpoon toward Ambrose, as Barney went down under a smother of bodies. Ambrose's knees forsook him then. He slumped to the floor, and the flying hickory spear went over his shoulder to shatter the window in a shower of glass.

Mrs. Rountree woke him that night, after midnight. "Ambrose," she said thoughtfully, "who was that nice man who brought us home in the limousine? Fuller?"

"Flora," Ambrose corrected. "Jack Flora."

"Peculiar name," said his wife. "Where in the world did you meet him?"

"Business call," Ambrose replied.

"I liked him," said Mrs. Rountree. "Will he be coming out again?"

"He's out of town now," Ambrose told her. "I think it's permanent."

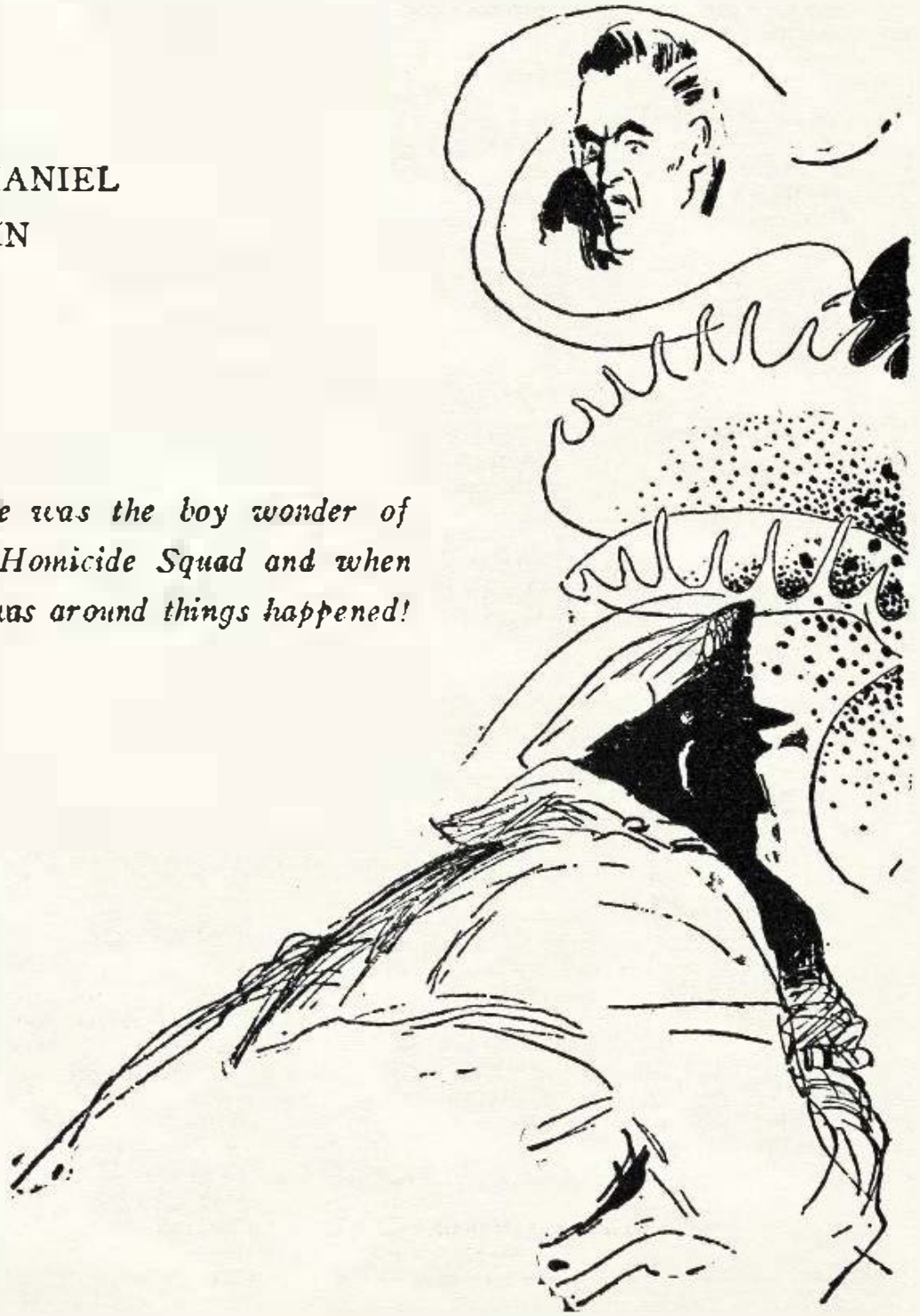
There was a moment's quiet. Then: "Ambrose," she asked, "has there been any news? I haven't seen a paper since I went to the hospital."

"*Sh-h-h.* I think I hear the baby," Ambrose said. He got up and went into the nursery. Maybe I can handle it tomorrow, he was thinking. But not tonight, Lord. Let me have tonight to think up a story!

THE END.

POISON WITH A PAST

BY
NATHANIEL
NITKIN



● *He was the boy wonder of the Homicide Squad and when he was around things happened!*

A Novelette

I.

Murder invaded the stolid Riverside Drive neighborhood, its mask ripped off. Apparently, the profile that murder had presented to the ordinary man was only deep as the tabloids. Now it was shamelessly exposed; something raw, ruthless, and nasty. And the butting in of the homicide squad blitz wagon with three prowl cars on that bleak day shocked the burghers

out of their serenity.

A lean army lieutenant—just five-feet-seven—w o r m e d his way through the crowd. It was his manner rather than his boldly featured face which drew women's stares. He was a d'Artagnan in modern khaki with a swashbuckling trench coat fastened to his body by a tight belt, and completed by a rakish cap. If one of the uniformed policemen had seen him, he would have recognized Don Hadley, the boy wonder of the homicide squad. Now he was Lieutenant Don Hadley of Army Intelligence.

A department car skidded to a stop beside the blitz wagon, accompanied by the squeal of screaming brakes. It disgorged a tall, mustached Dante in a black alpaca coat that hung loosely from his bony frame. His trade marks were an ancient hat of uncertain age, and a highly odorous black cigar clamped in his mouth. Don Hadley grinned. He would have recognized his former boss, the garrulous-and-taciturn Inspector O'Shea anywhere.

Hadley was through the police cordon with a bound. Before a cursing cop caught up with him, he materialized in front of the inspector and offered his hand. O'Shea glared at him. And then after recognition, his pale-gray eyes twinkled.

"Well, that explains everything," O'Shea grumbled. "The jinx—that's you—is here. We're blessed with a queer murder. I thought the army'd make it a difficult career, but I'm wrong. You've managed."

"Well, it's sort of revenge for your nasty behavior when you were my boss," Hadley grinned, shaking O'Shea's hand.

"I see its charm," O'Shea growled. "Come up. It's quite in your line. A stiff with more glamour than a pin-up girl. Unknown *modus operandi*. The fool m.e.'s up there. He phoned and said it's poisoning. He swears it's a queer stuff. And he hasn't the talent to make that stuff talk."

Hadley followed the inspector into the apartment house. "Who got killed?"

"Frederick Shelby, the explorer fellow with more lives than nine cats."

The murder had taken place in Professor Alexander Travers' apartment, G-4 on the seventh floor. When an excited boy opened the elevator door, Hadley found himself in a gloomy hall with dark, mournful tapestries which were accented by sombre shadows. The professor's murky apartment was unrelieved by the combined light of a f e w imitation electric candles, and it had the appearance of a macabre mezzotint.

There were books everywhere; thick manuscripts musky with age and volumes pungent with the smell of fresh printer's ink. Books with intricately embroidered leather bindings and paper-covered pamphlets; books in English, French, German, and Sanskrit. Evidently the professor had a single track mind, for all these books were on Hindu literature with several volumes on the Hindu Bible. The rest

were the writings of Vedanta philosophers.

The body of Frederick Shelby was in the library. It lay on a deep-purple davenport to which it had been removed. A detective had chalked the original position on the floor. The room was a bedlam of voices, shuffling feet, scratching furniture, and this rumbling roar was punctured here and there by explosive oaths. Over that human beehive watched a very corpulent man, benign like an enormous Buddha except that he wore a smartly pressed suit. He smoked a pipe whose bowl was wrapped in layers of felt.

Hadley grinned. Dr. Buck, the medical examiner's tour man with a celebrated mania for pipes, had found another meerschaum. He was coloriug it by covering it with felt, and by smoking it constantly.

Then Hadley looked at the corpse and he frowned.

Frederick Shelby already had entered the first phase of death's chemistry, primary flaccidity. All his muscles were relaxed and he should have had the peaceful expression of a man in an endless sleep. But his features were appallingly contorted with pain forever frozen by his sudden descent into oblivion. It was more than agony. It was an encyclopedia of passionate human emotions—horror, surprise, anguish, accented by fury at the unknown killer who had robbed him of his most precious possession, life. Oddly, Shelby's suit and shoes were immaculate.

O'Shea blinked at the body and swore. As if reading the inspector's thoughts, Dr. Buck said, his pipe clamped between his teeth:

"Poisoning. But don't ask me what it is. I don't know."

"Make a guess, please," Hadley suggested.

Dr. Buck shrugged. "Maybe it's atropine, maybe scopolamine. Maybe both. I won't be surprised if it's something else. Which is no help, you know."

"Perhaps he just died naturally?" O'Shea asked hopefully.

Dr. Buck shook his head. "Definitely not, unless you can explain to me how the stiff has all the symptoms of violent poisoning, yet died naturally. I'll anticipate your next question. He died between an hour and an hour and a half ago. Look at him again."

The m.e. had shifted the lamp so that a ray fell full upon Shelby's body. Hadley saw a point that he had missed; Shelby's skin was blue-white. Indeed, the corpse looked like a bluish Roman statue which someone had mischievously draped with modern clothes.

Without comment, Hadley nodded at O'Shea who called a detective. After shaking hands with Hadley, the detective said in a detached monotone:

"Witnesses don't know much, sir. They're cooling their heels in the next room: Professor Travers, a swell doll, name of Mary Devine, and Dr. Paul Starr, a college teacher. They say they started a jawin' session with this Shelby guy. Then Shelby gets worked up and

passes out. They don't know what to do. Like a bunch of kids, I guess. The doll suggests they remove him and call a doctor. They do. And the croaker phones for an ambulance. The interne, smart guy that fellow, figures it's a murder. So he calls us. Got the croaker and interne in the kitchen where they ain't gettin' no chance to put witnesses wise. That's all."

"Good work." O'Shea nodded at Hadley who asked, "Any traces?"

"The place is lousy with prints but none of them mean anything. Looks like a million people handled these books." The detective paused. "One more thing, sir. The stiff smoked a coupla fags before he died"—the detective pointed to a pack of cigarettes on a table—"but so did everyone else."

Hadley picked up the cigarette pack with his handkerchief and gave it a quick study. It was only a standard sized popular brand that could be bought in any store. He quietly put it back.

The detective continued, "We sent all stubs and ashes to the blitz wagon. The long-haired boys said in a hundred words, nothing wrong."

The professor's physician and the interne were called to the library. They backed the detective's story, and O'Shea let them go with instructions to be on hand for further questioning. Then the inspector met Hadley's glance. He nodded at the dining room, where the professor and his guests were being kept. Hadley shook his head. He crossed the library to the bookshelves.

Like those in the foyer, the books were on Vedanta philosophy with a few exceptions. Beside the open bookshelves, there were locked cases whose windows were barred by heavy iron screens. They contained old unbound manuscripts in Sanskrit.

O'Shea growled: "Dear friend, what do you expect to find over there?"

Hadley turned away from the books. "It gives us an idea what kind of people we're going to meet. Dilettanti, people who live in their dreams, usually. Come on, we'll talk to them now."

Hadley and the inspector went into the next room, followed by a detective-stenographer.

The small dining room retained the library's melancholic atmosphere. The furniture was stolid and massive and heavy, and had the appearance and odor of old age.

Besides a bored, gum-chewing detective, there were three people, two men and a woman. One of them was an elegant elderly man whose mane of carefully brushed white hair contrasted sharply with his youthful pink skin. His eyes were small and black, like shoe buttons. He was Professor Travers, and he said that he taught Oriental literature at Columbia University. The other man, Dr. Paul Starr, was a botanist. The army had sent him to the Asiatic jungles to write a descriptive list of edible and poisonous plants for its air

corps pamphlet. He had been given a medical discharge because of malaria; he still showed its effects in his sallow complexion and nervous eyes.

Instead of the bespectacled, skinny woman whom Hadley had expected to find, he discovered nothing wrong with Mary Devine. She was just a little over five feet, and her long blond hair was neatly brushed, making a nice frame for her regular features. She had won a fellowship in Oriental literature at Columbia, which Hadley learned from Professor Travers, the self-imposed spokesman.

None of the witnesses knew any possible motive for Shelby's murder, as Professor Travers said in a classroom voice:

"We don't know much about Shelby's past. We aren't interested. We've nothing in common besides

the Vedanta. And we never talked about anything but Hindu philosophy. As a matter of fact, we met at the Vedanta Society."

Neither did they know Shelby's movements before he arrived at Professor Travers' apartment. He had been in splendid health, though he had complained that the weather was bad for his old malaria.

Leaving O'Shea to question witnesses, Hadley studied Mary Devine, and the more he looked at her, the more he liked her. However, her eyes betrayed a vague fear. Perhaps it was because the shock of Shelby's sudden death was a recent and vivid experience. On the other hand, she might have a reason for terror. For the way she glanced over her shoulder at the library from time to time, was definitely not an abstract act.

Then the inspector finished his cross-examination and he nudged Hadley, who said: "Let me recall. You and Shelby were talking about—"

"The Vedanta," Professor Travers interrupted in a weary voice.

"I don't understand. You'll have to explain the Vedanta."

The professor's tone was slightly contemptuous. "It's a philosophy of life. It's pretty hard to explain. At any rate, Hindu scholars thought of it a thousand and five hundred years ago. Just a minute, don't dismiss it as silly idolatry. It definitely is not." He sighed with resignation. "Swami Atulanada can explain it better than I. Why don't you come to the Vedanta Society with us?"

"Maybe I will, some other time," Hadley said. "Now what brand of cigarettes do you smoke?"

Professor Travers raised his hands to the ceiling. "The detective in the other room asked us that question in his peculiar slang. Now that you've made a point out of it, I'll explain. Shelby forgot his pipe. Starr ran out of his private brand. He blends his tobacco. I had a full pack. So we all smoked my cigarettes." He frowned. "Incidentally, Miss Devine doesn't smoke."

Hadley nodded. "Thank you."

The rest of the interview was desultory, and O'Shea let them go after taking their names and addresses. He cautioned them to stay in the city until they were told that they were free. Then he left the apartment with Hadley, whom he invited to dinner at the Victory Kitchen. It was a Times Square joint that looked like a crowded down-at-heels bar with bare wooden tables and hard chairs. But the food was superlative.

"I confess I'm stumped. What do you make out of this murder?"

"That confession is a virtue, my friend. Anyway, it's your worry, not mine," Hadley said, putting down a cup of coffee. "A famous person killed by an unknown poison. No motives. No suspects. The murderer—that's if it's a murder—covered his tracks thoroughly. Well, it's too early to know definitely."

"Are you hinting at suicide?" O'Shea demanded belligerently.

"It's a possibility."

"Thanks, pal, but I'm not sure.

Tell me, what would you do if you were working on this case? I've my own ideas, but—"

Hadley lighted a cigarette with amused eyes. "I'm on leave, old man."

O'Shea snorted, "You're a swell help!"

II.

Hadley could not forget the murder. More exactly, the picture of Mary Devine drove all other thoughts from his mind. At the Officers' Club he speculated about Mary Devine. Then he went to the Hotel Algonquin bar to think no more of her—without any success, however. In his imagination, her fear became mortal and over her hovered an abstract but strongly tangible reign of terror.

He gave up and went to his hotel. He took a shower and retired. Still Mary Devine was in his mind.

The nightmare that Hadley dreamed was horrible. Mary Devine had changed to a Hellenic goddess, walking noiselessly along a scarlet pavement. Her face was expressionless, and her golden hair glowed like silken corn stalks in a bright sunlight. Then the color of the pavement changed to a sinister purple, accompanied by the beat of drums. An ugly cloud, massive and satanic with olive and gray and black tones blending into each other, rose into the sky. Like a gigantic amoeba, it expanded, thrusting dirty tentacles out to engulf Mary. She saw it and fled from it in panic, screaming in terror. The cloud leaped at her and exploded over her head. It showered droplets of foul steam on her. Then the fog cleared and the pale sun shone upon Mary Devine. She lay on a black pavement, dead as common clay, with fright etched on her face like the corpse of Frederick Shelby.

Hadley awoke with a start. Sunlight streamed through the window. He looked at his watch; it was not yet seven thirty.

He got out of bed and threw a robe on. He glanced out the window. Below, Lexington Avenue was almost deserted, with a lone taxi crawling along here and there, like tiny toys on a Norman Bel Geddes panorama. One block down the street, the Grand Central Palace was painted with deft touches by the rising sun.

A shave and a cold shower cleared Hadley's head. While drying himself, he thought of Mary Devine again and scowled. He was becoming romantic. Damn it! Detective-Sergeant Hadley had been a tough cop with a hard-boiled attitude toward dilettante women. Yet Lieutenant Hadley, the impersonal intelligence officer, was sentimental over such a woman against his better judgment.

Hadley did not fool himself. Many months in Africa could make even a confirmed misogynist long for the sight of an American girl. The smell of her perfume would be exhilarating, and the touch of her soft hands would soothe away any soldier's troubles.

All at once, Hadley realized that Mary Devine's life could be in dan-

ger, extremely so. She might have known that in spite of her sophisticated veneer. She had betrayed fear and if the murderer had been in Professor Travers' apartment, he would not have failed to notice it. A man, having committed murder, would be gripped by savage emotion. He would dread retribution. And in his urgent fear, he would not hesitate to kill all who had the slightest suspicion of his guilt.

But who was the killer? The method of murder was an unknown quotient. So was the motive. The poison was a mystery. More disturbing than that, there was not a single suspect unless Professor Travers and his two guests were included. That premise was hardly logical at present.

Yet, unless the case was broken and the murderer caught, Mary Devine already had a reservation in the morgue.

Hadley put on his trench coat, savagely jammed on his hat, and left the hotel. After breakfast, he took the subway downtown and strolled toward Center Street headquarters. When he entered the homicide squad office, detectives cracked jokes at him. He ignored them and walked toward Inspector O'Shea's private room.

A uniformed sergeant shouted a warning not to open the door. Hadley leered at the sergeant and yanked it open.

Inspector O'Shea was in the office and opposite him sat Mary Devine.

"Come in," the inspector said without enthusiasm. "I was going to telephone you."

Closing the door, Hadley pulled a chair toward the desk and straddled it. "The mystery cleared up yet?"

"It's still a mystery," Inspector O'Shea replied dryly. "Autopsy confirmed poisoning, that's about all. Though the m.e. sent some organs to the toxicological laboratory. No word from them yet. I suspect they're stumped, which serves them right. But listen to Miss Devine." He turned to Mary Devine. "Tell him what you told me."

Mary Devine picked a sweet smelling flower from the inspector's desk and gave it to Hadley. The flower was long, bell-shaped and white with a single yellow pistil. Its whiteness was startling; it glowed with a peculiar, evanescent vitality. Its stem and its maple-shaped leaves were dark-green.

"What's this?" Hadley demanded.

Mary answered in a melodious mezzo-soprano voice that Hadley liked, "In India, they call it *dhatura*. It's metel nut in other parts of Asia."

"Let's get down to brass tacks. Tell me about it."

"You'll be surprised. You've no idea how much poison every bit of *dhatura* holds. I'll quote a passage from Hindu writing just as an example. 'Its taste is pleasant and unctuous. If given in small doses, it intoxicates strongly, and if two drachms are given, it proves fatal at once.' In Rajputania, mothers feed *dhatura* to unwanted girl babies. It can be mixed with any

food. With tobacco, too. It kills without leaving any trace. And not even modern chemists can isolate it unless they know what to look for."

Hadley whistled. "Gosh! That's an interesting poison. It killed Shelby?"

"I believe so," Mary responded. "I got this by special delivery today. Paul Starr got one, too, and so did Professor Travers."

Hadley rubbed his jaw, examining the *dhatura* flower. "I see. The murderer's a queer fellow. He warns you he's going to kill you. The same way he murdered Shelby?"

Mary Devine shuddered. "Y-yes."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know."

Hadley rose and crossed the office to a bookcase, from which he removed a green volume. It was Muenscher's *"Poisonous Plants of the United States."* He glanced through the index until he found what he wanted—Datura. Then he turned to the indicated page.

"Here's the dope. *Datura stramonium,* alias Jimson weed. It grows wild in this country. It's quite poisonous, that's right. But it's more of a narcotic than a killer."

Mary shook her head. "No, not the same thing. *Datura stramonium* was introduced here. But it isn't *dhatura,* which is very deadly."

Inspector O'Shea interrupted, "You're quite an expert on *dhatura.*"

"The situation was pretty obvious when I got the flower. And Paul and the professor did the same. I have to protect myself. So I went to the library to get the facts on *dhatura.*"

Hadley's look at her carried respect. He told himself: "She's got plenty of common sense. That's what a dilettante hasn't. I was wrong about her." Aloud he said:

"All right. Here's a paragraph on metel nut. You're right, Miss Devine. It's *Datura metel.* Very common in India. The plant's lousy with five poisons—atropine, hyoscyamine, scopolamine, solandrine, and hyoscine."

"Holy cats!" Inspector O'Shea ejaculated. He picked up the phone and dialed a number. After getting an answer, he spoke earnestly, stopping only to ask Hadley to read aloud the list of poisons. Then he hung up and said:

"Called the toxicological laboratory and told them what to look for. They didn't thank me, though." He took another cigar from his humidor. "Now that we're sure it's murder—frankly, a queer murder—I'm going to put my best men on the case."

"You're a genius! But you won't keep me out of it," Hadley retorted.

"You slay me. I thought you said you're on leave," O'Shea said in a sarcastic voice.

"I can do what I please."

Then, as he escorted Mary out of the office, he was aware that the inspector had winked slyly at her. He glared quickly at O'Shea, whose expression of assumed innocence only confirmed his growing suspicion that the inspector had known he would take the challenge. For it

was a dare. A quest infinitely more dangerous than tiger hunting in the Bengal jungles. A tiger struck with blind ferocity. The human prey was subtle and cunning. His claws and fangs were invisible weapons that plunged his hunter into oblivion quicker than the mad charge of an enraged giant cat.

When Hadley emerged from police headquarters with Mary Devine, he said, "You and I are going to see Starr and Travers. They may know something."

Mary glanced at her watch. "I'm pretty sure they'll be at the Vedanta Society. Swami Atulanada is their favorite. He's giving a lecture. We can make it in time."

Hadley nodded and hailed a cab. "What's the address?"

Mary told the taxi driver, and Hadley judged it would be at 71st Street near Central Park West. In the cab, the lieutenant leaned back and closed his eyes momentarily. He had a definite lead now. He knew what had killed Shelby—*dhatura*. On the other hand, he had no idea how much *dhatura* Shelby had taken into his system. If there were a lot of poison in Shelby's body, the surmise was that he was killed at once. The less he took, the longer it would have taken the poison to act.

He brought his mind back to his surroundings and found Mary staring at him with expressive blue eyes. He smiled sheepishly.

"I was thinking about the murder, you know. Listen, you can help. Perhaps you can tell me how close Travers and Starr were to Shelby."

"That's a big order," Mary replied with a laugh. "I'm not much of an authority on them. But let's begin with Paul. He hardly knew Shelby. As a matter of fact, he met Shelby for the first time last night."

"I see. What do you think of him?"

Mary's eyes grew more suggestive, and a faint color crept into her cheeks. She said, in a teasing voice: "He's a nice fellow. I like him."

Hadley felt the bitter pangs of jealousy and, silently, he groaned with disgust. He was a sentimental romantic! He managed to keep a poker face, however, but he knew that his screaming actions betrayed him. He changed the subject quickly:

"How about the professor? He's an interesting item."

Mary hesitated. "They were pretty chummy. You know how a common interest draws friends closer. Well, in their case it was the Vedanta. They've collected volumes of rare Sanskrit manuscripts, which they willed to each other in the event one dies before the other."

"Just a minute," Hadley said, leaning forward with sudden interest. "How valuable are these manuscripts?"

"They're priceless."

Hadley whistled thoughtfully and looked out the taxi window. The cab was passing through Washington Square. He leaned back and asked Mary about herself. He learned that she had worked her

way through college, that she had won a fellowship in Oriental literature at Columbia. She felt that after the war, knowledge of Oriental languages and literature would be immensely helpful. Of course very, with the world shrunken by criss-crossing airlines, Hadley told himself. By this time, his opinion of Mary Devine had undergone a complete change. He told himself that she was definitely not a dilettante, but a woman with a practical mind.

Then, subtly, Mary made Hadley talk about himself. He described some previous murders which he had solved, and when the taxi roared up Central Park West toward 71st Street, he put his foot down:

"Hell! Why should I talk about old murders when there's a gory one right now? I can show you how it's done, and I will."

In a few minutes the cab stopped in front of the Vedanta Society. It was a three-story brownstone that was indistinguishable from the other rooming houses right and left of it; it was identified by an ordinary sign.

Hadley paid the driver and followed Mary up the stone stairs. A buxom Irish woman admitted them, and they climbed the carpeted stairway to the second floor.

The meeting room—it could not be anything else—was a fusion of two rooms. At one end was a bare pulpit; the windows were covered by gold cloth. On one side of the room cases were filled to overflow with all sorts of books. Hadley found later that there were exactly one thousand volumes.

Most of the people in the room were elderly men and ladies with a sprinkling of young women. Hadley judged that they were so bored by the banality of their humdrum lives that they sought an escape in the Vedanta. They were the type that preferred intellectual adventures to physical activity.

Professor Travers and Dr. Starr sat in hard chairs near the pulpit. They talked earnestly to three swarthy Hindus in black clericals.

