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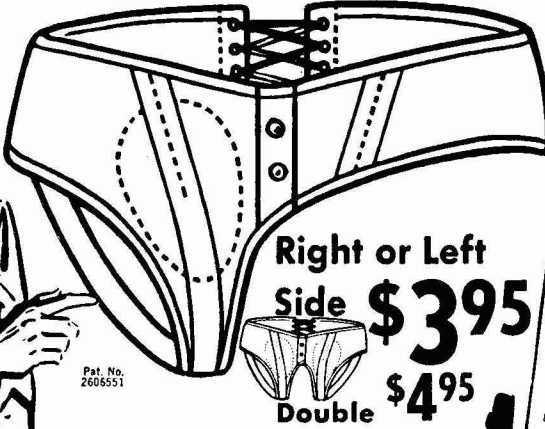
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June,
1954

Volume
14
Number
1

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

All
Stories
New,
No
Reprints

In This Issue

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Rex Trent finds that his face fits perfectly in a frameup for multiple murder.

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Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

Next Issue on Sale June 1st

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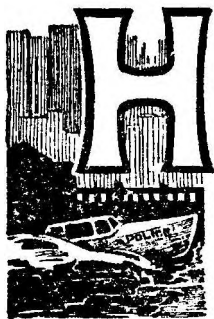
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SPOTLIGHT ON CRIME

"CAN YOU SPARE A COIN — SUCKER?" by Harold Gluck



HE WAS IN his early twenties. About five feet nine inches, and a good, honest face that spelled the right upbringing. His carrot-colored hair helped to create the feeling of friendliness, which was heightened by two

blue gray eyes. As soon as we were introduced, he shook hands with me. At the time I paid no particular importance to the fact that he was always standing with his back to the wall, as though to give support to his body. In a tone akin to a whisper he said, "There's a horse in the third race tomorrow that's a sure winner; jockey is a personal friend of mine. Play her to win and you clean up." He seemed sort of disappointed when I informed him that I kept away from the racetracks and the bookies.

Three days later as I was walking down the Main Street, there in front of our largest department store, I spotted my latest acquaintance. Minus both of his feet, he was seated on a platform, with rollers that he could move from place to place with his arms. On his lap was a large tin cup.

He greeted me and then added, "Drop a coin in that cup and start business." Out came a dime from my pocket and several people followed me, adding coins to his collection. "My dropper is ill and receipts are going to be off today."

For your information a "dropper" is the fellow who walks up and down the street and drops the coins into the cup of his confederate. This acts as a stimulus and psychological suggestion to others to come across with coins.

"How did you make out with that horse?" I inquired.

A string of invectives followed that can't be reproduced in print. Then he added, "I dropped a hundred bucks like a dope."

"Where do you park your artificial legs during business hours?" I asked. "Over at Joe's cigar store down the avenue; but I have a fellow who will give me better service, and get my car out of the garage."

The gentle art of begging is centuries old. In certain towns, the beggars had their allotted spots and they were even held in the family over a period of time. Youthful scholars in pursuit of knowledge found begging a good way to fill the stomach while the mind meditated about philosophy. But today, begging is a racket that separates the suckers from millions of dollars that could be better spent for legitimate charities. I knew a young man whose mother sent him to high school and college through her begging activities. She specialized in summer resort towns; she appeared as a humble little woman with a crippled right arm. Wonderful how she could twist that arm.

I never got up enough nerve to ask her whether or not she was a contortionist. She would manage to get up on the porch of a hotel, walk in front of people with her left palm extended and leave said porch with many silver coins and sometimes with bills.

It is remarkable, from a statistical point of view, how many crippled beggars possess all full faculties. I watched a man sit on the corner near the entrance to a busy building and collect his toll of coins. Even an expert would have found it difficult to spot the fact that he had twisted his two legs be-

[Turn To Page 93]

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NOVELET OF DEATH'S MAZE

MURDER COMES IN THREES

By Wilbur S. Peacock



Here was the perfect fall-guy: a man who could throw knives, and who owned a razor-sharp Commando blade. It fitted so neatly into a murder-plan that it looked like a sure thing—the perfect frame-up against Rex Trent.

EX-MARINE Rex Trent grinned when he saw the fog of flame-lit smoke over the great Hastings's steel plant. This was payday, the first real money he had ever earned in civilian life. From school he had gone straight into a uniform; and more than three and a half years had passed before a Korean truce had shoved him

back into the States again. Now, with two weeks of his first job in the past, and with hints of a promotion coming up, even the smoke-marked town of Steelville seemed bright and clean.

His heavy boots clattered on the wooden porch of the rooming house, and he went down the steps, swinging with a loose-gaited walk toward the

shabby sedan drawn up to the curb.

"Hi, fellows!" he said, ducked into the front seat.

Vince Canelli grunted his greeting from a corner of the rear seat, sucked dispiritedly at a cigaret. His olive features were slightly green, and his black eyes were bloodshot.

"Hangover," young Burt Oliver explained with malicious good humor. "Vince and I made the dance last night, and he got crocked." He grinned. "He and Dude tangled over some babe from the north side."

"I'll kill that louse some day," Vince Canelli said sullenly. "He'll swing his weight once too often some day, and I'll cut his damned throat."

"Oh, he's all right," Rex Trent said easily. "He gets too big for his pants sometimes; but he doesn't mean anything."

"Yeah?" Burt Oliver kicked the starter, sent the sedan ahead with a screech of meshing gears. "You have to like him, what with Eileen and you getting hitched. But he isn't going to be any brother-in-law of mine, so I'll still think what I please."

"Forget it," Rex advised, lit a cigaret.

Traffic swirled in a tinny flood about the narrow street, and he watched it, savoring the life of the town, feeling a closeness to it such as he had never felt elsewhere. Men, big husky men, walked the sidewalks, the black of their jobs ground into their clothes and skins, their shoulders wide and erect. This was the night shift coming off, and the huge restaurants were swallowing them by the hundreds, while others queued at the bus stops.

"There's Harkness," Oliver said, tooled the car toward the curb, where a gigantic blond-headed figure in coveralls bulked like a boulder against the tide of the shifting crowd.

"Morning!" Harkness said cheerfully, opened the door and dropped his weight onto the empty side of the back seat.

Vince Canelli flipped his limp cigaret silently from the window. Burt Oliver nodded, whipping the car back into traffic. Rex Trent turned on the front seat and grinned at the huge crane operator.

"Heard the latest?" he asked. "They're giving me a pusher."

Harkness frowned in mock disbelief. "Naw!" he said eloquently, then smiled. "First thing you know, you'll be tossing my 'Bouncing Betty' around." He scrubbed broad fingers through his shock of blond hair. "Who told you?" he finished.

"Dude."

Harkness shrugged, glanced at Canelli. "Well, if he says so, then it must be so; he's the boss." He scowled at the wiry Italian at his side. "What's wrong with you, Vince?" he asked. "Nursing a grouch?"

"Hangover," Tim supplied.

"So that's it. Well, old Doctor Harkness has the remedy for that." He shifted, fumbled in his hip pocket, retrieving a four ounce bottle. "Kill half of that," he said. "It's the hair of the dog."

"Thanks," Canelli drank from the bottle, shivered, spat from the window, handed the bottle back. Harkness' eyes dropped to the bandaged hand extending the bottle.

"Hurt yourself yesterday?"

"Last night," Canelli said venomously, "Dude used a broken bottle."

BURT OLIVER turned the sedan into the plant's parking lot, cut the engine, coasted to a stop in a line of cars. "He and Dude tangled again," he explained. "Both are out on bail until Friday's court."

Harkness opened the door, stepped to the ground. "Better get your apologies in today, Vince," he advised. "Otherwise you may find yourself out of a job." He turned. "See you guys later," he finished, strode toward the reclamation pits.

Canelli climbed from the car, vic-

ciously slammed the door. "Yeah, he can talk," he said. "He's so damned big, nobody tries to push him around."

Rex Trent watched the rolling walk of the crane operator, saw the cluster of men surround Harkness before he had gone halfway across the parking lot, felt a touch of envy momentarily. The big man had a natural friendliness that drew men and women about him without effort.

"Let's go," Oliver said; and the three of them walked toward the gate.

They passed the guards, showing identification badges, then separated, Burt Oliver going toward the offices, and Canelli disappearing down the tunnel marked *Supplies*.

Rex followed the main line of workers, nodding at the few he knew, feeling again a sense of belonging to the plant and the workers. His shoes made rustling echoes in the wooden hall-tunnel which was swallowed by the current of voices eddying about the corridor. There was the smell of overheated metal in the air, mixed with the odors of oil and the steamy fragrance of food coming from the company restaurant in a cross corridor.

He came from the tunnel, entered the wrecking building, blinked against the solid sheet of noise that smashed at him. Then habit shut away most of the sound, and he identified familiar noises one by one. A thousand men worked in the single building, each intent upon a single job, that of dismantling and tearing down tanks and jeeps and trucks that had been discarded by the armed services.

Electricians and skilled mechanics reclaimed instruments and electrical devices. Grime and sweat-stained men marked the great piles of war-torn junk with blue chalk, indicating parts that were to be salvaged. Still more men used wrenches and crowbars and oxyacetylene torches to save the blue-marked pieces.

Trent grimaced, feeling the muscles of his broad back tighten, as he

watched the scene. For two weeks he had handled cold chisels and crowbars, had worked shift after shift, reclaiming the junk, thinking his body could not stand the punishing drive that goaded every man to herculean efforts.

But as the days had passed, so had his ability to take the punishment increased; until at last he had worked with the best of the men, his skill increasing, the amount of work he accomplished growing greater each working day.

He skirted the edge of the building now, waving greetings at the men he knew, going toward the towering pile of iron and steel at the open rear, seeing the great wrecking crane towering like some fantastic dinosaur in the pits beyond.

A BULLDOZER motor bellowed into life, swung into action, the broad blade of its nose scooping and piling and ramming together odd fragments of the wrecking crew's waste, herding them toward a ramp that led outside. Blue smoke snorting from its exhaust, it backed, then charged the ten foot pile of scrapped metal with a ponderous slowness, urged it up the ramp, where it dropped with a burst of clashing noise into the pit below.

Then the bulldozer came crawling backward, nudging itself into place again, and the motor died. The driver scowled at Trent.

"Where in hell you been?" he snarled. "There's enough work here for ten guys, let alone two. Get your pusher and get to work on ramp two."

"Okay!" Rex turned away, went toward the second bulldozer a hundred feet further on the second ramp. Excitement tugged at his heart, for this would be his first day at a new job.

He swung into the cab, handled the controls for a moment, checking his memory against his knowledge. He had worked on these before in Korea and it was good to feel the solidity of the machine under him again.

"Trent?" The single word swung him about.

"Hello, Dude," he said. "I'm just getting the hang of things again."

Dude Ferrigan, head mechanic of the wrecking department, spat, jerked his head. "Come on down; I want a couple of words with you."

"Sure!" Trent swung from the cab, leaned against the huge front wheel. "What's on your mind?"

"I've got a message from Eileen."

"Fine." Trent flushed at the glance the foreman gave him, fought against the antagonism the man brought out in him each time they met.

They were of a size, each dark, but Dude was ponderous in his movements, muscle-bound from the years of working with iron and steel. The foreman's features were clean-cut, sharp, but blurring a bit now with the years, and the eyes were cold and hard and eternally suspicious.

"Eileen told me to tell you not to come around any more," Dude said, polished nails that were incongruously clean and manicured against one sleeve.

Rex grinned. "Stop clowning, Dude," he said shortly. "I've got work to do."

Ferrigan's face settled, and his tone was flat. "I said you weren't to come around any more."

There was no laughter in Rex's eyes now, and he felt the tightening of stomach muscles. His hands clenched involuntarily, and he no longer stood leaning against the wheel.

"What goes on?" he asked, and a whiteness came to his lips.

"You ain't welcome," Dude Ferrigan said, and turned away.

Trent whipped him about, hand knotted in the overall shoulder. "Keep talking," he said. "Keep talking, and it had better be good."

Dude knocked the hand aside, and muscles bulged in his thick neck. "I just decided I don't like you," he said. "You got friends I don't like."

Trent fought down the rage that



choked his throat. "You talking for yourself or Eileen?" he snapped.

"For both of us. Come around, and there'll be trouble. Eileen'll do what I say."

Rex swung, saw the trickle of crimson mark Dude's mouth, left himself wide open. Ferrigan caught his balance, moved in with a tigerish swiftness, threw a right hand that hit like a bazooka shell.

Trent went back against the wheel, a dull pounding in his head, the shock of the blow thrusting sickness into his stomach. But he whirled as he went back, went to one knee, came surging forward, hands outspread Commando style.

And stopped.

For Dude Ferrigan balanced a two foot scrap of razor-sharp steel in his hands.

"Pick up your time, Trent," Dude Ferrigan said. "And don't come anywhere around my sister."

A GUARD materialized about the end of the bulldozer, eyes cold and watchful. His club swung in his left hand, and his right was near his holstered gun. "Trouble?" he asked.

Rex ignored him, stared at Dude Ferrigan. "I'm coming over to see Eileen and get the straight goods," he said. "Get in my way, and you'll regret it."

Dude Ferrigan grinned coldly, and he dropped the scrap of metal from thick gnarled hands. "It's okay," he told the guard, swung back to Trent. "Your paycheck will be waiting at the end of the shift; you're through the

minute my report goes in." His eyes slitted. "You'll have company, pal."

He spun, walked swaggeringly through the piled debris. The guard watched him go, glanced at Trent, then paced back to his post. The ex-Marine stood near the wheel, shaking with reaction, his mind a maelstrom of chaotic thoughts.

The stinking louse, he thought, the dirty damned stinking louse!

He knew what had brought this about; knew that the fight with Cannelli had brought their mutual antagonism to a head. For Cannelli was his friend, and the foreman knew that.

He saw the stares of men about him, flushed, then climbed back into the cab of the bulldozer, kicked the starter. The motor roared, and he warmed it for a moment, before swinging it toward the pile of scrap metal. With instinctive skill, he cut out the bodies of several jeeps and a mass of twisted girders, herded the scrap along the ramp toward the pit where Harkness worked his gigantic crane.

Metal melted away from the front of the pusher, and he stopped the machine at the pit's edge, watched the wrecking crane come into position. He felt dull awe surging through the anger still coursing his veins, the same awe that first he had felt when he saw this machine Harkness handled with such careless skill.

From the great boom of the crane, steel cables dropped to a huge electromagnet. And attached to the magnet was a great steel marble. But this was no toy; this marble weighed ten tons, and its smooth surface barely showed the effects of the thousands of times it had been used.

Even as Trent watched, Harkness lifted the ten tons of steel ball high in the air. His hand cut the switch, and the ball hurtled down, crushing and breaking into small fragments the great pieces of steel that lay in the pit. The operator lowered the magnet at the end of the sinuous cables, cut in the elec-

tricity again, and the steel ball began to lift, small pieces of steel and iron flipping up and clinging to the shiny sides.

Harkness waved genially from the cab of the crane, and Trent waved in return. The crane turned ten degrees, and the steel ball smashed down again, breaking and crushing and pulverizing the metal below, making it ready for the furnaces again.

Trent's gaze ran about the pit, seeing the small cement openings where plant waste had once washed into the pit, travelling the wooden-railed walk that circled two sides. He saw the great steel ball lift again, and a bulldozer come waddling into the pit, where it cut loose a segment of the broken metal, pushing it toward the cars that would take it to the furnaces.

He scowled, seeing Dude Ferrigan and another man step on the pit's railed walk, saw them stride along until they were directly before the machine Harkness handled with consummate skill. To one side, the second bulldozer pushed another load of scrapped metal into the pit; and Ferrigan gave Harkness a go-ahead signal with his hand.

A third man stepped momentarily onto the walk, then stepped back into the shadow of the wall opening; and Trent frowned, recognizing Vince Cannelli. This was a hell of a time for an apology, for Dude did not like to be interrupted when on the job.

Ferrigan and his companion leaned against the railing, watching the crane lift its ten tons of dead weight with electrical magic, winced instinctively, as the huge ball hurtled down in a cacaphony of blasting sound. They talked as they watched, and Trent grinned, seeing that the second man was Burt Oliver. He liked the kid, and he knew the boy was trying again to be taken from "Filing" and put to work in the shop.

He frowned, seeing the men straighten angrily, posturing like voiceless

dummies on the narrow walk, their hands accenting words that could not be heard. Then Oliver struck the bigger man squarely in the mouth; and Trent scrambled from the cab of his bulldozer.

HE KNEW the beating Dude would give the smaller youth, knew the kid didn't have a chance. His feet struck the concrete, and he threw a single glance at the scene, before beginning a futile run to stop the coming beating.

Dude Ferrigan had the younger man by the throat, holding him easily with one hand, bending him over the rail, while his other hand made cutting slashing blows at Oliver's face. Blood was bright on the youth's mouth, and he fought with a dogged futility that was sickening.

"Stop that, you fool!" Rex screamed, and his words were lost in the volcanic roar of the shop.

He saw the flash of movement in the crane's cab, knew that Harkness was screaming soundless orders at the fighters. The cables at the boom end swung erratically, and the crane made a forty degree turn accidentally, as the blond operator forgot his job for a moment.

Trent took his first running step, almost fell, then flowed into action. He ducked along the pit edge, going toward the short flight of steps leading downward. His breath was hot in his throat, and from the corner of his eyes, he saw that the fighters had broken loose from each other.

They came together, just as he reached the first of the steps. He heard the mortal scream of agony, and for a second he was back in Korea. He halted, one hand on the rail, staring with sick incredulous eyes.

Burt Oliver was slumped on the walk, his hands pawing blindly at his ruptured face. At the rail, bent backward, hands clawing futilely to reach something in his back, Dude Ferrigan

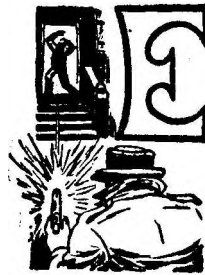
screamed again and again.

Then thick blood gushed torrentially from his mouth, and he toppled forward, curving over the railing, hanging with hands loose and slack. Crimson flooded from his gaping mouth, painted a strip of death down the side of the pit.

Rex Trent retched, clutched at the railing.

Dude Ferrigan was dead, a needle-keen sliver of shining steel thrusting upward from his curved back.

2



EILEEN FERRIGAN cried softly, the Minister's words making the sound harsh and bleak in the bright sunlight. Two miles away the steel plant poured smoke and soot into the fall air, and the noise of its turbulent

life was muted by distance into a vague hum. Men and women shifted uneasily about the grave as the coffin was lowered, then broke into small groups, homeward bound, as the services ended.

"We go now." Rex said at last and touched the slender girl's arm.

He guided her to his rented car, sat for a moment behind the wheel, watching the crowd thin and disappear. There was something bleak and unreal about the scene, for the cemetery was but a year old, and the landscaping was still being done.

He watched Eileen, without appearing to do so, saw the shadows beneath her eyes, felt sympathy knotting his heart, when he found he had not the words to soothe her anguish.

She sat huddled in the corner, sunlight sparking gold from the red of her hair, handkerchief tight in one hand, eyes staring blindly into space. The

simple dress molded her soft curves, until she was little more than a girl, tearful and frightened in a world that held no meaning for her.

Rex swore softly to himself, kicked the starter. He drove swiftly back to the city, cutting down a side street at the edge of town, going directly to the small house she had shared with her brother.

"Don't come in, Rex," she said, opened the door. "I want to be alone for a while."

"You'll be all right?" he asked anxiously.

The girl smiled temulously, nodded, went up the walk. Rex watched her enter the house, then sent the car ahead again. About him, the city continued its usual life, and he was strangely resentful.

He felt no particular sorrow over Dude Ferrigan's death; for months he had lived with death, had seen buddies die at his side. And Dude had been almost a stranger. It was regrettable, but little more than that, from his viewpoint. Eileen, of course, was alone now; but if she had not changed her mind, he would remedy that situation in the near future.

He cut down Market Street, then swung back on Talbot Avenue and parked the car before his rooming house. A huge blond man stirred, as he came up the steps, then came erect from the canvas porch chair.

"Everything go okay?" Harkness asked.

"I guess so. Why?"

"Just wondered. I couldn't get out."

The blond giant lit a cigaret, flipped the match to the yard. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Okay, come on up to the room."

Trent keyed the door and led the way up the narrow stairs. Inside his room, he threw his hat and coat on the bed, sank beside them, watched the burly crane operator pace the short carpet.

"Well, what is it?" he said at last.

"It's about Oliver; think he stabbed Dude?"

Caution tightened Trent's nerves, and he felt nebulous suspicions beginning to crystallize in his mind.

"Didn't he?" he asked.

"I don't know. I was watching the fight, and I didn't see the kid pick up the strip of steel." He hesitated, then plunged on. "I heard a guard tell the cops that you and Dude tangled to beat hell, that you threatened him."

Somehow, he was hard and dangerous then, the affability no longer in his wide eyes. He stared at the ex-Marine, his gaze a probing drill of suspicion.

Rex swallowed, wondered at the dryness of his mouth. He forced a short laugh, found a cigaret on the night table, lit it, then immediately ground it out.

"Yeah, we had a fight," he admitted, "but it went no further than that. Anyway, he was stabbed long before I got to the fight." He straightened on the bed. "Just what's your interest; why are you playing cops and robbers?"

Harkness shrugged, dropped his cigaret in the tray. "I don't know," he admitted. "I like the kid, so I was checking angles."

"So you put me on the spot just because you like Burt?"

"Look, Trent," Harkness said, and his voice was harsh, "I've got nothing against you; it was just that I liked the kid."

"What do the cops say?"

"Well, they've charged him with second degree murder, and are trying to make it first degree. I went down to the jail to see him, but they wouldn't let me in. I sent in some cigs."

"That all you found out?"

"That about takes it."

Rex stood, and was amazed at the tension that lay in his compact body. He picked up his hat and coat, hung them in the small closet. His tone was almost casual. "Canelli had a fight with Dude a couple of nights ago."

Harkness leaned against the wall. "Yeah, I know. But he was at 'Supplies' when Dude got his; I checked." His heavy hands moved expressively. "Anyway, I was watching the whole thing, and nobody was closer than fifty feet to Oliver and Dude when Dude was killed."

Rex switched on the small table radio, waited for the tubes to warm. He felt the impact of the big man's gaze on his back, glanced around. "There were a couple of thousand men around, when Dude was killed; if Oliver didn't do it, you'll have a hell of a time tracking down anybody else."

Harkness grinned for the first time. "I'm not tracking anybody," he said. "That's the cops' job, and I don't want any part of it. I just thought maybe you might have seen something going on that I missed."

ABSENTLY, Harkness lifted the Commando throwing knife Trent had brought back as one of a pair for souvenirs, balanced it in his hand. The razor edge nicked the skin of his thumb, and he blinked at the incredible sharpness, laid the weapon back on the table. Rex grinned, and Harkness smiled ruefully.

"Better blunt that thing," the blond giant advised, "before somebody loses a finger."

"When I used that," Trent said, "blunt knives cost a man his life."

But Harkness wasn't listening; his eyes had gone to the Commando weapon again. "Fifty feet isn't so far," he said musingly.

Rex whirled from the radio, clicking off the music with a twist of his fingers. His face was hard now, and a thickness had come to the muscles of his neck.

"Don't get any ideas, Harkness," he warned the other. "I see what you're thinking, and I don't like it. If Oliver didn't stab Dude, then somebody threw that piece of steel like a knife—and you're not pinning any suspicion on

me. Hell, for that matter, if that angle works, then maybe you're a good candidate for the chair yourself. You could have tossed that chunk of steel just as easily as me."

"Huh uh!" Harkness shook his head. "I've already had that out with the cops. They figured the possibility of the weapon being thrown, and questioned me. I got scientific and proved that I couldn't have done the job from my level, for the knife entered at a slight downward angle. That meant Oliver shoved the knife, or somebody pitched it from the same level or slightly above. I was in the pit, remember!"

He took a deep breath, and his shoulders squared as he faced the ex-Marine. "I like you and I like Burt; and I don't like the idea of somebody taking the rap for the other guy. So I come up here to see if you saw anything suspicious."

"I saw Canelli in the walk entrance," Trent said, and swore silently, for he hadn't intended to say the words.

"Canelli?" Suspicion thickened Harkness' tone.

"Yeah, Canelli!" Trent rushed on now. "He ducked back out of sight when he saw Oliver was with Dude. I didn't see him again." His voice hardened. "I suppose you'll pin the rap on him now," he finished drily.

"He *could* have done it," Harkness said thoughtfully. "It wasn't so many years ago he earned his living throwing knives."

"What?" Rex stared blankly. "I knew he travelled with a circus, but I thought he was a canvasman."

Harkness scowled. "He knifed his stooge, almost killed her. The accident killed his nerve, and he quit the act." He turned to the door, laid one hand on the knob. "Funny," he finished, "I never really gave him a thought, for the cops gave him a clean bill when he swore he was in the supply department."

Trent frowned. "You going to the police?"

"No! I'm going to talk to the guy. Maybe you made a mistake. Maybe, for some reason, you're lying. Anyway, I'm going to talk to him; and if I don't like what he says, then I'll call the cops."

Rex Trent braced wide-spread feet. "There's something fishy about you, Harkness, that I don't like," he said softly. "Your nose is too long." He took a deep breath. "Just what is Burt Oliver to you?"

Harkness opened the door, stood hulking in the entrance. "He doesn't know it, and you ain't going to tell," he said calmly. "Burt Oliver is my son; his mother and I were divorced a few months after he was born."

The door closed gently after him, and his footsteps went calmly down the hall steps. A door slammed; and then the house was silent.

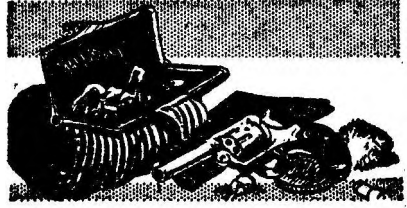
"Well, I'll be damned," Rex said stupidly, watched the closed door for long seconds.

HE SAT AT last, the bed creaking shrilly beneath his weight. He lit a cigaret, automatically, and his mind was a whirling of confused thought. But now, with Harkness' words still ringing in his memory, he began to find answers to questions that had vaguely troubled him for the two months he had known the man and boy, for the two weeks he had worked and eaten and played with them.

Father and son; big, laughing, blond Harkness and smaller, blonder, good-natured Burt Oliver.

He could remember now the similarity of features in the men, their many interests in common, and the ready laughter that each evoked from the other. That they were related was so foreign to ordinary thinking, the thought had not even appeared. And Harkness had not given a hint to the fact—a fact which apparently Oliver did not know.

Trent remembered incidents where the burly blond had stepped in to side



with Oliver, throwing the weight of his strength and personality to Oliver's side. But the action had been discounted as just another evidence of the character of the man, for he had been the arbitrator in many arguments and fights about the town.

Rex shook his head, crushed out his cigaret. No wonder Harkness had stuck his nose into the killing setup; with the life of his son at stake, there was nothing else he could do. The ex-Marine felt a surge of warm sympathy and liking for the crane operator.

It was growing late now, and the first greyness had come to the sky. He arose from the bed, retrieved his hat and coat, left the room, stopping at the hall telephone.

"One O two," he told the operator. "Hello, may I speak to Vince Canelli? . . . Oh, well, did he say when he'd be back? . . . Thanks, I'll see him later."

