

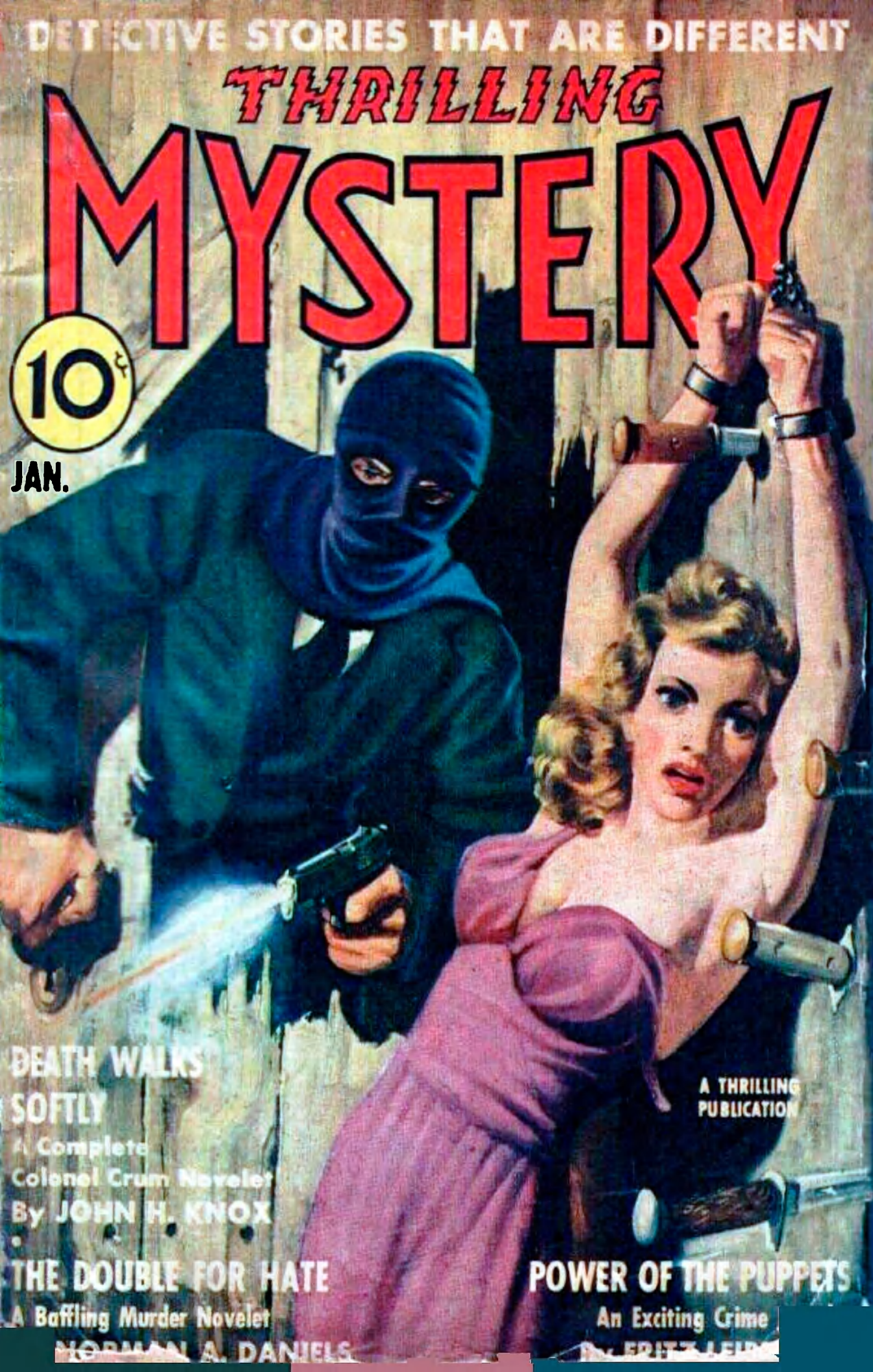
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THRILLING

MYSTERY

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**DEATH WALKS
SOFTLY**

A Complete
Colonel Crum Novelet
By **JOHN H. KNOX**

THE DOUBLE FOR HATE

A Baffling Murder Novelet
NORMAN A. DANIELS

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

POWER OF THE PUPPETS

An Exciting Crime
FRITZ LEIB



Day buys a Watch

on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

BULOVA **ELGIN** **GRUEN** **KENT** **BENRUS**

Yes—only 10c a day on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN will buy your choice of these nationally known watches. It's simple—here's how you go about it...

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine watches without burden on the pocket book or savings.

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A postcard brings my complete 48-page catalogue and full details on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN. No obligation.

JIM FEENEY
L. W. Sweet—Dept. 722-A, 1670 Broadway
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find \$1 deposit. Send me Watch No. _____ Price \$_____ I agree to wear the watch for 10 days. If not satisfied, I'll return it and you will refund my dollar. If I keep it, I'll pay balance in 10 equal monthly payments.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

R22
\$24.75

M17
\$24.75

R22 - Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. \$24.75
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L140 - Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. \$37.50
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K166
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P143 - Ladies' tiny KENT. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. \$15.95
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O68
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K273
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K273 - Service Watch - new radium dial, easy-to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Made especially for Army and Navy men.
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T567

O564
\$19.75

T567 - BENRUS for Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K gold plate; bracelet. \$19.75
O564 - Man's BENRUS; 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. \$19.75
\$1 deposit \$1.88 a month

L.W. Sweet

MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS, Inc.
Dept. 722-A, 1670 BROADWAY, NEW YORK



“THE BOSS DIDN'T EVEN KNOW MY NAME”

“HE SAID he remembered seeing me around, but he didn't even know my name until the I. C. S. wrote him that William Harris had enrolled for a course of home study and was doing fine work.

“Who's William Harris?” he asked. Then he looked me up. Told me he was glad to see I was ambitious. Said he'd keep his eye on me.

“He did too. Gave me my chance when Frank Jordan was sent out on the road. I was promoted over older men who had been with the firm for years.

“My spare-time studying helped me to get that job and to keep it after I got it. It

certainly was a lucky day for me when I signed that I. C. S. coupon.”

One reason employers recognize the value of I. C. S. training is that many of them are former I. C. S. students. They recognize that “today's I. C. S. students are tomorrow's leaders.”

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning | <input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Drafting | <input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal Work |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Drafting | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Drafting | <input type="checkbox"/> Mine Foreman | <input type="checkbox"/> Shipfitting <input type="checkbox"/> Shop Practice |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Auto Technician | <input type="checkbox"/> Foundryman <input type="checkbox"/> Heating | <input type="checkbox"/> Practical Telephony | <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Drafting |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> House Planning | <input type="checkbox"/> Radio, General | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegraph Engineering |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry | <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Metallurgy | <input type="checkbox"/> Radio Operating | <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Work |
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City..... State..... Present Position.....

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THRILLING MYSTERY

Vol. XVIII, No. 1

January, 1942

Price 10c



A Complete Colonel Crum Novelet

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By JOHN H. KNOX

Jungle Magic that Aids a Desperate Killer Sends Colonel Fabian Crum, Scientist Sleuth, on the Trail of a Crime Swathed in the Sable Robes of Mystery on the Mexican Border! - - - - - 26

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HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED - THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!



I Trained These Men



**Chief Operator
Broadcasting Station**

Before I completed your lesson, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operators license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator.
HOLLIS F. HAYES, 327 Madison St., Lapeer, Michigan.

**Service Manager
for Four Stores**

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio Service Manager for the M— Furniture Co. for their four stores.
JAMES E. RYAN, 119 Pebble Court, Fall River, Mass.



**\$10 a Week Extra
in Spare Time**



I am doing spare time Radio work, and I am averaging around \$500 a year. Those extra dollars mean so much—the difference between just barely getting by and living comfortably.
JOHN WASHKO, 97 New Cranberry, Hazleton, Penna.

In U. S. Signal Corps

I am in the U. S. Army, Signal Corps, as Chief Radio Clerk. My duties also include maintenance of the transmitter and receivers when the Chief Radio Operator is absent.
R. W. ANDERSON, Radio Station WTI, Vancouver Barracks, Washington.



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Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make \$5, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

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Over 800 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are over 50,000,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio for those jobs. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained. Many are getting special ratings in the Army and Navy; extra rank and pay.

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for Good Pay in Radio**

Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

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Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 8 times a private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW.

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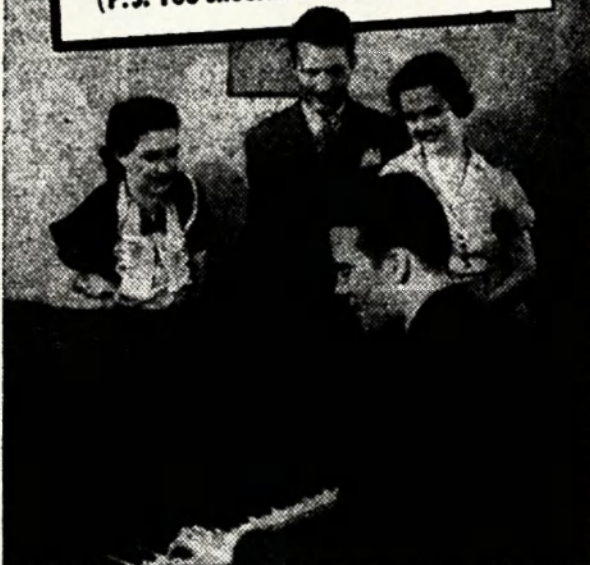
City State



**THIS MAN DIDN'T BELIEVE HE
COULD LEARN MUSIC BY MAIL**



**THIS MAN DECIDED TO TRY THIS
EASY, SHORT-CUT METHOD!
(P.S. You should hear him play now!)**



Do *You* Smile at the Idea of Learning Music by Mail?

Here Are Some Facts That May Surprise You!

YOU HAVE undoubtedly heard of the U. S. School method of teaching music by mail. This remarkable system of instruction has been in operation for over forty years and more than 700,000 people in all parts of the world have enrolled for it. Men, women and children of all ages and from all walks of life have taken up their favorite musical instruments this convenient, money-saving way. They have studied the piano, violin, guitar, accordion and, in short, every kind of popular instrument.

No Special Talent Required

Many of these pupils did not know one musical note from another when they enrolled. Many had previously tried other methods of instruction without success. And not a few were frankly skeptical. They doubted whether it was possible to learn music by mail, just as you may doubt it.

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One after another, pupils testify to the amazing ease with which they learned, and the fascination and pleasure they found in the lessons. They say it was "easy as A. B. C."—"so simple that a child could understand"—that "with all the wonderful photographs and diagrams to guide you, you simply cannot go wrong"—that "it's really fun to learn music this easy, fascinating way."

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(Established 1886)

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Piano Accordion	Mandolin	Clarinet	Harmony
Saxophone			

Name Do You Have Instr?

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City State

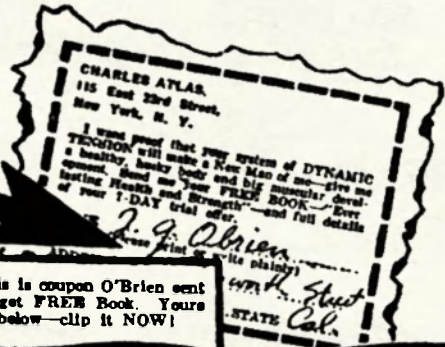
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HE Mailed This Coupon

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This is coupon O'Brien sent to get FREE Book. Yours is below—clip it NOW!

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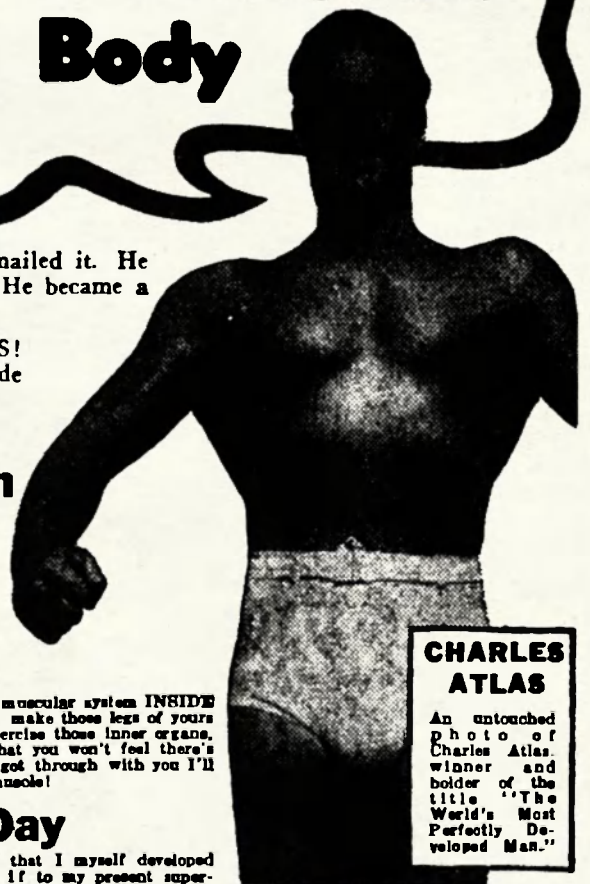
Only 15 Minutes a Day

"Dynamic Tension." That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at if to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no *exercises or contraptions to feel with*. You learn to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension." You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

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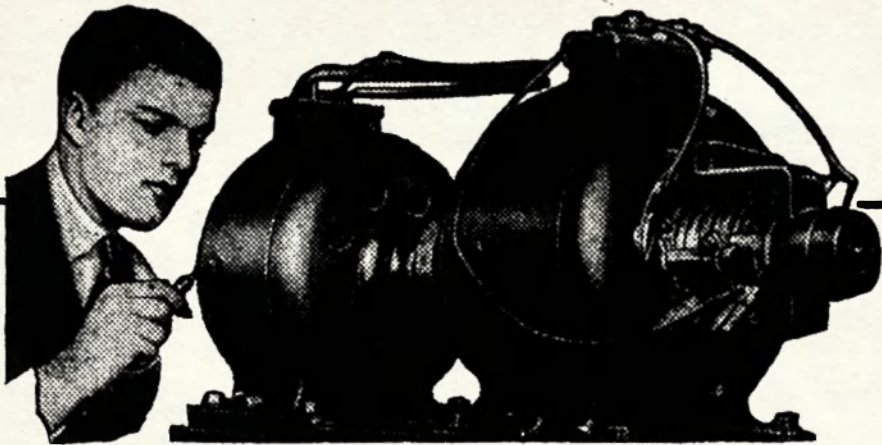
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Gentlemen: Without obligation, please send me at once complete information on how to get your Family Life Policy for FREE inspection.

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City State



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Don't spend your life hoping for a better job and a better salary. *Let me show you how to train for positions that lead to \$35.00, \$40.00 a week and up in the great field of Electricity.* NOT by correspondence but by actual shop work right on real electrical machinery. Then on my "PAY AFTER GRADUATION" PLAN YOU CAN PAY YOUR TUITION AFTER YOUR TRAINING PERIOD IS OVER IN EASY MONTHLY PAYMENTS.

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If you need part-time work to help pay your living expenses I'll help you get it. Then, in 12 brief weeks, in the great roaring shops of Coyne, I train you as you never dreamed you could be trained...on one of the greatest outlays of electrical apparatus ever assembled... real dynamos, engines, power plants, autos, switchboards, transmitting stations...everything from doorbells to farm power and lighting... full-sized... in full operation every day!

No Books—No Classes

No dull books, no baffling charts, no classes, you get individual training... all real actual work... building real batteries... winding real armatures, operating real motors, dynamos and generators, wiring houses, etc., etc. That's a glimpse of how



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Our Employment Bureau for graduates gives FREE lifetime employment service.

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Service Station Owner
Air Conditioning
Electric Refrigeration
Radio Servicing
and many others

we help to make you a master electrician so you can cash in on the opportunities ahead.

Jobs, Pay, Future

To get a good job today you've got to be trained. Industry demands men who have specialized training. These men will be the ones who are the big-pay men of the future. After graduation my Employment Department gives you Lifetime Employment Service. J. O. Whitmeyer says: "After I graduated, the School Employment Service furnished me with a list of several positions... I secured a position with an Electrical Construction Company paying me 3 to 4 times more a week than I was getting before I entered Coyne and today I am still climbing to higher pay."

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Coyne is your one great chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 40 years old—Coyne training is tested and proven. You can get training first—then pay for it in easy monthly payments after you graduate. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, free Coyne book...facts...jobs...salaries...opportunities. This does not obligate you. So act at once. Just mail coupon.

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FREE
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H. C. LEWIS, Pres.
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL, DEPT. 12-84
500 S. Paulina Street, Chicago, Illinois

Dear Mr. Lewis:

I'm really in earnest. I do want to get ahead. Send me your big free catalog with full particulars about Coyne training and your plans to help a fellow, who hasn't a lot of money, to get ahead.

Name.....

Address.....

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



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Send in Coupon on Page 112

DEATH MIRROR

THERE has been considerable argument about ectoplasm—that mist-like substance which exudes from the body of a person under certain psychic control. But no scientist as yet has given a satisfactory answer to “What is ectoplasm?”

True stories concerning the strange activity of ectoplasm are exceedingly interesting. A most astounding story comes from Mrs. Cecelia Wissman of Colorado.

Several years ago, her father died. His only regret in passing was that he would be lonesome without Rebecca, his wife, whom he had loved for more than fifty years. Never once had they been separated. He had been a handsome man, resembling John Barrymore; and even in old age, people had often commented on his “patriarchal profile.” His daughter had an artistic silhouette of her father, hanging in her bedroom.

Last Spring, Mrs. Wissman and her mother were entertaining friends, one of them a medium. During the conversation on psychic matters, the aged mother fell asleep in her chair. Suddenly the medium pointed to the old lady, and everyone saw a mist rising about her—a cloud about a foot in diameter. It drifted from the old woman's body toward a mirror above the sideboard. The mist gradually settled on the mirror's surface, and to the astonishment of all present, it took the exact shape of the father's silhouette.

Mrs. Wissman was so frightened that she turned on the lights more brightly, and in a few moments the mist had evaporated; but the daughter noticed that the silver of the mirror was slightly discolored.

Nothing was said to the mother when she awoke, for they didn't want to scare the old lady, whose health was none too good. But later, the daughter secretly examined the rear of the mirror and could still see a slight trace of the psychic profile. She was affected by the phenomenon, but said nothing more about it.

Three days later, the mother was stricken. The doctor and the daughter stood beside the deathbed awaiting the inevitable. Just as the doctor pronounced the old lady dead, a crash was heard in the living room. The grieving daughter rushed in to see what had happened.

The mirror was completely demolished as though someone had smashed it with a hammer. But no one had been anywhere near it. The psychic profile was gone. How do you account for it?

WHEN BOMBS FALL

IT has been predicted that enough true mystical stories will come out of the present war in Europe to fill a hundred volumes. One English colonel said recently: “So many strange things have happened in my regiment, that sometimes I fear for my own sanity.”

(Continued on page 109)



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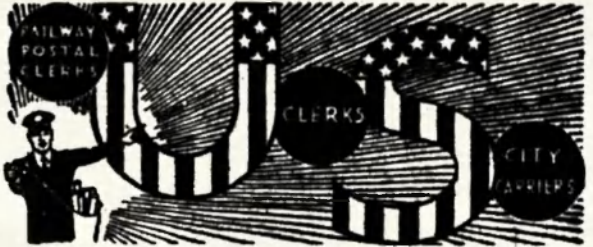
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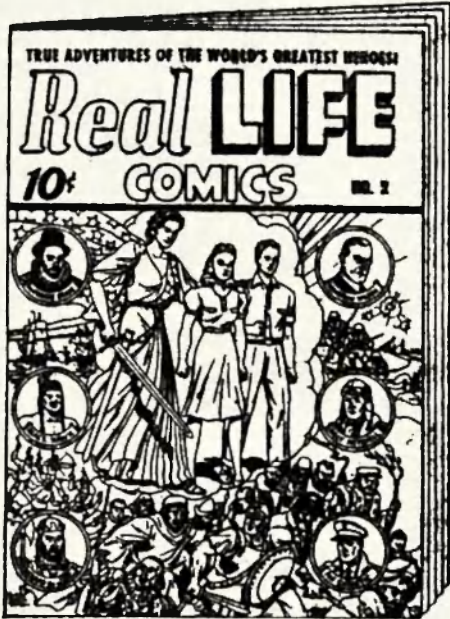
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CLUE IN BLUE

By FREDRIC BROWN

Author of "The Little Green Men," "The King Comes Home," etc.



I came in with a left uppercut that had all my weight in it

Fifty Grand Ransom Is Demanded for Wade's Girl—Until He Finds Evidence on His Fist and Plants the Proof on a Crook's Jaw!

THE telegram was burning a hole in my pocket. For hours I'd been cursing the train for going so slow. Now that it was going even slower, I stopped cursing because we were slowing down for the stop at Mercer, the old home town. But that wasn't why I was going back there.

I stood up in the aisle and got my

Gladstone out of the rack over the seat. The forty-five automatic in it made it pretty heavy. Just then a hand descended on my shoulder in a resounding whack.

"Well," yelled a voice louder than necessary, "if it isn't 'Fatso' Wade! Coming home to give the folks a treat?"

I turned around to see who it was.

"Hullo, Walt," I said. "Nope, this trip is business."

"You don't say. How's the big city been treating you, Fatso? What are you—Say, didn't I hear you got a job with some detective agency outfit down there? You mean your trip back here is business in that line?"

And then the darned fool howled at the idea. Fatso Wade, detective—that'll be a big laugh for the folks in Mercer—which was partly why I hadn't been back there at all for four years. That was why I hadn't corresponded with anyone but Ann Eldridge.

"How'd you ever happen to get into that kind of work, Fatso?" asked Walt grinning. "Take a correspondence course, or did they need someone to disguise as an elephant to find out who was picking the kangaroo's pockets at the city zoo?"

"Yeah," I said, "that was it. So long."

I pushed past him toward the end of the car and stepped off onto the platform, before he could get his own luggage and catch up with me.

"Hey, Fatso!" somebody else yelled. "Where you—"

But I waved and kept on going around to the other side of the station. Yes, there was "Pop" Willis' taxi. It was the same one, and it had been a wreck four years ago. Pop was in it.

"Well, hullo, there!" he exclaimed. "If it isn't Fatso Wade!"

"Sorry, Pop, I'm in one terrific rush. A hundred bucks is more than this jalopy's worth, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Considerable more, but if you're in a hurry, don't stand there. Get in and I'll take you where you're going."

I jerked my wallet out of my pocket and took a hundred-dollar bill out of it.

"Nix," I said, "you get out. I said I was in a hurry. I mean it."

HE took the bill and goggled at it as though it were a strange kind of snake that had to be held very carefully. "I—well, sure, but why—"

"Be a good egg, Pop, and don't argue. Just get out."

He stood there looking dazed while I slammed the car into gear and gave her the gas. As I gunned it off, he yelled:

"Hey, be careful of that left rear tire!"

I wasn't, of course. It blew out, but not until I was six miles out of town and only a mile from the Eldridge estate. I didn't get out to see if there was a spare. I kept going on the rim. Even with the blow-out, I made it in under ten minutes. If I'd let Pop drive me out there, he'd have taken three-quarters of an hour.

There was the same old iron gate across the entrance to the driveway that led back to the Eldridge place. It was heavily padlocked, though, which was something new. There was a sign that said "Keep Out" and a bell that I was supposed to ring to have someone come down from the house and let me in.

I rang the bell, but I was too impatient to wait for the gate to be opened. I could see the roof of the Eldridge house, half a mile back through the trees, and I was too near my goal to stand around. Ann Eldridge had sent for me.

I climbed over the gate and started back along the drive. But before that, I'd opened my Gladstone and transferred the automatic to my shoulder holster. I'd worn the holster down, but hadn't wanted to carry the gun in it while I was on the train.

I walked fast and it was lucky I did, or I'd have been caught in the open before I got to the trees. Two huge police dogs were bounding toward me, barking savagely as they came. They meant business, too, and they were big enough to tear any man to pieces in a minute.

For an instant my hand moved toward my holstered automatic. Then I realized I had no business shooting up a couple of hundred dollars' worth of valuable dog, if there was any other out. So I dropped the Gladstone and climbed a convenient birch, getting up it just in time.

The thwarted dogs made a devil of a racket and I heard a door of the house open and slam. A man whom I recognized as Captain Irby of the Mercer police, and a policeman in uniform, came running down the drive.

Captain Irby put his gun back in his pocket and grinned when he got close enough to recognize me through the foliage.

"Fatso Wade himself — and up a tree, as usual! Why didn't you ring the bell?"

"I did," I yelled at him, realizing that my entrance was more spectacular than heroic. "Must be disconnected. Call off Fido and Rover so I can come down."

Still grinning, he leashed the dogs and I climbed down.

"I don't know what this is about yet, I said. "Ann's telegram — she told you about it?"

"She said she'd sent for you. I don't know why. We're taking every precaution and I don't know just what—"

"What a fat clown like me could do?" I finished for him as we shook hands. "I don't know either, yet, but I'll keep out of your hair. Anyway, what I started to say was that the telegram was brief and all I got out of it was that Ann had been threatened with kidnaping or—"

"Not kidnaping," he interrupted. "Death! We didn't take it seriously at first. . . . Well, come on up to the house. No need to talk outside."

ANN ELDRIDGE met us at the door and my heart did the old flipflop, even though I hadn't seen her for four years. But I managed to hide it, like always, though maybe I held her hand a fraction of a second longer than necessary.

"Thanks for coming, Dale," she said. "I feel safer with you here."

I caught sight of Captain Irby grinning at that.

We went on into the living room. Judge Shipman—who was administrator of the Eldridge estate — and Ann's half-brother, Ely Balfour, were there.

Ely, who was twenty years younger than the judge, looked older. He nodded casually to me without getting up out of his Morris chair. I noticed that his left arm was in a cast from elbow to wrist and suspended in a sling of black silk. His lean saturnine face was just as I remembered it, but old, although he was only in his early thirties.

"Well, Wade, with you here," he said, "besides Judge Shipman and the police, I'm sure I shall not fall into any more open graves."

"Huh?" I wanted to know. "What's this about an open grave?"

It was Shipman who answered my question. I found myself studying him as a contrast to Balfour. Still in middle-age, Shipman was big, solid-looking, with an ageless face that might have been sculptured from granite. He'd lost out in the last election, but as usual with ex-judges, the title had stuck.

"There was a freshly dug open grave in the Eldridge burial plot yesterday morning," he said. "You remember where that is?"

I nodded, recalling the little group of graves in the corner of the north field, a mile from the house. It was a family burial ground with stones dating back to the late seventeen hundreds.

"And Balfour fell into it?" I asked almost incredulously.

Ely waved his cigarette holder.

"Oh, I wasn't stupid enough just to step into it without seeing it, I assure you. But I went over to examine it and my foot slid in some slippery mud at the edge."

"It was empty?"

"Not after I fell into it. Up to that time, yes."

"That grave, Wade, is what made us take the extortion notes seriously," Captain Irby cut in. "Until then we hadn't—well, we did take some precautions, but we thought the letters were just from some nut, or even a practical joke."

"Did the extortion notes say anything about the grave?"

"Yes. They were addressed to Mr. Balfour here and they demanded pay-

ment of fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand dollars from me!" Ely chuckled. "The old boy's will didn't leave me fifty thousand pennies, just the right to live as long as I like in this forsaken hole out in the country."

HE laughed without merriment, bitterly. Shipman glared at him.

"No matter to whom they were addressed, they demanded fifty thousand in cash, ordered us to have that ready and await instructions. Otherwise, the second of the two notes said, 'Ann will move one mile north and six feet down'."

"As I said, we took precautions," Irby added. "But when we found out that a fresh grave had been dug—as that note said, 'a mile north and six feet down'—that put it a bit above the nut-letter or hoax classification. Digging a grave is hard work and it was dangerous, too, because we'd put an armed watchman on the estate. The writer of those notes means what he says, but I don't see how he can possibly do anything with the precautions we're using."

"The notes," I insisted. "Were they mailed?"

"No. Both slipped under the front door."

"Almost time for dinner," Ann said. "If you want to wash up, Dale, I'll have Allen take you to your room."

"Fine," I told her. "Who's Allen and what other servants do you have?"

"Three altogether," she answered. "We're not as rich as we used to be when you lived in Mercer. There's Allen, our houseman, Mrs. Carey, who is cook and housekeeper, and one maid, a cousin of the housekeeper's. I do quite a bit of the work myself."

Over her shoulder I caught a glimpse of Balfour, grinning mockingly.

"Shall we call in the servants and let you question them one at a time?" he asked. "I think that's the proper movie procedure."

Allen's arrival — Ann must have pressed a button for him — saved me

the trouble of answering Balfour's crack. But a look at the houseman who carried my bag upstairs made me resolve to carry out Balfour's joking suggestion. There was a vague familiarity about his face and a certain something about his manner that made me wonder whether the familiarity came from having seen his picture with a number across the bottom.

The impression was too vague for me to wish to say anything about it, but I indexed it in my mind for future thought. Meanwhile, as he was leaving, I asked:

"Been here long, Allen? Don't believe I remember you."

"Four months, sir."

"Live in Mercer before that?"

"No, sir. New York." He hesitated at the door. "Anything else, sir?"

"No. Not now, anyway."

Dinner was ready by the time I'd changed clothes and gone downstairs. Judge Shipman and Captain Irby did most of the talking, with Ely Balfour cutting in now and then with a sarcastic remark. Almost as though an agreement had been made, no mention was made of the shadow that hung over the Eldridge house.

I didn't talk at all, except to ask someone for the salt or butter. I was sitting across from Ann and it was enough just to sit there and look at her as much as I could without staring.

But later in the evening, over coffee in the living room, Irby brought up the subject of their plans. He didn't think there was danger of another move by the extortioner until after the third note came, the one specifying how the money was to be delivered.

"And then, of course," he added, "only if we ignore the demand."

"And will you?" I asked.

"Frankly, Wade, it depends on circumstances," Shipman answered. "There is a possibility, for one thing, that we may nab him when he tries to deliver the final note. But I have a hunch he'll mail this one. He must know by now that the house is guarded."

"And if the note does come by mail?

"Well, fifty thousand dollars is practically all there is left of the Eldridge estate. It would almost pauperize Ann to have that money paid out, so we won't pay it. We've decided not to, unless we become fully convinced that Ann's safety really depends upon it. And with all the measures we've taken—"

"But you have it ready?"

SHIPMAN glanced about to see that none of the servants was near, then tapped his coat over the inside pocket.

"Had to cash in practically all the assets of the estate, but we talked that over, too. Besides, the market was good and this was the right time to sell, anyway. We'll reinvest after this is over."

An hour or so later, alone in my room, I was looking at myself in the big mirror of the dresser as I took off my necktie. So far I'd accomplished nothing at all, I told myself. But I was dog-tired and sleepy from the trip, tomorrow was another day and everything seemed to be under control for tonight. Anyhow, Irby was a good man, not brilliant on deduction, but sound on laying defensive plans.

I yawned, sat down on the edge of a chair and took off my shoes. My eyelids felt so heavy that I knew I'd better get into bed quick, or I'd go to sleep sitting there in that chair.

And then suddenly I was wide-awake, for the moment, at least. It had hit me that I was *too* sleepy. I'd had a good night's rest the night before and spending the afternoon on a train shouldn't have had that much effect on me.

Had there been something in that coffee we'd drunk in the living room?

Ten minutes later I was sure of it. The coffee had been drugged and that meant tonight was the night!

I left my shoes off, but I put my shoulder holster back on. Then, in the bathroom, I managed to gag myself and fortunately I had a little bottle of caffeine-citrate tablets in my

handbag. I took four of them.

I felt rotten, but I knew that as long as I stayed on my feet and didn't sit or lie down, I'd keep awake. It was hard to think straight, yet I remembered to turn out the light, so whoever was planning a coup wouldn't know I was still awake.

And I'd have to play a lone hand, I realized. I tried to remember back whether anyone in the living room had refused coffee but I believed all of us had taken it.

Let's see, we'd all been there except the two patrolmen Irby had with him. One of them had been on duty outside. The other had eaten in the kitchen with the servants. Had their coffee been doped? Probably. It wouldn't do any good to lay the rest of us out and leave the servants and the patrolmen. Particularly the police. I recalled now that Irby had told Allen, when the houseman brought in our coffee, to take a cup out to the man on duty.

But someone must have—No, whoever had drugged that coffee could have drunk a cup of it like the rest of us, if he'd had an antidote ready for himself. Or he might have accepted a cup and poured it into a vase or a flowerpot when no one was watching. And as for opportunity, all of us had been in and out of the living room several times.

My eyes were used to the dark by now and I could see fairly well. I went across to the door, opened it a crack and stood there listening. I didn't dare lean against the wall or the door-jamb. The house was so quiet that I hardly dared continue pacing back and forth, as I'd been doing, even without my shoes. There was a creaky board somewhere in that room. I don't know how long I stood there, listening for any sound anywhere in the house. It seemed like hours, but it was probably less. I got to feeling worse again, began to feel that I was going to go to sleep right there on my feet and fall over with a crash. And maybe even that wouldn't wake me up.

Then I heard soft footsteps downstairs and the faint creak of a door.

I groped through the utter blackness of the upstairs hall and felt my way down the steps. Dim moonlight, coming in the panes of the front door, made the lower hall light enough so that I could see my way. The scrape of something against metal seemed to come from the room off the hall which had been the den of the late Mr. Eldridge. And I could see a blacker rectangle there. The door was open.

With the drawn pistol in my hand, I crossed silently over to that door, reached around the jamb and flicked the light switch.

Allen, the houseman, whirled from the wall safe whose dial he had been manipulating. He reached for a hip pocket as he turned, but then he saw the automatic in my hand. His face went white and raised his arms slowly.

I stepped inside the room and closed the door.

"Anybody in with you on this," I demanded, "or did you send those notes yourself?"

"You're nuts, copper," he grunted. "I never sent those notes, but I saw I was going to get caught in the middle, me being an ex. And I saw you guessed that this afternoon."

"Who got you the job here?"

"Employment agency, but listen—I didn't send those notes! And I didn't have anything to do with digging that—that grave."

"Or the coffee?"

His eyes went wide with surprise.

"Say, was the coffee doped? That explains something. The harness bull outside is out cold. I don't like coffee, so I didn't drink any."

"How come you know about the policeman outside? Were you out there?"

He shook his head. "Saw from my window. He leaned against a tree and musta passed out leaning. He fell over and didn't get up. That's partly why—"

"He broke off, ran his tongue over his lips.

"You knew there was money in the safe," I finished for him.

"Listen, you got me cold," he said.

"I ain't got any reason to lie to you about it, see? I was on the level, but I couldn't help knowing that fifty grand was around the house. I dunno if it's in this safe or not. I was finding out. Like I said, I got a record. With this house full of coppers and God knows what going on, I knew I'd be caught in the middle. I was going to lam out."