Abruptly, Mary nudged Hadley and pulled him toward a couple of chairs. For an elegant Hindu with gold cloth over his black clericals had entered. He was a smooth-shaven man with broad shoulders, and he was quite handsome even when judged by Western standards. He walked with less noise than a cat toward the pulpit.

Mary whispered, "Swami Atulanada. He's a Hindu philosopher. They say he's a great genius. Perhaps they are right. Otherwise, I don't see how he earned the right to put the title, *Pandit,* scholar, before his last name."

"He looks like an epigram," Hadley retorted.

Swami Atulanada mounted the pulpit, faced the hushed audience, and then he began his lecture in a rich, restrained voice:

"Your world experience and mine are illusions because we do not know reality. The only reality is knowledge. Our sensual experiences definitely are not. Why?

Consider this then. Suppose you were deaf, blind, and suppose you have no sensation of touch and taste. Would you know these illusions which you call experience? No! On the other hand, if you pursue knowledge, you will be closer to reality. Because you will be forced to use your mind. The mind is all powerful and it conquers time and space. Only the mind can perceive knowledge—"

As Hadley listened, he was enchanted by Swami Atulanada's voice, which seemed to originate in the ethereal space and float tantalizingly in the air. That voice could not be mortal, yet Swami Atulanada was a man. He was an extraordinary man to be sure, which only the Orient could breed.

Hadley banished his imaginative thoughts and studied the people in the meeting room. Most of them listened to the man with attention that bordered on sheer emotional rapture. It was queer because the Vedanta meeting was not a cult revival. It was highly intellectual. Then Hadley switched his attention to the professor and Dr. Starr.

Resting his chin on the palm of his right hand, Professor Travers nodded knowingly at every point that the swami put across. He was just like an ordinary man who is surprised to hear an eloquent radio commentator put his thoughts into glowing words. Dr. Starr listened politely, his face expressionless.

The lieutenant glanced at Mary Devine. Having taken a notebook out of her bag, she took notes in shorthand, like a college student in a lecture room. He grinned with satisfaction. He had her number.

At last the meeting was over, and Swami Atulanada strode noiselessly out of the room. The Hindus in black clericals hoisted a pile of new books on a table near the door. They conducted a landslide business with the audience.

Professor Travers and Dr. Starr crossed to Hadley and Mary, and shook the lieutenant's hand. The professor chided Mary:

"You're a pretty fast worker. You've converted the handsome soldier. At least it seems to me."

Mary retorted, "He was a detective before the army took him. He's working on Shelby's murder. He wants to begin with you."

Travers' smile vanished for a barely perceptible moment, then he grinned broadly. "We'll talk about it later. Let's have lunch first. Where shall we eat? I'm host."

"East India Curry Shop," Starr suggested.

"Capital idea. It's a swell place. Yes, the best of its kind in town."

It was a fifteen-minute taxi ride to the East India Curry Shop, in East 57th Street. The restaurant was on the second floor, directly above an art studio. It looked like a chop suey place, except that the food was Indian and it had the tarty smell of Indian condiments; the waiter was a Hindu with a turban and flowing Indian garments. The Hindu nodded at a man who had entered after the party. The man wore a black coat and a Homburg hat.

Professor Travers suggested a

curry of *brimjiol* as a main course, which the waiter brought. Each plate carried a thick disc of curried yellow rice, in the center of which lay steaming vegetables. Hadley tasted the *brimjiol* and found it delicious. Then Starr rose and carried his plate to a table in the center of the restaurant. The others reached that condiment table a moment later.

Starr scooped up a wooden spoonful of some dark spiced vegetables, which he dumped on Professor Travers' plate. He challenged: "Tamarind! You can't stomach it."

"Dish more out," Travers retorted. "I ate tamarind before you were born."

Starr grinned and placed a variety of condiments, including Bombay duck—dried salt fish—on the professor's plate. Then he filled Mary's and left Hadley to take care of himself. They returned to their table, and while they ate, their conversation was mostly small talk. Finally, they finished a dessert of *halwa* and washed it down with tasty Dajeerling tea.

Leaning back with a full stomach, Hadley tore open the cover of a pack of cigarettes. The professor accepted one, but Starr refused.

"Thanks, but I smoke only my own brand. I mix the blend, a Virginia and Latakia mixture."

Starr searched in his pockets for his cigarettes, scowled, and then shrugged philosophically. He said that he had left his cigarette case in his other coat. Still he refused to accept one of Hadley's cigarettes.

"He's a nicotine fiend," Mary said. "Except that he chokes on his own formulae."

Hadley lighted his cigarette and grinned. He blew smoke into the air, then: "Now about the murder—"

Suddenly Starr interrupted in a sharp voice, "Professor, you are drunk!"

Hadley stared at Professor Travers. Indeed, he was drunk, eloquently drunk.

III.

Professor Travers' red eyes were half closed, and his face was flushed, unnaturally, and a thin film of foam trickled down the corners of his mouth. In an instant, he lost control of himself and, as he leered at Starr, he swayed gently from side to side. Mary touched his elbow to support him. He wrenched his arm away, scowling at her.

"I never needed a woman to help me," he chortled. "Never."

Starr accused again, "You're drunk."

Professor Travers burst into loud, harsh laughter. "I am not drunk! I never had one drop of liquor in my life." He squinted at Starr with mocking eyes. "I know what's eating you. You're jealous. I'm a better man than you. And Ethel knew it, too."

Hadley glanced at Starr with curiosity. The botanist had paled and his lips twitched nervously. The lieutenant thought that he had just had a strong emotional shock. Though not yet visible, it threatened to break to the surface and

precipitate a hurricane. All the time, the professor continued with increasing extravagant gestures:

"Ethel wanted intellectual life. You couldn't give it to her. You haven't the imagination. Me? It was a cinch. You were playing boy scout in the jungles. Ethel was lonely and bewildered. She fell in love with me. You didn't mean anything to her!"

Starr rose, trembling, his blazing eyes fixed on the professor. The color of his face changed under Hadley's fascinated eyes. Then it was white as marble, and now it was livid. He reached forward with a spasmodic movement, to seize the professor.

Hadley stopped him and forced him to sit down. The professor chuckled:

"I didn't want her. I never cared for any woman. No, not me. That's my strength. Ethel had no mind of her own. She had no will either. I had only contempt for her. She couldn't face that fact. She killed herself. The monumental fool."

The professor coughed harshly. Again Hadley looked at Starr. He was in the grip of an intense, hysterical struggle. His complexion had now taken the color of candle wax, and his purplish lips quivered. But it was his eyes that held Hadley. They were cold eyes, snaky eyes riveted on the professor; eyes that expressed unquenchable, permanent hatred.

Suddenly, Professor Travers drew in a sharp breath, choked and coughed. He raised his hand waveringly toward his brow. And then his arm dropped, hung helplessly at his side.

By the time Hadley reached him, the professor was dead.

And Mary screamed with a rising inflection, "That was the way Shelby died!"

The man in the black coat and Homburg came running from the opposite side of the restaurant. Hadley did not need a second glance to identify him as a detective. He had the earmarks of a professional cop written all over him.

The detective asked harshly: "What killed him?"

"Dhatura."

"Don't kid me."

Hadley's voice was serious. *"Dhatura* is a poisonous plant."

The detective nodded. He walked to the window and signaled to somebody in the street. Presently, two more detectives entered. Hadley understood. Inspector O'Shea had assigned shadows to tail Starr, Travers, and Mary Devine.

The detectives impounded all food including the condiments. They kept everybody in the restaurant until the homicide squad blitz wagon arrived. Inspector O'Shea took charge. After listening to Hadley's account of what had happened, he let the suspects go with instructions to report any suspicious thing to him. Then, with the homicide squad working as a competent team, he left with Hadley and drove the young lieutenant to his hotel.

Again Hadley recounted everything that he had learned since leaving police headquarters.

O'Shea listened with dreamy eyes, nodding from time to time. Then he lighted a cigar and asked: "Tell me, what's your opinion?"

"You tell me yours first," Hadley challenged.

O'Shea studied Hadley at length. "I don't know what's in that blitzkrieg brain of yours. How it works —That's the greatest mystery of mture. Anyway, you've always kept your trap shut until you've legal proof in your hands. I know that. Have you any?"

"No."

"I believe you," O'Shea said. "Well, it won't do any harm to tell you what I think. Travers poisoned Shelby to get those Hindu manuscripts. He had a hundred ways of killing Shelby in his home. Travers was scared when he found that you were interested in him. I don't blame him. He committed suicide to escape arrest. Check? Tell me how he alone could have been poisoned in that Hindu joint? You all ate the same food."

"It's quite plausible," Hadley admitted, and added, "But it doesn't hold water, psychologically. Consider that exciting zombi, Travers. He was a selfish, cynical egotist. He thought and acted only for his own interests. Remember how he talked about Ethel, for instance! Seriously, his interest in Hindu and Vedanta literature is only a compensation for failure in life. I've an idea he wanted to be a famous authority on Oriental literature. He failed. That hurt his ego. And he made up for it by plunging neck deep into Vedanta philosophy.

"What would such an egotist do when confronted by the possibility of exposure and arrest? Kill himself? No. He'd consider it beneath his dignity. For him, it would be weakness and cowardice. That's the basis of his contempt for Ethel. She committed suicide because her life was a mess. He'd be sure he could get rid of me and escape. In other words, he'd try to murder me."

O'Shea growled, "Then Travers got himself murdered?"

"Yes."

"Well, what's your opinion?"

For the first time, Hadley was aware of a persistent buzzing in his head and increasing pressure around his temple and eardrums. He ignored the feeling, however, and said:

"Swami Atulanada is right. The mind is an all-powerful entity. It isn't hocus-pocus. I'm serious. The mind has the power to resurrect the past, the power to plunge enemies in a trap from which they can't escape. Such a mind was at work today. I wager we haven't heard the last of it yet."

"Boloney!" O'Shea retorted.

"No. I'm perfectly serious."

"You're drunk," O'Shea said. "You're old enough to know not to drink when on a case." He brushed away Hadley's protest with a wave of his hand. "Sleep it off. When you're O. K., see me again."

Hadley rose to escort O'Shea out of the apartment. He was

slightly giddy, but he managed to lurch toward the door. He waved the inspector out and closed the door.

Then it blinded him with a tremendous impact. Under his feet, the floor heaved and slanted like the deck of a yacht that was bucking a vicious gale. The furniture became animated cartoons. Hadley groaned and staggered toward a

chair and tripped over its arm. He raised his body wearily.

He told himself that it was nothing, that he just needed a couple of aspirins. After all, he only had a headache.

He got to his feet and guided himself to a chair, into which he slumped. His head banged and roared as though a squad of gremlins were battering it.

He closed his eyes.

Hadley woke with a throbbing head. He tried to move. His brain burst into a clattering roar, and he winced. Finally, he opened his eyes. The room was pitch-black. He reached for the lamp beside his chair and switched on the lights. After his eyes were accustomed to the lamp's bright glow, he glanced at his wrist watch. It was ten o'clock.

He rose and lurched toward the bathroom, where he doused his head with cold water. It cleared his senses and he reflected that he had been poisoned.

It might have been a mild dose of *dhatura* that had made him drunk, and the realization drove him toward the telephone. Mary Devine might have been poisoned, too!

He dialed Mary's number. Her mother answered:

"Why, Lieutenant Hadley. I thought you telephoned before."

"What time did I call?" Hadley barely kept his voice from betraying alarm.

"An hour ago. You told Mary to meet you in the Belvedere Castle at ten-fifteen, didn't you?"

"That's right," he reassured her. But his heart beat furiously. "I wanted to be sure she's coming."

"I understand," Mrs. Devine replied. "A nasty weather, that cold rain."

Hadley hung up after thanking her, and, grabbing his trench coat and hat, dashed out of the hotel into the rain, which cascaded upon him in solid torrents. He tried to hail a cab, but most taxis were occupied. Time slipped by exasperatingly.

At last Hadley got a taxi, frightening the driver by his violent voice and manner.

Reaching Belvedere Castle, the young lieutenant jammed a dollar into the driver's hand, and raced up the stone stairs without waiting for change. The rain hit him cruelly and the whistling wind drove a slanting deluge into his lean face. The falling rain hammered leafless trees with the effect of a thousand tambourines. And they combined with the dirge of wind to form a weird and macabre symphony. Rain spattered and bounced on the concrete stairs and walks, creating streaming pools of water through which Hadley sloshed.

Belvedere Castle hovered into view like a lone and silent sentinel on the top of a rocky hill. On the path, weaving up the slope toward the castle, Hadley passed a couple of men. When he was a score of feet away from them, he realized they were detectives.

Approaching the castle patio, he slowed down. He saw two figures, one of them a man barely distinct

in the depressing shroud of darkness and the other, Mary. Fortunately for Hadley, they were in the roofed pavilion just beside the top of the stairway instead of in the open courtyard. It being so, the young lieutenant heard their voices distinctly.

The man's voice was neither harsh nor soft. It was neither loud nor quiet. Neither modulated nor untrained, in fact, and it seemed to float in the air. He was saying:

"Mary, please be reasonable. I don't want to hurt you." He paused for a moment. "Because I love you."

"Why are you telling me?" Mary demanded.

The man said, "I don't know what to do. You're dangerous to my safety. You know I murdered Shelby and Travers. I'll have to kill you to save myself."

"What do you want me to do?"

The man's voice became softer and persuasive. "Mary, don't talk to the police. Tell that soldier friend of yours to leave you alone."

"I won't," Mary said firmly.

"Then I must kill you." The man's voice had a trace of regret.

Hadley cleared the last few steps and burst into the pavilion. The man whirled to face him. His features were still indistinct, but his actions and mannerisms were plain enough.

Hadley said sardonically, "Now I see what you really are. Don't tell me you are a sophisticated philosopher. That was only a thin veneer to hide behind. You're nothing but a barbarian."

"Sure. What are you going to do about it?"

Hadley's voice became mocking, infuriating the man. "The savage kills his enemy as an everyday act. One he has to do for revenge. Is that so, Dr. Paul Starr?"

"That's right. Damn you!" Starr snarled and leaped at Hadley.

At this moment, the heavy rain changed to sleet.

Hadley sidestepped and met Starr's charge with a right to the jaw. Starr staggered and lurched out of the pavilion, into the sleet-soaked courtyard. Hadley followed, punishing Starr with a barrage of hammering fists.

Then Starr kicked out desperately. Hadley suddenly was doubled up by pain. It left him gasping for breath; Starr immediately took advantage. He leaped at Hadley like an infuriated tiger. Hadley slipped and fell.

Starr again leaped at Hadley, who bent his knees and planted his feet on the botanist's abdomen. Grabbing Starr's outstretched hands, Hadley stiffened his knees and rolled. Starr sailed over the lieutenant's body. He landed on the concrete yard and his momentum carried him toward the railing.

Hadley got to his feet. He charged at Starr, who had been getting up. The lieutenant battered his opponent with pistonlike jabs, followed by a neat uppercut. Starr's knees buckled.

Then Hadley swung his right fist. Unfortunately, the pavement was slippery and he slipped and fell. Suddenly, Starr swung around, dug

a revolver out of his raincoat pocket.

There was a flash, an explosion, and Starr sat down abruptly. He gripped his abdomen with trembling hands. A thin trickle of blood flowed through his fingers.

Then Starr's gun rose tremblingly, full upon Hadley. Gone were the thoughts of anything but urgent hatred. His contorted face and his fiery eyes expressed the terrible desire for vengeance. The young lieutenant rolled, and simultaneously a gun detonated a g a i n. Starr's twitching fingers opened with a spasm. His revolver clattered onto the pavement as he collapsed.

The two detectives, who had burst into the patio when they had heard sounds of the struggle, hurried toward Starr. One of them held a smoking revolver.

"What a voice that guy had!" The detective shuddered.

Hadley rose slowly. "Anybody can work wonders with his voice if he learns the Yogi way of breath control."

Inspector O'Shea's apartment in a house facing Central Park West was warm and after Hadley and Mary Devine had settled down, the inspector said:

"You've heard Starr's confession. That one's enough for the inquest. But you know I have to talk to reporters tomorrow morning." He lighted his cigar. "I've an idea you suspected Starr."

"More than that," Hadley replied. "I was sure Starr was the man. Let's list yesterday's suspects: Travers, Starr, and please forgive me, Mary. Until today. I had no proof, but I had a powerful weapon. I knew Starr's character and I figured what he'd do. Accordingly, I gave him enough rope to hang himself. But Mary was almost killed as a consequence. I must apologize to her for that."

Hadley went on, "When Mary showed us the *dhatura* plant, my first move was to give Starr A-1 rating as a suspect. It's elementary. A botanist would naturally think of using poisonous plants. I admit it wasn't a strong lead. Anybody who knows Hindu literature, would consider *dhatura*, too. Again including the professor and Mary. The incident at the East India Curry Shop confirmed my original suspicions. It was too late for Travers, though."

"You'll have to explain it," O'Shea said.

"I wasn't spoofing when I told you that the mind is a powerful entity. Here's what I meant. Travers knew he was poisoned. He suspected Starr, but he could not tell me without putting Starr on his guard. Which is a concession to him. On the other hand, Travers was a rabid Vedanta fan. The Vedanta includes Yogi training; breath control which explains Swami Atulanada's voice. And the trick of relaxing the body so thoroughly that the body seems to be sleeping while the mind is alert. In other words, though Travers was dying, he kept his mind alive with extraordinary control. He pointed at Starr by telling me Starr's motive

for the murder, revenge for Ethel. The effort, however, hastened his death."

O'Shea whistled with incredulity. Then he sobered and asked, "Why did Starr kill Shelby?"

Hadley lighted a cigarette. "I'll demonstrate for you. At the East India Curry Shop, I offered Starr a cigarette. He refused and said he smoked only his own brand which he blended. He had forgotten his cigarette case. And he refused to accept a cigarette. What does that tell you?"

Mary interrupted, "He was a pretty fastidious smoker."

"Exactly. You told me so. What happened in Travers' library just before Shelby was killed?"

Mary saw the light. "Starr mooched a cigarette from Travers' pack!"

"Why did he do it?" Hadley asked and answered, "It's obvious. When he mooched a cigarette, he put into the pack one he had made with tobacco and *dhatura*. He intended it for Travers. He knew you don't smoke, Mary. But he didn't reckon with Shelby who took that poisoned cigarette by mistake.

"How did he poison Travers? At the restaurant, he reached the condiment table first. He sprinkled dried *dhatura* on one of the condiments, probably tamarind. He challenged Travers to eat that tamarind, didn't he? He dumped the poisoned portion on Travers' plate. He scooped up unpoisoned ones for Mary and himself. I took a little *dhatura* without realizing it."

O'Shea closed his notebook. "It's very logical. One more thing. Is the Vedanta on the level?"

"It is," Mary responded. "Basically, the Vedanta is an idealistic philosophy. Kant and Schopenhauer were two of the great idealist philosophers of the last century. Yet, without knowing it, they preached the things that Vedanta writers had originated a thousand and five hundred years before them. I think Don knows it, too."

At the mention of his first name, Lieutenant Don Hadley glanced sharply at Mary Devine. She did not look at him, but there was warm color in her cheeks. Hadley grinned, thinking of how he would spend the four remaining days of his leave.

THE END.

BUCKET OF GEMS CASE

BY FREDRIC BROWN

Mr. Henry Smith, dapper little agent and investigator for the Phalanx Insurance Co., smiled at the girl at the reception desk, took off his gold-rimmed pince-nez spectacles to look at her better, and then put them back on.

"I wish to see Mr. Thorwald, your program manager, please," he said.

The girl looked doubtful. "The Bucket of Gems program goes on the air in just a few minutes and Mr. Thorwald's in charge of it. I don't—"

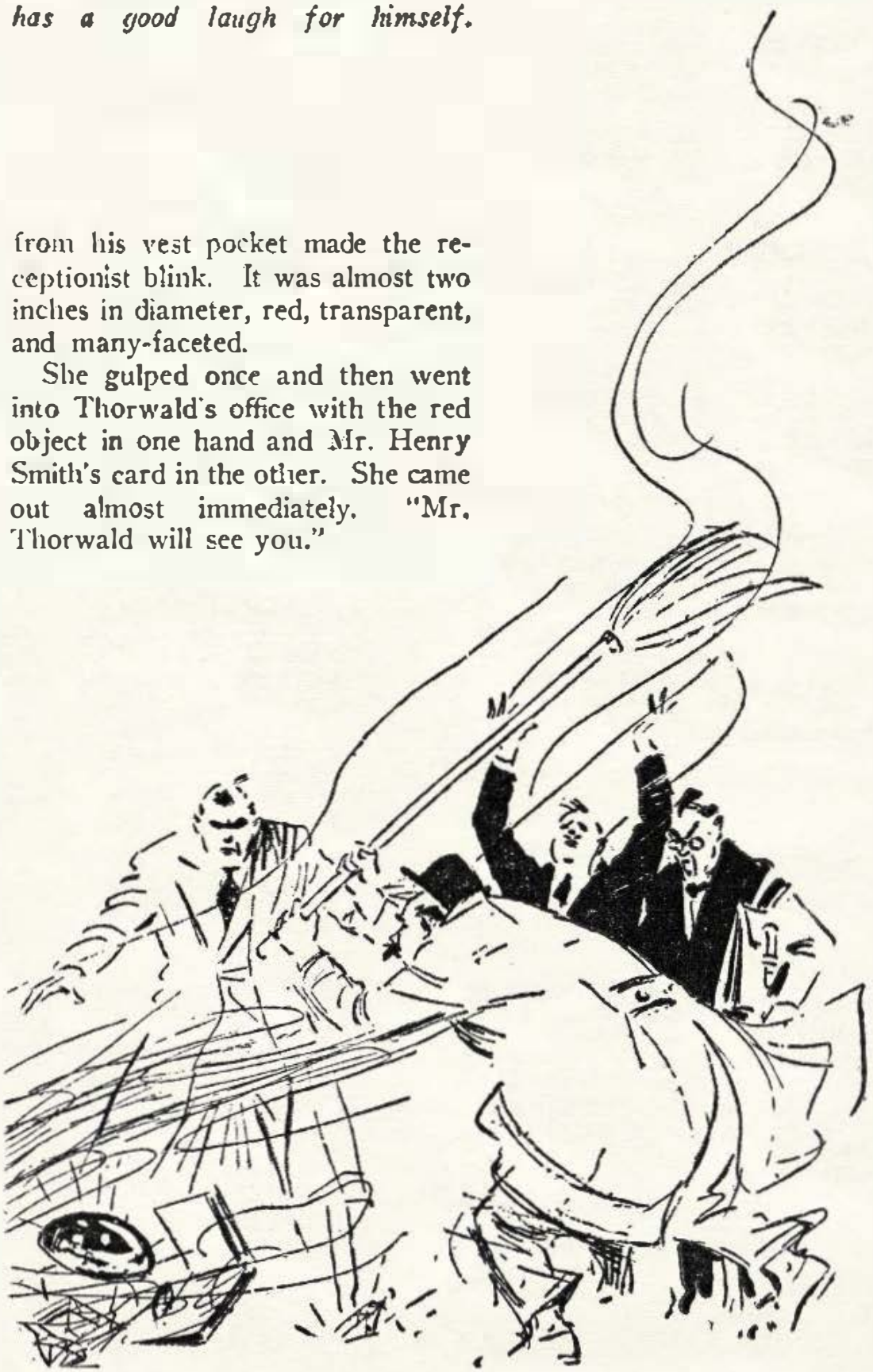
"Yes," said Mr. Smith. "It is concerning that program that I wish to see him. Ah, you may take this in to him with my card."

The object which Mr. Smith took

● *Mr. Smith, insurance agent, gets the jump on four detectives and has a good laugh for himself.*

from his vest pocket made the receptionist blink. It was almost two inches in diameter, red, transparent, and many-faceted.

She gulped once and then went into Thorwald's office with the red object in one hand and Mr. Henry Smith's card in the other. She came out almost immediately. "Mr. Thorwald will see you."



The program manager looked up at Mr. Smith with harassed eyes. "This looks like the Kent ruby."

"It does," admitted Mr. Smith. "Ah, I understand, Mr. Thorwald, that you are starting a series of programs sponsored by the Jewelers' Mutual Cooperative Association, each program to present, in dramatized form, the history of a famous jewel. The writer of the best essay on some topic concerned with gems will receive a prize known as a 'bucket of gems,' from which the program takes its name, the Bucket of Gems program. Ah, may I sit down?"

"Do sit down. Is this the Kent ruby?"

"Thank you," said Mr. Smith. He sat down. "I understand that, whenever possible, you plan to have, for the audience to see, the jewel whose history is being dramatized. Of course, the radio audience, as distinguished from the studio audience, cannot see it, but they will obtain vicarious satisfaction from knowing that it is present at the studio. Is that correct?"

"Yes, except that we're going to have the featured jewel at all programs. We'll feature only jewels we can get hold of, not the Kohinoor or the Cullinan. Ones we can borrow, like— Now, damn it, is this the Kent ruby?"

"Ah, no," Mr. Smith murmured. "You see, the Phalanx Insurance Co., my company, has insured the Kent ruby. For that reason I have been quite interested in it. You recall, at the World's Fair, the exhibition of paste reproductions of famous jewels? This was one of them, and because it became badly scratched, I was able to acquire it for practically nothing. A pity, of course, that it is damaged, but one must look closely to see the scratches."

Thorwald looked closely. "Yeah, I see them. Can't a real ruby be scratched?"

"Yes and no," Mr. Smith replied judiciously. "A diamond is ten on the scale of hardness, a ruby is nine. So one could scratch a ruby with a diamond. Now about your program, Mr. Thorwald. When precious stones are moved and handled, there is always danger of theft. I came to quote you on a policy that would cover your liability in case a theft occurred, either of the featured stones or of the stones in your award, the bucket of gems."

"We don't need insurance," said Mr. Thorwald. "With the guards and precautions we've arranged, the borrowed stones will be as safe as houses. And the 'bucket of gems' isn't worth . . . uh . . . isn't sufficiently valuable to justify— Well, look for yourself. There they are."

