

# MASTER MYSTERY STORIES



THE STORIES IN THIS  
VOLUME ARE FAST MOVING  
COMPLETE MYSTERIES BY  
TOP NOTCH AUTHORS

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# MASTER MYSTERY STORIES

EDITED BY

LEO MARGULIES

There's a bit of the detective in all of us. We like to think we can do as well as the real life sleuth whose tracking down of criminals is all in the day's work. That's why we're fond of detective stories, especially those that provide us with an entertaining problem that we, too, can solve.

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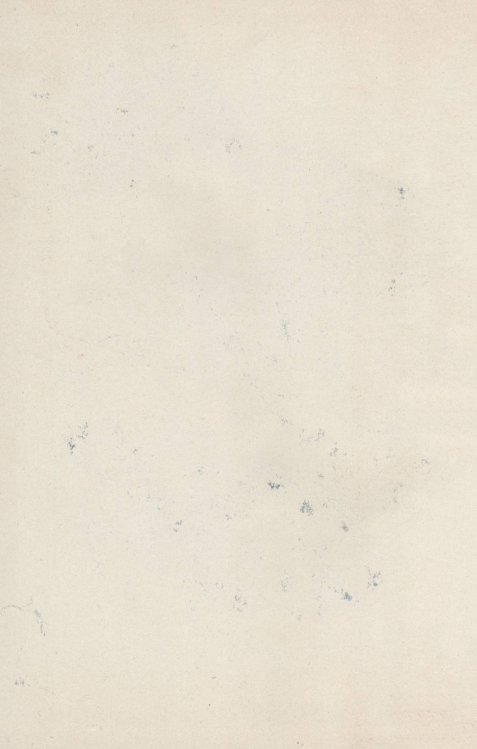
In this volume you'll find a varied detective fare, taking you from your arm-chair beside a warm fire, to Florida, New Guinea, the African veldt and your own home town. Our story detectives are guides on the road to Romance and Adventure. All for your exclusive entertainment.

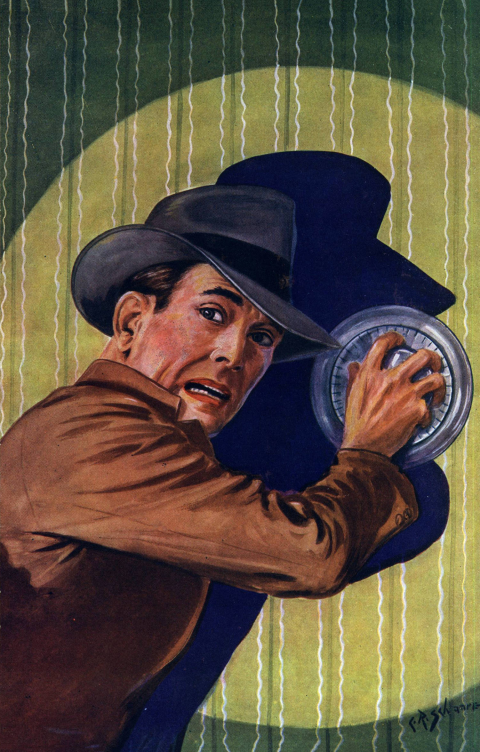
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LEO MARGULIES



*ILLUSTRATED*

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NEW YORK

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# MURDER IN SAN DIEGO

*By*

EDWARD CHURCHILL

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## I

AS THE TNT-loaded twenty-ton truck cut a hole through the rain drenched night, Sergeant Peter Dailey turned with a grimace to the guard, Private Herb Evans.

"California isn't any different than Iowa," he said, "and truck driving for the army isn't different, either. This is a fine way to fight a war—hauling a bunch of bang-bang from an ammunition dump to the San Diego docks."

He paused, looked at the broad Pacific highway ahead of him, a splattering sea in the rain. Just ahead, two soldier escorts on motorcycles, wrapped in oilskins, hunched low behind their wind-shields. About all Dailey could see was the red of their tail-lights.

"Trouble is, nothing ever happens," Private Evans said. "Might as well be carting a load of hay. I joined up thinking I'd get a crack at Tokyo or Berlin."

A railroad station momentarily loomed and was swallowed up.

"Some rain," said Sergeant Peter Dailey. "Paper says it's

good for three more days. When it rains out here it isn't kidding!"