He pronged the receiver, scowled at the phone for a moment, then went down the steps to the outside. On the porch, he gazed blankly at the car he had rented for the afternoon, then went down the stairs to the walk. In the car, he started the motor, debated a second before driving toward the center of town.

Traffic was heavy with the changing shifts, and he circled several blocks before he found a parking place near the main police station. Locking the car, he went up the steps, stepped into the open doorway of the station and approached the desk.

"No visitors," the desk sergeant said briskly, nodded at a man seated nearby. "But you can talk to that fellow."

The silent man had already risen

from his seat. "You're Trent?" he asked, went on at the ex-Marine's wordless nod. "I'm Seaton, FBI, and I've a few questions I'd like to ask."

"Now?" Rex felt the tension of nerves, for he had seen these men work before.

Seaton shook his head. "Tomorrow morning." He glanced at a slip of paper he had drawn from his pocket. "You work morning shift, so drop in here a few minutes before you go on." He smiled wryly. "This is Federal business now, Trent; this is still a war plant, even with a phony peace. Don't do any talking."

"But what about—" Rex began.

"Tomorrow morning." The Federal agent was already moving away.

Rex frowned, watched the man disappear through a side door, then left the station. Outside, he walked slowly toward a small cafe, found an empty booth at the rear.

He gave his order, ate slowly when it was served. An hour passed before he laid the empty coffee cup aside, and reached for cigarets. Paying his bill, he retraced his steps to his car, kicked it into life and sent it whirling down a side street. Five minutes later, he stopped before Vince Canelli's small boarding house.

He had no plan of action; there were in him only a few questions which needed answering. For some unknown reason, his nerves were tight, the small of his back clammy. If Canelli were the killer, and Rex faced him with a flat accusation, then there would be hell to pay. Vince might chalk up his second kill within forty-eight hours.

Rex smiled wintrily, flexed heavy fingers. He'd take his chances. He'd fought Reds whose lust to kill was a hellish rage that never faded, men trained to slaughter. And he was here to talk, while they rotted in the land they had coveted.

He went up the walk, palmed open the unlocked door, then stopped at the first room on his right. The door was

slightly ajar, and he cautiously pushed it open. A table lamp sent a yellow glare about the small room, touching the unmade bed, limning the easy chair, reflecting from the mirror over the washstand. Curtains blew gently at the open window.

VINCE CANELLI turned from the closet, holding an armful of clothing, startled fear in his black eyes. Rex closed the door behind him and braced his back against it. His gaze was cold, and grim certainty filled his mind.

"Going somewhere, Vince?" he asked.

Canelli dumped the clothes into a large suitcase on the floor, stood facing the ex-Marine, breathing heavily, assurance slowly coming back into his olive features. "Just for a few days," he said sullenly. "My sister's sick, in Sacramento, and I'm going up to help."

"Kind of sudden, isn't it?"

Anger blazed in Canelli's eyes. "What the hell business is it of yours?" he snarled. "You're not my keeper!"

Rex smiled disarmingly. "I guess not," he admitted. "But the cops won't like your walking out."

"Why should they care? They gave me a clean bill."

The ex-Marine shifted away from the door, ready for instant action. Blood surged at his temples, and his hands curved slowly into fists.

"Maybe," he admitted. "But they don't know you were within twenty feet of Dude when he was killed."

"You know that!"

There was no fight in Vince Canelli now. He walked about the bed and sat on the arm of the easy chair, fumbling for a cigaret. Rex watched quietly, seeing the man's nerve break completely, knowing words would come at any moment.

The window shade snapped high in a burst of machine gun sound. Canelli whirled with a startled cry, and Trent went instinctively into a crouch. Both

straightened slowly, their breath sighing in the following stillness.

"The shade," Vince Canelli explained unnecessarily, stood, reached for the dangling cord.

He grunted, as he reached, gasped and leaned against the raised glass. "No!" he said clearly and distinctly, and turned about, took two staggering steps toward Rex, hands pawing at his belly.

Then his right hand had jerked the great knife free from where it had ripped into the soft flesh just below his breastbone, and a gout of pulsing crimson turned the blade and his hands a glaring red. He crumpled, even as he began to scream; and Trent, instinctively reaching out to aid the man, caught the knife as it fell, feeling the warmness of the life-blood on his hands.

Vince Canelli screamed once, and then he was dead, Rex standing over the slack body, knife still gripped in his hand.

He heard the startled cry in the hall, and the instant pounding on the door. Without thought, he dropped the knife, plunged blindly forward, caught the window sill, legged it to the ground five feet below.

He was running toward his car, sprinting with a desperate urgency, when he heard the screams echoing from the room he had just quitted; and he knew the landlady had discovered Canelli's body. A car motor slammed into gunning power down the street, and he caught the barest of glimpses of the driver. Sickness came to his heart, even as he opened the door of his car and crawled behind the wheel.

For the driver was Eileen Ferrigan.

And then new fear came to his heart; for only then did thinking take the place of instinctive movement.

He remembered now that which had happened, remembered the knife he had held and dropped, knew that his fingerprints were on the smooth handle. And then the final damning memory reached his consciousness, tight-

ened the crawling muscles of his flat belly.

For the murder knife was a Com-mando knife, the souvenir he had brought back from Korea, and it could be traced to him, for he had carved his name and rank into the handle.

He swore with the galling agony of a trapped animal, kicked the car into flight, whirling it about a corner, knowing that nowhere in the world was a place big enough to hide him, no story anywhere that would clear him of the charge of murder.

He had stepped blindly into a trap that nobody could escape. His number was up, a prison death house his destiny.

3



TRAFFIC light stopped him five blocks away, and for the first time he became conscious of the crusting blood on his hands. Shivering, he used his handkerchief to clean himself as best he could, missed a green signal, and then started only when a car behind blew a shrill angry horn.

He sent the car ahead again, driving more slowly now, wondering what was happening back at Vince Canelli's boarding house. Within minutes the police would be there, with their questions and cameras and experts to build a story of what had taken place. Within an hour or two, at the most, the prints on the knife would be checked, and he would be a hunted man.

He stopped the car, debating giving himself up. Then a dull anger began to replace his fear, and his lips grew thin and white. He had a lead, and he had a thought that he knew the murderer. He had seen Eileen Ferrigan running from the scene of the murder;

but even that might be explained. Right now, he had a better clue than that, a lead that led straight to one man.

Harkness.

He was beginning to see the pattern now, seeing it clearly for the first time. No wonder Harkness had been sucking around, trying to find out if Rex had seen anything. He and Vince Canelli had been working together, with him covering up for the Italian, who had done the actual murder. From his vantage point in the crane cab, Harkness had signalled Canelli when to throw the chunk of steel, waiting until the moment there were no witnesses to see Canelli lurking in the shadowed opening to the walk.

He had come to Rex, ostensibly worried over Burt Oliver, whom he claimed as a son, but in reality to find out if Rex had reasoned out the pattern of murder that lay in the scene. He, of course, was clean of the stain of murder, for he could not have thrown the length of murder steel from his crane's cab. It was his job to protect Canelli.

Then when the ex-Marine had admitted seeing Vince Canelli hidden in the shadows, he had realized that, should Canelli talk, both would end in the gas chamber. He had evidently threatened Canelli, told him to get out of town. But he, Trent, had walked in at the wrong time, had broken Canelli's nerve.

That, of course, had brought up but one answer to the situation.

With the Commando throwing knife he had stolen from Rex' room, Harkness had murdered his partner, thus clearing himself of any chance at being implicated in Dude Ferrigan's death, and placing a killer's mantle, finally and tightly, about Rex' shoulders.

Rex swore harshly, seeing the situation clearly. What Harkness' original motive had been, he was not certain. But that was unimportant at the moment; the fact was that Harkness was the murderer, and only his confession could clear Rex.



He started the car again, driving now toward his rooming house. With luck, he would beat the police there, could obtain his .45 service automatic. With that in his possession, he could face the blond Hercules, could force a confession, one way or another, perhaps with a trick or two that the Marine Corps had taught him so painstakingly.

He drove cautiously, taking a round-about route, approaching his rooming house from a shadowed street. Far to his left, the sky was red with the flames of the sprawling steel mill, and to his right the sparkle of the business section lights made splashes of red and yellow and blue in the night. Traffic was light, only an occasional car or bus pulling past in the gloom with a pedestrian strolling aimlessly beneath the grime-sooted trees that lined the walks.

He parked the car half a block from the rooming house and cautiously approached it, eyes alert for signs of any hidden watcher, ready for a swift dash to freedom should any lurker give away his position. The only sign of life was the regular glowing and fading of a cigaret held by some person on the front porch.

He went briskly up the walk, feeling instinctively that this was Seaton, the FBI agent; and the muscles of his shoulders knotted, for if the man were Seaton, it might mean an attempt at making an arrest.

"I've been waiting for you, Trent," a voice said.

And Harkness came easily to his feet, towering in the light from the window, his face hidden by the shadows.

REX TRENT went rigid, one foot on the bottom of the porch steps, eyes narrowed and watching, ready for any move the killer might make.

"Why?" he said coldly.

Harkness spread heavy hands. "I don't like to do it," he said, "but I want to borrow some money, all that you can spare." His tone grew strangely pleading. "I need it, Trent, believe me," he finished. "I've hired a lawyer for Burt; but I just can't finance the thing myself at this time. If you'll loan the dough, I'll give you my note."

Rex blinked, held in thrall by the absolute simplicity of the request. Then a grin etched about his mouth, and he saw the cunning behind the man. Okay, if he wanted it played this way, then that was the way it would be played.

"I haven't got much," he said. "Maybe I can rake up a couple of hundred."

"I'd appreciate it," Harkness said slowly.

Trent went up the steps, careful to stay out of the giant's reach, keyed open the door, led the way. He was playing cautiously now, taking no chances. Before going to his room, he knocked on the landlord's door.

"Any calls for me?" he asked the blinking half-dressed man who answered.

"Miss Ferrigan called, said she'd call again."

"Thanks!" Rex went up the stairs, knowing now that somebody had seen Harkness with him, and that the blond would take no unnecessary risks.

He unlocked his room door, flicked the light switch. "Come on in—" he began, stopped in mid-sentence, staring blankly at the nearby table.

On it, light winking from the wicked blade, was his Commando knife.

"Something wrong?" Harkness asked over his shoulder.

Rex shook his head, entered the room. "Nothing," he admitted, and suddenly nothing that had happened made sense.

And then panic came to his mind, swirling thoughts shouting for remembrance. Events had whipped by with such fluid speed in the past hour, he had had little time for reasoning, particularly with the false premise with which he had started. He knew now why he had recognized the knife which had slain Vince Canelli, knew now the person who had wielded it.

Eileen Ferrigan owned the duplicate of the knife lying so innocently atop his table. Months before, he had given her the knife for a souvenir, had seen it many times lying on her writing desk where she had used it for opening mail. Now it lay beside a stiffening body; and he was the only one who had seen her flee the scene of the murder.

He sank to the bed, unmindful of Harkness, who stood, staring puzzledly at the ex-Marine.

"What's wrong, Trent?" Harkness asked. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Rex glanced up, sickness in his heart, blankness in his churning mind. "Everything's all right," he said mechanically. "I'll write you a check."

Anger flickered momentarily in the giant's eyes. "Hell, if you don't want to loan the dough, say so! I just hocked everything I own to get the bail for Burt; I guess I can rake up the rest somewhere."

"Bail?" Rex said automatically. "I thought the charge was first or second degree murder?"

Harkness shrugged. "The lawyer I hired got it reduced to manslaughter, and they let Burt out on bail about an hour ago."

"Oliver's been out an hour?" Incred-

ulity sharpened Rex' voice, straightened his shoulders.

"Sure. I got a bondsman. Burt said he'd see me later, but that he had some checking to do."

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know. I left him, then came here and waited for you."

Rex' eyes were slitted and almost expressionless. "You didn't see Canelli?"

"No, I went out there, after we talked, but he had gone somewhere. I'll see him after I leave here." Harkness scowled. "Anyway, what the hell is it to you where I've been or who I've seen!"

Rex reached for the checkbook lying in the drawer of the night table, filled out a check. "I was just wondering," he said. "You were so hot, after I told you I saw Canelli, I thought you'd camp on his porch."

"I'll see him yet," Harkness said, accepted the check. "Thanks, Trent," he finished. "I'll see you get this back."

"Forget it; I can wait."

Harkness turned to the door; Trent watched him with expressionless eyes.

"Why don't you tell Burt he's your son?" Rex asked softly.

"Why?" Harkness paused. "Because his mother has filled him with a lot of lies about me. *I'll* tell him when I think the time is ripe." He opened the door. "I'll let you know what Canelli says," he finished, and was gone.

REX CAME easily to his feet, took the small suitcase from the closet shelf. Rummaging through it, he found his automatic and two clips of shells. He loaded the gun deftly, slipped it beneath his belt, hid it under his coat. Then he turned off the light, left the room.

The landlord stopped him at the foot of the stairs. "I forgot to tell you Miss Ferrigan said she'd meet you out at the mill, in the Doctor's office."

"Thanks!" He brushed past the man and went directly to his car.

There was a sick futility in him as he drove, and with it was a growing angry hate for the killer who struck so ruthlessly. Something was going on that he didn't understand, and he could not force his mind to accept the obvious facts.

Burt Oliver was loose now, out on bail. If he were the killer, then it was he who had knifed Canelli. He could have killed the Italian because the man might have testified as to what he had seen while standing in the shadows above the wrecking pit. Perhaps Oliver *had* deliberately murdered Dude Ferrigan, and Canelli's testimony would have convicted him.

But that premise did not take into account the bloody knife which had slain Canelli, for it had belonged to Eileen; and Rex had seen her fleeing from the scene of Canelli's murder, had seen no one else in the street.

There were so many angles and possibilities that they became entangled inextricably in Rex' mind. He could find no answer to anything; he knew only that he had to find a solution, for his life was forfeit should he fail.

His only lead now was the telephone call Eileen had made; he had to find her to obtain at least a few of the answers.

Night was solid black now, as he drove, the lights like earthbound stars gleaming at every corner. Ahead, smoke and flame lifted into the sky from the furnaces, like a preview of hell; and he sent the car ahead even faster, knowing that by now the police would be laying a dragnet for him that he could never escape.

He parked the car in the company lot, showed his badge and passed through the gates. He shivered unconsciously, for never had he been in the mill at night, and there was an eerie feeling of unreality about the scene.

He tried to hug the shadows, making himself inconspicuous. He entered Plant One, going up the ramps toward the Infirmary, eyes bright and alert.

He hesitated before the Infirmary door, hearing the stifled groan from within, feeling the knotting of his stomach, for so much had happened, he expected the unexpected.

He pushed open the swinging door, went through. Doctor Arnold glanced up from where he was adjusting a machine over the left eye of a sweating grime-marked steelman.

"Sit down," he said to Rex. "I'll be with you in a minute."

Rex sank to a straight-backed chair and lit a cigaret, sighing. He was incredibly tired, as though he had worked a full shift, and his hands shook slightly as he lit the cigaret.

Doctor Arnold finished adjusting the machine. "Easy now," he said. "Don't blink."

He flicked a switch shut; the worker gasped slightly; then the Doctor was bathing the man's injured eye, bandaging it. Finished, he rubbed his finger across the magnet and showed a scrap of steel smaller than a pinpoint.

"That caused the trouble," he said. "The eye will hurt for some time. Lay off for several days, and see your own doctor about treatment."

"Thanks, Doc," the man said, left the room.

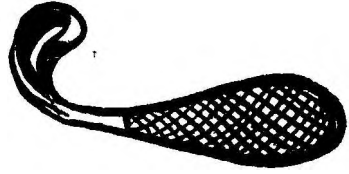
"Well, what's wrong with you?" Doctor Arnold asked, smiling.

Rex smiled automatically. "Nothing. I just wanted some information. I wondered if you had seen Eileen Ferrigan this evening?"

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, she was in a few minutes ago, asking questions about the murder of her brother. Oh—" Recognition came to his eyes, recognition and caution. "—you're the young man who saw the murder."

Rex nodded. "I saw Dude die," he said. "But Eileen said she'd meet me here, so I came by. Know where she went?"

The Doctor shook his head. "I haven't the faintest idea," he admitted. "She seemed worked up about something, asked questions I answered



when her brother was killed." He frowned. "Funny thing, I wonder why she didn't ask them the other day; she was in the mill when her brother died."

"In the mill? But her shift was—" Rex fell silent.

Doctor Arnold began gathering instruments. "She said something about the wrecking building when she left," he volunteered.

"Thanks!" Trent got to his feet. "If she comes back, ask her to wait, will you? I'll be back."

WITHOUT waiting for an answer, he pushed through the door, went down the hall. The Infirmary was almost deserted compared to the other building; and only when he passed through the Supplies department did he see any workmen. They gave him no heed, and he walked swiftly across the huge room, going toward the nearest tunnel-hall leading to the wrecking building.

The tunnel was dim, the lights fewer than in the rooms, barely bright enough to disclose the direction signs nailed to the walls. His footsteps echoing dimly, he hurried along, eagerness straining at his nerves now.

He saw the figure entering the tunnel ahead, coming from a cross-corridor, and quickened his steps. For one second he had believed it to be Eileen. He was so startled he did not cry out before she was gone.

He rounded the corner, saw the girl disappear at a second turn, hurried ahead. His breath was hot in his throat, and his pulse pounded at his temples. At the second turn, he stopped, seeing it was empty, swearing softly to himself. It was then he heard the slight

sound behind the door marked *Fuse Room*.

He twisted the knob, pushed open the door, "Eileen?" he called, heard the girl's faint startled cry.

Then blankness swirled into his brain, pulsing in a growing agony from the vicious blow that blasted from one side. He went to his knees, grunting against the pain of the second blow. His hands pushed against the rough cement, and red agony twisted along his spine.

Then a third blow caught him squarely in the temple, toppling him slackerly to one side, dropping him inertly to the floor. For one brief second he saw Eileen's white face close to his; then velvet blackness flooded his consciousness, and he knew no more.

4



HE WORLD was a great bronze bell dangling in inky space, and Rex Trent was the clapper, swinging from side to side, his head the tongue end that smashed great booming notes from the bell each time some monstrous being pulled the bell-rope.

He felt the ripping shuddering shocks of the blows, tensed against each swinging movement, trying to lift his hands to protect his face against the cold metal. Strangely, he could not move, and for the moment, sickening nausea held him in thrall, sending his mind reeling with sickness.

He opened his eyes, and the reality was the same as his nightmarish dream. He *was* in a bell; and even as he glanced about, the bell shuddered and rocked with a pounding blow, the notes no longer melodious, but harsh and terrible to his ears.

He tried to get to his feet, found that his arms and legs were hopelessly

bound; he tried to scream for help, and felt the constricting stickiness of tape over his mouth. Panic burgeoned in his heart, and his body bucked in convulsive instinctive terror, fighting the unknown, his panic a choking gag to his thinking.

He saw then that it was no bell in which he lay, but rather the battered steel of a gasoline drum. He had been wedged in, knees drawn up to his chest, and the metal flap of the tank smashed back until it pressed against his head, effectively concealing him from sight and holding him prisoner.

Memory came flooding back, bringing with it all of the shocked incredulity of those fleeting seconds when Eileen Ferrigan had clubbed him down in the fuse room; and he could feel the agony of her blows still rocking his head, the pain as nothing compared to the torture that lay in his heart because of her duplicity.

"Eileen!" he whispered, and there was no belief in him for anybody or anything.

By twisting his head, he could see through the ragged arc of cut metal at the drum top, squinting his eyes from pain, as he stared into the light outside his prison. And never in his life had he felt such blinding pulsing terror as raced through his body then.

"God, no!" he screamed, and the silent voice pounded against his head.

For this was death, hideous brutal death such as only a crazed mind could evolve. This was like something the fanatical Reds planned for their victims. This was a death that no man, no matter how brave, could face calmly.

For this was the wrecking pit, and each tolling of the bell he had heard was the great steel ball smashing into the pile of scrapped metal below, the thundering echoes a wild paean of destruction guided by the man in the giant electric crane.

His body bucked against the solid wall of his prison, and the steel drum rocked a bit, then settled in its nest of

broken steel and scrap iron, waiting inanimately for the huge ball of destruction to fall and crush it unrecognizably.

Rex tried to scream, tried to cry a warning to the man operating the crane, almost cried in relief when he saw the operator stop the action of the crane and step from the swinging cab. Then terror came flooding back, pounding at his temples in a black wave of horror, when he saw Harkness wave a smiling greeting and take the place of the other operator in the cab.

The crane began to move, lifting the brutal steel ball high over the pile of scrap metal.

The marble of death battered down.

The screech of tortured shearing iron and steel was a banshee wail of destruction for a moment. Metal shifted from the blow, and Rex' prison rocked slightly. But the steel ball had fallen fifty feet away, dropped with unerring skill by the giant in the crane cab.

Rex was almost strangled by his cramped twisting of his neck, but he had not the will to turn his head from the death that was coming. He saw the huge cable magnet drop smoothly, touch and cling to the steel ball, saw the scraps of metal flotsam bounce upward, cling like iron filings to the ball and the magnet, making the outlines distorted and quilled. Then the ball was lifting again, and the crane moved a few degrees, ready for another battering attack on the scrap below.

A movement upon the pit's edge, behind the crane, caught Rex' fear-strained gaze. For one fleeting moment, he saw the slender figure of a man duck into sight, saw the tense white blur of his face. He recognized the man.

Burt Oliver!

Then Oliver was gone, sliding behind a heavy pillar.

THE JARRING shrieking thud of the monstrous steel ball hammering at the metal in the pit came again, but

Trent gave it no heed. He knew now that he had but fleeting seconds in which to escape his prison, fleeting eternities in which to escape the crushing death that the murderer had planned for him.

And even as he fought, he felt a fleeting sympathy for Harkness, for he knew the man did not know that he lay but a few feet from the metal ball, did not know that Burt Oliver crouched out of sight on the pit's edge.

Then he had no time for idle thinking.

He fought the ropes that held his hands behind his back, slashed his wrists on the blades of inward bent steel where the gasoline drum had been ripped. Instinctively, he slashed at the razor-sharp metal, raking the strands of rope with short two-inch strokes, feeling perspiration soaking his shirt, swearing silently at the stabs of pain rocketing through his cramped body from his bruised head.

He heard each grinding shock of the steel ball lifting and dropping, winced, as another load of scrap came hurtling down from the wrecking ramps, cringed as chunks of iron hammered at his coffin. Each second was an age closer to eternity, and he fought with a frenzied application of every bit of strength and cunning he could summon.

The ropes broke, and he squirmed until his hands and arms were at his sides. He could not move his legs or lower body, so tightly had he been jammed in the steel cask; and sheer torture cramped the knotted muscles of his belly, as he forced his hands up over his head, until bloody fingers thrust through the narrow crack of the breached drumhead.

He locked the fingers of his right hand on the barrel edge, turned his left hand and pressed with growing strength against the bent-down head. Agony surged through his body, and for a moment he thought that he had not the strength to bend the steel.

Muscles rode high on his neck, and

he surged with all of the lithe strength in his shoulders, surging power into his arms, fighting against the cold implacable force of the steel.

Metal screeched, and the ruptured metal began to bend. He pressed with waning strength, drove the circle of steel higher and higher, until at last there was room for escape. Catching the edges of the opening, he drew his body from the gasoline drum, as a crab draws itself from its shell, rolled and fell in a twisting huddle onto the frame of a jeep, squirmed from that, and fell headlong in an avalanche of scrap, stopping only when his back struck the scarred pit wall.

Blood soaked his clothing where metal had ripped and torn, but he felt no pain. He pulled the tape from his mouth, breathed in great sucking gasps, the flood of air like cool water to his parched lungs.

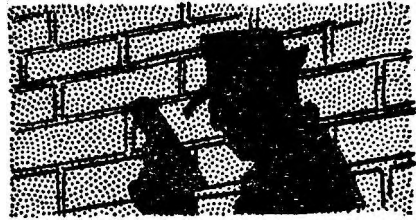
He still lay in a twisted knot, unable to move his body for the moment, returning circulation driving through him like a gouging flame. He winced, seeing the huge steel ball hammer down fifteen feet away, caught a glimpse of Harkness' horrified face. The huge magnet bobbed erratically near the steel ball for a moment, and shards of steel leaped skyward, then fell back, as the giant cut the electricity.

Then Harkness had leaped from his cab, was scrambling about the metal debris, was bending over the ex-Marine.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Harkness barked, then saw the ropes still about Rex' ankles. "For God's sake," he finished, "what's happening?"

He bent and broke the ropes with a twist of his massive wrists, helped Rex to his feet and steadied him.

"Somebody had me marked for a one way ticket," Rex said, sickened at the sheer horror of the death he had just missed. "I followed Eileen in the mill, got smacked on the head. When I woke



up, I was tucked into that gasoline drum."

"Eileen?" Harkness' face was still white with shock. "But she told me you'd left the mill. I saw her just before I came to work."

Rex stopped his shaking, leaned against the pit wall, still breathing heavily. There was a sickness in him that came from something deeper than the agony which had just been his.

"She lied," he said softly. "*She lied.*"

And as though the words were a signal, a man stepped onto the pit's walk, a gun bright in his hand. His voice came clearly, brutally, through the clamor of the wrecking mill. "Don't move," he ordered. "Don't move, or I shoot."

"It's Seaton," Harkness said unnecessarily, and Rex knew that this was the end of the nightmare of the past few days.

Seaton came lithely down the narrow steps, jumping the last few feet; and directly behind him came a plant guard with Burt Oliver, Doctor Arnold following, still dressed in his white smock.

The FBI agent came about the heaped metal, and a pair of handcuffs swung in his free hand.

"This is an arrest, Trent," he said brittlely. "For the murder of Vince Canelli, and suspicion of complicity in the slaying of Dude Ferrigan."

Harkness was gigantic beside the slighter men, and his tone was harsh and commanding. "Don't be a fool, Seaton; this boy is no killer. Only luck kept him from being crushed to death a few minutes ago."

For the first time, Seaton seemed to notice the blood and marks of Rex'

flight with brutal steel. His gaze swung over the ex-Marine, went to Harkness, came back to Rex. "You're still under arrest," he said quietly, made no move to use the manacles. "What's going on?" he finished.

DOCTOR ARNOLD, Oliver and the guard clambered over the scraps of metal, joined the group. They heard the agent's last question, watched Rex with inquiring eyes.

Rex braced his shoulders against the wall, feeling the trapped desperateness of an animal. He saw no sympathy in Seaton's eyes, saw belligerent curiosity in all the faces but Harkness'.

"I didn't kill Vince," he said harshly. "I was there, but somebody stabbed him when he reached up to lower a shade at the open window."

Seaton smiled then, and there was no humor in his eyes. "And I suppose the knife wasn't yours, and that the fingerprints got there when you picked it up accidentally?"

Rex talked then, talking as he had never done in his life, telling of the suspicions and counter-suspicions that had motivated his every action. He detailed his movements, feeling futility filling his heart, when he saw the skepticism in every face. He appealed to Harkness, and the blond verified points of his story; but even then he could see that he was convincing no one. He finished telling of his escape from the gasoline drum, and instinctively knew that he had failed in all he had said. Even in his desperation, he could see the flimsiness of everything he said, and knew what his reactions would have been had he heard the story from some other.

Seaton shifted from foot to foot. "Then you claim Eileen Ferrigan murdered her brother, killed Vince Canelli, and tried to murder you?" he asked.