On a table at one side of the room was a neat array of fifteen jewel cases, each containing a small jewel. Behind them stood a small bucket, about eight inches in diameter and five inches high, which would obviously be filled to overflowing with the jewel cases.

Mr. Smith walked over and looked down at them.

"Half-carat diamond?" he asked.

"Yes. Unflawed. Ruby and em-

erald are the same size. Good stones, but not extraordinary ones."

"And the others are larger, but less precious. An opal, a zircon, a garnet— But even so, there must be five-hundred-dollars' worth of gems here, at retail."

"At retail, yes," said Thorwald. "The Jewelers' Mutual doesn't buy them at retail."

"Of course," Mr. Smith murmured. "I grant it would be hardly worth while to write a policy on the bucket of gems alone. But what would it cost you if the Kent ruby were stolen this evening?"

Thorwald grunted. "Why would it cost us anything? Didn't you say your company already had insured it? Mr. Carmichel couldn't collect from both of us."

"But you agreed, did you not, to be responsible for the full declared valuation of a hundred thousand dollars? Our policy is for thirty thousand. Mr. Carmichel could, and would, hold you legally liable for the difference. A matter of seventy thousand dollars."

The program director whistled softly. Then he sighed. "O. K., so we'd lose seventy thousand. And I'd lose my job. But, man, we've got four armed guards! Say, why'd you send in this hunk of paste with your card? Just to get my curiosity so I'd see you?"

Mr. Smith smiled gently. "I fear I must confess to some such motive, but in a good cause." He picked up the red stone from the desk and replaced it in his pocket.

"A very interesting stone, the Kent ruby," he said. "Too bad that it is very slightly flawed or it would be worth—well, any figure you might name. Because of that, and because it is not properly shaped, too thin for its diameter, we insured it for only thirty thousand. But when one considers its bloody history—"

The buzzer on Mr. Thorwald's interoffice communicator interrupted. He flicked the switch.

"Mr. Carmichel is here, sir, and the four detectives."

"Send them in," Thorwald said. "And . . . uh . . . Mr. Smith, if you will be so kind as to leave now, I'll—"

"To leave? But, Mr. Thorwald, my company requested me to remain here until the program is over and Mr. Carmichel has been escorted home. We have a thirty-thousand-dollar interest, you see. They delegated me to . . . ah . . . protect the jewel."

The program manager looked at the mild-mannered, dapper little man across the desk from him, and only good breeding kept him from snorting aloud.

Two private detectives came in first. Mr. Smith knew them both; Waters and Powell of the Argus Agency. Powell was a tall, gangling youngster not many years out of school; Waters was middle-aged, middle height, middle everything, so inconspicuous one had to look twice to see him. The best shadow cop in town, Mr. Smith knew.

Then came Mr. Carmichel, hanging tightly onto a brief case. Mr. Smith knew him only by sight, as a moderately wealthy confectioner

whose money, made from bonbons, went into jewels for his collection.

After Carmichel came two men whom Mr. Smith recognized as police detectives and he nodded approvingly of Thorwald's choice of an escort. Krasnowicz and Lieutenant Brady were both good men. And the rivalry between the police and the private detectives from the Argus Agency would keep all of them on their toes.

Thorwald glanced at the clock on the wall. "Just in time, Mr. Carmichel. Twenty minutes to go. You . . . uh . . . brought the ruby?"

Carmichel took a jewel case from the brief case. He opened it and said, "The Kent ruby, Mr. Thorwald."

The program manager gazed reverently, and the others craned their necks for a glimpse before the box snapped shut. Thorwald said, "Thank you, Mr. Carmichel. We'll take good care of it." He put the case on his desk.

Brady had strolled over to the table that had the smaller gems on it. He said, "Nice stuff here," and held up the case containing the half-carat diamond. "This'd go nice in a ring."

Thorwald nodded. "Time to put those cases in the bucket. When you've looked at that one, lieutenant, just close it and put it in."

He followed suit by walking over to the table and closing another of the jewel cases and putting it into the small bucket.

Carmichel, looking at the opal, said, "Nice stones, but pretty small, aren't they, Thorwald?"

"Of course, but, after all, we're giving them away. Darn few programs give prizes worth as much as this bucket. It's worth more than any prize given regularly on any other program."

Powell said, "Me, I think it's a swell prize. Got flash."

The bucket was full now, and Thorwald said, "We'd better go up to the studio. I'll take the bucket. You bring the ruby, Mr. Car—"

His hand was almost on the handle of the bucket when it happened. A sudden hissing noise and then a flash of light that shone almost intolerably bright down within the bucket of gems, showing blindly between the edges of the cases.

Then flame and smoke as the tinderlike jewel cases caught fire.

It was Mr. Smith who moved first. He lifted his foot and knocked the bucket off the table onto the tile floor.

Jewel cases scattered. Some of them flaming, some smoldering, a few that had been on top, untouched. Some of the cases came open, others stayed shut.

And out of the bucket, too, came a tiny cylindrical metal thing, still burning with dazzling brightness.

"Incendiary," Brady snapped. "Let it alone. Get the stones out of the cases, quick."

There was momentary bedlam that gradually straightened itself into order. Less than a minute later the incendiary had burned itself out and was a mere bit of white ash in the center of a very black spot on the tile floor.

Several of the jewel cases, kicked

into a pile in one corner, still smoldered and smoked. But they were all empty. On the table where the bucket had stood lay all fifteen of the jewels. A few were dark and blackened, but most of them were unharmed.

Thorwald sighed and wiped his forehead with the handkerchief he had used to handle several burning cases, leaving a smear of black from temple to temple. "Thank Heaven, we've got buckets in the safe upstairs ready for several programs ahead."

He bent over the jewels lying on the table. "Garnet's ruined, and the opal. That little black thing used to be a pearl. Others are all right, although some of them will have to be repolished. Not much loss."

"How much would you say?" Waters asked.

Thorwald shrugged. "Not more than a hundred dollars. Even counting the cases and replacing a few tiles in the floor."

Lieutenant Brady was bending over the ash where the incendiary had burned itself out. "Something like an incendiary pencil in miniature. Only an inch or so long. But who put it in there?"

"One of us," said Mr. Smith.

Brady turned to stare at him. Mr. Smith nodded. "The bucket was empty five minutes ago. I picked it up and looked at and in it. As to which of us put it in—Well, we all had an opportunity. All of us were helping to close the jewel cases and to put them in the bucket."

Thorwald said impatiently, "I'm afraid this will have to wait. The program goes on in five minutes. I'll have to get another bucket of gems from the safe, and then we'd better—"

"Just a minute," Mr. Smith broke in. "Before anyone leaves this room, wouldn't it be a good idea to check on the safety of the Kent ruby? Nothing was accomplished by that incendiary, unless possibly it was placed there to cause a distraction."

Thorwald stared for a long moment at Mr. Smith and then whirled and grabbed the black case containing the Kent ruby. He opened it.

It was empty.

Lieutenant Brady took two steps to the door and put his back against it. He took a deep breath and seemed to get taller, his voice assumed new authority.

"All right," he said. "Guess I'm in charge. And the ruby has to be in this room, so nobody's leaving. Thorwald, you use the telephone if you want to. Tell them to get that other bucket for the program, and that they'll have to put it on without the Kent ruby, unless we find it in time. How long we got?"

Thorwald looked dazed. "It was to be shown near the end of the program, after the dramatization of its history. We've got almost half an hour."

"We'll find it then," Brady said. "It's got to be in this room."

Brady waited until Thorwald had phoned. Then he said, "No use calling headquarters till we've got

the ruby. Unless somebody objects to being searched without a warrant. In that case, we'll get a warrant. Anybody object?"

Nobody spoke up.

"And you won't object, Mr. Thorwald, to our searching the office?"

Thorwald's voice was grim. "Tear it to pieces if you want."

"It's in this room," Brady repeated. He said it emphatically, as an article of faith. "Krasnowicz can search me, then I'll search Krasnowicz. Then we'll go over the rest of you, one at a time. If it's on anybody, we'll find it. If we don't, we'll take the office apart. But we'll find it."

"I don't think you will," Mr. Smith put in quietly.

Brady glared at him. "If we don't, we'll all go over to headquarters, and there's an X-ray machine there."

Carmichel nodded approvingly. "I was going to suggest that. A stone that size would be dangerous, but not impossible, to swallow."

Waters asked, "Isn't a ruby transparent?"

"Not to X ray," said Carmichel. "Even a diamond shows up."

"Yeah," confirmed Brady. "Well, now that we got the program laid out, anybody want to save us the trouble?"

There was a deep silence and then Mr. Smith coughed deprecatingly and reached into his vest pocket. "I fear that I'd better account for my having this object, before you find it. It was not stolen from the case."

Brady grabbed for it, and his face turned almost as red as the object in his hand. He said, "Is this a gag? The hell that ain't the Kent ruby! Did you—"

Mr. Smith sighed. "I fear I shall have to call on Mr. Thorwald to corroborate my story. And to vouch for me on my possession of the imitation before the original came into this room. He examined it before you gentlemen entered the office."

Thorwald nodded. "That's right. And he explained how he acquired it and— Is that stone scratched?"

Brady looked closer. "Yeah, a little."

Thorwald took the stone, glanced at it, and handed it back. "That's the same one. I can identify the marks on it."

"I would suggest," said Mr. Smith. "that you put it aside and proceed. Later, at any time, you can check with the Phalanx Insurance Co. on my possession of—"

"All right, all right," Brady broke in impatiently. "Then this ain't it." He started to put it into his pocket and then, apparently remembering he was to be searched first, put it on Thorwald's desk blotter.

Then he raised his arms slightly from his sides and said, "O. K., Krasnowicz. Go ahead."

Krasnowicz stepped forward.

Mr. Smith took off his gold-rimmed pince-nez and breathed gently first on one lens and then on the other.

"Really," he said, "this is quite unnecessary. I mean, the Kent ruby is not concealed upon the per-

son of anyone in this room."

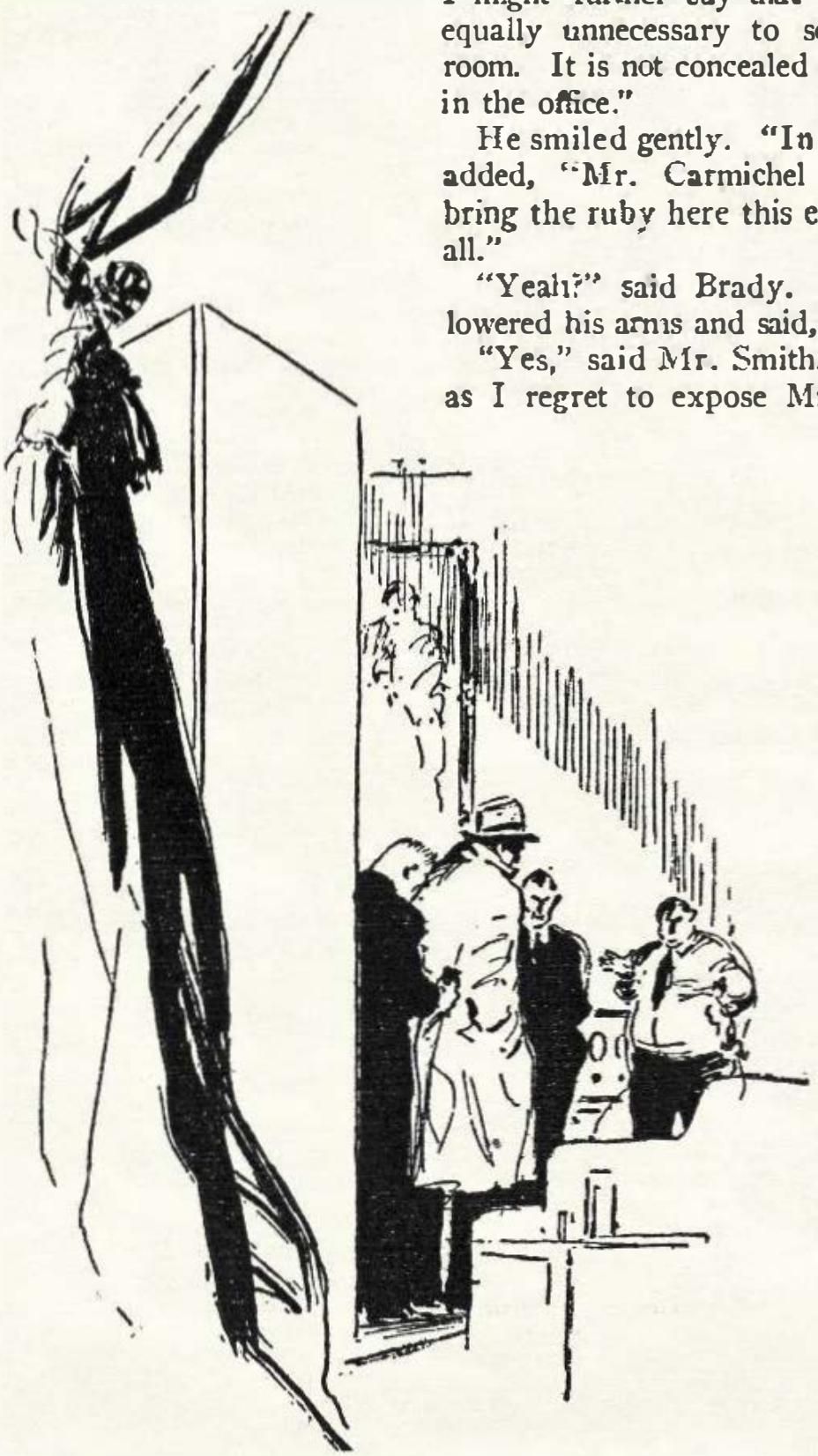
"Yeah?" said Brady. He didn't lower his arms.

"Yes," repeated Mr. Smith, "and I might further say that it will be equally unnecessary to search the room. It is not concealed anywhere in the office."

He smiled gently. "In fact," he added, "Mr. Carmichel did not bring the ruby here this evening at all."

"Yeah?" said Brady. Then he lowered his arms and said, "Huh?"

"Yes," said Mr. Smith. "Much as I regret to expose Mr. Carmi-



chel's duplicity, he did not bring the ruby here tonight because he no longer had the ruby. Some time recently—I don't know just when—Mr. Carmichel's house was broken into, and the ruby stolen."

"Huh?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith. "Mr. Carmichel did not, I regret to say, report the loss either to the police or to us."

Brady looked at Carmichel and then back at Mr. Smith. "What reason could he have for not reporting it?"

"We had insured the ruby," Mr. Smith went on patiently, "for the sum of thirty thousand dollars. Had Mr. Carmichel reported its loss, he would have received just that. But he already had arranged to lend his ruby for tonight's radio program. Now do you understand?"

"No," said Brady. "I think you're nuts."

Mr. Smith sighed. "The studio had agreed to be responsible for the gem while it was here, and at its full value, declared by Mr. Carmichel, of a hundred thousand dollars. If it were stolen, or appeared to be stolen, here tonight he could recover seventy thousand dollars from the studio besides the thirty thousand from us. A net gain of seventy thousand dollars."

"You mean," said Brady, "he brought a phony tonight instead of the real ruby? And he put the little incendiary in the bucket to distract attention while he took it out of the case?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith.

"But what the hell? The imitation he brought—we all saw there was something in the case—will have to be on him or hidden in the room here. He couldn't have got it out of the room, and it would give away the play if we found it."

"Quite true," said Mr. Smith. "He would certainly have anticipated a search, however. And I think I can make a sufficiently accurate guess as to how he disposed of the imitation ruby that was in the case."

"How?"

"In moving picture comedies," said Mr. Smith, "you have undoubtedly seen people break glasses and bottles over one another's heads, not to mention dishes and other articles?"

"Sure."

"Those articles do not injure because they are made of spun sugar, instead of glass. An imitation ruby could be made of colored spun sugar and if enough care were used in its making, it would stand superficial examination. Mr. Carmichel just gave us a quick glimpse when he opened and closed the case. It would probably have stood even a slightly closer examination; Mr. Carmichel is a confectioner, you know."

"But—"

"Exactly," Mr. Smith murmured. "I suggest that while the excitement over the burning bucket of gems was at its height, Mr. Carmichel took the imitation ruby from the case."

"And—"

"And ate it," Mr. Smith finished. "The sugar would digest, of course,

and leave no traces for the X ray. But, if I am right, proof can be found by making a microscopic examination of the lining inside the case. Surely minute traces of colored sugar would remain on the nap of the silk. A substance which certainly could have no other logical reason for being there."

Brady said, "I'll be a—" And turned to look at Carmichel. "Well, Mr. Carmichel, is he right? I mean, when we examine the case, will we find what he says?"

The confectioner met his stare for a few seconds, and then nodded slowly. "He wins. But I don't see how he guessed."

Mr. Smith sighed. "I had to guess, Mr. Carmichel, only at the method. You see, I already knew that the stone had been stolen from you. So I knew you couldn't bring it here tonight. The burglar who took the stone came to the Phalanx Co., knowing from the newspapers that we'd insured it, to try to make a deal with us. But we do not make deals with criminals. We turned him down, and one of our detectives managed to tail him to his room when he left."

"The hell!" said Brady. "They get him?"

"I regret to say, no. He left his room almost immediately, before our operative could arrange to have him arrested there, and a few blocks off he discovered he was being followed. He ducked our man in a subway station. But our detective returned to the man's room, found the jewel, and reported in with it. The police have been notified and are now watching the room for his return."

Thorwald glanced at the clock, and groaned. "Then I suppose we've got to go through the program without the Kent ruby. Your office is miles from here and there won't be time to send for it. The stone would have to be upstairs in ten minutes."

"I fear there would not be time," admitted Mr. Smith. "But about that policy, Mr. Thorwald. Do you now see the advisability of complete protection?"

"Damn it, yes. Have your office write one up, and I'll sign it."

"Excellent," said Mr. Smith. "But I anticipated that after what might happen here this evening, you would be ready to sign with us. I have the policy application right here."

He put a paper on Thorwald's desk.

"But you will not wish to sign it without reading it, of course, and there is hardly time for that if you wish to take the Kent ruby up to the studio for the end of the dramatization. Mr. Brady, if you will be so kind as to take that red stone from the desk and and rub it briskly with your handkerchief, the scratches will come off. They are . . . ah . . . external, applied with a jeweler's marking pencil."

Thorwald's eyes bulged. "You mean that *that's* really the—"

"Exactly," murmured Mr. Smith.

THE END.

● *A ringside seat at a forest fire!*
But he was too dead to have fun!

THE DEAD HANG HIGH

BY C. M. HARSH

The office shadows made the hollows in the woman's cheeks seem deeper than they were. The walnut-brown eyes, almost as bright as the steel caulks in her logger's boots, the straightness of her full lips, and the strained tone of her voice were the marks of a person living under constant tension.

Smith's jade eyes were curious. "What about these forest fires, Kay?"

"Someone has been setting them," the woman said. "We've had seven fires in the last week. The strange thing about them, Pete, is that every fire has had a fire line around it so it would not spread." Kay Borden shivered in spite of the unusual autumn heat. "It's weird."

"But it doesn't make sense," Smith told her.

"I know," the woman said solemnly. "But it doesn't have to make sense. If one of those fires had jumped the fire line and crowned in the big timber, it wouldn't have mattered to me or anybody else on this mountain whether it made sense or not. We wouldn't have had a chance. That's what we're afraid of, Pete. We're afraid the next fire might not have the fire line around it."

Smith moved his rangy figure to the window. Alpine, a logging town of a thousand or so inhabitants, filled a wide niche on the western slope of the Sierras. The pine and spruce forest, sucked dry by the burning winds, hemmed in the town like a giant stockade.

A solitary figure came out of one of the frame buildings. He stopped in the middle of the street, turned a complete circle as he searched the cloudless September sky for a telltale column of smoke. The figure moved to a post that held a psychrometer, looked at the low humidity, shook his head, and went back inside the building.

E DEAD HANG HIGH

"That man is afraid," Smith said, half to himself. "I'm beginning to feel it myself."

"It's the kind of fear that sticks with you all the time. You can't get rid of it no matter how hard you try," the woman told him. "You could, of course, run away and leave the forests unprotected, but you try to keep from doing that."

Smith put a cigarette between his lips, let it dangle unlighted. He knew Kay Borden was no flighty female who doted on imaginary fears. It took more than mere beauty to supervise a crew of high-test lumberjacks and manage extensive timber holdings.

The practical side of it was equally important. As operative for the Lumbermen's Protective Association, it was his job to protect the property of the members. It was his job to stop these fires regardless of the cock-eyed motive behind them—if there were a motive. It was his first assignment since his return from New Guinea. He wondered vaguely if fighting fanatic yellow animals for two years had dulled his brain. He knew it had added five years to his thirty, taken off two of his fingers, left him tougher. He stopped thinking, said:

"I'd like to see the spots where these fires were."

"I'll show you." Kay Borden brushed back a strand of soft brown hair. "I don't think you will find anything, though. The sheriff and the fire warden have searched every square foot of the burned-over areas."

Smith drew his eyebrows together. "And didn't find anything?"

"Nothing."

"Any suspects?"

"None as far as I know."

"How large were these fires?"

"Only an acre or two, thank God," the woman said passionately. "And they've been in slash. As yet, there hasn't been much damage to standing timber."

Smith threw his unlighted cigarette away. "Whose holdings have these fires been on?"

"Everybody's." Kay Borden waved her slender hands. "Frank Ballard's. The sheriff's, Oscar Hauser, and mine."

The metal corks in Smith's boots made o's in the soft pine floor as he walked across the office and came back. He ran his fingers through his short blond hair, said, "Let's take a look at these places, anyway."

The woman nodded and got up. They went outside. They reached Smith's sedan and started to get in. They stopped abruptly as a man ran out in the street and twisted the fire siren. The siren gave off an icy wail as though it were announcing the arrival of doomsday.

Fear sharpened the brightness in Kay Borden's eyes. "I hope the devil didn't forget the fire line!"

Smith nodded grimly. "We'll soon find out."

A cluster of volunteer fire-fighters swarmed to the red building where the forest fire control equipment was kept in instant readiness. A few brief seconds later, two

trucks roared out of the shed. Cars filled with tense men jammed their wake.

Smith slid under the wheel of his sedan and pressed the starter. Kay Borden got in beside him.

"Fighting a forest fire is not a woman's job," he said.

"I can use a wet sack if nothing else," she retorted earnestly.

They soon caught up with the others. Smith fought the sedan around the treacherous curves half hidden by the cloud of thick white dust. The convoy slowed, made a sharp turn, and went down an old haulroad. They crawled across the mountain toward the blazing sun. The haulroad ended.

"The fire is in Sheriff Hauser's holdings," the woman said.

Smith nodded and parked. He got out and looked at the fire. It was above them, a quarter-mile further on. It was not a large fire, but it was burning fiercely as it consumed the powder-dry slash hungrily.

The fire was gaining headway. It was less than two hundred yards from a towering stand of lodgepole pine. If the fire reached them and crowned—

The sudden realization of this new danger spread through the crew of fire-fighters. They rushed for fire pumps, axes, mattocks, saws, fire rakes, shovels, or any other tool they could reach quickly and hurried toward the fire.

Someone handed Smith a back pump. He slid into the shoulder straps and started up the mountain. He glanced back. Kay Borden was turning the cars around. Smith knew that was a good idea. They might have to get out in a hurry.

"Work on those spot fires to your left," the fire warden shouted to Smith.

Smith nodded and plunged through the brush. As he neared the blaze the first gush of heat almost knocked him off his feet. He lowered his head against it and veered toward a spot fire a few feet away.

He pumped water on the blaze until it was out. He moved to the next spot fire that had been set by flying embers. The roar of the main fire pounded against his ears. The thick smoke rolled over him and brought a blinding stream of tears to his eyes. A huge spark burned a hole in his hat. He threw it off before it caught his hair and kept going. He had to fight for the air he breathed. His lungs felt as if they were near the bursting point. He put out the fourth spot fire and stumbled to the next one. Then the water in the back pump ran out.

He staggered out of the smoke, sank to his knees, and gulped the precious air, and rested.

An ash-streaked logger came up. "I'll take over." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "You'll find water at the base of that small cliff."

Smith nodded and got on his feet. He cursed softly as the sharp brush tore at his woolen shirt. He went in the tall timber. He found the stagnant pool of water at the base of the rock ledge. He plunged

his face into the dirty, cool liquid, sloshed it over his head, straightened, and let it run down his back. He refilled the back pump and started toward the fire.

He detoured around the brush and ran into a wide barrier of fresh slash. He saw it was the spire-topped head of a giant piue trimmed to make a high-lead tree.

Smith stopped. His eyes traveled up the full length of the dark-brown trunk. The high climber who had topped the big tree had a fifty-yard-line seat at the fire with a gentle breeze in his face. Yet he would have traded places with anyone alive.

He was dead.

Fifty hot, tough, sweaty minutes later, they got the fire under control. Then another high climber went up the spar tree and let the body down on a pass line.

The dead man's name was Eric Johnson. The bullet had gone in his mouth and out the back of his head.

The coroner got up. His singed mustache went up and down. "I can't tell exactly, but I'd say he was shot about three o'clock with a .45 caliber gun of some kind."

"That would be about the time the fire was set," Smith said to no one in particular.

A tall man with bushy eyebrows nodded. "Yeah." Then: "Who are you, mister?"

Kay Borden said: "Mr. Smith, Mr. Hauser. Mr. Smith is from the Lumbermen's Protective Association."

The broad, square jaw on the sheriff went forward. He appraised Smith with unfriendly black eyes. Finally, he said: "I don't like finks."

Smith's feet came apart. "I don't give a damn whether you like me or not, Hauser. I'm here to find out about these fires. You can take it or go to the devil."

Hauser worked his jaw some more. "I'll take it," he grunted and stuck out his hand.

Smith smiled slightly and shook hands.

"I figure the killer didn't see Johnson until after he'd set the fire," Hauser said.

"It had to be that way," Smith agreed. "Apparently Johnson was so busy he didn't see him until it was too late."