"You said it, Pete. Say, wasn't that San Onofre?"

"Yes. Hour and a half and we'll be pounding our ears."

The truck swung over a bridge high above the railroad tracks. Nothing ahead now for ten miles but desolation. Sergeant Dailey hunched over the wheel. He listened to the steady hum of the wind-shield wiper motor, the mighty throb of the Diesel's pulse.

Then he saw the two motorcycles ahead leap into the air. There was a flash of exhausts, and then the tail-lights whirled crazily, wheeled and gyrated.

Sergeant Dailey pushed down on his brake pedal, his hand going for the emergency lever. The big truck heaved, jack-knifed, skidded on the slimy pavement, stopped.

"What the—" Evans exclaimed. He looked at Sergeant Dailey, saw his clamped jaws and white, muscle-taut face.

"Something's wrong!" Dailey muttered. "Both escorts did nip-ups at the same time."

Evans watched Dailey unlimber an Army .45 from its holster. He did the same.

"I don't like this," Dailey said. "Shoot first, then ask."

"Yes," said Evans. "One goes on his ear and it's an accident, but both is something else."

The wind, sweeping in from the sea, swallowed his words as he plunged from the cab. Dailey piled after him. They started for the motorcycle escort, rain blinding them. A spotlight limned them.

"Stand where you are!" came a crisp command. "We're taking over!"

"That's what you say!"

Peter Dailey's gun aimed a foot to the left of the flashlight as he disengaged the safety.

"Don't shoot, Petel!" rasped Evans. "They're Army."

Dailey blinked and squinted. Soldiers, four of them. All tall, lean and hard. The tallest had a funny looking flat pistol, with a silencer on it.

"What's the meaning of this?" Dailey demanded. "What happened to our escort? I ain't going to hand over my truck to nobody, Army or no Army!"

"I was afraid of that!" came the cold voice of the tall soldier. His gun spat flame. There was a soft, plopping sound and Dailey reached for his stomach, doubled, pitched forward.

"You dog!" snapped Evans.

His heavy automatic spoke. One of the four men spun crazily. Another blasted at Evans. He went down, clutching his chest.

Then there was complete silence. It was broken by brisk steps. A fifth figure loomed.

"The escort?" the tall man demanded.

"Both dead. The bodies and the motorcycles are loaded."

The tall soldier bent over the bodies of Sergeant Dailey and Private Evans. Then he straightened up.

"They are dead, too. It is best. Then they can't answer questions. This truck and these men must vanish."

One of the others, who had been bending over the man Private Evans had shot, rose and said:

"Tony's dead, too. . . ."

At eight o'clock the following morning, Nora Roberts, secretary to Harold Hunt, project engineer of the huge, jet-propelled super-bomber soon to be test-flown by the Amalgamated Aircraft Company at San Diego, fitted her key into

the lock on Hunt's office door. She swung it open, stepped into the room.

Harold Hunt, termed by executives in the sprawling hundred-acre factory, the "one-man aircraft company," seemed to be asleep. She wasn't surprised. As the designer of an airplane which promised to make obsolete every plane now flying, and to be the scourge of Germans and Japs, Hunt had been working night and day. She had found him asleep like this before.

"Mr. Hunt!" she called. "It's time to get to work!"

Then, as she moved closer to touch him, she saw the hole in his temple, black against the white skin of death; the dark splotch on the green blotter which covered his desk, and last, the big pistol, partly concealed by one of his arms. A pistol which had a bulbous silencer on it, like she'd seen in the movies.

She stifled a scream, braced herself with her hands on the edge of her desk until she got back her strength. Her lungs sucked air in great gasps and she shook her head to get rid of the nausea which swept her. Then she sent her numb hand after the telephone. Her fingers dialed mechanically. A feminine voice in the offices of the plant engineer answered.

"Give me Hayden Stone!" Nora demanded.

After a moment, she heard a smooth, masculine voice. "Hi, Nora! What's up so early in the morning?"

"Oh, Hayden!" she exclaimed. "It's finally happened!"

"Hunt?"

"Dead. Up here in the office."

There was a quick intake of breath at the other end of the line.

"I'll notify Arne Rennan, the plant protection chief,

immediately," the voice said then. "Don't worry about anything, Nora."