"I don't know," Rex said wearily. "It's damned funny that Vince got it just a few minutes after Burt was released from jail."

"Damn you!" Burt Oliver cried, leaped forward.

Seaton barely seemed to move, but the youth went whirling backward toward the guard.

"Hold him," Seaton snapped, kept his eyes on Rex. "You say you gave the knife to Miss Ferrigan weeks ago, and that she slugged you just a few minutes after you left the Doctor's office?"

"That's right. Find her, and maybe you'll get answers I can't give you," Rex said.

"She's gone; she packed a bag and left. I've put out a nine state alarm to have her picked up," came Seaton's reply.

"He's lying, covering up for himself," Burt Oliver said savagely. "He threw the piece of steel at Dude, knifed Vince, then stuck himself in that gasoline drum—and just *managed* to make a spectacular escape before Harkness *accidentally* killed him."

"The hell I did!" Crimson rage whipped into Rex so fast it shocked even him. "You talk a hell of a lot for a guy with a charge against him. That steel blade that killed Dude didn't get on that walk by accident; chunks of metal don't flip that high from the pit. If you didn't have it with you, then Vince did. You were working together, with the fight a phony, staged for Harkness' and my benefit. If there—"

Harkness' hand whipped the ex-Marine about. "Lay off the kid," he said slowly, dangerously.

"To hell with you; my neck is in this. I don't give a damn if he is your son; he takes his chances like everybody else," Rex snapped.

He tore his shoulder free, faced the blond giant.

"What goes on?" Seaton said, and his tone was so mild it was a shock. "Is Oliver your son?" he finished to Harkness.

Harkness flushed. "I wasn't going to tell yet," he defended himself. "Any-

way, the kid didn't do it; I would have seen him."

"You couldn't have," Rex said. "That damned wrecking crane was swinging in front of the fight most of the time."

He gasped then, seeing the incredible answer to everything; and even as the thoughts raced through his mind, he saw the glow building in the murderer's eyes.

"You're the killer," he said incredulously. "You're the murderer, Harkness, and I can prove it."

THERE WAS absolutely no sound; the six men were caught in a cocoon of nothingness, held in thrall by the accusation. About them, thousands of men worked in a cacaphony of noise; but not a decibel of it seemed to penetrate into the wrecking pit.

Then Harkness laughed, and the merriment broke the spell. Once again reality closed about the scene, and the noise of the mill was a solid background that had depth and fury and color.

"You can't pin a thing on me," he said at last. "I don't give a damn if you are desperate." He appealed to Seaton. "Take a look. I was in that cab, in the pit, and Dude was knifed on that pit-walk. I couldn't have thrown anything that far, much less murdered a man."

Rex straightened. "You didn't throw it, Harkness," he said, and felt his legs tremble with tension. "You used 'Bouncing Betty' to do the job for you."

Perspiration made oily drops on Harkness' face, and suddenly, as thought it had never been, there was nothing genial and friendly in the man. He didn't move, but he seemed to grow, and his eyes were sheened with a brightness colder than ice.

Seaton moved a single step, his gun centered between the ex-Marine and the crane operator. He was like a grey blade of steel now, and Rex knew that

he would flow into action at any overt move.

"Play your hand, Trent," Seaton said smoothly. "There are things about this series of affairs that don't make sense."

"He's lying," Harkness said throatily. "He's talking for time."

Rex shook his head. "I'm talking for more than that, Harkness; I'm talking to save my neck."

"Well, talk, damn you!" Burt Oliver almost screamed the words. "I know he's my father; I've known that ever since I sent that picnic picture of us home to my mother. If he framed me for killing Dude, then to hell with him. I owe him something for what he did to my mother, anyway!"

"Listen, kid—" Harkness began.

"You listen," Rex snapped. He pointed at the wall behind the pit-walk, indicating the small round mouths of the waste pipes black against the surface. "Those pipes are part of the set-up," he said, "and I'll give you the rest."

"Harkness wanted Dude dead, why, I don't know; so he set a trap. He laid a light, razor-sharp strip of steel in one of those waste pipes, and waited for his opportunity. His chance came the day after Canelli fought with Dude over some girl, the same day that Dude and I tangled. It was just luck that Burt and Dude had that fight at that coincidental time, for Dude was destined to die the moment he got in position on that walk."

"It's a dirty lie!" Harkness said, and his tone was so low it made him more dangerous than if he had shouted his denial.

"Shut up," Seaton said.

"Now here's the story, as I see it," Rex said, and confidence oozed back into his heart. "That electric crane Harkness handles generates a terrific magnetic field; it must to lift the tons of steel marble. That field extends for several feet, enough to whip that strip of steel from the waste pipe in a blur

of speed, enough speed to drive it almost full length into a man's back.

"When Burt and Dude fought, Harkness *accidentally* let the magnet swing almost to the walk's edge, cut in the electricity, and the strip of steel leaped toward the magnet. As planned, Dude got in the way and was killed—and Harkness, cutting off the magnet, swinging the crane back into position, had committed what might have been a perfect murder."

"You stinking rat!" Burt Oliver said dispassionately, coldly.

Rex continued. "Harkness came to me, thinking I might have seen something. He probably would have killed me had I suspected him. But I told him Canelli had been hiding in the shadows. That meant Canelli, if he had seen the actual murder, had to die. Vince *had seen* the murder, but had been afraid to talk. I found him packing, ready to leave town. He started to break. It was then Harkness reached through the open window, sent the shade up, then knifed Canelli."

Harkness swallowed. "You're nuts!" he whispered.

Rex shook his head. "I'm just guessing now about this. I saw Eileen running away after the killing. I think she had seen Harkness leaving her house, where he had stolen the knife, had followed him, heard the sounds of the murder, then raced away, frightened. I think Harkness saw her."

He paused, feeling the cold sweat on his back, feeling the tension in the air, seeing the craggy hat of Harkness' features. Then he went on, in a rush of words, wanting to finish his story.

"Harkness came to me to establish his alibi. Apparently leaving, he must have hung about and heard the phone message Eileen had left for me, and then followed me to the mill. He was sitting pretty in some ways, what with Oliver being loose while Canelli was killed; but his murder plan had gone so far awry he had to remove Eileen, too,

for she could identify him as Canelli's killer.

"Anyway, he followed me to the mill and found Eileen about the same time I did. He pulled her into the fuse room, made a noise, then slugged me. His plan was to put me into the pit, discover me accidentally—and save my life, thus putting himself forever in the clear."

REX TOOK a step toward the blond giant. "You balked at killing me, too, what with two murders already on your hands. But you had to kill Eileen for she knew too much. *Where is she?*"

Seaton leaned forward, and the handcuffs snapped on Harkness' right wrist. "There are a few details missing, Harkness," he said, "but the story holds water. You're under arrest until I do a bit of checking."

Harkness' breath was a slight sob, and his eyes were riveted on the cuffed wrist. He shivered—and moved.

He caught Seaton before the man could draw back, snatched the gun, backed slowly.

"I'll give you the details," he said thinly. "There's no need to check."

His voice was calm now, without emotion, and he smiled as he always had, and the smile was a death threat that none could challenge.

"Trent had most of it right; he just missed a few things," he said. "I killed Dude with the magnet because the man was going to get me fired. Me, who knows more about this mill than he'd ever know. Oh, I had better reasons than that; in fact, I would have got his job. But I made a mistake; I got soft-headed about Burt. I thought they'd send him up, so I figured to pin the thing on Trent. Then I found out that Canelli had seen Dude's murder, so I had to shut his mouth.

"I stole the knife Trent had given the girl; I'd seen it in her house when I was with Dude. I killed Canelli, framing Trent like a picture. And then

found Eileen had seen me at Canelli's. I went to Trent's place and planted an alibi about not seeing Canelli. There I heard the phone message from Eileen. Her number was up then. I went to her house, packed some of her clothes to make it appear she'd taken a runout powder, then came to the mill. Everything followed like Trent said, except I wasn't going to let him live, either. I figured the cops would think they'd run out together."

"Where is Eileen?" Rex asked, and took a sliding step forward.

Harkness edged away, ready for any move. His features were flushed now, and his breath was rasping in his throat. "Back there," he jerked his head, "in another drum." His voice was so low the words were barely audible. "I don't hate you, Trent," he finished, "but I don't like you, either."

He shot Rex in the chest.

Rex grunted, went hurtling to one side, felt paralysis cramping his chest and left arm. There was no pain, not yet, and even as he fell, he felt a vague wonder that he could have so misjudged the man.

Then Seaton was driving at Harkness, and the big man was hammering him to the ground with two chopping blows of the automatic.

Burt Oliver took a fast step forward, flanked by the guard and Doctor Arnold, then halted, watching the menacing gun as a hypnotized bird watches a snake.

"You're a stinking little swine," Harkness said coldly to Oliver. "I should have let you get the chair. You're only my son by marriage, anyway."

"She told me that in her letter," Oliver said, took a sidling step forward.

Rex heard the words, fought against the blackness that crowded his senses. Shock was biting at him now, and he knew that he could never fight the giant facing the group with the deadly gun. He sagged on hands and knees, watching crimson stain his shirt.

"I'm getting out of here," Harkness said coldly. "I don't want to kill any more, but try to stop me, and I shall." He backed toward the wall steps.

"You'll never make it," Burt Oliver said, and suddenly there was no resemblance between him and the towering killer, their only likeness lay in their blondness and their comparative features. In character they were totally dissimilar.

Rex was hidden from Harkness' sight now by the heap of metal rubbish. He began to crawl, like a wounded animal, going about the pit, away from the killer. Agony bit at his body, and his senses reeled, but he fought doggedly on, hearing nothing of what went on behind, the words swallowed by the clamor in the mill which had drowned out the entire scene from the workers in the building.

He edged past a stripped truck, came to the crane, pulled himself by one hand on the wheel until he was erect, then clambered in sick agony into the cab. Vertigo made him clutch for support; and an eternity seemed to pass before he could move.

At last he could see and move again; and he turned to the controls, blinking when he saw the tableau had changed but little since he had begun his crawl. Harkness still backed slowly, the three men matching him step by step, while further back, Seaton was just sitting groggily.

Then Oliver hurtled forward, and Harkness blasted him to the ground with two quick shots. Whirling, he darted at the wall, swarmed up the steps.

Trent moved then, his right hand reaching instinctively, forcing his left hand to move against the wracking pain of his shattered chest. The crane roared into action, swinging the giant magnet in a great arc about the pit, almost scraping the wall. It flashed toward Harkness, who screamed in deadly fear, threw up his arms in futile protection.

Trent cut in the switch at the last moment.

Power surged high—and like a vacuum cleaner, the magnet snatched at the gun and handcuff on Harkness' hand, flipped him from the steps, dangled him twenty feet in the air, held by the cuff.

He fought the power of the magnet, battering with his free hand, his voice rising in a frenzied shriek. But no human alive could have broken the power of the magnetic field that clamped him to the magnet.

Rex grinned, felt blackness sweeping in. He saw the flailing kicking body of the killer swinging by one arm, and there was something funny about the entire scene. He was still chuckling when he fell into the bony tunnel, and he didn't feel the gentle hands that seconds later lifted him from the cab.

IT WAS AN hour later, in the Infirmary, that Rex held Eileen's hand, while the Doctor finished his bloody task of retrieving bullets from Burt Oliver. He felt pain in his chest, but he had felt that before, and he knew that he would live.

"It was the Doctor who furnished

me the final clue," he cleared up the last points for Seaton. "I just remembered his electrical gadget that pulled metal splinters from eyes or flesh here in the Infirmary, and the whole thing became clear. I muffed some points, but you'll get them from Harkness."

Seaton nodded, then shivered. "He was a cold-blooded devil," he said. "He obviously planned for you and Miss Ferrigan to go to the furnaces with the broken scrap, and—"

He broke off, seeing the whiteness of Eileen's face, then came to his feet. "We'll talk later," he said, went from the room.

Eileen's fingers were tight on Rex', and the fear was still a shadow across her eyes. He pressed her hand, smiled.

"We'll go away for a while," he said. "We'll go away until things are better."

Burt Oliver's drowsy voice drifted from the side of the room where the Doctor worked. "Thanks, Rex," he said. "Sorry that—"

But Rex Trent, lately of the Marine Corps, was not listening to words; he was hearing only the answer that lay in Eileen's eyes and in his singing heart.



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BIG-HOUSE COUNTERPLOT

NOVELET OF
DEADLY SECRETS

by Norman Ober

It was a desperate chance that they had to take. The spy had successfully evaded letting out his secret to anyone, and he was to be burned soon for simple murder. Only one man could possibly get that secret from him

in time...



comes," he said.

BI DISTRICT Chief Howard Chance licked his lips nervously and muttered to the man with the badge, "Jury's in." Three minutes, they were out!

The other man whistled. "Here it

Word seeped out of the courtroom to Courthouse Square, filled with silent, sullen people. A patient impatience was stamped on the faces of the people. If the decision should go the wrong way, they'd become a raging mob! There were bulges in strange places in clothing. The day was cloudless, but many carried stout umbrellas; many idled near large stones and none dared to ask where the debris had come from so suddenly.

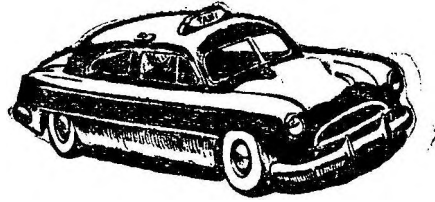
Within the crowded courtroom, the jury-foreman faced the prisoner. The man on trial stood tall and forboding but contained, his face as emotionless as it had been during the entire bitter trial procedure. If there was any expression on his face, it was one of resignation.

The foreman's face was a patchwork of emotions. A vein bulged dangerously in his neck. His eyes mirrored a savage satisfaction and foreshadowed the verdict. The foreman's expression was matched, even surpassed by the other eleven faces in the jury box. In fact, a study of the entire courtroom; judge, legal staffs, audience, failed to reveal any contained emotions, save those masked behind the stolid stoicism of Roger Turrell's pale features.

The clerk asked the question and the foreman could hardly wait for the legal language to ebb before spitting out the harsh words, "Guilty! Guilty as hell! No mercy for—"

The judge's gavel cut off the editorializing. More than that, a spontaneous roar of approval, tongued with figurative flame by all those who heard the words, drowned out the juror's angry tirade. In a flash, the verdict reached the outsiders and the roar was re-echoed a hundred times louder and more furiously than within the courtroom.

Roger Turrell's expression didn't change. Nor did it as the judge, a man of serene countenance turned stonily



severe, pronounced the sentence of death. There was an uneasy moment for the deputies when it appeared that even the death-sentence wouldn't appease the lingering mob. Turrell came close to cheating the electric chair when a near-corner of the mob bit into the wedge that hustled him to an armored car. At last, however, the car broke through the swelling human avalanche and the prisoner was on his way.

Fists shook in the wake of the departing car. A voice quavered, "Oughta leave 'im to us, the dirty murderer! Anyone who'd kill the way he did..."

Another chimed in, "Killing the blind for what they'd begged! The electric chair's too good for 'im!"

The car carrying the prisoner and his warders picked up speed. Roger Turrell was flanked on either side by deputies, manacled to both. A third man rode beside the driver. Tension rode with them until the last remnants of the mob had fallen behind. Then a strange thing happened.

THE MAN in front, next to the driver, turned around and heaved a sigh of relief. "Okay, boys; get those irons off him."

No questions were asked. The manacles came away. Roger Turrell sighed slowly, rubbed his wrists where the handcuffs had roughed them up. The tension in the car disappeared. Turrell finally said to the man in front, "Well, Chief, the stage is set!"

Howard Chance, FBI District Chief, nodded. "Yes, you're on your way to the death-house, where even the inmates slated to go before you will hate

your guts. It's a good beginning; I only pray we're not making any mistakes, Rog."

Turrell shrugged. He accepted a cigarette from the agent at his left. "Too late to back out now," he commented. "The fake killings, the trial. Boy, for a while I thought the mob would never let us get away."

Turrell's Chief was lost in thought. "The stakes were worth the risk," he mused. Coming back to earth, he added, "The Bureau was lucky to get a volunteer for a job like this."

Turrell thought of the part of the drama that still lay ahead. "With my carnival background, I was really the only man for the job; if I botch it up, it'll be my own hide and my own fault, too."

Howard Chance smiled. "You won't botch it, Rog. I'd like to think the worst is behind us, but—"

Turrell grinned. "With the death-house still ahead—and Jock MacMahan?" His implication was clear. The trial had been child's play alongside of what lay ahead.

The G-Chief grew serious. "Let's go over the details once more. Take it slow, and everybody listen; if there's a flaw, one of us might catch it."

The others tensed up to listen hard. Turrell took a moment to set his thoughts in order and began speaking. The death-house decoy murmured softly, "The only man in the whole barred bide-a-wee who's in on this is the Warden himself. Everybody else; the guards, the prisoners—especially Jock MacMahan in the death-house—will be expecting Roger Turrell, the killer of the blind."

Howard Chance muttered, "Right."

Turrell went on, "I'll be moved into the death-block, Cell Four, directly opposite Jock. It's vacant. The third day, after Cell Three is vacated—that would be Charlie Devany, wife-killer—I'll be switched to Three, right along-

side Jock in Two. That'll give him a chance to size me up from the distance before I go to work."

The G-Man's chief consulted written notes. "The figures are all correct." He handed back a diagram. "Here, study the plan of the death-block again. Make sure every detail checks in your mind. Up to a point, you'll have help; after that, it'll be up to you."

Turrell studied the plan Howard Chance gave him. He'd seen it before. There'd been plenty of time during the trial. The car was silent for some minutes before Roger Turrell handed the diagram back. "It's been burned in," he commented. Then he added, "Remember, I have a personal interest in this case. It'll help me remember... everything."

The G-Man boss-man, Howard Chance, studied Turrell for several moments. "That personal interest," he put in, "can be like a shield for you when you need it... or it can block your vision like blinders. Never let your personal reasons for joining with the government against Jock MacMahan rule your judgement; it could be fatal!"

"I'll try to remember," Turrell replied, but his fists were clenching and unclenching. He was remembering something else, out of the past. Howard Chance saw the gesture and frowned, but he said nothing. In a government case like this one, steeped in complexities and seeming impossibilities, a calculated risk had to be taken. Roger Turrell, tall, handsome carnival man turned G-Man, was that calculated risk. The stakes, Chance reflected, justified the procedure many times over.

Silence fell in the car. Not until the shadow of the penitentiary loomed up ahead did Howard Chance speak again. He murmured, "There it is. Turrell, it's your ball now; we'll succeed or fail according to how you car-

ry it. I can't tell you how vital your success is to the government!"

Roger Turrell looked out the window. He felt the handcuffs closing around his wrists. The institution looked formidable to him. He couldn't help swallowing a gulp that came out of the tension locked within him. Turrell answered, "I'll do the best I can, Mr. Chance."

THE FOOTSTEPS of the guards pat-padded away. There was an echo of foot-scuffing; the sound of a metal door opening; more scuffing, then a slam that faded into deep silence. For a long moment, the death-block was silent. Dark eyes burned from between death cell bars, bored scrutiny in the direction of the newcomer, in Cell Four.

The silence broke when a grating rasp filtered out of Cell Three. Charlie Devany, wife-killer, on the prison schedule as next patron of the chair, spoke his mind. Subtlety was not a requirement for admission to hell. He said, "They don't care what riff-raff they let in this joint! A respectable wife-killer—and she was the ripest cheat for killing a man ever married—forced to keep company with a lousy killer of the innocent blind." The sound that followed his words was the unmistakable issue of spittle and its collision with stone floor.

From Cell One of the quartet of heavily barred rooms came the deep intonation, "But Devany, you escape the vile contact on the morrow! I, Randolph Arlen, a misunderstood victim of those same inflaming passions that made my acting so great, must stay on for days and abide the crushing contact. Fah! You—Turrell, I believe your name is—a thousand times shame! Cold killer of the sightless! It does me dishonor that you die in the same seat as I. For such as you, a special death! First, I would blind you... then rob you... of your life!"

Turrell waited for a comment from Cell Two. But Jock MacMahan, who couldn't have helped hearing what the others had said, offered no observation of his own. Cell Four was mute, too. Turrell decided to make no reply; he had enough to occupy his thoughts as Devany, the wife-killer, and Arlen, the barely-sane actor, vented their tensions in his direction in the form of vituperative language.

For Roger Turrell, the past six weeks had been hectic beyond belief. It had been he who approached the G-Men when MacMahan, the world's most dangerous secret still locked within him, appeared certain to carry that secret to his death. Roger Turrell had been motivated by two things. One was a desire to be of service to his country and two—well, that part of it was better forgotten. Whenever Turrell thought of that, a raw, ripping pain crept up from his heart. As the G-Man District Chief had put it, to let his personal feelings take possession of him might prove fatal.

Turrell reflected inwardly, *Enough have died already*. Quickly, he dismissed that from his mind, too. To dwell on that even a moment might be to abandon all hope of proceeding against Jock MacMahan with the cold, objective reasoning that would have to be his.

Randolph Arlen, the actor, contented himself with a few more archaic phrases of condemnation and then fell silent. But Devany, the wife-killer, seemed unable to stop. He railed furiously at the newcomer; words kept bubbling from his lips interminably; ill-suppressed hysteria in the form of bitter complaint against Turrell's character flowed fast and furious from Cell Three. "She deserved to die, she cheated! She sucked the love out of me like a vampire and when she found her appetite greater than the feast before her, she looked for more food! She was mine and others had

her! I loved her more than life, but she deserved to die; she cheated. Those you killed...what had they done? Poor souls living without sight and you had to come snuff out what little they had."

Randolph Arlen took advantage of a lull in Devany's invective to observe mournfully, "Reminds me of a wench I knew in the theatre...when the young blood in me was higher than now, I can tell you. Egad, but that woman was starved for love! The actors; the stagehands; a passing usher—on desperate days she'd wheedle 'em out of the audience. I give you my word, men, there was no bottom to that well." He sighed as the reflection bathed him in momentary warmth. "Wound up wed to a wrestler, a great buck of a man who appeared to have in his musclebound brain the combination to her—uh—intricate demanding nature."

The talk was such as men exchanged under many kinds of circumstances. It was as natural as human nature itself. To each of the four men, talk of women undoubtedly recalled memories, near and distant. To Roger Turrell, the actor's mournful phrases awoke only more pain—the vision of a lovely girl whose name came futilely to his lips, escaped with a half sob of remembering. Vainly, Turrell tried to erase his recollections of Ann. Only when he remembered the part in the drama played by the man in the opposite cell was the G-Man recruit able to harness his emotions and force himself to a stoic, stony calm.

NIGHT FELL and heightened the gloom of the death-block. Devany's complaining lost its focus, and gradually even its coherence. He forgot about Turrell, the killer of the blind, and began cursing dim shadows in his mind—a father who had beaten him; someone who had wronged him in business; a girl who had refused his

advances. Gradually, as the hours wore on, Devany's talk turned to sobbing. Turrell knew no sleep that night—only Devany's wailings, which continued until dawn.

Daylight of Devany's last day seemed to exercise a calming effect. As soon as it became light, Devany quieted down. Then he became almost friendly. "What makes a guy rob and kill the blind, anyhow?" he asked in a voice made hoarse by his all-night session of sobbing.

Turrell spoke for the first time. His voice was low, cold, thoughtful. "Take this with you to hell, Devany. We're all of us mostly alike in these four cells; we've done murder. The reasons might have been different but God-fearing men don't kill at all. I killed a man once—for money. He had eyes and fought back; after that—well, those blind ones never fought back."

Randolph Arlen admitted, "There's truth in what you say, Turrell. Your lust for money; Devany's lust for his wife's fidelity; my lust for glory—did you know that I murdered my agent for no greater a provocation than his telling me I was washed up? Simply went wild!"

Turrell asked the naive question. "Is there anyone else here? Is Cell Two empty?"

Arlen snorted. The actor intoned, "Full house, lad. Now there's a case: the quiet type. Small wonder you thought the cell vacant. Jock MacMahan's the occupant's name. We hear only whispers about that one, but I'll wager it's a lust for something that's landed him in our select circle."

Devany complained, "They've postponed him twice. Who do you know, you in Cell Two?"

There was silence from Jock MacMahan. Randolph Arlen explained, "He hasn't spoken yet. I have a feeling he'll be there when all of us have tried out the institution's current."

The grim humor of the actor accomplished something no words before had done. A chuckle came from Cell Two. Hearing it, Roger Turrell caught his breath. That chuckle broke a silence that had begun with Jock MacMahan's trial for murder. Arlen warmed to his subject. "I wonder if the sensation differs as between alternating and direct current. Must be a totally different kind of send-off in each type. I must ask the padre which kind our sordid hostelry employs. They might ask...where we're...uh...going."

Devany screamed hoarsely, "Shut up with that talk, you crazy ham! Shut up! I can't stand it!"

Offended, Randolph Arlen subsided. But Cell Two exploded with hearty laughter. Jock MacMahan, a man feared by entire western world for what he knew, a man facing death but possessed a rich sense of humor; that was clear. He broke his silence with peals of laughter that lasted several minutes.

Turrell, standing at the small barred section of his metal door, as he had as much as possible to give the man in the opposite cell ample opportunity to see him, listened to the laughter and took heart. Gripping two of the bars in his door, he gave vent to an explosive roar, like a caged animal. Copying Devany, Turrell bawled, "Shut up that laughing! I'm ready to die if I have to—but I don't think it's funny!"

As he spoke, Turrell's big hands gripped the bars in evident fury. He strained at them in what appeared a futile gesture. But to his own apparent astonishment, the bars started to yield. Under the former carnival-performer's powerhouse grip, the bars began to bend.

From across the block, a voice hissed, low and sharp, "Stop that, you fool! Not now!"

Roger Turrell heard Jock MacMahan's words. He suddenly ceased his

activity. Looking furtively at the other cell opposite, and noting that Devany had seen nothing, he quickly strained the bars back until the bend had straightened out.

Jock MacMahan murmured, "That's better; save it!"

Turrell managed a mumbled reply. "Yeah, yeah. Save it."

That was all. The man in Cell Two moved out of vision and Turrell, following up his actions as intelligently as possible, accepted the fact that the laughter, to which he had objected, had ceased. "All right," he grunted for form, "just cut out that laughing."

Turrell's heart was pounding out a message of wild hope. Jock MacMahan, the renegade physicist, the killer, the man feared by those who had the power to kill him—the man who had murdered Ann in cold blood when cornered and seeking to escape—the man who had retreated behind the most powerful wall in the world, a wall of silence, when his words were vital to the nation's security. Jock MacMahan, with aims and connections one could guess with shudders—had *spoken!*

Chapter Two



HEY CAME for Devany shortly before midnight. The wife-killer had been almost hysterically gay when they brought his last meal. "I'm going to join her in hell. We'll start fresh," he promised himself.

"In a place like hell, it won't matter if she cheats." He ate his meal with good appetite. He was all conversation and the others, MacMahan excepted, did what they could to cheer him.

Shortly before they came, Devany

confided, "I don't want her to cheat. I'll make things different for her this time; she won't want anyone else." The thought struck him suddenly. "She's been there a while! I'll find her with someone else for sure!"

After an appalling silence, he moaned. "I don't want to die. She's there and I'm here; it'll start all over again after..."