Sheriff Hauser nodded. "Johnson was the best high climber in these parts. He was the only one I had. I fired his partner yesterday for showing up on the job drunk. It sure leaves me shorthanded. I'm gonna find the loco gent that killed him if I have to arrest everybody in the county."

Smith rubbed his ash-streaked cheek. "Do you think our man is crazy?"

"Sure," the sheriff scowled. "How could he be anything else?"

Smith shrugged. He didn't say anything.

Hauser went away as a couple of lumberjacks helped the coroner down the mountain with Johnson's body.

Smith stared morosely at the smoldering area. The fire-scarred

remains of the once green lodgepole pines were like gaunt skeletons with their twisted, charred limbs silhouetted against the evening sky.

Kay Borden put her hand on Smith's arm. "What do you make of it, Pete?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "Maybe Hauser is right. Maybe the man we're after is a pyromaniac who likes to see a fire burn, but doesn't want it to get out of control. But I can't see it that way. I have a hunch that there is a definite plan behind all these fires." He waved his hand. "Maybe we'll find out what it is if we live long enough."

"Hauser is a better logger than he is a sheriff," Kay Borden said without rancor. "He was only elected because nobody ran against him."

"Thanks," Smith grinned. "I was just talking." His green eyes became serious again. "It could be anybody the way it stands now."

He walked away from the spar tree a hundred feet or so and stopped. Kay Borden followed him. Smith studied the topless stem, raised his hand, and sighted over it. He moved back a few feet.

"From the angle the bullet went in, the killer was standing somewhere in this vicinity. If he used an automatic instead of a revolver the empty case might still be here. It won't do any harm to look anyway." He began poking in the thick duff of pine needles.

In the fading light, it was like looking for a diamond chip in a beach of white sand with a candle.

Smith straightened up. "Forget it, Kay. It was just an idea."

Sheriff Hauser came up and asked Smith what he was looking for. Smith told him.

"I'll go over this place tomorrow," Hauser said.

A thin man with a thin face and thick eyelids joined them. He could have been thirty or fifty. He stood with a slight slouch, but there was dignity in his precise actions.

"Sticking your nose in my business again, Ballard?" Sheriff Hauser growled.

The long nose twitched disdainfully. "These fires are everybody's business."

"But it's my business to find out who's starting them," Hauser said belligerently.

"Attend to it then," the slight man snapped. "If you don't, one of these fires is going to get out of control and ruin all of us."

Kay Borden said: "Mr. Smith, Mr. Ballard."

"Sorry," Ballard said as they shook hands.

"Thanks," Smith said.

"Miss Borden told me she was sending for you," Ballard went on. "She tells me you are an excellent investigator."

"Thanks," Smith murmured with no more expression than before.

Ballard's chilly blue eyes went back to Hauser. "Maybe we'll get some place now."

"I hope so," Smith cut in.

"So do I," Sheriff Hauser added.

"I'm not a member of your association, Mr. Smith, but I'll give you

one thousand dollars if you find this arsonist-murderer within the next forty-eight hours," Ballard said, then added: "Johnson left a wife and three children."

Smith said: "I'm working on it. It may take longer than forty-eight hours."

"I hope not. Unless these fires stop by then, I am going to sell out my holdings. I simply cannot afford to take a chance on fire wiping me out," Ballard told him.

"You can afford it better than I can," Hauser growled.

Ballard shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid I agree with Mr. Ballard," Kay Borden said. "I would sell out now if I could find a buyer."

Smith waved his hands. "You can find a buyer. There is plenty of money in San Francisco just aching to gamble on timber. Of course, you'd only get about a fifth of what your holdings are worth."

Hauser made a noise in his throat. "I'd buy out both of them if I had the stake. I'm not going to let a few fires scare me out."

"You have to stick whether you like it or not unless you want to resign as sheriff," Ballard pointed out.

Smith cut in gently: "Let's get out of here before it gets dark."

They started down the mountain. Sheriff Hauser suddenly stopped. He reached out and got Ballard by the shoulder.

"I meant to ask you why you didn't show up until now."

Ballard removed the sheriff's hand as though picking off a raveling. "I was putting out another fire," he announced quietly.

Hauser's square face darkened. "Why didn't you tell me before?" He balled his hand into a hairy fist.

"Take it easy, sheriff," Smith said.

"Keep out of this, fink," Hauser snarled.

Smith's nostrils flared slightly. "Call me a fink once more and I am going to find out how thick your hide is."

Hauser turned on Smith. "Don't get tough."

"I'm not getting tough, but if you want to try me, go ahead," Smith said evenly. "In the meantime, I would like to hear what Ballard has to say if you can keep your mouth shut long enough."

"O.K., Mr. Smith," Hauser fumed. He glared down at Ballard. "Speak your piece."

Ballard glanced at Smith, blinked, said: "I'll attempt to tell it so even you can understand, Hauser. I was returning from an inspection trip earlier this afternoon when I saw smoke coming from your Red River holdings. The fire was only a couple of hundred yards off the road. Fortunately, it had just started. I was able to put it out with the fire pump I carry in my car. After that, I returned to Alpine. When I learned there was another fire out here I came on out."

Smith digested it. "Did this fire have a fire line around it?"

Ballard shook his head. "I don't think it was connected with this fire."

Smith brightened. "Why?"

"For two reasons," Ballard said thoughtfully. "First, because there was no fire line around it. And I found several empty beer bottles near a spring just below the fire. I think one of Hauser's men took the afternoon off, got drunk, and started the fire accidentally."

"Did you see him?" Hauser asked acidly.

Ballard blinked again. "No," he replied calmly. "He probably heard me coming and slipped away."

Smith's face was wooden. "Your theory may be right, Ballard. What time was this?"

"About three-forty or fifty."

Smith broke off a pine needle, chewed on the end of it. "How far is it from here?"

"Two or three miles if you know where to cut across without going all the way back into town," Ballard said.

"You could make it from here in forty minutes if you walked," Sheriff Hauser broke in. "I'm gonna look the place over, anyway, regardless of what Ballard thinks."

Smith nodded agreeably. "If you find anything, let me know. Right now I'm going back to town, clean up, and get a drink."

The others followed him down the mountain. Except for a few men still patroling the fire to prevent a stray spark from starting it all over again, the rest of the firefighters had gone.

Sheriff Hauser got away first. Smith followed him down the haulroad. They reached the highway.

Kay Borden fingered a crease in her forest green slacks. "I think you broke it up intentionally."

Smith grinned at her. "You take a woman to dinner a few times and she thinks she can read your mind." He stopped smiling. "You're right, Kay. I did break it up. I've got some thinking to do. There are too many angles. I've got a couple of ideas chasing one another around inside my head, but I can't get them to hold still."

"If I can help--"

"Thanks," Smith said. He thought a moment, asked: "How much do you know about Hauser and Ballard?"

"What anybody would know about their competitors."

"I thought everybody had all the business they could handle."

"We have. But we're competing for labor and timber, or were until these fires started," she told him. "That's why Hauser and Ballard are always fighting. Ballard accuses the sheriff of arresting his men when they've been drinking and letting them go if they say they will work for him. Hauser claims Ballard is always pirating his men by offering them a bonus they never get. They fight for timber the same way."

Smith put the sedan in second gear as they started up a long climb. "Tell me what you know about them. Start with Hauser."

"Hauser used to be a logger. About five years ago he started up an outfit of his own. Some say he made the money on a roulette wheel in Reno," she began. "Frank Ballard came up here three years ago for his health. The lumber

business must have looked good to him because he invested a lot of money in it. I think he made his money in oil before that. Both of them are timber hogs and tough men to deal with. So far, they've left me alone."

Smith chewed on an unlighted cigarette. "What about yourself, Kay?"

She studied his face intently. "I'm a graduate forester; I inherited my timber holdings. I have them under selective management and I have all the timber I can manage. But you already know all those things, Pete. You suspect everybody, don't you?"

Smith smiled tightly. "I was just trying to save myself some leg work. I'll take you to dinner if I get that grand of Ballard's."

"If you stop these fires, I'll take you to dinner," the woman said.

Hauser slowed down ahead of them and turned off into a side road. Smith kept on the main road.

"That was the way to Hauser's Red River holdings where Ballard put out that other fire," she said.

Smith nodded and said: "I hope he finds something that will help us."

Kay Borden agreed absently. Her brown eyes were far away. "I don't know if this means anything, but the sheriff's car was not there when I turned the others around. He didn't come until fifteen or twenty minutes later," she said.

Smith shifted the car into high as they topped the long climb. "I'll jump him about it."

They came to Alpine.

Traphagan's Saloon was a sprawling building without paint. The sparse lights left huge patches of darkness in the dim corners. Smith stopped inside the split doors until his eyes became adjusted to the dimness. Then he went direct to the bar.

"Rye." He wondered if the liquor would loosen up the kinks in his brain. He was as much in the dark as ever. All he had was a bunch of mixed-up facts that he could not fit together. He was beginning to think his brain had rusted out completely.

The bald bartender with burned-off eyebrows stopped cleaning the pine bar, shoved Smith a bottle of rye and a glass. Smith filled the glass, emptied it, and filled it again. "Where is everybody?"

"In bed, I reckon. Everybody's wore out. I just opened up long enough for the boys to wet their whistles," the bartender said.

"I won't hold you up," Smith said, and finished his second drink.

"Take your time," Traphagan told him. "Too bad about Johnson. The boys are pretty mad about it. If they ever stick their hooks into the guy that did it, they'll string him up sure." He threw aside his towel and came closer to Smith. "I reckon you heard about the other fire."

Smith said, "Yes," and poured another drink. "Join me."

Traphagan got a bottle of beer out of the ice cooler. "Bring me a bottle to taper off on," Smith said. The bartender pried the caps off the bottles and set them on the counter.

"Do you sell beer to take out?" Smith said.

Traphagan wiped his lips. "When I have it."

"What about yesterday and today?"

"I got a truck load in this morning," the man informed Smith. "I sold several cases of it before we had it all unloaded."

Smith took two swallows of the beer, set the bottle down, and twisted it in his hands. The wet label came off. He balled it up and dropped it on the bar.

"Did Hauser get any of this?"

"A couple of cases."

"What about Frank Ballard?"

The bartender nodded. "He bought a case."

"Any of Hauser's lumberjacks buy any?"

"I reckon they did. I sold about forty cases. I can't remember everybody that got it."

The curiosity went out of Smith's face. "Forget it. It was just an idea."

Traphagan looked at him. "If it's got anything to do with the fires, I'll sit up all night until I remember who got it."

"Never mind," Smith said. "I was just feeling my way in the dark." He finished the beer, and topped it off with the third shot of rye. "How much?"

"Forget it," Traphagan said.

Smith said, "Thanks anyway," put a silver dollar and a fifty-cent piece on the bar, and went out.

Even in the cold moonlight, the forest seemed hot, dry, dangerous. Smith wondered when the next fire would be. He shivered a little. He glanced at the full moon in the cloudless sky and hoped the change would bring rain. Rain would not find the killer but it made the forests safe for a while; it would take the pressure off.

He came to the sheriff's office. He went up the steps slowly. He remembered Kay Borden's tense face. It didn't make him feel any better to know he could not do anything about it. He went inside.

They were waiting for him.

Kay Borden had changed to a beige skirt and a scarlet wool jacket. She seemed fresh, alive, with all the tense anxiety gone from her face. Frank Ballard was wearing a business suit. He, too, seemed to have lost his grimness. Only Sheriff Hauser was unchanged. Smith did not get it.

He stopped halfway across the room. "Did you find anything, Hauser?"

The huge sheriff shook his head. He pointed to the empty beer bottles on his desk. "I want to check them for fingerprints. I don't agree with Ballard. I figure the same guy started both fires. He got scared after he killed Johnson and was gonna burn off the whole mountain. If Ballard hadn't happened along when he did it would've been too bad for the rest of us."

"You may be right," Smith said slowly. "Ballard may be right."

"What's your theory, Smith?" Frank Ballard asked. "I would like to hear it before I leave."

Smith's face was expressionless. "You're leaving?"

"Tonight. I've decided to sell out," the thin man said. "I called my lawyer in San Francisco. He thinks he can find me a buyer." Ballard motioned toward Kay Borden. "Miss Borden has decided to go with me. We hope the same man will buy out both of us."

"I'm going to sell before it's too late," the woman added gently.

"I don't blame you," Smith told her. "I hope you get a good price." He crossed to Hauser's desk, leaned down, and looked at the empty beer bottles closely. The dry labels were the same brand as Traphagan sold. The bottles were clean as though they had been wiped off. The fog in his brain lifted suddenly as he saw the whole thing clearly. He straightened up slowly.

"I hope you don't forget that thousand-dollar offer you made, Ballard," he said casually.

Ballard reddened. "I had forgotten it. I'm glad you reminded me." He took out his checkbook, filled in one of the blanks, and handed the check to Smith. "You have a little more than forty-four hours left. At the end of that time, you can tear up the check if you haven't stopped the fires."

Smith turned the check over in his hands. He got a pen from the sheriff's desk and endorsed the check. He handed it to Hauser.

"Give that to Johnson's widow."

Hauser's eyebrows went up and down. His mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Ballard stood up. "But you haven't earned that check," he protested.

"You'll get your money's worth," Smith said.

Kay Borden's eyes were wide. "That means you know who has been setting these fires. You know who killed Eric Johnson."

Smith said: "Yeah."

"Then I won't have to run away," she murmured.

Hauser was still staring at Smith in amazement. "I've been butting my head against a butt log for a week and getting nowhere. You come in here and figure it out in six or seven hours. You're no fmk, Smith!"

"Thanks," Smith said cheerfully. "You deserve most of the credit, sheriff. You can pass part of it on to Ballard and Kay Borden. All I did was put it together."

Sheriff Hauser came around the desk. "Show me this guy, Smith."

Smith sat down on the edge of the desk and lighted his first cigarette since his arrival. He took a deep puff, let the smoke out through his nostrils slowly. He pointed the red end of the cigarette across the room.

"Ballard can show him to you."

The slight man stiffened, but his cold blue eyes remained steady as he looked into Smith's colder green ones. "I don't follow you, Smith."

Smith crossed the office and stopped two feet from Ballard. "You did it," Smith told him gently.

Ballard's nose twitched. "You're crazy, Smith."

"Maybe," Smith said evenly. "But if I am, so are all the facts."

"Then you've twisted them," Ballard insisted calmly. "Two of

the fires were on my own property."

"That was part of it," Smith declared. "You planned it so the fires wouldn't do any damage—I'll get to the reason in a minute. You started these fires in several different places so it would keep everybody guessing at your motive. This afternoon you almost got caught. You killed Johnson because you were afraid he'd seen you. That put you on the spot. Your plan was working, but you couldn't afford to let it drag along any longer; not after today. Fires are one thing; murder another.

"You got an idea— That's one thing I'll say for you, Ballard, you can think on the run. You knew if you started another fire further down the mountain and made it look different, that it would cover you up long enough to put you in the clear. You planted the empty beer bottles so you could put out the theory about the drunken logger.

"That's where you made your mistake, Ballard. You tried to make it too complicated. If you'd merely started the second fire, put it out, and forgot about the beer bottles you might be on your way to San Francisco"—Smith tilted his head toward Kay Borden—"with a nice companion."

Smith put out his cigarette and pointed to the empty bottles on the sheriff's desk. "The bottles are what tipped me off. Take a good look at them, Ballard. The labels are the same as they were when they left the brewery. They haven't been in a spring or any other kind of water. If they had been, the labels would either be soaked off or wrinkled from the moisture. Those bottles came from the case of beer you bought this morning. You dumped the beer, wiped off your fingerprints, and planted the empties. You don't drink beer without first cooling it," Smith added softly, "not on a hot day like this."

Ballard's eyes were on fire. A tiny bead of perspiration stood out on the tip of his twitching nose. Then the nose stood still and left his face as immobile as an egg shell.

"And I went to all this trouble just because I like to see a pretty fire, I suppose," he said through his teeth.

"Nothing like that," Smith said. "You had a cold, practical motive, Ballard. You wanted to own the whole mountain. This was just the first step. The fires were intended to scare Kay Borden into selling out for practically nothing. That's why you put the fire line around all the fires you set. You didn't want to destroy the timber you thought you were going to get.

"Of course, you had to pretend you were going to sell out, too. After you got Kay's timber through a stooge, you were going to come back and say you'd changed your mind. You could operate Kay's holding through the stooge. After that, you probably planned to go to work on Hauser."

Ballard stopped breathing. "Prove it."

"I have proved it," Smith said pleasantly. "If you mean the legal details, that's Hauser's job. I don't

think he'll have any trouble, though."

"Not a bit," Hauser promised grimly. He came over and jerked Ballard off his feet. "I'll have a confession in no time at all."

"You'll get blood over the floor," Smith said. His face was wooden as he looked at Ballard. "I was talking to some of the men who have been sweating their insides out on these fires, friends of Eric Johnson. They intend to hang the killer to the same spar tree we found Johnson's body on."

Ballard suddenly kicked at Hauser's middle. The big sheriff went down. Ballard clawed his way past Smith.

"You forgot your hat," Smith shouted, and kept going.

The trick worked. Ballard hesitated a split second. It was long enough for Smith to catch up with him.

"Sucker," Smith said cheerfully, and dropped Ballard with a sharp right.

Hauser struggled to his feet. His face was almost peaceful. He carried the limp Ballard to his desk, set him in the chair gently, then slapped him awake.

"Unless you want my jacks to string you up to that spar tree, start writing," Hauser snapped.

Ballard wrote.

Smith looked over the signed confession, said: "You will hang anyway, Ballard. Legally."

He did six months later.

THE END.

MURDER HAPPENS AT BREAKFAST

A Novelette

BY RALPH BERARD

● *Julia didn't object to her husband's weird hobby of tracking down murderers, but when he started in at the crack of dawn, well—*

I.

Coming back from the telephone, I sat down at the table for a second cup of coffee while waiting for captain of detectives, Bill Calahan, to stop for me. As Julia poured the fragrant liquid she pouted, "Why does murder always have to happen at breakfast?" She rolled her eyes and her head in mock weariness, but she was smiling. Julia's the kind of wife to have, capable of appreciating that a man can have a hobby and not be always fussing about it. She collects miniatures herself and is completely screwy about them. "Is the murdered person a friend of yours this time?" she asked.

"Not from what Bill told me on the telephone," I answered. The captain and I had become close friends. He had called me in on the first murder case we had solved together because I had been personally acquainted with the mur-

dered girl and because of the close study I had made of applied psychology.

Bill had gray-streaked hair above an unusually intelligent face. His body was massive and powerful and his two guns, one of which he carried in an armpit holster, were both dangerous when a criminal got bad enough to shake him out of his natural cheerful and good-humored method of settling things by cold reason and quiet weighing of evidence.

When his coupe stopped in front of the house, Julia opened the door while I tossed on my coat. A whiff of feathery white fog drifted in out of the chill October morning and Bill Calahan, his face ruddy with the exertion of his bouncing up the steps, appeared. "Sorry I can't stop for that cup of coffee you're goin' to offer me," he grinned at Julia, "but we've got a corpse that's been cold twelve hours and if it was murder, the guilty person's trail isn't getting any warmer."

Julia shuddered and grimaced. "Cheerful Captain Calahan," she chided. "Talking of dead people again when you should be drinking coffee."

I was ready by then and we left. Fifteen minutes later we were climbing a flight of cement steps which led from the sidewalk up to a fairly old rooming house at 718 Alder Street. This place was no dump, but neither was it a castle. "This is a queer case," Calahan said. "Plenty of chance here for you to exercise your psychological theories."

"But I'm not acquainted with this place," I protested.

It was something of a joke between us that, because I had lived in Brightesville so long, I was supposed to be personally acquainted with everything and everybody. That was what had interested the captain in me in the first place. He had a theory that knowing people personally helped a careful psychologist to appraise their actions and motives. Now Bill said, "We'll have an even break this time then. Let's see who finds the clue which solves the case."

A uniformed officer stood guard just inside the door of the apartment. "The body's been removed," Calahan informed me as we entered. He went on to give me a few facts. The dead woman's name was Mrs. Carr. As near as the police could figure, she had died between three and six the afternoon before. A bottle containing strychnine tablets had been found in a kitchen cabinet, but Bill hadn't received a report yet to make certain Mrs. Carr had been poisoned. There was evidence indicating that she and her husband had quarreled and were separated. "But," Bill concluded, shrugging slightly, "it was her husband who found the body. He came here early this morning and let himself in with a key he still had." Bill nodded toward the larger of the apartment's two rooms. "We'll go in and question him."

In the living room, a second uniformed officer was sitting on a wine-colored couch beside a youthful-looking chap who Calahan intro-

duced as Mr. Carr.

The young fellow glanced up. His eyes were red-rimmed. I decided two things about Phillip Carr almost immediately; first, that he was a little older than his slender form and boyish face might make one think and, second, that his grief over his wife's death was either very real or else he was a pretty good actor. He had a slightly Southern drawl and, although grief-stricken, he didn't seem excited or nervous. He gave his age as twenty-nine and disclosed the rather astonishing fact that his dead wife was fifty-eight.

Captain Calahan glanced my way as if to place special emphasis on the difference in ages, then turning back to Carr, suggested, "Just tell us in your own words what you know. Give us as much of your wife's background as you can, and of your own."

"Well"—Carr placed his two hands on his knees and kept looking at them as he talked—"my part of the story sounds pretty screwy, I guess. I'm from Texas. Two years ago, when my draft number came up, I made a try for the paratroopers. I was in a hurry to help get this war cleaned up and back to a normal life afterward."

I watched Carr's face closely. He seemed to be laboring under some sort of melancholia and there was a lack of normal life in his eyes. He didn't seem to take a quite logical interest in things, not even in the murder.

"We were making test hops in Nevada one day," he told us. "One of them was bad luck for me. A ground draft caught my chute and jerked me up again after I'd hit the ground. I yanked a shroud rope and spilled the air out of the chute. It collapsed suddenly and let me down on my head."

Bill glanced my way. That such an event could have a bearing on the crime was pretty doubtful, but Calahan and I both believed in checking people's past experiences thoroughly.

"You see, I'm not exactly up to par all the time," Carr went on. "That spill gave me a brain concussion and three cracked vertebra. It raised hell with my nervous system." He explained that he had been in the base hospital for six months, that he had come out feeling pretty well, but the doctors had looked him over and recommended that he spend a year at Lakewich Sanitarium, a government institution, for special observation. "That was a crazy idea," he grimaced. "Who wants to sit in some damn sanitarium for a year when he feels all right? I'd sure be off the beam by then."

"You don't have an idea you're really insane?" Calahan probed.

Carr shook his head. "Sometimes I do." He grinned and went on to tell us that army doctors had given him a clear bill of health mentally. His trouble was entirely physical, they had told him. Only time and total rest could completely remedy the damage done his nervous system. He might feel all right, even without the year's rest, providing he didn't do anything too strenuous. He wouldn't be any good, though,

for hard work. He mustn't crank a car or do anything that might in any way strain his back. He had protested against the idea of a year in the hospital and the army had offered to let him go with an honorable discharge right away. "But," they had cautioned, "you'd be better off to take the year's treatment and receive a medical discharge. That way you'd be subject to care and a pension if trouble should show up later."

"I took the honorable discharge," Carr said with emphasis. He drew a billfold from his pocket and showed Calahan and myself the evidence. Calahan took advantage of this interlude in Carr's story to explain to me that Carr had been searched only for weapons, that he was not necessarily under suspicion and that no charge had been placed against him. Carr hardly seemed interested even in that.

He continued his story. He told us how he had drifted out to the coast, how his back had troubled him every time he exerted himself, and how his nerves were so adversely affected that he had periodic spells of despondency.

"A sort of turning point came," he said, "when I finally got a job at Bloeling Aircraft Co. where I could sit down most of the time. By going to bed for an hour or so after work, I found I could rest enough to enjoy going to a dance after dinner. Something about dancing, maybe it was the rhythm, seemed to help my back."

Carr lifted his eyes toward me and grinned a bit sheepishly. "Suppose it sounds funny to you cops that I should meet a woman thirty years older than myself at a dance. But that's where I met Mrs. Johnson."

Calahan interrupted to explain to me that Johnson had been Mrs. Carr's name previous to this latest marriage.

"Yes, she was married twice before," Carr continued, "but neither husband was true to her and she was jealous as the devil. She was jealous of me, too, but there wasn't any reason for it. I guess some people thought I was playing for her money. She owned this apartment house and a bigger one before she bought this. She had a lot of cash, I guess. I never asked about things like that. She bought a car as soon as we got married. I always brought my check home and tried to give it to her, but she would say, 'No, Phil, darling, I don't want your money. Buy me presents with it. Bring me perfume and clothes and slippers.' "

Calahan and I sat and listened closely. You couldn't help being interested in Carr's unusual story. He told us how his wife would put her arms around him and hug him and how affectionate she always was. A sad look came into his eyes and he paused for a little while before going on.

"I was lonesome. I didn't have any folks except one kid brother. I had heard that he enlisted in the navy, but I don't know where he is. I met this Mrs. Johnson, she was kind and affectionate. In fact, she

was so affectionate that that was what we quarreled about."

Calahan and I exchanged glances without Carr noticing. Even the uniformed officer grinned a little. Carr's love life was certainly a bit ludicrous. "Five or six weeks ago," he went on, "she started razzing me because I wasn't affectionate enough. Said I was becoming indifferent and didn't care about her any more."

"Were you?" Calahan asked gently.

Carr shrugged and eyed the floor as if it were something he couldn't understand himself, much less explain to anyone. "She always called me 'honey.' She'd put her arms around my neck and kiss me as soon as I got in the house, even before I could wash up. I guess people aren't all built alike. I never was one for much love-making. Finally, she got to saying she thought there was too much difference in our ages. She'd tell me how she would be seventy when I was only forty. She got to thinking she hadn't been fair in marrying me in the first place. At last she kept telling me that if I wasn't interested in her any more she thought I had better go." Carr stopped and began looking down at his hands again.

"You mean," Calahan probed, "that she put you out?"

"No, she just asked me if I didn't think it would be better if I left."