## II

Husky, corpulent Henry Willson, president of Amalgamated Aircraft Company, chewed on a cigar and studied a tall, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped young man who sat on the other side of the long mahogany conference table. He was surrounded by the "brass hats" of the corporation, all deeply worried.

"Inspector Fowler," Willson said, "I asked that you be sent here from Washington because I'm not satisfied with the investigation into the death of Harold Hunt." He shot a chilled-steel glance of disapproval at Arne Rennan, chief of plant protection, whose squat, fat body overflowed his chair. "Rennan here calls it suicide, due to overwork—I think it's murder."

"He was heading for a nervous breakdown," Rennan said defensively. "Who else could've done it? I've got this plant so well sewed up that not even a midget mosquito could get in."

"I'll do the talking," snapped Willson. He turned again to the alert, gray-eyed, ruggedly handsome representative of the F.B.I. Dan Fowler had the steely, coiled-spring look of the born man-hunter, and his trigger-quick mind didn't like the air of suspense, suspicion and distrust among the men who had been summoned by Willson.

"As I was saying, Fowler," the president continued, "your director consented to send you here because Hunt was killed on Government property, the buildings and land being owned by the Defense Plant Corporation. This may be only the beginning of a reign of terror. This new jet-propelled

bomber is bigger, faster and can carry more bombs farther than any plane yet built. It'll shorten the war by months. Losing Hunt's a big blow. He was to have supervised its test flight as soon as the weather clears up. A delay could be vital."

"Was Hunt afraid something might happen to him?" Fowler asked.

"He was afraid of his own shadow," Rennan admitted. "I got him a pistol permit."

"Nerves!" scoffed Richard Belden, the tall, lean, sardonic vice-president and general manager of the aircraft company. He ran a nervous hand through a shock of steel gray hair. "Really, gentlemen, you're all developing a phobia. The Army says it was suicide, and so do the plant protection men and the San Diego police. We'd better get back to work."

"What about plans for the plane?" Fowler pressed. "Would there be any motive there?"

Henry Willson leaned forward in his big chair and toyed with a model bomber which stood on the conference table.

"Any enemy power would try anything from wholesale murder to sacrifice of hundreds of their own men to get the secret of the XB-91," he said. "But, Fowler, as far as we know, there's never been a master plan for that airplane. The XB-91 is so revolutionary that Hunt didn't even trust himself."

"He ordered design drawings on this and that part. But he never let one engineer or group of engineers know what the other was doing. There's no master plan unless Hunt concealed one. And there is only one first model or prototype of the plane—the one now in the Experimental Building, surrounded by a twenty-four-hour guard. Hunt wasn't taking any chances on a spy getting hold of anything."

"It looks like trouble," Fowler said.

"Trouble!" repeated Willson. "Why, man, we've been slowed down at least a year by Hunt's death. We have to design for production. Tool up, make jigs, get our production drawings in order, break down complicated assemblies so that green workers can do simple jobs, start our assembly lines. Hunt was the only man in the world who had the complete 'know how' of the project."

Willson turned to a small, thinly built, gray-haired man with a florid face.

"Isn't that right, Reg?" he asked.

Reginald Britton, who had been introduced as vice-president in charge of engineering, nodded. "We're stuck," he agreed.

"We'll see," said Fowler. "And now, I'd like to see Harold Hunt's office. I presume nothing has been touched?"

"Only the body's been removed," Rennan said, with heavy sarcasm. "We're all ready for one of those big-time F.B.I. investigations."

Fowler was accompanied to Hunt's office by the resentful Rennan, Britton, and Belden, the sardonic vice-president and general manager. The office gave off the main engineering room, which was approximately a hundred yards square, and contained half a thousand engineers and draftsmen, many of them women, who looked up curiously from their desks and drafting boards. Rennan waved aside a guard and unlocked Hunt's door with his own key.

Dan Fowler's alert eyes photographed the small, bare cubicle, caught a desk, chair, a bookcase filled with engineering treatises, books and magazines. The blood and the pistol, together with a plan of some kind, were still on the blotter. The office was unfinished, bare steel girders with numbers

on them supporting the walls and acting as braces for the ceiling.

Fowler eyed the pistol with interest.

"Odd weapon," he said. "Has it been checked?" He looked at Rennan.

"Sure," Rennan said. "Fingerprints were Hunt's. No state registration."