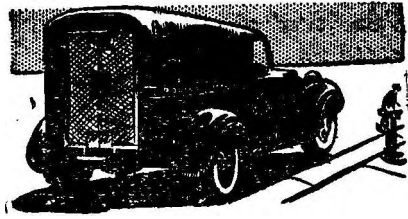
They took him away, screaming and struggling. Some time later, the dim lights of the death block grew dimmer. When the lights came up, they knew it was over. The cell next to Jock MacMahan was empty.

"Poor devil," the actor muttered. Soberly, Randolph Arlen observed, "The way they've been postponing the spy, I daresay I'll be next."

No more words were spoken that night. And during the night until sleep finally rescued Roger Turrell, he occupied himself by giving in to his emotions and going back over the history of his involvement with the case that had brought him to his present situation.

For the government, it had started with the windup of a long, difficult, secret investigation of leaks concerning progress of fusion experiments, when a chain-reaction of detective work compounded by chance put the blame at the doorstep of the—until then above suspicion—physicist, Jock MacMahan.

For Roger Turrell, it had begun when Ann Prouty met her death. The handsome carnival strongman had known the girl since they were children; Ann, the child of the Flying Proutys, carny-size trapeze artists; he, the firstborn of the Turrell the Titan, strong man of past generations. Roger had stayed with the carnival, Ann had left it. But something of the life was in her blood; she found many occasions to return, to visit old friends and family. It had been as natural for Rog Turrell, fast maturing into a strong-



man in his own right, to fall in love with Ann Prouty as it had been for Ann to be attracted to this young symbol of a way of life she could never truly desire to escape.

Ann had been vague about her work. Secretarial work, she had said, for some time. Then she'd gotten into government work. Roger had known she was Jock MacMahan's secretary but he had never known, until her role came out after her death, that she had been with the FBI.

Ann had been the kingpin in the government's investigation; her deduction had penetrated the seeming innocence of the man she worked for. She had been the instrument of bringing him to justice, but it had cost her life. And until Roger Turrell, entering the case for reasons of his own, had appeared on the horizon, it seemed as if Ann would be cheated posthumously of the full fruits of her victory. For Jock MacMahan, found guilty of her murder, was on the point of going to his grave for that murder. But he would carry with him two vital facts—vital to the government. That was behind the reluctance of officials to carry out the execution. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was hoping against hope to unseal the lips of MacMahan and learn the two vital answers. So far, everything had failed.

Roger Turrell wanted to know those answers. At the moment, everything else having failed, it appeared the carnival strongman, now in government service, was the FBI's last trump card. If MacMahan went to the electric chair with his secrets unspoken, the government would never know, until possibly too late, just how

far the traitor's actual experimentation had advanced and, just how much of the information he had passed along to his iron-curtain contacts.

IN THE DARKNESS of the death-cell, Turrell stared at the ceiling and his lips formed the words, "Ann, I'll finish it for you, I promise!" A tense feeling of expectancy went through him as he remembered that, later that morning, he was slated to be moved to Devany's empty cell, next to Jock MacMahan. Turrell tried to concentrate on the next phase of the FBI's plan. But in spite of himself, sleep claimed him.

They moved him after breakfast. To make it look good, three uniformed officials descended on his cell following the move and tore it apart. The actor was impressed by the display. "Egad, killer of the sightless, what can they have thought you had concealed in there, to move you out and search the premises that way?"

Turrell responded with ill-temper, "A missing blonde from the Warden's harem!"

Randolph Arlen replied, "If you managed to move her with you, the sporting thing's to share the dear creature with a doomed cell-friend." He chuckled at his own humor and added dryly, "I haven't made the fuss Devany did, but they've reserved a special seat for me tonight."

Turrell answered, "I didn't know you were so soon. With talkative next to me here, it'll be lonely when you're gone."

The actor replied, not without a hint of satire, "Tell you what, butcher of the blind, I'll render the soliloquy from 'Hamlet'. T'll make it easier for you to give me up when me time comes."

With that, the actor launched forth in his best basso profundo. It was a poor rendition—nothing to trouble Gielgud or Oliver, or dim the mem-

ories of Barrymore—but it was not without feeling. Turrell applauded, and Arlen was grateful; he was just about to suggest an encore when the metal door down the end of the block opened. They came right up to the actor's cell before anyone spoke. Randolph Arlen, a trace of alarm in his voice, joshed, "What's afoot, minions? They moved up me time?"

One of the guards grinned. The other smirked, "Accept our congrats, Arlen. The governor's just commuted your sentence to life!"

There was a slight pause. The thespian's timing was perfect. "Oh? The devil you say! Decent of the blighter; makes me sort of wish I'd voted for him."

The guards rejoined, "They're gonna love you over in permanent headquarters." The door opened and they gathered Arlen up for the move.

The actor, emerging from his cell, blinked at the two occupied ones, where he saw two faces framed in the small barred openings of the doors. He made a formal bow. "Gentlemen, forgive me if I don't linger. I've just discovered I have an appointment—to stay alive." He paced off down the hallway with the others and tossed back, just before the door slammed him out, "Good frying to you both, gentlemen. I'd put in a word with the governor, but I hate traitors and butchers of the blind."

There was a long silence after the actor left. Turrell had no desire to rush things. The first move, he had decided, would be up to the physicist. It came sooner than Roger anticipated, some ten minutes after the actor's departure.

MacMahan's voice came low and with a trace of accent. "I've thought you over carefully since that business of the bars; I don't trust you."

There was a pause. The suddenness of MacMahan's approach and the direction of his thoughts startled the

G-Man recruit. Finally, he replied, "We're alone here, so you must be talking to me. What the hell do you mean, you don't trust me?"

MacMahan was evidently weighing what he'd just heard. He took time to answer. "The way they moved you from one cell to another; you could be a plant."

Turrell snapped, "If the state has its way, I will be a plant—six feet under. Relax, mister, you'll be out of here before I am."

"You're not planning to try an escape?"

"Escape? From *here*? Are you nuts?"

"But you can bend the bars with your bare hands!"

"Sure. And the doors out of here are solid metal; them I can't bend." Turrell's tone was one of incredulity, as if the very idea of escape had never entered his head.

SOME TIME went by. Turrell wanted to know, "What'd you say you couldn't trust me for? What's the difference? I don't trust you, either. So what? You think *you* can escape? Go ahead, try it."

The response was surprising. "You probably know little about mathematics," MacMahan said. "It might surprise you to know that by using my eyes and ears, I have figured out the entire layout of the building we're in. Once out of this cell—"

"Have a good trip!" Turrell interrupted. His tone implied he regarded this step as an impossibility. "Hell, suppose I *can* bend these little bars; the space is too small to crawl out."

MacMahan seemed to have made up his mind about something. "Perhaps I judged you harshly," he said; "it may be we can be of use to one another." Abruptly, the physicist asked, "You'd escape if you could, wouldn't you? I've listened to your voice. You're neither brilliant nor dull, but you're

not morose; you've killed blind people because they were easier to rob than sighted ones. A perfectly logical approach for a man without conscience. We might help one another. If I could be sure."

Turrell shrugged. "You're talking doubletalk. Sure of what? We both killed someone, or we wouldn't be here. Neither one of us is trustworthy by legal standards. Sure, I'm not morose; I'd escape if I could. But I'm not accusing you and you stop accusing me of anything. The way it looks to me, neither of us is going anywhere; until they walk us."

MacMahan persisted. "You're either duller than I thought or acting better than that—that Randolph they just took out of here. You're either a doomed killer, or someone they've planted here in hopes of trapping me; I've faced that much. Further, you will either help me escape or, if this is some kind of trap, the worst that can happen is that I'll end up right here again. In any case, if this is no trap, both you and I stand to gain a great deal. If it *is* a trap, I am confident that I can outwit you and those you represent." The other's voice picked up confidence.

"You're blowing hot air. How could I help you escape if I wanted to? If I got out of here, do you think I'd stop for you?" Turrell sounded more than convincing.

MacMahan was satisfied with his response. His voice carried still more confidence. "Spoken like a rascal and not a spy of the police, surely. Listen to me, we're alone now but we may get company any time. If this is to be done, it must be done immediately. You have the brawn, I the brain, understand? You'll have to follow orders to get out of here; you haven't the grey matter to manage that without taking me. Your reward will be greater by far than petty pennies stolen from dead blind. There are millions

behind me. Billions I might say!"

"You sound like you're either batty or you figured something out," Turrell put in, sounding unconvinced.

The physicist fumed impatiently but kept his voice low. "Don't talk; listen. I expect to have to tell you several times before you understand. There's a way out of here, thanks to your remarkable brawn. Did you try bending the bars of your present cell? Do they bend?"

Turrell's heart leaped. "Yeah, they bend. Go ahead, talk; what you said about money sounded good. And even without it, this is no place for a guy to stick around if he doesn't have to. I'm listening and hoping you're as smart as you're telling me."

"Here," the man in Cell Four said to the man in Cell Three, "is what we can do. To begin with, bend out the bars in your door as far as you can."

"And have the guard see it when he brings our next meal?"

"You know little about human nature. Keep away from the door. I promise you he'll never see it; it's dimly lit here. Besides, what he will see is a memory-picture of what he has always seen in the past, provided you keep away from the door."

"That sounds screwy, but I'm still listening. What happens next, master mind?"

MacMahan began talking. Turrell didn't have to listen; he knew what the plan would be. Detail for detail, it was what he himself had envisioned. A sensation of triumph grew within him, tempered more than a little by the cold confidence in the other's prior words, "If it is a trap, I am confident I can outwit you."

Turrell clenched his fists. He spoke no words but thought to himself, *Maybe you will, but you'll need more than brains to do it!*

MacMahan had finished speaking. Turrell had rehearsed his answer too many times to miss out on the proper

tone of awe mingled with doubt. He said, "Well, I suppose it's possible. You give it to me again, see, and then I'll give it to you so you'll see if I got it right."

Unless the physicist was a better actor than Randolph Arlen, Turrell thought, MacMahan's response reflected complete acceptance of Turrell's slightly-confused admiration.

"Go ahead; tell me now how you understood it. If necessary, I'll correct you as you go along."

"All right. I start out by bending the bars apart, right?"

"Right," the scientist replied. "Then what?"

"Then," Turrell began, keeping his voice low...

Chapter Three



IT WAS TIME for Turrell's meal. He heard the guard fumbling around the lower doorplate through which the tray would be shoved. He sidled around the wall to a point next to the door, after giving

the guard a chance to see him sitting at a distance. This he accomplished while the guard was bent over pushing in the tray.

As the uniformed tray-carrier straightened up, Turrell made a cat-like movement to the door and spoke out in a soft, natural voice, "Hey, will ya take a look at these bars? Didja notice—they're bent!"

The guard whirled and stared. Taken off-guard, he moved closer, jaw dropping. "Why, hell! How'd that..."

He got no further. Two great hands whipped out of the space and grabbed his head, pulling him with a violent shock that jammed his face against the door before he could utter a word.

Praying he didn't do too much damage, the former carnival strongman held the other in position until he felt the body go limp. Then he reached out as far as possible, yanked the man up with one hand and frisked him with the other. There was one key. One would be enough.

With lightning movements, Roger Turrell dropped the dead weight of his warder and reached down to unlock his door. Catlike, he slipped out, noting the end door was closed, and stepped over in front of Cell Two. He spoke low. "How much?" he demanded.

MacMahan cursed. "Hurry! This is no time for that!"

"How much?" Turrell repeated, as if he had all night.

"Money's no object, don't you see! For you, it's only money; for me, the universe! Unlock that door and I'll make you rich beyond your own best dream!"

Turrell blinked; he complied. MacMahan took a brief second to note that Turrell had shoved the guard into his own former cell. The spy murmured, "You see, they regard this hole so thoroughly escape-proof that their very attitudes become a means for the truly wise to escape. Come on!"

The G-Man fell in behind the light-footed physicist. *It takes a peculiar kind of mind, Turrell observed to himself, to be that confident. And that very confidence, in the end, is the method by which routine detective-work will bring him down to size.*

The two, each with his own plot in mind, approached the outer door of the block. The scientist motioned for silence, but Turrell shook his head and indicated with his lips, "You've got the brains; I'm the imitator. I'll do it."

When they reached the door, Turrell scuffed his feet and said, in perfect imitation of the guard's voice, "Okay; now the other one's chow."

The door swung open. Another

guard, tray in hand, proffered it and saw his error—too late. He went down in a heap. By the quickest movement, Turrell managed to get the tray before it crashed a warning.

"Now," Jock MacMahan said, as the other conspirator yanked a ring of keys from a peg behind the guard's desk post, "you follow me." His dark eyes gleamed. "Ahead, unlock the stairway door on the right."

"How do you know it's a stairway?" Turrell challenged. Actually, it was; without a knowledge of the plan, Turrell would never have known it.

"Simple, if you understand architecture. I noted the appointments carefully when they took me in. In the darkness of my cell, I reflected and reconstructed the design around the corridor; that *must* be a stairwell!"

The words made Turrell's flesh crawl. The man was remarkable, no denying it. Roger unlocked the door, once he found the key to it.

"We'll go up," MacMahan decided. "Below, there are others. We'll cope with whatever's ahead best from the vantage of the roof, where we can plan with the entire layout in view."

Turrell didn't argue. Whichever way they had proceeded, a clear route of escape had been planned for them by the FBI. The planning had foreseen, with MacMahan's brilliance in mind, that the man should have ample opportunity to appear to make his own break.

THEY MADE the roof, but not before MacMahan ordered Turrell to use his great strength against a well-padlocked door frame.

Turrell affected great tension. He cowed and shrank, as if afraid that eyes bore from every direction. "Which way?" he mumbled, lips trembling.

MacMahan took time to pace the perimeter of the roof on hands and knees. He moved rapidly and took it

for granted that no reason could possibly direct eyes to him at his vantage point. His perusal finished, he motioned to Turrell to follow. "Move fast!" he commanded, "there's a truck of some kind approaching the gate of the west wall. It appears to be the service gate, from the layout."

"Think they'll open the gate and let us out while they let them in?" Turrell chided, refusing to move.

"Nothing of the kind; explanations will delay us."

Turrell had reason to know the timetable would wait for the escapees. He had a part to play. He hung back, evidently unable to proceed. "I'm staying here."

MacMahan's lip curled. "And I thought you might be a plant," he observed. "Very well. Rot here 'til they find you and burn you; I'm going alone." He began moving off, noting with satisfaction that, as soon as he started, Turrell leaped to follow. "That's better; I may need your strength."

Moments later, the other proving himself agile as well as canny, they had lowered themselves, hand-over-hand, down a drain to the level of the ground. Dusk had fallen, aiding them measurably in their movements.

They slipped past a series of buildings to a sheltered view of the gate in question. By that time, an iron grating was being machine-raised as the gates mechanically opened. The truck moved in and the gates closed.

"We have to hope it does its business and leaves," MacMahan whispered, "and before they discover our absence; we can't count on much more time."

"That's a helluva thing," Turrell put in. "The wagon may be here all night."

"Then we'll find another way."

"You're a cool one, all right. How many ways you figure there are?"

MacMahan faced Turrell squarely



and murmured in a low voice, "Perhaps none; perhaps a dozen. It all depends on chance. Meantime, we're relatively free."

The markings on the wagon indicated the business was of a culinary nature. It was a bread delivery. "Shouldn't take long," Turrell grunted.

The truck passed not far away and drew up in front of a loading platform. "If they give us enough time," MacMahan muttered, motioning Turrell to fall in behind him as he began moving towards the halted truck. Turrell had reason to know circumstances would favor them. Circumstances, carefully supervised, did. Moments later, the men were secreting themselves behind some empties—oddly enough, constructed with enough depth for a strongman to be able to lower the spy into a bottom case and then squeeze himself into the one above.

Silence fell in the truck once they were in position. Turrell was tempted to talk, but knew this would be foolhardy from the standpoint of escaping prisoners. He kept silent but his mind was troubled deeply. In this silence, what was Jock MacMahan thinking? It had gone so well! Wouldn't the brilliant man, who seemed to know everything, be concluding that it had gone *too* well. And after that, might he not make several logical deductions about the big man who lay in the empty above him?

There were footsteps, voices, the sound of more empties being maneuvered to the back of the truck. Before long, the truck gates slammed.

THEY FELT the driver heft himself into the front seat. The motor turned over and the wagon started moving. The two stowaways were on their way to freedom.

The truck paused at the gate. While it was stopped MacMahan whispered hoarsely. "We'll have to commandeer the vehicle; any minute, the sirens might go off. The driver, hearing them, might be smart enough to investigate his load. He might even turn back."

"Yeah," Turrell countered. He knew the plot would unfold differently, therefore he agreed complacently. It was nearly time for...

The wagon moved through the gate and rolled slowly along smooth road. MacMahan made himself heard. "Get yourself out and get me out. We'll dump over some empties; that'll bring him back."

Turrell grinned as he eased himself out. That, he thought, was fine coming from MacMahan. It delighted him that the brilliant mind had, in so many details, showed little originality in the carrying out of the escape as the FBI had planned it. Even to the dumping over of the empties. The G-Man was glad, all things being equal, that the suggestion had not had to originate with him.

The truck slowed to make a turn. Turrell winked and sent a pile of empties heeling over in a crash. The wagon completed its turn and came to a stop.

A moment later, the rear door opened. Like a jack-in-the-box erupts, Roger Turrell flung himself bodily on the driver. He needed no help from MacMahan; the driver went down under a rain of blows.

Turrell dragged the still form off

the road into some scrubby brush, bent over the "bakery driver" and recognized the face of Howard Chance, the FBI District Chief. Chance opened an eye briefly and winked it shut. The action consumed only a moment and Turrell was leap-frogging back to the truck where Jock MacMahan was behind the wheel, desperately trying to get the truck started.

Turrell jumped in on the wheel side and pushed Jock away from the wheel with his body. "You wouldn't be trying to run out on me, would you?" Turrell demanded gruffly.

"Of course not," MacMahan retorted. "We have no time to lose. I was trying to get the motor started, but there's something wrong with it."

"You probably know the theory of the engine backwards," the G-Man recruit snorted, "but you're a helluva driver." He turned the ignition on and the motor started immediately. The scientist looked nonplussed; the engine had refused to respond to him.

Behind them, a distant siren-wail told them that their jail break had been discovered. "We'll have to make space now," Turrell muttered. Suiting the action to the words, he threw the truck into reverse and backed out to the highway again, then shifted into first and roared her forward. He skipped second and gunned it into high, as the truck ran into a steep upgrade.

MacMahan looked back anxiously. "Can't you get more speed out of this truck?"

"Relax. As soon as we get over the hump, she'll open up."

The truck climbed laboriously until the top of the grade finally came under its wheels, then it plunged with sudden-found enthusiasm into the downgrade. Turrell leaned over the wheel, eyes riveted to the road ahead. The truck picked up speed alarmingly.

"Not so fast," MacMahan cautioned. "You'll lose control."

TURRELL bided his time until the truck shot past a certain tree, number eleven on the right hand side since the top of the grade. Then he abruptly jammed his foot down on the brake. The pedal went all the way to the floor. There was no response. "The damn brakes are shot!" Turrell gasped, eyes still on the road ahead. He made several more attempts to get the brakes to work and then pulled hard on the emergency; but the truck kept gaining speed.

"We'll be killed!" MacMahan yelled. "Stop it, *somehow!* We'll pile up at the bottom of the grade!" His voice rose to an almost hysterical wail.

"Just our luck after losing the hot seat!" Turrell responded. He never took his eyes off the road one moment. "Hold tight! I'll try to clear that curve at the valley but..."

The bottom of the grade was practically on them. Turrell kept his big hands tight around the wheel. Pale as a ghost, he had to exert a tremendous effort to keep from moving his lips while he kept careful count in his mind. MacMahan had thrown his arms up over his face. He moaned, "To die now, this way—no, it's impossible! I must live! You hear? I *must* live!"

They were in the curve. Roger Turrell frantically wheeled the truck into it, wheels skidding, hot rubber marking a black line against the pavement. The side of the road, a wide ditch and a wall of trees loomed up. As the truck veered and reared up over its motor, still counting, Roger Turrell completed his difficult driving stunt. He reached back above the driver's seat, felt where the monkey wrench lay, brought it down on Jock MacMahan's head, dropped it, grabbed the scientist and, with his inert body, leaped clear just as the truck was about to hurl itself into metal scrap.

There was a terrific roar of impact, then silence.

Chapter Four



ON THE DOCTOR'S office operating table, Jock MacMahan groaned. The doctor quickened his efforts. At a sign from Howard Chance, the FBI District Chief, and all others in the room except the doctor, the patient and Roger Turrell slipped out of sight. In the doorway just before he disappeared, Howard Chance whispered back, "So far so good. But remember, Rog; if you fail now, everything else will mean nothing."

Turrell nodded. Chance disappeared and the doctor finished his intricate job of bandaging. "It's done," the medico muttered, wiping away a generous accumulation of perspiration.

"He'll be—you've done everything that should have been?" Turrell asked. The medical man nodded. "Okay, wake him up," the G-Man countered.

A needle was slipped into MacMahan's arm. In a moment, the spy began to writhe and finally opened his eyes. He looked about wildly. His eyes came to rest on Roger Turrell. "Wh-what? Where?"

Turrell moved to his side. He affected a look of disgust. "Great shape you're in, pal!" he muttered disgustedly. "The sawbones here says you're paralyzed from the waist down! You're on your way out! The crash finished you, but slow!"

MacMahan responded by attempting to get up. But his lower quarters refused to accommodate him. He struggled desperately, then fell back on the table exhausted. "Paralyzed?" he gasped, his eyes seeking the doctor's.

"You've sustained a spinal injury.

You'll have to go to the hospital. I've done only the preliminary." Nodding to Turrell, he added, "Your brother's pretty badly smashed up, too; I wonder he was able to carry you all that way without collapsing himself."

"Hospital? He carried me?" MacMahan turned to Roger, his eyes questioning. Roger's eyes reassured him; somehow, the doctor didn't know the truth. Covertly, Roger managed to pat his hip pocket. MacMahan understood. Turrell had come into possession of a gun.

Roger Turrell came closer. "It's been four hours since the wreck," he put in. "You were out the whole time. We were lucky, at that; truck was wrecked to splinters." He shut his eyes tightly and then opened them, shaking his head. "It was murder!"

"I can't go to any hospital," Jock MacMahan snapped. "If you got me here, get me out of here!"

"Impossible," the doctor intoned. "You're a dying man!"

The physicist made another frantic effort to spring off the table, but he was already dead from the waist down. The effort blanched him. His pulse pounded and he felt faint. Roger leaned over him. "He says you're croaking. He says it might be a few hours. He says hospital. He says he thinks he wants to call the cops!"

The doctor snapped, "There *is* something fishy about you two! Why shouldn't a dying man go to the hospital?" Abruptly, the doctor moved to his desk and grabbed the telephone.

"No!" MacMahan cried. "Stop him!"

Roger Turrell made a grab for his hip and whipped out the gun. In one motion, he brought it up and fired. The doctor grabbed for his breast, moaned, and fell, the phone clattering to the floor beside him. Roger moved over and examined the doctor. "Some shooting! He's dead as hell!" he commented, pleased with himself. He replaced

the receiver on the hook of the phone, wheeled and went to the door to listen. For a long moment, only Jock MacMahan's breathing could be heard in the room.

"We're still lucky. At least I am," Turrell grunted; "guess nobody heard that shot." He moved quickly around the room and put out all the lights except one. Then he returned to the scientist, who was lying on the table watching his every move. For a moment, they eyed each other. Finally, the man on the table spoke.

"You carried me from the wreck. Why didn't you leave my body there? You could have left me to die!"

"Money!" Turrell snapped. "You promised me money! Before you croak—where is it?" Turrell's eyes were beedy with greed.

MacMahan kept his eyes glued to the other's face. He was trying to search into Turrell's soul. His eyes were like probing searchlights. "I did promise you money," he agreed, "and you shall have it."

TURRELL'S expression turned to one of crafty eagerness. "Where? Tell me! I'll take you there now! Enough to make my dreams come true, you said—you said that, if I got you out! It wasn't my fault—the truck! I killed the guard—the driver—the doctor here! I'll kill anybody for enough money; I'll kill you if I don't get it!" Turrell was standing close, his eyes burning down into those of the helpless scientist. And something about his very evident intent, satisfied the man who watched his every move.

"Don't be silly!" MacMahan suddenly growled. "Kill me and you get nothing! Listen to me! Listen carefully! I'm going to give you an address! Get me there and I'll see..." The physicist broke off. He brought a hand to his throat, gulped for breath. Turrell grabbed him and held him, preventing him from rolling off

the table. MacMahan was seized by tremors, shaking like a leaf. His face was bathed in perspiration. His eyes bulged. It was almost five minutes before the attack subsided.

"The doctor was right," MacMahan finally gasped. "I'm dying; it's too late!"

"Too late?" Turrell repeated, growing livid with rage. "What about my money? What happens to the money? Where is it?"

The scientist licked his lips. "You'll get it—all of it," he promised. "But listen carefully; there's something you must do first!"

Turrell grabbed the man and shook him like a leaf. "What? Talk fast!"

Jock MacMahan had made up his mind. "I'm going to give you an address. I have something for you to bring there, understand? You'll bring it to the address I give you—you'll go nowhere else—and *they'll* pay you all you ask!"

"That's not good enough! They might not!"

"You money-mad devil, you'll get it, I promise you!" There were tears of frustration in the scientist's eyes. "That I should be obliged to trust a hulking brute with a priceless—" He broke off. "I promise you, you'll get—a hundred thousand—enough to go to the ends of the earth!"

Turrell looked convinced. His face was a study in cupidity. "All right," he breathed; "what do I do?"

MacMahan tried to rise and failed. "Paralyzed!" he groaned. "Find the doctor's bag and bring it here!" he ordered. Turrell sprang to where it lay. Hands trembling, he dumped its contents next to the other. "Get a scalpel—a sharp knife—from his bag or wherever he keeps them here!"

Turrell made a search until he found one that suited MacMahan. The scientist said, "Cut away the right leg of my trousers—above the knee." Tur-

rell, hands trembling in earnest, complied.

"Look closely and you'll see a slight difference in the texture of the skin covering an area about three inches square!"

Turrell looked. He saw. "I can't see anything," he said.

"Look closer. You'll see. The skin's a little darker—a three inch square patch of the flesh."

"Yeah! There's something. I see it. What do I do?"

"You'll butcher me!" MacMahan groaned. "But it should convince you the money's waiting for you as I say if I'm willing! Cut out that patch of skin—try to keep the cut shallow but get it all—take it to the address I give you, understand?"

"A piece of skin?" Turrell echoed. His eyes popped. It was nothing he had to feign. "You—you want me to cut off the—the skin of your leg?"

"That entire patch!"

"I—I can't do it!" Turrell said, looking sickish. "I never did anything like that. I—I couldn't."

MacMahan's voice was like a whip-lash. "You idiot brute! You've done murder for money; for pennies, you've killed! For a hundred thousand, you can cut a patch of skin!"

Turrell struggled for self-possession. The greed came to the fore and he gripped the scalpel determinedly. "I'll do it," he muttered. "I'll do it!" He bent forward, knife poised.

"Wait, you fool! First the address! I'll probably faint; I may die under your brutish hand. Get a pencil! Write down the address!"

TURRELL groped around the doctor's desk and returned with paper and pencil. "Go ahead, where do I take the skin?" Before MacMahan could answer, Turrell threw in, "Are you sure they won't think I'm nuts, bringing them a piece of skin?"