"Did you quarrel? Was anything said about money, or the property?"

Carr shrugged rather limply. "No, we didn't quarrel. We never talked about money or the property. I never knew what she had till after we were married. She said things now and then which showed me she was pretty well fixed. But it wasn't any of my business. What she had was hers. That's the way I looked at it."

"But this morning you came back," Calahan reminded.

"I sure did," Carr agreed in a disheartened way. "I'd been gone a week. I never was so damn lonesome in my life. I didn't know anybody in town. I'd get to thinking about my brother. I wondered where he was and if he was still alive. I even got to reading casualty lists. I never did that before. I even got lonesome to hear my wife call me 'honey.' It used to kind of disgust me before. It didn't seem necessary."

"So you came back?"

"Yeah. I hadn't slept all night. I was just nervous and restless. I came back"—Carr lifted his right hand from his knee and turned the palm toward the outside door—"and there she was."

"That's all you know?" Calahan asked.

"Well, there's some other little things. I know she had a hell of a fight with a guy named Koomers who lives in No. 5." Carr smiled faintly, evidently thinking of Koomers. "He was drunk all the time and made a lot of noise. She tried to raise his rent because she wanted to get rid of him. He went to the OPA and that made her mad. She went down to see them herself and they wouldn't even let her put the guy out. Koomers came in specially drunk one night. He stopped at the door and told Margaret he'd cut her throat if she bothered him any more."

Carr looked from one to the other of us and laughed a little. "He was drunk. He was just bluffing and trying to scare her. I knew it would just make things worse or I'd have busted him one."

Calahan asked a few questions about Koomers. Carr said that Koomers worked nights and usually slept in the daytime so Calahan told the cop at the door to go down to No. 5 and see if Koomers were there. Then, turning back to Carr, he asked, "Is there anything else?"

"I heard you mention that you had found strychnine tablets in the kitchen. That seems funny to me.

Margaret never had any that I know of. There certainly wasn't much wrong with her heart." Suddenly Carr glanced up with an unusual spark of animation and interest in his face. "Say," he exclaimed, "there's a bundle of laundry over there." He pointed to the bundle lying on a chair. "That was in front of the door in the hall when I came this morning. The laundryman must have left it there. But I found that the door wasn't locked. I don't see why he didn't put it inside."

I stepped over and looked at the bundle. Calahan came and stood beside me a moment, then he turned thoughtfully to the officer who was still with us. "We'll hold Mr. Carr temporarily, Mack. We may want to question him further. You can take him down to headquarters with you in the prowler while Mark and I try to get some fingerprints."

A moment later Calahan and I were alone in the apartment trying for fingerprints. We found a glass sitting on the kitchen drain with a dirty, smudged print on it that was almost perfect even to the naked eye. A glance at it and I knew the same hand had made it that had made similar marks on the clean white paper in which the laundry was wrapped. Calahan followed my thinking. "That laundryman either came inside," he decided, "or someone who had been inside picked up that bundle and laid it outside the door."

I nodded. That much seemed clear enough. We carefully took off the prints, both from the glass and the package, and we also got a second print off the glass which was very dim. "Strychnine could have been served in that glass," I suggested.

"It could," Calahan agreed. He wrapped the glass carefully to take along, then we began inspecting the apartment in general.

There was a clothes closet which amazed us both. A brand new mink coat which I valued at a minimum of $2,000 hung right in front. There were several dresses, one or two of which I knew had cost at least a hundred dollars. A few minutes later, in the drawer of a small writing desk, I found a receipted bill for nineteen hundred and ninety-eight dollars, plus tax, from the North Fur Co. for the coat. It was dated five days before and I stood looking at it a long time before I said to Calahan, "I choose the coat as my clue and this bill from the North Fur Co." I walked back to the closet and took the coat off its hanger.

"I'm not exactly following you," Bill admitted, looking at me quizzically.

I smiled. "Simple matter of association," I explained and then shrugged. "Maybe Mrs. Carr committed suicide. If she did, the coat won't mean a thing. But I don't think she did." I picked up a Bible which I had noticed on a small table. "Mrs. Carr was a good Christian woman, but she believed in living to the fullest. She wore good clothes. She went to dances. Her apartment looks cheerful and comfortable. It doesn't look to me

as if she'd be the kind to leave life very willingly."

Calahan was smiling at me. "Why does that make the coat a valuable clue?"

"If she were murdered, it was for her money. I can't think of any other reason that seems logical. The coat represents quite a bit of money. Whoever knows more about this coat also knew about Mrs. Carr having money. The coat associates with money; money associates with the motive for the crime—" I was being half serious and half playfully melodramatic. "Anyway, I'm going to see where the coat leads me."

Calahan was always laughing at my amateurish theories, but before we could discuss it further, the cop who had gone for Koomers, came back with him. "Had to rouse him out of bed," he explained. "That's what took so long."

Koomers was a sight—hair uncombed, shoes not laced, a heavy red handkerchief at the open neck of a blue work shirt. He hadn't shaved yet. His eyes were bleary with sleep and liquor.

Calahan said abruptly, "I understand you threatened to cut the landlady's throat the other night."

Koomers stood a trifle unsteadily, just looking at Calahan blankly. He didn't say anything.

Calahan explained further: "Mrs. Carr was murdered last night. We found her right here on the floor this morning."

Koomer's drunken expression lighted up. He actually looked delighted and chuckled like a kid just handed a candy bar. "You found her dead? Right here?"—he pointed at the floor.

"Dead. Right there," Calahan said.

"Then I don't have to cut her throat," Koomers almost beamed. I had never seen such kiddish demonstration of innocence in the face of such a serious charge and I know that Calahan and I both wanted to laugh. But you learn better than to be too easily fooled by appearances.

Calahan said, "You're not quite sober. Were you drunk last night?"

"Hell, yes. I'm drunk every night." Koomers was inclined to be boastful.

"Where do you work? What kind of work do you do?"

"I unload coal off o' scows down at the Lake Worden Gas Works."

Calahan seemed to decide suddenly that any further questioning could be done at headquarters. "Bring him along," he instructed the officer. "We can at least hold him till he sobers up."

Calahan and the officer took the drunk. I took the coat and the North Fur Co. bill. Two hours later we had the fingerprints developed and had rounded up the laundry driver whose prints matched. He was a sullen, blond-faced Scandinavian. Standing in front of Calahan's desk, he glared back at the captain defiantly and refused to answer his questions. I figured the fellow was ignorant and scared and doubted at first if there was any chance of him being guilty.

Calahan repeated again and

again, "You were inside that apartment. Your fingerprint was on that glass. You might as well admit it, Lars."

His name was Lars Engstrom. Finally, he got mad. He started spluttering a broken English-Norwegian lingo at Calahan that I had a mighty hard time following, but the gist was that he had delivered the laundry, that the door had opened almost by itself and that he had seen the glass sitting on the drainboard and, "I was tharsty," he fairly shrieked at Bill, "so I vent in and got me a drink of water."

"And you didn't see Mrs. Carr's body just inside the door?" Bill was sarcastic.

"Yeah, sure, I see it." Engstrom was even more sarcastic. "But I don't see it going in. I am looking at the glass und I am tharsty. The body is behind the door ven I open it, und I don't see it until I am coming out. Ven I do see it, I get out of there fast like hell."

"And you don't notify the police about it."

"Vy should I? It vill only make you be asking me questions."

That was all we got out of Lars Engstrom except that he had made his call at five p. m. So we knew for certain that Mrs. Carr had been dead at that time. Calahan did a little checking on Engstrom with his employer, found he had worked for the laundry three years and had a good record, so he released him on his own recognizance in spite of how foolish the story sounded. Then, all we had left was the dim print of a woman's thumb. If that print proved to be Mrs. Carr's and there were traces of strychnine in the glass—well, it was suicide.

I still had the coat. I hung it in Calahan's locker and he laughed at me. "You check on it," he agreed. "Meantime, I'll check Carr's story and his past history. I'll find out if he's really got a brother."

"I might want to ask Carr some questions later," I suggested.

Bill said, "O. K., and I'll let you know if that other print on the glass is Mrs. Carr's."

I went from police headquarters straight to the North Fur Co. I don't have a police badge and don't carry a gun. Criminal hunting is just a hobby with me and Calahan is nice enough to cooperate. So, now when I found a very dignified elderly woman manager in the stylish retail shop of the fur company, I was free to do some high-class story telling. "My wife's interested in a mink coat," I told her. That was no lie. Whose wife isn't interested in a mink coat? But I also said, "You sold a coat to a Mrs. Carr. Mrs. Carr is a friend of ours and—"

"Oh, yes," she interrupted. "Miss Carr took care of Mrs. Carr." She paused and smiled. "Sounds odd, doesn't it? Miss Carr. Mrs. Carr. They're not related though. The name is just a coincidence. Miss Carr has taken a customer to lunch. She should be back any minute now. I'd like to have her wait on you. She took care of Mrs. Carr and knows all about the coat. I believe Celia took the coat up to Mrs. Carr five or six days ago. Have you seen

Mrs. Carr's coat? It was a very beautiful garment. Is Mrs. Carr pleased with it?"

I didn't answer immediately. In fact, I only heard her last words rather subconsciously. She was rather g n s h y and talkative, I thought, but she had given me a couple of possible clues. I was trying to weigh them and talk to her at the same time. Finally, I said, "Yes, I've seen the coat. Mrs. Carr was very pleased with your saleslady. She mentioned that Miss Carr delivered the coat to her the very moment the alterations were completed." This last sentence was a straight shot in the dark. I watched the woman's face eagerly for the reaction.

"Celia always does that. She's so thoughtful." The store manager spoke with a wise expression. "When a woman buys a fine coat, she is always impatient to be trying it on and wearing it. I know your wife will just love Celia."

I nodded without too much enthusiasm. If Julia ever found out what I was doing I would be sunk. Julia would be more interested in a miniature—I hoped. I said, "I'll be back in a few minutes then, and meet Miss Carr. I have a call I can make nearby."

My "call" was from a public telephone. I reported to Calahan the unusual coincidence of the two names being alike, although I attached no importance to it myself. "But it might pay to check up," I suggested, "and see if Celia Carr could be a relative of Margaret Carr's."

"We'll check it," Calahan replied. I could feel him grinning at me over the phone. "We also found out something about the strychnine. Mrs. Carr signed for it five days ago at the Cozy drugstore just a block from her apartment. It looks

like she must have contemplated suicide about the time her husband left her. For some reason she put it off a few days. The other print on the glass was hers. There's no question about that."

"But," I insisted, "Mrs. Carr did not commit suicide." Of course, I knew Bill Calahan well enough to rib him a little. "A woman doesn't commit suicide when she's just getting a brand new mink coat. I bet you don't find any trace of strychnine in the glass. She just drank water from it as the laundryman did."

"I haven't closed the case as a suicide," Calahan agreed more seriously. "We'll keep working on it."

I hung up and returned to the fur shop. There I met Celia Carr. She was twenty-five, I estimated, and charming. "And you're the man whose wife is interested in a mink coat." She smiled, showing perfect white teeth, and lips which were so properly red that you could not be sure they were rouged. There was a professional twinkle in her eyes which might well take any man for the count.

I admit she disconcerted me. But she did not fool me. Never have I seen a young woman more perfectly attired nor with a more perfectly featured face nor a more fitting and becoming hair-do.

Yet, I knew, somehow, that her face was not a face. It was a mask. I had three clues in my mind which told me that face was a mask and I clung to that conviction in spite of the tendency which her beauty and personality had to sweep me off my feet.

"You will understand," I suggested, "that this is purely a business proposal, but would it be possible for us to have lunch together tomorrow. The lunch hour," I lied, "is about the only time I have free. I should like to talk to you about the coat, and about the price, before my wife comes in." I forced myself to meet her eyes directly and I did not smile. The blunt proposal I had made was not exactly easy, even for me, but I was determined to study this girl at close range.

"You have a card?" she asked slowly.

I handed her one of my business cards. I own my own insurance agency.

She looked at the card, held it carefully in her fingers while she studied me. "You seem sincerely interested in a coat," she decided. "Tomorrow at twelve?" She smiled.

"Tomorrow at twelve," I agreed. "I know you like to take your customers to lunch. Mrs. Carr said you took her and that she learned an awful lot about furs. What she said helped me to become seriously interested in them." I watched her very closely. It seemed to me that her smile disintegrated briefly and then came back. "Yes," she murmured. "I often take my customers to lunch. I shall insist on paying the check, however. I always do."

"We won't misunderstand each other." I laughed good-naturedly. "I'm very much interested in a coat.

I'm sure you're the one to help me."

I didn't add that the coat which interested me was one she already had sold. Nor did I mention exactly how I expected her to help me solve a murder. When I left her I felt unusually thrilled and excited. Instinctively, I knew that Celia Carr was a dangerous woman. I could only hope she was not clever enough to suspect my true purpose. As I stood waiting for a bus to take me home, I cussed myself a couple of times for stressing the fact that she took so many of her customers to lunch. That could have been a mistake if it made her suspicious at all.

Before the bus came along, I stopped at a small specialty shop to get my mind away from its tenseness and to buy Julia a miniature. I wanted specially to keep her mind off fur coats. Gosh, I might really have to buy the thing. One should not let a hobby become too expensive, not even the hobby of running down killers.

II.

The next morning at headquarters Calahan reported that checking into Carr's affairs indicated that Mrs. Carr, formerly Mrs. Johnson, formerly Mrs. Briggs, had no children, no heirs. Phillip Carr would inherit better than a hundred thousand. He had been checking also on Miss Celia Carr, but didn't have much yet. "She can't be any relative of Phillip Carr's, though," Calahan assured me. "I've already got a report from the police in Austin, Texas. They've checked up."

After Calahan and I had talked an hour, he called Koomers in. The man was sober and had turned sulky. "Why would I kill the old cat?" he demanded. "Maybe I take a few drinks and talk too much, but I never hurt anybody yet."

Calahan nodded and let him go on condition that he contact headquarters every forty-eight hours until further notice.

When we were alone again, I asked about the strychnine tablets. "Just where did you find them in the apartment?"

"On a shelf in the kitchen," Calahan said.

"Were they stuck out in front as if someone had just taken some, or were they behind other stuff like groceries and spices maybe?"

"They were behind some stuff. Mack moved everything on the shelf before he found them."

"That's what I figured." I was having a spell of confidence. "It hardly seems likely that a woman committing suicide would take what tablets she needed for the job and then hide the rest. Do you think so?"

"What makes you think they were hidden?" Calahan asked.

"I think the person who put them there didn't wish them to be seen accidentally because they were put there several days before Mrs. Carr's death." I stood up, smiling wisely, pretty sure I had the case right. "Have you made sure it was strychnine that killed her?"

Calahan nodded. "A rather small dose. It wasn't enough to kill her

immediately. It likely took several hours."

"She would get sick," I reasoned, "but wouldn't realize she was poisoned. Isn't that likely how it would act?"

"That's about it," he agreed.

As I started out, I told Calahan about having an appointment with Celia Carr for lunch. At the door I stopped, turned, looked back at him and grinned. "If I'm not back by three o'clock you better look for me."

Miss Carr was charming. In the hour I spent with her I learned more about mink and furs than I ever had guessed there was to know. I studied the girl closely. Once I said lightly, glancing at her rather large handbag, "I bet you carry a gun in there."

The twinkle in her eyes seemed to skip a beat. "Why? What makes you think that?"

"You impress me as a very capable, self-reliant person," I said. "That coat you're wearing must be worth about two thousand dollars. I don't believe you'd let any one take it from you without a fight. In your business it pays to show the furs you sell by wearing them so you wouldn't be going around without it." I smiled as if I thought my reasoning was perfectly natural.

"As a matter of fact," she admitted pleasantly, "I do carry a gun. I got a permit from the police to carry one."

I switched the conversation back to the coat for my wife. I requested that she give me a card with a brief description of the coat and the price. She agreed unsuspiciously and produced her own pen and a card. When she handed me the card, I glanced at it, then pushed it back across the table. "Would you mind signing your name? I want to deal with the same person in whom I have confidence right through the whole deal and if I have your name the shop will know you personally gave me the figures."

She frowned, then finally complied with my request. "You're a meticulous sort of person."

"I've found it pays," I said. I glanced at where she had written

"Miss Celia Carr" and thanked her. "My wife'll likely come in for the coat just before Christmas."

I rose, pulled back her chair, and let her pay the check without any protest. We went outside and I left her at the entrance. I had Celia Carr's signature on a card and when Calahan and I took that card to the Cozy drugstore the word "Carr" on the pharmacist's record where Mrs. Margaret Carr had signed for the poison matched identically. It was one tiny detail the clever Celia had overlooked.

Calahan and I talked everything over. He might have arrested her then, but we thought we could strengthen the case. I didn't think Celia Carr was suspicious and if she wasn't, she would certainly go on with the rest of her plan. Calahan was inclined to agree with me that Phillip Carr would be in danger if released from jail, but Bill was willing to take that chance. Bill had received enough dope to confirm most of my suspicions, but he decided to check still further regarding Carr's brother who was in the navy.

Phillip Carr went back to the tiny apartment on Alder Street. Calahan assigned a detective to watch the place all the time Celia Carr was not working at the fur shop, which was mostly evenings. Three weeks passed and nothing happened. It was getting close to Christmas and I began worrying. Miniatures might satisfy Julia, but Celia might begin wondering why we didn't buy that coat and get suspicious.

The Christmas rush also swamped Calahan's department. He ran short of detectives, so he told me one day, "Suppose you watch the place for a couple of nights. You won't have any authority and you won't have a gun, but you can let us know if anything happens." He laughed at me. "Anyway, you should be able to handle one woman."

"Yeah," I agreed a bit doubtfully, "if she doesn't bring her gang along."

So I had to make excuses to Julia. Insurance calls in the evenings, I said. But I had luck. The second evening, the tenth of December, I was standing across the street from 718 Adler Street when I saw a young woman get off the bus. She was dressed entirely different, but I knew it was Celia Carr. It was drizzling rain and damn uncomfortable. I don't think she liked the weather. Neither did I. My lips were blue from standing there and I was half numb with cold.

Action was welcome and it came fast.

Celia walked straight toward the apartment house. There was a yellow slit of light around the blinds in Phillip Carr's front apartment so she knew he was home. She ran lightly up the cement steps. I had to hurry to get to the outside door by the time she had entered and skipped along the hall to the door of Carr's apartment. She had already knocked and he was opening the door when I slipped down the

hall behind her. I had seen her holding the big handbag in front of her and lifting the tiny gun out of it.

I wasn't quite soon enough so I yelled.

Celia swung around. Instead of swinging the gun toward me and shooting as a man likely would have done, she smiled, a rather pitiful attempt, and I saw the handbag closing as she tried to conceal the gun.

I leaped toward her and my arms have never embraced any woman with more businesslike determination. The force of my rush carried us both through the door Carr had opened and I yelled at him, "Get that door shut, Carr! Lock it so she can't get out."

Somehow, we tripped. We went to the floor with a crash. I had hold of her handbag and was clenching it shut upon her wrist with both my hands. She had hold of the gun, but couldn't pull it out of the bag. Carr stood staring at us a moment and then the damn fool, thinking I was attacking her, began pulling at me. That was when I really used my head. I let go of her bag with my right hand, drew it back into a fist and cracked the beautiful Celia Carr squarely on the chin with every ounce of strength I had.

We were sure lucky the blow knocked her out because Carr had me off balance and he upset me backward. She still had the gun and if she had been conscious she could have killed us both. But both the gun and Celia clattered to the floor. Carr saw the weapon and began to realize what had happened. We telephoned headquarters immediately and Bill Calahan came himself. By the time he got there, Celia was just regaining consciousness. Believe me, I had hit her hard.

It didn't take long to tell Calahan what had happened. He and I, of course, had gone over the rest of it a lot of times. The manager of the North Fur Co. had given me my two initial clues that first day I called. She had said that Celia Carr had delivered Mrs. Carr's coat personally five days before, so I knew Celia could have secreted strychnine on the kitchen shelf to make the crime she was planning look like suicide later. She had kept enough of the strychnine to put in Mrs. Carr's tea or coffee when she invited her to lunch, presumably to make sure she was satisfied with her coat. The dose had been light enough so Mrs. Carr would be able to get home before she died.

Celia Carr was capable of the crime. We knew that, because Calahan's investigation had definitely hooked her up with gang stuff in the old Chicago Dillinger and Karpis days and now she had simply gone in for higher class stuff.

When Calahan had her revived and handcuffed, I couldn't help getting in my nickel's worth of melodrama. Turning to Phillip Carr, I smiled a bit wryly, remembering how he had jumped on me and almost succeeded in getting us both shot. "Permit me," I said, "to introduce you to your sister-in-law."

I told him briefly how this scheming female had been unscrupulous enough to pick up his kid brother while he was in town on furlough a few months before, and marry him. "You'll have to admit," I said, "that any young kid would find her pretty hard to resist. Miss Carr wasn't much of a change in name from Mrs. Carr. That was the nearest to being on the up and up of anything she did."

I went on and explained to Carr how marrying his brother put her in direct line for a hundred thousand dollars. All she had to do was bump off Carr himself after getting rid of his wife.

Carr frowned at me in a perplexed way. I admit it was a little hard for him to get all at once. "You hardly realized your wife was rich," I explained. "But Celia realized it all right. With your wife dead, you became rich. With you dead your brother would inherit your wife's property and money. Your kid brother might get his any day out there in the Pacific. And Celia figured that if he didn't, she could handle a kid like him, anyway, without too much trouble."

Carr was beginning to get it all right. I stepped closer and put a hand on his shoulder.

Calahan said to him, "Cheer up, fellow. We found your brother. He's safe and well. You've inherited as much money as you'll need for a long time. Things could be a lot worse."

Carr's face lighted somewhat, but he still seemed pretty confused. "Julia and I'll drop around and see you some day," I told him. "I'd like to meet that kid brother of yours when he gets back." I turned to Calahan and walked beside him as he led Celia to the car. "Right now," I laughed as I left him, "I've got to buy Julia a couple of miniatures. Do you know any place that would still be open?"

Calahan gave me a look. What he said tickled me because Celia Carr heard it. "I thought you were going to buy your wife a fur coat," he said, pushing the handcuffed girl into the police car.

THE END.

DIFFERENCE

They told me you were dead, who knew
The power in my love for you.
But ah! how little did they know
The comfort such love can bestow
Because it has no time or space,
Or permanent abiding place.
Let those who will pronounce you dead—
I hold you closer, dear, instead!

ANNA HAMILTON WOOD.

● *Patrolman Mike Kinucan knew every inch of his beat and the people on it and when murder happened even the sidewalks had tongues and talked.*

"THERE ARE NO BETTER—"

BY M. I. H. ROGERS

MICHAEL KINUCAN'S big feet hurt and under the upper middle of his size 44 police uniform coat there was a dull ache as he plodded his beat in Bower Heights for the last time.

So named for some long-forgotten reason, Bower Heights lay flat as a prairie, and long and narrow, between the bay and a hilly residential suburb. It had been settled largely by Portuguese, Mexicans, Negroes, and Filipinos. Michael Kinucan knew every inch of it, every backyard and front stoop. He knew their churches and cafes, their dance halls and dives, and their itinerant gospel tents. Many of the homes were also diminutive factories, tacos, tamales, or laundries. They were all as familiar to him as his own chin.

The toughest beat in the city before Kinucan took it over, Bower Heights now gave the police very little concern. He saw to that. It was his creed to keep his people out of the clink and the courts, and he accomplished his purpose by close contact and a tough, kindly guardianship. He also saw to it that the vicious ones moved along.

Refusing to admit that the pain in his chest was heartache, he

tramped on. Tomorrow he would begin a two-weeks' vacation and when he came back, it would be to a despised job guiding visitors through the new city hall. The radio cars were taking over Bower Heights and crisp young men would soon be knocking on doors with the order: "Come along, you. We'll talk it over at headquarters."

"They don't understand these people, and there are no better people when you do understand them," Kinucan mumbled. "They're bright lads and they mean well, but hell will be popping in a week." He had reminded Chief Patrick that there had been no major crimes in his district since the holdup back in '29 when two men and a youth had robbed messengers bringing gold from border resorts for deposit in an American bank. The two men, Munster and Castro, were in the penitentiary, and the boy, Pablo, was now a respectable married father, working steady for the ditch gang of the gas company. Pablo and his wife, Marie, were Kinucan's good friends.

Thinking of that, he had complained to the chief: "I ought to be here to meet those two when they get out of San Quentin. Castro's about due. Major Munster, too."

To that, Chief Patrick had answered: "If I had my way, you'd stay in Bower Heights until you retired. It's this city manager with the new charter in his pocket and a head full of efficiency schemes. Sit tight. Give me time. You know how to handle the public and I'll place you somewhere in a decent spot after this hurrah dies down." Then the chief had added the argument which always stopped the big cop cold. "Sure, you sent those two up and salvaged Pablo, but where's the gold they stole?"

"Hello, Big Mike," a shrill voice called.

The officer stopped to grin down at the small dark boy swinging on a gate. Gates were scarce in Bower Heights, and so were whitewashed picket fences, even crooked ones, such as this. But rarer still were gardens with red geraniums and white marguerites, cabbages and chili pepper plants.

The boy was waiting, breathless, his eyes dancing, small body quivering in anticipation of the daily repartee.

"Hello, Little Mike," the officer said. "The top of the morning to you."

"And the rest of the day to you!" the boy shouted and jiggled the gate with joy. Son of Pablo and Marie, he was christened Miguel, but as Kinucan had often gravely assured him, Miguel and Michael were one and the same, so they were Little Mike and Big Mike by grace of the blessed saints of Mexico and Ireland.

Gravely now, Big Mike explained that he was going on a vacation, just as he had last year. Little Mike listened, dark eyes desolate in his brown face, small hands clutching the bib of clean faded overalls. He promised to be a good boy and take care of his mother until the officer came back, and Kinucan moved on, his heart and

his big feet thumping out a rhythm: hell—will—pop, hell—will—pop.