"With the fifty thousand, if you could find it," I added.

"Sure. I saw that cop go down and figured it was my break. The dogs know me. Listen, that's straight. I didn't—"

"All right," I interrupted. "Maybe you're telling the truth. If you are, you're just a monkey-wrench in the works. I'm going to tie you up and leave you in my room. Get going."

I motioned toward the door with my automatic. Somehow I had a hunch Allen was telling the truth, or mostly the truth. Whether he came here originally with the idea of going straight, or of casing the joint for a burglary, didn't matter now. In either event knowing there was fifty thousand dollars around and a chance of his getting away with it would have made him act just as he said he had.

That part of the story rang true, which meant I'd caught a jackal. My only hope of getting bigger game was to get Allen out of the way. Tomorrow we could check his story.

STEPPING farther back from the door, I caught a momentary glimpse of my face in a mirror on the wall. It was white, chalky. My lips were blue, instead of their usual color, and my eyes looked like the devil.

I must have stared at that reflection a bit too long. Allen, his hands still at shoulder-level, was walking past me. He saw my attention waver. He wheeled and the flat of his hand knocked the automatic out of my relaxed grip. His other fist lashed out in a vicious uppercut that exploded against my jaw and sent me reeling drunkenly backward.

My head hit the wall, but not too hard. Strangely, the thump appeared

to do me more good than harm. It seemed to clear my head enough for me to coordinate my muscles again.

Allen was reaching again for his hip pocket. I dived in before he'd got his gun out, caught him around the waist in a tackle that sent us both crashing down.

For a minute fists were raining in my face. Then I managed to catch hold of one of his wrists and twist it with all my strength. It worked. With a low moan, he rolled to his side and stopped putting up a battle.

I reached down and finished the job he'd started, getting the pistol out of his hip pocket. It was a nickel-plated thirty-two revolver.

I felt a surge of weakness coming over me again and I knew I couldn't risk holding him while I tied him up. I tapped the butt of that revolver against the back of his head. It was a light, professional blow, just enough to knock him out and keep him that way for a few minutes.

Then, with cords that had held back the heavy drapes over the windows, I bound his wrists and ankles tightly. I didn't gag him. He had nothing to gain by yelling, anyhow.

I leaned against the wall for a moment to try to get my strength back, but I found myself feeling worse instead of better. I knew I'd never be able to move Allen up to my room. Maybe later, when this wave of dizziness passed, I'd be able to drag him as far as a closet. I still wanted him out of the way, though, figuring that the real business on schedule hadn't come off yet.

Another dose of the caffeine-citrate would probably help, I decided. I couldn't risk taking too many of them, because my heart was pounding dangerously from the excitement of the fight with Allen. But maybe a couple more would get rid of the buzzing in my head.

I had to hold onto the bannister to get back up the steps. I didn't worry much about silence. Anyone who hadn't been awakened by the noise of that fight downstairs wouldn't be awakened by a little creaking.

My movements seemed like those of

a man in a slow-motion movie before I finally got to the top of the stairs and started to grope my way along the wall toward the door of my room. I was groping with both hands, so I must have dropped my pistol somewhere, although I don't recall hearing it hit. I could hear the scrape of my hands against the wallpaper, but the sound seemed to come from miles away.

I had almost reached the door when I felt my knees going out from under me. Something that wasn't too hard—probably the carpet—hit me in the face.

That was the last I knew.

AFTER a long time I realized that I was being shaken and that somebody was shouting in my ear. The top of my head seemed to come off when I opened my eyes. The pale light of early dawn filled the corridor, but it hit me like an airport searchlight at ten feet.

It was Captain Irby who had awakened me. He looked almost as bad as I felt.

"Ann's gone!" he yelled. "What happened? How'd you get out here?"

I struggled to my feet, stumbled to the door of Ann's room. It was open. The covers had been thrown back off her bed. It had been slept in, but there was no sign of a struggle. Of course she had also been drugged, I reasoned dazedly.

"Yes, she's gone!" Irby snapped. "Quick, man, what happened to you?"

In a few short sentences I told him what I'd done up to the time I'd gone under.

"Shall I go and see if Allen is still there?" I asked.

"He'll keep," said Irby. "If he got out of those ropes, he's miles away by now. If he didn't, he's still there. Let's wake the others up."

He was already heading for the other end of the hall. I picked a closed door, hammered on it, then opened it when there wasn't any answer.

Shipman's massive body was relaxed across the bed. He was still partly dressed and a book lay on the

floor where he'd dropped it. There was the same blueness about his lips that I'd seen on my own in the mirror and on those of Captain Irby.

I shook him without result, slapped his face not too gently until his eyes opened. While I was telling him what had happened, Irby appeared in the doorway.

"Couldn't wake Balfour," he panted, "although he's alive and breathing regularly. Guess he got a double dose. We'll phone for a doctor. Come on, we'll see if Allen's still there."

Allen was still there, but we didn't have to be in any hurry about untying him. There was a pool of dried blood under his head. His skull had been smashed in by a vicious blow.

Irby looked at me strangely.

"Is that what you mean by a light tap on the head, Wade?"

"I didn't do that," I protested. "I did tap him lightly. Someone else must have done it later."

I hoped I was telling the truth. After all, I'd been pretty well under the influence of the drug by that time and my own actions seemed a bit hazy to me now.

"Well," said Irby, "we'll see about that. Meanwhile, of course, you're under technical arrest for manslaughter. Just don't leave the house."

"The devil with that! I stormed. "What about Ann? What are we going to do now?"

The ringing of the doorbell startled us. We both hurried to the front door. Before we got there, we could see through the glass of the door that it was a blue-uniformed figure. "Clanden," Irby explained to me. "He came out to relieve one of the men already here. He's a bit early."

"Hello, Captain," said Clanden as the door opened. "Say, somebody poisoned them pooches under a tree out there. Looks like strychnine. Everything okay here?"

Irby grunted disgustedly, told the patrolman to start a search of the grounds, promising him that help would be there shortly. He turned to me.

"I'll be busy phoning for awhile,

Wade. You can start searching the house, if you want to help. It may be that—Well, anyway, see if you find anything."

GLAD of a chance to do something, anything, I nodded eagerly and headed for the stairs. I met Shipman coming down. There was a shocked look on his face.

"The north field!" he gasped. "That grave! I'm going to look."

"Nuts," I growled, mostly to convince myself. "You won't find anything there. Either the guy who did this outsmarted us, or he knew you wouldn't pay out that money as long as Ann is safe. He knew the only way to collect it was to show you she wasn't, to kidnap her. The next step will be another note."

"Probably, but—"

He went past me down the stairs and toward the back of the house.

I started my search in the attic and was on the second floor when Irby called up that I could stay there. He'd take the lower part of the house, now that he'd finished phoning. I kept on hunting, though I didn't know what I was looking for.

Whatever it was I didn't find it—until I sat down to rest on the steps and happened to look at the palm of my right hand. There it was. For maybe five seconds I looked at that faint blue mark with abstract curiosity. Then things clicked into place.

I got up so suddenly that my head spun and I almost fell down again. I didn't wait for the wave of dizziness to pass before I started. I held onto the banister to get down the steps. By the time I was downstairs, the worst of it was over. I got out the back door and started down the path, running.

Judge Shipman had reached the edge of the open grave when he heard my footsteps pounding up. He turned around.

"There's an envelope down there, Wade!" he said excitedly. "See a pole anywhere? It's so muddy and slippery, it'd be pretty hard to climb out if one of us went down."

"Blast the envelope!" I shouted.

"Where is Ann?" I had my automatic in my hand, covering him.

His face was pale, but his features were composed.

"Are you crazy?" he demanded. "Put away that gun and help me get that note."

"I'll even guess why," I told him coldly. "Somehow, probably by speculating, you ran through that estate and found yourself out on a limb. You haven't got fifty thousand dollars. Neither has the Eldridge estate, ex-

with a fine comb that they're going to get from us."

I'd hit home. I saw his face turn white, then livid. His hand went for his coat pocket, but I dropped the muzzle of my automatic lower, about at his knees, and pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty firing chamber.

And I was looking into the muzzle of a short-barreled thirty-eight revolver in Shipman's hand. I was also cursing myself for not checking my

Death Stalks a Chemical Factory When Criminal Elements Combine

IN

THE MURDERING GHOSTS

A Complete Mystery Novel

By **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

PACKED WITH THRILL-A-MINUTE ACTION

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE



cept on paper. You were going to pay out a mythical fifty thousand to a mythical third party. That would put you clear, maybe even with a profit, if you're not in as deep as fifty thousand. Where is Ann?"

"The charge is absurd," he stated, outraged. "You're going off half-cocked!"

"This gun will do that, unless you talk," I answered grimly. "The game's up. The agency I'm with has an auditing bureau that's a wow. Keep on bluffing, if you think the estate accounts can stand the going-over

own gun after I'd been lying unconscious for hours in the upper hallway, where Shipman would have passed me in going to Ann's room.

I could almost see his mind working. His only out now was to shoot me, but he'd have to have a story ready. He'd have to stage it so it would look like self-defense.

My own mental wheels were working frantically, too. If I kept talking, it would keep him from thinking fast and straight. It was a long chance, but if I could stall until Irby missed me, or maybe on his own hook decided

to come out to the grave, I might have a chance.

"You had to kill Allen," I said in a rush, "because he was lying there, tied up. He saw and recognized you when you went into the room with the safe and turned on the light. Why you went there, I don't know, unless you went over the whole house to be sure—"

"Shut up!" he snapped. His left hand went into his other coat pocket. Something rattled, probably the cartridges from my automatic. He was figuring out whether he'd have time, after the sound of a shot which would carry back to the house, to get them back into my automatic before someone from the house got in sight.

"Know how I realized it was you, Shipman?" I asked in a bigger hurry than ever. "There was a blue mark on my hand, the one I'd slapped you with when I was waking you out of your fake sleep. You knew the drug you put in the coffee would give a bluish tinge to the victims' lips. You make up your own face to match. Look."

I held up my right hand, palm toward him. I saw his eyes momentarily glance toward it. That was the nearest thing to a break I was going to get, so I jumped in. My own eyes had stayed on the gun in his grip and I grabbed for the muzzle with my left hand.

He pulled the trigger, but I shoved aside the muzzle just in time. The bullet ripped through my left hand, completely missed my body by an inch. My right hand closed around the gun and jerked it away. Before I could use it, a shattering blow from his free hand sent me staggering back, barely keeping my footing. The gun dropped from my hand. It lay between us, a bit nearer to him than to me, and I was staggering back. He stooped to get it, but I got my balance back just in time. I came in with a right uppercut that had all my weight behind it.

That ended the fight and nearly broke my hand in the bargain. He went down and I kicked the gun aside, bent over him and slapped his face

vigorously until I saw his eyes open.

"Where did you put Ann?" I asked through my teeth.

His eyes glared at me, but he didn't answer. Unsportsmanlike or not, I punched him again, this time on the nose, so it wouldn't knock him out.

My own mind was racing now, trying to see just how much of an edge I had. It wasn't much, if he wouldn't talk. Ann, unconscious, hadn't seen her abductor. Allen, the only witness, was dead. We'd be able to prove the accounts were short, but aside from that it would be tough going.

I didn't care about that. Ann's safety was all that interested me. Shipman would never dare carry through his scheme now and if he kept silent, we might never find Ann until too late. Bound and gagged somewhere, she might starve first. He'd had most of the night to hide her. She might be fifty miles away!

From the house, still half a mile away, I saw Irby and one of his men running toward us. The sound of the shot had carried that far and brought them. They'd be here in a few minutes, but Shipman hadn't seen them.

I had to work fast and I didn't give a hang whether or not it was sporting. I walloped his nose hard and drew blood.

"Where is Ann?" I demanded and started in alternately on his eyes.

He yelled with pain, unable to take it. He started to swear and it cost him two front teeth. Then I started to work on his nose again.

I got it out of him with a minute to spare. She was in the shack at the Burke Road quarry.

THREE days later I was getting ting ready to leave. Doc Rogers had finally decided that the bones in my left hand were setting right and that it would be okay in a month or less. The door of my room was open and Ann Eldridge stood in the frame. "How do you like the city, Dale?" she asked me.

"Swell," I said casually. "I'm assistant superintendent of the agency already and I've been there only four years. And down here"—I grinned—

"I'm just Fatso Wade. Guess no man's a prophet in his home town, especially if he's a few pounds overweight."

"But you aren't any more. Dale, I'm thinking of—of moving to the city myself, now that things have changed. Do you think I'd like it there?"

"Why, I guess you would, but you might be lonesome at first."

"Would I?" she asked. Then you don't feel the way you used to?"

I guess I just gaped at her, wondering if she could possibly mean what it sounded like she meant. The very thought that she might have meant it made the room go in circles around me.

"Do you mean—" I began weakly. She did.

SABOTAGE AND MURDER STALK A
SUBMARINE OIL SUPPLY BASE
IN
THE MAN WITH TWO HEADS

A Complete Mystery Novelet

By **G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS**

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DEATH WALKS



By **JOHN H. KNOX**

Author of "Devil's Lottery," "Death Is a Little Man," etc.

CHAPTER I

Surprising Curio

RUBELIO PAREDES was uneasy. Stiff as a mummy behind the counter of his dingy curio shop in La Cholla, Mexico, the old dealer was watching with an Indian's intentness the expression on the face of his solitary customer.

The customer was a small man, slightly less than four and a half feet

tall. But his body was trim and athletic under the elegantly tailored dark suit, brightened by a single ornament—the little watch-charm pistol dangling from a chain across his vest. At the moment he was thoughtfully examining a curious finger-length section of bamboo, filled with some black gumlike substance, and the look on his hard, sardonic face was the cause of Rubelio's discomfiture.

Small he might be, Rubelio reflected, but he had the eyes of the

SOFTLY

*A Complete Colonel
Crum Novelet*



Aga Aslan was atop a tall, raw-boned man

Jungle Magic That Aids a Desperate Killer Sends Colonel Fabian Crum, Scientist Sleuth, on the Trail of a Crime Swathed in the Sable Robes of Mystery on the Mexican Border!

eagle and the wits of the fox, this Don Fabiano who, they said, put fear into the hearts of gringo criminals. And Rubelio was certain he was going to ask questions.

Rubelio was right. Colonel Fabian Crum raised his eyes from the bamboo section.

"Where did you get this stuff, Rubelio?" he demanded. "I've been buying from you for several years now,

and the stuff was always in little earthen pots. I know in what part of the jungle it was made and could depend on its strength and purity. But this—" he twiddled the bamboo tube—"is obviously from another district. Where did it come from?"

Rubelio did not answer at once. There was a slight evasive flicker of his eyelids. Casually he shifted his body so that a glassed cabinet in the

A Hairless Cat, Its Secret Worth Millions,

shadows behind him was completely hidden. But Colonel Crum, quick to note such things, moved slightly too. A queer illusion resulted. A small face, shrunken, flaccid, seemed to be peering over Rubelio's shoulder.

The eyes of the famous scientist-detective narrowed.

"A *tzantza!*" he grated, using the jungle term of the head-hunters among whom he had once traveled. "So you traffic in dried heads, Rubelio? And this" — he tapped the bamboo tube — "came from the same source?"

Rubelio winced. "Si, it is true, Don Fabiano," he admitted. "All of that in the pots was gone. When this trader, a stranger fresh from the jungles, offered me the bamboo tubes, I bought. As for the *tzantza*—well, I do not usually handle such things, but he asked only a trifle for it, so—"

"So you bought it! Well, bring it out."

RUBELIO took the dried head out. But as he laid it on the counter Crum got a shock. For the puckered features were distinctly not Indian. And the hair was red!

"A white man's head!" Crum exclaimed. "Some poor devil of an explorer caught by the Jivaros, probably. Well, you're not going to peddle this to some morbid tourist. I'll take it myself, bury it somewhere." And he added after a moment's hesitation, "I may as well take three of the tubes."

He would have preferred not to buy the head. Seeing a white man's head hung up for sale like an animal pelt should have cost Rubelio his patronage. But he needed the black gummy substance in the bamboo tube.

It was *curare*, the deadly jungle arrow-poison, called the "Flying Death." With it the scientist-detective impregnated the tiny bullets fired by the toylike pistol on his watch chain. Lethal as an express rifle, this apparent bauble had more than once saved his life. And Crum at the moment was completely out of the poison.

He paid Rubelio, took his bundle, and strode back into the hot bright street. His big limousine was waiting, with his young Asiatic assistant, Aga Aslan, dozing comfortably behind the wheel.

"We leave now, *Effendi?*" Aga asked as Crum crawled in.

The little detective hesitated. The red-haired *tzantza*, reposing at his side in its brown paper wrapping, troubled him. Maybe it had not come from the jungle at all. Maybe—

But he put the distracting thought aside. Haste now was imperative, and anything else must be put aside. Already he had risked offending an old friend by failing to call on Sheriff Dew Perry of Molina, the American town across the river. But he was in a hurry to reach a place in Southern California from which an urgent appeal for his help had come.

"I'll have to stop at our tourist camp in Molina," he said to Aga. "Long enough to analyze this *curare*. You can take the afternoon off to see the sights. We'll be ready to leave by eight or nine tonight. . . ."

Colonel Crum spent the rest of the afternoon at his trailer. In that marvelously compact laboratory which always followed the roving scientist-sleuth in his travels over the continent, he made the analysis of the *curare*, which proved satisfactory. But while he worked, the *tzantza* with the red hair haunted his mind.

He began to temporize. Perhaps he should call the sheriff of Molina county, after all. A short chat would not delay him for long, and the tip about the dried head of a white man might prove useful to the officer.

Finally, just as the semi-tropical dusk was settling, he strolled out across the hollow square of the "Friendly Tourist Courts", where he had parked his trailer, found a telephone in the drug-store and called his old friend. Then he waited in front of the place for him to arrive.

Sheriff Perry got there in record time. A short, wiry man with a drawling voice and a friendly grin, he piled out of his car as soon as it had stopped.

Starts a Weird Orgy of Brutal Murders!

He pumped the little detective's hand vigorously, and introduced the man behind the wheel. He was Perry's deputy, "Ox" Hassel, a fat-jowled sleepy-faced man, almost as big as Aga.

"Just get in, did you?" Perry asked.

Crum admitted that he had arrived earlier in the day.

"But I had several things to attend to, Dew," he explained, "and since you always try to put me to work—"

Sheriff Perry laughed. "Well, I could put you to work now, I guess.



COLONEL CRUM

Only you wouldn't be interested in a thing like the disappearance of a rabbit hunter. That's Ox's specialty." He chuckled again. "But I did want Ox to see that laboratory of yours I been telling him about."

Crum said he would be glad to show it and led the way back to the tourist camp. Then, while Ox goggled in amazement at the formid-

able array of scientific equipment crowded into the small space, Crum remarked conversationally to Perry:

"So you're spending your time hunting vanished rabbit hunters?"

"Not me." Perry laughed. "I told you I leave that to Ox. My idea is that this farmer, Alban Hoyt, just skipped the country. He had a mortgage due on his farm and was having trouble with his wife, and one day a couple of weeks ago he went off rabbit hunting and didn't come back. But Ox here scents sinister doings in everything. Besides, Dave Crowley's nagging has been getting under his skin." He chortled good humoredly. "Crowley," he explained, "is our local town marshal. He's got his eyes on the sheriff's office and is always making fun of our department. But Ox worries more about that than I do."

Ox frowned at his superior.

"It's no joke," he growled. "Dave would give his eye-teeth to be sheriff. He'll do us dirt some day." His lips tightened. "As for Hoyt's disappearance, there's been some queer things—"

"Yeah, I know," Perry dismissed it. "Like that tramp mumbling double talk. But we won't bore the colonel with Red Hoyt's troubles."

Crum looked at him sharply. "Red Hoyt, did you say?"

"That's his nickname," Perry explained. "He's a carrot-top."

Crum turned and walked to a cabinet. He reached in, brought out a brown paper bundle, laid it on the laboratory table and opened it.

There were simultaneous exclamations from the two officers. Slowly they drew near and stared at the gruesome shrunken head.

"It's Hoyt!" the sheriff gulped. "Where did you get it?"

Crum told them. The sheriff stood digesting the disclosure in grim silence. But Ox Hassel let out a rumble of triumph.

"You see? I told you! I'll bet this Mex curio dealer himself—"

Crum shook his head at that.

"No, I'll vouch for Rubelio's innocence. It's the man who sold him the

head that you'll have to find. I'll write Rubelio a note and he'll give you a description and all the help he can."

Perry scowled. "You mean you won't stay and help us—even now?"

"I wish I could," Crum said slowly. "It looks interesting. But it may be a long case and I've already promised —"

He took a sheet of paper and began scrawling a message in Spanish to Rubelio Paredes. As soon as it was finished, Ox took it eagerly.

"How about me going right over to see this fellow, Boss?" he asked.

"Okay," Perry agreed. "I'll stay and try to change the colonel's mind."

Hassel left and Perry began to argue. But Crum clung to his decision. They finally strolled out into the warm night and loitered near the big gates. While they were standing there a stocky man in a loud green shirt and fawn-colored slacks came out of the camp drug-store and sauntered toward them. He was "Doc" Oates, owner of the camp, and his sallow, blue-jowled face emanated professional good cheer.

"Hiya, Colonel," he greeted. "One of our boys says your man said you're leaving tonight. Sure hate to lose such a distinguished guest."

"Thanks," Crum replied. "I'm sorry, too, but duty calls."

Oates spoke to Sheriff Perry, then stood exchanging small talk.

It was a quiet, almost drowsy moment when they heard the voices. Talk had lagged, their cigarettes glowed intermittently in the darkness. Nothing more exciting seemed about than the night bugs zooming under the lights. And then that interruption. It came from the open window of a nearby darkened cabin—a woman's voice, low, musical, but edged with terror.

"I can't sleep!" the mutter drifted out. "Can't get it off my mind—that cavelike place, the little savage squatting there watching me. And that awful cat! Alive, but like a skinned carcass—completely hairless!"

It ended on a gasp of revulsion. Then a male voice spoke, low and sick:

"Stop it, Irma. It's bad enough to lie here without any body—just think-

ing, thinking—without hearing that again."

"Heavenly days!" Perry breathed. "What was that?"

Oates made a low chuckling sound, drew them aside.

"Forgot to tell you that we had a couple of nuts in there."

"Nuts?" Crum asked.

"Well, the woman at least, seems to have gone screwy," Oates said. "The man's an invalid, paralyzed up to the neck. The woman evidently brought him here thinking the climate would help him. She was all right when they got here, but last night she went off on a bat or something. I found her on the doorstep this morning, raving like she was hopped on marihuana, though she may be putting on to fool him about staying out."

"You called a doctor?" Crum asked.

"She wouldn't let me," Oates said. "I did the best I could. I'm a registered pharmacist myself and I fixed up a sedative for her. If it's really dope she's had, she'll soon sleep it off and be okay."

He started strolling back toward the drug-store. Crum and Perry walked along beside him for a few paces. Then they turned back toward the trailer, letting Oates go on. But half-way across the court Crum stopped.

"I must talk to that woman," he said flatly.

"What?" Perry exclaimed. "Refuse to help me, then let this doped woman get you interested?"

Crum shook his head. "That was not the voice of a dope addict that we heard," he said, "but of a frightened woman with a sick husband who's at the end of her rope. Yes, I think it takes precedence over all the rest. We'll see if we can win her confidence."

CHAPTER II

Death Gives Warning

WINNING the woman's confidence did not prove to be a simple matter. She was in a blue funk. The

fact that she was familiar with the reputation of Colonel Crum, and that the sheriff of the county was with him, did nothing to reassure her.

"No, no," she told them through the half-open door, "we don't want any help. It's a private matter. Please go away and forget what you heard."

"We can't very well do that," Crum said. "And if you're in danger, it's much worse to face it alone. I'm sure your husband, if he's incapacitated, will want you to have all the protection possible."

"Yes, Irma," a man's voice urged from the darkness, "let them in."

"All right," the woman agreed with a sigh. "But come in quietly. I won't risk a light. I have an idea we're being spied on constantly."

Crum and the sheriff stepped in and she offered them chairs. But as soon as Crum was seated, he produced a cigarette and struck a match to light it. He held it only a moment, but the brief glare allowed his eyes to photograph the two occupants of the small room.

The woman bore out the impression her voice had given him. Slender, haggard, forlorn, with her dressing gown hugged tightly about her, nevertheless she had an air of breeding. And in her pale lovely face a clear-eyed courage shone through the lines of pain. The lean, helpless limbs of the man on the bed were outlined by the sheet. His stubble-darkened face was a mask of bitter frustration.

"Please trust us," Crum said gently. "We want to help you."

The firm sympathetic tone of his voice rarely failed him. The woman sighed. Then in a low flutelike voice she began her story, at the Colonel's gentle urging.

Her husband, she said, was Roy Wheaton, a chemist. They were from Dallas. A few months ago Wheaton had suffered an injury in a fall, while escaping from a burning building. It had not seemed serious at the time, but later he had begun to lose the use of his limbs. The doctors had called it "spastic paralysis" but had seemed unable to cure him. The story, however, had been played up in the papers, due to heroic rescue work Wheaton

had done, and one day they had received through the mail a mysterious offer of help.

"I know the letter by heart," Irma Wheaton said. "It ran: 'I have read of your husband's case and I am confident I can cure him. If you will come to Molina and notify me through the "Personal" column of the local paper, I will prove that my methods are scientific, even though I have to work secretly. You need not worry about money. Your husband is a chemist and can repay me by helping me with my work after he is well again.' It was signed simply, 'Mr. Z.'"

Mrs. Wheaton paused, then finally said: "I know you're saying we're fools to fall for a crank letter like that. But we were so desperate. We came here at once and put the ad in the paper. We got a prompt answer through General Delivery, but it was a shock. 'Plans changed. Sorry. Go back to Dallas—Mr. Z.' was its brief message. That made me mad. He had no right to get us here and then throw us over. I put an ad in the paper: 'Must have explanation before we leave', and signed my initials. That got results. A letter came directing us to rent a cabin at this camp and wait. We did so, and last night a man came."

She took a deep breath, and covered her eyes with her hand a moment before she went on.

"His looks didn't inspire trust," she said. "He was tall, thin, with a pinched yellowish face and shifty eyes. But he knew all about the negotiations and said he would take me straight to Mr. Z. I went with him, but I soon saw my mistake. I had let him blindfold me, and as soon as we were out of town he stopped the car, grabbed me, stifled my screams and stabbed me with a hypo."

She faltered a little, then forced herself to say:

"The rest was a nightmare. When I came to I was in an awful cavelike place, its walls hung with dirty canvas, its floor strewn with straw. There was a half-naked little savage squatting by a lighted lantern watching me. He kept stroking an ugly cat without any hair on its body." She stopped.

"You think I'm crazy?"

"Not at all," Crum assured her. "It's interesting. Go on."

"I wasn't sure myself that what I saw was real," she said, "and I'm still confused. But at some time the tall man came in and began to threaten me. He said he had intended to kill me but had decided to let me go on one condition—that I leave Molina with my husband at once and never speak a word to anyone of what had happened. Naturally I promised, but—" she sighed deeply—"we couldn't leave. We haven't any money left."

THERE was a short silence. Crum could hear both man and woman breathing heavily in the darkness. Then the sheriff cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Wheaton," he said, "I'm not implying your story's false, but—well, you admit you were drugged. And that stuff about a hairless cat—"

The woman laughed nervously. "It was so like a nightmare I couldn't quite believe it myself. I wasn't sure I'd believe it later. That's why, after he had given me that last hypo and had thrown me into the back of his car to bring me back, I groped about for something tangible to prove to myself later that I hadn't imagined it. But all I could find was a crumpled scrap of paper which I thrust into my blouse just before complete unconsciousness claimed me. But it's as senseless as all the rest — utterly crazy!"

"May I see it?" Crum asked.

The woman got up and fumbled in a dresser drawer. She came back and thrust a folded paper into Crum's hand. He flashed on his light and glanced at it. It was a half sheet torn from a notebook. Written on it in a neat hand were the incredible words:

Stick which catches fire—toucan tongue—thick gold stick—vine which is like a frog—magic stick which grows beside the big water—black poison stick—stick which is like a boa—root from the plant which talks in the wind.

The sheriff, leaning over Crum's shoulder, muttered the words aloud.

"What the—" he gulped, blinking rapidly. His brow furrowed. "Where

the dickens did I hear something like that?" Suddenly he cracked a fist against his palm. "Powder River! I've got it! It sounds like the junk Ox said he heard that crazy tramp mumbling! But I never paid much attention to it."

Crum looked at him sharply. "What crazy tramp?"

"Why," Perry said, "the guy Ox ran onto one night. Ox was searching for Alban Hoyt, that vanished rabbit hunter, and was plodding through the brush land out beyond the irrigated section. It was after dark and he was heading home when he runs onto this fellow just on the edge of a field. The guy had a big tin can over a pile of twigs like he was getting ready to cook himself some tramp stew. But he didn't have any food, only a mess of what looked like dried herbs. And he was mumbling to himself—just such stuff as that written on the paper there. Ox remembered it because it sounded so loco. Anyhow, when this tramp sees Ox, he grabs the stuff and hightails it into the brush. I just figured the fellow was crazy, though Ox thought he was up to some devilment."

"Yes, it was devilment," Crum said. "Did Ox tell you just where this happened?"

Perry scratched his head. "If he did, I've forgot."

"Then we'd better find out that important point from Ox," Crum said, "and the sooner the better. I wouldn't be surprised if the hide-out to which Mrs. Wheaton was taken is somewhere around that place. Let's see if Ox has come back from La Cholla."

They stepped back into the court. But the sheriff's car in which Ox had left was nowhere in sight. Aga had not returned either.

"Maybe we'd better call a taxi," the sheriff suggested. "We can drive over to La Cholla and see if we can catch Ox at that curio shop before he goes off on some tangent of his own."

Crum agreed. While Perry went to call a cab, he stepped back to the Wheaton cabin and cautioned Mrs. Wheaton to lock her doors and windows and not to admit anyone.

"I don't think you're in any immediate danger," he said, "but we can't be too careful now. I'll leave a note at my trailer for my assistant, and as soon as he returns he'll stand guard at your door."

WHEN the taxi arrived Crum and the sheriff were whisked swiftly to the Mexican town. They found Rubelio Paredes sullen at being disturbed a second time. The big man, Hassel, called Ox, he told them, had been there and had been given a description of the man who had sold Rubelio the shrunken head. The man was a thin, tall American, with yellowish hair and a face which Rubelio said was like a prairie dog's. That, he swore, was all he knew.

"Fits in with the woman's description all right," Sheriff Perry remarked excitedly to Crum. "Well, let's get on. Ox is probably waiting for us at the tourist camp right now."

They were driven quickly back to the tourist camp. But no sooner had they stepped from the taxi than Doc Oates, the camp proprietor, came running through the gates. His face was flushed, his eyes wide with alarm.

"Colonel Crum, thank the Lord you're back! Marshal Crowley's about to shoot that fellow, Aga, of yours and—"

His words broke off as a shot rang out inside the court. Hoarse oaths followed as Crum and the sheriff dived through the gates. Two struggling shapes were wallowing on the ground in front of the Wheaton cabin. The struggle ceased as Crum shot his flash beam out.

Aga Aslan, a calm but questioning

look on his dark face, was seated atop a tall, raw-boned, booted man, whose arms he was holding firmly pinioned to the ground. A .45 revolver and a white sombrero lay nearby. The ugly lantern-jawed face of the tall man was apoplectic.

"Get him offa me, Perry!" he bawled at the sheriff. "Get him offa me! I'll kill the danged furriner!"

"Seems you ain't had much luck so far, Dave," the sheriff said. "What's wrong? That feller is Colonel Crum's assistant."

"I don't give a hoot if he's the governor's pet bull," Town Marshal Crowley raged. "He's resisted arrest and attacked an officer and—"

"What happened, Aga?" Crum asked.

"*Effendi*," the giant said patiently, "there is perhaps a mistake. The note you left told me to guard this cabin. I got here only about ten minutes ago. I came here at once. But no sooner had I sat down than this man came prowling."

The sheriff let out a loud guffaw.

"Well, let him up, Aga. He's the town marshal, though what he's doing creeping around here, I don't know."

"I'm attending to my business!" Crowley snarled. "Which is more than some law officers in this place does. I'm makin' my rounds when I see this furriner here drive into the camp in a big limousine. Well, I'm always on the lookout for furrin agents, so I says, 'I'll just see where this big hombre goes.' I step in behind this cabin, see him go to the trailer there, then come sneakin' back. I'm about to arrest him when he ups and attacks me." [Turn page]

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"Well, he was on duty here," the sheriff dismissed it, "so just forget it, Dave." He looked at his watch. "Wonder why Ox ain't come back?"

"Hassel?" Oates who was standing nearby gave a start. "Why, he's here. In the excitement, I forgot to tell you. He got back about twenty minues ago. I told him you two had left, so he said he'd just wait. He parked over there." He nodded toward a shadowy corner of the court.

Crum and the sheriff turned. There was a big tree and parking space at that end of the court, and now they saw the dim outline of the car.

"Well, I'll be durned!" the sheriff snorted. "Ox always was bad about going to sleep as soon as dark came. But I wouldn't thought he could sleep through all this racket. Well, let's go wake him up."

He started off, followed by Crum. The other three men trailed behind. But as for waking Ox Hassel up, that did not prove to be a simple matter. Crum's sharp eyes were the first to note something incongruous in the silhouette of the mountainous figure slumped over the wheel.

HE quickened his pace, flung his flash-beam out. The men behind him stopped as if they had suddenly run into a wire fence. A gagged cry broke from the sheriff's lips. Ox was there—but only a part of him. The huge body was propped against the wheel, but his head was missing. Only the bloody stump of a neck rose from the sloping shoulders.

Crum, his nerves quivering, stepped forward and flung the car door open. A small white card fell out upon the running board. He picked it up, trained his light on it and read:

Let this warn you, Crum. Move out and keep moving.

The Taker of Heads.

The hour that followed was a hectic one. While Aga worked with flash-bulb and camera, photographing the body and scouring the car for fingerprints, Crum and the officers questioned all guests and employees of the Friendly Tourist Courts. Only the

Wheatons were excepted, and Oates was cautioned not to mention them.

While Town Marshal Crowley was loudly airing his views to the newspaper men, Crum and the sheriff talked briefly with the Wheatons, then hung a "Sick—No Visitors" sign on their door.

But all the questioning came to nothing. No one, camp employee or guest, had heard any disturbance up to the time of Aga's and Crowley's altercation. No suspicious-looking stranger had been seen anywhere about.

"It's devilish!" Sheriff Perry summed it up as he sat in Crum's trailer after the first rush of excitement had died down. "How could this fiend come and go, as invisible as the air? How could he have beheaded Ox who'd have tackled a bull, and who was armed to boot?"