"There's something on it!" the sci-



entist snapped impatiently. "It's worth all you want for them to get that something! You can't read it. It's worthless unless *they* get it!"

"Okay, okay!" Turrell answered, licking his lips. "Where's it go?"

MacMahan gave him the address. When Turrell had written it down, the scientist made him show it to him. Satisfied it was correct, he appeared to relax.

With a sudden gesture, Turrell whipped the address out of MacMahan's hand and said, "Okay, Doc. You can get up now. Show's over!"

The doctor, who had been on the floor since he was shot, gratefully rolled over and got to his feet. "Thank goodness; another minute and I'd have felt rigor mortis setting in."

The door opened and, before the astonished eyes of Jock MacMahan, Howard Chance and other individuals began to appear. Someone put more lights on. MacMahan sized up the situation without a word. He looked from one face to the other and finally back to Turrell. "The Federal Bureau of Investigation?" he asked tonelessly.

Turrell nodded. "That's right, Jock; the jig, I'd say, is up as hell!"

Howard Chance, the FBI District Chief, closed on MacMahan's bare leg. "A re-agent will bring out whatever's written there. We can do it with-

out surgery, Jock. You ought to be glad of that!"

MacMahan's face was a pattern of defeat. "You've been cleverer by far than I had imagined," he acknowledged. He sighed. "Bad fortune has dogged me ever since I had the lack of foresight to take on your unfortunate Ann Prouty. I should have been wise enough to get my information out before you closed your little trap."

Howard Chance responded, "You're a smart guy, Jock, but you're right about Ann Prouty. Killing her was the worst thing you ever did. That brought Turrell into the case."

THE OTHER looked at Turrell unbelievably. "You have brains as well as brawn, I see that now," he acknowledged, "but the accident—that terrible wreck—you didn't plan that?"

Turrell grinned grimly. "Ann and I were brought up in the carnival. As a kid, I could imitate anybody once I heard him speak. I knew sleight of hand when I was twelve. I came by my strength naturally. As to wrecks, escaping from a burning wreck was something I learned to do when I was twenty! That's the whole story, Jock."

The scientist murmured, "I was determined to go to my death on the electric chair rather than give up my secrets, except to those who believe as I do." He paused, then added, "It's well that I am dying."

Turrell grinned nastily. "You're dying all right; but there's nothing wrong with you that won't wear off after a night's sleep. There's nothing wrong with your spine; you're dying in the chair for the murder of Ann Prouty. I wouldn't have gone after you if anything would have stopped that!"

The scientist had struggled to a half-sitting position. He made a dive for his exposed knee with a free hand and made an effort to rip into the flesh with his fingernails.

Howard Chance and Roger Turrell leaped at him and restrained him. "That's enough of that, Jock! Our government wants your pound of flesh! As soon as we get you out of the trick harness Doc rigged you into, your knee's going to the lab. After that, you can rip away to your heart's content!"

The way the physicist fought to get his arms free, it was just as well his lower quarters were effectively pinned. MacMahan stopped fighting only when they got the manacles around his wrists and pinned them behind him.

When the scientist was gone, Turrell shrugged at the FBI Chief. "The address of his contacts should open up the whole business behind him. What he's learned about fusion, you'll be able to read on the skin of his right knee. There's your case, Mr. Chance."

"Thanks to you, Roger Turrell. I hope this makes you feel a little bit better about Ann," Chance said.

Roger turned away. "It doesn't bring her back," he murmured very softly. "But it'll have to be enough. In a way, it was Ann who *really* nailed him, you know. It was always her, since we were kids; whatever I did, it was always because Ann would approve."

Howard Chance patted Turrell's big shoulder. "Then stay with the FBI, Rog. Ann would approve of that. There's lots more Jock MacMahans, you know. Not scientists, but men who don't care where their money comes from, or how they get it. Or, worse still, who've been so blinded by ideals they think they're helping make a better world." Chance sighed. "Our job would be lots easier if all the little traitors and spies helpers were nothing more than criminals, out only for loot."

"That," answered Turrell, "goes without saying."



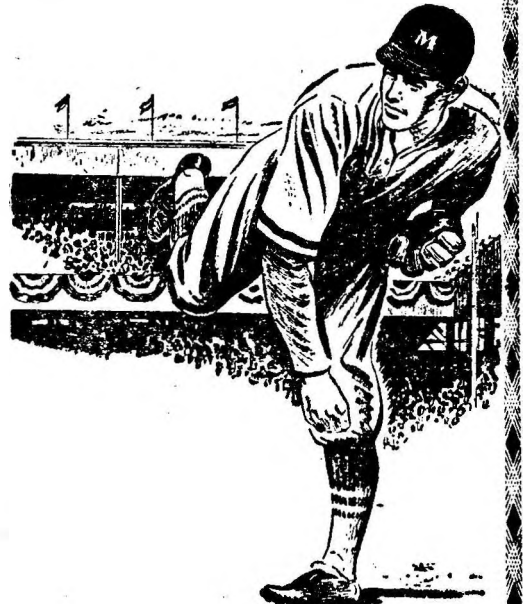
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THE BLUE STUDY

by Marc Millen



Was Vernon Young an eccentric or was there a reason for his painting his study, and everything in it, blue? Was there a connection with a stolen ruby?

THE NURSE looked up from behind her desk, removed her glasses in annoyance, and rose disdainfully. She glared at the two men who came tromping noisily down the hall. "Gentlemen, if you don't mind," she said, "this is a hospital, not a dancehall; please walk a little more quietly. Please."

The taller of the two, a middle-aged man with grey temples and horn-rimmed glasses protruding from behind the protection of a huge nose, removed his hat. "Sorry. We're not used to pussy-footing around hospital halls, nurse. My name," he changed his tone to that of official withdrawn confidence, "is Lieutenant Harry Winsted. This," he poked a finger toward the short, blond man on his right, "is Sergeant Forman."

"Oh," crept from rigid lips.

"Do you have a patient here named Vernon Young?" Winsted asked.

The nurse lowered her head ever so slightly. "Yes," she mumbled; "we had."

"Had?" Forman asked.

"That's right," came the reply. "You see—"

"He's still here, isn't he?" Winsted asked. "I understand that a man doesn't just get out of bed after a siege of pneumonia and walk home."

"Mr. Young died this morning," the nurse said. "I'm sorry." Then, in a patronizing manner, "Related?"

"Not by a long shot," Forman spouted. Then, "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to shout."

"Well," she said finally, "just what business *did* you have with him?"

"Official." Winsted's tone was clothed in contempt.

"Oh," she said. "Then exactly what can I do for you?"

"We want to see the body," Winsted said, "that is, if it hasn't been removed yet."

The nurse placed a call from the phone on her chart-piled desk, then said, "Room 400, two floors down; he's still there."

"Any personal belongings?" Forman asked.

"What do you mean, Sergeant?" she raised her eyebrow.

"Well," Forman's face showed anger mixed with fatigue, "I don't suppose that even *this* hospital would put a man to bed in his own clothing." The sarcastic tone was replaced by one of condescension. "In simple English, where are Young's clothes; his personal effects, and so on?"

In an indescribably horrid tone, the nurse said, "You will find, *gentlemen*, that Mr. Young's personal belongings are in a carton, properly labeled. You will find it in Room 401, right next door to—"

"Yes, yes," Winsted said. "Tell me miss, are you married?"

A startled look spread on her face. "Why—why no?"

When the reason for the question did not come forth, she asked, "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Winsted snapped back. "I just want to thank you on behalf of the male population for your wise decision. May our good fortune continue."

Both men turned away from her venomous glare and headed for the elevator bank down the hall.

THE LATE Mr. Young's personal effects were commandeered on behalf of the police department by the two men, and after a brief examination of the sheet-covered corpse, they headed back to their office.

"Damned if I can figure it out," Winsted remarked. "Young must have swallowed the thing!"

The "thing" in question was a ruby, valued at \$20,000 by the insurance company that begrudgingly had paid off to the owner of the gem when it was stolen from his apartment. After three weeks of keeping their collective ears trained to the underground network, the police had arrested Daniels and Princeley, both felons with long records. They had both been grilled until they confessed, and a third name, that of Vernon Young, constantly popped up. When pressed on Young's tie-in, both suspects refused to add anything further.

"Since we were assigned to trail Young," Forman said disgustedly, "he hasn't done a damned thing to arouse suspicion. Now, after we find that pneumonia got him, we still can't turn up that ruby."

"Yeah," Winsted said. "But since he is dead, we have a legal right to search his apartment. I've never seen a lawyer pull so many fast tricks to keep us out of Young's place in my whole life. Hell, even that damned search warrant couldn't get us past that shyster."

An hour later, their car pulled up at the curb in a quasi-rich section of town. Both officers debarked from the sedan, took the elevator to the fifteenth floor, and waited impatiently while the superintendent fumbled for his pass-key.

"Do you think that Young's pals were promised a split if they kept their mouths shut?" Forman suddenly asked.

"I'm pretty sure of it," Winsted said, pushing past the superintendent into the apartment. "Whew!" His gaze fled about the apartment. "What a layout!"

The apartment seemed to float atop a thick pile rug which hid the shoe-tops of both men. Expensive-looking paintings hung in profusion about the room. A bar in the corner, complete to its filled ice-bucket, diverted their attention, and it was only upon remembering the Captain's remarks about drinking on duty, that the men pried their eyes away.

They made a quick tour about the place, coming finally to a small, locked door that seemed to cower in awe at the huger rooms about it. A skeleton key soon opened the lock, and they stepped inside.

"I be damned!" Winsted said.

"Likewise," Forman mumbled.

In direct contrast to the neat and orderly rooms that they had seen, this twenty-by-fifteen cubicle was the essence of disorder. A battered blue desk stood in a corner, cigar butts littering the floor about it. A blue chair that had seen better days stood behind the desk, one leg at an angle incongruous to the others.

Winsted snapped on a light, and his shock doubled upon sight of the decorations. The wall had been painted a jumble of blue tones. It was obvious that cardboard, paper, corrugated board and scraps had been glued to the wall, then paint had been slapped over them. Since many sections of the wall differed in shading from the rest,

Forman remarked, "Each section must have been painted at different times."

"A rank amateur could have done a better job," Winsted answered. "I never had a brush in my hands before last summer, yet I did a halfway decent job on our kitchen. Sue rather got a bang out of it, too. Said I was developing a flair for the arts!"

"Did you ever think," Forman smiled, "that we are supposedly being paid to investigate, not to reminisce?"

"Drop!" Winsted answered.

BOTH MEN made a search of the desk, the other bits of shabby furniture in the room, and in every imaginable place. Two hours later, they gave up in disgust. It wasn't a hot day, but beads of sweat stood out on their foreheads, and Winsted remarked that he felt as if he had just stepped out of a shower.

On their way out of the room, Forman snapped off the light. Uncertain of the furniture location, Winsted bumped against a chair and took a headlong dive, his chest ramming up against the wall beside the door. His remarks were pungent, but Forman had judiciously moved down the hall toward the front door.

Both Forman and Winsted, as investigating officers, were present when Vernon Young's safe-deposit vaults were opened at four different city banks by the officials. Stock certificates, savings bonds, a handful of cash, legal documents and the like made up the cache. Yet, there was no trace of the ruby. A thorough search of Young's midtown office, deliberate questioning of his half-dozen employees and servants turned up no further evidence.

"Mr. Young never let any of us in that study," the colored maid said. "I once knocked and asked if I could clean up while he was there to watch me. But he cussed somethin' awful; I never was inside, and I've been working here about fo' years."

"Same here," the house-boy said. "We was allowed all over the place; he even lef' us here when he done left on vacation. But he never let none of us go into that room, no suh."

"Did either of you ever see Mr. Young allow any of his visitors in there?" Winsted asked.

"No, suh," the man answered.

"Once," the maid said. "Once I remember him goin' in there with a fren' of his. Stayed about an hour, I think, and lef'. Never saw anybody else, though."

"Do you know the name of this friend?" Forman asked.

"No, I don't," she replied. "Never saw him but that once."

"I see." After the usual instructions, Winsted allowed them to leave. Then, after striking up a cigar he had taken from Young's humidor, Winsted said, "What a mess! The ruby's been gone for a little over two months, and we haven't the faintest idea of where it is."

"Those two accomplices—Daniels and Princeley, isn't it?—might be lying," Forman said.

"No, not likely," Winsted answered. "They were both questioned separately; one didn't know what the other said, and they were kept in separate cells, too. Nope," he shook his head, "it was too innocent to think that there was any collusion between them."

"The Commish even offered to cut their sentences to bare minimum if either of them talked," Forman added; "and those two bums never let out a peep. Talk about birds of a feather—"

"But now that Young's dead," the other said; "maybe that'll make a difference."

"How?"

"Well," Winsted said, "with Young dead, and his estate scattered from here to hell and back, they may figure that they might not get their cut when they do get out."

"Sounds reasonable," the other murmured.

IT SOUNDED reasonable, but it wasn't. When confronted with a newspaper telling of Young's demise, both men smiled, shook their heads, and said nothing.

"Nothing!" Forman exploded. "Winnie, what's this Young done to keep those sons so clam-tight?"

"Damfino," Winsted said. "Let's have us a cup of coffee, huh?"

They repaired in meditative silence to the local beanery, and soon had hamburgers and coffee before them. Winsted said, "Damn."

"Now what?" Forman gazed up from his steaming mug.

"I spilled catsup all over my jacket," Winsted said, mopping futilely at the red gob on his chest. "Sue'll kill me, Formy, and she's got good reason, too."

"Hell," Forman replied, "it was an accident. It could happen to anybody."

"Yeah, I know," Winsted said.

"If you want," Forman smiled engagingly, "I'll take the stand in your behalf; I'll swear that it spilled accidentally." A sarcastic gleam shone in his eyes as he added, "Nothing like being a bachelor, says this bachelor."

"Shove it," Winsted snapped. "One suit; well, that's all right. But Sue chewed my tail about that other suit I messed up. It cost her a couple of bucks to have a paint stain removed from the lapels."

"Where in hell did you pick up paint stains?" Forman inquired.

"Damfino," Winsted replied. "But it had a blue blotch on the damn thing; pretty near ruined it, too."

"A blue stain?" Forman's eyebrows shot up.

"Yeah," the other murmured. "Plastered all over the damn thing."

Both men lapsed into speculative silence, and it wasn't until Forman had put an after-lunch cigaret to his mouth that he said, "Well, back to the grind."

"Sue'll really give me hell," Winsted said.

"Probably send you to bed without supper, you poor boy," Forman smiled his bachelor smile again.

"Formy, do me a favor—"

"Dammit!" Forman said. "Why didn't we think of that before?"

"Think of what?"

"You say that you got a blue stain, right?" Forman asked.

"Don't remind me," came the reply.

"How'd you get it?"

"Well, I put the wrong ink on my money-making machine," Winsted said. "How in hell do I know how I got it?"

"Think. Think," Forman shot back.

There was an urgency in his tone that caused Winsted to stop short for a minute to ponder. Then, "Musta brushed against something, I suppose."

"That something couldn't have been a wall, could it?" Forman shot back. "A blue wall—in a blue study!"

WITH HASTE amazing for two grown men with a good meal in their stomachs, they drove back to Young's apartment, burst into the study, and stopped.

"Say," Winsted remembered, "I tripped over something and fell against *that* wall." He pointed to the wall next to the door.

Both men moved over to it, hands rubbing its surface. Forman busily tore off the papers, cardboard and other junk that had been glued to the wall before it had been painted.

"What a pair of stupid schmoes we are," Forman shook his head. "Look."

"Look at what?" Winsted asked, his eyes following Forman's finger to a bunch of scraps in the sergeant's hand. "I don't get it."

"Aargh," Forman mumbled. "Look, we've got to tear every hunk of paper off these walls; I'll explain then."

An hour later, after sifting through the jumbled collection that they had

piled atop the desk, Winsted shook his head. "I don't know what we're looking for, but I'd say negative to this collection."

"Lemme fill it in for you," Forman said. "Young and the other two mugs robbed the apartment, and Young took the ruby. He told the other guys that he would hold it. No matter what happened, they would get a cut. He described the manner in which he intended to hide it. One of them didn't go for the idea, and he was probably the visitor that the maid saw; when he got a look at the layout, he was satisfied. Enough so, I might add, that when we told him of Young's death, he still felt safe enough that he didn't talk. Follow?"

"Yeah," Winsted said. "Go on."

"The whole apartment is nicely laid out—except for the study here. It's blue—not tasteful, not neat, just god-awful blue all over the walls, ceiling, and in the lamp there's even a bulb that casts a blue tint on everything."

"So," said Winsted. "Young had a screw loose somewhere; had to surround himself with blue. You heard what they told us just now; apparently he was working on the room piece-meal. Did the last bit just a day or two before he died—in slow-drying oils. You trying to tell me there was a method behind this madness?"

Forman nodded. "There was. Ever hear the old gag about where's the best place to hide a tree?"

Winsted pursed his lips in thought. "Umm, yes; in a forest."

"Right. Well, first of all, my guess is that Young wanted to hide a *blue* object." He waved his hand. "Could you think of a better way to conceal a blue object than to put it in a blue room?"

The other looked sadly at Forman. "All this is very nice," he said, "but the stolen ruby was *red*."

Forman nodded. "So we're not looking for the ruby; it isn't here. But

there's something here that tells us where to look for the ruby—and *that something is blue.*"

Winsted bowed in Forman's direction. "You take my breath away, Holmes; as painful as it is, I must admit you have something. So, let's see if I can carry your reasoning further. What Young wanted to conceal was some kind of paper—in order to take attention away from this, he slapped all kinds of paper, all sizes and shapes of cardboard, etc., on the walls and painted over them. But this bit of paper was blue to begin with; I'll bet that's what he wanted to conceal."

"Right." Forman's hand rested on the desk. "And just to be sure that the misdirection was well applied, Young also painted things like this ivory chess-set blue. He..." Forman broke off and hit his head with the palm of his head. "Of course! It's been right in front of my eyes all along." He spilled the blue pieces out of the blue box in which they were piled, looked through them carefully. "Just as I thought; one piece missing—the queen."

Winsted picked up one of the large, ornate figures. "Hell of a thing to do to an expensive set—though I guess it can be taken off, all right. So you mean that he put the ruby inside one of the chessmen—the queen. Then where is the missing piece?"

Forman had been scabbling through the paper on the floor. "See for yourself," he answered. He opened his palm, and a blue piece of paper gleamed dully in the semi-light.

Winsted took it, then turned it over. No larger than a match-cover, a blue pawn ticket lay exposed there.

Silently, both men moved toward the door, flicked off the light, and closed the door softly behind them. They padded slowly through the pile-rug, and tromped on to the elevator. The blue study had given up its secret; with a half-smile on his face, Forman stood aside to allow his superior officer to enter the elevator first.

IF

by Gene Rodgers

THE KEY FITS

The key was large and heavy, and bore a crest on it. And three lives had paid for it before Mark Varral discovered the secret of the lock which that key fitted. One more life was forfeit, then.



A BOTTLE; a lousy bottle of rotgut. To anyone else, it would mean a good time, loud talk with loud dames and a beaut of a hangover the next morning. But to Sam Hiller, it meant a one way ticket to a cold slab with a D. O. A. tag tied to his toe.

Nobody called me in on the deal—they didn't have to. When a guy shares a foxhole with you for two years on a pile of rock and sand somewhere in the Pacific, you get to know him like he was your own self. And when you see the guy grab at his belly and scream so loud that your flesh is be-

ginning to crawl, you deal yourself in. No fee, no retainer; you don't look to make a red cent out of the thing. All you want is to come face-to-face with the guy that spiked the bottle; that's all the pay I wanted.

Sam, my buddy, lay there on the floor of that cheap dive on Third Avenue, his face was contorted into a mask of pain. But Sam was lucky; his pain lasted a few minutes and then—it was all over. He jerked spasmodically for a few seconds, turned his eyes up at me like he was a horse with a broken leg, dying to be put out of his misery, then he gave a last shudder and lay still.

Sam's blonde began to laugh. "Come on, Sam," she said with an edgy trace to her voice, "get up off the floor and take me home."

But Sam didn't get off the floor. The blonde kept pleading with him to stop the play-acting, and I guess I did, too, inwardly, but Sam just lay there, blank eyes staring at a couple of flies playing tag near the naked light bulb that hung from the ceiling.

"Sam; get up. Quit foolin', honey!" the blonde started to get a little nervous.

I reached over, took her hand, and said in as calm a voice as I could, "Sorry, babe; Sam isn't going to get up."

"W-what's the matter?" she asked, her mouth trembling and twitching at the corners.

"He's dead. Dead." I repeated the word to make it clear to her. "He won't be taking you home."

The guy with the dirty white apron came over to see what was going on. He was a skinny, pallid-looking jerk, and I felt like swinging at him and punching his stupid face apart. I wanted to grab something, somebody, and beat hell out of him just to get that sick, dead feeling out of my stomach.

"Drink too much?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah," I answered dully; "he drank so much that he's dead."

"Hey, I don't want any trouble in my place," he said. "I don't wanna lose my liquor license."

Lose a liquor license, I thought bitterly. All Sam meant to that lug was that his death might lose his lousy license for him. A guy that was breathing, only a few minutes ago; now he's face-up on the floor, and he's cold.

And right there and then, I knew that the guy who killed Sam was going to be caught; I was going to catch him. I didn't care if it took me a hundred years, but I'd catch him; and when I did, I wasn't going to turn him over to the cops—although they'd get him, eventually.

WHEN I think back on it, I recall certain things that seemed out of place. When Sam buzzed me at my office, he sounded fine. Nothing worrying him, not the least bit nervous—just fine. "Hi, you old son!" he shouted when I lifted the receiver.

"Sam. Sam Hiller! When did you blow in?"

"Just got in a couple of days ago, fella. Busy?" he asked, that nasal quality to his voice booming over the phone.

"Not that busy; you must have something in mind."

"That I do," Sam told me. "Two babes; real stuff, too. Why don't you come on over?"

"You got yourself a boy," I told him. "What's the address?"

"Apartment 29A, 800 Fifth Avenue," he said.

"Say, you must be doing all right."

"No complaints."

"Be over in an hour," I said, then hung up.

So old Sam is back. I haven't seen him since we were separated from Uncle Sam over at Dix in '47. Bet he's fat as a pig by now. I'll be damned, I thought.

Sam did seem a bit tense when he

opened the door. All the way uptown, he kept sounding as if he wanted to tell me something, but couldn't. By the time we made the restaurant, we were old buddies again; but I couldn't stop feeling as if Sam were holding back on something.

Then, when the two dames showed up, I knew we wouldn't have too much time to talk, Sam and me. We ended up in that dirty saloon under the El; and now Sam was dead—nothing on earth could bring him back. Then, suddenly, I remembered a key—the key Sam gave me when we got out of the cab three saloons ago.

"Hold this for me," Sam said. "If anything should happen to me, just remember this; SH 666."

He didn't get a chance to fill in the rest of it, because the blonde grabbed his arm and started bleating into his ear. As I said, that was three saloons ago. Now Sam was dead, and he wouldn't be able to finish what he started to say.

I pulled the bartender over and told him to call the cops. He seemed pretty scared, but he did as I told him. The two dames were sobbing, looking at Sam and crying again. I bent down and felt through Sam's pockets. He had a wallet with a couple of hundred bucks in it, business-cards, a little book with phone numbers—nothing out of the ordinary. But, in the secret compartment, he had a receipt from a pawn shop; I lifted the ticket and put all the rest back. I know how the guys at the morgue are. I took his money and his watch, too.

Sam had often talked about his family back in Honesdale, and I figured that if they ever wanted to see his watch and the money, the best bet was for me to send it to them.

I walked outside, found a drugstore open, and bought a couple of stamps and a manila envelope. I addressed it to myself, put Sam's money and watch into it, then mailed it on the way back to the dive.

THE COPS got there shortly after I did, and they started out by asking me a few questions. To save them all a lot of wasted breath, something that most cops seem to do a lot of, I filled them in on the main points.

"Then you mean you all drank from this bottle?" the cop asked.

"No. I had beer; the dames had Manhattans, and Sam was drinking from that bottle," I said, pointing to the solitary ale bottle on the table.

"None of you tasted Hiller's drink, then?" he quizzed.

"I said no; isn't that enough?" I began to get sore.

"Don't get fresh, wise guy, or I'll have you in jail as a material witness before you can take a breath," the cop threatened.

"And I'll slap that officious-looking smile off your ugly puss before you'd have laid a hand on me," I countered. I wasn't really mad at him, but he was nettling me and I'd have liked nothing better than to have knocked the smile off his kisser.

"Oh, you're tough," he said; "all right, we're taking you in."

He reached into his back-pocket and pulled out his pair of handcuffs. He started for me, saw my fists clench, then told me to hold out my hands. "Come and get me," I taunted.

He came forward, reached his left hand out, and grabbed my wrist. As he snapped the cuffs toward my arm, I suddenly jerked back, the swing of the cuffs following through—but bright-eyes had locked his own left wrist. As he stood there with a bewildered look on his face, I grabbed the right cuff, pulled him to me with it, then spun him around a pillar and locked his right wrist. Now he was handcuffed to himself, his hands around the pillar.

Before anybody could lay a hand on me, I slapped him with my open hand, his face turning redder with each blow. His neatly-combed hair was

oil mussed up by the time three of junior's helpers had pulled me off.

Two of them held my arms and the third started to get rough. It didn't take me too long to slip out of their grip, then put my shoe in one guy's groin, my fist in another's stomach, sending the air out of him like a collapsed balloon, and knock the third guy senseless.

I threw a couple of bills at the shocked bartender, grabbed the two dames, and soon had them in a cab. "You don't know anything; you were home all night. I'm going to follow this through, but I don't want you two to go lousing up my case," I told them as we headed downtown.

"But—" Sam's blonde began.

"No buts," I cut in. "Do as I say. Whatever happens; you don't know me; you never saw me before in your life. Understand?" They both nodded numbly. "All right. I'm getting out at the next light. Just do as I said and everything'll turn out OK."

On 50th Street, I tossed the dames a pair of fins and then got out of the cab.

I FISHED out the key that Sam had given me. Under a strong light, I could see that it wasn't an ordinary key. It bore a crest on it and was big, heavy and unwieldy. I figured that it was pretty old, and I hoped that my friend, Harry Musella, could give me the info on it.

Harry had once picked a lock for me—strictly legal. By opening the old trunk in a man's house while he was out for the evening, we got enough on him to put him in jail for ten years; I got a fat bonus and Harry had an everlasting friend.

Harry owned a little place on Sixth Avenue and was still there when I showed up. He told me to wait till he had closed up, since we had a lot to talk over. I hadn't seen Harry in quite a long time.

About fifteen minutes later, he walked through the curtain into the dingy backroom of his store and said, "Well, my friend, how are you?"

"I'll be much better if you can answer some questions for me," I told him. "Look at this key."

I handed him the key and he turned on the desk light. "Mmmm," he mumbled, "pretty old."

"Any idea as to just how old?" I asked.

"This type of key was used by the French. I'd place the year around 1800, or maybe a little later. That crest," he said, pointing to the elaborately worked insignia, "is from the House of Ormson. As I recall my history, they were cousins—or some relation—to Napoleon."

"What would a person use the lock this key fit for? In other words," I said, "what would this key open?"

"Well, that's hard to answer. You know, a G. I. could have found it, brought it back, and have the damned lock on his lunch-pail for all I know," Harry said.