He dropped in at headquarters the evening that vacation ended and saw his gloomy predictions realized. Ahead of him a radio-car officer was hustling Pablo Rodriguiz through the door. Kinucan followed and heard the officer tell the desk sergeant to book Pablo for murder.

Pablo's shoes were caked with mud and his blue overalls were dirty, as were his hands. Mud splattered his handsome brown face, now closed sullenly against an unsympathetic world. When his outraged eyes recognized Big Mike, they lighted and he made a dive for the officer.

"These men say I kill Jorge Castro!" he cried. "Big Mike, you tell them I am good man. I work for the gas company."

"Take it easy," Kinucan said. He put one hand on Pablo's shoulder and his other elbow against the chest of the officer who reached to grab him. "Wait a minute, Daney. What've you got on him?"

"The whole book," Daney snapped. "He knifed his wife's father. We got a phone tip and caught him right in the middle of it. The boys are still over there."

Kinucan considered, still holding the officer away. It was only a bit past five and he would not report for duty until eight tomorrow morning. Tonight was his. Pablo never killed Marie's stepfather, but no court was going to acquit him because a fat old cop *said* he was innocent.

"Pablo," he began, his eyes holding the limpid brown ones which implored him, "you be a good boy and do what these men say. I'll go right over and see about this. And I'll take care of Marie; don't fret."

"If Marie is his wife," Daney told him, "there's a pick-up on her, but none of those monkeys down there'll give out. We figure she packed up this afternoon and beat it with the kid, knowing the killing was due. Pablo won't tell where he was meeting her."

"He called me liar. I don't talk," Pablo said. The young Mexican's face had closed against them again and his eyes were blank.

Kinucan squeezed his shoulder. "You're doing all right, boy. I'll see you later."

"Hey, what goes on?" Daney demanded. "Are you encouraging that dirty bum to defy the law?"

"I American citizen, no bum!" Pablo shouted. "Clean as you, too. I work in ditch all day and there is no time for washing."

"Pipe down, boy," Mike told him gently. "And keep your mouth shut until I get back."

Before he could be taken away, Pablo leaned close and whispered swiftly one brief word, but it spoke a whole column to the guardian of Bower Heights.

To the desk sergeaut, Kinucan said: "Do me a favor and book him suspect felony. Time enough for a murder charge in the morning." Then he turned his big impassive face on the young officer. "They'll

talk to me, Daney. And keep a civil tongue in your head. This boy's father and mother were born in California. Can you say the same?"

"Come along, you," Daney snapped. "Fine Americans! Just wait until you get a whiff of that filthy dump."

"Ever see a neat murder?" Kinucan asked, but he took Daney's words with him and they kept confusing his thoughts. Pablo living in filth? Not if Marie were on her feet. But Daney had said Marie was not there. Queer. And her vicious stepfather had come back to be murdered. Good riddance.

Jorge Castro was one of the two men Kinucan had sent to the pen eleven years ago for that gold robbery. The tiny house with the picket fence belonged to him and if he had not sold or gambled it away, Marie would inherit it. Kinucan sighed heavily. Just one more motive to strengthen the charge against her husband.

This would be Sergeant Dicker's case. The homicide dick was a good friend of Mike's and wouldn't object to having the big patrolman on the job, but Mike was a stickler for regulations. He went down the long corridor to knock on a door. Chief Patrick's seamed face broke into a friendly smile when he saw Mike in the doorway.

"Come on in, Kinucan. Glad to see you back."

"And time I got back. They just brought Pablo Rodriguiz in on a murder rap. That's one big mistake."

The chief's smile faded. "Uh-huh. There's been plenty of trouble cooking up down there. Now comes a killing." He looked sharply at Mike. "Not trying to agitate you back into your old job, are they?"

Kinucan said slowly, "I haven't told anyone I was being transferred."

"They know it," Patrick persisted grimly. "Someone sent the word along."

"I'm going down to see what I can do," Mike said. "Want your permission."

Again Chief Patrick's face was riffled by a smile. "Seeing as you're going anyway, you have it. I'll tell Sergeant Dickers."

"Thanks." Mike turned toward the door and the chief said casually: "I see you're not in uniform. Better pick up your gun."

Mike flushed at being caught short. He hated the weight of the big .38 and hated worse to use it. "I won't need it," he said.

"Get it!" Patrick snapped. "You know the regulations. I won't have you going down there unarmed."

For a moment Kinucan looked into his superior officer's eyes, saw the lively warning there, and went to his locker for his gun.

Officer Kinucan took a taxi and paid off the driver half a block from where the police cars stood before the Rodriguiz house. He turned in at the gate, shouldering his way through the crowd and into the small parlor.

Sergeant Dickers, tall and lean, light reflecting from thick-lensed

glasses, grinned at him. "Hello, Mike. Have a good vacation? Maybe you can get these people to talk. Looks as if we'd have to throw them all in the cooler overnight."

Big Mike looked about. There was the graying deacon with his wife, they lived one door north of Pablo; the young Mexican from the house on the south, and other assorted members of the neighborhood, all nervous and unhappy. They stood in a cluster as far away as possible from Jorge Castro, sprawled, face down, in a dark pool of blood.

"Which of you phoned the police?" Kinucan asked.

They all shook their heads, muttering denials.

"They're lying," a young officer snapped. "One of them put in the call."

Kinucan faced the elderly deacon and asked respectfully, "Deacon Jefferson, did you hear any disturbance in here tonight?"

The old man shook his head. "Never heerd a sound, Mr. Kinucan. Never knew nothing 'bout it until the po-leece come knocking on my door."

"No loud words? No fighting?"

"Never heerd a thing," the deacon insisted.

"He's telling the truth," Kinucan said. These people wouldn't say anything helpful under such pressure. Later, they'd see that he got the right dope, as far as they knew it. "Why don't you let them go, sergeant? I'll pick 'em up for you later. They're all good people."

Without waiting to see how Dickers acted, Kinucan pushed his way to the kitchen doorway.

He hesitated there, repelled by the stench, while his gaze moved slowly from the sink piled with dirty dishes, bottles, and garbage, to the table thick with grease, and the army cot, trailing gray blankets exposing a slipless oily pillow. He looked at the low ceiling, black with smoke, opened the cast-iron heater and saw the globs of soot hanging from the under side of the lid. He held the lid up for a long moment, reading the story it told, then he turned and elbowed his way through the crowd to the bedroom.

The curtains were closely drawn and here, too, was filth and disorder. He looked into the closet, which was not a closet really, but a corner shelf with a torn curtain hanging from it. The hooks were empty. A couple of clothes hangers lay on the dusty floor. At his shoulder, Sergeant Dickers said:

"Rodriguiz and his wife moved out, bag and baggage."

"Yeah, and not yesterday, either. Well, I'll circulate and see what I can pick up."

"You don't believe Pablo did it, do you?" There was a sympathetic gleam in the sergeant's eyes.

"Right. I don't."

"Well, I'm not so sure myself, but the boys caught him in here, almost red-handed. Have you forgotten that Pablo threatened to carve Castro up if he came back to bother Marie?"

Kinucan had not forgotten. There were others who might re-

member it, too, and use it to destroy the young Mexican. He sighed ponderously. "Pablo's done about everything he could to get himself found guilty of this, but he didn't do it. Marie would never have let him."

"Then he's the first Mex I ever saw who asked his woman if he could shove a knife into someone." The sergeant paused and Kinucan felt his eyes querying him. He didn't look up and after a moment the sergeant went on: "Look, Kinucan. Don't go overboard for these people. I know how you feel about them, but they'd sell you down the river pronto to save their own hides. We won't charge Pablo tonight. I talked to the chief. Let me know what you pick up."

"Thanks, sergeant. Now, here's one for you. Castro got killed while he was melting down that gold he served time for stealing. Bet you'll find it right here if you dig around. The killer wanted to frame Pablo and he wouldn't have time to move all that weight and get Pablo on the scene in time. He had to plan its hiding place before the killing."

"Then Pablo was the one who Castro caught with the cache, and Pablo killed him in the fight that followed. There isn't anyone else." Dickers' tone was assured and scornful.

"That's not the way I see it." Kinucan turned and went out and down the street with the slow tread of a big tired man, and a thoughtful one. His blue eyes looked pale against the dark of weathered skin and the smile on his wide mouth did not soften the grimness of those eyes when he called to Pop Johnson from the front of a small grocery.

Pop's excited greeting ran through the store as the old man bobbed out to meet Kinucan, one game leg dragging, his bald head shining under the center light. "Hello, Big Mike. Lots of excitement down here tonight. Well, all I can say is that Jorge Castro only got what was coming to him, moving in on Pablo that away, the dirty old—"

"That's what I wanted to ask you," Mike broke in. "When did Castro show up here?"

"About ten days ago. Not long after you left. Sa-ay"—his voice dropped and anxiety showed in his old eyes—"we hear you're not pounding pavements in the Heights any more. That so?"

"Looks that way," Kinucan said laconically. "Now, about Castro—"

"There'll be trouble if they take you off," Pop Johnson said, wagging his head angrily. "You can't run these people by remote control. They gotta have someone to keep them in line. I'm going to get up a petition. That's what I'm going to do."

"Thanks, pop," Kinucan said patiently, "but you can help a lot more by answering my questions. Did Pablo make trouble when Castro came?"

"Not that I know of, but he went around like a bear with a sore nose. Darned shame to lock him up. He's a good boy. I don't see much of Marie any more. She comes in

now and then to buy a little beef, onions, and beans, but I guess it costs more to feed an extra mouth and she don't spend so much on the other stuff as she used to."

"Such as soap?" Big Mike suggested.

"Come to think of it, Marie ain't bought no soap for days."

"How about milk and cereals?"

"Nope. Nothing like that any more."

"Does she bring little Miguel with her?"

"Nope. Ain't seen the kid for a long time. Ain't sick, is he?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. Thanks a lot, pop. I'll be seeing you, and better not get up any petitions."

Officer Kinucan went on down the street past the Chinese laundry, the movie theater, the pool hall, and everywhere he heard talk of the murder. He exchanged words with those who called to him, but continued his slow steady pace until he came to the bootblack stand in front of the barbershop. There he climbed up and stuck his big feet out.

"Evenin', Mr. Kinucan," the Negro boy said as he reached for his brush. "Have a nice vacation?"

"Yes, Joe, I did. How's your mother?"

Joe rolled his eyes up at Big Mike. That question was a signal that the officer was on the prowl. From his vantage point in the center of the main business block, Joe heard and saw much and usually he knew what Big Mike wanted to know, without being asked. As he bent over Kinucan's shoes, he watched the sidewalk and when no one was close enough to overhear, he dished out his bits of information.

"That Jorge Castro wasn't no good. He just got what was coming to him, and Pablo never had no straight razor. He never did that cuttin', Mr. Kinucan."

"How do you know it was done with a razor?" Big Mike asked quickly. Joe was a smart boy, worth listening to.

"Too much blood. Stabbin' don't make so much blood."

"How do you know about the blood? Been in there?"

"Not me, no, sir! An' I ain't goin' neither." He grabbed paste and snapped the flannel cloth briskly across Kinucan's shoes. "I jus' knows, thass all."

The big officer waited patiently. Joe was a good boy, but he was afraid to mix with the police. He'd tell just what he felt safe in telling and Kinucan would have to guess the rest. So he waited. Joe dabbed on more paste and brushed vigorously. Then he laid one cheek on his shoulder and looked up sidewise, his eyes rolling, and said softly:

"You know that Major Munster's back in town, Mr. Kinucan?"

"Munster, huh?"

"He sure must've knowed you was on a vacation," Joe offered and grinned knowingly.

Kinucan's mouth thinned and the grooves in his cheeks deepened, sharpening his face. This was the sort of thing that would happen once he was transferred out of

THERE ARE NO BETTER—"

Bower Heights permanently. Munster was the other man involved in that holdup with Castro and Pablo. He had been the brains behind it, a cocky, handsome young American with a taste for high living and pretty girls, and no scruples. The title of major was acquired after Munster had impersonated army officers and cashed checks in their names. But murder! Never in his criminal career had Munster been associated with murder.

"Did the major knife Castro?" Kinucan asked softly.

The grin faded from Joe's wide mouth and the brush slid from his thick fingers. "Where's that old major now, Mr. Kinucan?" he asked.

Kinucan understood. Joe wouldn't say any more now, but if Munster could be safely cached in jail, Joe might talk. He tried, anyway. "Answer my question, Joe. How about it? Did he knife Castro?"

Gray fright spread across the dusky face and trembling lips mouthed: "I neve' say so, Mr. Kinucan. I neve' say so."

Mike got down heavily, paid the boy, and moved on. Funny thing about stool pigeons and wire tapping and all that. It was useless in court, wouldn't stand up as evidence, but it gave an officer just the lead he needed when he was up a blind alley. He could always go on from there and build up his case until it would stand in court. For instance, working backward now, had Joe cleaned blood from the boots of Major Munster? Could be.

Then the ex-con had framed Pablo for the killing, knowing the law could find plenty of motive. He had sent Pablo to the house and then tipped off the police. If Munster were still in Bower Heights, where would he go to hide out? Would he stay in Bower Heights if he had killed a man? Regretfully Kinucan decided he couldn't take a chance on that. He went into a drugstore and called Chief Patrick.

"Kinucan speaking," he said softly. "Better send out a pick-up on Major Munster, chief."

"Major Munster? He's in the pen."

"He *was* in the pen. Either escaped or been paroled. Probably a bulletin about him on the board now. He's been in Bower Heights this week and he may want to get out of town in a hurry. Tell the boys to check every car with a man in it; they've got his description. Remember he bragged that he could hitchhike out of any hot town. Well, I'd hate to see him give us the slip this time."

"What's up?" Patrick asked.

Mike said: "And one more thing, chief. Will you ask Pablo if he got a phone call sending him back to his old home tonight after work? Tell him I said to give it to you straight."

"All right, Kinucan. Now, what's doing?"

But Big Mike had gently replaced the phone and gone back to his first problem. Joe was the only one so far to mention Munster to him, therefore it was not generally known that he had returned to

Bower Heights, and that meant the ex-con was still outside the law. If he had not already scrammed, where would he hide? There weren't many who'd take a chance hiding him. Not many.

Patiently, Kinucan began his list. Madame Lilly would do anything for money, once her fear of his close supervision had been removed, and word had spread that he was out. Then there was Marie. Munster might know where she was and force her to hide him, or buy him a gun. Mike felt sure that Munster did not have a gun as yet.

He could picture, as if he had been present, the major, swaggering even in flight, following Castro to the Rodriguiz home. That would be at least a week ago. Pablo would at once pack up Marie and Miguel and take them away. Marie was young and pretty, and Munster had been in the pen eleven years. That would explain Marie's purchases. The food she bought of Pop Johnson was for Castro, her stepfather. She would do her own trading near her new home.

Beside those two hide-outs, there were dark spots along the bay front, under piers, in sheds, but the gregarious major would seek them only as a last resort, allowing that he would leave without what he had come for. The old cop shook his head stubbornly. Munster had not taken away the gold, yet. He was sure of that. Again he entered a phone booth. This time he called a taxi and told the driver to go to the location which Pablo had whispered to him. He still had to find the exact house.

The big officer walked through the streets leading away from that small business oasis, past mean houses huddled three and four to a lot as if for comfort or defense. Lights burned in many of them. Now and then a dog barked and the blare of a radio met and traveled with him awhile. This was all his, his home, his family. How could an impersonal car moving through the streets prompted by an unseen guide, know and understand the problems he was constantly settling for these childlike people? Who would protect them from marauding toughs? They'd never take such complaints to a desk sergeant, see them written down, sign them. Mike sighed gustily.

It was quite dark and the stars were brighter here, away from the neon interference. He could smell meat cooking, and garlic and cabbage. Soft from their two weeks' rest, his feet began to ache and he remembered that he had not stopped for dinner.

Then he saw a small black huddle on the curb before one of the house clusters and heard a soft whimpering.

"Hello, Little Mike," he said gently.

At once the black spot rose and dived at him. Big Mike lifted and held the shaking little body against his big chest.

"You did come. Mamma said you would. I been so scared, Big Mike."

"All right, there. All right, now

stop your bawling, lad. I'm going to fix everything. Where's your mamma? Take me to her."

"She's scared, too, and papa is gone." Sobs and relief got the better of the courage which had kept him waiting there on the curb and only a linguist or an old-time harness bull could have interpreted the sobbing torrent which came from the little boy.

Kinucan carried him back past the first houses to a fourth in the alley where he put him down. Little Mike knocked on the door and called softly. A key turned, a bolt slipped, and the door opened.

"Hello, Marie," Kinucan said.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Marie whispered. "It is the Big Mike at last. Come in. Excuse the no light. I am full of fear."

He entered and she closed the door, locking it again. There was a faint light from the corner street lamp and gradually Kinucan's eyes adjusted to the half darkness. Marie's head was covered with a black shawl. She had probably hurried to church for a quick prayer. Her hands gripped the fringe of the shawl and her face looked chalky and drawn inside its somber hood.

"You have seen my Pablo? He is arrest?"

"Yes, Marie, and—"

"My Pablo did not kill—"

"Yes, I know," he soothed her. "But, Marie, it is not good to hide out when the police want to ask questions. Did Pablo come home after work tonight?"

"No! He always comes home at once. Someone must have brought him to that other house, someone knowing what was there."

"We'll check on that, but now, Marie, I want you to take Little Mike and leave him at my home with my wife. You are in danger and Pablo needs you. Then you must go down to headquarters and ask for Chief Patrick. Tell no one else who you are or what you want. The chief will take care of you. Will you do that?"

In the silence, broken only by the boy's relaxed whimpering, Mike waited, knowing she wanted to trust him, but that all her instincts were urging her to cower here in the dark until her man came back. He could not leave her here. Others might also know where she was. He had to know she was safe.

"You will go with me?" she wheedled softly.

"Not now, but I'll come later. I'll give you two papers, one for my wife and one for Chief Patrick. Don't give them to anyone else. Let's have some light."

While he wrote, he gravely told Little Mike what was expected of him and got his promise to obey. Then he put them both in a taxi, paid the driver and gave him his orders.

There were no loungers at the entrance to the Elite Hotel. Men passed under its single light globe, but they did not linger. Officer Kinucan pushed through the door and went up the stairs to the second floor, where he could see the full length of the empty quiet hallway.

A makeshift desk held the regulation guest card index, key rack and telephone. Behind it a pretty girl in a bright-red dress sat hunched over a magazine. She looked up and her eyes widened as she grinned uncertainly.

"Hello, Minnetta," Kinucan said. "You been on duty all evening?"

"Why, hello, Mr. Kinucan. Yes, I has. Who you looking for?" Her high-pitched voice was not loud, but her question indicated there was someone who needed looking for. "Mamma ain't sick, is she?"

"Your mamma's all right," Kinucan said. "Take me to Lilly and be quiet about it."

Fear appeared and glowed deep in Minnetta's eyes. "You ain't got no business going in there tonight, Mr. Kinucan," she said and shook her slicked-down head violently.

A little quiver ran down Big Mike's spine. So he had guessed right. "Come on, get along," he said. "I know best."

Minnetta rose slowly. The magazine fell to the floor and she moved reluctantly down the hall, shaking her head and turning repeatedly to see if he were close. He was right at her heels when she knocked at a door. Someone inside spoke and the girl said:

"It's Minnetta, Miss Lilly. I gotta see you a minute."

Mike Kinucan moved his service gun from the belt of his pants to his right coat pocket. The door opened a mere crack. Kinucan pushed Minnetta quickly aside and shoved through. A first quick glance showed him only the woman. He closed the door and leaned solidly against it until the lock clicked.

Lilly faced him with a brazen pretense of indignation. He ignored her while he took a look around. On a table were beer bottles, scattered playing cards, and an oversize ash tray well filled with cigarette butts, one of which still burned. A purple-dressed doll stood on a costly radio, and color rocketed across calendar pictures on the walls and cheap overstuffed furniture. He surveyed it all soberly.

Lilly leased this cheap hotel and prospered because she did not inquire too closely into the affairs of her patrons. The police had picked up many a wanted man there. Lilly had made only one attempt to bribe Mike Kinucan and his wrath had inspired a wholesome fear in her.

Now she tittered at him nervously, a silly grin on her face. "Evening, Mr. Kinucan. I thought you wasn't on this beat no more."

"I'll bet you did," he said bleakly.

"Are you?"

He didn't answer at once and in the silence he could almost hear the racing throb of her heart and see her fear rise as she realized this was no accidental call. A vein swelled and beat in her neck and thick lids drooped over her eyes.

There was a time to be gentle and a time to be tough, and Big Mike knew the precise line of demarcation. "What do you think, Lilly?" he asked.

"Well, we heard—"

"Where's Major Munster?" Kinucan snapped.

"Why, Mr. Kinucan, that no-good white man ain't in here!" Again she tried to brazen it out, high-pitched indignation in her voice.

Big Mike's words were as inexorable as his ponderous tread. "Snowball gets out of prison next week, Lilly."

"What I care 'bout that?" she demanded shrilly. "I done deevorced him."

"Suppose," Kinucan said, letting each word fall slowly so there was no mistaking the threat behind them. "just suppose that Snowball was to be told you fingered him for the police? You'd care, then."

Madam Lilly reached out gropingly, encountered a chair, and collapsed into it. Against the soiled burgundy velvet her face grayed and her flamboyant good looks retreated under the spur of terror. The skin tightened over her cheekbones, made hollows below them, and left her large mouth a gaudy splash across her face. Her lips quivered, but no words came.

"That Snowball's a mean man, Lilly."

"You wouldn't tell him that, Mr. Kinucan. You jus' wouldn'."

"Why not?"

"He cut my throat!" she whispered.

"He would. Where's Munster?" Big Mike repeated. The odor of her fear reached his nostrils, as tangible as the blue smoke curling from the ash tray.

"He not here," she insisted, but the true answer lay in the rolling whites of her eyes as they indicated a door across the room.

Once, Mike had stood on the other side of that door, a thin panel with a heart-shaped design of tiny holes about the height of a man's eyes. He knew that if Munster were in there now, he could see them as clearly as from a police shadow box, and he would know that Lilly had betrayed him, without speaking a word.

Kinucan moved fast, to the left and away from Lilly, hoping to get her out of the line of fire. That door would have to swing toward him to open and the man behind it would be handicapped in coming around it to get at him.

But Munster knew that, too, and suddenly the center panel of the door exploded under a blast of fury. Big Mike's right arm jerked violently backward, his gun dropping from nerveless fingers. He spun around, sprawling to the floor, and Madame Lilly slumped forward, her face shot away. Major Munster kicked the wrecked door open.

The roar of sound vibrated savagely through the room and acrid smoke soured the air. From the shadows on the floor, Kinucan saw the crook's handsome face, older, harder, desperate.

"I owed you that for a long time, copper," he said, and his lips flattened against pointed teeth in a thin cruel smile.

Mike watched him steadily, feeling the hard lump of his gun be-

neath him and the warm flow of his blood, expecting the shot which would finish him. Voices sounded in the hallway and Munster turned alertly, dashed to the door and jerked it open. As it banged back against the wall, he ran through.

Officer Kinucan rolled over, reaching with his left hand for his revolver. His fingers closed on it, but he could not get to his feet. Munster's steps pounded down the hall to the rear door. He rattled it, shook it, battered at it with the gun butt.

Big Mike struggled to his knees, gripping the revolver. He inched forward, his arm dragging while bright hot pain tore at his side. Minnetta had cleared out, but her fear of the law made any help from that source only a dim hope. Sweat beaded his face as Kinucan balanced his big body, knees spread wide for support.

Now Munster was hurrying back, making for the front stairs. He passed the open door on the run. Big Mike fired twice.

In the hall there were a few stumbling steps. A crash. Silence. Then whispering voices. Terrified voices. Feet running down the stairs.

"What beats me," Chief Patrick was saying, "is how you could be so sure Pablo didn't do it before you even knew Munster was in town."

"Dirt. Marie and Pablo would never live in such filth." Mike looked up from the hospital bed. "You get to know these people when you see them every day."

"Well, they don't know you. Half of Bower Heights was on the phone demanding officers to come help you. You didn't need any help."

So Minnetta had spread the word. Kinucan grinned. "That's only because they're afraid of a mean white man. He always means trouble for them."

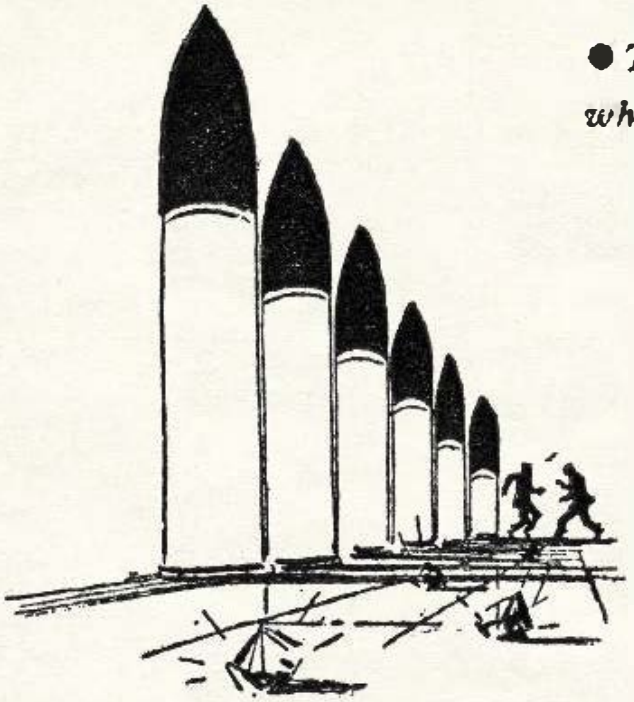
"But not for you," the chief said. "Sergeant Dickers found that melted gold tucked away in the hole which had concealed the coins all the years that Castro and Munster were in the pen."

"That's what I figured. The major probably caught Castro melting it down without waiting to divide it and killed him. He's the sort would frame Pablo, and then take his time coming back for the loot. A man on the lam couldn't carry a handicap like melted gold."