"I think I can explain that part of it," Crum said. "Ox, I think, was stunned with *curare*. The killer probably crept up behind him, gave him a gentle stab that wouldn't have hurt more than a pin-prick, but which would have made him limp and helpless almost instantly. The beheading would then have been a simple matter."

The sheriff shuddered. "It's awful! And all because we talked too loud about Ox having heard that man muttering the mumbo-jumbo!"

"I'm afraid so," Crum admitted. "The killer was evidently spying on the Wheatons while we were talking tonight. He knew he had to silence Ox before we learned from him just *where* that tramp had been seen. The hide-out undoubtedly must be near that place, as I said. We've got to find it, Dew."

"Sure," the sheriff moaned. "But how? The land around here's all irrigated farms, with brush and hills beyond. We don't know where to start."

"We might start with Alban Hoyt, the vanished farmer," Crum said. "My guess is that his only connection with the case is that he stumbled on this 'cavelike' hide-out, as a man hunting rabbits might do, and paid for it with his life. Where was he

hunting that day?"

"Nobody seems to know," the sheriff replied. "Hoyt was in the habit of wandering long distances when he hunted, sometimes clean on the other side of town from his place. Of course I'll organize another search party, but what have we got to look for? A cavelike hide-out, which is sure to be cleverly concealed, and a blond, weasel-faced man. That's all."

"Not quite," Crum said dreamily. "There's the hairless cat."

"The hairless cat! You really believe Mrs. Wheaton saw that?"

"Of course," Crum said. "And cats are apt to roam about."

"Meaning?"

Crum took a sheet of paper and began to write:

Lost, Strayed or Stolen—"Baldy," a hairless cat. Freak show owner will pay twenty dollars for information leading to recovery. Call with cat or information at newspaper office.

He handed the sheet to Perry.

"Get that in the morning paper if it's possible," he said. "A hairless cat is a sight not apt to be forgotten. It may bring results." He got up from his chair. "That, I think, is about all we can do tonight. You may as well get some sleep. I'm going to work awhile on those letters of Mrs. Wheaton's."

CHAPTER III

The Hairless Cat

JUST as soon as Perry had gone, Crum procured from Mrs. Wheaton the three letters signed "Mr. Z." He laid them out beside the warning card which had been left with Hassel's body, and labeled them A, B, C and D. He photographed them, ran the prints quickly through his small dryer, and began a careful comparison of the handwriting of each.

The three letters, all written in a small cramped hand, appeared identical at first glance. But Crum's analysis developed the interesting fact that

letters B and C, received by the Wheatons after reaching Molina, were in reality skillful forgeries of the handwriting of the first letter which had offered them aid.

Continuing, he turned his attention to the warning card left with Ox Hassel's body. A further startling fact came to light. The warning, though obviously in a disguised hand, was not, he convinced himself, written by the writer of either the first or the second and third letters.

Three different men, then, were concerned in this grisly puzzle!

Mulling this over, Crum strolled out and relieved Aga who had resumed his guard post on the Wheaton doorstep. Later in the night Aga took up the watch again while Crum slept. The rest of the night passed uneventfully.

But next morning the local newspaper had a field day. Conspicuous among the lurid accounts and speculations about the "Molina Maniac" as the newspaper accounts dubbed the killer, were the quoted opinions of Town Marshal Crowley. The sheriff's office, Crowley said, was not only incompetent, but a joke and a disgrace. Even with the presence of a world-famous detective to bolster it, the department had allowed one of its men to be murdered. And almost at the same moment, the famous detective's assistant had been busy obstructing Town Marshal Crowley who might otherwise have caught the killer.

That had its effect. Amidst the wild rumors running rife through the streets, muttered jibes and threats against Sheriff Perry were mingled. It was only with difficulty that he was able to enlist enough men to help in his search of the brushlands for the "cavelike" hide-out.

Crum worked at such clues as he had. Most of the fingerprints taken from the car proved to be Hassel's and the sheriff's. Also, a set of smudged impressions indicated that the killer had worn rubber gloves. Scant hope was left that any of the fingerprints would prove useful. And as the day wore on, no answer came to the advertisement for the hairless cat.

One fresh angle, however, did de-

velop. The discovery of a small puncture near the left shoulder of Hassel's body set Crum to searching the ground about the murder spot carefully. At a point behind a tree he found scattered shavings, evidently from a sharpened pencil. He collected them. A finely sharpened pencil would have made an excellent vehicle for the curare which had stunned Hassel. But it would have been a dangerous thing to carry in the pocket afterward. He continued his search, and in a refuse can, found the pencil, its tip stained brown by the poison.

Crum examined pencil and shavings under his microscope and found what he had hoped to find—the tiny nicks inevitably left by the blade which had sharpened it. At once he began making delicate moulage casts of both the pencil and the shavings. It was late afternoon by then and he was busy under the laboratory lights, applying a coat of positive moulage with a Chinese hair brush, when Sheriff Dew Perry came in.

The sheriff was haggard, weary, discouraged.

"Not a thing," he announced. "There simply ain't any natural caves in that brushland, and we've visited every farm that's got a cellar or a dug-out on it. No business. But unless something's done soon it won't be safe for me to walk the streets without a bodyguard. Folks are that riled up."

He looked curiously at the pencil on which Crum was working.

"What's that?" he asked.

CCRUM told him, explained how cutting edges may be identified as positively as fingerprints by the characteristic traces they leave.

"But," the sheriff said ruefully, "you got to get the cutting edge first." Then he added, almost as an afterthought, "Oh, yeah, I came by the Sentinel office, and there's a report on that hairless cat."

Crum laid down his work. "The creature's been brought in?"

"Naw," Perry said. "But a Mex truck farmer, Joe Salinas, out west of town, claims he's seen the critter. Says she comes by his place some-

times of an evenin' to beg for food. Says he aims to catch her. But I wouldn't put too much faith in it. He may be just lying to get the twenty dollars."

"You still don't believe in the hairless cat, eh?" Crum asked. He was peeling off his apron. "Well, let's go and see Joe Salinas anyhow."

Hurriedly he packed a small kit with a hypodermic syringe and various tubes of chemicals. Then he left orders with Aga to guard the Wheatons every minute and followed the sheriff to his car.

The colors of sunset were fading in a gray haze as they drove swiftly down a road crisscrossed by irrigation ditches, and drew up finally before a low adobe hut on the outskirts of the farm district. A dim light burned inside and Mexican children were playing in the twilight. A stooped man in dirty dungarees shuffled out of the door to meet them.

"Hello, Joe," the sheriff greeted. "Did you catch that cat?"

"*Si, si.*" Salinas replied. "I have her, the ugly beast."

They got out and followed him to a lattice-covered box near the door. Crouched inside, and whining plaintively, was a gaunt tabby cat whose hairless body had the mottled nakedness of a salamander. But Crum, once he had made friends by the proffer of a meat scrap, lifted the cat out as if she had been a priceless vase. Pressing a twenty-dollar bill into the eager hand of Joe Salinas, he cradled the cat in his arms and started down the road.

"Hey," the sheriff asked, "where you going?"

"The cat will decide that for us," Crum replied. "She's hungry and will probably head for home."

"You aim to follow her? But it's almost dark—"

"So much the better," Crum said.

He had stooped and produced a small tube from his pocket kit. Moistening a finger, he made two crossing marks on the cat's back. The marks glowed with a whitish luminosity.

The sheriff chuckled. "Luminous paint, huh?"

Crum released the cat and stood up.

She rubbed against his ankle for a moment, whined. But getting no more food, she bounded away into a nearby field and started across it at a slow trot.

Crum and the now excited sheriff followed. The cat ambled along at a uniform pace, paying no attention to them. She seemed to know where she was going.

It was dark now save for a faint afterglow like the sheen of heated metal illumining the edges of the hills beyond the brushland. In the hot silence tension seemed to grow. Neither man spoke, but both were thinking of the red-haired *tzantza*, of Ox Hassel's headless body.

Finally they came to a fenced lane. The cat crossed it. On the opposite side the silhouette of a hay pile loomed up beside an empty cattle pen.

"What's this place?" Crum asked in a whisper.

"It's a part of the Greeve farm," the sheriff replied. "Used to be a shack here, but it was torn down. The house is farther on across the field there. Place hasn't been farmed this year, but I think old Professor Greeve has come back to live in the house, though I couldn't get any answer when I stopped there today while I was searching."

"And who is Professor Greeve?" Crum asked.

"Just a harmless old codger who used to teach science in the Molina High School," the sheriff said. "But he quit and went off somewhere several years ago and just recently came back." He stopped. "Say, that cat seems to be heading for the Greeve house!"

SHE was. For a few moments the luminous X on her back had vanished in the shadows about the hay pile. But now it had reappeared, was moving straight across the field toward a light which marked a window in the house.

Cautiously the men followed. Nearing the place, they crept up behind a shed and peered around its corner. The cat was now whining at the back door of what appeared to be the kitchen. Through its lighted win-

dow they could see the lean, bearded figure of a man bending over a stove where a huge boiling pot was emitting dense fumes into the air.

"That's old Professor Greeve," the sheriff muttered. "But what—"

He stopped. The man had moved from the stove. A moment later the door opened and his gaunt shape stood framed in its embrasure. His scrawny torso was naked, and outlined in the light, his shaggy head looked startlingly large, with its great skull dome and sunken eye sockets. In one bony hand he was holding a slender stick, while the other clutched a huge kicking bullfrog.

He stepped out and squatted down in the patch of light. Pinioning the frog's forelegs under his toe, he stretched the rubbery body out and deliberately forced the pointed stick into the delicate white underskin of the creature's hind leg. Then he withdrew the stick and prodded the frog. It began to jump.

"*Shuc!*" the squatting man grunted. "*Ishcai, quimsa!*"

The frog made three jumps. Then it collapsed in a limp heap.

Sheriff Perry's breath made a harsh sound in the darkness.

"The old fool's gone stark mad!" he muttered. "He could be murdering for pleasure, torturing animals like that, muttering gibberish like an idiot!"

"No," Crum said in a low voice. "He's merely counting in the language of the Jivaro Indians, a habit he may have picked up while watching them test their curare on frogs—just as he is doing now."

"Curare! So that's what he's cooking?"

"Undoubtedly," Crum said. "The man whom Ox Hassel surprised on the field's edge was also starting to cook curare. In fact, that paper which Mrs. Wheaton picked up in her captor's car—'stick which talks in the wind,' and all that stuff you called mumbo-jumbo, was simply a formula for making curare, written down in the terminology of the Jivaros."

"The devil!" Perry grated. "And you knew that all along? Well, anyhow, we've got him now!"

He drew his gun and stepped out.

"Get 'em up, Greeve! It's the law."

The squatting man jerked up his head. His sunken eyes stared at them in glassy panic. Then he tottered slowly upright, raising his bony arms.

"All right, Sheriff," he quavered. "All right. I know when I'm whipped. I suppose I'm charged with practicing without a license!"

"Practising without a license!" The sheriff was thunderstruck. "What in thunderation are you trying to pull on me?"

"I think I know," Crum spoke quietly. "Suppose we go in and talk."

Old Greeve stumbled ahead of them into the fume-reeking kitchen. He sank into a chair and cradled his bearded head in his hands. Perry kept his gun on Greeve, but looked bewilderedly at Crum.

"He means," the little detective explained, "that he's been guilty of practicing medicine without a license." He faced the old professor. "How long," he asked, "have you been working on your curare treatment for spastic paralysis, Professor?"

"How do you know that?" Greeve shot back warily.

"I'm a scientist of a sort myself," Crum answered modestly. "So naturally I'm familiar with the experiments being carried on in that field. And since Roy Wheaton is suffering from one of the ailments classed roughly as spastic paralysis—"

"So you know the Wheatons!" old Greeve interrupted. "Yes, I thought so. They turned me in, didn't they? That's gratitude!"

CCRUM held up a restraining hand.

"Let's not go so fast," he said. "Tell me about your work."

"My work? It's over now!" the old man said bitterly. "And all because I don't happen to have a doctor's license! Yet I know more about the possibilities of curare than any of them. Ever since I was a poorly paid science teacher I've dreamed of perfecting a cure for spastic paralysis—the curse that made my mother an invalid for years. As soon as I could save enough money I went to the jungles, studied the making of curare

there, developed a type of unsurpassed strength and purity. But I had to work outside the law as far as testing my treatment was concerned. I came back to my old home, set myself up secretly here. I read of Roy Wheaton's case, wrote to them offering my help—"

"And then terrorized the woman!" Perry put in.

"Terrorized her?" Greeve repeated. "I never saw her. They came to Molina and put an ad in the paper as I had directed. I wrote them a letter telling them to come here. But I got no answer except another ad in the paper which demanded some sort of explanation. I couldn't understand it and wrote to them again, since the only way I knew to reach them was through General Delivery. There has been no answer and I have still been waiting."

"You mailed the letters to them yourself?" Crum asked.

"I mailed the first one," Greeve said. "But my assistant, Henry Nolte, mailed the others."

"Henry Nolte," Crum repeated. "Is he a tall lean fellow with blond hair and a weasel face?"

"Well," Greeve said, "Henry isn't pretty, poor fellow. He was a very sick man when I found him in Ecuador, stranded, penniless. But I weaned him away from—well, it was the drug habit. I gave him a job, brought him back with me. And he's been a big help, does almost everything for me. Buried in my work as I am, he's my sole contact with the outside."

"Worse luck for you," Crum said. "But you have another member of your household too, don't you, Professor? A native Indian?"

Greeve gave a start. "You know that too? Yes, Yacu is a Jivaro I brought back with me. But I've always kept him under cover, knowing he would attract attention, excite curiosity. I only let him out at night to get a little fresh air—in Nolte's company, of course. Though Yacu is quite harmless."

"He might be, under ordinary circumstances," Crum said. "But cooped up and repressed like that, I imagine a savage would be easy prey for a

fiend who tempted and enslaved him with drugs and gave free reign to his head-hunting proclivities. By the way, where are these two now?"

"Why," Greeve said, "they left about twenty minutes ago for a little ride in the car."

"Thunderation!" Perry gasped. "Those two murdering devils at large!" He moved threateningly toward Greeve. "Are you trying to pretend you don't know what they've been up to?"

Greeve goggled dazedly. "Murdering devils, you say? I don't know what you mean. I rarely read the papers, I live like a hermit."

"I think the professor is probably telling the truth," Crum interrupted. "He admits writing the first letter to the Wheatons. But the other two, which were written after they got to Molina, were written by another hand. And since it was a forgery of the professor's handwriting, it would seem to indicate that the professor has been deceived too."

"Deceived? I?"

"Yes, and worse," Crum replied. "Your man Nolte is playing some deep and ugly game. He's got your Jivaro Indian in it with him. They've got a cavelike hide-out of some sort to which they probably go at night. Some time ago they killed a rabbit hunter who stumbled on the place. Your Jivaro cured his head and Nolte sold it, along with some curare he had either made or stolen from you, to a curio dealer in La Cholla."

DLD Greeve's sunken eyes grew wide and startled.

"I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "Henry wouldn't—after all I've done for him. And Yacu—Yacu is quite harmless!"

"Not if a white man has fed him drugs," Crum said. "Marihuana, for instance. Not if the savage's repressed impulses have been played upon, a resentment built up in his mind against you for keeping him cooped up. And he has been given a chance to go back to his jungle practices of head-hunting. But that's not all Nolte has done. Let me ask you, did he know about your invitation to

the Wheatons at the time you wrote to them?"

"No," Greeve said. "I told him about it later."

"Then that explains why he didn't stop them before they came to Molina," said Crum. "But, failing that, he did the best he could. He forged letters in your handwriting, the first telling them to go back. But the woman refused to go without an explanation from you. So he kidnaped her and threatened her with death unless she and her husband got out. Later still, a deputy sheriff was murdered because he knew too much."

"But why?" Greeve protested. "Why would Henry do that?"

"Can't you guess?" Crum asked. "It's clear he was desperate to keep the Wheatons away from you. And the reason for that, it seems to me, must be your offer to let Wheaton repay you with his help in your work. Obviously, Wheaton, being a chemist, would have access to your secrets, might learn perhaps of formulas which Nolte covets for himself. Curare isn't the only valuable drug the jungle holds. Isn't it true that you are working on other formulas too?"

An evasive look came into Greeve's eyes.

"But I keep my formulas locked away," he said. "Also, they're written in jungle terminology."

"I know that," Crum replied, "because Nolte *did* steal your curare formula—tore it from one of your note-books. But he's evidently after something else, something which, if he can't steal it, he'll get by holding you captive in his hide-out and torturing you until he does get it. I imagine he arranged that hide-out for that specific purpose!"

The hairless cat had come into the room and now lay curled up on the floor. Crum looked down at her, then back at Greeve.

"There are numbers of jungle drugs which have proved valuable commercially," he said. "There's quinine, and more recently *rotenone*, the fish poison now used in insecticides. And there's another, as yet unexploited, though often spoken of by explorers."

He looked significantly at the car again.

Greeve let out a sigh. "All right," he said. "I see you've guessed that too. Yes, I know it takes a fortune on this—money I'd have used to promote my special pathology work. But I haven't perfected the formula yet. I've been too busy with the current experiments. And now—"

"Now," Crum said, "you're lucky we got here before you were murdered. But if you help us to get Mike and the Jew—"

He stopped in mid-sentence. Old Greeve, during the short hour, had suddenly turned forward, a look of wild terror on his face.

"Yes," he murmured. "Yes, stop!"

CHAPTER IV

The Jungle Killer

INSTANTLY Crum flung himself sideward, whipping out his gun as he whirled toward the door. Outside, in the patch of light a brown shape was visible, a flashing saw-tooth already raised. Where Crum could fire, the man—Crum was whirling straight at him. He missed Crum's chest. But he was cocked. His arm was straight out and his shot went wild. What a terrible way the little brown man melted into the darkness.

Crum started after him. But he whirled at a car horn behind. The horn which had missed him had found another mark. Sheriff Doc Perry, a stumped look on his face, was clanking in the doorway, that of the car embedded in his chest. His abdomen's his fingers were numb, his knees buckling under him, and he collapsed in a limp heap on the floor.

Instantly Crum was at the side, whipping the door open, reaching a flashlight made of his flashlight, around the injured man.

"Get the car," he yelled at Greeve. "Hurry."

But Greeve already had it. He knew the jungle treatment for such a mortal wound, and he applied it. Crum

with a razor blade taken from his pocket kit, was cutting the poisoned flesh away. Moving aside to let Greeve apply the salt, he fished a hypodermic syringe and a small ampule from the kit.

"Prostygmine?" Greeve asked, surprised.

Crum nodded. "I was afraid it might be needed. It's a fairly effective remedy, and together with the jungle treatment, it should save him."

He got up. "Where's your telephone?"

Greeve jerked his head toward the hall. Crum hurried to the old-fashioned wall telephone and called the Friendly Tourist Courts. The voice of the owner, Doc Oates, answered. Recognizing Crum's voice, he interrupted excitedly before the little detective could get his message out:

"Colonel Crum! You'd better hurry in here quick. Plenty has broken loose. The Wheaton woman has been snatched and your man slugged!"

"Aga slugged?" Crum's heart jumped violently. "Badly injured?"

"Fraid so," Oates stammered. "Slugged from behind by the kidnaper who got into the Wheaton cabin through a window, slugged Wheaton too, and carried the woman off. Anyhow, you'd better hurry in!"

Crum hesitated. A terrific struggle was taking place within him. Aga was injured, perhaps dying. Aga his friend and helper, loyal companion of a hundred perils, Aga who would fight for him to the death!

But could he leave here now? There was the injured sheriff to think of, the drug-maddened Jivaro roaming the countryside, the kidnaped woman in the hands of a killer. Unless saved, she would not escape death this time, would not live to identify her abductor. And now not if even, was Crum's chance to find the hide-out. For the killer would be bringing the woman there, might give its whereabouts away.

Crum rushed back to the phone, tried to speak to whatever officer was at the post. As luck would have it, Town Marshal Crowley answered. Quickly Crum related what had happened, asked that a doctor be

sent out and a posse organized to round up the Jivaro. Crowley listened with infuriating calmness.

"Okay," he drawled, "I'll do the best I can. Reckon Dew Perry'll call on me sooner next time he goes off to get himself in a mess."

Crum hung up and went back into the kitchen. He told Greeve of the kidnaping and advised him to get his gun and stand guard over the injured sheriff. Then he hurried out.

The night was moonless. As Crum moved swiftly away from the lighted house the warm darkness closed about him like a tangible menace. He knew how the Jivaros can move as silently as shadows. He knew the deadly accuracy of their gleaming blow-guns. He knew that Yacu was somewhere about.

HE reached the center of a field, crouched down, gripping his revolver, and stared toward the scattered lights of Molina five miles away. Was he too late? Had the kidnaper already reached his secret haven?

He tensed. Down the road from town the lights of a car winked like a firefly against the flat darkness, grew larger as it drew nearer. It was coming toward the Greeve house. But suddenly it swerved, moved along a field's edge and turned into a lane. Its beams, poking out like luminous antennae, were pointed straight at the cow pen and the haystack.

The haystack! Suddenly Crum got it. A cavelike place, hung with canvas, strewn with straw, Irma Wheaton had said. And he recalled how the cat had come here first before going to the Greeve house. The hide-out was probably inside the haystack, standing there in plain sight all the time, while they had been searching for a cave!

The car had stopped a couple of hundred yards away. The abductor was not risking driving up to the place. As the lights were snapped off Crum started running across the field. He reached a point between the haystack and the parked car and stopped. He could not hear or see a thing. But the wires of the nearby fence suddenly gave off a singing

note. Crum gripped his gun and waited.

Something moved vaguely in the darkness ahead. It came nearer—a man's shape, with a white burden in his arms. Feet slogged softly in the loose earth. Slowly Crum raised his gun. Then he froze. Out of the darkness something sang past his ear like a giant wasp—a blow-gun dart! He spun about. A small dark shape shifted in the blackness and he fired, pumping four shots at the elusive shadow.

But he had given his position away. A pistol shot from the other direction caused him to fling himself flat, whirl to send his last shot at the tall figure now charging down upon him. He missed, hurled his pistol, clawed for his curare gun.

Too late. The towering shape pounced down, gun swinging clubwise. It cracked against Crum's skull with a violence that flattened him in the dirt again, too stunned to resist the bony hands that seized him, pinned him flat, began trussing up his wrists and ankles with wire.

Crum raised his head to keep the dust from smothering him. His senses cleared.

"Yacu, Yacu, quick!" a rasping voice was calling. "Drag him inside. I'll take the woman in, then I'll get Greeve. Hurry!"

Lifting Crum's body in short but powerful arms, the Jivaro followed the tall figure plodding ahead with the woman. At the haystack Crum was flung down. A bale had been moved aside. Dim light shone from the tunnel-like hole. The Jivaro waited for the tall man to crawl out. Then he dragged Crum in.

The hollow space inside the haystack, roofed with planks and hung with dirty tarpaulins, was lit by a dim lantern. In one corner lay the bound, gagged and unconscious body of Irma Wheaton.

The Jivaro had flung Crum into a corner, picked up a machete, and now squatted by the entrance. The feverish gleam of *marihuana* shone in his black button eyes.

"Why you fight your master, Professor Greeve?" Crum asked him.

The Jivaro slapped his chest. "Me go back Ecuador. Much money. Much heads. Me be big chief. Nolte promise."

So that was it. And now Nolte had gone back for Greeve. There was a chance that the posse from town might surprise him there. But Crum did not count on it. The crisis was quickly shaping to a head. Nolte had planned the hide-out as a place in which to torture Greeve into giving up the formula. But his time was limited now, and he would certainly allow none of them to escape alive. Unless—

PAINFULLY Crum strained and twisted at the wire around his wrists. But the Jivaro was watching him intently. He had to work slowly, carefully. Moments ticked past, then a sound came from the tunnel. The tall man came backing in like a spider dragging its prey. The prey was the limp body of old Professor Greeve. He was unconscious and bound with wire. Blood from an ugly welt on his forehead stained his face and beard.

The man dragged him into the center of the room, turned. He had a small head on a scrawny neck. Thin yellow hair was plastered close to his skull and his face had a sharp rodent look. Sucking on a cigarette which released the acrid smell of marihuana, he scowled at Greeve.

Crum studied him, appraising the drugged brain with which he had to deal. Finally he spoke.

"You may have killed him and lost your chance to get the formula after all."

"What formula?" Nolte growled warily.

"The formula," Crum said, "which you were so afraid the chemist, Roy Wheaton, might get hold of. The formula for the fabulous jungle depilatory, sometimes called *Avelina Blanca*, the permanent non-toxic hair remover with which the Indians keep themselves beardless and hairless. A compound of that stuff fit for civilized use would be worth a fortune."

"He told you about that?" Nolte demanded.

"Never mind," Crum said. "What I'm warning you about, Nolte, is that you'll never profit from it."

"I won't, eh? And why not?"

"Because," Crum said, "you're too dumb. You're simply a tool in the hands of a man who has duped you with drugs and promises, just as you have duped the Jivaro. He'll get the profits and you'll take the rap."

He paused. Nolte's eyes had narrowed.

"You see," Crum went on, "I found that three different men had written the letters to Mrs. Wheaton and the warning note left on Hassel's body. That last was the work of the clever man who's using you. I believe he killed Hassel too—and cleverly. But you blundered by killing the hunter, Hoyt, or letting the Jivaro kill him. You're known to the police, while the other man has kept hidden. You're a risk to him and a liability. And you'll be the goat, unless—"

"Unless?" Nolte said it sneeringly. But a germ of suspicion was in his slitted eyes.

Crum pressed his point. "Unless you use your brain and check out while the checking's good. I don't think you killed Hassel, and I suspect the Jivaro killed Hoyt. That would leave you clear of actual murder. And if you'll come clean, put the finger on the man who's using you—"

It had seemed for a moment that Nolte was wavering. And Crum, who had talked himself out of more than one tough spot, was beginning to hope. But a sudden reaction stirred Nolte's drug-swollen ego.

"Dumb, am I?" he grated. "You'll see how dumb I am!"

He turned, grabbed a pitchfork that was propped against one wall and jabbed its tines savagely against Greeve's stomach. The old man gave a wild cry and opened his eyes.

"I want that formula!" Nolte snarled. "I want it now!"

"But it's not perfected, Henry," Greeve whimpered. "I swear it! I didn't remove the cat's hair with the stuff. I shaved her. True, the stuff has checked her hair growth since, but I don't know yet—"

"I aimed to let you finish it," Nolte rasped, "but there's no time now. I'll take what you've got. Out with it, or I'll rake you to pieces. I'll murder the woman before your eyes! I'll—"

With a crazy edge to his voice, Crum knew he was quite capable of carrying out the threat.

"Tell him, Greeve!" he said.

Greeve's face was green under the sweat. "All right, Henry," he said. "It's in the secret pocket in my belt, all written down."

NOLTE pounced on him like a hawk, ripped the belt from its loops, unsnapped a flap near the buckle and extracted a folded paper. Gloating lit his face as he rose.

"Millions!" he sighed. "Millions!"

"For your boss." Crum said.

Nolte glared at him, his thin lips quivered. He drew a revolver from his pocket, leveled it at Crum.

"Henry Nolte will outsmart you all!" he snarled. "I've got the formula now. As soon as I kill you and the others, I'll do a fade-out."

A faint sound from the tunnel spun Nolte about. He swung his gun toward the dark hole a second too late. A shot blasted and Henry Nolte pitched forward, one outflung hand still holding the crumpled formula.

The Jivaro who had sprung to his feet made a backward leap for safety. The second shot caught him in mid-air. He fell twitching, a hole drilled neatly between his eyes.

Crum was pulling wildly at the wires that bound him. The gun flares had revealed the masked, shape crouching in the tunnel. Now it moved forward. Steel-cold eyes shone between the hat-brim and the handkerchief which hid the lower features. A hand snatched the paper from Nolte's grip.

And just then Crum's bleeding wrists came free as the twisted wire finally broke.

It was an instant of crisis. In one swift move Crum's hand could reach the curare gun at his vest front. A single shot would do the job. But not before the masked killer had fired. Both would certainly die.

Crum had no desire to die. But

the lives of others hung in the balance—Greeve's and the brave woman's. The woman he had promised to protect.

In a flash his decision was made. His right hand flew from behind him, seized the curare gun. But something else was happening. The killer's gun had swung toward the lantern. A shot blasted and the lantern crashed.

Crum rolled face down as a dull explosion filled the hollow space. Streamers of burning oil laced the air. He raised himself to see the straw-strewn floor already blazing like a prairie fire. Tongues of flame licked hungrily along the hangings.

Quickly he freed his ankles, flung himself toward Greeve, twisted loose the wires that bound him.

"Help me with the woman!" he panted.

Greeve scrambled up. The hay-walled crypt was a torture chamber now. The hangings quivered in red-edged shreds. The baled hay was taking fire. Thick smoke blinded their eyes and seared their lungs like acid.

Blindly they groped toward the helpless woman, began dragging her toward the exit. They reached it and Greeve began pulling her in by her feet while Crum lifted her head. A whiff of fresh air from the hole revived them. A few more seconds and they would be safe. Then Greeve screamed. The bale of hay that formed the lintel above the opening had fallen, pinning the old professor beneath it.

Crum sprang forward, braced his shoulder against the bale, heaved. But others above it had fallen too. He couldn't budge it. Stooping, he seized Greeve's hand and tried to drag him forward. But he could not do it. His blood was boiling in his veins now and his lungs were choking. Suddenly he heard the cries and shouts of alarm outside. Help had arrived, but too late. Human strength could never snatch them from this oven.

Not ordinary human strength anyhow. Bitterly, Crum thought of Aga, his towering bulk and mighty shoulders, Aga lying unconscious—or dead!

He dropped Greeve's hands. The place was now a flaming inferno. He was blind from the smoke, his clothing was afire, his lungs a raw torment. The whole maelstrom of blistering flame and smoke was beginning to swirl crazily about him. Madly he flung himself against the wedged bales again, threw all his failing strength into a final heave.

The bale moved slightly. It shocked his fading consciousness to life. But he had not done it. Something had moved it from the outside. He pressed his face to a crack and deep, panting breathing reached his ears. Then a voice was calling:

"*Effendi!* You are there? I am coming!"

The bale moved again. This time it was jerked violently aside and Crum glimpsed the giant's flame-splashed face, framed in its turban of white bandages, saw the huge body boring toward him with powerful arms that flung the hay bales aside like packing crates.

"Aga!" Crum gasped. "Thank God!"

Then things went black.

CHAPTER V

Out of the Fire

A DULL glare lit the night. The hay pile had burned down to a red-rimmed heap, at the edges of which men worked, beating down the last flames. Crum's vision cleared and he saw Aga bending over him while two figures loomed beyond—the thick-set form of Doc Oates, the tourist camp owner, and the tall gangling frame of Town Marshal Crowley.

"Well," the marshal drawled smugly, "we didn't get here any too soon. Always thought Dew Perry needed a guardian."

"The others were saved too?" Crum asked.

Crowley nodded. "We got 'em out. Old Greeve and the woman are okay. The little savage and the tall feller are dead."

Crum frowned. He had hoped that Nolte would live to talk. He looked at Aga, smiled with relief.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "They told me—"

Aga touched his bandaged head.

"It was a bad crack," he said. "I was hit from behind. At first they thought it was a concussion, but luckily it wasn't. When I came to, learned you were in danger, I hurried here."

Doc Oates laughed. "He was almost too wobbly to stand up, but raring to go. I offered to drive for him, and Roy Wheaton was worried half crazy about his wife, so we had to load Wheaton into the trailer and bring him along too. But when we got to the Greeve place we found only the sheriff there—still paralyzed, but able to talk a little. He told us how this fellow Nolte had got the jump on Greeve, slugged him, and carried him off. So we split up and started searching. I was off in the brush when I heard your man yell and saw the smoke and flame from the haystack."

"Where's the sheriff now?" Crum asked.

"Over by your trailer," Crowley nodded. "We brought him along when we pulled it over here to load Wheaton's wife in."

Crum turned, saw the sheriff and Professor Greeve lying on a blanket spread near the trailer door. He started toward them, but stopped. He was still thinking of Nolte, of the unlucky fact that the man had died. Nolte could have been made to talk, to put the finger on the real killer who was behind him. Now it would be no easy task to bring that wily villain to bay.

"And where is Nolte?" he asked.

"Layin' over there by the cow pen," Crowley told him. "But you'll git nothin' outa him. He's dead as a doorknob."

Crum walked over and found the body laid out in the shadows. He snapped on his flash, still vaguely hoping that a mistake had been made. But Nolte was dead. He would never betray the man who had killed him.

Wearily Crum stooped down and studied the hole where the bullet had entered just under the man's ribs. He

was about to get up when a tiny detail caught his sharp eye—a slight cut in the fabric in the upper edge of the blood-stained hole in the shirt. A bullet had not made that. Frowning, he unbuttoned the shirt, exposed the undershirt beneath. There lay the answer before his eyes. Just above the bullet-hole was another rent—a clean-cut gash in the undershirt's fabric!

Crum stood up and flicked off his light. A grim smile crept over his sardonic features. Slowly he walked over to the trailer where Greeve and the sheriff lay. They stirred as he came up.

"Greeve's told me what happened in there," the sheriff muttered thickly. "But he says the big-shot got away. Too bad. We may never get him, now that Nolte's dead and can't tell tales."

"I'm not so sure he may not tell tales anyhow," Crum replied. He turned to Aga who had come up. "You got here first, didn't you?"

Aga nodded.

"Are all the men who came up later still here?" Crum asked.

Aga said they were.

"Then I wish you'd call them all together," Crum told Perry.

HE went on into the trailer. In its back compartment, Roy Wheaton and his wife lay on opposite bunks. A doctor was bending over the woman while Wheaton watched with anxious, tender eyes.

"The doctor says she'll be all right." Wheaton's thin lips smiled at Crum. "I don't know how to thank you—"

"Don't try yet," Crum told him. "I'm not quite finished."

He went on into the laboratory, took a small atomizer from a cabinet and filled it with liquid from a labeled tube. Then he thrust it into the pocket of his scorched and wrinkled coat and went outside again.

The men were straggling up—Crowley and Oates and a dozen assorted villagers and farmers. The sheriff was explaining that Crum wanted them.

"Oh, he does?" Crowley snorted. "One of his famous stunts, eh?"

Crum smiled. "It won't take long. I just want you all to line up there

and show me any knives which you may have in your pockets."

"Knives?" Crowley growled. "Well, I reckon most of us have got pocket-knives. How does a knife figger in this business tonight?"

"Henry Nolte was killed with a knife," Crum said.

"I thought he was shot!" Oates exclaimed.

"He was," Crum said, "but the shot didn't kill him. Somebody stabbed him afterward to make sure he wouldn't talk. The same man who shot him, taking advantage of the confusion later to finish his job."

"How do you know?" Crowley challenged.

"Because," Crum said, "the killer slipped up. He thought that by stabbing unto the bullet hole, stabbing up toward the heart probably, he would leave no trace to be discovered. He did make only a slight cut in the hole in the shirt, and it might have passed. But he forgot that when Nolte was dragged out, his undershirt was disarranged, pulled up so that the bullet hole didn't match the one in his shirt. Consequently he stabbed a fresh hole in the undershirt—which gave him away."