"Yeah," I answered, "but what would the *original* owner have used it for?"

"Well, it's so big that it must have fit a pretty big lock. I can't see a nobleman carting this key around with him," Harry said, "so it must have been used to lock something that wasn't opened too frequently. In fact, I'd say one of two things; a Mausoleum, or an old trunk."

"Do you think you could locate this lock for me?" I asked.

"Don't know," he said flatly. "This lock is pretty rare—that much we know. But since it is rare, we'll have that much less trouble looking for it. Of course," he paused to scratch his chin, "the guy who owns this may not use it every day himself; it could possibly be years before he even notices that it's missing."

"That's just dandy," I said disgustedly. "A guy gets killed because of this

key—and the owner probably doesn't even know that it's gone."

"Killed?" Harry asked.

"That's right. An old war-buddy of mine; Sam Hiller. I'm pretty certain that he was murdered because of this," I said, tapping the key with my index finger. "Well, thanks a load, Harry. I'll let you know what happens."

HARRY WAVED goodbye and I stepped outside. Right next door to Harry's store was a camera shop. I noticed that they made photostats, and it suddenly dawned on me that it might be wiser to put the key in a safe place while I was hunting for the lock.

The guy behind the counter told me that he'd have the photostat ready in about an hour, so I hopped a cab over to Al's Loan Association, a nice name for a hockshop.

I gave the clerk the receipt I had taken from Harry's wallet, paid thirty-two bucks for the package, and opened it as I sat in the cab on the way back to the camera-shop.

It was a small package, no bigger than a cigarette-case, and it was wrapped in brown paper and tied with cord. I soon had the package open and then I swore.

Sam must have really been off his nut. I had laid out thirty-two smackers for a cardboard box, a wad of cotton, and one of those tags that the Amvets sell—a license-plate in miniature; the kind most guys attach to their key-ring.

I looked on the wrapping-paper, but there was nothing written there, either on the outside or the inside. The cotton was just of the dime-store variety, and the box was the kind you buy Christmas cards in.

I was puzzled, all right. A guy gets killed because of an old key and a license-plate tag. Nothing made sense; what connection was there between the two?

Then I looked down at the tag. We



passed a street light and it cast a fleeting glare on the little piece of metal in my hand. All of a sudden, I knew that there was a connection. The tag was a replica of a New York State license plate, a 1952 plate. But the thing that made the link in my mind was the number on it; SH 666. It was the same number as Sam had whispered to me when we were making the rounds.

"Here we are, buddy," the hackie's voice jarred me out of my thoughts. "That'll be a buck and a quarter."

I PAID THE guy, who kept looking at me as if I were out of my head, and got out. Harry had turned out his lights and locked up for the night and the store next to him, the camera shop, was deserted, a dull light in back casting a long shadow on the sidewalk.

The door was open, so I walked in. I had an uneasy feeling—a sense of trouble. I didn't want to get suckered into anything, so I pulled out my gun and slowly walked around behind the counter.

The curtain was open slightly, and I pushed it aside with my gunhand and went through. There was a guy bending over the camera, his hands limply hanging to the floor. Everything was in order—save one small item; the guy had a stiletto sticking out of his back!

I drew a sharp breath, then suddenly remembered the key. I went back out to the front of the store, locked the door, pulled the shades down and began to tear the place apart.

The front was empty, so I went to the back. It was obvious that the clerk had been developing a print when he got the knife in him. His hands had the foul smell of developer on them, and I knew then that my key wasn't there. Whoever had killed the clerk, also made sure to take the picture he had been printing. Then I recalled that he must have had to make a negative before he could develop the positive. The big camera that was suspended over the table in the center of the floor was the one that he had probably used.

I opened it up, found the negative; and being somewhat of a camera bug myself, I made up a fast print. Sure enough, when I had it done, it was a picture of my key.

I figured that the killer, suddenly realizing that he had forgotten the negative, might be coming back. I couldn't very well reinsert the old negative, so I took a picture of my photo, and left the negative in the camera.

There was a bolt on the front door of the place, and I slid it into place. There was a door leading out the back way and I opened it slowly, saw the back alley deserted, then closed the door behind me. There was a piece of wire on the ground some feet away, so I picked it up, bent it out straight, then used it to jam the lock on the back door. That way, if the killer did return, I'd have successfully thwarted any attempt he might make to get back in. But, even if he did get in, the place was rigged so that he wouldn't suspect anything.

I knocked on Harry's back door, and a few minutes later we were back in his little office-bedroom.

"That's the whole deal," I finished

explaining, "and I thought that you might have heard a noise—anything from next door within the last hour."

"Not me," Harry answered. "I turned the t. v. on to watch the fights, and I didn't turn it off until nearly midnight; I was just getting into bed when you knocked."

"Nuts," I said disgustedly. I pulled out a pack of butts, lighted one and inhaled deeply. "Is there a way from this place to the next store without going outside?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "but it's boarded up. Why?"

"Well, the killer might return. If he did, I'd like to wait here and nab him; then I could get some information out of him, and get down to the bottom of this deal that much quicker."

"If we ripped the boards loose, we could fix it so that we could hear what's going on over there," Harry said.

"Let's try," I said, picking up a hammer and moving toward the door. There were about thirty nails holding the slats over the opening and it didn't take long to work them loose, pull all the boards away, and re-build the door so that we could open it in no-time flat.

WE WAITED there all night, but our friend didn't show up. Early next morning, the phone next door rang, and I went over to answer it.

As I lifted the receiver, a voice immediately started to talk in a low, sinister tone. "I've got the key, you know where the lock is. If you'd like to make a deal, say—well, \$10,000 for the lock—it could be arranged. If you don't, we'll get the lock anyhow."

"Who are you?" I asked.

Almost as if he hadn't heard me interrupt, he went on, "If you are willing to do business, be on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 25th Street at nine o'clock. Someone will meet you there." Then, the phone went dead.

I thought it over. *I had the lock*, the voice had told me. He had the key; that much I knew. But I *didn't* have the lock; I didn't even have any idea where it was, either.

My watch read eight o'clock; I had one hour to meet their man. I was positive that they'd show up in a car, so I got my friend, Bob Johnston, to stand on the other corner and get the license-number. Johnsy and I had worked together often, and we were always glad to give the other guy a hand when he needed it.

I grabbed a cup of coffee, and some ham and eggs, on the corner of 23rd and Seventh and glanced at the morning paper to see if there was anything in it about the killing. I couldn't find a single line about it. I was just finishing my second cup of coffee when the big clock over the door read fifteen minutes before nine.

The girl smiled prettily at me, so I left her a big tip, got another big grin as I walked over to the cashier, paid my bill and left. Five minutes later, I saw Johnsy across the street, got a nod from him, and stood, waiting for Lord knows what, according to the phone-instructions.

I stood on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 25th Street from a few minutes before nine in the morning until one o'clock in the afternoon, then gave up in disgust. I nodded to Johnsy, and he hailed a cab, got in, and soon was gone.

When I got back to my office, I had time to sit and figure the deal out. The key—that was the focal point of the whole thing. I reached into my breast pocket, pulled out the photo of the key that I had made, and studied it carefully.

Harry had said something about the House of Ormson. Since the crest was theirs, whatever was at the end of the jackpot must be theirs, too. I called George Friend at the State Department and asked him to fill me in.

"The House of Ormson was distant-

ly related to Napoleon," George said. "When he saw that he was going to be beaten, Napoleon gave Pierre Fremont Ormson a box. He said that this box was to be kept hidden until Napoleon sent for it. Well, old Bonaparte never got around to sending for it, and the box has been handed down from generation to generation—until the last war broke out.

"When the war was over, no one could find the box. The Nazis must have gotten hold of it, but it was never found. As I remember, the sole survivor of the Ormson family, Henri Phillipe, died a few years ago. Why the sudden interest?"

I FILLED him in on the deal, then said, "I'm pretty sure that this lock and key is the link between the box and whoever is trying to get it."

"I don't think so," George said. "First of all, when Henri Phillipe Ormson reported the loss to our authorities over there, he never mentioned any lock and key. He merely said that his family had kept it for so long that he assumed it must have contained valuables. For all we know, it may have nothing in it but dirty laundry."

"You mean that no one has *ever* opened the box?" I asked somewhat dubiously. "It's been kept all these years and no one has had the curiosity to open it?"

"Seems that way," George replied.

"What do you suggest I do?" I asked.

"Strictly off the record," George said, "I think that the French government instituted a search a while ago, but found nothing—and forgot all about it. The State Department has little interest in it and we wouldn't be able to help you. You can't appeal to your city police, because they'd stick you in Bellevue before you had half the story out. My advice to you is this: do what you want, pray like hell that you can catch Hiller's killer, and don't ask any government agencies for help.

But—and this is a big but—if you *do* find it, you'll make the French Government mighty happy. And you'll also stand in the way of some sort of reward.

"Actually," George concluded, "I don't think your friend Hiller had anything to do with it; he was probably trying to be melodramatic—nothing more."

"All right, George," I said; "thanks for the help. It seems to me that you're saying something like, 'We won't help you, but if you find it, the Internal Revenue boys will be down on your neck,' right?"

George laughed, then said, "I'm afraid it *will* be something like that."

As I hung up, I found that the few pieces I had were beginning to form a chain. Sam must have gotten the key, knowing what it was all about, and passed it on to me when he figured that they were going to kill him. The box probably had jewelry of tremendous value to rate this kind of search. They needed the key—but why? If they wanted to open the box, they could pry it open—so why did they have to go around killing people to get the key? And, if they had to get the key to open the box, why did they need the lock, too? My guess was that they had to open the lock with the key to find something else.

The phone jangled again and it was Johnsy. "Well, Mark," he asked, "what's the deal?"

"No deal, no nothing," I said. "They must have been frightened off; I never stood so long in so much heat to draw a goose-egg. Hell, my feet still hurt."

"Do they know what you look like?" he asked, a snicker on the edges of his voice.

"I suppose they do," I said, "because they must have followed me from the saloon over to Harry's—hey! They might try to get hold of Harry! Goodbye!" I said, slamming the receiver down.

It took me the better part of forty-



five minutes to get over to Harry's, but I knew that it was too late when I jumped out of the cab and sprinted into the store.

Two police-cars were drawn up in front and they were waiting for the ambulance. I told the cops that I was in a rush to pick up a set of keys Harry had made for me, and they let me go in back to find them. I noticed that the door that led to the photo shop was lying on the floor and I went in. I noticed that the camera had been tampered with. The photo-negative I had left in the camera was gone.

The body of the photographer was being carted away and I went up to the guy in charge and asked, "What killed him?"

A big smile creased the cop's face. "What do you care?"

"Just curious," I said. "I found my keys, so I'll be leaving. Thanks a lot."

"Forget it," he said. "Since you're curious, the guy's throat was cut with a stiletto. There was a body next door, too, and the killer must have used the same knife on both of 'em."

I gave an involuntary shudder. A knife was bad enough, but to have it drawn across your throat... I grabbed a cab and got back to my office.

JUST WHAT connection was there with the SH 666 license-plate tag and the key? I reached into my pocket

to pull the thing out and my hand curled around a piece of paper that I didn't remember putting there.

It was an ordinary piece of note paper, folded into a small packet. I unfolded it, spread it out on my desk, and read:

Friend,

We aren't fooling. We want that lock very badly. If you decide to be sensible, wear a bright red tie tomorrow. We will make arrangements afterwards. Remember, there's \$10,000 in it for you if you do chose to play ball and a bullet in you if you don't.

So we had made a connection; someone had slipped that note into my pocket while I was waiting. But now, I had to make a definite move quickly. In fact, I had to either figure the whole thing out by tomorrow morning—or I'd find a couple of bullets in me by nightfall.

Again, I reached for the license-tag. I turned it over in my hand. SH 666, New York 52, it said. But what was the connection between that little tag and the lock? Then I suddenly had a thought. The tag itself might be the link. I reached into my desk-drawer and took out a knife, wedged it in between the cardboard tag and the metal holder, then twisted it sharply. The cardboard tag came out, and there, in the little recess between the back of the holder and the tag itself, was a small, gleaming piece of metal. I turned the holder over in my hand, and the little hunk of metal fell out into my palm. I looked carefully at it, and then, I knew what the connection between the two seemingly different things was. The little hunk of metal, no thicker than two playing cards back-to-back and no longer than a head of a match, was the most exquisitely-worked miniature lock.

Now I had the lock—and knew where the key was. But the thing that puzzled me yet was this; what purpose

did these two items serve? Why would three men be killed to obtain them?

Although it was getting late, I called George Friend over at the State Department again, and was connected to him.

"George," I said, "I have something."

"You're lucky that you caught me," he answered. "I was just on my way out. What did you turn up?"

I filled him in on the killing of Harry and the note. Then, "When I opened the tag, I found a miniature-lock inside. Now that I have the lock and know where the key is—what next?"

"You've got me there, Mark," George said. "Maybe you'd better do as the note says—meet their man tomorrow."

"Look, George," I said. "They'll probably get tough with me. I don't want to have the lock on me—or any place that they can get their hands on it, either. Suppose I send it by registered mail to your office? Can you put it in the safe until I reach you?"

"Fair's fair," George said. "I'll do that much for you."

"Good," I shot back. "Whatever you do, don't give it up *unless* I personally ask you for it. Under no circumstances are you to send it to me if I call, or if any messenger calls for it with a note. Understand?"

"All right," George answered. "Will do."

I FIGURED that my apartment was being watched, so I took out an ordinary envelope, put the tag and the lock back together and enclosed it in the envelope. I addressed it to George over at State, placed sufficient postage on it for special delivery, and put it in the chute outside my place to be picked up by the regular mailman.

Then, I called the messenger service, and in less than an hour a boy came up to my office.

"Son," I told him, "I want you to

take this package to the postoffice. Go to the registry window, mail it and then you're through. If anybody tries to stop you, try to get rid of the package, but if you should be forced to give it up—then let them have it. Understand?" I took out a twenty and handed it to the boy. "This should take care of any difficulty."

I think the kid would have taken that empty packet to China and back for the twenty bucks, but he nodded that he understood and then he left. I watched from my window as he stepped out onto the street. A black car came around the block at top speed, a window rolled down and a nasty-looking gun poked out. I was only on the second floor, so I drew my revolver and snapped off a shot at the rear window as the car rolled past.

There was a sudden swerve, a screech of brakes and the big sedan plowed into the plate glass window across the street. The driver staggered a few steps, but I shot again, and this time he lay where he fell. The guy in back—the torpedo—wouldn't be moving ever again.

The kid took off after that and I suppose he mailed the package. It was addressed to the President of the United States, and it was empty—so I didn't expect to hear anything about it.

I took the staircase down and was across the street before hardly anybody had moved. I frisked both bodies—found an address-book and identification on both men, then beat it down the street before John Law put in his unwelcomed appearance.

As soon as it was clear, I took the back way to my office and soon was sitting at my desk, looking through the wallets. The driver, a man about fifty years old, was named Otto Guth, born in Germany and a naturalized citizen. His address was given as 355 West 72nd Street, and I found that it was a phony; the sharpshooter in the back was Hans Schilder, born in Ber-

lin in 1916, and a citizen of this country since 1949.

Already the pieces were falling into place, and I decided to make a few phone calls. Ben Remmstein, the old school chum from college, now working at the Immigration & Naturalization office, told me that a man named O. Guth had been killed in a street-accident the month after he got his final papers and Schilder had died a natural death in 1950.

Wenman at the City Morgue checked into his files and came up with the fact that neither man had been claimed by relatives, but that both bodies were signed for by the European Welfare League.

The address given by the EWL turned out to be a garage on Tenth Avenue and the further fact that there was no such organization on the charity lists as the European Welfare League further bore out my ideas.

So it all hinged on the next day. As I prepared for bed that night, I kept seeing the face of Sam Hiller before me. I kept seeing that tortured look, the one he gave me just before he died. I kept thinking of Harry Musella and his throat cut from ear-to-ear. I kept thinking of that photographer who was trying to make a buck—and the stiletto sticking out of his back.

I kept thinking that two grown men had tried to run down and shoot a kid running an errand for me. The more I thought, the angrier I got, and the angrier I got, the more the hatred built up in me.

It wasn't hard to hate a man you've never seen enough to kill him. Sam—dead Sam, now—had given my life back to me on that stinking island in the middle of nowhere. An order came through to go get the pillbox ahead of us, and I tapped Sam on his helmet, signalled him to stay there, and I crawled out. Suddenly, a slug whined and I felt that goddamned pain in my ribs—I knew I never could crawl back to that hole. And Sam crawled out to get me. I

didn't know about it until later—I was out all the time. And Sam took a slug in his leg and two in his arm before he got back with me.

And now Sam was dead. I sat there—less than three feet away—and I couldn't do a damned thing about helping Sam. He just lay there, his life flowing out on the dirty floor in that dump. But I knew now that he would feel I'd be getting even. I knew that he'd realize that I was making up for that island. I knew, too, that I'd have to kill the dirty son who did it. And I smiled, too, because I knew that I wouldn't mind killing the guy in the least; in fact, I was even looking forward to it.

I took my gun out of its holster, and emptied the shells out. I took each bullet and scratched a cross deep into the lead. There was a hunk of garlic in the kitchen and I rubbed it into the craters left in the bullets. If I had to kill the guy, and I knew I would, it was going to be with a dum-dum. Not pretty, but effective. I've seen guys with holes in their bellies big enough to put a watermelon in; and that guy tomorrow—he was going to get it that way.

NEXT MORNING, I was up early. I took a cold shower, picked at my breakfast and put on the red tie. Then I went out of my apartment by the front way, over to Central Park and was soon watching the animals in the zoo.

I felt the gun in my back almost at the same time that I sensed the guy behind me. He nudged the barrel into my ribs and said, "Don't bother looking back."

"Who are you?" I said in an even, unemotional tone.

"None of your business," came the answer; "walk ahead of me."

"Listen, stupid," I said through clenched teeth, "let's cut this cops-and-robbers routine. I'm willing to go along with you; I'm not going to need your rod in my back to get me there

any faster. So put it away, junior, before it goes off. Your boss wouldn't like it if I didn't show up."

The pressure eased up and I reached into my pocket. Again, he jammed the barrel in my ribs I feigned tripping on the slate walk, leaned forward, then spun around and put my fist wrist-deep into the guy's fat belly. He wheezed, doubled over and fell to his knees. I hacked at the back of his neck and he sprawled on the ground. Then I went over the water fountain, filled an empty soda bottle with water, and emptied it on the guy's face.

Slowly, he came around. "What happened?" he asked.

"I told you once," I said, "that I don't want you sticking a gun in my ribs. Now get up and stop trying to act like a junior G-man!"

He got up, rubbed his neck with his fat palm, filled up at the water fountain, then started walking to a car that was parked two or three blocks away on Fifth Avenue.

There were three guys in there, and they made room for me in the middle of the back seat. One guy started to frisk me, but the guy who picked me up nodded for him to lay off.

The car was fitted with blinds in the back and they pulled them down. I didn't bother trying to figure where we were going, but just sat there. When I reached into my pocket, they all jumped, but I just pulled out my pack of butts and they relaxed. The guy sitting on my left even got his lighter out and held it for me while I got it started.

About an hour later, the car drew up and we got out. We were somewhere out in the country, and I was willing to bet that it was Scarsdale. We went across a beautifully-kept lawn and up the steps to the front door. It opened as we approached and we were soon in the library—if you want to call that small-sized museum a library.

The room itself must have been at least fifty feet from wall to wall. There

was a fireplace at the left and a small bar at the right. Toward the far end, there was a large, bay-window, looking out on the garden. Chairs were drawn up in front of the desk which sat directly in front of the window.

The three other guys took seats on either side and behind me. I sat facing the empty chair behind the desk. A door at the side of the room opened on well-oiled hinges and a quick glance by the others told me that here was Mr. Big.

They all stood up and didn't sit until Mr. Big sat—or should I say, Miss Big! She was in her forties, streaks of gray hair running through the dark brown. She wore a man-tailored suit, a tie and a man's watch.

SHE DIDN'T have a trace of make-up on and I went back to my first impression—Mr. Big; this one was as queer as a three-dollar bill. She sat there, her hands folded, then looked up, black eyes piercing into me.

"Mark Varral?" she asked in a dull, lifeless voice.

"That's me, sister," I answered. "Who are you?"

As if she hadn't even heard my question, she went right on. "My advisers," she swept her hand at the three

others sitting there, "have informed me that you have the lock. We are willing to pay \$10,000 for it." She said it as if she were offering a dime for a package of chewing gum.

"Make it \$50,000," I said, "and I'll consider it."

"We don't care to quibble; fifty thousand, then," she said. "Is that a satisfactory figure?"

"I just wanted to see if you were willing to go high for it," I said. "Offer me a million—I still won't trade."

"Why are you being so persistent?" she asked. "Be reasonable; my associates," again the wave of her hand, "know how to get something when they want it."

"Sister, all the money in the world can't buy back the lives of three men. Sam was a friend of mine, saved my life in the war. Harry was a friend of mine, too. The photographer was a nice guy, too. I'll bet he left a wife and maybe a couple of kids. Your dirty money can't put life back into any of them. Go to hell!" I said.

"In other words, you won't do business?" the old buzzard asked.

"Exactly. In fact, I came here for only one reason," I said. "I wanted to see what you looked like—I wanted to see someone who could order the killing of three people, just to make a couple of bucks."

"Must we resort to other measures?" she asked.

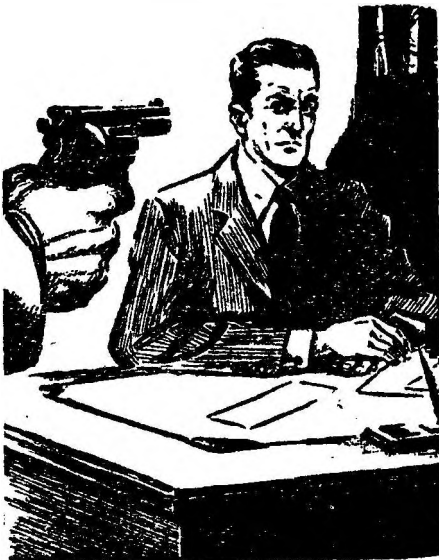
"Sister, I have a gun on me; I'd as soon gutshoot you as look at you; if I have to die killing you—then fine," I glared at her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"All I want is the guy that killed Sam. Give me the guy and you can have your lock. I want to get my hands on him; that's all I want," I told her, my face livid with color.

"And the jewels—you don't care about them?" she asked.

The last piece had fallen into place; I had the whole deal now. I wasn't fishing for pieces. All I needed was the



name of a bank—then I'd ditch these vultures and finish the deal off.

"If I gave you the lock now," I said, "would we go right to the bank?"

She looked up at me and her eyes clouded. "So you *do* know all about it. I suspected that you did—now I see that we are not talking around you."

"Glad to see that you've finally got your eyes open," I told her. "Suppose you fill me in on the minor details."

"You know, Mr. Varral, that you'll never get out of this alive?" she said. "So there is absolutely no harm in telling you."

"Go on," I said, leaning forward in my chair.

She took a cigarette, fired it up and leaned back, tapping her fingers together. "It all began some years ago—around 1800. Napoleon had been steadily losing, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he went under. But he thought that he'd get away—be able to start all over again. We don't *feel* that way, we National Socialists *know* it. So Napoleon turned over to his cousins, the House of Ormson, a box containing jewelry and other valuables he had taken as booty in his better years.

"The box was passed down, from generation-to-generation, until the World War came. We secured the box and had it sent to Berlin. When the high command sensed a temporary disaster, they had it taken by submarine to me, here in America," she paused for another long drag on her cigarette.

"I was married then," she continued, "to an American. He found out about it and stole the box from me. He placed it in a vault-box here in the city, arranging with the officers of the bank that they were to release it only upon presentation to them of the key and the miniature lock. He gave them a photograph of the key and lock—they have to match the photograph to the key," she pointed to it lying there on



the desk, "and the lock," she pointed to me.

"In order to get away from me and my colleagues," she went on, "my husband joined the U. S. Army and was sent to the Pacific. Naturally, he changed his name—but we finally found him."

I sat erect in my chair. "Sam. Sam Hiller!" I said.

"Precisely," she snarled back. "That American pig was my husband. But, we finally found him in that saloon. It was I—Clara Junger—who dropped the poison in his glass. I laughed as he fell to the floor and grovelled there like a sick dog."

"Then," I said soberly, "I'm going to kill you."

"My, but aren't we becoming dramatic," she said. "Carl, tie him up."

NONE OF my three playmates had moved, but strong arms reached around my windpipe and I was turning blue when he finally let go. They had trussed me to the chair, my legs tied to the rungs and my hands secured to the arms of the chair.

The big guy behind me did something to my neck and the next thing I knew I was lying on a table, probably in the basement, my arms held down by leather thongs and Clara Junger standing over me.

"We are through playing," she said. "I want that lock."

I stared up at her and said, "I gave the lock to a friend of mine at the

State Department. He was instructed to keep it—not to give it up unless I, personally *and* alone, came up and asked for it. You can beat me senseless—it won't do you any good."

"Oh," she said. She turned to the other guys standing there and they whispered for some minutes. Finally, one went over to the medicine chest and come back with a long hypodermic needle, filled to the top, a wad of cotton over the point.

"This," he sneered, "is sodium penatol. It is commonly known as truth serum; you'll tell us what we want to know, my friend, whether you want to or not."

Then he put the point into my arm and I felt a warm, heady sensation through my body. They asked me questions and I answered them. I didn't even try to lie—I couldn't if I had wanted to. Then, I blacked out.

When I came to, they were still there. Clara Junger bent over me and said, "You weren't lying. We just got

George Friend. It's a pity he had to be killed, but he corroborated your story."

I felt sick to my stomach at the thought of George getting mixed up in it. I got mad, too, and the next thing I knew my arms were free and I was rushing at Clara Junger, squeezing my fingers tighter and tighter around her throat. They tried to stop me, but no power on earth could have torn my hands away until she was lying on the floor, her eyes bugged out and blood slowly bubbling from her nose and mouth.

They forced me to drink something after that, and I suddenly felt dizzy. I knew that the lock and key were safe. The letter I had written the night before to the French Embassy told the whole deal. The pain is getting worse now, and I suppose it won't be long; it's getting hard to type. But I see the face of Sam Hiller now, and he's smiling. And I'm smiling, too.



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Dan Butler hadn't planned on taking any more cases, but this one fascinated him—after all, he'd never been called upon to guard a cadaver before. But there was something wrong about the case, something theatrical...

DON'T LET THAT CORPSE GET AWAY!

by Wallace McKinley

THE *PURITAN*, crack train to Boston, began to glide effortlessly out of the platform at Grand Central, and Dan Butler signalled a club-car porter. He ordered a double rye and soda, fired up a cigaret, and slouched deeper in the chair. He looked slightly peeved, something like a child who had been promised candy, but who hadn't been paid off on the promise yet.

"Who in hell would want to kill a corpse?" he mumbled under the muted rumbled of the train wheels.

"Pardon me?" said the distinguishedly-gray banker in the chair on Butler's right.

"Just my false teeth rattling. Pay no attention," Dan told him; he felt the man eye him as if he might be slightly unbalanced, then edge his chair away. Dan was beginning to wonder if the man might be right. This case was out and out whacky. Dan's business—listed as "Confidential Investigator" on the frosted glass of his office door—was to keep people alive, or to find out

who did it when they got dead. But up on the freight-car behind the engine, soon would be a dead man in a coffin. And he, Dan Butler, was being paid to see that nothing happened to the cadaver.