"Well," the chief went on, "the city manager better make an exception to the radio-car patrol or he'll have the whole town in his hair. You're going to stay on the job and boss those tough monkeys on the Heights."

"Aw, they're all right when you get to know them," Big Mike protested. "Didn't they come through for me tonight? He sighed contentedly. "Isn't that Little Mike a cute kid?"

THE END.



● The short story of a man who learned to count the hard way.

THE SIXTH SHOT

BY WILLIAM R●UGH

His subconscious registered the first three explosions while he was still asleep. At the fourth he jerked upright in bed, his insides rattling.

He fought for control, telling himself it was only his grandfather shooting target in the basement range. The old gun crank had left the soundproof door open again.

It was no use fighting, he'd been in Tunisia and he reacted as always, now, at the sound of shots; perspiration sluiced from his pores, his hide tingled, the detonations set the hemispheres of his brain vibrating.

He fell back on his pillow, washing stiff fingers through his crisp brown hair. This wasn't Africa; it was home, his grandfather's house, the Bradley mansion in the old Spuyten Duyvil section of the Bronx.

Jamie squinted at the luminous clock by his bed. It hit him squarely. If old Barney were shooting at three o'clock in the morning, he wasn't practicing!

Barney Bradley had died against the wall of his beamed library, slid-

ing down it to a half sitting position just under the light switch. There was no mark on his meaty face or bald head. The slugs all had poured into him below the shoulders. Dampish splotches on his bathrobe showed this.

Jamie braced himself, the corners of his mouth twitching like a fiddle string. His eyes flicked to the dangling door of the old wall safe, storehouse for commercial jewels used by the Bradley Shipbuilding Co.

"A burglar," Jamie said, sick. "A slob of a burglar."

Footfalls scampered from the servants' quarters. The three-toned door gong was pealing, *"Bong, bong, bing."* A nightstick drummed on the front door. The shots had carried clearly.

Jamie hunched. He'd seen it before, but not like this, not at home —an old man against a wall, bullet-riddled without a chance.

Without a chance? Jamie's brown eyes glinted on the area around the body. He forced himself to lift Barney, searching. There was no gun anywhere.

The butler made a choking sound behind Jamie and was awkwardly trying to shield the cook and the maid. They screamed.

"Stop that!" Jamie ordered. "Let that cop in. Call Ray—"

"I'm here!" A slope-shouldered, black-mustached man, short of forty, set air in motion as he bored into the library. "What's—" His words sliced off. His green eyes cruised the room once, then poured glittering accusation at Jamie. And more—hate.

Jamie sucked in air. He and Raymond Bradley were first cousins. Their fathers had been lost in World War I, and old Barney Bradley had raised them, decreeing in his will that the one who rose highest in the Bradley Shipbuilding Co. was to inherit two-thirds of it, the other one-third.

With Jamie away, Raymond, deferred, had gained authority. Then Jamie came back.

He wasn't glamorous or a hero, but he was a warrior still, seasoned, and knowing why ships had to be built. Scorning sermons, he pushed the men and they liked it. So did the board of directors and Barney Bradley. Authority began shifting from Raymond to Jamie.

Yet this was the first time, with death between them, that Jamie recognized what was in Raymond.

Jamie was startled, then wary. He let Raymond do the talking to the local patrolman, the prowl car officers who came next and, following them, a streamlined modern lieutenant of homicide.

The lieutenant looked at the old safe. "No trick to crack that. Boxmen don't usually kill, though. What's missing?"

Raymond counted the neat packets inside the safe. "Nothing. Grandfather probably got here just in time."

"Hm-m-m. How many shots were fired?"

"Five."

"Oh, more than that, sir!" the cook squeaked.

Raymond quieted her with a glance, and the butler said prudently, "Five is right, sir."

"Quite." Raymond nodded. "I counted them."

Jamie jerked. "Six. *I* counted them."

It was an issue. The medical examiner said, "There are five bullets in the body."

"Witnesses get mixed up," the lieutenant shrugged. "If six shots were fired but only five struck Mr. Bradley, the sixth would be in the wall behind him."

"And it isn't," Raymond said quickly.

Jamie's brain twanged. Raymond was insisting only five shots had sounded.

Abruptly, Jamie strode out and up to his grandfather's room, a detective playing watchdog at his heels. When he came back to the library, Jamie hefted a target pistol, a .22 on a .45 frame, and ordered, "Search the room!"

"Hm-m-m. Why?"

"Do I have to do it myself?"

"Now, Mr. Bradley—"

"Search it!" Jamie ordered.

The lieutenant snapped, "It'll be searched in the routine when—"

Jamie twitched and lifted the gun. "Search it! Look for a bullet hole!"

Jamie sweated it out. They were ready to jump him to a man, as they worked. The lieutenant's eyes smoldered.

Jamie looked at Raymond. Raymond was just as eager to jump as the rest. More eager, Jamie saw, for Raymond was afraid.

There was no bullet hole.

"Did you examine the carpet?" Jamie demanded. "The upholstery? The pillows?"

"We ain't amateurs," growled a detective. "I'll bet a month's pay—"

"Then you'd lose! I heard six shots!" Jamie licked his lips. "Lieutenant, if I put up the gun, will you give me thirty seconds to explain?"

Raymond adopted the tone an adult uses with an upset child. "Now, nobody's blaming you, Jamie."

The lieutenant warned, "Thirty seconds even."

Jamie handed him the gun. "It's been fully reloaded, but look inside the barrel. It's dirty."

"So?"

"That's my grandfather's favorite gun. He kept it by his bed. He never put it away dirty in his life!"

"Jamie, easy! You've had shooting on the brain ever since you got back." Raymond put a hand on Jamie's shoulder.

Jamie couldn't take that. His fist snapped to Raymond's jaw. Raymond crumpled.

"I heard six shots, and bullets don't melt!" Jamie ripped open Raymond's dressing gown. He tore Raymond's pajama coat clear and snatched a piece of adhesive tape from Raymond's left shoulder.

"There's the sixth bullet hole in this room!" Jamie snarled.

"He couldn't get out of that hole," the lieutenant said, later. "He admitted he was substituting low-grade synthetic sapphires and rubies for the real ones in the safe. What

would have happened?"

Jamie's voice was tight. "The precision instruments in the battlewagons we're building wouldn't have been *prccision* instruments. I would have been blamed. It was my department."

"Oh, so when the old man saw Raymond sticking his nose into a department where it didn't belong and where Raymond knew there was going to be trouble, later—Hm-m-m."

Jamie said, "If it had been a real burglar, there'd have been only one shot, Barney's. As it was, he recognized Raymond, hesitated, and Raymond shot first, three times. Barney snapped one shot going down. Then Raymond stepped in and fired twice again to finish it."

The lieutenant nodded. "And he saw right away that if he left the old man there with a fired gun in his hand, everybody would guess the truth. So be ran up the back stairs, reloaded the gun and returned it."

"But didn't have time to clean it," Jamie said, "and that was it."

"You must've had more than that to go on."

"I had three things," Jamie said grimly. "One, a gun crank like my grandfather wouldn't prowl the house without his baby; two, if Barney were downstairs dead, but his .22 was up beside his bed dirty, then he'd had the gun down here, had used it, and someone else, someone who knew just where the gun was kept, had put it back. Three, six shots had been fired."

The lieutenant's nose wrinkled. "Flimsy."

"Not when your men didn't find a sixth bullet hole," Jamie said. "A bullet fired in a house has to hit something. It didn't hit windows or furniture; what else could it have hit? It could have hit what a crack shot aimed it at, a man."

The lieutenant shrugged. "I wouldn't build a court case around a witness who heard six shots when the rest claimed five."

"You might if you saw my army discharge," Jamie said.

The lieutenant's brows arched.

"I was a sapper," Jamie explained. "When we detonated land mines, we lined them up, took cover, and counted the explosions as they went off. One day, there were seven mines, and I counted seven explosions and stood up." Jamie shivered. "I'd miscounted," he said, low. "I thought I heard seven, but only six had blown. I was lucky I was standing sidewise. I didn't get it in the face."

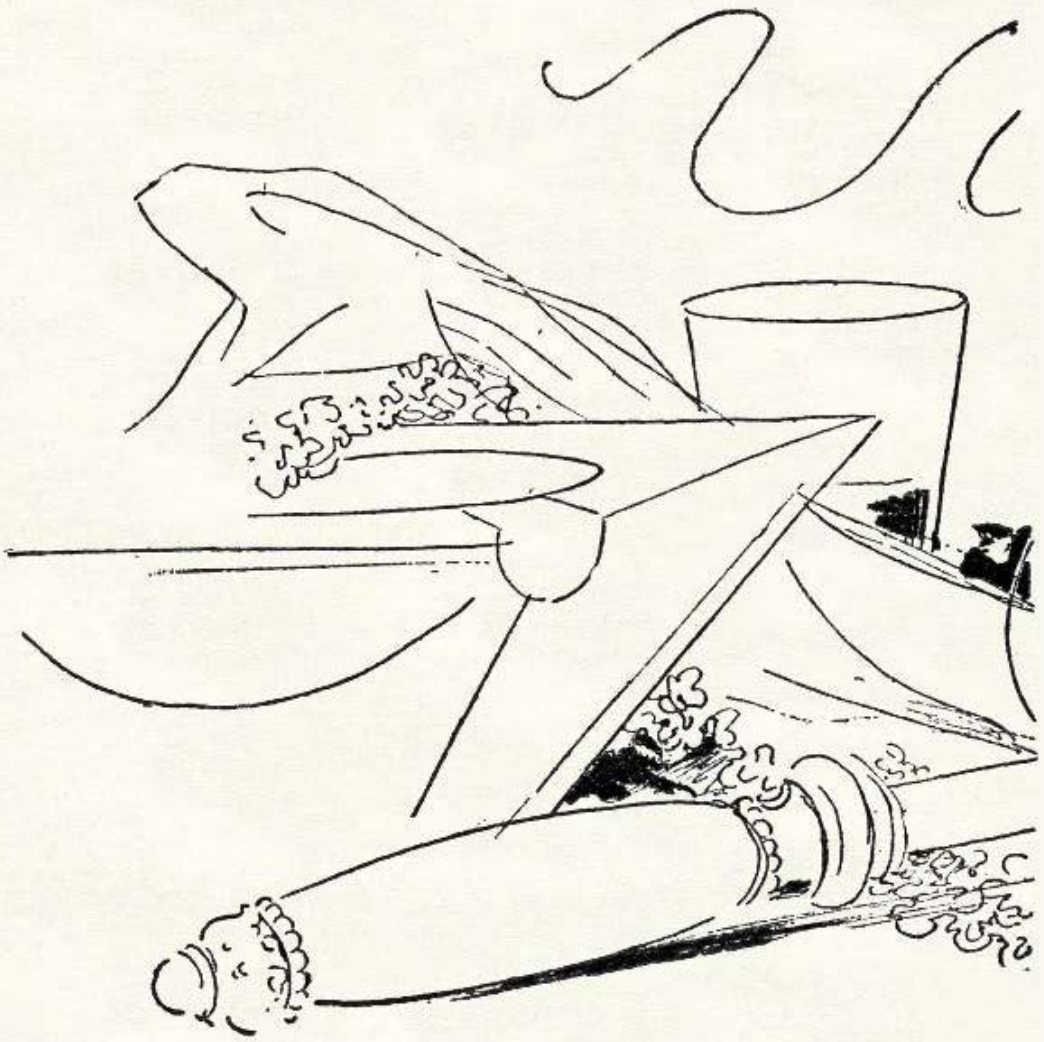
The lieutenant puckered his lips.

"I'll never miscount shots again," Jamie said. "Would you?"

"Hm-m-m."

THE END.

● *When Tony Grant, night-club owner, had an early-morning, before-breakfast call from police headquarters, life suddenly took on a new interest.*



I.

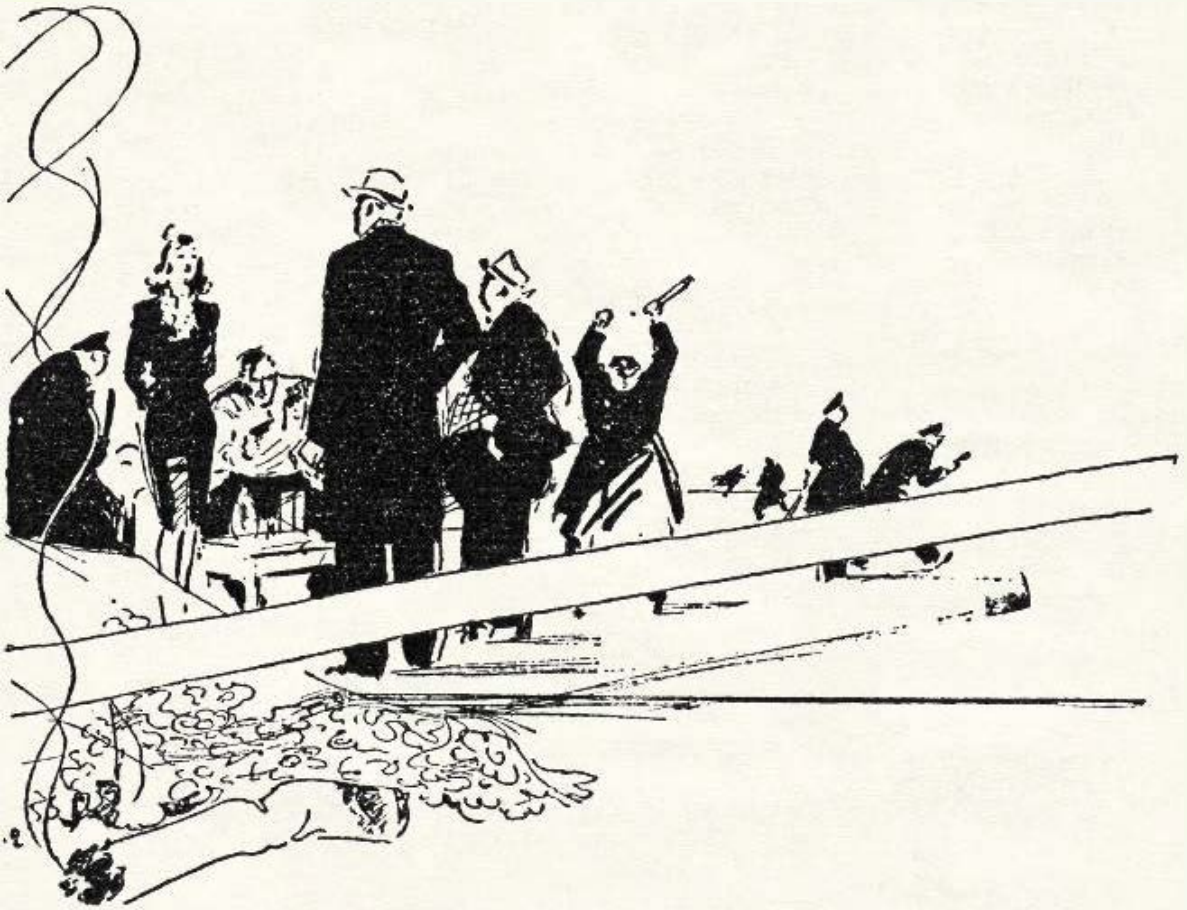
A huge spot of yellow light beat down upon the lovely figure of Marcia Le Baron as she stood swaying in the middle of the dance floor at Club La Congo, her soft, husky voice raised to the still popular, "Brazil."

Tony Grant handed his gray Homburg and his expensive Chesterfield to the hat-check girl; stood listening to the talented Marcia for a few moments. He was a slim,

THE WAY TO MURDER

A Novelette

BY JOSEPH C. STACEY



tall man, with dark-brown, wavy hair, and decidedly handsome features which were accented by a thin, well-groomed mustache. He was clad in immaculate, finely-tailored evening clothes, and possessed a certain suave, affable air.

A dark figure made its way to his side. "Everything O.K., boss?"

"Certainly, Curly," Tony said, and went into his private office. He locked the door and poured himself a drink. Lifting the glass, he noticed, for the first time, the blood

on his right hand. There wasn't much of it. Just a tiny smear from the slight cut across one knuckle. He finished the drink and dabbed at the blood with a handkerchief. His eyes were expressionless, but the ghost of a smile flashed across his lips.

He lighted himself a cigarette, and pressed a hidden button upon the wall behind his chromium-trimmed desk. A costly painting slid noiselessly aside, exposing the blue-steeled wall safe. He turned the combination. The door sprung open.

He inhaled his cigarette, then ground it out in the ash tray on the desk, exhaling a stream of bluish-white smoke. He took a .32-calibre revolver and two letters from his pocket, placed them in the safe. He shut the door, and let the hidden motor slide the painting back into position again. He poured himself one more drink, finished half of it, and picked up the phone. He dialed a number. Waited. The connections were made.

"Ronnie?"

"Yes," the woman on the other end of the line said.

"Tony. I've got them. Two. Right?"

"Y-yes, two of them, Tony. Did . . . did you have any trouble?"

"A little. But don't worry. Santos will never bother you again."

There was a soft sob of relief from the woman.

"When do you want them, Ronnie?"

"I'll . . . I'll come to the club tomorrow night. Is that all right?"

"Certainly. Good night, Ronnie."

"Good night, Tony, and thank you. Thank you so very much!" There was a click as she hung up.

Tony finished his drink, and went out into the club, to mingle about and chat with the customers as was his nightly practice.

Harvey Longfellow Jones, safer known as "Curly," shook Tony Grant awake early the next morning. "Sorry, boss. But you'll have to rise and shine. Sarge Hammy is demanding your immediate presnce. But immediate!"

Harvey Longfellow Jones, who swung at the hip at anybody and everybody who made the error of addressing him by either of those two given names, had a head as shiny and as hairless as a billiard ball, except for the fringes of fuzz at the nape of the neck and around the ears. He possessed a cherubic, grinning face, and a good-sized bay window. All in all, he was a roly-poly sort of individual; looked harmless, cheerful, easy-going, and at most times, he was just exactly that. But whenever the occasion warranted it, he could be ten times deadlier than a cobra, either with his fists, or with a gun.

A great many persons wondered just exactly what he was to Tony Grant—valet, body guard, business partner, or friend. They would have been greatly surprised to learn that he was a little of each, but mostly the latter. Tony had run into him during his heyday as a private investigator, and they'd

been inseparable ever since.

Tony yawned and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "Hammerstein?" he said, sitting up in bed. "What the devil does he want so early in the morning?"

"He wouldn't say. But he made it plenty plain that it was important."

Tony slid out of bed, stretched himself lazily. "Well, tell him to wait a few minutes longer, Curly. I'm going to take a cold shower first."

His brain revolved with memories as he showered. He remembered the times when the police had made it almost a daily habit of getting him out of bed. Those were the good, old days. Dog eat dog, and no quarter asked.

If it hadn't been for his father, he probably would have shaken hands with Mr. Satan years ago. Anthony Grant Sr. had willed his complete string of night clubs to Tony, and an immense amount of money; together with the wish that Tony give up his dangerous life as a private investigator. Warily, Tony had done as his father wished. He was ex-private investigator, now, and Tony Grant, night-club owner. All that had occurred well over six years ago.

It was an easy, unexciting life, this, and he did not care a great deal for it. But, yet, somehow, he could not force himself to abandon it. There were times, of course, when he gladly returned, momentarily, to that ex-life of his and helped those of his friends who found themselves in trouble.

He finished his shower, combed his hair, and went out into the richly-furnished living room of his suite atop the Wellington Arms.

Sergeant Max Hammerstein was sitting in a deep armchair. He held an expensive Corona-Corona in one hand, and a highball glass in the other. He was a huge man, over six feet, and weighed well over two-fifty. His baby face was a healthy pink, his eyes a smiling blue. He took one look at Tony and groaned, "Well, for cripe's sake! Ain't you dressed yet?"

Tony smiled blandly. "You wouldn't want me to go without having my breakfast first?"

Hammerstein stood up to his full height. He placed his empty highball glass carefully upon the cocktail table, and shoved the cigar into his mouth. "Now, looka here, Tony," he began belligerently, the cigar bobbing up and down in his mouth.

Tony said, "Give Max another drink, Curly."

Hammerstein simmered down a bit. "Well, now—Well, O.K. But snap into it, for cripe's sake, Tony! The inspector is gonna skin me alive as is. I was supposed to have you down to the Kent joint an hour ago!"

Tony sat down, drank half his orange juice. He was buttering a piece of crisp, brown toast when the full significance of Hammerstein's words struck him. He put the knife and toast down, turning around slowly. "What did you say, Max?"

Hammerstein jerked an eyebrow up. "Huh?"

"Did you just mention the Kent place?"

"Sure."

"What's the inspector doing at the Kent place?"

"Why, investigating, of course!"

"Look, fatso," Curly put in. "Make sense, will you? What the hell's happened there?"

Hammerstein looked amazed. "Ain't you boys heard? Why, in the old days you was telling us what hap—"

"Can the old days!" Curly bellowed.

Hammerstein smirked. He rose, put down his glass, placed his hands in his pockets, and actually rocked back and forth on his heels with complete pleasure. "Well," he said quietly. "Well, it seems that somebody kilt poor, little Missus Kent, and seeing as how you made a phone call to her last night, the inspector wants to find out what connection you got in the case." He grinned broadly. "When the inspector learnt that you had yure nose in this kill, he pretty near bust a blood vessel!"

Vista Drive was choked with press and police cars, the sidewalk cluttered with the usual curious bystanders that murder always draws.

Hammerstein drove the police car up a long, winding driveway, and stopped before a tremendous, white, Colonial-styled house.

They were admitted at once.

The dead woman's husband, a tall, good-looking man of about thirty-eight or forty, sat on a divan. He was a member of the highly successful Swanson, Kent, Adair advertising firm. His eyes were dull with shock, and his expression was one of bewilderment.

His secretary, Marie De Vare, a pretty, dark-haired girl, clad in a blue wool suit, stood near the window, nervously smoking.

She and Tony exchanged greetings. Frank Kent did not even seem to be conscious of Tony.

There were a few homicide men in the room, too. But Inspector Hanely was not among them. At a questioning look from Hammerstein, one of the detectives said, "In the library, Max."

Tony was staring down at the dark, ugly splotch of blood on the carpet. A cocktail table lay overturned a few feet away, the glass top shattered.

Veronica Kent's body was not in sight. The morgue squad must have taken it away.

Curly said softly, "A helluva business, boss."

Tony nodded, feeling nauseated. Hammerstein had given them some of the details on the way down.

It had been the servants' night off. Frank Kent was away on a business trip to Chicago and arrived home early in the morning to find his wife lying in a pool of blood on the living room floor. She had been dead for several hours. She had been struck with the fireplace poker, and had been killed when her head hit the edge of the cocktail table.

Inspector Thomas C. Hanely sat perched upon the edge of the glass-topped desk in the library. He was a small, thin man, and looked like a quiet, mild one, instead of the aggressive, hard-boiled cop that he was. He waved the maid, the chauffeur, and the cook, whom he'd been questioning, away, and told Tony to sit down.

Tony shook his head. "Thanks, Hanely. But I'll stand if you don't mind."

"Suit yourself," the inspector grunted.

The two men eyed each other coldly. There always had been bad friction between them. "What was Mrs. Kent to you, Grant?" Hanely finally asked.

"A friend."

"How good a friend?"

"We came from the same town."

"Oh, I see—"

"Just what the devil do you see, Hanely!"

"That you're being cute! That you're evading the question! You see, I've already been informed that Mrs. Kent used to be an old flame of yours."

"So?"

The inspector got sore. "Why did you phone her last night? Why did you go to see her yesterday afternoon?"

"That's my business."

"Answer me, damn you!"

"Go to hell."

The inspector went livid with rage. "Where were you between ten and eleven o'clock last night?"

"At the club."

"Can you prove that?"

"I'm certain that several dozen very reputable citizens will corroborate my statement."

"Corroborate, hell!"

"Tch, tch, inspector!" Curly put in. "Temper, temper!"

Hanely whirled on him. "And, I suppose, you were at the club, too, during those hours? I suppose, you've several dozen very reputable citizens to corroborate that fact, also?"

Curly grinned pleasantly. "I cannot tell a lie, inspector. I was and I have. Amen."

Hanely turned on Hammerstein. "Show these two gentlemen out, Max!" he bit out vehemently. "And I mean out! The mere sight of them turns my stomach!"

The two men walked for about a block, then Tony halted. "Do you know where Paul Santos lives, Curly?"

"Sure, boss. At the Borden Hotel."

Tony's face was grim and savage. "I want him, Curly. I want him bad. Do you understand?"

"But only too well, boss," Curly stated, flagging a cruising cab. "You've as good as got him." He climbed into the cab and gave the driver the address.

Tony stood on the sidewalk, and watched the cab disappear around the corner. He lighted himself a cigarette and walked the dozen, or so, blocks to his apartment.

Marcia Le Baron was sitting comfortably in one of the deep easy chairs when he entered. She had a highball glass in one of her slen-

der hands. She waved the hand and the glass at him. "Hi, darling. Remember poor, little me? We were supposed to have a date."

Tony tossed his hat and coat across one of the chairs. "Sorry, Marcia. Something important came up."

The red-headed singer pouted crimson lips. "Blonde or brunette?" she asked.

He did not even hear her. He poured himself a stiff drink and downed it in a single gulp.

Marcia saw that his hands trembled slightly. She put her glass down and went to him. She wound her soft arms around his neck, deep concern plainly audible in her husky voice. "What is it, darling? What's wrong?"

The telephone bell jingled just them. Tony pushed her away and scooped up the phone. "Curly?"

"That's right, boss."

"Well?"

"Sorry. He's gone. Bag and baggage. Late last night. No forwarding address."

"I still want him, Curly. Get me?"

Curly got him. He knew what to do. He was to spread the word around town. Tony had hundreds of friends of the decidedly lower caliber, as far as social standings were concerned, who in turn, had friends—from newsboys, to bellhops, to cabbies, from panhandlers, to petty larceny boys, and up to the grand larceny ones. They had served him well in the past. They should serve him well again.

II.