A look of slow alarm was spreading over the men's faces.

"And you think it was one of us?" a farmer asked.

"I'm sure of it," Crum replied. "It happened after Nolte was pulled from the fire, and no one has left since then. You see, the killer who shot Nolte and set the haystack afire did not escape. He came back and joined the rescuers and so was able to finish killing Nolte."

"Yeah, but he'd have thrown away the knife he used," Crowley said.

"I don't think so," Crum replied. "To have it found and identified as his would draw more attention to him than just to keep it since, as you say, so many of you carry knives. And of course he didn't think that anyone would suspect that Nolte had been stabbed at all."

"Well, he'd have cleaned it anyhow," Crowley said flatly. "So the heck with all this hocus-pocus. I reckon since the sheriff's incapaci-

tated, I'm the ranking officer here, and I say—"

"You're out of your jurisdiction, Dave." The sheriff spoke haltingly from his pallet. "Colonel Crum, I deputize you to—"

Crowley's oath cut him short as he laid a hand on his gun, glared at the little detective. But he had failed to see the quick signal which had passed between Crum and Aga, causing the giant to move quietly around behind the marshal.

"You'll pay the dickens!" Crowley began, but at that instant powerful arms gripped him from behind in the hug of a grizzly, held him cursing and struggling.

Crum stepped quickly forward, wrenched the marshal's revolver from its holster and fished from Crowley's pocket a long, wicked-looking knife. Pressing a button, Crum let its gleaming blade shoot out.

"You won't find no blood on it!" Crowley raged.

"Nor on mine," said Doc Oates.

He, like the others, had at first seemed bent on following Crowley's lead. But now he produced his knife meekly. It was a large instrument of the pruning knife type, with a sharp curved blade.

"It's as clean as a whistle," he boasted. "I never use it for anything but trimming the trees and shrubs around the camp."

CCRUM ignored it all. With the little atomizer taken from his coat pocket he was spraying the blade and handle of Crowley's knife. He then laid it on the ground in front of Crowley and treated Oates' knife likewise. He went on down the line, giving each knife a similar treatment. Then he stepped back.

"What the devil is that stuff in the spray?" Crowley snarled.

"*Di-aminophthal hydrazide*," Crum answered. "It exposes killers, even the careful ones. For a garment or weapon that has been blood-stained, even after being cleaned will, if sprayed with this chemical—" He paused, took a firm grip on the gun he had taken from Crowley, and with his other hand reached back and slammed

the trailer door shut. "Will," he finished "give off an unmistakable reaction."

The dying fire still glowed behind the men. But in front of them the knives lay in their shadows. They were invisible—all but one. Alone in the group it glowed with a greenish white luminosity.

"All right, Oates, you're covered!" Crum's voice rapped.

There was a concerted gasp. A choked oath rang out. Doc Oates sprang back, glowering like an animal at bay.

"It's a frame-up!" he shrilled. "It's nothing but a trick!"

"In that case," Crum said grimly, "you won't object to my trying another test. I've got the sharpened pencil, impregnated with curare, which was used to stun Ox Hassel. It was sharpened on the spot, almost certainly with the knife which was used to behead Hassel. I've made casts of the tiny grooves on the sharpened pencil, left by microscopic nicks in the knife's blade. If your knife is the one, I can prove it so scientifically that no jury will doubt—"

Oates did not wait for him to finish. What he did was a last brilliant flare of the cunning brain which had engineered the orgy of crime. He whipped out his gun and jabbed it into the side of Aga who was still holding Crowley's arms.

"Now!" Oates snarled. "Drop that gun or I'll blow your big stooge's insides out!"

Crum was momentarily paralyzed. That Oates would carry out the threat he had no doubt. Yet even if he were able to grab the curare gun on his watch chain while throwing the revolver down, it might be too late to save Aga, who had released Crowley and was now standing rigid. Then Crum noticed the look on Crowley's face as the marshal stared at Oates—consternation changing to the indignant rage of a touchy man who's been made a fool of. Crum gambled on Crowley's hair-trigger temper then.

"All right," he said and, lowering the gun, he tossed it forward.

It landed near Crowley's feet. The irate marshal's reaction was almost

automatic. With a snarled oath he dived for the gun. Instantly, the rattled Oates swung his own gun toward Crowley. But instantly too, Aga acted. His huge right fist lashed out in an arc that ended with a crack on Oates' chin. With a snapped-off cry the gunman tottered backward, and even before he hit the ground, Aga had him in his powerful clutches. In a matter of seconds Oates was pinned flat, helpless, but still snarling curses at Crum who had come forward to stand over him.

"I should have killed you inside there!" Oates raged.

"You would have," Crum said, "if you hadn't been so sure the fire would do it. You almost won your game anyhow, though I've had my eye on you from the start. You were a little too anxious to steer us away from the Wheatons, explain her tragic experience as effects of marihuana. And the fact that Hassel was killed so quietly, with no stranger seen around the camp, made it look like an inside job. Also there was the fact that Nolte had steered the Wheatons to your camp, after his first attempt to get rid of them had failed. And there was the fact that, being a pharmacist, you would naturally be interested in the formula which Nolte told you about—probably when he was getting a narcotic prescription filled."

"The rat!" Oates grated. "If I had it to do again—"

"You won't," Crum assured him. He turned. "Marshal Crowley," he said, "you have the honor of making the

formal arrest. Despite past differences, I think you have earned the honor. . . ."

COLONEL CRUM stayed long enough in Molina to help arrange and document the evidence that would be used in Oates' trial, and to make sure that Sheriff Perry—thanks to the quick treatment—seemed certain to recover from his curare wound. Crum also had a last talk with the Wheatons and Professor Greeve. The old man had already sufficiently recovered from his night's experience to be deep in plans for Roy Wheaton's treatment.

But this time he was wisely sharing honors with a doctor who had agreed to supervise the case.

Nor was the jungle depilatory formula forgotten.

"It's far from perfect yet," old Greeve admitted, "but Roy's a chemist himself, and together we'll work it out, once he's cured. Then we'll be partners, and one of these days that formula will make us a fortune."

Irma Wheaton smiled happily. It was, Crum thought, worth all the danger and delay to see her fine brave face once again wear the sort of expression it deserved.

But there was the case in Southern California, and Crum was never one to linger over finished triumphs. Next day the white road was flowing in a smooth stream under his car again, and his busy brain was building up conjectures about the task—and the adventure—which lay ahead.

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CHAPTER I

A Plot Afoot?

"**L**OOK at the ugly little thing for yourself then, and tell me if it's an ordinary puppet!" said Delia, her voice rising.

Curiously I examined the limp figure she had jerked out of her handbag and tossed on my desk. The blue-white doll-face grinned at me, revealing yellowish fangs. A tiny wig of black horsehair hung down as far as the empty eye-sockets. The cheeks were sunken. It was a gruesome piece of workmanship, with a strong flavor of the Middle Ages. The maker had evidently made a close study of stone gargoyles and stained-glass devils.

Attached to the hollow papier-mâché head was the black garment that gave the figure its appearance of limpness. Something after the fashion of a monk's robe, it had a

The puppet held the weapon as a man normally does



Detective George Clayton Probes a Manikin

THE PUPPETS

Crime Mystery Novelet

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"The Automatic Pistol," etc.

little cowl that could be tucked over the head, but now hung down in back.

I know something about puppets, even though my line is a far cry from puppeteering. I am a private detective. But I knew that this was not a marionette, controlled by strings, but a hand puppet. It was made so that the operator's hand could be slipped up through the empty garment until his fingers were in a position to animate the head and arms. During an exhibition the operator would be concealed beneath the stage, which had no floor, and only the puppet would be visible above the footlights.

I drew the robe over my hand and fitted my index finger up into the head, my second finger into the right sleeve, and my thumb into the left sleeve of the puppet. That, as I recalled, was the usual technique. Now the figure was no longer limp. My wrist and forearm filled out the robe.

I wiggled finger and thumb, and the manikin waved his



Mystery When Grim Fate Pulls the Strings!

arms wildly, though somewhat awkwardly, for I have seldom manipulated a puppet. I crooked my first finger and the little head gave a vigorous nod.

"Good morning, Jack Ketch," I said, making the manikin bow, as if acknowledging my salutation.

"Don't!" cried Delia, and turned her head away.

Delia was puzzling me. I had always thought her a particularly level-headed woman and, up to three years ago, I had seen a great deal of her and had had a chance to judge.

THREE years ago she had married the distinguished puppeteer, Jock Lathrop, with whom I was also acquainted. Then our paths had separated. But I'd had no inkling of anything being amiss until she had appeared this morning in my New York office and poured out a series of vague hints and incredible suspicions so strange that anything resembling them did not often come a private detective's way, though I hear many odd and bizarre stories during the course of a year's work.

I looked at her closely. She was, if anything, more beautiful than ever, and considerably more exotic, as might be expected now that she was moving in artistic circles. Her thick, golden hair fell straight to her shoulders, where it was waved under. Her gray suit was smartly tailored, and her gray suede shoes trim. At her throat was a barbaric-looking brooch of hammered gold. A long golden pin kept a sketchy little hat and a handful of veil in place.

But she was still the old Delia, still the "softie Viking," as we sometimes used to call her. Except that anxiety was twisting her lips, and fear showed in her big gray eyes.

"What really is the matter, Delia?" I said, sitting down beside her. "Has Jock been getting out of hand?"

"Oh, don't be foolish, George!" she replied sharply. "It's nothing like that. I'm not afraid of Jock, and I'm not looking for a detective to get any evidence for me. I've come to you

because I'm afraid for him. It's those horrible puppets. They're trying . . . Oh, how can I explain it! Everything was all right until he accepted that engagement in London you must remember about, and began prying into his family history, his genealogy. Now there are things he won't discuss with me, things he won't let me see. He avoids me. And, George, I'm certain that, deep in his heart, he's afraid too. Terribly afraid."

"Listen, Delia," I said. "I don't know what you mean by all this talk about the puppets, but I do know one thing. You're married to a genius. And geniuses, Delia, are sometimes hard to live with. They're notoriously inconsiderate, without meaning to be. Just read their biographies! Half the time they go around in a state of abstraction, in love with their latest ideas, and fly off the handle at the slightest provocation. Jock's fanatically devoted to his puppets, and he should be! All the critics who know anything about the subject say he's the best in the world, better even than Franetti. And they're raving about his new show as the best of his career!"

Delia's gray suede fist beat her knee.

"I know, George. I know all about that! But it has nothing to do with what I'm trying to tell you. You don't suppose I'm the sort of wife who would whine just because her husband is wrapped up in his work? Why, for a year I was his assistant, helped him make the costumes, even operated some of the less important puppets. Now he won't even let me in his workshop. He won't let me come backstage. He does everything himself. But I wouldn't mind even that, if it weren't that I'm afraid. It's the puppets themselves, George! They—they're trying to hurt him. They're trying to hurt me too."

I searched for a reply. I felt thoroughly uncomfortable. It is not pleasant to hear an old friend talking like a lunatic. I lifted my head and frowned at the malevolent doll-face of Jack Ketch, blue as that of a drowned man. Jack Ketch is the hangman in the traditional puppet

play, "Punch and Judy." He takes his name from a Seventeenth Century executioner who officiated with rope and red-hot irons at Tyburn in London.

"But Delia," I said, "I don't see what you're driving at. How can an ordinary puppet—"

"But it isn't an ordinary puppet!" Delia broke in vehemently. "That's why I brought it for you to see. Look at it closely. Look at the details. Is it an ordinary puppet?"

Then I saw what she meant.

"There are some superficial differences," I admitted.

"What are they?" she pressed.

"Well, this puppet has no hands. Puppets usually have papier mache or stuffed muslin hands attached to the ends of the sleeves."

"That's right. Go on."

"Then the head," I continued unwillingly. "There are no eyes painted on it—just eyeholes. And it's much thinner than most I've seen. More like a—a mask."

Delia gripped my arm, dug her fingers in.

"You've said the word, George!" she cried. "Like a mask! Now do you see what I mean? Jock doesn't operate his own puppets any more. He has some horrible little creatures like rats that do it for him. They wear the puppets' robes and heads. That's why he won't allow me or anyone else to come backstage during a performance. And they're trying to hurt him, kill him! I know. I've heard them threaten him."

"Delia," I said, gently taking hold of her arms, "you don't know what you're saying. You're nervous, overwrought. Just because your husband invents a new type of puppet—why, it explains itself. It's because of his work on these new-type puppets that he's become secretive."

She jerked away from me.

"Won't you try to understand, George? I know how mad it sounds, but I'm *not* mad. At night, when Jock has thought I was asleep I've heard them threaten him with their high little voices like whistles. 'Let us go—let us go or we'll kill you!'

they cry, and I'm so weak with fear I can't move. They're so tiny they can creep about everywhere."

"Have you seen them?" I asked quickly.

"No, but I *know* they're real! Last night one of them tried to scratch my eyes out while I was asleep. Look!"

She swept back the thick hair from her temple, and at that moment I also felt as if the needle-touch of fear had been transmitted to me. There in the creamy skin, an inch from the eye, were five little scratches that looked as if they might have been made by a miniature human hand. For a moment I could almost see the ratlike little creature Delia had described, its clawed hand upraised. . . .

Then the image faded and I was realizing that such grotesque happenings were impossible. But oddly I felt as if I no longer could attribute everything Delia had told me to her neurotic fancies. I feared, also—but my fear was that there was a plot afoot, one meant to terrify her, to work on her superstitious fears, and delude her.

"Would you like me to visit Jock?" I asked quietly.

Some of the weight seemed to drop from her shoulders.

"I was hoping you'd say that," she said, with relief. . . .

THE exquisitely lettered sign read:

LATHROP'S PUPPETS—2nd Floor

Outside, Forty-second Street muttered and mumbled. Inside, a wooden stair with worn brass fittings led up into a realm of dimness and comparative silence.

"Wait a minute, Delia," I said. "There are a couple of questions I'd like you to answer. I want to get this whole thing straight before I see Jock."

She stopped and nodded, but before I could speak again our attention was attracted by a strange series of sounds from the second floor. Heavy

stamping, then what seemed to be an explosion of curses in a foreign language, then rapid pacing up and down, another explosion of curses, and more pacing. It sounded as if a high-class tantrum were in progress.

Suddenly the noises ceased. I could visualize a person "pausing and swelling up in silent rage." With equal suddenness they recommenced, this time ending in a swift and jarring *clump-clump* of footsteps down the stairs. Delia shrank back against the railing as a fattish man with gray eyebrows, glaring eyes, and a mouth that was going through wordless but vituperative contortions neared us. He was wearing an expensive checked suit and a white silk shirt open at the neck. He was crumpling a soft felt hat.

He paused a few steps above us and pointed at Delia dramatically. His other hand was crumpling a soft felt hat.

"You, madam, are the wife of that lunatic, are you not?" he demanded accusingly.

"I'm Jock Lathrop's wife, if that's what you mean, Mr. Franetti," Delia said coolly. "What's the matter?"

I recognized Luigi Franetti then. He was often referred to by the press as the "Dean of Puppeteers." I remembered that Jock had been in his workshop and studied under him several years ago.

"You ask me what is the matter with me?" Franetti ranted. "You ask me that, Madam Lathrop? Bah!" Here he crumpled his hat again. "Very well—I will tell you! Your husband is not only a lunatic. He is also an ingrate! I come here to congratulate him on his recent success, to take him to my arms. After all, he is my pupil. Everything he learned from me. And what is his gratitude? What, I ask you? He will not let me touch him! He will not even shake hands! He will not let me into his workshop! Me! Franetti, who taught him everything!"

He swelled up with silent rage, just as I'd visualized it. But only for a moment. Then he was off again.

"But I tell you he is a madman!" he shouted, shaking his finger at Delia. "Last night I attended, unannounced and uninvited, a performance of his puppets. They do things that are impossible—impossible without Black Magic. I am Luigi Franetti, and I know! Nevertheless, I thought he might be able to explain it to me today. But no, he shuts me out! He has the evil eye and the devil's fingers, I tell you. In Sicily people would understand such things. In Sicily he would be shot! Bah! Never will I so much as touch him with my eyes again. Let me pass!"

He hurried down the rest of the stairs, Delia squeezing back and turning her head. In the doorway he turned for a parting shot.

"And tell me, Madame Lathrop," he cried, "what a puppeteer wants with rats!"

With a final "Bah!" he rushed out.

CHAPTER II

Strange Actions

I DIDN'T stop laughing until I saw Delia's face. Then it occurred to me that Franetti's accusations, ludicrous as they were, might seem to her to fit with her own suspicions.

"You can't take seriously what a man like Franetti says," I remonstrated. "He's jealous because Jock won't bow down to him and make a complete revelation of all his new technical discoveries and inventions."

Delia did not reply. She was staring after Franetti, absent-mindedly pulling at the corner of a tiny handkerchief with her teeth. Watching her, I knew again the fear she felt, as if again she were feeling a little creature gouging at her temple.

"Anything to that last remark of Franetti's?" I asked lightly. "Jock doesn't keep white rats for pets by any chance?"

"I don't know," Delia said abstractedly. "I told you he never lets me in his workroom." Then she looked at me. "You said you wanted to ask

me some more questions?"

I nodded. On the way here I had been revolving in my mind an unpleasant hypothesis. If Jock no longer loved Delia and had some reason for wanting to be rid of her he might be responsible for her suspicions. He had every chance to trick her.

"You said the change in Jock began to show while you were in London," I said. "Tell me the precise circumstances."

"He'd always been interested in old books and in genealogy, you see, but never to the same extent," she said, after a thoughtful pause. "In a way it was chance that began it. An accident to his hands. A rather serious one, too. A window fell on them, mashing the fingers badly. Of course a puppeteer's no good without hands, and so Jock had to lay off for three weeks. To help pass the time, he took to visiting the British Museum and the library there. Later he made many visits to other libraries and to bookshops. I was glad he had found something to occupy his time, since he's apt to be very nervous when anything prevents him from working. When the war started we came back, and the London dates were abandoned. He did not work here, either, for quite a long time, but kept up his studies.

"Then when he was finally ready to start work again he told me he'd decided to work the puppets alone. I pointed out that one man couldn't give a puppet show, since he could only manage two characters at a time. He told me that he was going to confine himself to puppet plays like *Punch and Judy*, in which there are almost never more than two characters in sight at one time.

"That was three months ago. From that day he's avoided me. George—" her voice broke—"it's almost driven me crazy. I've had the craziest suspicions. I've even thought that he lost both his hands in the accident and refused to tell!"

"What?" I shouted. "Do you mean to tell me you don't know?"

"Do you begin to see how secretive

he is?" she said with a wan and rather pitiful smile.

"No. Seems strange, doesn't it? But I can't swear even to that. He never lets me come near, and he wears gloves, except in the dark."

"But the puppet shows—"

"That's just it. That's the question I keep asking myself when I sit in the audience and watch the puppets. *Who* is manipulating them? What's inside them?"

At that moment I determined to do everything I could to battle Delia's fear.

"You're not crazy," I said harshly. "But Jock is!"

She rubbed her hand across her forehead, as if it ached.

"No," she said softly, "it's the puppets. Just as I told you."

AS we went on upstairs then I could tell that Delia was anxious to get my interview with Jock started. She had had to nerve herself up to it, and delays were not improving her state of mind. But apparently we were fated to have a hard time getting up that flight of stairs.

This time the interruption came when a slim man in a blue business suit tried to slip in the semi-darkness unnoticed. But Delia recognized him.

"Why, hello, Dick!" she said. "Don't you know old friends?"

I made out prim, regular features and a head of thinning, neutral-colored hair.

"Dick, this is George Clayton," Delia was saying. "George, this is Dick Wilkinson. Dick handles my husband's insurance."

Wilkinson's "Howdya do?" sounded embarrassed and constrained. He wanted to get away.

"What did Jock want to see you about?" asked Delia, and Wilkinson's apparent embarrassment increased. He coughed, then seemed to make a sudden decision.

"Jock's been pretty temperamental lately, hasn't he?" he asked Delia.

She nodded slowly.

"I thought so," he said. "Frankly, I don't know why he wanted to see

me this morning. I thought perhaps it was something in connection with the accident to his hands. He has never done anything about collecting any of the five-thousand-dollar insurance he took out on them two years ago. But whether that was it or not I can't tell you. He kept me waiting the best part of half an hour. I could not help hearing Mr. Franetti's display of temper. Perhaps that upset Jock. Anyhow when Franetti went away, fuming, five minutes later Jock leaned out of his workshop door and curtly informed me that he had changed his mind—he didn't say about what—and told me to leave."

"I'm so sorry, Dick," murmured Delia. "That was rude of him." Then her voice took on a strangely eager note. "Did he leave the door of his workshop open?"

Dick Wilkinson wrinkled his brow. "Why yes, I—I believe he did. At least, that was my impression. But, Delia—"

Delia had already slipped on ahead, running swiftly up the steps. Hastily I said good-by to the perplexed insurance agent and followed her.

When I reached the second floor I went into a short hall. Through an open door I glimpsed the closely-ranked seats of the puppet theater. Delia was vanishing through another door down the hall. I followed her.

Just as I came into a small reception room, I heard her scream.

"George! George! He's whipping the puppet!"

With that bewildering statement ringing in my ears, I darted into what I took to be Jock Lathrop's workshop, then pulled up short. It too was dim, but not as dim as the hall. I could see tables and racks of various kinds, and other paraphernalia.

Delia was cowering back against a wall, stark fear in her eyes. But my attention was riveted on the small, stocky man in the center of the room—Delia's husband. On, or *in*, his left hand was a puppet. His gloved right hand held a miniature cat-o'-nine-tails and he was lashing the puppet. And the little manikin was writhing and flailing its arms protectively in a

manner so realistic that it took my breath away. In that strange setting I could almost imagine I heard a squeaking, protesting voice. Indeed, the realism was such and the grin on Lathrop's face so malign that I heard myself saying:

"Stop it, Jock! Stop it!"

HE looked up, saw me, and burst into peals of laughter. His snub-nosed, sallow face was contorted into a mask of comedy. I had expected anything but that.

"So even the skeptical George Clayton, hard-boiled sleuth, is taken in by my cheap illusions!" he finally managed to say.

Then he stopped chuckling and drew himself up nonchalantly, like a magician about to perform a feat of sleight of hand. He tossed the whip onto a nearby table, seized the puppet with his right hand and, to all appearances, wiggled his left hand out of it. Then he quickly flipped me the limp form, thrust both hands into his pockets, and began to whistle.

Delia gave a low, whimpering cry and ran out of the room. If it had been easy for me to imagine a tiny, nude creature scuttling away behind Jock, half concealed by his left hand, what must it have been for her, in her tortured, superstitious state?

"Examine the thing, George," Lathrop directed coolly. "Is it a puppet, or isn't it?"

I looked down at the bundle of cloth and papier-mache I had caught instinctively. It was a puppet all right, and in general workmanship precisely similar to the one Delia had shown me at my office. Its garments, however, were a gay, motley patchwork. I recognized the long nose and sardonic, impudent features of Punch.

I was fascinated by the delicate craftsmanship. The face lacked the brutishness of Jack Ketch, but it had a cunning, hair-trigger villainy all its own. Somehow it looked like a composite of all the famous criminals and murderers I had ever read about. As the murderous hero of Punch and Judy, it was magnificent.

But I had not come here to admire puppets.

"Look here, Jock," I said, "what the devil have you been doing to Delia? The poor girl's frightened to death."

He regarded me quizzically.

"You're taking a lot for granted, aren't you?" he said quietly. "I imagine she hunted you up as a friend, not in your capacity as a detective, but don't you think it would have been wiser to hear both sides of the case before forming judgment? I can imagine what sort of wild stories Delia's been telling you. She says I'm avoiding her, doesn't she? She says there's something queer about the puppets. In fact, she says they're alive, doesn't she?"

I heard a furtive scuffling under the work table, and was startled in spite of myself. Jock Lathrop grinned, then whistled shrilly between his teeth. A white rat crept hesitatingly into view from behind a pile of odds and ends.

"A pet," he announced mockingly. "Is it Delia's belief that I have trained rats to animate my puppets?"

"Forget Delia's beliefs for the present!" I said angrily. "Whatever they are, you're responsible for them! You've no excuse in the world for mystifying her, terrifying her."

"Are you so sure I haven't?" he said enigmatically.

"Good Lord, she's your wife, Jock!" I flung at him.

His face became serious and his words took on a deeper quality.

"I know she's my wife," he said, "and I love her dearly. But George, hasn't the obvious explanation of all this occurred to you? I hate to say it, but the truth is that Delia is bothered by—er—neurotic fancies. For some crazy reason, without the slightest foundation she has become obsessed with some sort of deep-seated—and thoroughly unreasonable—jealousy, and she's directing it at the puppets. I can't tell you why. I wish I knew."

"Even admitting that," I countered quickly, "why do you persist in mystifying her?"

"I don't," he flatly denied. "If sometimes I keep her out of the workshop, it's for her own good."

HIS argument was beginning to make sense. Jock Lathrop's voice had a compellingly matter-of-fact quality. I was beginning to feel slightly ridiculous. Then I remembered something.

"Those scratches on her face—" I began.

"I've seen them," said Jock. "Again I hate to say it, but the only rational explanation I can see is that they were self-inflicted with the idea of bolstering up her accusations, or perhaps she scratched herself in her sleep. At any rate, people with delusions have been known to do drastic things. They'll go to any lengths rather than discard their queer beliefs. That's honestly what I think."

Pondering this quiet statement, I was looking around. Here were all the tools of the expert puppet-maker. Molds, paints, varnishes, clay models of heads, unformed papier-mache, paper clippings, and glue. A sewing machine littered with odds and ends of gay-colored cloth.

Tacked above a desk were a number of sketches of puppets, some in pencil, some in colors. On a table were two half-painted heads, each atop a stick so that the brush could get at them more easily. Along the opposite wall hung a long array of puppets—princesses and Cinderellas, witches and wizards, peasants, oafs, bearded old men, devils, priests, doctors, kings. It almost made me feel as if a whole doll-world was staring at me and choking back raucous laughter.

"Why haven't you sent Delia to a doctor?" I asked suddenly.

"Because she refuses to go. For some time I've been trying to persuade her to consult a psychoanalyst."

I didn't know what to say. The white rat moved into my line of vision. It occurred to me that a rat could be used to explain the scuffling sounds made by anything else, but I put such an irrational thought out of my mind. More and more I found

myself being forced into complete agreement with Lathrop. Delia's suspicions were preposterous. Lathrop must be right.

"Look here," I continued feebly, "Delia keeps talking about something that happened to you in London. A change. A sudden interest in genealogy."

"I'm afraid the change was in Delia," he said bitterly. "As for the genealogy business, that's quite correct. I did find out some startling things about a man whom I believe to be an ancestor of mine."

As he spoke, eagerly now, I was surprised to note how his features lost their tight, hard appearance. The look of impudence was gone.

"I *do* love Delia very much," he said, his voice vibrant, low. "What would she think of me, George, if it turned out that her accusations were partly true? Of course, that's nonsense. But you can see that we are in trouble, George—bad trouble, that is considerably out of the line of work a private detective follows. Your work is concrete, though in your criminal investigations you must have learned that the mind and body of man are sometimes subject to brutal powers. Not supernatural—no. But things—hard to talk about.

"George, would you do something for me? Come to the performance tonight. Afterward we can discuss this whole matter more fully. And another thing. See that old pamphlet over there? I have good reason for thinking it concerns an ancestor of mine. Take it with you. Read it. But for heaven's sake don't let Delia see it. You see, George—"

He broke off uncertainly. He seemed about to take me into his confidence about something, but then the hard, self-contained look returned to his face.

"Leave me now," he said abruptly. "This talk, and that business with the old fool, Franetti, has made me nervous."

I walked over to the table, carefully laid down Punch, and picked up the yellow-paged, ancient pamphlet he had indicated.

"I'll see you tonight after the show," I said.

CHAPTER II

Punch and Judy

AS I closed the door behind me, I thought I saw in Lathrop's eyes that same look of fear I had seen in Delia's. But it was deeper, much deeper. And only then did I remember that not once during our interview had Jock Lathrop taken his hands out of his pockets.

Delia rushed up to me. I could tell she had been crying.

"What will we do, George—what will we do? What did he say to you? What did he tell you?"

I had to admit that her hectic manner was consistent with Jock's theory of neurotic fancies.

"Is it true, Delia," I asked abruptly, "that he's been urging you to see a psychoanalyst?"

"Why, yes." Then I saw her stiffen. "Jock's been telling you it's only my imagination, and you've been believing him," she accused.

"No, that's not it," I lied, "but I want to have time to think it all over. I'm coming to the performance tonight. I'll talk with you then."

"He *has* persuaded you!" she insisted, clinging to my sleeve. "But you mustn't believe him, George. He's afraid of them! He's in worse trouble than I am."

"I agree with you partly," I said, not knowing this time whether I was lying or not, "and after the performance we'll talk it over."

She suddenly drew away. Her face had lost something of its helpless look.

"If you won't help me," she said, breathing heavily, "I know a way of finding out whether I'm right or wrong. A sure way."

"What do you mean, Delia?"

"Tonight," she said huskily, "you may find out."

More than that she wouldn't say, although I pressed her. I took away

with me a vision of her distraught gray eyes, contrasted oddly with the thick sweep of golden hair. I hurried through the hall, down the stairs. The measured pandemonium of Forty-second Street was welcome. It was good to see so many people, walk with them, be jostled by them and forget the fantastic fears of Delia and Jock Lathrop.

I glanced at the pamphlet in my hand. The type was ancient and irregular. The paper was crumbly at the edges. I read the lengthy title:

A TRUE ACCOUNT, as related by a Notable Personage to a Trustworthy Gentleman, of the CIRCUMSTANCES attending the Life and DEATH of JOCKEY LOWTHROPE, an Englishman who gave PUPPET SHEWS; telling how many surmised that his Death was encompassed by these same PUPPETS.

Night was sliding in over New York. My office was a mass of shadows. From where I was sitting I could see the mammoth Empire State Building topping the irregular sky line.

I rubbed my eyes wearily. But that did not keep my thoughts from their endless circling. Who was I to believe? Delia or Jock? Was there a disordered mind at work, fabricating monstrous suspicions? And if so, whose mind was it? They were questions outside the usual province of a private detective.

I TILTED the pamphlet to catch the failing light and re-read two passages that had particularly impressed me.

At this Time it was rumored that Jockey Lowthrope had made a Pact with the Devil, with a view to acquiring greater Skill in his Trade. There were many who testified privately that his Puppets acted and moved with a Cunning beyond the ability of Christian Man to accomplish. For Jockey took no assistants and would explain to no one how his Manikins were activated. . . .

Some say that Moll Squires and the French Doctor did not tell all they saw when they first viewed Jockey's Corpse. Certain it was that a long, thin Needle pierced his Heart and that both Hands were hacked off at the Wrists. Jockey's wife Lucy would have been held for Trial for Murder at the Assizes, only that she

was never seen afterwards. Moll Squires averred that the Devil had come to fetch Jockey's hands, to which he had previously granted an unholy Skill. But many maintain that he was slain by his own Puppets, who chose the Needle as being a Weapon suitable to their Size and Dexterity. These recall how the Clergyman Penrose inveighed against Jockey, saying "Those are not Puppets, but Imps of Satan, and whosoever views them is in Danger of Damnation."

I pushed the pamphlet to one side. What could one make of events that had happened one hundred and fifty years ago—faint reverberations from the Eighteenth Century fear-world that had underlaid the proud Age of Reason? Especially when one read of them in an account obviously written for the sake of sensation-mongering?

True, the names were oddly similar. Lowthrope and Lathrop were undoubtedly alternate spellings. And from what Jock Lathrop had said he had further evidence of a blood relationship.

The pamphlet angered me. It made me feel as if someone were trying to frighten me with nursery tales of ghosts and goblins.

I switched on the light and blinked at the electric clock. It was seven-forty-five. . . .

When I reached the puppet theater it was buzzing with conversation and the hall outside was already blue with cigarette smoke. Just as I was getting my ticket from the sad-eyed girl at the door, someone called my name. I looked up and saw Dr. Grendal. I could tell that the garrulous old man had something on his mind besides his shiny, bald pate. After a few aimless remarks he asked his question.

"Seen Jock since he got back from London?"

"Just to say hello to," I answered cautiously.

"How'd he impress you, hey?" The doctor's eyes glanced sharply from behind their silver-rimmed spectacles.

"A little uneasy," I admitted. "Temperamental."

"I thought you might say some-

thing like that," he commented, as he led me over to an empty corner. "Fact is," he continued, "I think he's definitely queer. Between ourselves, of course. He called me in. I thought he needed me in a professional capacity. But it turned out he wanted to talk about pygmies."

HE COULDN'T have surprised me more.

"Pygmies?" I repeated.

"Just so. Pygmies. Surprised you, didn't it? Did me, too. Well, Jock was especially curious about the lower limits of possible size of mature human beings. Kept asking if there were any cases in which they were as small as puppets. I told him it was impossible, except for infants and embryos.

"Then he began shifting the conversation. Wanted to know a lot about blood relationship and the inheritance of certain traits. Wanted to know all about identical twins and triplets and so on. Evidently thought I'd be a mine of data because of the monographs I've scribbled about medical oddities. I answered as best I could, but some of his questions were queer. Power of mind over matter, and that sort of stuff. I got the impression his nerves were about to crack. Told him as much. Whereupon he told me to get out. Peculiar, hey?"

I could not answer. Dr. Grendal's information put new life into the disturbing notions I had been trying to get out of my mind. I wondered how much I dared tell the old physician, or whether it would be unwise to confide in him at all.

The people in the hall were moving into the theater. I made a noncommittal remark to Grendal and we followed. A rotund figure pushed in ahead of us, muttering—Luigi Frannetti. Evidently he had not been able to resist the temptation presented by his former student's puppets. He threw down the price of the ticket contemptuously, as if it were the thirty pieces of silver due Judas Iscariot. Then he stamped in, sat down, folded his arms, and glared at the curtain.

There must have been two hundred people present, almost a full house. I noticed quite a splash of evening dresses and dress suits. I didn't see Delia, but I noted the prim features of Dick Wilkinson, the insurance agent.

From behind the curtain came the reedy tinkle of a music box—tones suggestive of a doll orchestra. The seats Grendal and I had were near the front, but considerably to one side.

The little theater grew dim. A soft illumination flowed up the square of red silk curtain. The melody from the music box ended on a note so high it sounded as though something in the mechanism had snapped. A pause. The deep, somber reverberation of a gong. Another pause. Then a voice, which I recognized as Lathrop's pitched in falsetto.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for your entertainment Lathrop's Puppets present—Punch and Judy!"

From behind me I heard Franetti's "Bah!"