Fowler picked it up and broke it open. He flicked the empty shell from the single shot breech. "Handelstrom. German make target pistol with a Maxim silencer."

Dan slipped it into his pocket as three people entered the office. Belden said, "Inspector Fowler, I'd like to present Hayden Stone, the plant engineer, Nora Roberts, Hunt's secretary, who found the body, and Hunt's assistant, Phineas Kent."

Fowler surveyed the trio, classifying them. Stone was tall, built like a grayhound, with gray hair at his temples, and a sharp glint in his dark eyes. Nora Roberts, he thought, should have been in Hollywood, with raven black, shining hair, flashing dark eyes, and beautifully molded features. Phineas Kent was chinless, watery-eyed, and had thinning blond hair.

"You found the body?" Fowler asked Nora Roberts.

She bit her lip nervously and looked to Hayden Stone, as if for assurance. Stone gave her an encouraging yet almost imperceptible nod.

"Yes, I did," the girl said.

"We both knew Hunt rather well," Stone interrupted. "He'd been pretty upset. By the way, I have full charge of the plant and structures—know the whole physical layout of the property—if you want any information along that line."

"Thanks," said Fowler. He looked from one to the other

of the trio. "Any of you know about a master plan for the XB-91? Did Hunt ever mention one?"

Nora Roberts and Stone shook their heads.

"Hunt was very secretive," Kent said.

Fowler looked at the plan which lay on the desk. He looked at Britton. "What's this?" he asked.

Britton studied it. "That's a three-view drawing of our A-27, an attack bomber," he said.

"Funny he'd be studying that when he was killing himself," Fowler said. He walked to the single window and looked out. The office was on the third floor of the engineering building, and beneath the window was a billowing sea of wire and chicken feather camouflage. The chicken feathers, shellac-covered to hold them to the wire, were soggy in the downpour.

"That'll be all, people," he said abruptly. "And now I'd like to use a telephone."

### III

Fowler went to the parking lot off Coast Boulevard where he had left his car under the chicken feather and wire camouflage. He drove to the F.B.I. field office, closeted himself with Arch Devlin, the agent in charge.

"I'd like to get a man to shadow Hayden Stone," he told Devlin. "Watch the man from the time he leaves the plant. I have a hunch he'll be with Nora Roberts. Send another man up to Hunt's office. Have him search it for the master plan for the XB-91. Might be in some secret panels, or in the stuff in the bookcase."

"Right now," said Devlin.

Fowler went to the laboratory, turned over the target pistol and shell to Bill Conklin, ballistics expert and chemist.

Then he went to the office to which Devlin had assigned him and called the Director of the F.B.I. in Washington.

"This thing looks awfully hot," he told the Director. "There are a lot of angles to cover."

"I suppose," came the reply, "that you mean you want Larry Kendal and Sally Vane. Is that what you're getting at?"

"Exactly, Chief," replied Fowler, grinning. "Sooner the better."

"Very well," came the reply.

"Thank you, sir." Fowler replaced the receiver just as Conklin barged in excitedly.

"Fowler, you'd better come and look at this!" he exclaimed. "Queerest thing I ever saw!"

Fowler followed Conklin to the laboratory. The chemist pointed to a comparison microscope. Fowler looked into it, saw identical markings on two shells, the one he had brought in, and another.

"Look at the dents made in the caps by the firing pin!" Conklin exclaimed. "There's a slight imperfection in both. They're twins!"

"Fired by the same pistol," Fowler agreed. "What's the story on your shell?"

"Night before last," Conklin replied, "somebody knocked off a TNT truck between San Onofre and Oceanside. The truck didn't show at the docks and a check-up was made. They found a spot where two steel cables had been stretched across the road, anchored to two trees. It had just about cut the trees in half. There was some spilled oil, this shell, some G.I. shells, but the rain had washed out any other leads. The truck, the driver, Dailey, and his helper, Evans, two escorts, two motorcycles and the TNT had vanished into thin air."

Fowler's lips pursed, he whistled. "Then the same pistol that was fired fifty miles from San Diego also drilled Hunt the same night," he said slowly.

"Maybe Hunt got out of line and pulled something," suggested Conklin. "He got afraid and bumped himself."

Fowler grinned. "You stick to your lab," he said. "What we've got here goes a lot deeper than that."