"—a number of persons were questioned in connection with the Kent murder, among whom was the well-known night-club owner, Mr. Tony Grant. The same Mr. Grant who, some of you may remember, made quite a name for himself as a private investigator five or six years ago. But what part he was thought to have played in the drama has not been revealed by him, nor by Police Inspector Thomas C. Hanely. The inspector did reveal, however, that the case was progressing most satisfactorily.

"Washington, D. C.: Secretary of State—" Curly Jones snapped off the radio switch and cut short the news commentator.

Tony Grant was reading the "bulldog" edition of the *Daily Informer*. The police had checked up on Frank Kent's Chicago business trip. He had gone alone. The police had verified the fact that he was in the Windy City the night his wife was slain, and that he had arrived at La Guardia airport at six thirty that fatal morning.

Stanley Gill, the chauffeur, Helen Tremaine, the maid, and Mrs. Abrahamson, the cook, all had substantial alibis.

The only clue of any importance that the police seemed to have was a set of a man's footprints, which they found in the flowerbed under the window looking into the death room.

The poker had been wiped clean of fingerprints.

Tony flung the paper down with

vehemence and rose from the chair. "If I only can lay my hands on Paul Santos!" he said fiercely.

Curly was mixing a couple of highballs at the miniature bar in the living room. "So you're sure it was Santos who killed Mrs. Kent, boss?"

"I'm damn certain of it!"

"Why—because of what happened between you, him and her yesterday?"

"Yeah."

Curly handed a drink to Tony, sipped his. "Just exactly what happened between the three of you, boss? All I know is that you paid her a visit that afternoon, and five hours later, went out to keep a date with Santos. A very secret one, I might add, considering the fact that you wouldn't take me along with you, much less tell me what it was all about."

Tony turned to the window. It was beginning to snow. Not hard. Just a flurry of snowflakes that danced, now and then, as a slight breeze spanked them playfully. "Santos was blackmailing Ronnie," he replied. "She came to me. I looked Santos up, and persuaded him to give me the blackmailing ammunition."

Curly finished his drink, and eased his bulk onto the couch. "So you're figuring that Santos murdered Mrs. Kent in a fit of revenge due to the . . . ah . . . persuasion which you had to use on him?"

"Something like that."

Curly lighted himself a cigar, and exhaled a huge cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "And you refused to tell the mighty inspector anything concerning Santos, or the nature of your visit, and phone call to Mrs. Kent because you didn't want the rags to grab hold of the blackmailing angle, and, maybe, raise a stench?"

Tony turned around. Nodded.

The break did not come until two days after the funeral. Tony Grant was in Club La Congo. It was six-thirty in the evening. Marcia Le Baron finished only one number, and left, complaining she wasn't feeling well. A dozen scantily-clad chorines were teasing the male patrons with a new routine.

Curly Jones tapped Tony on the arm. "The call, boss."

Tony hurried into his office, grabbed up the phone. Curly took his automatic from the desk, and three extra clips for it.

"Hello," Tony barked into the transmitter. "Grant speaking."

The voice on the other end was shrill with excitement. "This is Moe Finch, Mr. Grant. I am hearing tell that you are looking for Paul Santos?"

"That's right. Do you know where he is?"

"Certainly, I am knowing where he is. If you are coming uptown to Pine Road, and meeting me, I am showing you where he is."

Tony hung up. He took his own gun, shoved it into his pocket. "O.K., Curly. Let's go."

They climbed into Tony's coupe, and reached their destination in fifteen minutes.

Moe Finch stood against the wall near a newsstand at the corner of Pine Road and Maple Street. He was clad in dirty, ill-fitting clothes. He had a pair of dark glasses over his eyes, and a sign, reading, I AM BLIND, hung from his neck.

"Where, Moe?" Tony asked.

The man nodded across the street toward a small white house. The place was illuminated.

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly, I am sure. I seen him with my own eyes."

Tony and Curly crossed the street. They approached the front door of the house cautiously. It was open. That was surprising. The two men stepped into the dimly lighted foyer, and proceeded into the living room.

Paul Santos was in the living room.

The blackmailer was sitting in a high-backed, easy chair. His chin rested against his chest, and his unseeing, horror-filled eyes were bulging from their sockets. He was clad in a maroon smoking jacket, which was opened, exposing a white shirt front dyed crimson with blood just a little below his heart.

Curly emitted a soft, low whistle of complete surprise; then, the surprise was driven to cover by puzzlement. "But, hell, boss, this doesn't make sense! Who gunned him out and why? Why?"

Tony moved to the dead man's side. He touched him. His skin was still warm. Death had occurred not over an hour ago.

Curly scanned the room carefully. "No gun in sight, boss." He scratched his neck. "Hell, I still don't get this."

Tony said, "It's fairly simple. There are but two possible answers to it. One, his death has nothing to do with Ronnie's murder, he, possibly, having been killed by an enemy from out of the past; and two, it has everything to do with her murder."

Curly shook his head slowly. "But if he killed Mrs. Kent—"

"That's it. *If* he killed Ronnie, his death tends to throw an entirely different light on the matter."

"You mean, somebody else might have killed her?"

"That's what it looks like. Now, let's reconstruct theoretically: After I leave him, he, burning up with hate and revenge toward Ronnie for bringing me down upon him, sets out for her place. But upon reaching the house, something prevents him from carrying out his plan. I should say that somebody else prevents him, and that somebody else is the murderer."

"Oh, I get it, boss," Curly said. "You mean, that Santos did not kill Mrs. Kent because this other party, whoever it is, beats him to the punch?"

"Exactly. So what does Santos do after that? Say, he arrived in time to see the murder committed—those footprints the cops found under the living room window must be his. Does he go to the cops with the identity of the slayer? Not Santos. He holes up here, in this place, fearing me, knowing that I'll blame him for the deed, and attempts to blackmail the real killer." Tony nodded toward the corpse. "This was the killer's pay-off."

"That certainly jells, boss," Curly admitted.

Tony reached down and went through the dead man's pockets. He found cigarettes, matches, some change, keys, and a wallet. The wallet contained two hundred dollars in bills, identification card, social security card, draft registration card, a 4F classification card, and several photos. The photos were of Santos and a blond-haired, rather pretty girl in various poses. The girl looked vaguely familiar.

Curly glanced over Tony's shoulder at the photos. He snapped his fingers as recognition came. "Hell, boss, that babe is none other than Helen Tremaine, the Kent maid!"

Tony looked closer. "You're right, Curly! It is Helen Tremaine!"

Curly looked quizzically at Tony. "What does that mean?"

Tony placed the photos in his coat pocket. "It's beginning to mean a great deal. This connection between the maid and Santos explains how he got hold of Ronnie's letters."

"Do you think she killed him, boss?"

"That's quite possible."

An ivory cigarette box, standing upon the cocktail table near the dead man's feet, drew Curly's attention. He opened it and let out another whistle of surprise.

The cigarette box was minus any cigarettes. It contained a black revolver, a .38 Colt Police Positive Special. The gun had not been fired.

"It must be Santos' gun, boss,"

Curly reasoned. "He knew damn well that he was playing for high stakes, and wasn't taking any chances. But the murderer was smarter than him, and blasted him before he could get his hands on it."

Tony nodded in agreement.

The two men wiped their prints off everything they'd touched and started to make their exit. Something tiny and white in the foyer attracted Tony's attention. He picked up the small object. It was a handkerchief. There was a fragrant, delicate scent to it. Perfume. His heart started pounding furiously. He recognized the scent. He would have recognized it anywhere.

A sharp fear stabbed at his heart. He tried to refuse to believe what his brain was telling him. But one look at the initials in one corner of the handkerchief banished all thoughts of disbelief. The initials were: M. Le B.

Curly saw the initials, too. He saw the look that came over Tony's face. His eyes widened in surprise. "Not . . . not Marcia, boss!"

Tony felt like being sick. He nodded slowly. "Yes. Marcia."

Moe Finch was still standing by the newsstand. He grinned pleasantly as Tony and Curly approached him. "Everything kosher, boys?"

Tony's face was an impassive mask. "Tell me, Moe. When and how did you spot Santos?"

Moe nodded at the newsstand. "He is coming here and is buying some smokes and the paper at six-ten."

"Did you keep an eye on the house after he returned to it?"

"Certainly."

"Did he have any visitors?"

"Two visitors, Mr. Grant. One fella and one gal. The fella is going in at about six-fifteen, and is coming out five-ten minutes later. Then, the gal, is coming. She is going in at about six-thirty, and is coming out one-two minutes later."

"What did the man look like?"

Moe shook his head. "When he is going in, I am only seeing his back. When he is coming out, he's commencing to blow his nose with a big handkerchief, and he's having his hat pulled down low, and is having his coat collar pulled up high. So all I am knowing is that he is being a tall, slim fella, is having snazzy clothes, and a nice walk."

"How about the girl? What did she look like?"

Moe smiled pleasantly. "You are knowing her, Mr. Grant?"

"You mean, it was Marcia Le Baron? The girl who sings at my club?"

Moe nodded. "She's being the one, Mr. Grant."

Tony cursed savagely beneath his breath.

"Why, what is being wrong, Mr. Grant?" Moe inquired.

Curly said, "Plenty! For one thing, Santos is dead!"

Moe made a *tch, tch* sound. "Now, ain't that being a shame!" He eyed Tony and Curly. "You gentlemen are killing him, maybe?"

"Use your head, Moe!" Curly

snapped. "That's how we found him!"

Moe guessed, "Then, either the fella or the gal is killing him?"

"Did you hear any shots, Moe?" Tony asked. His voice was hoarse. There was fear in it, too.

Moe considered this. "Now that you are mentioning it, I am hearing something like a shot. Like two shots. But at the time I am thinking that it is a car that is backfiring?"

Tony dreaded to ask the next question. "When did you hear those shots, Moe? After the man entered the house? Or after Marcia Le Baron had?"

Moe scratched his head in thought. He frowned and scratched his head again. "I am not being sure, Mr. Grant. Maybe when the fella is going in or, maybe, when the gal is. I'm not knowing."

Marcia was not at the club. Tony drove to her apartment. He and Curly hardly exchanged a word all the way down.

Tony flattened his thumb on the buzzer beside the door marked 3B. He and Curly waited. There was no answer. Tony used his thumb again. This time, there was sudden movement from inside the suite. A woman's high-heeled footfalls *tap-tapped* toward the door. Halted. "W-who is it?" Marcia Le Baron's voice inquired; her tone was strained.

"Tony."

There was a click as a key turned in the lock. The door swung open and the red-headed singer faced the two men. Her face was deathly pale, her eyes red from recent tears. Her hair was mussed a little, and her white evening gown was wrinkled.

"Hello, Marcia," Tony said, stepping into the suite. Curly followed, nodding a greeting to the girl.

She closed the door, brushed a stray curl off her forehead, and smoothed the gown over her slim hips. "Won't . . . won't you sit down, Tony—Curly?"

Tony did not sit down. He stood facing her. She couldn't meet his direct gaze. "You've been crying?" he said, his voice gentle.

Marcia did not look up at him. She attempted a smile, failed miserably. She moved past him and sank into a chair. "Of course, I've been crying, Tony. A girl has the right to cry, now and then."

Curly had seated himself on the couch. "Sure, a girl has the right to cry, now and then," he said softly. "A good cry never hurt anybody."

Tony turned to her again. "Did you know Paul Santos, Marcia?"

She looked up at him this time. Her tear-filled eyes clung to his. There was sadness in them. "Yes, Tony. I knew Paul Santos."

"What was he to you?"

"N-nothing."

"Did you visit him tonight?"

She started to shake her head. "I . . . I—" The tears came then. "Oh, Tony, Tony!" she sobbed pitifully and was in his arms.

Tony held her close for a moment, let her cry. Her face was

buried against his chest, and her entire body trembled with every sob.

"I'm . . . I'm all right now, Tony," she finally whispered hoarsely. He gave her his handkerchief. She wiped the tears away. There were cigarettes in a box on the cocktail table. She lighted one and sat down in the chair again.

"Tell me about it, Marcia," Tony said quietly.

Her slim body was still trembling. "Paul Santos learned something about my past," she said, her voice hardly audible. "He was blackmailing me with it. I . . . I received a phone call from him this noon. He said that he wanted all the money I had and could get, that he needed it very badly. He gave me an address, on Pine Road, and told me to be there by seven. I drew every cent I had from the bank, and went to him—" She stopped and shuddered violently. "I r-rang a few times. There was no answer. I tried the door. It was unlocked. I went in, and found him . . . found him s-sitting there. He . . . he was dead." She looked up at Tony. "B-but how did you know that I . . . that I—"

He drew her handkerchief from his pocket and laid it on the table. "You dropped it in the foyer."

She stood up, but didn't move toward him. "You . . . you believe me, Tony, don't you?"

He smiled at her. "That you didn't kill him? Sure, I believe you."

A flicker of a smile flashed across her pale face. "Tony," she said, her voice bordering on the verge of hysteria. "Tony, please, don't hate me!"

"I don't hate you, Marcia."

"But . . . but you will, Tony. You will when you learn why Paul Santos was blackmailing me. Y-you see, there was a man in the past. I thought I was in love with him. He—"

Tony stopped her from going any further. He took her in his arms. "Look, Marcia. I don't give a damn about the past. The past is dead, and should be forgotten. It's the future that really matters." He wiped a tear from her cheek with his finger. "Maybe, I never told you before that I loved you, Marcia. Maybe, I didn't know it myself until tonight. But I do love you, and nothing from out of the past can change that love. Nothing."

He bent his head, and kissed her. She clung to him for a moment; then he and Curly were gone.

III.

The two men rode the self-service elevator down to the lobby, and came out of the hotel building. "Where do we go from here, boss?" Curly inquired, buttoning his overcoat.

Tony climbed into the coupe. "To the Kent place. I'd like to have a little talk with the maid, Helen Tremaine."

Curly slid into the seat beside him. The drive took twenty minutes. Tony drew the coupe to a halt before the house, and ascended several stairs to the veranda,

Curly remained in the car.

There was a huge, bronze knocker on the massive door. Tony used it. He lighted a cigarette and waited.

Frank Kent himself opened the door. He seemed surprised to see the night-club owner. "Why, hello, Tony."

Tony threw away his cigarette. "Good evening, Frank. How are you?"

Kent managed to force a wan smile. "Oh, I guess, as well as anybody could be under the circumstance," he replied, and invited Tony to come in. He led him into the study. Marie De Vare was busy at the typewriter on the desk.

Tony nodded toward her. "Good evening," he said.

She stopped typing. "Good evening, Mr. Grant," she acknowledged, giving him a smile. She pushed back the chair and reached for a cigarette. Tony lighted it for her. "Thank you," she said.

Kent waved a hand at the cluttered desk. "We've been trying to get out a new advertising campaign for a client. Been at it for hours." He shook his head a bit dejectedly. "We've got to have something to show by tomorrow, and so far—" He shook his head again.

Tony said, "Then, in that case, I won't intrude any longer. You see, I really came to see your maid—"

Kent cut him short. "Maid?"

Tony nodded. "Yes. Helen Tremaine."

Kent looked puzzled. "What in the world do you want to see her about?"

"Oh, nothing very special. Just wanted to ask her something."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'm sorry, Tony, but she isn't here any longer. I let her go. You see, with Ronnie dea . . . with Ronnie gone, there was no need to keep her. She was Ronnie's personal maid."

"Then, I guess, I'll be running along. Sorry if I disturbed you."

"No need for apologies, Tony. We weren't making much headway, anyway."

"By the way, Frank, do you happen to know where Miss Tremaine lives? Maybe I can reach her there."

Kent nodded. "Why, in a rooming house in the East Sixties, I believe." He gave Tony the address.

Tony thanked him. He asked how the police were progressing on the case.

Kent said, "They seem to think, now, that a prowler may have been responsible for the crime." He shook his head somberly. "I . . . I sometimes think that I won't be able to go on without her. She was so alive, so gay." He gritted his teeth vehemently. "Oh, Lord, if I could only lay my hands on the person responsible!"

Tony finally bade him and his secretary good night, and left.

One of the mailboxes, in the foyer of the rooming house, had a neat, white card reading: HELEN TREMAINE—303. Tony and Curly climbed two flights of stairs to the third floor. They proceeded down a dimly lighted hallway, and found the door marked: 303. There

was no bell so Tony used his knuckles.

Silence greeted them.

"Maybe she isn't in, boss," Curly said.

Tony knocked again. The door swung open under the slight pressure. The interior of the room was in complete darkness. "Miss Tremaine," he called out softly.

There was no reply.

He stepped into the room. Curly gripped the automatic in his coat pocket, and went in after Tony. "I don't like the looks of this, boss," he said softly.

"Neither do I," replied Tony, groping for the light switch. He found it, and flooded the room with light.

Helen Tremaine lay on her back on the floor near a chintz-covered divan. She was clad in a dark-blue housecoat and light-blue mules. The housecoat was twisted around her body, exposing one bare, white knee. Her hair was long and blond, reaching down to her shoulders. It now framed her waxen, pale face against the green-and-blue carpet. One hand was on her chest, clenched into a tiny, tight fist; the other lay at her side, the fingers of it just touching a brandy glass. There was pain and horror in every line of her face and in her wide-opened, brown eyes.

Tony bent over her. There was no pulse. Her skin was cold. She had been dead for about two hours. He looked for a wound. There wasn't a visible mark on her.

Curly was on the other side of the girl. He was on his hands and knees, sniffing at the contents of the brandy glass which had soaked into the carpet. "Smells like cyanide, boss," he said, arising. "Looks like somebody gave her a dose of it with the brandy."

There was a coffee table in the middle of the room. A two-thirds full bottle of brandy stood on it, an empty brandy glass, and an ash tray with one cigarette butt in it. One look at the empty brandy glass upon the table revealed the fact that it had been wiped clean of finger-prints and lip imprints, too.

Tony looked closer at the cigarette butt in the ash tray. There was a smudge of lip rouge on one end. He pulled out his handkerchief, and bent over the dead girl once more. He wiped some of the rouge from her lips and compared it with that on the cigarette butt. The rouge on the cigarette was of an orange hue, and that from Helen Tremaine's lips was of a medium-red.

Tony placed the handkerchief back into his pocket, and turned to Curly. "I had a hunch as to who was responsible for Ronnie's death," he said grimly. "Now I'm positive." He headed for the door. "Let's go."

The two men came out of the rooming house, and were on the way to the parked coupe when total blitzkrieg was let loose upon them.

A gun, from across the street, started blasting quick death at them. The first bullet drew hot blood and pain as it grazed Tony's cheek, the second one knocked Curly's hat from his head.

Curly emitted a savage yell of rage, and hit the icy sidewalk, gun in hand. Tony did the same. The gun across the street blasted three more times, but this time Tony's revolver, and Curly's Walther were answering it, slug for slug. They couldn't see their assailant. He seemed to be hidden from sight behind the four-foot brick wall of the house across the street.

Windows all along the street began popping open; voices of men and women started yelling; people came running out from the neighboring houses. But neither Tony nor Curly were conscious of the reigning pandemonium. Curly lay on his stomach and kept pulling the trigger, until the hammer clicked on an empty gun chamber. Tony had come leaping to his feet, and, using Curly's fire as a protective screen, went charging across the street toward the wall.

There were no more gun blasts from behind the wall. Tony went leaping over it into ankle-deep snow. There wasn't anybody behind the wall. Their assailant had fled, leaving a trail of footprints in the snow.

Curly came running up to Tony's side, shoving a fresh clip into his automatic. They ran around the side of the house, following the footprints. There was another wall in the back yard. This one was about six feet high. The footprints led up to it and over.

Tony chinned himself cautiously. There was no sign of their quarry, except for another trail of footprints in the snow. The footprints emerged through the alleyway on the next street.

In the distance, a police whistle began blowing. The wavering wail of a prowl car's siren cut through the noisy night. That was their cue. The two men returned to the coupe, and vacated the neighborhood in a hurry. They couldn't waste time explaining things to the police.

IV.

This time Marie De Vare opened the door to Tony Grant's pounding of the bronze knocker at the Kent place. "Yes?" she asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

"Has Frank returned yet, Marie?" Tony asked.

Not a flicker of emotion crossed her face. "Returned from where?"

Tony and Curly pushed past her into the house. "From where the hell do you think, sister?" Curly lashed out harshly. "From trying to kill us!"

The girl drew back from the two men. "I . . . I don't know w-what—"

"Can it, sister!" growled Curly, grabbing her by the arm and shoving her toward the study after Tony.

Frank Kent sat in a brown leather chair facing the doorway. "Hello, Tony, Curly," he said quietly. "Won't you come in?" There was an ugly smile on his lips and a still uglier gun in his hand. He nodded at Curly. "You will, please, let Marie go."

Curly released the girl. She

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went to Frank Kent's side.

Tony said softly, "I see that one of our bullets found its mark?"

Frank Kent's shirt was torn open at the left shoulder, exposing a makeshift bandage dyed red with blood. A first-aid kit lay at his feet. He nodded his head. "Unfortunately, yes." Pain made him grimace.

"F-Frank," Marie De Vare got out huskily, "I . . . I'm going to call the doctor. I—"

He shook his head. "Later, Marie. Later."

"B-but, Frank—"

"It's nothing but a scratch. Believe me."

She sank to her knees beside his chair and began to cry. Kent said to Tony, "So you know everything?"

"Most of it, Frank. I know that your secretary killed your wife, and poisoned Helen Tremaine. I know that you killed Paul Santos. The thing I'm not sure of is whether your wife's death was premeditated, or an accident."

"I didn't mean to k-kill her," Marie De Vare sobbed out. "I . . . I didn't!"

Kent said, "No, Tony. She didn't mean to kill Ronnie. It was an accident. You see, my wife found out about us, somehow. When I went to Chicago, she asked Marie to come here and then told her what she knew. There was a quarrel. Ronnie tried to strike her with the poker. Marie wrenched it from her hand and struck her instead. Not hard enough to cause injury. But Ronnie slipped and hit her head against the cocktail table." Kent grimaced with pain again. "The police weren't the least suspicious of Marie. But—"

"But," Tony stated, "Paul Santos had witnessed the entire scene between your secretary and your wife. He attempted blackmail. You went to him and paid him off in full—with a bullet. Somehow, you learned of the connection between him and your wife's maid, Helen Tremaine. You either thought she knew the real truth, or she actually did. So she had to be got out of the way, too, and Marie took care of that."

Kent smiled thinly. "I saw Helen Tremaine and Paul Santos together a few times. So when he tried blackmail, I had Marie go to her apartment to try to find out what she knew. She knew too much. Marie came and told me. She had noticed the brandy in Helen's apartment. That's how we hit upon the poison. Marie returned to the apartment again, and—" He broke off and shrugged indifferently.

Curly put in, "But why commit murder when your secretary had only killed your wife accidently in the first place. So what if Santos ran to the cops, if you refused to pay him any dough? The odds were that your secretary would get off scot free, or at the worse, draw a manslaughter plea of a couple of years."

Kent shook his head. "You don't understand. Paul Santos had witnessed what happened, but he made it plenty plain that if he went to the police with his knowledge, his story would be that Marie had de-

liberately killed Ronnie."

Marie stood behind Frank Kent's chair now.

Tony asked, "And what do you propose to do, Frank? Continue with more murder, or give yourselves up and hope for the best?"

"What hope could there possibly be for us, now, Tony?" His gun wavered a little. "No. The only alternative left us, is to kill the both of you. Without the knowledge you two possess, there will be a far better chance for us with the police."

"You must love her a lot, Frank, to commit murder for her?"

"I do, Tony. But tell me. How did you learn that it was Marie and myself who were responsible for the crimes?"

"I didn't know the truth," Tony revealed, "until I came here tonight, after discovering Paul Santos' body. You claimed that you and your secretary had been in the house for hours, working. That was a lie, of course. When I came in, I noticed rouge on your lips. Marie's lip rouge. I knew, then, that there was something more between the two of you than a boss-secretary relationship. So I gnessed the truth.

"Another thing, Marie left a rouge-smeared cigarette butt in Helen Tremaine's apartment. So I knew that a woman had poisoned her, and I knew, from a witness, that a man had shot Paul Santos. I just put two and two together.

"You became frightened when I came here inquiring about the maid, became afraid that I knew the real

truth. That's why you tried to kill us."

Frank Kent sat slouched down in his chair, now. His face was a mask of pain. "Marie," he said, his voice weaker, filled with fear. "Marie, get their guns. Quick!"

Marie came around the chair swiftly. "No!" Kent gasped suddenly. "No! Stand back, Marie! I . . . I feel weak. I've got to . . . kill them before it's too . . . too late!" His finger tightened on the gun's trigger.

But Marie De Vare had got a bit too close to Curly. He leaped into action like a released coiled spring. He grabbed the girl to him with his left hand, his right diving into his coat pocket.

"Frank!" she screamed shrilly.

Kent pressed the trigger of his gun. Not at Curly and the struggling girl, but at Tony. He missed by a good foot, and before he could aim again, Tony was upon him, knocking the gun from his hand.

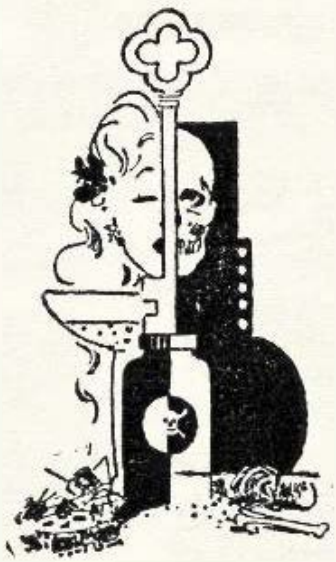
Kent fell to the floor after the gun—and remained there, unconscious. The struggling girl saw him, and let out a horrible, hysterical scream. She tore out of Curly's grasp, and flung herself across his prone body, weeping hysterically.

Curly Jones mopped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. He saw that he still clutched his drawn automatic. He put it away, shaking his head sadly, feeling a bit ill.

Tony Grant lighted a cigarette. His hands were trembling. He walked over to the desk, picked up the phone, and dialed police headquarters.

Marie De Vare continued to cry.

THE END.



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