Then the curtain parted and slid rustling to the sides. Punch popped up like a jack-in-the-box, chuckled throatily, and began to antic around the stage and make bitingly witty remarks, some of them at the expense of the spectators.

It was the same puppet Jock had let me examine in the workshop. But was Jock's hand inside? After a few seconds I quit worrying about that. This, I told myself, was only an ordinary puppet show, as clever as the manipulations were. The voice was Jock Lathrop's, pitched in puppeteer's falsetto.

It is ironic that Punch and Judy is associated with children and the nursery, for few plays are more fundamentally sordid. Modern child educators are apt to fling up their hands at mention of it. It is unlike any fairy tale or phantasy, but springs from forthright, realistic crime.

PUNCH is the prototype of the egotistical, brutish criminal—the type who today figures as an axe-fiend or sashweight slayer. He kills

his squalling baby and nagging wife, Judy, merely because they annoy him. He kills the doctor because he doesn't like the medicine. He kills the policeman who comes to arrest him. Finally, after he is thrown into jail and sentenced to death, he manages to outwit and murder the fearsome executioner Jack Ketch.

Only in the end does the devil come to fetch him, and in some versions Punch kills the devil. During all these crimes Punch seldom loses his grim and trenchant sense of humor.

Punch and Judy has long been one of the most popular puppet plays. Perhaps the reason children like it is that they have fewer moral inhibitions than grown-ups to prevent them from openly sympathizing with Punch's primal selfishness. For Punch is as thoughtlessly selfish and cruel as a spoiled child.

These thoughts passed rapidly through my mind, as they always do when I see or think of Punch and Judy. This time they brought with them a vivid memory of Jock Lathrop whipping the puppet.

I have said that the beginning of the play reassured me. But as it progressed, my thoughts crept back. The movements of the puppets were too smooth and clever for my liking. They handled things too naturally.

There is a great deal of clubbing in Punch and Judy, and the puppets always hold on to their clubs by hugging them between their arms—the thumb and second finger of the puppeteer. But Jock Lathrop had made a startling innovation. His puppets held their weapons as a man normally does. I wondered if this could be due to some special device.

Hurriedly I got out my opera glasses and turned them on the stage. It was some time before I could focus one of the puppets; they jerked about too much. Finally I got a clear view of Punch's arms. As far as I could make out, they ended in tiny hands—hands that could shift on the club, clenching and unclenching in an uncannily natural way.

Grendal mistook my smothered exclamation for one of admiration.

"Pretty clever," he said, nodding.

After that I sat still. Of course the tiny hands were only some sort of mechanical attachment to Lathrop's fingertips. And here, I thought, was the reason for Delia's fears. She had been taken in by the astonishing realism of the puppets.

But then how to explain Jock's actions, the strange questions he had put to Dr. Grendal? Merely an attempt to create publicity?

It was hard for a "hard-boiled sleuth" to admit, even to himself, that he did have an odd feeling that those manikins were alive. But I did, and I fought against this feeling, turning my eyes from the stage.

Then I saw Delia. She was sitting in the row behind and two chairs further to the side. There was nothing of the "softie Viking" about her now, despite the glimmering, curving lines of her silver lamé evening dress. In the ghostly illumination from the stage, her lovely face was cold, stony, with a set determination that made me apprehensive.

I heard a familiar mutter and turned to see Franetti moving down the far aisle as if the stage were drawing him like a magnet. He was glaring at the puppets and talking to himself.

Twice I heard him mutter, "Impossible!" Patrons gave him irritated looks as he passed or murmured complainingly. He took no notice. He reached the end of the aisle and disappeared through the black curtained doorway that led backstage.

CHAPTER IV

Dark Heritage

RAPIDLY the play was drawing toward its climax. Punch, in a dark and dismal prison, was whining and wailing in self-pity. Jack Ketch was approaching from one side, his face and black hair hideous in the dim light. In one hand he carried a noose; in the other, a needlelike sword about five inches long. He

brandished both dexterously.

I could no longer view the scene in a matter-of-fact way. This was a doll-world, where all the dolls were brutes and murderers. The stage was reality, viewed through the wrong end of a telescope.

Then came an ominous rustle behind me. I turned. Delia had risen to her feet. Something was gleaming in her upraised hand. There was a sharp crack, like a whip. Before anyone could stop her she emptied the chambers of a small revolver at the stage.

On the fourth shot I saw a black hole appear in Punch's mask.

Delia did not struggle against the bewildered men who had risen to pinion her hands. She was staring fixedly at the stage. So was I. For I knew what she hoped to prove by those shots.

Punch had disappeared, but not Jack Ketch. He seemed to be staring back at Delia, as if the shots had been an expected part of the performance. Then the high tuning voice, screamed, a reedy scream of hate. And it was not Jock Lathrop's falsetto voice that screamed. Then Jack Ketch raised his needlelike sword and plunged down out of sight.

The scream that followed was a full-voiced cry of desperate agony that silenced and froze the milling audience. And this time it was Jock's voice.

Hurriedly I pushed my way toward the curtained door. Old Grendal was close behind me. The first thing that caught my eye in the backstage confusion was the trembling form of Luigi Franetti. His face was like wax. He was on his knees, murmuring garbled prayers.

Then, sprawled on his back beneath the puppet-stage, I saw Lathrop.

Hysterical questions gave way to shocked whispers, which mounted to a chorus as others swarmed backstage.

"Look! He's dead—the man that works the puppets!"

"She got him all right! Fired through the curtains underneath!"

"I saw her do it myself. She shot

him a dozen times."

"Somebody said she's his wife."

"She got him on the last shot. I heard him scream. She's crazy."

I understood the mistake they were making, for I knew that everyone of Delia's shots had hit above stage level. I walked over to Jock Lathrop's body. And it was with the shock of my life that I saw that Jack Ketch's pygmy sword had been driven to the hilt in Lathrop's right eyeball. And on Jock Lathrop's right and left hands were the garments and papier-mâché heads of Punch and Jack Ketch.

Grendal hastened forward and knelt at Lathrop's side. The chorus of frightened whispers behind us kept rising and falling in a kind of mob rhythm. The drab insurance agent Wilkinson stepped up and peered over Grendal's shoulders. Indrawn breath whistled between his teeth. He turned around slowly and pointed at Franetti.

"Mr. Lathrop was not shot, but stabbed," he said in a curiously calm voice that caught the crowd's ear. "I saw that man sneak back here. He murdered Mr. Lathrop. He was the only one who could have done it. Get hold of him, some of you, and take him out front."

FRANETTI offered no resistance. He looked utterly dazed and helpless.

"The rest of you had better wait out front too," Wilkinson continued. "I shall telephone the police. See to it that Mrs. Lathrop is not troubled or annoyed. She is hysterical. Do not allow her to come back here."

There was a rustle of hushed interjections and questions, but the crowd flowed back into the theater. Wilkinson, Grendal, and myself were left alone.

"There's no hope, is there?" I managed to say.

Grendal shook his head.

"He's dead as a nail. The tiny instrument penetrated the eyesocket and deep into the brain. Happened to be driven in exactly the proper direction."

I looked down at Lathrop's twisted

body. Even now I could hardly repress a shudder at the sight of the puppets. The vindictive expressions on their masks looked so purposeful. I regarded the bullet hole in Punch's mask. A little blood was welling from it. The bullet must have nicked Lathrop's finger.

At that moment I became aware of a confused surge of footsteps outside, and of the crowd's whispering, muffled by the intervening hangings, rising to a new crescendo.

"Look out, she's getting away!"

"She's running! Stop her."

"Has she still got the gun?"

"She's going back there. Grab her, somebody!"

The black draperies eddied wildly as Delia spun through the door, jerking loose from a hand that had sought to restrain her. In a swirl of golden hair and shimmering silver lamé she came in. I glimpsed her wild gray eyes, white-circled.

"They killed him, I tell you, they killed him!" she screamed. "Not me. Not Franetti. *They!* I killed one. Oh, Jock, Jock, are you dead?"

She ran toward the corpse. And then came the final nightmare.

The arms of blue-faced Jack Ketch began to writh, and from the puppet-mask came squealing, malevolent laughter.

Delia, about to fling her arms around her dead husband, slid to the floor on her knees. A sigh of horror issued from her throat. The silver lamé billowed down around her. And still the puppet tittered and squealed, as if mocking her and triumphing over her.

"Pull those blasted things off his hands!" I heard myself crying. "Pull them off!"

It was Wilkinson who did it, not the feebly pawing Dr. Grendal. Wilkinson didn't realize what was happening.

He was still convinced that Franetti was the murderer. He obeyed automatically. He seized the papier-mâché heads roughly, and jerked.

Then I knew how Jock Lathrop had died. I knew why he had been so secretive, why the ancient pamphlet

had affected him so profoundly. I realized that Delia's suspicions had been correct, though not what she had believed. I knew why Jock Lathrop had asked Grendal those peculiar questions. I knew why the puppets had been so realistic. I knew why Jockey Lowthrope had had his hands hacked off. I knew why Jock Lathrop had never let anyone see his own ungloved hands, after that "change" had begun in London.

The little finger and ring finger on each of his hands were normal. The others—the ones used in motivating a puppet—were not. Replacing the thumb and second finger were tiny muscular arms. The first finger was in each case a tiny, wormlike body, of the general shape of a finger, but with a tiny sphincterlike mouth and two diminutive, malformed eyes that were all black pupil. One was dead by Delia's bullet. The other was not. I crushed it under my heel. . . .

AMONG Jock Lathrop's papers was found the following note, penned in longhand, and evidently written within a few days of the end:

If I die, *they* have killed me. For I am sure they hate me. I have tried to confide in various people, but have been unable to go through with it. I feel compelled to secrecy. Perhaps that is *their* desire, for *their* power over my actions is growing greater every day. Delia would loath me if she knew. And she suspects.

I thought I would go mad in London, when my injured fingers began to heal with a *new* growth. A monstrous growth—that were my brothers who were engulfed in my flesh at the time of my birth and did not begin to develop until now! Had they been developed and born at the proper time, we would have been triplets. But the *mode* of that development now!

Human flesh is subject to horrible perversions. Can my thoughts and activities as a puppeteer have had a determining influence? Have I influenced their minds until those minds are really those of Punch and Jack Ketch?

And what I read in that old pamphlet. Hands hacked off. . . . Could my ancestor's pact with the devil have given him his fiendish skill? Given him the monstrous growth which led to his ruin? Could this physical characteristic have been inherited, lying dormant until such time as another Lathrop, another puppeteer, summoned it forth by his ambitious desires?

I don't know. What I do know is that as

long as I live I am the world's greatest puppeteer—but at what cost! I hate *them*, and *they* hate me. I can hardly control them. Last night one of them clawed Delia while I slept. Even now, when my mind wandered for a moment, the *one* turned the pen and tried to drive it into my wrist. . . .

I did not scoff at the questions that Jock Lathrop had asked himself. I

might have at one time. But I had seen *them*, and I had seen the tiny sword driven into Lathrop's eye. No, I'm not going to spend any more time trying to figure out the black mystery behind the amazing skill of Jock Lathrop. I'm going to spend it trying to make Delia forget.



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DR. NORST VISITS DEATH

By

WILLIAM A. ROSSI

*Author of "Satan Is My Lover,"
"Curse of the Jilted Bride," etc.*

The Young Scientist Knew
He Was Dead—But the
After-Life Was No Change
From His Mortal Existence!

DR. PETER NORST knew that he was dead.

An ironic little smile twisted his handsome face. He smiled because death was so different from what he had always imagined it would be. There seemed to be no radical change from mortal life to existence after death. There were no angels floating about now, no radiant beauty and sweet music in his new environment, no one to welcome him into the new world.

He found himself thinking about the same commonplace things: his intensive cancer research; his superior, Dr. Ethan Slade, at the Cancer Research Institute; his co-workers, Doctors Andrew Brent and Stephan Lode; his half-brother, Dr. Karl Norst; his dog, Fritz, and a horde of other events and people that comprised his daily life.

But somehow it was all wrong. Men had always said that there was no bridge between life and death, that when a man died he lost all contact with life on earth, and began a new and grander life. It was odd, therefore, that he should still know of these commonplace mortal things, that he should still be thinking of them.

And yet, Dr. Norst knew that he was dead.

A doctor should know death, he



Norst felt that hard instrument bang down on his head

thought. Yet, Norst would have liked to have been more positive. If only he could see some of the objects around him in the lodge. For example, Musty and Rusty, the two caged monkeys whom he had recently injected with the new cancer serum. He wondered how they were getting along. It was a couple of days ago since he had seen them, fed them.

Norst smiled again. He smiled because he was trying to conceive of time in this timeless world of the hereafter. Still, he persisted, he would like to see the pair of monkeys with his own eyes. He wondered how the serum was working. It was almighty important that he should know, for it was the vital key that might lead to the cause and cure of cancer. If only he could see those invaluable monks, see the effect of the serum . . .

But Peter Norst couldn't see—because he was blind.

Very annoying, blindness, Norst thought. A research worker had to have eyes. Yet, many of the blind got along well. They compensated their affliction with a more sensitive development of other senses; the hearing faculty, for instance.

Now Norst listened vainly for the chirp of birds in the trees outside his lodge, which was buried deep in the Maine woods. Every time he came up to his secluded lodge to do some intensive research away from the others at the Institute, he always enjoyed listening to the forest creatures. They gave him a sense of companionship in this lonely spot, miles from civilization.

If only he could hear them once more before he lost all contact with things mortal. If only he could hear something, anything.

But he couldn't hear—because he was deaf.

NO sight, no hearing. Norst growled. He thought he could make a noise through his throat, but how could he know when he couldn't hear? He wondered where Fritz, his faithful shepherd dog, was. The poor fellow was no doubt very hungry, the same as Musty and Rusty.

Norst felt more certain of his death

now, for, he reasoned, if he were alive his dog would be right there at his feet, as always. But Fritz wasn't there. He was probably still back in the lodge, sniffing around the kitchen in search of food. Norst felt deeply remorseful. He couldn't see or hear, but if he were alive he could at least smell out a good steak in the refrigerator. Norst would have liked to have done that last thing for Fritz. But he couldn't do even that.

For Peter Norst had completely lost his sense of smell.

Norst felt a burst of anger surge through him. No sense of smell to scent out food for the dog and the monks—and for himself, too. Yes, Norst was mighty hungry. That was odd, he thought. He had never believed that hunger was a sensation that one carried to the next world when one died.

He thought of the steak again and something churned in the vicinity of where his stomach should be. He made a motion like licking his lips, as he reflected upon the delicious taste of a juicy steak. And then a horrible feeling of futility came over him.

He could not taste anything—because he had no sense of taste whatever.

Panic started to well in him now. He felt a violent urge to run, to get up and move about and relieve this terrifying tension. Despair pierced him as he suddenly remembered that he had already tried to walk. That was the very first thing he had done when he realized that he was dead. He had walked—that is, he *knew* he was moving his limbs, and yet there seemed to be nothing under his feet. He felt as though he was walking on air, as if he was floating.

He had tried to feel his way about the familiar rooms of the lodge, for it was there where he had died. But when his hands came down on objects which he *knew* were there, he touched nothing.

Even now he wasn't sure whether he was sitting or standing. He believed he was sitting, for standing all this time would have fatigued him. That is, if the dead could tire. Desperately, now, he made a motion as if

clapping his hands together, but the hands seemed to pass through each other. He felt no contact. Norst could not feel anything—because he had no sense of touch.

Peter Norst could not see, hear, smell, taste or touch. His five vital senses were gone!

With this horrifying realization, profound anguish swept over him, and for the moment he thought that his soul was being initiated into Hell. Strange that he should feel such an agonizing emotion. If he were mortally dead then his body could not respond to emotions. Or could it? His five senses were gone and yet his mind was functioning. He was thinking, but only of mortal, earthly things. If this was true death then it was all so incongruous, so utterly wrong. Suddenly a revelation pierced Norst's mind.

He was dead, and yet he wasn't!

Sure, it was inconsistent, fantastic, but he knew he was a living-dead paradox. A man that had no senses could not perceive anything around him, could not identify himself as a living being. And if there were no perceptions there could be no new conceptions of knowledge for him.

The door to existence, living, was locked. He was shut out from life and yet not in the realm of death—a creature that could hang for an eternity between life and death! His body was dead but his mind was alive.

His mind was able to give him all this startling information. His mind now informed him of another astonishing fact, a fearful fact. If he had been murdered, as he believed he was, then his flesh should be decomposing, and his soul would have gone from that rotting body to its own realm. But such he knew had not happened. Some one did not want him to die an ordinary death.

Some one had taken his five vital senses away, leaving him dead and yet alive!

Who could have done this horrible thing to him? And why? With his mind—his one remaining link with mortal life—Norst began to remember and recall the events that led up to the horror of his present predicament.

From his memory loomed up the Cancer Research Institute followed by a parade of rapid happenings. . . .

* * *

PPETER NORST had his own experimental laboratory in the Institute building. He worked without salary in the lab which he equipped and maintained out of his large personal fortune. He was working intensely on this night—the fourth consecutive night that he was staying overtime. But time meant nothing to this brilliant young scientist who was steeped in his world of cancer research. He felt certain now that he was at last on the evasive trail of the dread disease, and the new serum he was compounding would give him the all-important answers.

Norst was bent over his microscope when the door of his lab opened. He looked up and saw Dr. Stephan Lode, whose thin lips were twisted in a queer smile. Young Lode and Andrew Brent worked as a research team in the next lab. Lode was a small chap with an erratic disposition, an energetic and zealous worker.

"Well, Norst," Lode said, "you're still at it, eh?"

"And so close it isn't even funny," Norst replied, a trifle annoyed by the interruption.

"Don't tell me that the brilliant Dr. Norst has found the cause and cure of cancer?" Lode said sarcastically. He seemed to delight in irking Norst.

"I'd certainly be the last one to tell you anything, Lode," said Norst sharply.

Lode flushed. "If you think you can beat Brent and me to the answers, you're cracked. There are some answers that even money can't buy—even your kind of money."

Norst clenched his jaws and continued to peer through the microscope, ignoring the remark. Lode's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Could Norst have really found something? He had been hearing some talk around the Institute. He respected Norst, despite his envy of him. Now he stepped toward Norst and glanced down with bold curiosity at the papers on which Norst was jotting notes.

"I'm a monkey's uncle if I don't be-

lieve you have found something," Lode said, after a moment.

Norst glanced up impatiently.

"Listen, Lode, I *have* found what might be the key to the whole cancer problem. In fact, I'm almost certain I have it. Now, will you please go away and let me alone? I'm trying to work."

Lode looked sharply at Norst, then said in a hollow voice:

"Sure. Sure, Norst."

He slowly walked to the door, flung back a queer look, then left. Norst heard the outer door close.

Norst cursed himself for a fool for having said anything to Lode. The inquisitive fellow would be pestering him for days now, and babbling to Brent as well. Only Dr. Ethan Slade, director of the Institute, and Dr. Karl Norst, Peter's half brother, really knew how close Peter Norst was to the answers.

In fact, it was Karl Norst who had been trying to make his brother promise that if he found the cancer secret he would capitalize on it commercially instead of donating it to science. Karl, a keen surgeon but with a greater passion for women and horses, which continually kept him broke, had tried to make Peter see his point.

Now, young Norst again concentrated on the slide under the microscope. He had no sooner fell in with his normal mental tempo when his door opened again. He was about to utter a curse when he suddenly saw that the visitor was a woman, Sandra Brent, Andrew Brent's dark, exotic wife. Peter had reason to writhe uneasily.

"Oh, I'm sorry to disturb you, Peter," she said sweetly, walking in. "Is Andrew here? I thought I'd ride home with him."

"If he isn't in his lab he must have gone home already," Norst said nervously. Beautiful women always made him feel uneasy, especially women who looked at him the way Sandra always did, with a sort of smug cat-to-mouse certainty.

She came closer, in a casual way, until Norst squirmed with the vibrant warmth of her nearness. She looked

cunning and—determined.

"Andrew has been telling me how hard you've been working, Peter," she said softly.

"Sandra, I—I'd like to finish this work," Norse forced out. "It's terribly important."

She laughed. "Why, Peter! You're actually telling me to leave. Let that fussy old work wait, dear." She planted a soft kiss on his cheek.

Norse jumped up, flushed.

"Sandra, you'd better leave."

SHE laughed again, then with a felinely-quick move pinioned his arms to his side with her own around him, and pressed her red lips hard against his mouth. For a second he was helpless with amazement, then he started to tear her fiercely clasped arms from him. Suddenly he saw past her glistening black hair to the door.

Andrew Brent, foaming and purpling with rage, stood in the doorway.

Sandra sensed another presence in the room and quickly dropped her arms. Her face blanched at the sight of her infuriated husband.

"How long have you been pulling the wool over my eyes, Norst?" he grated.

"Now listen, Brent—" Norst began.

But Brent wasn't listening. He was flying at Norst like an enraged beast. Norst sidestepped and Brent slammed into the wall with an oath.

"Brent, for God's sake, keep your head!" Norst snapped.

The jealousy-maddened Brent was relentless in his intent. He whirled and lunged at Norst. This time the latter's hard fist shot out. It smashed into Brent's mouth and he reeled against the wall. Sandra screamed, then turned and fled from the lab.

Brent rebounded, his fists flailing around the agile Norst's head. Young Norst saw that there was no alternative. He waited for an opening, then sent a wicked uppercut from his knees. Brent's head snapped back. He seemed nailed to an awkward upright posture for the barest second, and then he dropped with a groan.

Norst picked him up and carried him over to the small operating table. He wet his handkerchief and started

to wash the blood from Brent's mouth and nose, when he heard the heavy rumble of footsteps coming from the outer lab. Dr. Slade and Karl Norst rushed into the room.

"Peter!" Slade gasped. "What's happened?" He looked down at Brent. Slade was a big man with kind gray eyes and a gray mane atop his fine head.

"We heard the scream—both of us," Karl Norst said. "I was just coming in to see you and bumped into Slade, who was rushing down the stairs. Then Mrs. Brent ran past us as we were coming down. We knew something was wrong." A grin slowly spread across his handsome but dissipated face. "Looks like a bad case of jealousy."

Slade laid his hand on Peter's shoulder.

"I'm sure it wasn't your fault, son," he said kindly. "Only—well, Brent is liable to make things disagreeable around here. It's too bad, and with you right at the crisis with your experiments."

Brent slowly rose to his elbows, glancing dazedly around him.

"A rotten shame," Karl Norst said sadly. "This will throw your work off keel, at least until Brent cools off." His face glowed suddenly with an inspired idea. "Say, Peter, why don't you go up to the lodge until this thing blows over?"

"A good idea," Slade said. "You'll have the quiet you need up there."

"Eh? Lodge?" Brent murmured, then glanced at Peter. Hatred burned in his eyes.

Slade grabbed Brent's shoulder in his big hand.

"Easy, Brent," he warned. "We've had enough trouble around here."

Brent slumped back, mumbling something incoherently.

Peter nodded to his brother and Slade.

"I think your suggestion is a wise one," he said. "I'm too close now to be delayed by anything. I'll leave first thing in the morning. . . ."

he finished compounding the new serum which was to tell him so much, almost every answer he had been seeking. With a hand that was not quite steady at this auspicious moment, he carefully injected the serum into Musty and Rusty, the two monkeys he had brought up from the Institute.

After placing them back in their cages, he went into the living room and sat down. It would be a day, maybe two, before the serum would take effect. And then he would know if he were a success or failure.

Norst dropped back in his chair and lit his pipe. It was only now that his work was done for a brief interval that he fully realized how tired he was. He had eaten and slept little while up here, but that was customary. Fritz, the shepherd dog, came over and stretched out at his master's feet. Norst noticed that the dog seemed restless, his long, sensitive ears furtively alert.

Then Norst became conscious of the storm howling outside, the roar of thunder and the brilliant flashes of lightning. Perhaps Fritz was a little jittery, as animals sometimes are during a storm. Norst let his tired eyelids droop with the monotonous beat of the rain on the roof.

He was jerked out of his cat-nap by Fritz's sudden fit of barking. He blinked and saw the dog sniffing and pawing at the door. Norst shrugged, then went over and opened the door. Only the louder beat of rain greeted him. Fritz lifted his head and howled—an eerie, plaintive wail in the night.

"You're mistaken, Fritz," he said. "Nothing out there." He closed the door.

But the dog would not be calmed. His snout went all along the wall as he whimpered in fear. Norst thought he saw the dog trembling.

"Well, old fellow, if you feel that bad about it we'll take a look around."

He threw on a slicker and an old hat, then picked up the flashlight and went out. Fritz hung on his heels, still whimpering, though his head jerked furtively around. Norst circled the house, his flash playing through the thick trees that surrounded the lodge. He saw nothing, and could hear noth-

FOR two days and nights Norst worked in the finely equipped lab in his lodge. Late on the second night

ing above the heavy bleat of the rain on the mud-soaked ground.

Just as Norst was entering the house again, he noticed that Fritz was not with him. He called out but there was no response. Quickly he ran around the side of the house, calling out and playing his light anxiously. He stopped for a moment, bewildered.

He couldn't possibly have heard these footsteps behind him, but he did feel that hard instrument bang down on his head. Felt it for just an instant. Then he slumped amid a whirr of blackness. He thought he heard a pathetic little wail from Fritz somewhere out in the darkness. Then the door to consciousness closed.

He awakened once more, though just for a couple of minutes. Long enough to know that strips of adhesive tape covered his eyes, and that he was stretched on his own operating table in the lodge lab, his hands and feet firmly tied. The acrid odor of ether came strongly to his nostrils, and he could hear the wild screeching of his two monkeys.

He started to shout, to say something—he wasn't sure what—when the ether cone came down over his mouth and nose, gagging him. He kicked and tugged, but it was all so very hopeless.

Then slowly, so torturously slow, he lost consciousness altogether.

* * *

AND now he was dead.

He was a man without the five vital senses, and such a man could rightfully be called dead. True, he still retained consciousness, and perhaps his heart still beat and he breathed. Also, he suffered hunger and thirst. Maybe this was true, because he couldn't be sure of anything. Only his consciousness told him he was alive. But was he mortally alive, or was he alive in the hereafter, in another world?

Peter Norst didn't know, couldn't know.

But he did know some important things. He knew that if he was dead, he had been murdered in his own lodge. And that his murderer was probably a doctor. He remembered the expert handling of that ether cone.

Who was the doctor? Norst knew so many doctors, for he lived in a world of medicine and medical men. But which of them could hate him enough to murder him?

And then he remembered Andrew Brent, remembered the jealous hatred that glowered in his eyes. Brent had plenty of reason for revenge, and a man crazed by jealousy and imagined unfaithfulness on the part of his wife would be insane enough to murder. But what medical ingenuity did that madman use to defy all natural laws—to make a man dead, yet alive?

Panic suddenly welled in Norst as a new terror dawned on him. He himself could slowly be driven to insanity in this helpless, frenzied state. Dementia would gnaw at him, eating out his sanity like a parasite and leaving him a stark mad Thing! That's all he would be—a Thing. For there had never been another creature like him, and hence there was no name for whatever monstrosity he was. Who could want to drive him insane instead of murdering him outright?

Norst fought against the terrifying thought and finally succeeded in thrusting it from his mind, temporarily, at least. But no sooner had he calmed his roiled mind than a new abysmal horror dipped into his consciousness.

Peter Norst knew that there was someone, *something*, near him at this moment!

He didn't know *how* he could tell, but by some uncanny, inexplicable means he knew. For a moment he began to believe in thought transference, for he knew that whatever was the presence around him it was a living creature. Human? Beast? Norst didn't dare guess. His mind was vibrating like a taut wire in a gale. He feared to venture a move of any sort. What would be the good of it? He could only hope, and wait.

He counted seconds, earth time, while he waited for that presence to make itself known. For all he knew those seconds might have been eternities. And that waiting was the kind of slow torture that could easily twist one's mind like a wet, tattered rag and leave it limp with insanity.

And then something happened. The flagella-like object he had to believe was his tongue was moving around as though with difficulty. He tried to adjust it in a comfortable position but he was having trouble trying to manage it, for he had no sense of taste or touch to guide him. It seemed to crowd what was supposedly his mouth. Finally, he gave up the idea.

Then he heard a voice! It was a human voice speaking in a language he understood. The voice was saying:

"You can hear only because of that little instrument I just inserted in your mouth. Your natural auditory channels are eliminated. This instrument is an ingenious though simple thing that permits you to hear by carrying sound through your teeth and jawbones to the cochlea of your inner ear, the rest of your auditory apparatus having been put out of commission. Now you are able to hear and also talk, for your larynx is undisturbed. Those two faculties are sufficient to serve the purpose of communication between us."

Norst had not previously considered speech at all. Even if he had absently spoken to himself before he could not have heard what he was saying. Now he spoke slowly, experimentally: "Wh-who are you? What have you done to me? Why?" His voice sounded odd to him.

NORST heard a light, casual laugh, then the voice:

"Never mind who I am. It wouldn't do you any good to know, anyhow. But to put your mind at ease I'll answer your other questions as briefly as possible. As you must surmise by this time, your five senses have been taken from you. They have been destroyed. I've already explained about your hearing.

"Your sight was destroyed by a simple operation of severing the optic nerve. Your sense of smell was eliminated by severing the olfactory nerve. Your sense of taste by severing the lingual nerve, which automatically cuts off transmission of taste sensations received by the taste buds on the tongue, as you know. Lastly, your sense of touch,

the most difficult to eradicate, was destroyed by an operation on the post-Rolandic region of the cortex, the touch center in the brain. And now, as no doubt you already know, Norst, you are utterly helpless."

"Why—why did you do it?" Norst heard himself demanding.

"You ask why?" the voice went on. "How naive. Norst, just what did you expect from the husband of the woman you stole? Death was too easy, too quickly done with. I had to devise a way wherein you would have a long time to recount your treachery, to be remorseful and suffer as I have suffered!"

The bitterness left the voice, and then the tone became cunning:

"But after more thought I've decided to gain more than revenge for all my trouble. Norst, I know that you're on the verge of uncovering what may lead to the cure of cancer. I overheard you and Slade talking about it a few days ago at the Institute. I know you came up here to complete that final experiment, and no doubt you already have the results. I want that serum formula.

"It won't do you any practical good—now. But I can cash in on it, to say nothing of putting my name in the history books. So I'll strike a bargain. Give me the serum formula and I'll see that you're well cared for in a sanatorium for the rest of your natural life. You can yet live many years, with constant expert care."

Norst wasn't sure. The man inferred that he was Brent, and yet he had spoken of cashing in on the formula. That reminded Norst of someone else. Who would benefit by Peter Norst's insanity and confinement to a sanatorium?

"And supposing I refuse?" Norst said slowly.

"You die, and without even having had the satisfaction of knowing whether your serum did the trick," the voice replied. "With my proposition you'll have your life and life-long care, plus the self-satisfaction of having accomplished the modern miracle. I have nothing to lose and you have everything to gain."

"I might escape after you leave

here," Norst countered. He knew that was no threat. He was merely trying to stall, to be sure of the voice, which was almost impossible to identify through the artificial hearing device in his mouth.

The man laughed. "Escape? How far would you get in these wilds without even one of your senses to guide you? You'd starve or die of exhaustion and exposure. Or worse, just think of tumbling over a precipice like Shadow Cliff and dropping two hundred feet into that rocky chasm." The man laughed again.

"You win," Norst said grimly, helplessly. "But before I turn everything over to you I'd like some food and water. And Fritz—what happened to him?"

"I clubbed him in the dark. He dropped without a sound. But he's all right now. He's been yipping all day, though naturally you couldn't hear him."

"Where is he?"

"In the side room. His strength is about gone, but one dog less, Norst—"

"Bring him out to me!" Norst snapped. "Get food and water for him, too. If you refuse then the deal's off."

"All right," the man growled. "You dog-lovers are cracked, anyhow."

"Better put him on a leash and tie it around my wrist," Norst warned. "The minute he regains strength he'll go for you. He knows you're no friend of mine or his."

THE man laughed derisively from the kitchen. A minute later he came out.

"Here, I'll have to feed you," he said. "Push that device against the side of your cheek. I'll get your mutt." In a minute the man spoke again. "There, the leash is tied around your wrist. Better make that dog behave after he gets his belly full, or I'll shoot him."

Norst experienced a sensation of elation somewhere inside of him as he felt a faint tugging, not a sensation of touch, but a vague feeling of movement. He knew that Fritz was joyfully tugging at the leash.

The feeding was over in five min-

utes. Norst knew that he had eaten simply because he no longer felt that gnawing hunger and thirst. Also, he could feel that vague tugging a trifle stronger and he knew that Fritz, too, had regained his strength. "Fritz!" said Norst sharply. "Lie down."

"Obedient mutt," the man commented. "All right, Norst. The serum formula."

"First," Norst replied, "we have to see the results on the monks. I can't tell you anything about the serum until I know what the effects have been. Have to check on the symptoms. Now, if you'll be good enough to get one of the monks so that you can check on the questions I'll have to ask. . . ."

The man growled. "Either one?"

"Either one." Norst's voice was taut.

Almost a minute passed, and then Norst heard a raging shriek of pain from the lab. The man came running.

"That blasted monk gave me a wicked bite on the arm, then jumped back in the cage," he raged. "I ought to kill it!"

Norst smiled—a slow inscrutable smile. Somehow he was certain that the man's face was masked with terror at sight of that crooked line across Norst's mouth.

"Sit down," Norst said, almost commandingly. "There are some questions that I must ask you now. There isn't much time left—for you."

"N-Norst!" the man choked. "What are you talking about?"

"Are your hands swelling?"

"Y-yes!"

"Is your skin turning blue?"

"Yes!"

"Do you feel pain and congestion around your heart and lungs?"

"Yes, yes!" The man groaned with agony. "Norst, what—"

"You are poisoned," Norst replied calmly. "That monkey bite is fatal."

Norst heard a heavy thud, and he knew the man was writhing in pain on the floor.

"Y-you tricked me!" the man screamed. "You knew those monkeys were poisoned, knew that they'd bite me!"

"I knew that they were very hungry. But anyway, I had to find out what

effect the serum had taken. Now I know." Norst paused, then said slowly: "I believe I have found what may lead to the discovery of cancer's cause and cure."

"Norst!" the man choked. "Give me an antidote. You must have one!"

"Yes, there is an antidote, but it will have to be administered immediately."

"Then give it to me! I—I'll set you free!"

"I'll have to operate—"

"Yes, but hurry!" The man was gasping.

"Sorry, but I can't. I have no sight, no sense of touch. It would be certain murder."

The man moaned, then broke into a fit of coughing. Norst knew the man was coughing blood, for the poison caused the capillaries to burst. In a minute the larger blood vessels would burst, and then—

Norst rose to his feet. That is, he went through the motions of standing, though he felt nothing beneath him.

"Come on, Fritz, we're going home," he said. Fritz barked, and Norst felt that vague tugging on the wrist, felt his limbs forced to move to prevent him from falling on his face. "Good boy, Fritz. To the door."

"Y-you can't leave me!" the dying man on the floor choked out.