Dan Fowler began receiving reports shortly after six that night. Brightwick, the agent Devlin had assigned to Harold Hunt's office, reported that he had been over it from floor to ceiling.

"There was plenty of evidence the office had been worked over before I got there," he declared. "There were plans for other planes, but not a single drawing of any kind pertaining to the XB-91."

Fowler glanced at another report. As he had anticipated, Nora Roberts and Hayden Stone left the factory together at five o'clock. They were now at the Sky Room at the El Cortez having cocktails. The agent had been unable to learn what they were talking about, but it appeared to be serious. The beautiful girl had been near to tears.

At nine o'clock, Fowler put in a call for Arne Rennan. He heard the heavy voice of the plant protection chief on the other end of the wire.

"I've been trying to get a line on Harold Hunt's home address," Fowler said. "They haven't got it at the plant. They say he is the only employee out of some forty thousand who isn't listed."

"It's confidential with me," said Rennan, impatiently. "He lived at the end of Seacrest Lane, in La Jolla—last house at the left before you fall into the Pacific. Brown shingle. But we've checked the place from end to end."

"Okay," Fowler said. "Thanks."

Rennan made a noise like "Grmph" and hung up.

Fowler looked up to find Reg Britton and Henry Willson on the threshold of his office.

"The outside door was unlocked, and when we got no response to our knock we came in," Willson said. "We wanted to find out what progress you've made."

"Yes," agreed Britton, "and we wanted to tell you that there's a romance or something going on between Hayden Stone, the plant engineer, and Nora Roberts. There was sort of a triangle, with Hunt the other man."

Fowler wondered how much of his conversation they had heard. It was ten minutes before he could get rid of them. Then he quickly slipped into a raincoat, donned his hat, checked his service revolver and went outside to his car, seared by the chill of the rain.

Half an hour later he drove down desolate Seacrest Lane. He finally spotted Hunt's home through the rain, which fogged his windshield and defied its wipers. He could hear the moan of the wind in the gnarled, stubby sea pines as he made his way off the lane down a drenched path, his flashlight winking intermittently ahead of him. Beyond, the sea crashed relentlessly, booming onto the shore, cracking against the rocks.

A set of skeleton keys soon mastered the lock and he was quickly inside, a place made musty by storm and short disuse. Rummaging from one end to the other he found typical monuments to bachelorhood—a dirty sink, stacked dishes, a cold, inhospitable living room with a bay window giving out to the ever-threatening, ever-advancing sea.

He went to Hunt's study in which there was a bookcase, a leather chair, a large draftsman's desk, and a gun case. Here

he found an assortment of weapons, including two of the Handelstrom single-shot target pistols with Maxim silencers!

He turned to an inspection of the desk. In the drawers he found nothing but drawings of airplanes of various types and sizes developed during the past ten years. He was about to inspect the last drawer when he heard:

"Reach for it, G-man!"

He found himself looking into a revolver barrel held by a gaunt man with gimlet, killer eyes. He whirled, going for his own .38. At the same instant, there was a blast of fire, and he heard the brush of unearthly wings past his head, so close that the bullet clipped his hatband and knocked his hat sidewise.

"This is not a single shot," said the tall man in tweeds who stood before him. "There are five more."

As the intruder spoke, Fowler lunged forward, his hands groping for legs. Then, too late, he saw two men behind his attacker. From the rear, facing onto the scrub-pine slopes, he heard the crash of a window and felt the blast of cold, soggy air it admitted. Lead from guns outside and in splattered against the walls. Fowler whirled as he plunged, sending a bullet into the light overhead. At the same instant he threw his weight against a stand lamp. The small room went dark. Then with the ferocity of a football guard who was out to stop the traditional rival on the one-yard line, he lunged through the window. His body thudded into a mass of yielding flesh.

Gunfire poured from the window. He knocked the opposing bodies aside, rolled along the ground as a fusillade of bullets splatted into the ground around him. He jarred into a scrub pine, slithered behind its protecting trunk, holding his fire so as not to reveal his position.

By the time he was on one knee, sheltered by the pine trunk, he heard the sounds of harsh, staccato commands and withdrawing footsteps inside the tiny house, the banging of a door, the thud of feet on rain-soaked terrain.

"They haven't found the plans!" he kept telling himself, exultantly. "That's what they're looking for. Somebody pulled a colossal dud when he bumped Hunt without getting them!"