His drink came and he put down half of it in a long gulp. He barely tasted it; it might have been so much mild lemonade for the effect it would have on him. He would be that way until something materialized and broke in this case. Something he could get his teeth into.

He said to himself, "If I were a writer, I'd call this job 'The Corpse with the Question Mark.'" That reminded him of Joan. Joan was the divine little blonde, with what he called the church-window face, whom he had met on an earlier case. They were engaged to be married when she was mustered out of the WAVES. And he had half promised her to quit the detective business she considered so dangerous, and do a book on his career. There had been certain loose ends to be picked



up at the office. Then this Tyson case had come along.

Dan didn't mean to break the half promise, but there was something about this case that held an irresistible come-on for him. He smelled something more odiferous than a ten-day-old body lacking the ministrations of an embalmer. Yet there wasn't a single fact, a single detail to back up his intuitive hunch. Which was why he had reluctantly agreed to take it; he had almost overlooked the fee.

"But it will be the last one," he promised. "The last one—the case of 'The Corpse with the Question Mark.'" His mutter carried to the man next to him as the *Puritan* slowed for 125th Street, the last stop before they took on the steam engine at New Haven.

The man on his right readjusted his pince-nez and inspected him briefly again over the top of his financial magazine before edging around to present a patently-cold shoulder. Butler was a large slouchy-looking man, clothes typ-

ically rumpled, flat-bodied. He looked as if he would be physically soft, with the big hunk of shapeless face and the bright dots for eyes that had a slightly amused twinkle behind them. He rose and ambled to the end of the car.

"'Nother one of those double eyes, Armbruster," he told the porter. "And if I don't get back on, hold it out the window as you go through Larchmont." He went to the platform, heeled out his cigaret as he gauged the speed of the still-moving train. Then he had the platform-flap up and swung open the door. In another moment he was dropping off, before the train halted, hitting the platform on the run, moving at a ground-devouring lope up through the shadows of the dimmed-out elevated station. He patted the back pocket of his gray pin-striped suit to make certain his stubby automatic was there. It was.

He moved with surprising and effortless speed for a large man who sham-bled or slouched so pronouncedly in repose. He had reason for speed; at the 125th Street station was where the last

mortal remains of Mortimer Tyson were to be put aboard. Mortimer Tyson, the man Butler was being hired to protect.

A look of self-disgust came over his face dim beneath the snap-brim hat. He felt somewhat foolish.

There were few passengers on the platform. The *Puritan* took none on at that stop. Dan moved quickly past a couple of day-coaches, then he was up near the freight-elevator with the electric engine just ahead, a sleek monster with something lethal in its very silence. An instant later, he might have been a Westchester commuter awaiting a local—a tall figure leaning against a post and peering at the comic-strips of an evening paper. The light glow of Harlem barely touched him.

There was some mild commotion around the elevator, the rumble of the cab itself coming to a halt and the snap of the barrier being folded back. A freight-wagon towed by a couple of men creaked into view and moved up to the baggage-car behind the locomotive. The outline of the dark rectangle upon it was unmistakable. The coffin. The freight-car door was slid all the way open and a partially hooded lantern gleamed as the crew proceeded to move the late Mortimer Tyson inside. Butler's brows knitted in surprise. There was something there that didn't fit the picture.

TYSON had been a utilities-magnate, a very wealthy, if not particularly well-known man at the time of his retirement. Yet the other box about the coffin itself was of rough cheap pine, a shoddy case, such as Dan had seen at the funerals of poor people.

The baggage-car door was closed halfway; the bar dropped across the gap after a small crate had been passed inside. A trainman waggled a lantern. Butler saw the two men, who were obviously black-clad undertaker's assistants, retire onto the elevator. One of

them stepped out beside the shaft again and peered up and down the platform. He had his hands in the pockets of the black tubular topcoat that was tight for him. It was plain one of those pockets was bulged by a gun. Then he went back onto the freight lift; the spindled gates closed from top and bottom like the jaws of a trap. The two black-clad men were on the open-ended cab as it sank from sight.

A conductor called the "All aboard-d-d!" Butler came alive and swung over beside the open vestibule up forward, running lightly. The train was moving as he swung onto the steps; he hung there until it had picked up speed, with the baggage-car clear of the platform. A west-bound train from Boston came rolling into the station from the other direction, slowing to disembark passengers.

"Four minutes late, the Back Bay Special," said the conductor on the platform, holding his watch as he nodded at the incoming train.

Butler's eyes narrowed. That train's tardiness could have upset the calculations of the party or parties interested in getting possession of the remains of Mr. Mortimer Tyson, or of his coffin. The two trains in the station simultaneously, with the crowded platform and the attendant confusion and din, travellers crowding the staircases, and— Then Dan shook himself as if coming out of a dream. How the devil could anybody, even in the darkness, hope to purloin a full-sized coffin or its cargo? There was no sense to this whole thing.

And because there wasn't, he was suspicious. That was why he was making the motions of going through with it. Dan meant to find out what was behind the crazy pattern, so he moved back through the day-coaches, and Pullmans with some berths already made up, got to the club-car and signalled for his drink as he resumed his former seat. The gray-haired man with the nose-glasses made a slight

sniffing sound when Butler dumped down half that drink. With the undertone of clicking train wheels, the *Puritan* resumed its trip to Boston.

Dan Butler picked up the check on his drink, pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, and dangled it in his right hand rather obviously. He looked up and down the club-car from the two U. S. Army majors in the booth at one end to the service-pantry at the other. The dyed blonde, pushing forty across the aisle, tilted her plucked eyebrows with a slight show of interest. The little redheaded man gazed his way through cigarsmoke, then turned back to interrupt the argument of his companion.

Nothing else happened. The other passengers in the car were reading. "You're a first-class fourteen-carat fool. This whole thing is a string of phoney gags, Butler," he said to himself.

A woman entered the car. She wasn't beautiful, but everything about her was right, smart with that simplicity that spells expense—from the trim-tailored Oxford gray suit to the fur-piece caught carelessly about a shoulder. She had a slim face with a slight Slavic mould; great dark eyes; a luscious mouth unpurpled with lipstick; a tall slim figure that curved intriguingly at the proper spots. An aura of bored haughtiness clung to her every move as she seated herself several seats away. She crossed sleek silk-clad legs a showgirl would have envied, opened a book.

Dan snapped the twenty-dollar bill impatiently. If a smooth dish like that had been involved in the matter, he could have understood himself taking the case. He scowled down at his drink check again as if he thought he had been overcharged. He had to stall longer, for those were his instructions.

To take the *Puritan*, the ten o'clock train to Boston, as he had done. Tyson's body would come aboard at 125th Street, to attract as little attention as possible, and he would check on its arrival. Again as he had done. Dan would

be in the club-car immediately after leaving the Harlem stop, would have a drink in front of him, and would display a twenty-dollar bill in payment. Which he was doing now. These would be his identification signs to the unknown party he had to contact.

He was wondering how long he would have to wait, wondering if it might be the medium-sized splinter of man who had entered and hesitated at the front end of the car. The portly banker-type beside him lowered his financial journal and removed his pince-nez. The new arrival turned and left. Then Butler saw the smartly-clad girl rise, staring at him, and walk down the aisle to him. Her wide mouth broke in a smile.

"DAN," SHE said in a low throaty voice that held just the hint of some kind of a foreign accent. "How sweet to see you again! Don't tell me you don't remember Elise. . . . We were practically engaged once, weren't we? Of course, it must seem like twenty years ago now."

The "twenty" was one of the words of the prearranged code. Then she tilted up her slim face and kissed him fully on the lips. It was almost a lush kiss, lingering, full-mouthed, one that did things to a man's blood-pressure.

He got out, "Yeah. Time does pass quickly these days. Who was the chap—the ski instructor—who had the big crush on you then?"

Her dark-fringed lids dropped intriguingly a moment. "Oh, you mean Nick Hordla."

Butler said, "Yeah, Hordla." That was another key word; it was Dr. Hordla who had hired him for the job.

She looked slightly sad. "He got killed in a motor accident on a house-party up at Falmouth a few years ago. Nicky was a nice boy."

That clinched it. Tyson, the hot-coffin cargo up in the baggage-car, had met his end in a motor accident. Now, the body was en route to Falmouth to

be buried in the family's private cemetery on the Cape. That was the complete chain of identification terms as given to Butler by Dr. Hordla.

He indicated the vacant chair on his left. "I'm just finishing a drink; perhaps you'll join me."

She shook her head with a curt negative action, without her deep eyes leaving him. "But I will finish my cigaret with you. And wipe off the lipstick, Dan." She chuckled.

The banker-type sitting on Dan's right rose to leave, crowded against Butler in passing with a grunt. Dan looked around, amused as he saw the gray-haired man blink with something like surprised alarm. The latter had hit his back pocket and undoubtedly felt the automatic lodged there. It would be slightly terrifying to a stuffed-shirt like him. He left the car.

Chapter Two



UTLER reseated himself beside the girl called Elise. She had a nice trick of leaning close to him over the arm of the chair. They made small talk, dovetailing in a sort of crazy way as they pretended to be old friends

picking up the threads. It wasn't a bad game, implying intimacy with such an attractive girl. She consulted a tiny jewelled wrist-watch.

"I must be turning in. I have to catch some sleep before we get to Boston. Goodnight." One of her gloves slipped from her lap apparently by accident. Their heads came close as both bent to recover it. She whispered, "The third car forward. Lower eight." Then she had risen and was shaking hands.

He finished a third drink after she left, rehashing the known facts in his mind. Perhaps the case wasn't so crazy

after all. The whole routine they had just gone through with the code words was to make the meeting appear accidental to any interested spectators. Also so nobody would guess that Butler was on the case, or could connect him with it.

He went back to the original call from Dr. Hordla. The cultured, precise voice via the telephone suggesting—just suggesting—that if Mr. Butler considered a half hour of his time worth one hundred dollars, would he be kind enough to call at the doctor's hotel at three that afternoon. No more than that; a mere repetition of the request when he shot some questions. That had been that very day.

Curiosity, more than anything else, had prompted him to call at the smart hotel in the East Fifties. An anemic-looking halfpint of a male secretary had admitted him to the Hordla apartment. Dr. Hordla was some six feet of rangy, colorless man, mild-voiced, emanating gentleness. He offered some excellent brandy though he admitted he abstained himself as a life-long habit. His sad, watery gray eyes seemed to have forgotten how to smile.

"I was a great personal friend of the late Mortimer Tyson," he had opened the matter, "though not the physician who attended him on his death-bed. You might say I was almost a member of the family. I am pleased you do not look like a detective, Mr. Butler."

"Some people think there's a good reason behind it," Dan had quipped as he waited for a cue as to the business. Dr. Hordla was a very slow speaker; he seemed loathe to commit himself impulsively, even when dealing with facts.

"Because, you see," he went on, "I wish you to guard the body en route to the family burial-ground."

"Somebody wants to steal a corpse?" Dan had said coldly.

"Shall we say figuratively, to pick the pockets of a corpse's shroud, Mr. Butler."

The doctor wished Butler to take the train that would carry the body. After the Harlem stop, there would be one other stop at New Haven on the *Puritan*. Dan said he supposed they'd want him to ride with the coffin. The doctor had shaken his head.

"That would only draw attention to the whole thing, including the body of my late friend. And it would also—as I believe the expression in your business is—put the finger on you. It would be easier for the person, or persons, we fear to work, knowing he had to take care of you."

Dan had put down his brandy glass and risen. "I don't like it. Who are the 'person or persons'? Why do they want to pick the pockets of a dead man? Why not get regular police-protection if you have tangible fears?"

Hordla had looked very sad. "You must take my word for some things, Mr. Butler. Many years ago, there was a great scandal in the Tyson family. Fortunately it was covered up; but if it were brought to light today, many innocent people would be seriously injured. I can't tell you what the scandal was."

But Mortimer Tyson, an eccentric, had specifically demanded that he be buried with certain letters bearing on the personal scandal. They had been placed in his coffin before it had been sealed, following the church-service in New York.

"There is a certain distant—shall we say, poor and not too scrupulous—relative of the Tysons who knows of the presence of these letters. He had made veiled threats already, demanding blackmail. This man has a criminal record and can enlist the aid of criminal acquaintances."

"You mean, he would attempt to either spirit the body and coffin off the train, or break into it?"

"He would have to get it removed from the train before he could break into the metal casket, Mr. Butler."

Hordla had added that now Dan



must see why they couldn't call in the local police authorities. "And I wish to hire you to see that the casket is not removed when the train stops. The fee offered is a thousand dollars, five hundred payable now, and the remainder when the body is interred at Falmouth. This is entirely sub rosa. Regardless of the arrangements announced in the newspapers, the late Mr. Tyson will be taken to Boston on the ten o'clock train tonight. That is to throw anybody off the track as much as possible. We hope there will be no trouble. But..."

He added that few members of the deceased's family were aware of the plan. Also that those who were, would deny all knowledge of it if approached.

Butler had said he would have to consider it. The gentle Dr. Hordla raised the ante five hundred. But when Dan heard of how he would meet an unidentified person en route, connected with the case, the smell of something wrong became stronger. It was all too complicated, and the necessity of it wasn't logical; it was too damned theatrical.

OUTSIDE he had phoned his arch foe, McQuade of the Homicide Bureau. And that was the clincher that had made Dan accept the case. McQuade had just about seared the ears off him, even at several miles' distance. Told him the department was

going to crack down on him and the other buzzards of private agencies. That it was all some crazy rumor that had gone the rounds to the effect that there was some trouble in the Tyson family. And members of the family were tired of being called by private dicks offering their services.

"If there was anything breaking in the Tyson death, Butler, yours truly would have known it before you umpchays. And I don't know nothing!" McQuade had bawled.

"Thanks for admitting it," Dan had purred back, hung up, rung Hordla, and told him he was taking the assignment. Anything to show up that blubber-headed McQuade. And, so now, here he was.

Of course, a quick check of the newspapers had confirmed the facts regarding the demise of the late Tyson. The accounts had hinted of some scandal more than twenty years ago, when Tyson and his wife, now dead, had been divorced. But there was no more than that to go on.

"And playing watchdog for a stiff that only has to be watched over when the train starts—it stinks in spades," Dan Butler summed up the thing to himself again. Two heavily-armed private guards stationed in the baggage-car would discourage any attempt at outright theft of the casket or of breaking into it, normally. Yet, on the other side of the ledger was the girl, Elise. Also the fact that, according to McQuade, other private investigators had phoned the Tyson relatives. And there was the old adage about flame being around somewhere when there was smoke.

He rose to go up and do some probing on the girl, when the chief conductor with his assistant entered the car. Awaiting his turn to have his ticket checked, Dan idly ran his eyes down the columns of a paper on the reading-table. They were across the Connecticut line now, the locomotive hooting once as they rolled effortlessly

through the night. There was a small piece on the Tyson funeral services, stating that the body was being held at the funeral parlor for interment on Cape Cod on the morrow. Over in another column was a statement from some high official in Washington denying the rumored presence in the country of one Emil Svoboda, prominent metallurgist, who was listed as a Red agent, and active behind the Iron Curtain.

"Svoboda would not be permitted entrance to the country by the government," the official spokesman was quoted as saying. "He has served in posts under the satellite governments, and—"

The conductor tapped Butler's elbow and he turned to present his ticket. He had been lucky enough to secure a lower in the fourth car forward, though he did not expect to waste much time in sleeping. The conductor was a pasty-faced individual with a big bulbous nose. He punched Dan's ticket and the detective made his way forward.

In the third car forward, the upper of Number Eight was lowered and occupied. The lower section had the green curtains pulled, but was not made up. Dan scratched none too loudly on the drape and poked his head in. Elise sat staring out the window. He dropped into the seat beside her and made sign language to inquire about the snoring occupant above. She said it was safe enough, a white-haired old lady who would undoubtedly bow her head religiously at the sight of a coffin rather than ever try to rob it.

Butler looked at his black brogues propped on the opposite seat. He wanted to keep his head cool and his emotions leveled off, and looking at the pale girl with the tempting mouth did not contribute to either. He said: "How did you draw a ticket to this show? Where do you fit?"

She put a hand to her forehead with

a weary gesture, the kind that made a man feel sorry for her. "I was Mortimer Tyson's niece. But—I happened to be his favorite relative. When the will is probated I will be found to be the heir getting the bulk of the estate."

Dan made a noiseless whistle. "Which makes you the one on the X spot, the person the blackmailer is interested in. Yes?"

"Unfortunately—yes." Her eyelids shuttered in that intriguing manner.

Butler's low voice took on a brusque, cold note. "Then as a damned interested party will you kindly explain to me how in the name of Heaven you hope to keep the blackmailer from pulling a ghoul job and procuring the incriminating letters after the late Mr. Tyson is buried at Falmouth?" That was the sixty-four dollar question, the one to put them on the ropes. "Or do you intend to have guards at the grave twenty-four hours a day from now on to eternity?"

If he expected her to either flush or wince, he was disappointed. She regarded him with a slightly-angry expression, then answered levelly. "Because it will be only a sham-internment at Falmouth. My uncle's body will be buried elsewhere—secretly."

Dan half-grinned with relief. That just about put the quietus on the screwball angle of the case and all the hocus-pocus; now he was convinced it was on the level.

She continued, icicles in her voice. "There were certain facts, such as that, we did not consider necessary to tell you. Not knowing them you would have been safer had anything happened."

He shoved back the ruffled hair with the white streak. "Don't worry about me. Mr. D. Butler knows when to button up his overcoat!"

She shed the frost and swayed slightly nearer him as the train rocked on a curve. "I'll just bet you do, Mr. Butler."

Chapter Three



HE TRAIN whistled as it slowed for the New Haven yards. Dan went forward several cars and elbowed through a bunch of college men. Again he let himself off before the train had come to a halt. He was up by the baggage-car, a nondescript figure in a loose gray topcoat, even as the door of the latter was shoved open. He checked that the door on the far side was closed. In the dimness of the car he thought he detected an armed railroad-guard, but it was hard to be certain.

There was supposed to be a ten-minute wait in the Yale campus city. But that much time elapsed before the electric locomotive did its final chore of moving the train into the yards to the east. Butler had already slipped a Pullman porter a bill. A vestibule was left open and he hunched on the steps as they moved out to be hooked onto the steam engine. The latter came rumbling across a switch out to the left, whistling steam and cascading great blinding clouds of it onto the chill night with its light wind. Dan realized that here was a chance, if ever, for somebody to hijack a corpse if they were desperate enough.

Again he took to the earth and his legs, advancing like a big cat up the myriad tracks. The electric engine was uncoupled, moving off, freed from its burden. A man leaned from the half-opened door of the baggage-car. Misty steam flooded over Butler; he had his automatic in a side pocket now and a hand clamped over it. The steam cleared, and he could see the form of the cheap roughbox in the baggage-car, a small package atop it.

It had been clever, as he figured it

now, to have the cheap roughbox for traveling purposes. Somebody not too certain of his facts would never suspect it for the bier of a millionaire. A brakeman bawled across the night and Dan fitted himself between two cars of a standing freight line.

It was eerie out in the yards, with the clank of train-trucks and the slow-shifting shadows broken only by occasional lanterns, and the glow when the engine's firebox was thrown open. With a jolt, the steam locomotive contacted the train, bumped it sharply rearward twice. A brakeman hopped in to couple the housings. Steam shunted back from the panting engine and engulfed Butler in its white, fleecy blanket. Just before it did, he had the uneasy sensation of being watched, of glimpsing the wan splotch of a man's face around the corner of a boxcar further down the line. Then he was momentarily blinded.

The steam cleared and Butler shot a sweeping glance up and down the line. There was nobody in sight except for the vague figure of a brakeman atop a boxcar, further up. It could have been an optical illusion. The baggage-car door was slammed shut. Dan turned and raced back along the train. A man was dimly illuminated briefly as he clambered up the vestibule steps several cars down; his hat was off. For an instant Dan thought there was a strong resemblance to the portly, gray-headed banker-type who had been beside him in the club-car. Then he dismissed the idea; Mr. Banker wasn't the kind who went stumbling about the dark tracks of a railroad-yard in the night.

"Probably somebody who missed the train at the station and hiked out here," he told himself as he swung onto the steps of his own vestibule. He looked up the line of the already moving train. Only seconds had elapsed since he had turned his back to run. And as the train pulled out of the yard, the side of the baggage-car was revealed plainly in the wan light of the waxing moon. Nobody



was engaged in shoplifting the coffin from the car.

Butler grinned. Here he had been worrying about some kind of a phoney angle on the case, and it was simple as A, B, and C. All he had to do was ride herd on an allegedly hot corpse at a few stations and he collected handsomely. The very fee itself had heightened his suspicions. Now it was clear enough; wealthy, well-bred people, shunning publicity, with a skeleton in the family closet, afraid to go to the proper authorities, terrorized by the empty threats of the blackmailer. So they had hired Dan Butler.

It was a cinch. If anybody was insane enough to try to get at or remove the coffin enroute, while the train was moving, the commotion aroused alone would frustrate them. He reached the platform and bumped against the dark-garbed Elise in the Pullman doorway.

He gave her the "O" sign, thumb and forefinger closed. She looked thoughtful. "Perhaps—well, couldn't you go up to the baggage-car on some pretext or other and make certain the coffin—I mean—that it's Uncle Mortimer's casket all right?"

Dan shrugged. "No need to; I know. And Dr. Hordla specifically said I wasn't to mark myself by fooling around the coffin."

"Oh." There was disappointment in her voice and a fretful frown on her wide forehead. They got down to Lower Eight and ducked in. She said she had to powder her nose and left.

LIGHTING a cigaret, Dan Butler took a few quick puffs and pinched it out. The click of the wheels beneath became a monotonous refrain. He felt

himself tightening up inside, and needed a drink again. They rushed by a piece of rocky waterfront; he heard a muffled voice inquiring when they would reach New London, and if it would be possible to dispatch a telegram at that point. The *Puritan* was not scheduled to make a stop.

It was then that Dan realized how long Elise had been gone. He waited a couple more minutes, then moved out and down to the ladies' room at the end of the car. It was an embarrassing predicament. He jabbed at the green cloth curtain and called "Elise" twice. The cold cream-smearing bony face of a spinster of fifty poked out.

"Young man, I'll report you to the railroad authorities," she croaked. "A masher! I'll—" She was going to shrill crescendo.

Butler thought fast. "Madam, I'm looking for my bride!"

"Well, there's been no other woman, bride or otherwise, in here in the last fifteen minutes—but myself, of course. I've got a good mind to call the conductor, anyway, and—"

Dan darted past her toward the vestibule with a prescience of danger. He got to the door in time to see Elise emerging from the door of the next car. A man with a broad-brimmed black Homburg stood smoking a cigar on the far platform. Something dropped from Elise's bag as she passed him. Dan Butler strode out.

She saw him, gave a little start, and put a gloved hand on his arm. "I'm worried. . . . As I got to the ladies' room—I—I thought I was being followed. So I kept on going through several cars till I found a trainman. I made a pretext for speaking to him. . . . The person shadowing me—he—he had disappeared."

Butler nodded curtly, said she had dropped something. He stepped over to the other platform. The man in the Homburg smiled through a blue haze of cigar smoke. "The lady just dropped some matches." He extended them.

Dan took them, idly noticing that the lid of the paper jacket had been torn off.

He had a hunch something was due to break, a feeling that they were overdue to. He and Elise got back to Lower Eight. Dan said, "If it was a man following you, why didn't you go into the ladies' room? He couldn't have followed you. There was a woman already in there."

He never did get the answer. There was a jolt like a small earthquake, the screeching of locked wheels on the frosty tracks beneath. The seat opposite seemed to leap across space and hit Butler in the chest and along the jaw. He was on the floor and it was like having a rug yanked out backward from under him. Somebody had obviously pulled the emergency-stop cord and the air brakes had been applied full force.

This could be it.

UP AND DOWN the car people were groaning or screaming. Butler got out into the aisle, and fell over a blonde in a lacy nightgown—who had been thrown from an upper berth. Dan noted that she was cute, stood her up, and hurried on for the end of the car. He elbowed by two men, got to the platform where he had encountered Elise a few moments before. The red coal of the still burning-cigar of the black-hatted man glowed from the floor. There was no sign of the owner, though, and cold air hit the dazed Butler in the face like a blow. The vestibule door was open.

He swung out, dropped to the half-frozen roadbed, and ran up toward the engine hissing in protest like some human monster. Conductors and trainmen were swinging down, lanterns bobbing excitedly in the wind. Automatic half out of his pocket, Butler pointed at the dark baggage-car and shouted to a member of the train crew.

"Anything happen there?"

The man ran over and pounded on the sliding door of the baggage-car,

shouting through the wind to identify himself. "Are you all right?" he asked when a man poked his head through the aperture of the door. The baggage-man said they were. "Joe just bumped his head against the coffin when we stopped. 'S all."

Dan let out his breath. It meant that the coffin was still there. The chief conductor came along and said it probably was that drunk they had had trouble with back in the club-car. Butler looked over toward the road; it was several hundred yards away across bare bumpy terrain. Dan pointed toward the figure topping one of the rises at a swaying run, headed toward a gas-station.

The trainmen held a brief conference, then decided to let the man escape and get the train under way again. Dan climbed back aboard and they got under way again.

ELISE was ruefully inspecting a run in her stocking at the knee. Dan said the casket was all right. She accepted it without question, and he noticed that—noticed, too, how she was at ease, poised, in contrast to her tension just before the train had been braked.

She smiled enigmatically, evidently reading his mind. "You're so capable and energetic, Mr. Butler, that my worries have vanished. We will undoubtedly get my uncle to Boston without mishap." She patted back a yawn, said she'd take a nap, and reached for the cowled light beside the window significantly.

Dan said she'd know where to find him on the car ahead. On the platform of his own car, he smoked a couple of cigarets, thinking. The still-lighted cigar left by the black-hatted man on the other platform stuck in his mind. A man doesn't throw away a cigar smoked less than a third down... except in an emergency. And—the black-hatted man had not been drunk.

Butler had a drink sent up to his

Pullman-section and tried to figure an angle on it while he sipped.

They moved through Saybrook. Then Butler was looking out the window of his darkened section at the basin on the edge of New London, the train grinding on the long curve at reduced speed. He stood up and pulled on his topcoat. From here on it would be clear sailing, non-stop to the Hub City. And he was beginning to get that jittery feeling inside again that all was not strictly on the up-and-up in this case. Perhaps the casket was just a stooge, a piece of bait—

But they didn't stop in New London; Dan returned to his seat and propped open a volume on economics. Strangely enough, the stuff was a sure-fire safeguard against dozing with him.

He turned a page. Aside from the muted undertone of sleeping people in the green-walled tunnel that was the interior of the Pullman, it was hushed. The track-noises had faded into a lulling monotone. A woman down the aisle sneezed in her berth. Butler heard lowered voices, turned to see the chief conductor coming along, and took his hand out of the pocket of his topcoat on the seat beside him. The automatic was in that pocket.

Then the conductor was bending over him, muttering something about a mistake in reservations and asking to see his ticket. Dan Butler put his right hand in his vest pocket. And the fire-works opened up.

He sensed the presence of a woman, jerked his eyes around. It was Elise. The conductor's bulking form had blotted out sight of her coming up the aisle. Terror had wrenched her face into a silent stricken mask.