Norst turned. "Can't I—Dr. Ethan Slade!"

"How d-did you know?" the man wheezed. "You couldn't see or touch or—"

"When you mentioned Shadow Cliff and the two hundred foot drop into the chasm, I knew," Norst explained. "Brent has never been up here to the lodge, nor has Stephan Lode. Only my brother and you. My brother has never been up to Shadow Cliff, knew nothing about it. But you and I have been up there several times together, Slade, on your frequent visits here."

Slade laughed, a short cackle.

"Go ahead, Norst, but you'll never make it! You have no senses to guide you through those woods!"

"I have a voice and a hearing device, thanks to you," Norst said. "And I have Fritz. And lastly, Slade, there's one sense you couldn't

destroy. Intuition—the sixth sense. That will provide me with a sense of direction!"

And as Norst went out the door he heard those final dying breaths choke out: "They'll find your corpse in the woods!" A last gurgle and all was still.

* * *

FOLLOWING is a partial transcript of one of the National Press' final stories in the series concerning the remarkable case of Dr. Peter Norst:

The nation may now rejoice with the latest report that Dr. Peter Norst, the wealthy and brilliant cancer research worker whose new serum promises to bring the long-evasive cause and cure of cancer almost within medicine's grasp, is on the way to rapid recovery under the care of Dr. Nigor Vilsenn, the world-famed neurologist.

Dr. Norst's case, one of the strangest in news and medical annals, is now in its closing chapter. And the incredible tale of Dr. Norst's heroic dog, Fritz, who chewed off the leather leash that he might go for help while his master lay near death, is a story that will forever remain dear to the hearts of dog-lovers.

Dr. Vilsenn finally agreed to give a statement to the press in regard to Dr. Norst's condition. Dr. Vilsenn's report in his own words is as follows:

"When the rescue party, led by Dr. Norst's remarkable dog, came upon Dr. Norst, they found him perilously near death, suffering from hunger, thirst and exposure. At the hospital they thought his fantastic story to be the rantings of a hysterical person. After they succeeded in restoring his strength, he requested that I be sent for.

"When I arrived he recounted his experience and told me of the operations that Dr. Slade had performed on him. I thought it fanciful at first, but then I knew that such operations, especially in the hands of a clever neuro-surgeon like Dr. Slade, were quite possible.

"Diagnosis, however, revealed a somewhat different picture. The main nerve centers for each sense faculty were not severed, as Norst believed, but were merely paralyzed, which produced the same effect. The paralysis was produced by use of a drug whose effects could last as long as a week. The effects of the drug have almost wholly worn off, and in a few days Dr. Norst will be released. A short rest will be prescribed, and then he will be able to continue with his research on the serum, which, incidentally, has already instilled high hopes into the hearts of the nation's physicians and cancer sufferers."

THREE LEFT HANDS

By SAM MERWIN, Jr.

Author of "Talent for Trouble," "The Twentieth Hole,"
etc.



Whatever Hurst was going to say to Peter was lost as a siren whined to a halt outside

With Plenty of Motive to Slay a Theatrical Simon Legree, It's a Puzzle to Sort a Framed Man From a Killer!

THE thick-set man in evening clothes picked up a heavy hunting knife from the row of gleaming blades on the table in front of him. His monocle glittered as he leered at the girl in the lavender evening gown.

"You might as well talk," he said, and there was an undercurrent of viciousness beneath his silky tones. "No Hooded Avenger can save you now. No one knows we're here."

Blond tresses swirled over her bare shoulders as she shook her head defiantly. High above her head, her wrists were manacled to the wall of the isolated shack.

"You can kill me if you want to!" she said tensely, her blue eyes flaming. "But you can't make me imperil thousands of lives for the sake of my own."

"I'm well aware of the fact that I can kill you," he said, and his smile was the epitome of evil. "I'm also aware of the fact that I can choose the method of your death, and the length of time it will take."

With an easy, almost indifferent motion, he lifted the hunting knife and snapped it at her. It thudded into the wall, into the small space between her manacled wrists, drew a strangling gasp from her throat.

"Feel like talking?" he asked with vicious gentleness.

"No!" she gasped.

He shrugged, and leisurely sent another knife into the wall a bare three inches from her rounded young arm. Again his monocle gleamed as he looked at her with polite inquiry, but she shook her head.

His third knife was a little wider,

and he flung the fourth quickly. It skimmed by her dress, and one of the straps of her evening gown was severed. She stared at the vibrating haft with widening eyes of horror.

The man in evening clothes picked up another of the weapons and sighted along its length.

"This one," he said, "is going to draw blood—unless, of course, you choose to tell me what I want to know."

"No!" cried the girl. But she was evidently weakening in the face of such a fate.

Her tormentor shrugged once more and raised his arm to throw. But he stopped short, stockstill, as there came a peremptory banging on the door. The knife thrower's eyebrows rose in surprise and fright, and the monocle fell from his eye socket.

Crash!

The rude planks of the shack's door were shattered. Another blow, and a gaping jagged hole was revealed. In the opening, the head and shoulders of a man appeared. He was masked by a purple hood through which only his burning eyes were visible.

"Drop that knife!" he shouted.

His left hand appeared, holding an automatic. His right hand was braced on the door-knob. Flame streaked from the muzzle of his pistol as he fired three times.

Crimson splotches sprayed the white shirt front of the man in evening clothes. He groaned, grabbed at the table, but missed and fell face down on the floor. . . .

THE audience in the rows out front clapped and cheered and whistled in the usual reaction to a melodramatic climax. Now was the moment for the hooded avenger to turn the knob, step in and reveal himself as Tom Chester, the dashing young playboy juvenile. The stage was set for the final clinch.

But instead of coming onstage, the hooded man ducked from sight into backstage darkness. And then the girl screamed. The man in evening clothes, supposedly killed in the name of his art, bucked and rolled con-

vulsively on the stage floor.

No one in that crowded audience ever forgot that. Dextro, the world's greatest knife-thrower, the man who had lifted his routine act out of the drabness of lesser vaudeville attractions by embroidering it with a playlet and attractive performers, was kicking out his life there on the boards!

In the few seconds before the curtain was mercifully lowered, that fact was evident. The audience had watched no graceful theatre death. They had looked upon the real and horrible thing itself. . . .

Below the stage, in a dingy dressing room formed by wooden partitions that were three feet short of the basement ceiling, Peter Lewis, a member of Dextro's cast, picked himself up groggily, trying to remember what had happened. But all that he could recall was that something had landed hard on the back of his head as he started for the stage, after making his final change of costume.

Panic seized him. He must have missed the finale! Or had he? There seemed to be no applause or disturbance on the stage, or in the wings. No one was summoning him.

He rubbed his aching head, wondering what had happened. Carefully he picked up his Hooded Avenger hood, which had fallen to the floor.

His head was still spinning around when he heard running footsteps, the slam of the dressing room door next to his own. A moment later, Jean, the blonde who also worked in Dextro's act, stuck her head over the partition.

"Lock your door!" she whispered imperatively. "They'll be here in a minute."

"What gives?" he countered vaguely. "I just came to with a sore noggin."

"Then you didn't do it!" she said, and there was quick relief in the look she gave him, relief which gave way to alarm. "But they'll think you did! Grab your coat and climb over. You can get out through my window if you hurry."

"What didn't I do outside of missing the finale?" he asked.

"Somebody used real bullets on

Dextro!" Jean choked. "Not that he didn't have it coming. It was somebody who took your place in the act! Where's your gun?"

He locked his door hastily then, panic gnawing at his vitals. Swiftly he searched for his gun. It was not there! If this were all true, he was on the spot!

"The killer left his gun backstage," the girl said. "He must have used yours. Hurry, Pete—hurry! I've got an idea who did it, but you'll have to go it alone." Her voice became sibilant. "Here they come! I only got ahead of them by faking hysterics."

Hoarse shouts and running footsteps sounded on the stairs leading from the stage overhead. Peter Lewis didn't stop to count 'em or weigh 'em then. Panic-stricken, he climbed to his table, vaulted the partition to the girl's room. As he landed beside her, he thought of something.

"But I'm left-handed," he said. "And my gun—"

"So was this guy left-handed," Jean said. "So was Roger Hurst. You know about him. He used to have the job you have. I saw him upstairs just before—before . . . Dextro stalled him, said he'd meet him at Joe's in fifteen minutes. Maybe you can find him there. I'll cover here."

"Open up!" said a soft voice. "This is Ray. What happened?"

JEAN opened her door a crack, admitted Ray Maxwell, then locked it behind him. Maxwell, a stocky, swarthy chap with heavy spectacles, was a theatrical agent. Quickly Jean told him what had happened. The agent whistled and glanced toward the partition. Fists were already pounding on the door of Peter's dressing room. Peter Lewis, himself, stood there silently.

Always uncommunicative, the agent listened without comment. At mention of Roger Hurst, he nodded.

Outside somewhere, a siren wailed, and the door of Peter Lewis' dressing room was slammed open.

"We'll stall them as much as we can here," the agent whispered to Lewis. "You'd better try and nail Roger Hurst. He'll show up if only to make

it look good. Once the cops get their mitts on you, they'll hang on tight."

"But what motive did I have for killing Dextro?" Lewis asked, bewildered. "He gave me my first real meal ticket as an actor."

"They'll find a motive—Jean here, anything. You find Hurst and go to town on him. Make him talk. It's your only chance."

His head still whirling, Lewis ducked out the window, legged it down the alley to the side street, then walked as slowly as he dared toward Joe's Café. No one stopped him, though his every step was accompanied by the wail of sirens as police cars continued to gather at the theater behind him. It was not pleasant music to his ears.

Joe's was a quiet place, well-suited for lovers' rendezvous or other intimate conversations. Its booths had draw curtains, and no one got inquisitive unless too much noise came from behind them.

The young actor walked in, strode the length of the narrow floor, looking for Roger Hurst. He narrowly missed upsetting a waiter carrying a tray laden with spaghetti as he spotted his predecessor.

Roger Hurst was a nervous, emaciated shadow of the good-looking young man who had once played the Hooded Avenger in Dextro's act. His sleeves were frayed, and a half-empty glass of beer was in front of him. He looked as if he were not sure he would be able to pay for it.

Peter Lewis slipped into the booth with Hurst and beckoned a waiter.

"Drink up," he said. "This one's on me."

"What do you want?" Hurst asked him. There was a sneer in his voice. "I didn't come here to see you. And I don't want your drinks."

"Yeah?" said Lewis. His wits were returning now. "I imagine it is a bit of a surprise. You figured I'd be in jail by now."

"And I want your doubletalk even less," Hurst said rancidly.

"Don't play dumb," snapped Lewis. "What's the idea of framing me for shooting Dextro? Talk fast or I'll take you apart."

"Talk about *what!*" barked the broken-down actor. He stared at Peter with such surprise on his face that it was hard not to believe.

"You heard me," snapped Peter Lewis. "If Jean and Ray Maxwell hadn't helped me get away, I'd be on my way to the chair right now."

Hurst's response was a surprise. He put back his head and began to laugh softly. He laughed until tears streamed down his face. Finally Lewis leaned across the table and slapped him smartly.

"Talk!" he ordered tensely. At any moment he expected the hand of the law on his shoulder.

"I'm not hysterical," said Roger Hurst, gasping for breath. "It's just funny, that's all. So you think I framed you with Dextro's murder!" Suddenly his face stiffened. "This isn't a gag, is it?" he asked.

PPETER LEWIS slapped him again, using the heel of his hand.

"Hey—cut it!" said Hurst. "Don't play rough. I just wanted to know." He grew serious. "I suppose you've got the same motive for bumping Dextro that I've been carrying around for two years."

"Why would I kill my paycheck?" snapped Lewis. "Make sense!"

"Grow up, kid," said Hurst. "I've been wanting to kill Dextro for a long time. He shut me out of two movie bids Maxwell got for me. Wanted too high an ante and wouldn't come down. He owned me legally—lock, stock, and barrel—just the way he owns you."

"Quit stalling," said Peter Lewis. "Why'd you kill him?"

"I didn't," said Hurst. "Believe me I've wanted to, but I couldn't drum up the nerve. Look at me." He held out a hand that shook like a leaf in an autumn wind. "I went to the theater tonight to see if Dextro wouldn't release me from my contract. I've got a couple of offers to play stock, and he's been keeping me tied up. He is—was—that kind of a heel when he thought he'd been crossed."

"Stop kidding," ordered Lewis. "You told Maxwell you were coming here so you'd have an alibi. I'm not

taking a rap for you."

"I—" Hurst began, but whatever he was going to say was lost on Lewis.

A siren whined to a halt in front of the restaurant. The accused young actor leaped to his feet, dived out of the booth toward the rear of the restaurant. As he reached the door to the kitchen, a revolver blasted its message of death behind him, and a slug whistled by his ear.

Then he was through, and this time he did not avoid the waiter, who appeared with another trayload of pasta. Waiter, spaghetti and tray fell together as Peter Lewis charged by, passed an astonished chef and went out the back door. He leaped a fence, crossed three back yards, emerged on a side street, and began walking away from the center of the city.

What to do? He felt like a fox with the hounds in full cry on his trail. He couldn't go to his hotel. He couldn't go to any hotel. And he hadn't enough cash on him for any kind of a get-away. He slowed down, his brain racing as he tried to dope out his next move.

Suddenly the thought of Ray Maxwell came as a flash of light. The agent had helped him escape once. He should at least be willing to put him up and stake him for a hide-out somewhere until this murder was solved.

He remembered then that he was out of a job. That was going to make it tough—plenty tough. . . .

Ray Maxwell lived in a swank small apartment house on the rim of both the residential and amusement sections of the city. His apartment, which Peter Lewis had visited more than once before now, and when the Hooded Avenger act was playing its home town, was on the ground floor.

Lewis waited until the doorman had stepped inside with some guest's luggage, then slipped along the delivery entranceway until he came to a corner window of the Maxwell apartment, a window which was just above eye level. It was dark, and, without hesitation, he put his hat around his fist, jumped up and broke the pane. Then, pulling himself up to the sill, he got the window open and slipped inside.

He found himself in the living room. Turning on a lamp, he settled down to wait.

The agent did himself well. The furniture was modernistic and looked expensive. The walls were cluttered with signed photographs of theater and screen celebrities, all of them inscribed with the routine loving and devoted regards to Ray Maxwell. On top of a table against one wall was a target. The colored feathers of half a dozen darts protruded from it, four of them clustered the bull's-eye. The other two were not far away.

"**W**ONDER if he's been practicing up to take Dextro's job," thought Lewis.

He got up and examined the board, intending to pull the darts out and try them himself while he waited for his involuntary host to return. But after a long close scrutiny, he stayed his hand. The darts had all gone in with their points slanting a little to the right. They were deeply imbedded in the pitted board.

This was queer. It rang a bell in his head, but he couldn't pull the pieces that floated around in his thoughts together.

Shaking his head, he moved back as if about to try some target practice himself. He found he was standing beside a teakwood table. There was nothing on this table but a copy of "Variety," a cigarette box, an ash tray and a lamp. He frowned.

Then, stooping, he opened a drawer. There he saw the dart pistol with its ingenious rubber band device for getting velocity. Closing the drawer, he went back to the chair and sat down, still frowning. Finally, he smiled, picked up a magazine.

Half an hour later, a key turned in the lock. Ray Maxwell and Jean came in together, laughing. When they saw Peter Lewis, they stopped short.

"What's the idea, Peter?" said Maxwell. "I gave you one chance to scam. What goes?"

"I need a stake for a getaway, Ray," said the young actor. "How about it? You know I've been framed."

"How do I know?" asked the agent. "The police seem pretty sure of your

guilt. Why didn't you tell me Metro is after you, kid? I might have been able to fix it up without a murder."

"Give him get-away money," begged Jean. "So what if he did kill Dextro? Dextro was a first-water rat."

"Okay," said Maxwell, pulling out a roll and peeling off some bills. "Here's half a grand. It should get you far away and give you something to start out with. Did you see Hurst?"

"Sure," said Lewis. "But the cops got there before I could make him talk. Thanks."

He put the money in his pocket. He was standing beside the agent.

"What's this about Metro?" he asked.

"They've been after your contract for six months," said Maxwell. "It only came out since the killing. Dextro had the letters."

"And you could have fixed it, Ray, if you had known?"

"Sure I could have."

"The way you fixed Hurst up?" Peter Lewis' voice was sharp.

The agent looked at him, frowned.

"I never got a chance to help Hurst," he said. "Dextro wouldn't let me. He wanted too much money. He had a pile, and didn't care much. But the movie people couldn't go high enough. Now get out of here."

"Not so fast," said Lewis. "I still don't see how you figure in this, Ray—except that you killed Dextro! Maybe he had you sewed up too. That's just a guess, but it fits."

"What do you mean?" the agent demanded belligerently.

He moved closer, his fists cocked.

"You killed Dextro, all right," said Lewis, while Jean stared at him with wide eyes. "You framed me, helped me get away while I was still slug nutty, to make it look bad. And you had Roger Hurst planted in Joe's for a fall guy in case I didn't pan out as a suspect. You'd even had him in the theater—got him to go there to see Dextro.

"When I got away, you told the police where to find Hurst and me. They'd never have reached that café so quickly if you hadn't. My guess is that Dextro had you tied up for exclusive services, then kept fellows

like Hurst and me tied up while you cooked up movie offers. He must have wanted to keep us in the act. His act came first. When Hurst tried to break away, Dextro blacklisted him and kept him on his payroll for a pittance. It has to be like that. Hurst told me just enough."

"Okay, sucker," drawled Jean. "So you know. Don't blame me, kid. Ray figured out the frame. But I didn't want to spend the rest of my life dodging those pig-stickers of Dextro's. Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"**JUST** this," said Peter Lewis. All of the anger and frustration of the evening boiled over inside him as he swung for the agent's jaw. The blow landed solidly, sent Maxwell over the back of an armchair. He banged his head on the corner of a

table as he went down. He lay there and didn't move.

"Sorry, Jean," said Lewis as he reached for the phone. "I can't take this lying down. Between us, Roger Hurst and I can work out a pretty good case against Ray Maxwell. If you're smart, you'll play with us. Or would you rather serve a term as an accomplice?"

"You win," she said, sinking into a chair. "But how'd you figure it out?"

Lewis hesitated before picking up the telephone. He nodded toward the dart board.

"Whoever shot Dextro had to shoot left-handed to make the frame stick," he said.

"Ray must have practiced with his dart gun. You'll find that all the darts go in to the right. Only by shooting from the left side could he do that."

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THE DOUBLE FOR



The pasty-faced chauffeur had

A Complete Crime

CHAPTER I

Ten-Thousand-Dollar Deal

“HEY you! Hey—bum!” Don Courtney heard those words, knew they were directed at him and turned around slowly. It was true that he probably did look like a bum. His shoes were run down, his suit had not been pressed in a month. His shirt was definitely soiled and the battered hat he wore had come out of a rubbish can after he had lost his own some days before.

The man on the bench who was calling was about Don Courtney's age, but there the difference ended. He wore excellent tweeds, his homburg was just the thing, and it was plain at a glance that he paid five dollars for his ties. Like Courtney, he was fair of



A Down-and-Outter Becomes a Stand-In for

HATE

By **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

Author of "No Defense," "It Comes Out Murder," etc.



been shot through the neck

Mystery Novelet

skin, light-haired, and both had deeply blue eyes.

"Did you speak to me?" Courtney asked softly, his voice like a soft breeze before the lightning breaks loose.

"Yes—I called you a bum. Aren't you a bum? Or perhaps you are one of these freaks who go around trying to find out how the other half lives."

Courtney sighed. "Well," he said, "you might as well stand up, because I won't sock a man who is sitting down. But if you don't stand, so help me, I'll forget all the rules and let you have one right on the schnozzle."

The stranger seemed to be enjoying all this and Courtney was puzzled. But puzzled or not, he was going to wipe out that insult—even if he did have all the earmarks of a bum.

"Now hold that punch," the man on the bench said quickly. "I meant



a Millionaire in a Grim Drama of Death!

nothing personal by the remark. I was merely testing you."

Courtney's fists lowered. "Testing me?" he repeated. "Exactly what do you mean?"

"You'd like to make some money, wouldn't you? Well sit down and, for heaven's sake, cool off. I called you a bum to see the reaction. It was perfect. You've got nerve and pride, and you also seem to be well educated. Suppose I offer you this to begin with—just for the right to have your attention for ten minutes."

CCOURTNEY looked down at a twenty-dollar bill. He didn't take it, but he sat gingerly beside the man and looked at him curiously.

"My name is Wilcox—Nick Wilcox," the stranger who had accosted him offered. "Here—take the twenty. It's sort of a retaining fee. I need your help. I'm willing to pay plenty for it, but there's a chance you might not want the job, so this is for just listening. It's not charity, man. Take it."

"Thanks."

Courtney took the bill and let his fingers glide over its surface. It had been—let's see now—at least ten months since he had held a twenty-dollar bill in his hands.

"My name is Don Courtney," he said, as the man seemed to be waiting. "My—ah—appearance isn't exactly prepossessing, but believe it or not, I've been to college and I graduated with something they call honors."

Wilcox wagged his head from side to side.

"Remarkable," he approved. "You're tailor-made for the work I have in mind. Now, suppose you tell me just how you went on the bum like this. No criminal record? The cops aren't looking for you?"

Courtney laughed. "They might have been if I hadn't met you. It's funny what a desperate man will think of—and brother, I've been desperate. . . . Well, for the twenty bucks, I've got to dish it out. When you get sick of listening, just squawk. . . . I'm twenty-seven. Four years out of college, and the first two I had a sweet job. Travel agency work. I trained

for it. You know—languages, diplomacy and all that stuff. The third year things weren't so good. A guy named Hitler saw to that, and then—boom—I wasn't working."

Wilcox proffered a cigarette, lit Courtney's and then his own. He blew a stream of smoke straight out.

"I can imagine what a tough break that was," he observed.

"Tough?" Courtney grinned. "You don't know the meaning of the word. Anyway my money didn't last long. I tried to get back at Adolph for making me lose my job by joining the armed forces, but they'd have none of me. A man's health can go under par when he hasn't enough money to eat properly. So that was out. I've picked up odd jobs here and there. Defense work is impossible to get because I haven't an iota of skilled training to my name. Well—there you have it, and did I hear you mention something about a job?"

"Yes," Wilcox said. "It's a dangerous assignment, Courtney. You—might not live through it, but I'll make the thing worth your while. If you do come through, you won't have to worry again. If you don't—well, death brings no worries to the righteous. Do you want to hear me out?"

Courtney nodded eagerly, and Wilcox went on talking in easy, swift sentences.

"My father once operated a mill, about sixty-five miles upstate. The whole town depended on it for work. The depression came along, things went from bad to worse, and Dad closed the mill. Of course the whole town had to go on relief and they didn't like it. They maintained that Dad had money enough to keep the mill going. These people claimed they had worked to help him make his wad and now, when the going was tough, they didn't intend to let him crawl out."

"I don't blame them," Courtney said, "and I'm beginning to see a streak of daylight through the fog. Go ahead."

Nick Wilcox stopped long enough for a long inhale. Then he went on.

"Dad was a peculiar gent. Stubborn

as a mule. And he had three times the kick. One night a few of the more hardy souls up there burned down the garage. Dad didn't wait. He phoned his brokers, canceled the insurance on the mill and then—he burned her to the ground. Two hours after the fire was out, we were running like the wind from the vengeance of that town. Dad is dead now. I'm the only member of the family still alive—and I want to go back there. I still own the property. With the right cooperation I'll rebuild the mill. It would be profitable, with all the defense work. But I'm afraid. I think those people—those who still live there anyhow—will skin me alive the moment they lay eyes on me."

CCOURTNEY snuffed out his cigarette.

"And you want me to take your place, to go up there, face the music, and find out if it's a waltz or a dirge?" he asked. "That was a dirty trick your father played, and I don't blame you for being afraid. Well—what's the proposition?"

"You assume my identity and I'll take yours. We'll swap clothes right here—in the park behind us. I arrived from Brazil this afternoon, checked into a swanky hotel and kept my face covered as much as possible. They'd never notice the difference between us. We do look somewhat alike, especially in stature. Frankly, I've spent the last five hours just searching for a man like you.

"Go up there to that town, face the people left there and find out their dispositions. I was just a kid when Dad pulled his freight, so they would accept you at face value as me. If you—ah—live and make those people understand I want to do the right thing, there will be ten thousand dollars in it for you. Ten thousand for, perhaps three months' work. If they let you alone that long, I'll know it's safe to go there. How about it? I'll even arrange with my bank so you can draw against my account, and you may investigate me wherever and as much as you choose."

Courtney stuck out his hand, saw the grime on it, and hastily rubbed it

on his pants leg. They shook hands then, and grinned. Ten minutes later they had changed clothes. Courtney noticed that Wilcox transferred a huge roll of currency to his new clothing. He was not going to starve at any rate.

"Now it's perfect," Wilcox said. "Go to the Pierre—ask for the key to Suite Sixteen-forty. You'll find money for expenses there. Take all my clothes—golf clubs, everything. Hang around town for a couple of days and then light out. You won't be able to contact me for at least a week. The town you'll go to is Hazardport. It's no port—way inland—but Dad named it and he had a sense of humor.

"There's no railroad station, I haven't a car here with me that you can drive, so you'll get off the train at Keeton and chisel a ride somehow, since I won't know exactly when you'll get there, and it won't be possible to telephone for a car to meet you at any particular time. There's a high bluff overlooking Hazardport and right smack on the top is the house—my house. You will find servants there. I never kicked them off the place, and they'll be friendly. From then on—watch your step."

Courtney grinned and looked down at the neat press in his newly acquired suit.

"Brother," he said, "I hope there won't be any renegeing on that ten thousand because I'm liable to develop a new way of living and it won't be easy to go back to—to what those clothes you're wearing represent. Thanks for the opportunity, and I hope I can make those people up there look at things properly. For your sake, but mostly for mine. Good-by—and good luck."

WHEN Don Courtney sauntered into the lobby of the Pierre he hoped nobody would notice his obvious lack of a haircut. He was at least shaven. There was a razor and some soap in the pocket of the suit Wilcox now was wearing.

But if anyone noticed the lack of a haircut, no one showed it. There were bows and scrapings on all sides.

Courtney got the key, went to the

suite, and whistled in amazement at the lavishness of the place. He found everything Wilcox had promised—money, clothes, bags. There was not a thing lacking.

Courtney sat down to contemplate his luck. It was almost too good to be true, almost worth it even if he lasted only a few days at Hazardport. All in all he figured Nick Wilcox as being possessed of an exaggerated complex about those people. Time heals wounds.

By now the men of Hazardport would be at work in other factories. There might be a few who would retain grudges. But murder the son of a man who had caused them harm? Hardly. People were not made that way any more. That stuff belonged in history, in feuding, not in modern times.

Courtney relaxed, and decided to enjoy himself for the next few days.

CHAPTER II

Hot Welcome

THOSE days of relaxation had passed faster than Courtney realized. He had checked on Nick Wilcox. At a big bank he learned that Courtney's account was at his disposition.

He also discovered that Nick Wilcox had done a little investigating himself. All the places where Courtney had worked had been visited. The few friends he had made had been interviewed. Courtney didn't mind that. After all, Wilcox was giving him a rather responsible job and allowing him full access to his bank account.

Nick Wilcox had told the truth. Courtney discovered that from the bank officials. They knew all about the activities of Nick's father in that obscure little town upstate. Other sources verified these facts, and Courtney was satisfied that he was not going to be involved in anything criminal, nor made a fool of. Now Courtney rode an old rattletrap of a train, with a through ticket for Keeton.

When that place was reached after a few hours' ride, it proved to be a so-called bustling metropolis. There were

at least ten stores, doing a bang-up business. Cars were parked everywhere. The people looked intelligent and prosperous. They would be the same in Hazardport, Courtney was sure. Why not?

Courtney's biggest problem was how to reach Hazardport. Too bad he couldn't have let Wilcox know when he would arrive, so a car would be there to meet him. He spotted a garage and headed for it, with two grinning kids trailing behind him, loaded down with his baggage. Each one had a considerable fortune, represented by a dollar bill, clutched in a grimy hand, besides the suitcases.

Courtney saw an old car, a roadster of about 1935 vintage, parked outside the garage. The car was jacked up and the wheel had been removed for repairs. Courtney headed for the big doors—and came to such a sudden standstill that the two boys bumped into him and spilled his baggage all over the place.

What Courtney saw would have made any man stop—or at least strain his neck muscles. The girl was tall, regally so. She had auburn hair, neatly arranged. She wore slacks and a vivid blouse—something that Seminole Indians might dare to wear. There were blue sandals on her feet. She had green eyes. Or no, they were gray, Courtney noticed at a second glance.

Then he turned a dull red. He had forgotten that the girl had eyes too, and she didn't exactly like the way he was staring. Courtney removed his hat and tried one of his best grins.

"I'm terribly sorry, miss," he apologized. "I suppose I was rude, but—well, I've been away a long time. South America. I—ah—"

She smiled and Courtney heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," she said. "You meant that for a compliment. There are few enough of those around my neck of the woods. If you're looking for transportation, I'm afraid you're due for a long wait. The town's only taxi is doubling as a funeral car today."

A mechanic came out with the wheel and quickly installed it. He lowered the rear end and tipped his hat to the girl.

"That'll be a quarter, Miss Diane. I ain't askin' full price for people up Hazardport way. Thank you, Miss Diane."

Courtney waved the two baggage boys away.

"Look—Miss Diane," he said hesitantly. "I—I wonder if you'd take me to Hazardport. I'm quite willing to—ah—pay . . ."

The girl called Diane looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Are you going to Hazardport? Why hop in, Mister. There won't be any charge. You're the first stranger to set foot in our town in two years. We're on the black list of the transient salesmen. Even the bums don't come there any more."

CCOURTNEY piled his baggage into the rumble seat, climbed into the car, and almost lost his hat when Diane stepped on the gas. She really let that old crate out and to Courtney's surprise it had a powerful, quiet motor.

She glanced at him, after they had ridden in silence for about half an hour.

"Know someone in Hazardport?" she inquired.

"Well, no. That is, I— Look, Miss Diane—slow down to about seventy so I can open my mouth, will you?"

She laughed gleefully and eased up on the gas pedal. Courtney braced himself. This was his first encounter with an inhabitant of Hazardport and come what may, he had to go through with it.

"You'd better stop," he suggested. "I don't exactly know how you're going to take this. You see—we did you folks a rather dirty trick up there in Hazardport. What I've really come back for is to sort of live down the reputation. . . ."

The car stopped so quickly that Courtney was banged against the dashboard. Diane's eyes were green fires. He would not have believed that her mouth could draw down so at the corners. Still she was pretty—ravishingly pretty. But what she said was not pretty.

"You're Nick Wilcox!" She said it the way a Greek might speak to

Hitler if he met the man face to face and unprotected. "You're coming back. I might have known. The servants opened the big house for you. Well, Mr. Nick Wilcox, it's exactly sixteen miles back to Keeton and fourteen miles to Hazardport. At least I can thank you for springing your little surprise in this desolate section. Get out—get out, before I—"

"Hey-hey-hey!" Courtney opened the door and practically fell into the road. "Let me explain. You owe me that at least."

She looked straight into his eyes.

"Ah, but Fate is kind today. You didn't recognize me, did you? I'm Diane Gregory. Now you know the truth. I hope you stumble and break your neck. I'll throw the first spadeful of dirt into your face, you—you pig!"

The roadster shot forward.

"Hey, my bags!" Courtney yelled.

He got them. As she drove, Diane hurled one at a time from the car. Courtney picked up as many as he could carry and hid the rest. He hid the others, too, about four miles further along the dusty road. That old cramp in the calf of his legs was acting up again as it used to do when he hunted jobs. Even city pavement was kinder than this dirt road and he had at least another ten miles to go.

Not a car passed him in either direction. There was not a house. Wilcox had not been fooling when he said Hazardport was off the beaten path. A blue jay swept down to a branch just ahead of him and squawked raucously.

Courtney said, "Aw, shut up!" and felt like heaving a stone at the bird.

Then he heard a familiar roar. It was the roadster coming back. He started to smile. Diane must have suffered a change of heart. She was returning for him. He decided to reject the offer of a ride when it should first be offered him, then finally give in.

But when the car stopped, amidst more dust than a twenty-mule team could kick up, two men got out of it. Each carried a rifle, and both were red-headed and looked something like Diane. Courtney stopped short. He didn't just like the way those two men were approaching him. Their rifles

were aimed at his chest. Courtney began to bristle.

"**S**TAND where you are!" one of the men snapped. "We don't want to come within ten feet of a Wilcox. Stand still, you—you rat! I don't know what's keeping my trigger finger as still as it is."

"Now see here," Courtney objected. "This has gone far enough. Perhaps we played you people a dirty trick. In fact I'll admit it, but a fellow is entitled to a second chance. I've come back to help build the town up to where it belongs . . ."

"That's enough, Wilcox," the taller of the pair ground out. "Turn your hide around and head for Keeton. You're not returning to Hazardport—because if you do, we'll have to kill you, and there's no bounty in these woods on skunks. Get moving."

Courtney did not stir. "All right," he said finally. "You asked for this, gentlemen. I'm going to beat your fool heads off. Put those rifles down, because if you don't I'll find you some day without them and beat you up twice as badly."

The two men looked at one another in sheer amazement. Then, as if by prearranged signal, they dropped their guns. Courtney did not wait. He could fight like a fool. A man does not exist in the kind of life Courtney had led, without knowing how to defend himself.

One of the pair started a rush of his own. Courtney grinned coldly. This was exactly what he wanted. He ducked the wild swing of the redhead, lashed out and clipped the man full on the chin. The blow veered the redhead off his course and hurled him into a thatch of brush. He didn't get up.

The taller of the pair growled something about the luck of the devil's own and came at Courtney much slower, with his fists up and ready. Courtney saw a jaw-breaker headed his way and ducked, but not quite soon enough. He tumbled backward and fell flat. In a split second the tall redhead made a dive for him.

Courtney's two legs came up, poised, and struck out. The redhead flew

through the air, landed with a jarring thump, but sprang back to his feet as if he had hit a powerful spring. Courtney took the offensive now and he was sore. The redhead found that out quickly. Courtney's fists moved like pistons and were just as true in their course. The redhead's face began to resemble his hair. Then Courtney saw the beautiful opening and let him have it—squarely on the chin.

The fight was over. Courtney dabbled at a couple of lacerations on his face, grinned a little unpleasantly and walked toward the roadster. Both redheads were sitting up and trying to figure out what brand of mule had kicked them.

"Well," Courtney called out, "to the victor belongs the spoils. It was a fair fight and you two lost. Therefore, enjoy the hike. I'll leave your car around where it will be easy to find."

"I'll be double dog-goned!" Courtney heard the taller man say. "Has he changed! Never knew a Wilcox to face a scrap or to get up after he'd had one."

Courtney grinned, but changed the facial expression quickly. A bolt of jagged pain shot through his jaw. He stroked his chin and found it swelling all out of proportion.

Twenty minutes later the nose of the car dipped down, and he saw two things simultaneously—a ghost town, and one of the most resplendent mansions he had ever seen in his life. It was on a hill directly across town. There must be thirty rooms in the place, Courtney figured, even at this distance. No wonder Wilcox wanted to come back.

He hit the Main Street and saw the various signs of complete dissolution. There were two small stores, with scanty stock in their windows. Most of the houses had gone to ruin, and those that were still occupied were in sad need of repairs. The people looked like the houses, weather-beaten and dejected.

Courtney braked the roadster and pulled up in front of one store. Four men were lounging outside it. Three of them deliberately spat in the dust and walked away. The fourth just

stared back at Courtney.

"Pardon me," Courtney said. "This car belongs to—"

"It's the Gregorys'. You pulled a fancy trick on Lank an' Bundy. Stole their car, you did, rather than face 'em. That's all I got to say. Now move along, y'hear?"

"Look," Courtney reiterated with great patience. "I did meet those two crazy redheads. I licked both of 'em and they're walking back, but this car isn't mine. I want to know where they live so I can leave it there."

The man spat, pointed the shank of his pipe down the road. Courtney shrugged and drove on. Pretty soon he saw a white, two-story bungalow. Neat as a pin with fruit trees all around it and a walk of whitewashed stone leading to the front door. A rural mail-box at the gate said "Gregory." He slid to a stop and tooted the horn.

Instantly the front door opened and Diane came out on the run. She slowed up near the gate, stopped, and held onto the fence. Her face went white.

"You—you—"

"Hold it," Courtney warned. "Your brothers are all right. We had an argument and they lost. I just came here to return your car. And you can tell the big one—Lank, I suppose he's called—that he packs a beautiful wallop. I'll be seeing you around, Diane."

He got out of the car and strode away, taking the next road which he could see led to the big house. When he neared the top, he was fervently glad that the two Gregory boys had not decided to waylay him there. That hill was a killer.

As he set foot on the steps of the big house that seemed to sprawl over about ten acres of land, the door opened. A girl in a maid's uniform came out, and she was smiling. Courtney smiled back, because she really was something. Pert, blond, and made up attractively, he wondered how on earth Hazardport had produced two such lovely specimens as this girl and Diane Gregory.

"How do you do, sir," the maid said, and curtsied slightly. "Welcome back, sir."

A man in overalls and jumper,

carrying a rake, came around the side of the house. He tipped his hat, then went to work.

Courtney noticed just one significant thing. This man must be a gardener, but what in the world was a gardener doing with a heavy gun concealed in his pocket. The outlines of it were clearly visible.

A tall, bald-headed, wooden-faced man appeared in the doorway and snapped his fingers. The maid promptly moved aside.

"I am Collins, sir, the butler," he announced. "I am the only person in the full confidence of—that is, sir, in your full confidence, if you know what I mean, sir."

"Yes—yes, of course."

Courtney knew what he meant. Wilcox must have communicated with this frozen-faced stooge. And as the butler turned sideward to wave Courtney into the house, Don Courtney saw the outlines of another gun!

CHAPTER III

Warning of Death

INSIDE the house, Courtney handed over his hat to the maid, sent for the chauffeur, and told him where to pick up his bags. Then he summoned the butler into a study that reminded him a little of the Pennsylvania Station. Seventy-five people could study at one time in this study.

"Look here, Collins," he said to the butler, "I realize the townspeople aren't exactly glad to see me back. Take a squint at my face and see for yourself. The Gregory boys did that, bless 'em. But what I'm getting at is this. Isn't carrying guns going a bit too far?"

Collins showed neither surprise, excitement, nor resignation.

"I'm sorry, sir," he murmured, "but you don't quite understand how difficult things are here. We arrived only two days ago, and already three attempts have been made to burn down the house, and one to wreck the limousine. It's quite distasteful, sir."

"Umm—yes," Courtney said slowly.

"I can see your point. All right. Keep the guns on you, but just for self-protection, understand. Take a pot-shot at anyone and I'll personally kick you and the whole staff right in the pants. That is all." He glanced around and smiled as he saw the maid. "Oh, hello there."

She had slipped quietly into the room and she smiled at him warmly. Courtney decided that the job on her was not quite as good as that on Diane, but she was a trim little dish. He waved the totem-pole butler out of the room and sat down.

"My name is Marie," the maid said. "I hope I'll prove quite satisfactory to you."

"You will," Courtney prophesied. "Don't worry about it. . . . Say, it's getting dark. Turn on the lights, please."

Marie moved to the door and pressed a switch. There was just a click—no light.

"Something's wrong with—" she started to say, then her voice climbed furiously to a scream. "Look out!"

Courtney whirled around, saw a flash of something metallic, and ducked. That something clipped his already swollen jaw and thudded into the wall. Wetting dried lips, Courtney looked at a knife imbedded in the plaster. There was a folded piece of paper tied to the haft.

He didn't stop to read it. Instead he bolted for the French window through which the knife had been flung. He vaulted the porch rail outside and looked around in the near gloom for signs of the intruder. He heard someone running toward him and the gardener appeared, with a gun in his fist.

"I saw him!" the gardener shouted. "Big, tall guy he was. Disappeared in the brush like a deer!"

Courtney relaxed. "Well, put that howitzer away then. Guns make me nervous. Look around and keep your eyes open after this. You almost lost a pretty good boss."

Back in the study he found Marie excitedly explaining to Collins of the wooden face what had happened. Courtney yanked the knife out of the wall, removed the paper and read it.

KILLING A WILCOX IS LIKE KILLING A LOCO WOLF. TAKE GOOD ADVICE AND GET OUT OF TOWN.

There was no signature, and the letters had been hand-drawn with pen and ink.

"Whew!" Courtney mopped his face. "For a warning they certainly put some real effectiveness behind it. Thanks, Marie, for giving me a chance to duck. Now—how about some dinner?"

"It is served," the butler said. "This way, Mr. Wilcox. . . ."

WHEN Courtney awoke the next day, he had some difficulty in orienting himself. That is, until he sat up in bed. There was a note in the hand-drawn letters pinned to the top blanket. He winced as he read:

THERE WILL BE NO MORE WARNINGS. NEXT TIME WILL BE THE REAL THING. GET OUT WHILE YOU CAN STILL WALK AND BREATHE.

"O - h - h - h," Courtney groaned. "What an appetizer that is." He ate breakfast, as he had eaten dinner, in solitary splendor. Marie hovered in the background, Collins served, and an elderly woman kept bobbing in and out of the kitchen to see if things were quite all right.

Finally Courtney threw down his napkin.

"Collins," he ordered, "have the car brought around. I'm going into town."

Marie brought a hand up to her throat. Collins never stirred a facial muscle.

"I wouldn't, sir," he advised. "It will be highly dangerous."

"Yeah? Well I'm going just the same—and right now. The heck with those fools who don't know the difference between right and wrong—who can't drop a grudge."

"Yes sir," Collins said, "but there is a 'phone call coming for you at nine-thirty, sir. It—it's rather important, begging your pardon, sir."

Courtney decided to wait. He lit a cigarette and strolled out on the porch, looking down at the town sprawled out below, and for the first

time saw what was left of the once great factory. Just a shell—something like what the newspapers showed England as being, after a raid. Nothing had been done to remove the ruins—not a solitary thing. No wonder the town hated Wilcox with a thumping vengeance.

Collins called him before long. He was led to a 'phone in the library, though he appeared to move as if well aware of its location. The real Nick Wilcox spoke to him.

"Hello there, Double. How are things going?"

"Oh, just beautifully." Courtney laughed dryly. "Just grand. So far I've been given two warnings, one with a knife. A couple of redheads named Gregory tried to beat me up, but they didn't. Outside of that the scenery is beautiful, the house is swell, and you certainly know how to pick maids. This Marie is a hum-dinger."

"Oh, I didn't know," Wilcox said. "Anyway have a good time between the knives, the bullets and the fists. You know, I'm almost sorry I sent you up there, Courtney. By the way, feel free to use that bank account. I want this thing done up brown."

THERE was a click and the connection was broken. Courtney hung up too, sat back and smiled. At least, if he was going to die, he could have some fun doing it. Courtney was not going to draw any lines with that dough. Wilcox was right, too. The only way to win these people back was to build the town up to something like the prosperous place it once had been.

The car waited outside the door with a pasty-faced chauffeur at the wheel. Courtney ordered him out, got behind the wheel, and headed down the steep incline toward town. The distance was about two miles and the road strictly private.

Half-way down he heard a hiss, then the thumping of a flat tire. Courtney stopped, got out, and swore softly. The right rear was as flat as his pockets had been a week before.

He removed his coat, hung it on the door handle and started to turn

away. The coat slipped off the handle and he made a dive for it. At that precise instant a rifle cracked, and the sound of the bullet smashing into the side of the car was absolutely not musical.

Courtney did a dive to the side of the road. He lay there, huddled beneath the bank. His lips were tight, his face grim. He knew the sound of a rifle, and that meant the Gregory boys were up to their old tricks. Anger shot through his veins. He was sorry now that he had not done a real job on those two.

For perhaps five minutes he lay there, then risked a quick look up the side of the hill. When no shots cracked, he sprinted to the car, slid behind the wheel and started the motor. Flat or no flat, this spot was not exactly healthy. He drove on the rim for about a hundred yards.

Then he thought he really was shot. A driving pain in the small of his back elicited a cry of agony from his lips. He slammed the brakes on, gingerly pulled away from the wheel and saw the note, pinned to the upholstery. The pin had worked loose, and its point had been driven into his back when he went over a bump. The note itself was another masterpiece of terseness in those now familiar hand-drawn letters. It read:

HOW MANY TIMES DO YOU THINK
YOUR LUCK WILL HOLD OUT?

Courtney shoved the note into his pocket and kept going slowly, squirming at the racket made by the rim. That pasty-faced chauffeur could have pinned that small piece of paper there, Courtney was thinking. The man's hand had hovered near when Courtney had taken his seat in the car. Pinned flat against the back of the seat it had not been noticed before, especially in the excitement of getting a flat tire and being shot at. It would not have been noticed now, if that pin had not worked loose. He reached the Gregory house without the wheel falling off. He got out, banged the gate open and strode up to the porch. There was a bell, but bells didn't express his present attitude, so he banged on the door.

It opened, and Diane stared at him. She started to turn around and close the door. Courtney put his foot inside and seized her by one shoulder. She spun around with a little cry—not of fear, but of utter surprise.

"You people give me a pain," Courtney said. "What happened was years ago. I'm here to rectify the wrongs, but I can't do it with everybody taking pot-shots at me or scaring me half to death by throwing knives. You can tell those carrot-topped brothers of yours that next time anything happens, I'll look them up and the consequences won't be nice. Understand?"

Her mouth opened a little and her eyes were wide. When she looked at him that way, Courtney felt like a heel. He let go of her shoulder.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said finally.

"No? Well those brothers of yours are trying to rub me out—take me for a ride—murder me. And I don't like it. A few minutes ago they fired at me with a rifle."

"Mr. Wilcox," Diane said steadily, "you're wrong. If Lank or Bundy shot at you, you wouldn't be here. They never miss!"

Courtney went back to the car, frowning. Diane was not the type to exaggerate, but whoever had fired that shot had been no amateur with a gun. Only the fact that he had reached for his coat had saved his life. Courtney looked down the street, saw a garage sign, and drove there. A man came out, looked at him and turned back, his spine stiff as a ramrod.

"Wait a minute," Courtney called. "I want some service. No wonder you run a flea-bitten dump like this. Come back here."

The man obediently returned, but he was not friendly. Courtney got out of the car.

"See that tire? Take it off. Take all of them off and replace them with the best you have. Okay—I know I don't need rubber all around, but I want it anyhow. You can have the old ones and I don't give a hoot what you charge me. Here's a signed check. Fill it out and just tell me

the amount, for the records."

Courtney walked across the street, turned once, and saw the stupefied garage owner staring at him. He grinned. A little of this here and there and Wilcox's old reputation would be smoothed over like magic.

He walked into the first grocery store, bought the place out and ordered the food distributed to the needy people in town. He did the same with the second store.

Then, after considerable persuasion, he located the address of the town's mayor. He spent half an hour with His Honor and when he left, the mayor gave a whoop of delight and started his telephone working overtime.

CHAPTER IV

Murder Strikes

BACK at the garage, Courtney's car was ready. The owner, not quite so unfriendly now, came over to him.

"That was a funny job on that tire," he said. "The one that blew, I mean. Of course she was cut up pretty much, but I think the valve let the air out of her. It was fixed to let it seep out slowly."

"Thanks," Courtney said, and his lips tightened.

The car had been purposely arranged so he would have to stop and give the marksman a chance to aim. That had been an inside job. Like those warning notes. Someone at the big house was in league with these townspeople, or else that person now at the Wilcox house was carrying out his own form of vengeance. Those notes—the one on the bed and the one in the car—both had been placed there by people who had been close to Courtney.

He stopped the car about an eighth of a mile from the house and walked the rest of the way. He used the back entrance, and slipped through the kitchen without being spotted. The moment he reached the reception hall he heard someone crying.

then heard a sharp word of admonishment. He flattened himself against the wall.

Marie was coming down the steps, dabbing at her eyes. Collins, the butler, held her elbow in a tight grip. She tried to shake herself free and he twisted her arm cruelly. Courtney permitted them to go on by.

Collins let her go finally, and she entered the library. Courtney went in after her and she turned around with a frightened cry on her lips.

"Sit down," Courtney said. "I'm a democratic guy. Now what's bothering you, Marie? Is it money?"

"No-no, sir." She tried to smile. "Not money. There's nothing wrong, really. I'm just—nervous because of those—notes. I don't want them to kill you."

Courtney hunched his chair closer and picked up one of her hands. He pretended to be thinking deeply, but his eyes were riveted on the red-red nail polish, the long fingernails so neatly cared for, the white hands unused to housework. He noticed that Marie wore spiked-heeled shoes, the kind that would crucify any woman if she did housework in them. This girl was no servant.

"Pay no attention to those notes," he told her. "The trouble is that you're lonesome. Nobody here your age. The gardener is old enough to be your father. So is Collins, and he's no prize either. The cook is old, and the chauffeur looks as if he had escaped from prison a few days ago. Why, I'm the only person here who can make you happy, Marie. So I'll do my best, because I like you."

"Do you?"

She looked up at him, and Courtney drew a sharp breath. He had not thought she would take him up that fast, or as seriously.

"Now I'll take you to your room," he told her. "The—ah—mascara is running a bit with those tears."

She clung tightly to his arm as they climbed the stairs to her room. And when they reached it Courtney saw that she occupied a guest room—not a servant's room.

Inside, he had to restrain a gasp of surprise. Marie travelled with plenty

of baggage and the initials on those bags did not include the letter "M."

She sat down before an elaborate vanity. Courtney gave no indication that he saw her suddenly reach forward and turn a picture around. But Marie was excited, and she didn't realize that the picture now faced a section of the mirror.

COURTNEY needed no more than a glance to see that this was a studio portrait of Nick Wilcox. There was an inscription, too, and unless his eyesight played tricks it read, "Love—Nickie."

Courtney pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. This was getting more mysterious every minute. He decided that when dinner was over, Marie was going to do some talking.

He smiled at her, took her arm, and they walked toward the door.

"It's time for dinner now, and there's a new regime around here. We all eat together—you beside me. Anybody who tries to break up that idea, gets a punch on the nose. Let's get at it. I'm starved."

It was a strange-looking table. Marie sat beside Courtney. The chauffeur and the butler were both across the table. Cook stayed in the kitchen, and Collins positively refused to unbend and sit down. He served everyone stiffly.

There was wine, especially ordered from the cellar. Marie sipped hers like someone who knew good wines, and knew how to drink them. Her eyes were alive and pretty, as though she had received a new reason for happiness.

Courtney had been a football player in college, and the younger students had looked up to him. Some of the girls had had crushes on him, and Marie was looking just as they had looked.

Several times the lights flickered, but Collins explained that the generator was not up to par, and that sometimes the lights went out entirely. It was rather an old generating plant, the butler informed.

Suddenly Marie seized Courtney's wrist and bent closer to him.

"I—I know who you really are,"

she whispered. "Listen! There's danger here. You don't know what danger! You've got to get away—now—without wasting a second. It may mean my life to tell you this, but I can't help it. You're a good guy and I like you too much to—"

Then the generator did stall and the house was plunged into darkness. Courtney stood up quickly. Someone brushed past his shoulder. It was not Collins, because he had been at the far side of the room. The chauffeur and the gardener were both across the table. Courtney lit a match. Everyone was in his place.

Marie gave a faint cry, then the match burned Courtney's fingers. Before he could light another, the generator started working again.

Courtney looked down at Marie. She sat there, her head erect, both elbows on the table. One hand held her glass of wine. Then her fingers loosened their grip and the wine glass fell. Marie's head sagged. Her whole body fell forward and became still.

Courtney lifted her. Those eyes that liked laughter so much were glazing over. Her pretty mouth hung open slackly. Marie was dead!

"Don't move—any of you!" Courtney snapped.

He picked up Marie's wine glass and sniffed at it. He had studied chemistry and knew what that rank odor portended. He looked up, eyes hard and cold.

"Cyanide," he said. "Pure stuff. Killed her in seconds."

The gardener's shoulders seemed to rise and envelope his head.

"What-what you lookin' at me for—that way?" he demanded. "I didn't kill her. Me and Skeeter, we was sitting like we are now. Collins was right back of us. She musta knocked herself off."

"Spoken like a true gutter-snipe," Courtney rasped. "You didn't pick up that accent or vocabulary around gardenias, my friend. Furthermore, I saw you working in the gardens this morning, and I don't know what's keeping the flowers alive. You're not, because you don't know anything about the job you're supposed to be

filling. Any more than your pasty-faced friend there is a regular chauffeur. . . . Collins, get on the 'phone and call town. Get a doctor, and whatever representative of the law there is up here right away."

COLLINS bowed. Even sudden death could not disturb his demeanor. He started for the other room. The telephone began to jingle. Courtney jumped up.

"Never mind. We both know who that is, Collins. Stay in the room and nobody goes near the body, understand? I hold you responsible."

Courtney went into the other room and picked up the 'phone. Sure enough, Nick Wilcox greeted him with a chuckle.

"So you're still in there punching to get my ten thousand, Courtney. How's it going?"

"Better than ever," Courtney snapped. "The masquerade is over, Wilcox. Somebody just polished off Marie, the maid. Poisoned! I've got to 'phone the law."

"Marie—murdered?" Wilcox cried in horror. "Are you sure? Listen Courtney! That poison wasn't meant for the maid. It was meant for you. I've made a mistake. I should have faced the consequences myself. Don't report the murder, Courtney. It will bring the whole town out. You'll be exposed. They'll get you sure—just as soon as they find out their trick missed fire."

"Sure," Courtney agreed sarcastically, "but murder is murder, and what can I do with a corpse on my hands?"

"There's a way. Listen to me, Courtney. It means your life—probably mine too. Until we've got the people who killed her, neither of us are safe. I've known Marie for some time—nice kid. She has no people at all. She'll never be missed. If you turn her over to the police, they'll bury her in some Potter's Field. We can at least save her from that."

"How?" Courtney demanded. Wilcox was talking sense all right.

"Our family crypt. Collins will show you where it is. Put her in one of the niches and seal it up. When

this affair is over, we'll do the thing decently. For heaven's sake, Courtney, don't try to tear the town apart for the killer. There isn't just one person! Everybody in that town is a suspect. Probably two hundred people would cheerfully knock you off—meaning me, of course, for I'm the intended victim. I'll double the reward! Twenty thousand if you carry out those orders."

"All right," Courtney said slowly. "I guess it's the best thing, but I'm warning you, Wilcox, my job doesn't end until I find out who killed Marie. The only way to do that is by exposing myself—letting the killer know he missed and making him try again. Good night, Wilcox. I'm earning that money, by the way."

Back at the table, nobody had moved. Courtney stopped beside the dead girl. His eyes drifted over the table, stopped, and he picked up his own wine glass. There was lipstick on it! He gave a gasp of horror. He remembered that he had not touched his wine. The poison had been meant for him. In the darkness, Marie had picked up his glass instead of her own.

Wilcox was right. This matter required a personalized service — not the public stuff which the police would give it.

"Collins," Courtney said, "is there anyone else besides those in this room in this house, except the cook? I know she couldn't have been in the room because in her white uniform she'd have been seen."

"No sir," Collins reported. "We are all assembled here, sir."

"Then whoever passed by me and poisoned that wine, came through one of the French windows behind me. All of you take flashlights. Go out on the estate and start searching. If you see anyone, don't shoot, do you hear? I want my snooper alive."

THEY started for the door. Courtney stopped them.

"You, Chauffeur—when the search is over, I want a talk with you, so begin thinking up a good yarn. Now get going."

Courtney himself helped. He was

at the northwest corner of the estate when he heard the sinister crack of a rifle. Then someone opened up with a revolver. Courtney raced in the direction of the shots.

A flashlight somewhere waved crazily. It showed Collins, ashen-faced and for once not the stony-eyed butler. One hand, holding a club instead of the revolver he must have dropped, shook badly. Courtney darted ahead—and swore. The pasty-faced chauffeur would never tell who he was, nor why he had posed in that capacity. He had been shot through the neck.

"Two men, sir. I got a glimpse of them." Collins tried hard to be suave. "They must have thought the gardener was you, sir. I fired, but I'm not good at this sort of thing. They went in that direction."

Two men, who had mistaken their target. Who else but Diane's hot-headed brothers? This was the showdown. Diane or no Diane, murder could not go unavenged.

Then Courtney saw a gun—a rifle—lying on the grass. He picked it up. It looked like the same type which the two brothers had carried, and it had been recently fired.

Courtney put the rifle under his arm and stalked back to the house. Collins and the gardener came hurrying in also.

"I know who did this," Courtney told them. "I'm going after those killers, but first I'll phone the police to head them off."

He picked up the phone, waited a moment, then flicked the connection several times. Still he got no answer. He pushed the receiver tight against his ear. There was no buzz. The line was apparently dead. He hung up.

"If anything happens to me," he told Collins, "get in touch with the police. Tell them the Gregory boys, Lank and Bundy, are the killers. Keep your eyes and ears open. They might come back."

Courtney raced out to the garage, wheeled the coupé onto the drive and ducked his head out of the window to see if the Gregory boys had broken the telephone wire near the

house. There was a powerful spotlight on the coupé and he used this. But there seemed to be no telephone lines coming into the house. It was as if they had removed the lines entirely, at least as far as he could see.

He grunted in exasperation, and promised himself to investigate that angle later. There were wires—or had been—for there was an outside phone connection. Nick Wilcox had called him on it often enough for him to know.

CHAPTER V

Double Exposure

SENDING the coupé roaring down the road Courtney used the high-beam headlights in hope of seeing the two redheads running away. When he stopped in front of Diane's house, there was no need to ring the bell. His brakes made so much noise that Diane came hurrying onto the porch.

She saw Courtney approach, saw the rifle under his arm, and leaned weakly against the porch rail.

"What are you doing with that—gun?" she asked tensely.

"So you recognize it."

Courtney tried to sound tough, but those eyes of hers still did things to him.

"Certainly. It belongs to Lank. Bundy has one just like it, except he carved some designs on the stock. Would you mind telling me just why you stole it?"

"I stole it?" Courtney gasped. "Listen, Diane, this thing has gone too far. The maid at the big house was murdered tonight. The chauffeur was shot and killed about fifteen minutes later—with this rifle. The butler saw two men running away. I don't like to make accusations, but those brothers of yours have no liking for me. Neither has the whole town, and for some silly thing that happened so long ago, and could be easily rectified. I've got to tell the police!"

"Wait!" Diane hurried into the house and returned with a sweater over her shoulders. "You talk of

silly things that should be forgotten. I'm going to show you something, Nick Wilcox. I'm going to show you why we can't forget. Get in your car. I'll ride with you—something I once swore I'd never do . . . Well—what are you waiting for?"

"I don't get it, Diane. But I'll go along, of course. I'm sure you can explain—"

Courtney suddenly felt a bullet slam into his left arm, high, near the shoulder. At the same instant a rifle cracked. He grabbed Diane, practically knocked her down beside the car, and dropped himself.

"And I suppose that was Santa Claus," he said grimly. "Diane, you were right about one thing. Your brothers don't often miss when they shoot."

"You're hurt!" she cried. "Your arm—it's bleeding. You need a doctor."

"Not on your life," he said belligerently. "I'm not worried about myself, but those crazy fools might have hit you. That would have been a fine thing . . . Now, we'll go on from where we were. You wanted to show me something."

She slid into the car. Courtney risked a quick run around the back of it, got behind the wheel and started off as fast as he could, expecting more shots, but then mentally giving the brothers some measure of credit for not opening fire again when their sister sat beside their target.

At Diane's direction, he turned right at the center of town, and headed out along an old, little used road. Diane worked on his shoulder as he drove, and managed to fashion a crude bandage out of a section of his shirt.

"The bullet went right through," she said. "But you must see a doctor, Nick. You must."

"What makes you so worried all of a sudden?"

"Oh Nick, I can't help it! The years mellow some people, but I guess we Gregorys don't mellow. If that hadn't happened—well, you're much nicer than I thought you were. I suppose when they burned down your father's factory, there was some measure of revenge enacted against

you. But it killed this town and no Wilcox is worth that."

COURTNEY eased up on the gas and looked at her. He even forgot the ache in his shoulder.

"When they burned down my father's place? I thought he did that—out of spite."

Diane blinked a couple of times, then pointed to the left. Courtney stopped the car beside a small cemetery enclosed by an old-fashioned iron fence.

"See—the tallest monument?" Diane pointed. "You did that, Nick Wilcox. It may have been a long time ago—but I can't forget. Four people lie in those graves. Two of them were my brother and my mother. The other two were my friends. You've changed, somehow, since you left town. Then you were a fresh, arrogant boy with more money than brains. You were always trying to get me to ride in that roadster of yours—a flashy car for those days. Fast too—so fast that you killed those four people with it, Nick Wilcox. You murdered them, do you hear me? I—I don't know why I ever brought you out here. I can see you don't understand. You don't even want to. Though you know all these things as well as I do."

Courtney stared at the slim granite monument outlined in the night. His shoulder began to ache, but his wits were spinning madly.

"Diane," he said slowly, "tell me all about it—what happened those years ago. You say I killed four people with my car?"

"And ran away," she sobbed. "My brother might have lived if you'd taken him to a doctor. They were returning from a party. People said you had been drinking. But you never went to prison for those murders. You weren't even fined. Your father's influence was pretty good in those days. Everyone knew you were guilty. Your car was damaged, there was blood on it, part of the headlight caught on the clothing of one victim. That's why, when they let you go scot free, that some of the people couldn't restrain themselves any longer and they set fire to the factory.

That was just as bad as what you did, I suppose. It killed the town. Your father cursed us all and moved away."

"And moved away," Courtney repeated, as if trying to register those words in his mind.

"Yes." Diane lifted her head and looked straight at the monument. "That's why I can't forget, even though I want to sometimes. I—heard what you did in town today. Helping Mac with his garage and the two stores. You put them on their feet and drove hunger away from plenty of homes. I—I tried to 'phone you, to express my appreciation, but—"

"I didn't get your call," Courtney said slowly. "Collins must have forgotten, with all the excitement."

She looked at him curiously. "But how could he have told you? Central said that the phone in the house had been removed years ago."

Courtney's foot came down on the gas pedal. He forgot everything now except the fact that he must get back to the big house. Not with Diane though. That was too dangerous. He stopped the car furiously in front of her house.

"Get out quickly," he said. "Find your brothers. Take them somewhere where there are a lot of people who can swear to their presence. And Diane, one thing more. I'm not Nick Wilcox. I didn't kill those people."

"Not Nick?" Diane gasped. "But—but then who are you?"

"A sucker—plain and fancy. A fish who swallowed hook, line and sinker, and who now is going to swallow the fisherman."

He leaned closer and kissed her. Then he shot away from the house, headed up the steep hill, and shut off the lights half-way along the private road. He left the car and started running. Blood seeped through the bandage and flowed down his arm, but he paid no attention to it.

Nearing the house, he saw Collins on the porch. Courtney circled the house and went in through the back. He crept up behind Collins, suddenly grabbed the man around the neck and strangled the cry that rose to his lips.

He held him like that until the man's struggles stopped. Then he laid him down gently, went into the house again and climbed the stairs to the second floor. He began investigating every room. Finally he came to one that was locked.

"Who is it?" someone inside whispered.

"Collins," Courtney said hoarsely. "Something has happened."

A key turned, the door opened, and Courtney went in with his one good fist performing miracles. He was dimly aware that sirens howled in the distance, but the man he attacked was putting up a good fight and there was no time for anything else.

Then Courtney hit the fellow on the nose, flattened it, and sent blood gushing out. He took two hard blows against his wounded shoulder, which nearly made his senses black out, but he gritted his teeth and waded in again.

Feet pounded up the steps. Courtney paid no attention. He cornered his man, measured him for a blow and grinned as he delivered it.

The real Nick Wilcox—Courtney had known that was who it would be—couldn't duck in time. His head banged against the wall. His knees wobbled and he sank slowly into an awkward sitting position on the floor.

Diane rushed into the room. A uniformed policeman was behind her. Two other men were dragging Collins upstairs. Diane looked at Courtney, looked down at Nick Wilcox, then with a little cry ran into the shelter of Courtney's good arm.

"I—I guessed what would be happening after you left," she said. "So I brought help."

"Great!" Courtney told her. "There's the real Nick Wilcox. He gave me a cock-and-bull story about being afraid of everyone in town because his father had ruined the town by burning down the mill. Instead, it was your brothers and the relatives of the other dead people he had killed, that he was afraid of."

"We drove him out of town," said Diane. "Told him we'd kill him if he returned. That's why he sent you, Nick . . . Oh, what am I saying?"

Your name isn't Nick. I—I don't know what it is."

"Don Courtney," he told her with a grin. "The whole thing was a set-up. I was to be killed and your brothers blamed for it. They'd be put in prison and then Wilcox could come back openly and sneer at the natives if he wished to. He didn't care whether or not it was known that he sent a substitute to take the rap. He killed Marie, the housemaid by accident. She wasn't a servant—she was his girl friend."

HE TURNED and looked down at the butler.

"Collins? You're awake, eh? Collins, you've a nice little audience here. There are two dead people on this estate and an accessory to murder burns with the actual killer. Your way out is to talk."

"Yes — yes, I'll talk," Collins groaned. "It was a crazy idea to begin with. Marie was—Wilcox's girl friend, as you said. He didn't trust us, so he sent her up here to keep tabs on us. The gardener was in on it too; so was the chauffeur. Wilcox didn't dare return while the Gregory boys were alive, but he had to come back here. His money was running low.

"Oh, he still has plenty, but you don't know how Nick spends money. With all the defense work around, the site of his father's factory could have been turned into a profitable thing. There's cheap water power there. He wanted to rebuild the place, get the people back to work there until he cleaned up, then he was going to desert the place again."

"And Marie?" Courtney grabbed Collins by the collar and shook him. "Why did he kill Marie? Was it by accident, as you said?"

"Yes—by accident. But he was angry with her, because she didn't like the dirty trick he was pulling on you. She—well, she fell for you, I guess. Anyway, the poisoned wine was meant for you. He slipped in through the French windows when the lights went out and dropped that cyanide in the wine glass himself. But Marie got it by error. She must

have been so excited, not knowing just what Nick intended to do, that to quiet herself she reached out for her wine glass to take a swallow of it—and got yours through error.

"After that Nick Wilcox didn't much care what happened, so long as it happened fast, and the Gregory boys were blamed. He killed the chauffeur with one of the Gregory boys' rifles. I didn't want that, though I knew that chauffeur probably would have finally been broken down and told everything—he was weak. No, I didn't want deliberate murder, although I stood to profit a lot, as did the gardener and the chauffeur, if they could have been kept in hand.

"Nick had seen to that, all right—our profiting, I mean—and we would all have been wealthy men when this factory got going again. Each of us had been given a big interest in it. But in order to get it going, Nick had to come back and do it himself. And he had to have the town with him. Everybody but the Gregorys would finally have accepted him all right, so he had to get rid of them."

"Nice going," Courtney said. "Wilcox came up here and laid his plans during those days I basked in his wealth back in New York. He pretended to phone me long distance so I wouldn't be suspicious that he was here. But he used the house phones,

an independent system. There is no outside connection. Diane tried to call me, and she found that out. Lank and Bundy are probably off somewhere where it will be hard to find them—lured by Wilcox arrangements so they'll have no alibi. Wilson stole Lank's rifle."

"He also put the rest of the poison in the Gregory home," Collins said dejectedly. "He came back and said he was sure he had wounded you, and that tonight he'd finish the job. Everything was arranged so the Gregory boys would be convicted of the murder. Wilcox hated them, hated the town, but he wanted to come back and lord it over the people. To exploit them and be the master of the town. He told me. I'm telling the truth."

Courtney's good arm sought Diane's waist. He was grinning broadly.

"Then Nick Wilcox is going to have an awful surprise," he said. "He turned over his checkbook to me. He arranged it himself so that my signing of his name would be honored. I bought a few things—like a new factory and some new houses. I paid for it all, too, and before Nick finds out about it, the checks will have cleared. Let him know when it's all finished, so he can have something to think about when he starts the walk to the electric chair."

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Over Time to Stab Its Accusation
at a Murderer!

ILD Gennaro Rossi fingered the violin lovingly.

"Yes," he said, "it is an instrument of the greatest interest. An instrument with a history and a tradition, most queer."

"You've owned it a long time, Maestro?" I said.

He shook his great mane of white, shaggy hair.

"No. It came to me from my young protege, Carito, who died. My pupil of whom I would have made a great virtuoso. That was a sad day for me, gentlemen."

"I remember him," George Johnson, the music publisher remarked. "A young gypsy boy, wasn't he? Handsome young fellow. Died about a year ago?"

"A year ago tomorrow night, gentle-



"The body of Carito was found with the rain beating against his face"

men," Rossi said. "A dark night, like tonight. But I remember that it was raining. A rain that was beating down on his dead face when at dawn we found him in the dell where he had slipped and fallen from the little height beside it. Not far from my house here."

The old Maestro was staring at the violin in his hands as though he were seeing not the dark mahogany of the instrument blackening with the patina of its age, but the dead white face of the boy he had loved. His voice had fallen, until now he seemed talking only to himself.

"That rain was like Chopin's Raindrop Prelude," he muttered. "Chopin knew the horror you feel when you see the rain dropping on the dead face of someone you love. I think Carito would like me to play the Raindrop. It is very beautiful on his violin. . . ."

There were four of us here in the music studio of old Gennaro Rossi. I am John Stanley. I fancy myself as a violinist, but I had done some composing, with perhaps more talent in that direction. Chance led me to take a small summer cottage in this artists' colony of Woodmere. I had just arrived today, and tonight the old Maestro—from whom I was planning to take lessons—had invited me to his home to meet some of his neighbors.