"Hey, what the hell—" Dan started, half rising. He stabbed his right hand toward the topcoat pocket.

The conductor's left fist, hamlike, hooked around and exploded on the bridge of Dan's nose between the eyes. His neck snapped against the back of the seat and he felt the topcoat sliding

to the car floor. Lights geysered before his blinded eyes, as the red spurted down over his mouth. He cursed and ducked sideward away from the follow-up he expected. He got his vision cleared in time to see the conductor's blue-sleeved arm snatch the black bag from Elise's hands.

"This is your man, Officer," the conductor said. "I spotted him as we came into New Haven, but he must've been hiding somewhere on the train. But it's him all right; he's the one who has been riding these trains and robbing the passengers with crooked cards. A card sharp!"

Butler wondered if he were out cold and dreaming crazily. Maybe the whole cockeyed case was only a hallucination. He spat blood that was trickling down inside his mouth. Then he saw the neat stubby .32 the conductor had plucked from Elsie's bag and was holding close against her side. He switched his eyes up to the conductor's face. It had changed; no pasty countenance with bulbous nose. Instead, it was the distinguished gray-haired banker-type, pince-nez gone now, who had been in the club-car. He wore a conductor's blue coat.

A third figure appeared, the splinter of a man who had appeared in the club-car entrance briefly. He flipped back the lapel of a raincoat to reveal some kind of a badge a brief instant. "The card sharp, eh, conductor? And the woman's the come-on who works with him, eh? All right. We don't want any trouble, mister; I'll just take you off—"

Dan came up, thrusting hard, lashing out with a foot and pistoning his left into the body of the stout man who looked like a banker. Two things happened. The thin little fellow side-stepped neatly, and all there was from the banker guy was a tight grunt, Butler's knuckles bumping muscles like a rock. Thin Man was whipping that sudden-drawn blackjack across.

Dan Bulter averted the blow slight-

ly with upthrust arm. The sap made a thud-thud sound on the side of his head. And the dimmed lights of the sleeping car flared to a brief, intense red, exploded into lavender comets, and went out.

Dan heard one of them who sounded a mile away say, "See about his gun, Bill!"

Chapter Four



HE WHIFF of colder air hit his mashed face. They were crossing a vestibule into the next car forward. One blurred eye open, Dan tried to play possum, and let his legs fold completely. The next instant, he jackknifed

his body and tried for a ram-play on the Banker, who was half-dragging him along. Thin Man, herding the girl behind, brought the sap down glancing off Butler's ear and onto his shoulder. It numbed the latter.

They were in a stateroom when the pea-soup thinned from Dan's brain next. He himself was propped on a berth, head sagging so that he stared down at the fresh bloodstains on his trousers. Past other trousered legs he saw the silk-sheened ones of Elise. Propping his eyelids wider he realized she sat across the way, calm as a hunk of alabaster statue.

"Toting a heater, too, eh?" It was the splinter of guy standing before Butler. He waved the automatic like an iron finger in one hand. "All right. All right. Who's working with you?"

Dan Butler shrugged. "If you chaps want to play crazy—don't count on me to cooperate! I'm no crooked gambler. What's the frame?"

A loose set of knuckles bounced off his fast-swelling eye. He started to curse. Over by the door stood the bogus conductor, Mr. Banker, covering the

whole compartment with Elise's small gun. His eyes were narrowed up into stony hard bits that plainly said he would know no compunction if he had to pull the trigger.

"Come on," Thin Man spat at Dan. "You aren't pulling the coffin-job alone? Who and where are the others?" When Butler swore some more he got clipped under the chin. The case was breaking fast; the corpse was hot.

He slumped down in the seat, feigning unconsciousness. Mr. Banker snorted, "Bill, you play damned rough!"

Bill, Thin Man, said, "This isn't squat-tag. We're all riding the hearse; it's the works now. . . . Come on, Lilli! The game's up. You aren't fooling us any more. You made a play for the heater in your bag when you realized we were grabbing you with the chump here. Spit it out."

Dan shifted suddenly on the seat as the train tilted sharply on a long heavily-banked curve. It was slowing. He cracked an eyelid and saw that Bill, Thin Man, was facing the girl, and that Mr. Banker's dignified face was turned that way, too. And the private detective made his play, grabbing the hat mashed over his head and slinging it. It caught Banker across the eyes. And Butler was hurtling for the light switch.

There was no need to complete the play. Even as Bill twisted, Dan had a split-second glimpse of Elise grabbing at her tailored skirt, revealing a length of bare thigh, snatching for a slim derringer in a clip there. She was very fast with it. Dan kicked Mr. Banker in the shins and twisted the .32 from his hand as it spat into the carpet once.

The derringer was in Bill's back and Elise stood up calmly. There was no need to flick out the lights. "Dan, stay here with them; I'll be right back." She reached up and pulled the emergency-stop cord. Then she slid through the door as Mr. Banker cursed like a Marine. Butler kicked it closed and put his back against it. He had to brace

himself stiffly against the angle of the car floor.

Bill and Mr. Banker didn't seem too excited. "Don't worry. She won't be able to get off, Bill. I cut the emergency-stop cord up on the next platform; won't work."

The battered-faced Butler watched them, then realized the train was slowing still more. Bill glanced at his wrist-watch. His eyes widened with alarm. "Hell, it's stopped." He threw a glance at the windows with the drawn shades. "My gawd—this is it! We're pulling into Mystic; she's loose and—"

"And I hope she'll have sense enough to get some coppers! Move back there!" Dan said. He hooked out a toe and drew in his own automatic that the Bill guy had let fall, when Elise had gotten the drop on him. As he bent and picked it up, gropingly as his head still spun, somebody large smashed into the compartment-door at the other side.

He was sent staggering forward. But before either other man could move, the door crashed inward. A colored porter, with walking-beam shoulders bulging his white jacket, stood there. Behind him were a cluster of excited faces, figures roused from their berths and in hastily-donned dressing gowns. A couple of trainmen pushed through.

"The poor girl—she said these men tried to abduct her! Right on a train, mind you!" one woman outside shrilled.

"A young bride like her, too, and—"

People were spilling into the room. Mr. Banker swung to a trainman calmly. "I can identify myself with these credentials here," he said assuredly. "I think I've ridden on the *Puritan* enough for you to know me, Charlie. I'm—" He leaned closer to the railroad man to speak in his ear.

DAN BUTLER grabbed his cue fast. He elbowed Bill onto a seat, rabbit-punched Mr. Banker into momentary silence, and let out with a nice

blood-curdling yell. He surprised himself at the effect he attained. "I'm her husband! I'm her husband! Where did she go? Please—"

It worked. Wrought-up sympathizing passengers opened an avenue for him as Mr. Banker and the trainman grappled at him. Dan felt his topcoat rip, but got into the aisle and the milling small throng closed behind him.

"That way!" A bald man pointed toward the front end.

Butler reeled from the beating he had received, but levered himself up the aisle, using the seat backs like horizontal ladder-rungs. One thing was stamped in his mind. Elise, when Mr. Banker and Bill had borne down on him, had given no outcry despite the fact there was no gun on her at the moment; there had been no shout of warning. The case looked like some kind of a hoax once again, and a hoax on him.

On the platform, Dan got the vestibule open and dropped out on a road-bed overlooking bleak marshes between the sea and a small Connecticut town. Two church-spires shone whitely in the moonlight. The train had already drawn to a halt, engine chugging asthmatically up ahead. And just down from it, the baggage-car door had opened.... Men were unloading the coffin in the cheap roughbox.

The hot corpse was being snatched.

Chapter Five



BUTLER floundered forward, then caught a foot in a hand-switch control and plunged down hard. He had a deep gash over one eye when he pushed himself up, and his right ankle had been twisted. He hobbled on, scarcely able to believe his eyes. The

close-up station was unlit, but he could see the men under the moon lifting the coffin down, two thick-set figures. And the baggage-car crew was offering no protest, much less any resistance. There were no guns in sight, nor had any shots been fired.

"They bought out the baggage-men!" flashed through Dan's throbbing brain. It seemed to be it, a thing he had not thought of. Advancing at limited speed, he saw the husky pair moving swiftly toward a light but high-powered delivery type truck. They shifted the roughbox inside with surprising ease. The baggage-car door thudded closed. Butler tripped again over the rim of the platform.

They had closed the rear of the truck when he rose, were scuttling around to the front. He ran with all he had, reeling, teeth gnashing against the pain of his injured ankle. The truck-motor roared. Dan lunged past a baggage-wagon and out of the shadows and at the running-board of the light truck. As it bolted away his hand closed on the door-handle of the enclosed cab. It was locked, and did not twist in his grasp. He was dragged yards before he managed to get his feet braced on the running-board, stiffened against the careening body a little behind the door window.

They raced in a wide curve and straightened on a tree-flanked street, the naked branches limned against the moon-silvered sky. In that light, Dan Butler got a look at the closed window of the door. And he knew, by the steel-wire tracery of the glass that it was bullet-proof. He edged his face forward, was almost thrown off as they screamed on two tires around into the deserted main-street. He saw the stubby-jawed figure beside the driver and the big bluish automatic in the man's hand.

Dan figured fast. He couldn't gun his way into the gun-proof, locked cab. Once he was discovered out there—well, there'd be some lovely flowers

at the grave for the late Mr. Butler. His once chance was getting a tire; he was leaning wide, to try for the front one.

They had only gone a few blocks on the main-street silent as a corridor of tombstones at this hour. And the dark sedan bolted from the unseen alley on the right.

Brakes ground and tires shrilled burning protest as the truck swerved to avoid a crash. The expertly-handled sedan rocked out to almost fully block the road. And the truck bearing the casket headed for a store-front, jumped the curbing, and bumped to a halt with its front bumper against a post.

Dan had leaped at the last moment, landed rolling. But he had lost his gun. He got off his knees, half-spinning; vague figures were already closing on the blockaded truck. A gun spat twice, and the guard beside the driver who had flung open one door to make a stand doubled onto the pavement. A

man in a black hat darted past Butler; he placed him as the man with the big cigar on the train platform who had picked up the girl's matches. He drove past the shot man and into the truck cab. And he came out tugging at the limp form of the driver.

DAN ADVANCED a few steps toward the big automatic that had fallen from the shot guard's hand.

"It's all right, Mr. Butler," somebody cried softly. He turned and saw the gentle-voiced Dr. Hordla coming up from the sedan that was already being wrenched about to head up the road.

"The truck all right?" the black-hatted one yelled.

"Well, we fooled 'em anyway," Butler started to say. "I hopped on the truck and—"

"Yes-s, Dan." And Elise, whom Bill had called "Lilli" back in the train



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stateroom, walked toward him, face uplifted, eyes soft.

Something warned him. It was too late; the little derringer close to her side flashed up like a metallic serpent under the moon. It wasn't a stiff crack that caught him over the temple, but he had caught so many that evening that he felt his body sag even before consciousness ebbed. "We were finished with him," Elise's voice came like a dreamy whisper.

The soft-toned Hordla cursed. "We can't leave him behind; he can tell too much now. He has seen us—"

Dan had a vague sensation of being lifted and shifted into the back end of the truck. Darkness seemed to smother him. The end of the coffin roughbox hit him in the cheek. He dimly sensed the roar of the motor...

IT WAS A steady tapping sound that snapped Butler from the half-dream state, in which he lurched about loosely to the motion of the jolting, careening truck. A rasping noise impinged on his consciousness. He was very tired and little demons were playing bowls with iron-shod balls inside his skull. Then he was aware of somebody breathing over his face.

It was ghostly. Dan Butler clutched at consciousness like a man with one foot in the grave. Dim light came through a small window over the partition of the driver's cab. And Dan saw himself looking up at a bald, white-bearded gnome of man who held a cold chisel in one hand and was twisted half out of the pried-up lid of the roughbox, out of the casket.

Butler pushed up to his knees. He peered, swallowing the hard way.

The gnome-like figure croaked something, and Dan Butler heaved a sigh of relief as he realized it was no ghost. Nor was it the dead Mortimer Tyson; Tyson had been a large man with a mane of white hair. The little man crawled further from his coffin hiding place.

Dan wasted no further time than in figuring things out. He had cudged his brains at that, en route on the train as he neared the spot where he was to play stooge. The little, aged man was gesturing toward the back doors. Taking the chisel, Butler crawled to them as the truck labored up a steep grade.

The doors had not been locked, only the latch closed. Furiously, realizing this pack of whom the girl had been the decoy, could not let him live—much less escape—he pried and tore at those doors. One swung wide so suddenly he almost plunged out onto the hill up which the truck pushed at reduced speed in second gear.

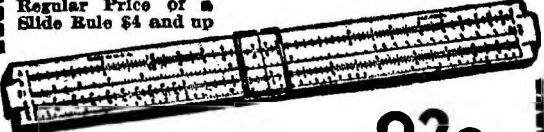
Half holding the feeble little man, Dan lowered him out, jumped immediately after. He rolled into the brush at the side of the road, and walked back weakly to lift the little man from hands and knees. There was a hollow crash. Butler looked after the truck. Beyond he could see the headlights of the sedan in front probing against the night. And behind was the empty roughbox which had slid out of the truck. Butler dragged the gnome into the high grass of the open country that looked down upon a tide-water stream.

He held his breath and prayed. The two cars moved from sight, motors dimming. But back down on the night came the loud banging of the flapping steel doors of the truck. Dan knew he didn't have long.

And he made a mistake. Still holding the chisel, his lone weapon now, he beckoned the little man after him and limped painfully on his bad ankle down through the grass. He looked behind. The little man had groped a few steps only to stand indecisively, peering about. Butler called. The man came a few tentative steps, then, hand probing ahead of him, stepped smack into a low bush and almost fell. Dan went back and stared close at his face. The coffin-cargo was more than half blind.

[Turn Page]

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From up at the top of the hill there was the scream of hard-braked tires on the road, faint voices. Then headlights came sweeping back down the hill as Dan half-dragged the little man further back and down into the grass. There was a chance the returning cars would pass them.

Then Butler knew they wouldn't, as the headlights of the sedan picked up the roughbox that had fallen into the road. He should have removed the tell-tale evidence.

It was over quickly. The sedan yanked to the side and the truck pulled in behind it. Hordla glided out; after him came the girl, a third man. And the stocky black-hatted one popped from the truck. They conferred but briefly. Then flashlights knifed through the night and up and down the roadside. Elise called out, pointing to the swathe left in the grass by the fugitives.

Fortunately the lamed Butler had half-circled from the spot he had entered the grass; but he knew it was a mere matter of seconds. A bluff was the last resort, one step from a nice cold demise in the Connecticut countryside. He half rose, the gleaming stubby chisel spiking from his hand. It could have been a gun-barrel.

"All right! Don't move.... You're covered and standing there with your own death-warrants in your hands!"

His voice echoed on the stillness. It became a frozen tableau with the four figures on the road, Butler in the grass over the crouched gnome, all braced against the stiff wind that raced down the hillside.

Because the wind was that way, none of them heard the approach of the deluxe high-powered station-wagon that rounded the curve below so suddenly.

Headlights blazed from it as its occupants spotted the group on the asphalt blinding them with half-raised arms. And Mr. Banker, with Bill and another man, leaped out, automatics covering them.

"Who's that there in the grass?" Mr. Banker bawled.

"Dan Butler, chum," Butler said weakly. "Just been holding these folks here until you happened along and—"

"All right," Bill cut in harshly. "You got Emil Svoboda there with you?"

THEY WERE in the modestly-furnished livingroom of the snug renovated little farmhouse tucked deep on a backroad of the Connecticut hills. Mr. Banker had emerged from the side-room, where he had held a confab with Dr. Hordla and his confederates. The man known as Bill stood in the doorway of that room, knuckles of one hand freshly bruised.

Mr. Banker sat across the table from Butler, who was trying to forget the pain of his aching head with a tall slug of rye before him. Mr. Banker had already identified himself. Dexter Owens, one of the leading chemical engineers of the country. He had also identified Emil Svoboda as a fugitive from Czechoslovakia, a great expert on metals.

"It's all very simple," Bert Owens went on. "You know who Svoboda is now. He played with the Reds to keep alive and stall them off. But we couldn't get the U. S. officials to believe he was not an enemy agent. And we knew he had perfected a formula which would cut the manufacturing-time of aluminum in half. We had to get him out—and into this country illegally. William Evers over there worked that almost single-handedly."

Butler swallowed. Evers was one of the toughest men the F. B. I. had ever had in its ranks until he resigned to take over this assignment.

Owens made the rest of it clear. An old friend of the Tyson family, he had

[Turn Page]



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contacted them and made arrangements to pass Svoboda off briefly as the corpse of the late Mortimer Tyson.

"We had poor Svoboda in New York but knew we were under close surveillance of Red agents. So we planned the living-man-in-the-coffin scheme. We couldn't call on official assistance. But a Mr. McQuade of the New York police department did help considerably."

BUTLER almost spilled his drink. And that envious would-be rival of his had sworn there was nothing to the rumor about the Tysons.

"That's where your friend, Elise—She's really Lilli Hache, an international agent and damned dangerous, by the way—came in. She had known Svoboda. We didn't know which side she was playing. Then she came to us, with the story an American detective had been hired to get hold of the coffin with the live body. They knew Svoboda wasn't dead. Somehow they got word of our plans to slip him up here."

Owens added that, following an operation to restore his faded eyesight, Svoboda would be able to draw up again his intricate aluminum process, thus proving his loyalty.

The rest was simple. "I was the stooge," Dan guessed.

"Exactly; Hordla just gave us the details; he was an Australian who went Red." Elise had identified Butler, the alleged detective hired to steal the coffin, but the kiss on the club-car. That had been her proof to Owens she was straight. "You see, Butler, the idea was that if we watched you, the Hordla gang would have their hands clear to get that coffin."

"You watched," Dan agreed.

"After New Haven, where we had seen you prowling about the baggage-car, apparently backing up her charges, she came back to our compartment and asked when we would jump you. I told her at the last moment, shortly after we left New Lon-

[Turn To Page 92]

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don. She said at Mystic and I let it slip. Yes; that was how she knew we would remove the coffin back there."

"But how did she get the information to her confederates?" Butler wanted to know.

"They had a pretty good idea it was east of New London, anyway. Leaving us she slipped the dope to Shleiner. He pulled the emergency-cord, left the train, and phoned it to New London; he was even fortunate enough himself to get a lift and get in on the play."

Dan nodded as he fingered his scalp gingerly. Shleiner was the man with the black hat. Dan remembered the dropped packet of matches with the lid torn off; the information had been written on the lid.



"The rest is pretty obvious. They did grab off Svoboda for a few minutes."

Dan Butler nodded ruefully. "Very clear. And I thought I was going through routine motions on a simple case with a fat fee."

Dexter Owens chuckled. "Don't worry about the fee, Butler. We'd never have caught up to them. It was you who got Svoboda out of the truck, and then held them up just long enough, faking that chisel as a gun. That piece of nerve is worth a very nice check, my friend."

SPOTLIGHT

On Crime

(continued from page 6)

neath himself and was concealing them.

ONE OF THE oldest and yet most successful techniques of getting money without even asking for it is the "crust of bread" trick. You are walking with your best girl down a not-too-crowded street. A shabby little man darts out in front of you, steps down from the sidewalk, and picks up a crust of bread. He thrusts it into his mouth and begins to chew it like a starved animal. You would have to be made of stone and iron, without a heart or soul, to remain unaffected; chances are you will even have to persist before he takes money from you. And you may never try to figure out the strange sequences that could lead up to man-bread-you-money. He either planted it there before you came, or dropped it down from his sleeve. Repeated twenty times a day, and the collection is good. One variation on this technique is to use a garbage-can as the picking-up place instead of the street.

The fainting technique requires the use of at least two or three confederates, but the take is high enough to warrant the hiring of extra help. You are walking down a busy street, and not a police officer is in sight. Suddenly a man stumbles and faints. A man shouts, "Get a doctor, quick."

Out of the crowd comes a respectable-looking man who replies, "I am a member of the medical profession." He examines the man on the ground, who is slowly recovering consciousness. "Why this man is suffering from starvation!"

Then he speaks to the poor unfortunate, "My good man, when was the last time you had any food?" A murmur, then a sobbing reply, "Not for three days." A man in the crowd takes

[Turn Page]



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off his hat, places a dollar bill in it and takes up the collection. Bet you drop at least two bits or a half dollar into that hat! Only after you see this done twice, do you realize you have been gyped.



Refinement pays off in this racket. A well-dressed woman with a valise, stops another woman. "I only have a ten-dollar bill in my purse. I understand the bus drivers won't change such a large bill; it really is embarrassing, but can you spare a dime? If you give me your name and address, I'll mail the coin to you."

The woman opens her purse and is only too glad to part with a dime; she brushes off the idea of writing down name and address. You'd be surprised how many times this can be done within sixty minutes.

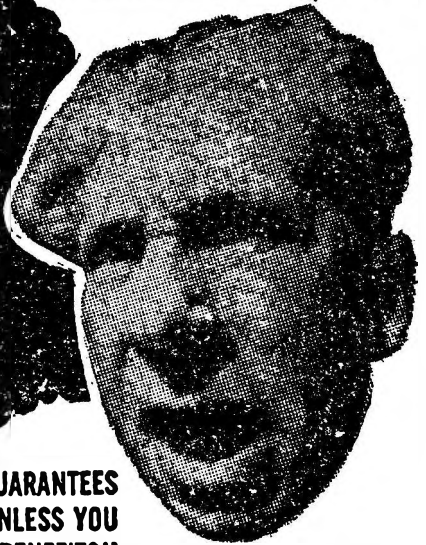
Outside one of the leading theatres in town, at box-office time as well as at the intermission, would appear a man in full dress. He carried a tray with chewing gum. He would walk silently and slowly in front of the theatre. There were all kinds of rumors—anything from the story that he once was a famous actor to the one that he was the black sheep son of a certain millionaire. Net result was that his tray became full of coins and bills, and the amount of chewing gum never varied.

[Turn To Page 96]

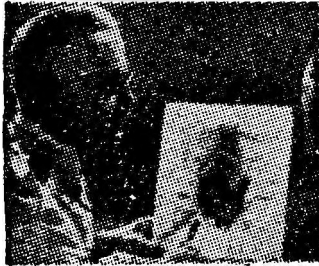
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What would you do if a well dressed man came up and said, "All I want is just ten cents; I'm broke. Please don't give me more, for I'm not a beggar. I hate to do this." Chances are you would either give a dime, or insist on the man taking a larger sum of money.

Children have been used in this racket and here are some of the set-ups. A boy has a broken bottle of milk in his hand. He is sobbing. You stop the boy and inquire what is wrong. "I just broke the milk-bottle, and if I go up, my stepfather will strap me." What can you do—especially if you have children of your own? In these days of high milk-prices, you separate yourself from two bits.



A KID SITS dejected on the steps with five newspapers on his lap and tears streaming down his face. His last five papers, and he hasn't sold them yet. You give him the money and even let him keep the papers. He'll probably repeat that stunt till way over bedtime.

Or you may pass a little girl who is huddled against the wall. She holds in her hands a tray with various items and a sign "Twenty-five Cents." You fumble in your pocket for some pennies which you then drop on the tray. As you start to walk away the child says, "I don't want any charity," and she hands you back the small change.

[Turn To Page 98]

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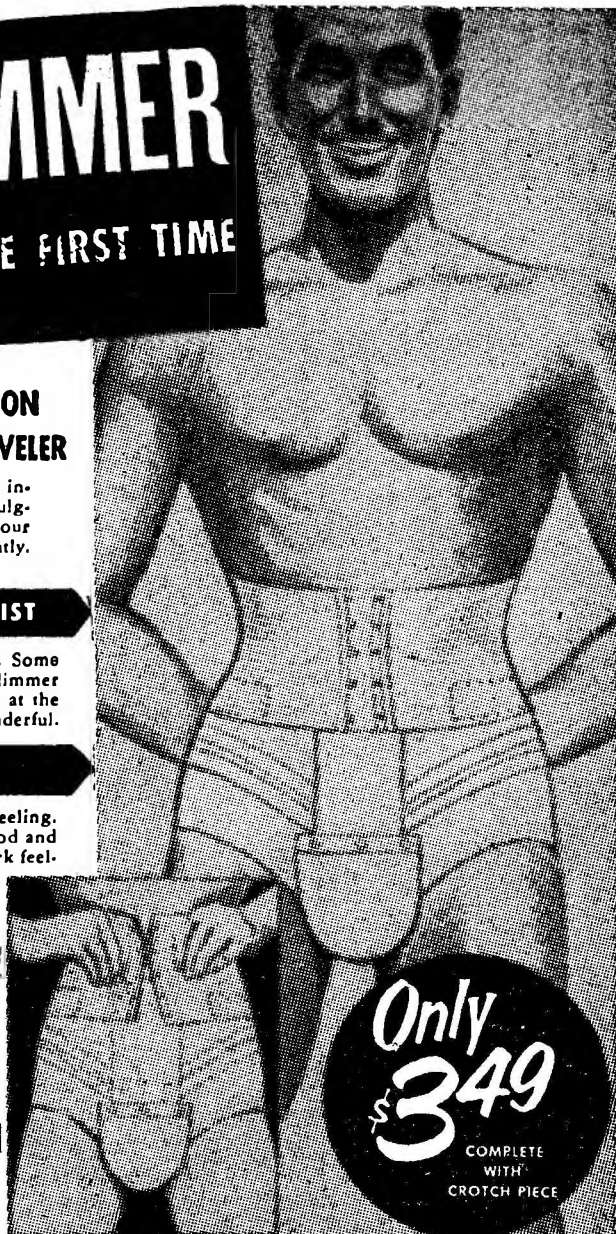
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Recently many children have aided in charity drives of one kind or another. A group of youngsters went into business for themselves, using the accredited boxes of a well-known organization. Only they kept the receipts for themselves, having discovered how easily a human being and his money can be parted.

Here are some time tested, sound bits of advice about what to do when you want to give the stranger a bit of money. First of all, when approached do this: "I shall be glad to help you; give me your name, and address, and I will communicate with the proper organization."

You have in your community religious, non-sectarian, and community chest funds, as well as official relief organizations; nine times out of ten

that will be the end of the matter. Second, make it your business to give your charitable contributions to accredited groups. Thus you know your money will help some worthy unfortunate meet the demands of the day. Third, if asked for money to buy a hungry man a meal, follow the spirit of Christ—none of them shall hunger while I have a crust of bread. Offer to accompany the person to a lunchroom, and say you will leave the money with the cashier or sit down and watch him eat. In regard to the last seven people who tried to make a "touch" for a bite to eat, here is the score: five turned down the offer; one said he really wanted a shot of whiskey; and the seventh ate as though he were starved.

It is my opinion that those who trade on human sympathies are among the lowest in the scale of human beings. They exist, and now you know how to recognize some of them and what to do.



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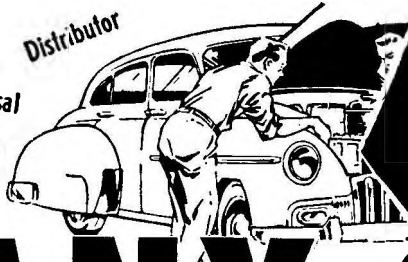
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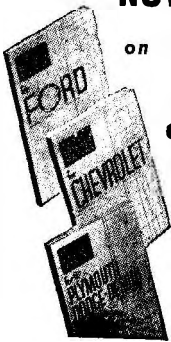
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