There were two of them here now. George Johnson was a big, handsome blond fellow. Rather the businessman type than an artist. A man in his thirties, he was a music publisher, who specialized in violin music. I was thinking now that possibly I might persuade him to publish some of my compositions.

The other guest was Juan Torigo, one of Rossi's pupils. He seemed a few years older than myself. He was short, heavy-set, with a swarthy Latin face, small black mustache, and black hair that was clipped so close over his forehead it stood up like the bristles of a brush.

Of us all, old Gennaro Rossi undoubtedly was the dominant figure. He was a man in his seventies now, but still erect despite his frailness. His patrician old face was heavily lined, smooth-shaven, with bushy

white eyebrows beneath which his dark eyes smoldered. His head was leonine, seemingly too large for his body because of his mass of white hair.

IN his day, thirty years ago, Gennaro Rossi had been a great violin virtuoso. He was retired now, Maestro to a few selected pupils whom he had gathered here about him in Woodmere. Most certainly I counted myself fortunate in having been accepted by him. He was sitting now—clad in black trousers, slippers, white blouse open at his stringy throat, with his long black tie hanging loose—with the violin of Carito on his lap.

His grand piano, littered with scores and sheet music, was beside him. The big room, here in his rambling old bungalow, was dim with just a single lamp on the piano so that the shadows were heavy around us. Rossi was reaching for the violin bow on the piano, when abruptly there was a sound behind us.

I turned. In the dark studio doorway, draped by a heavy velour portiere, a woman was standing now. It was Mrs. Green, Rossi's housekeeper. She was a big, dour-looking, middle-aged female, almost masculine with angular ruggedness. How long she had been standing there in the doorway listening to us, I had no idea. Her movement had attracted our attention, and as we turned she said:

"You will have refreshments served now, Maestro?"

The old man laid down the violin bow.

"Why yes, Martha," he agreed. "Let us have sandwiches and *vino*. A very good idea."

Her blank, sour-visaged gaze inscrutably swept us as she nodded and withdrew.

"*Vino* from the sunny slopes of Palermo," old Rossi was saying. He was smiling as though now to throw off the morbid thoughts of Carito which had been obsessing him. "Palermo is so beautiful. As you know, I am Siciliano, gentlemen."

"No more beautiful than my Andalusia," Juan Torigo said, smiling. "But your Italy did produce the best violins. I have to admit that, Maestro." He

gestured. "That one of Carito's. You call it a high-arch violin. With a most soft mellow tone, doubtless. An Amati perhaps, from old Cremona?"

"It is unlabeled," the old man said. His fingers again were caressing it. "There is no one now who will ever know its maker."

"You said it has a history—a tradition mos' queer," Torigo persisted. "Tell us, Maestro."

We sat silently listening as the old man told us of the instrument's strange tradition. The boy, Carito, had been of a gypsy family who emigrated here from Hungary. The violin had been in the family for generations. Carito's father, his grandfather and others behind them all had played it, so that it had become one of them. Almost a living thing.

"A strange people," old Rossi was saying. "Magyars from the dark forested mountains of Bohemia. A superstitious people, you might say. But the soul of music is in them. And this violin so beloved by them with its haunting, crying voice like a thing that is alive."

Old Rossi went on to say that there had been times when this old violin mysteriously had given voice to music, unaided by any human player. A haunting, crying little Magyar melody. Carito's grandfather had told the tale that his father had told him. A girl of the family, foolishly in love, had been tempted to run away with a man unworthy of her—a man of an unworthy gypsy tribe from the distant hills beyond the Black Forest.

And as she made ready that stormy night to slip away, the violin which she and all her kin so loved, had cried out in protest that little throbbing melody. When the girl heard that, she gave up her plans.

"The violin saved her," old Rossi was saying earnestly. "And Carito said his grandfather told him that was only one of several times it had performed such a service. It was as though at a crisis in the lives of those humans who loved it, something was given this old instrument, some power to be of service."

The Maestro's sensitive fingers were trailing over the body of the violin as

he spoke. A touch like a caress.

"A violin is a strange instrument, gentlemen," he continued. "Responsive. Who shall say but that this instrument has not been given some power that none of us can understand? I cannot actually believe the thing myself. Still—"

He was gently smiling, but his eyes were somber as he stared down at the violin. A gaze far-away as though now he were trying to see back into those dark forests where the gypsies roamed in the mountains of Bohemia.

"Of course, I do not believe it," he added softly. "And yet, I wonder."

WITHIN his hands the old violin lay inert. A thing alive, but quiescent now. A violin that in times of stress, could play itself? Its bow rising up and trailing the strings, so that they would physically vibrate? Absurd. I knew old Rossi did not mean that.

For that moment we were all silent, awed. Then young Juan Torigo spoke.

"Well, this is most queer," he said skeptically.

Presently the housekeeper was serving us with the sandwiches and wine.

"That violin of Carito's," George Johnson resumed. "Is it valuable? I owned a Stradivarius once. You remember it, Maestro. The one that was stolen from me so that all I got was the twenty-two thousand insurance which fortunately I had on it. That set me up in my publishing business, as it happened. You should have this violin insured, *Signor Rossi* and not take the chance of having it stolen."

"It's value is only to those who love it," Rossi said gently. "There is no violin, unlabeled, having no proof of a famous maker, that has any great value. A value it had to Carito, and now to me."

It was raining outside now—a dark, windless night with the rain dropping in slow, sodden rhythm on the bungalow roof. A night like this, a year ago, the boy Carito had died. My gaze drifted to the old violin. Rossi had placed it on a chair beside him. Responsive old instrument. Was something within it now quivering with the sorrow of Carito's death?

Then the Maestro was telling us more of his young protege. Carito was an orphan, adopted by Rossi. A handsome, romantic boy of nineteen. Swarthy with the blood of the gypsies, with deep, dark eyes and wavy black hair. Carito had gone out in the night, evidently had slipped from the rocky path at the edge of a brink, fallen some twenty feet into the mossy dell. His head had struck a rock so that he had died, doubtless almost instantly.

"But why was he wandering out there at night?" George Johnson asked. "Out to meet a girl perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Rossi agreed. He leaned toward us, more serious than ever. "I remember a queer thing he said to me that evening. I remember he seemed disturbed. He whispered to me hurriedly that he had something to tell me. Then we were interrupted, and all he said was, 'Where the hearts are entwined I want to tell you—'"

There was a silence as the old man ceased speaking. A silence broken only by the uneven drip of the rain outside. I found myself tense, with my heart beating faster. To me it was as though here was something mysterious, and momentous.

"That is all he said?" Juan Torigo murmured. He, too, was tense.

"He was going to tell you something about his girl," Johnson suggested. "His love and hers. You suppose it was that?"

"Maybe," Rossi said. "I do not know. The next time I saw him he was lying dead, with the rain beating on his face. Like tonight."

MY thoughts went out into the dark night outside the studio here. There were perhaps a score or more little bungalows set here in this deeply wooded, hilly, rocky area. This afternoon I remembered having seen the little dell into which Carito had fallen from the path along the twenty foot brink. A little seat was up there between two trees, like an old trysting place where a romantic boy well might go to meet a girl.

The old Maestro had picked up the violin again.

"I will play to you that little melody of Carito's family," he was saying.

"It lives in this violin. To me, it is the boy himself. Something of him is still living here."

He raised the bow, and with the violin beneath his chin, softly began playing Carito's melody. Just a fragment of the song's minor cadences. Weird little fragments, with the soft, mellow voice of the high-arch violin making it seem almost like one who was sobbing. It died away, and suddenly Juan Torigo exclaimed:

"That's what I heard last night!" The young Spaniard gazed at us, excited, awed. "It is! I remember it clearly now. I woke up and that's what I was hearing! It came from out under the trees, beyond my house."

"You were playing it here, last night, Maestro?" I suggested.

Old Rossi shook his head.

"It would hardly carry down to my house, from here," Torigo commented. "It seemed to come from the direction of the dell. I think that there was another night also that I heard it. I didn't know what it was, of course, or that it was this violin. But now—"

We could only blankly stare at each other.

"Anyway, to me, that little tune always was Carito," old Rossi murmured. "It is all of him that is left now. And he died, with the rain beating on his face. Like this."

He drew the bow again across the strings, and began to play Chopin's Raindrop Prelude. Its sweet, plaintive opening melody throbbed through the studio. It was a melody of love, plaintive perhaps with the premonition of coming tragedy. To me it has always seemed like that. And then the rain—and the tragedy. That slow reiterated G-sharp, like raindrops slowly falling.

It came now from Carito's violin with a dull, sodden pound. That single reiterated note seemed to mingle with the rain outside. Just that one G-sharp, over and over, so hideously pounding. Rain falling on a dead, white face. . . .

Never before had the little Chopin masterpiece affected me so poignantly as this. I was shuddering. Suddenly, young Juan Torigo shoved back his chair with a clatter.

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"Maestro, please!" he protested. "Stop it! It's so gruesome now!"

Old Rossi stopped at once. We were all shuddering. And in the doorway behind us the big, dour housekeeper was standing blankly staring at us.

The rain kept on, all that evening. It was still raining when, before midnight, we visitors went home. My little cabin, where I was living alone, was only a hundred yards or so below Rossi's bungalow. I went to sleep, still with the memory of the weird evening there in Rossi's studio. . . .

I awakened in the night with a sudden start and the realization that a little fragment of the Magyar melody was floating in my open window. The song of Carito! The voice of his violin! Mellow, plaintive timbre. The high-arch violin of Carito, undoubtedly.

FOR a moment, only half awake, I lay listening. The rain outside seemed to have stopped. The cloudy, oppressive night was dankly silent—a silence broken only by that floating cadence of the violin. Was it coming from Rossi's bungalow? Was the old Maestro playing now in the middle of the night?

I was hardly aware that I had slipped from my bed and gone to the window, tensely bending over the sill, listening. No, it did not seem to come from Rossi's. From whence, then? Carito's little melody died away, then began again. Was it coming from that patch of trees, out to my left beyond the dark outlines of the Maestro's home?

That would be down in the dell perhaps, down where Carito had been found with the rain beating on his dead face. Was his melody coming from there now? I could not tell. The song seemed to float everywhere, yet nowhere.

I was certain it was no figment of my imagination. I was hearing it with my ears. If I could get closer I could determine its source. Or would that be like trying to get to the end of a rainbow?

Hastily I had slipped into trousers and shirt, put on a pair of shoes and was outside with the blackness overhead and all around me the rocky broken woods. The music was still

audible, still plaintive. Abruptly now, I realized that it was no longer Carito's song, but another, more modern melody.

I ran down a winding little path toward what seemed the source of the music, but as I advanced, somehow it seemed to recede. What was it playing now? I stopped to listen. It was a plaintive theme, sweetly simple. A slow, rambling little melody with cadences often unresolved. A melody wholly familiar to me.

Queer that I couldn't identify it. Its name, its composer—they seemed to tremble just beyond my memory. The tune was an unpretentious piece like a sketch, by some modern composer. I was convinced that I knew it well, that I had perhaps in the past played it myself, in my browsing for my own amusement.

"Oh—you, Stanley?" The voice almost beside me in the darkness made me jump. It was Johnson, the music publisher. He was clad in dressing gown and slippers. He gripped me as he murmured, "That music—I heard it down at my place. Carito's violin."

[Turn page]

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Who the devil's playing it and where's it coming from?"

Together we advanced. To our right the dark outlines of Rossi's bungalow loomed fifty feet back and above us as we followed the path.

"It sounds as though it might be down in the dell," Johnson said, listening intently. "Do you suppose what old Rossi told us—"

"What's that it's playing?" I whispered, interrupting.

We had stopped by a tree to listen. The queer rambling little melody was persisting.

"I never heard it before," Johnson murmured. "Queer sort of tune."

"Well I know it. I've even played it, but I just can't seem to remember—"

Abruptly the voice of the violin was stilled. Johnson's grip on my arm tightened.

"Look there!" he muttered.

A moving blob was up on the rocks ahead of us. A man's figure! For a second it was outlined in silhouette against the sky. Old Rossi! His thin form, his great shaggy mane of hair, were recognizable. He was only a few feet from the back door of his bungalow. And in that same instant he moved toward it and vanished. Had he come out to listen to the music and when it stopped, gone back in again? Or had he come from somewhere else?

The violin did not sound again that night, though until dawn I lay awake back in my cabin, expecting it, as no doubt also the puzzled Johnson was lying awake in his home, expectant. But there was nothing.

It rained all that next day and I stayed in my cabin pondering, puzzling, trying to identify that second melody the violin had played. A slow, rambling, measured rhythm in four-quarter time. A major key, with ramblings into the minor. It echoed now in my head so that I was humming it to help my memory.

NIGHT came. All evening the melancholy rain persisted. And I could not get that puzzling melody out of my mind. Why had the violin played it? To me, somehow, it seemed a momentous thing. Something important to the dead Carito was hanging now upon my ability to identify

that little, threadlike tune.

The tune was from a modern composer, I was sure of it. Someone whose work I must know very well. Those queer, unresolved cadences — MacDowell!

The name leaped into my mind that night, just as I was going to bed. Of course, it was something by MacDowell. I drifted off to sleep, still with it echoing in my mind. It was a melody that well might suggest a little love song in the woods.

MacDowell's Woodland Sketches perhaps? Was it one of them? To a Wild Rose . . . In Autumn . . . By a Meadow Brook? No, not any of those.

I must have drifted off, still pondering. And then, quite suddenly I knew that I was awake again. The music! It was trembling in the night outside as the soft, mellow timbre of Carito's violin wafted in to me from some leafy distance. This time, I was determined that I would find its source, probe this weird mystery.

The tune I heard now was the song of the Magyars, that same little crying melody of Carito's
[Turn page]

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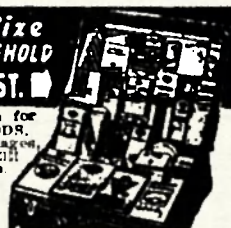
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gypsy family. Then as it throbbed and died away, the violin voice was murmuring, that other one which had so puzzled me last night. Something by MacDowell. One of his Woodland Sketches, and more than ever now, I was sure of it.

I was out of my cabin within a minute, creeping forward along the little rocky path. It seemed to have stopped raining, but the dark, motionless tree branches were heavy with moisture, dripping with a sodden patter. Overhead the sky was black with poised, hanging clouds. Surely the music was coming from the dell into which Carito had slipped and fallen.

The dell was beside me now, twenty feet down, dark and somber with shadow. Was my fancy tricking me, or was the thread-like, quavering little melody actually coming up from down in those bowered shadows?

It was so eerie, so tremblingly wraith-like that still I could not tell. A little will-o'-the-wisp of the voice of music floating, darting from one place to another.

I stood tense in the darkness, drawn against a tree as I peered and listened. That weird little violin voice, was it trying to tell me something? A message, to me, to anyone who would listen and interpret it? I peered at the dark, broken rock-clumps, still wet with the rain.

The sodden thickets, the heavy, wet tree leaves were all suspended, motionless with expectancy at what now would happen. Was I the only one out here attracted by the eerie music? It seemed so. Then I thought for a second that I heard a little rustling behind me. But it was my own fancy. Just the stirring of a thicket as moisture fell on it from the overhead branches.

I moved forward again. The melody seemed to well a little louder. Somewhat quaintly, I thought, not too sentimentally.

The words popped into my head. The directions for playing, printed on a sheet of music. I remembered them now! Why, of course! "At An Old Trysting Place." That was the name of this piece! "At An Old Trysting Place," from the Woodland Sketches! I recalled it perfectly now.

With the coming of that title into my memory, the thing so startled me that for a moment I stood on the path, blankly staring into the darkness. An old trysting place. That suggested lovers, of course.

I recalled then that here near the path, just off it and close by the brink over the dell, there was a wooden lovers' seat, across the V of two trees which grew with roots together. A little trysting place here in the woods. On one of the trees the bark had been carved into the crude design of two hearts intertwined. . . .

HEARTS entwined! Why, Carito had used those words to old Rossi the night the gypsy boy died! I recalled what old Rossi had said when Carito came to him perturbed, with something to tell him. They had been interrupted, so that Carito had only been able to murmur:

"Where the hearts are entwined—I want to tell you. . . ."

Something about the old trysting place which Carito had learned, and had had no chance to tell?

The eerie violin voice was still floating through the night with the quaint MacDowell melody, as I pushed my way forward and came to the bench between the trees. They were white birch, ghostly in the darkness. I had a small flashlight in my pocket. I took it out, flashed it. Its little circle of illumination lighted the bark of one of the trees where the entwined hearts were carved.

My imagination, of course, yet it seemed then as though the throbbing little violin voice had gone into a crescendo of triumphant eagerness.

Then, at the roots of the trees, under the seat, my light picked out an opening—a place where the tree-base was decayed. It was a foot-wide irregular space. With my heart pounding, I knelt, thrust my hand and arm into the opening. The inside space seemed far larger; the bottom of part of it was an irregular-shaped triangular stone.

I could feel that stone slimy with moisture and fungus-growth. Then as I tugged at one of its projecting ends it came loose. Breathlessly, I twitched and shoved it to one side. Another

[Turn page]



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opening, down into the ground, was underneath it.

I was lying flat now, with almost the full length of my arm reaching down. My fingers felt something smooth and crinkly. It was an oiled, moisture-proof fabric covering. Something big and hard was inside it—an oblong, rounded thing standing on end in the deep, narrow orifice which the flat stone had covered. I tugged, drew it out, and in a moment had it on the ground beside me with my little flashlight beam on it.

It was a moisture-proof bag, yellow, semi-transparent. And within it was a black violin case! In an instant I had it out and opened the old case. A big violin was inside. Not the violin of Carito. This one did not have a high arch. It was a large concert model.

My heart raced as I stared at it. This old instrument, obviously the work of one of the great masters, was immensely valuable. Then I raised it up and peered with my light down into one of its F-holes. A Stradivarius! A genuine Stradivarius!

The eerie voice of Carito's violin, somewhere here in the darkness, had gone abruptly into a triumphant thro of the MacDowell melody. And now, abruptly, it died away and was gone, as though its mission were ended and it was satisfied now that I had found this other, hidden instrument.

For that moment I crouched by the lovers' seat, numbed. A genuine Stradivarius, hidden here? Absorbed by my racing thoughts, I was only dimly aware of a sound behind me. I had no time to rise up. I turned, saw a blob coming and a man leaping at me with a big chunk of rock in his hand!

The reflection of my flashlight lying on the ground disclosed him. George Johnson! He who had owned a Stradivarius that was insured for twenty-two thousand dollars! A Stradivarius supposedly had been stolen, so that he had collected the insurance and used it to start his publishing business!

THOUGHTS are instant things. In that same second, the plunging Johnson tried to crash the rock down on my head, but my upflung arm diverted it so that it missed me and clattered away. Then he was on me.

Locked together, fighting with flailing legs and thudding fists, we rolled at the brink.

I am a big fellow, but so was he. There was a moment when I thought we would go over and crash down into the dell. But I fought him back. Then, with a lunge, I had him pinned under me, pounding him. In a frenzy I lifted his head and shoulders up and bashed him down so that his head was hitting the rocks under him. His strength was going, and suddenly he gasped:

"Don't! Don't kill me!"

I was aware of flashlights around us. Then there were voices, and blobs that came running. The nearby neighbors, roused perhaps by the song of the violin of Carito and then by the commotion of my fight with Johnson. And as I lifted him up they gathered in excitement around me. And further back, coming from the back door of his big dark bungalow, I saw the thin figure of old Gennaro Rossi. His gaunt housekeeper was beside him. And trembling excitement, they came hurrying forward.

The stocky Juan Torigo was here, in dressing gown and slippers. He came at me.

"You, Stanley!" he exclaimed. "And Johnson! Stanley, what have you done to him?"

"Done to him?" I roared. "He tried to kill me. There's his supposed-to-be-stolen Stradi. I found it under that tree near the little bench where he's had it hidden." I shook Johnson as he slumped against me, with blood streaming down his face. "It's your Strad, isn't it?"

He was trying to mumble protestations.

"And you killed Carito," I fumed on. "He found your hidden Strad that night in the rain, and you killed him to silence him. Hit him on the head with a chunk of rock, the way you tried to do to me." I was cuffing the dazed, trembling Johnson.

"All right," he mumbled. "That's it. He—"

"And then you tumbled his body down into the dell, so that it would look as though he had fallen there and crashed his head." I turned to the excited group of men. "He was frightened last night at that weird voice of

[Turn page]

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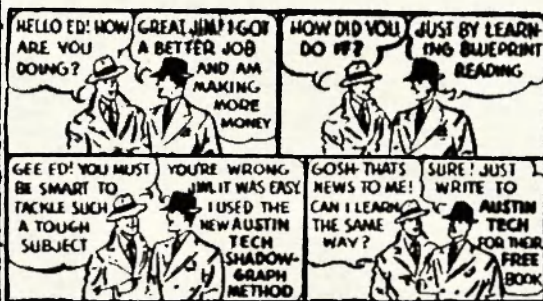
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Carito's violin. And again tonight, so that he came out here to investigate. Perhaps to move his Strad to some other place. He had no chance to do it by daylight today, for he'd have been seen. And he feared tonight that Carito's violin voice would disclose this hiding place! Well, it did! That's exactly what it did."

They could only stare with numbed awe when I told them exactly what I'd found. . . .

THAT is all there was to the weird mysterious thing of the violin of Carito. Often I wonder if old Rossi suspected, by what Carito had said, that there was something queer about that lovers' nook; something that Carito had tried to tell him? Had old Rossi suspected enough so that he had played the strange old gypsy violin?



Had he played that MacDowell melody to frighten Johnson, to lure him out and perhaps make him unmask himself? Was it that?

Or is there indeed something of a living soul imprisoned in the violin of Carito, something which that night was crying out in protest and trying to avenge the gypsy boy's murder?

I recall that later, when Johnson had been taken away to the village jail, I went for a moment up to Rossi's. The old man was seated in his studio. Carito's violin was on his lap as his fingers caressed it lovingly.

"Maestro, it told me," I said, nodding at the instrument. "It seemed to lead me to the hiding place.

Old Rossi had no answer. He did not look up, just stared down at the worn patina of the old violin's black-brown body as though he were trying to penetrate the secret imprisoned there.

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MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Continued from page 10)

And then the colonel told about Sergeant Mackey who had performed a feat of daring that no doctor could account for. It happened the night that Coventry was demolished by German bombs. Mackey was on leave at that place.

When the fury of detonation and fire subsided, Mackey rushed forth to help any wounded who had been unable to reach shelters. In front of one of the smoldering buildings, he heard a cry for help. The heat drove most of the other men away, but the sergeant didn't hesitate. He saw an old woman sprawled and pinned beneath a huge girder. She was still conscious. In jumping over the debris before him, he stumbled and hurt his leg. But he got up and went forward, limping. Several women watched him.

Like a Samson out of the pages of biblical history, Sergeant Mackey grabbed the girder which looked as though it weighed a ton. Almost instantly the girder came up. It seemed to suspend in mid-air as Mackey pulled the woman from under it and carried her to safety. Then he collapsed.

People could not believe what they saw. Later, a doctor attended the sergeant. He had fractured his upper leg when he had fallen. The doctor shook his head, marvelling how Mackey could have accomplished what he did in such a condition. But when the sergeant regained consciousness and was congratulated for his heroic deed, he said: "Don't thank me—thank those three Kilties who lifted that girder."

"What Kilties?" asked a listener.

"Why, those three Highlanders who went in with me."

But no one had seen any Scotsmen on the scene. People thought the sergeant delirious, until it was learned that the old lady he had saved, Mrs. MacBride, of Scotland, had had three sons killed in the last war—and they had all been members of a Highland regiment.

THE CLOCK MURDER

It has been said that clocks emanate psychic power. Whether it is the rhythmic beat which affects the brain through the ear, or the harmony of vibrations, too many people have had strange experiences not to indicate something of the sort. There are thousands of cases on record where clocks have stopped the moment the angel of death has come into a room and stilled a person's heart.

Now comes an astounding story of a clock being accused of murder. Tom Sewell of Alaska is positive about it. He tells of Major Calloway, a rich gold-miner for whom Sewell used to work as butler.

The major had been a prospector in his younger days, and by the time he was forty-five, was wealthy, due to the Blue Rock Mine of which the major became sole owner after the death of his partner. For



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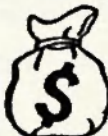
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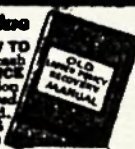
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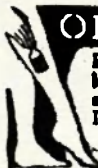
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twenty years, the major appeared to enjoy life, although everyone knew he wasn't happy. There was something on his conscience. His friends often tried to get him to open up; but he only grew angry when questioned.

Then one afternoon, destiny struck him. A heart attack put him in bed. The doctor warned Sewell, the butler, to keep the major quiet. If his heart started beating fast, to call the doctor at once. The doctor would return in the morning.

There was an old grand-father's clock across the room from the major's bed—a valuable piece which the major cherished. It kept perfect time.

"It was about nine o'clock that night," said Tom Sewell. "I was sitting at the major's bedside feeling his pulse. The old clock was ticking slowly, just about keeping time with Calloway's heartbeat. Then suddenly something happened. The old clock started to race like mad and grew louder. I wondered what had happened to it. Then the first thing I knew, the major's heart began to beat faster—it was keeping time with the clock.

"I remembered the doctor's orders. As I jumped up to fetch him, I saw Major Calloway rise up in bed with a strange look on his face. He reached under the pillow for his revolver and pointed it at the clock. Then he shouted, his face drawn in terror: 'Damn you, Mike Donlin. You said you'd come back to get me. But you won't. I killed you once—and I'll kill you again.'

"With that, the major fired six shots into the clock. The glass on the front of it, shattered. To this day, I swear I heard a laugh come from the clock. I turned to the major, but he was dead.

"Later when I told my story to the major's friends, one of them shook his head and said: 'I always did think he killed his partner Mike—but there was no proof.'

"The doctor who had been examining the clock turned and said: 'The clock was right when I left here this evening. Now it is two hours ahead and ticking all right.'"

It is still running perfectly even to this day. Had some strange psychic vibration speeded it up to cause the major's heart to race to his death? Who knows?

MOUNTAIN MIRACLE

A RUMANIAN refugee has reported this strange coincidence which has been verified by newspaper clippings.

Stories had been told for years concerning Hermit Golla who lived alone in the mountain beyond the town of Arad in Rumania. People claimed he had strange power over the wind—and that if any enemy approached him, he could command a gale to blow that enemy over the cliff to jagged rocks below. Strong gales were common in that section, and when they would rise suddenly, people would say: "Golla is angry again."

Children stayed away from Hermit Golla

when they climbed the mountain, in fear of their lives—all except one child, Martha Doeffler who had come to Rumania from Transylvania. One day, Martha dared to wander to the hermit's hut and looked in. She saw the old man lying on the wooden floor and bleeding. He had fallen. She summoned help which was the means of saving the hermit's life.

From that time on, Martha was his companion, visiting him almost daily. He gave her trinkets and told her never to be afraid. He would see that no harm came to her. But a year later, he died of an heart attack. He left his few treasures to Martha.

Time passed. Martha reached her 12th birthday—and her mother took her and her younger brother on a picnic to the mountain plateau overlooking the picturesque valley. The children were enjoying themselves running around trees and bushes. Childlike, Martha paid no attention to the cliff nearby, and in trying to escape from her young brother, she went too far from the mountain path and stumbled. She rolled down the embankment toward the edge of the cliff. Her cry attracted the mother who screamed as she rushed to save the girl. But it was too late. Martha disappeared over the cliff.

The mother fainted. The young brother brought help and the prostrated mother was assisted down the mountain.

As they neared the valley, two men, one a brother of the mother, came rushing up. The brother shouted:

"She is safe. Martha is safe. No one knows how it happened. We heard a scream and then saw a body hurtling down. We expected to see it dashed to pieces on the rocks—when suddenly a gale came up, and a whirlwind rose from the earth. It was so strong, it caught Martha like a feather and carried her away from the rocks. She landed in the soft swamp, her fall broken by the whirlwind. It's a miracle—a miracle."

Someone whispered: "The ghost of Golla."

THE HANGING GHOST

Readers still write such letters as this: "Can you tell me the name of any living person who has actually seen a ghost?"

In answer to this, Kenneth Culbertson of 3108 Washington Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois, has volunteered the following story:

"On April 16, 1940, Miss H— of Indiana, hanged herself in her bungalow where she lived alone. I found the body a few days later. Since I had known her from my own infancy, it was a terrible shock to find her hanging in this horrible manner with her mouth open in terrifying grimace.

"Later I returned to Chicago. One afternoon I came home and as I entered my room, I felt a cold chill and seemed to imagine Miss H— near me. I went out to get some fresh air and felt that I was being watched. As I went down the

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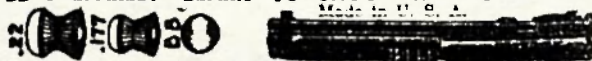
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steps I was sure I was being followed. So strong was the feeling that I looked back. What I saw nearly made me scream. Ten feet behind me was the image of the mother of Miss H—who had been dead for eleven years. She was dressed in her usual gaudy style. But the thing that terrified me, was her mouth. It was open in the horrible likeness of the daughter who I found hanged. She looked at me and her eyes burned through me. I tried to cry out in fright but couldn't utter a sound. Finally, I stepped back to the curb. For an instant, the apparition stood still, then walked slowly past me and headed west along the boulevard. Spellbound I followed her. She crossed Kedzie Avenue and soon mounted the high steps of an old stone mansion fronting on Washington Boulevard. She entered the front hall and disappeared.

"By this time I had my wits, so went after her. I hurried across Kedzie Avenue and reached the two-story building. It was empty. A sign in the front window, read: 'For Rent.'

"When this woman had died eleven years previously, her daughter had had her cremated and the ashes were kept in an undertaker's to be interred with the daughter. I had told the undertaker to put the

[Turn page]

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mother's ashes in the coffin with Miss H— I wonder if this had any connection with the strange vision. I know I didn't imagine the whole thing, for it was broad daylight. I inquired from my neighbor whether there had been any visitor in our building who had come out after me. There had been no visitors. I have never seen the woman since that day."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra: I have heard that certain people, under a trance, can foretell tomorrow's events. Are there any records of this?

Thelma Dicks.

Dear Miss Dicks: Yes, Roger Dagan, a history lecturer at New York City Museum recently demonstrated this. It was reported in the New York Evening Journal. At the Commodore Hotel, Dagan was hypnotized by Signor Michael Raduano and predicted the headlines in the following day's newspapers. They proved correct.

Dear Chakra: What is meant by the statement that every man is his own medicine cabinet, meaning I presume that he can cure himself by his own body and mind force?

Nelson Wigman.

Dear Mr. Wigman: This is called The Duncan theory, originated by Dr. Charles Henry Duncan, 10 East 77th St., N. Y. C. For information you will have to consult him.

Dear Chakra: What is the address of Joseph Dunninger who has offered \$15,000 to anyone producing phenomena which Dunninger cannot duplicate?

Mary Bedford.

Dear Miss Bedford: Joseph Dunninger can be reached at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City.

Dear Chakra: What is meant by "ceiling trance?"

George Brook.

Dear Mr. Brook: It is the theory of releasing your astral body by lying on your back in a dimly lit room, concentrating your gaze on the ceiling and willing your body to be lifted up to it. Be careful in experimenting. Better set an alarm clock an hour in advance to snap you back to consciousness in case of self-hypnosis.

Dear Chakra: I understand that some famous international doctor lives with Adolf Hitler. Who is that doctor?

Mort Hellig.

Dear Mr. Hellig: It is reported to be Dr. Carl Jung, the famous psychiatrist, indicating that Hitler is a mental case, for Dr. Jung specializes in mental aberrations.

—CHAKRA

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20x24-36	36	11.00
20x24-38	38	11.00
20x24-40	40	11.00
20x24-42	42	11.00
20x24-44	44	11.00
20x24-46	46	11.00
20x24-48	48	11.00
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10-20	4-36	10-20	4-36
10-20	4-38	10-20	4-38
10-20	4-40	10-20	4-40
10-20	4-42	10-20	4-42
10-20	4-44	10-20	4-44
10-20	4-46	10-20	4-46
10-20	4-48	10-20	4-48
10-20	4-50	10-20	4-50
10-20	4-52	10-20	4-52
10-20	4-54	10-20	4-54
10-20	4-56	10-20	4-56
10-20	4-58	10-20	4-58
10-20	4-60	10-20	4-60
10-20	4-62	10-20	4-62
10-20	4-64	10-20	4-64
10-20	4-66	10-20	4-66
10-20	4-68	10-20	4-68
10-20	4-70	10-20	4-70
10-20	4-72	10-20	4-72
10-20	4-74	10-20	4-74
10-20	4-76	10-20	4-76
10-20	4-78	10-20	4-78
10-20	4-80	10-20	4-80
10-20	4-82	10-20	4-82
10-20	4-84	10-20	4-84
10-20	4-86	10-20	4-86
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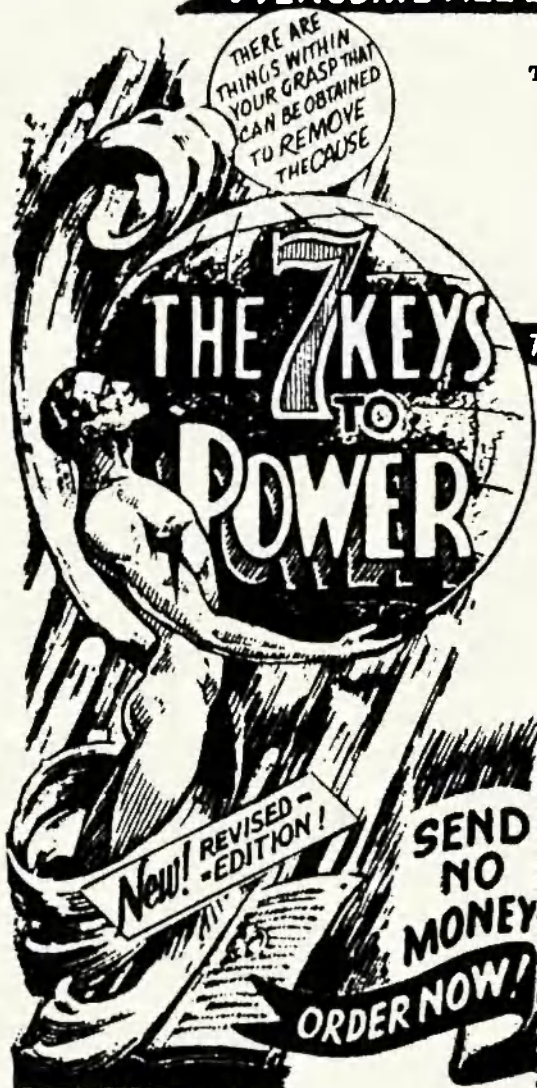
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