In the distance, he heard the grind of a starter and an engine leap to life. As the engine roared, he raced to his own car, concealed by a row of cypress, and leaped into it. He pushed on the starter pedal, felt the engine catch, whipped through his gears and found himself swinging into La Jolla Boulevard. Ahead of him, bobbing in the distance, he saw a red tail-light.

His car roared in chase, and he felt grateful for the husky, driving throb of a sound mechanism. The pursued automobile roared through South La Jolla, passed the Naval Aircraft gunnery range, and Dan Fowler thought of the men there—the men who trained daily. Jobs like this saved their lives! That was enough glory and credit for Fowler—the hope that through his efforts sons could be restored to mothers, husbands to wives, brothers to sisters.

The car careened wildly around the bend at the abandoned railroad tracks, roared south toward Mission Beach, swung left again toward the military academy, right through Crown Point, and out over the causeway. No turnoffs here for more than a couple of miles! Fowler kept pressuring the throttle, peering anxiously through the rain-blurred windshield as the pursued car hurtled up one bay bridge, down the other side and then across the second.

The car ahead, its driver driving it wide open, cut into

Rosecrans, swerved by the west plant of Amalgamated Aircraft and the Marine Base, cut into Coast Boulevard, narrowly missing several marines trying to flag a ride in the downpour, and bore down on Plant One.

The G-man tried to catch at least a part of the license number. As it passed under the lights he could see that it was a gray Ford '41 sedan. Then, without warning, as the Ford raced by the plant, it slowed abruptly, skidding close to the curb. Fowler saw a shadowy form hurtle from it. At the same instant he caught the last three numbers of the license plate.

The man scuttled along the plant wall. The sedan shot ahead again. Fowler chose to follow the vehicle. It swung abruptly to the left, started up the grade toward the hills. Fowler hurtled after it, jamming into second to take the curve, roared fifty yards toward the Santa Fe tracks. A swinging red light warned of an approaching train. The pursued car leaped across the tracks twenty feet ahead of a freight locomotive.

Fowler jammed on his brakes, spun the car sidewise as the juggernaut cut him off from the sedan. Muttering silently, he whirled his car the rest of the turn and started down the hill. Fate had made his choice for him.

Where the shadowy figure had so suddenly leaped from the car, there was no place that a man could hide in the few seconds that he had been away from the spot. On the bay side of the boulevard it was flanked by huge cement walls rising smoothly more than twenty feet. On the opposite side was a huge parking place used by day-working executives, now deserted.

Yet the man had vanished completely!

Dan Fowler slowed. Then that sixth sense which is given

to the man-hunter, coupled with what he had already learned, gave him the clue he needed. Earlier, he had parked in that lot. Rennan had boasted that the plant could not be entered, but the wire and chicken feather camouflage came to within eight feet of the ground, and extended to within a few feet below Harold Hunt's office!

Fowler whirled his car into the parking lot. He leaped out. A moment later, his hard arm muscles were pulling his lean, supple body onto the camouflage. Then, unchallenged and undetected, he was on top of the netting and headed toward Hunt's office.

He had proceeded perhaps two hundred feet when he heard:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

He froze, held his breath. Then he relaxed as he realized that a sentry posed in a cubicle which housed an anti-aircraft gun atop the plant was challenging someone else. He heard an officer reply to the challenge.

From here on he was careful not to come so close to any more anti-aircraft guns, for if challenged he would have to spend precious minutes identifying himself. Through the drizzling downpour, he continued to head for Hunt's office.

Slowly and carefully he worked his way across the springy canopy to a point five feet below Hunt's office. The window was open. His sharp eyes detected the flicker of a flashlight. He unlimbered his gun and clamped his teeth onto the butt. Then he reached up and pulled himself into the window. He catapulted himself head first into the room. As he rolled across the floor he heard the *plop* of a muted pistol and the thud of lead in the wall behind him.

"Stick 'em up!"

The tone was bewildered, uncertain. Fowler grinned. His

eyes, accustomed to the Stygian darkness of the drenching outdoors, saw the shadowy form. He swung up his gun into firing position.

"You're covered!" he snapped.

He wanted to take this intruder alive, for the man must hold the key to the mystery. The answer was a shot which missed him by inches. But the shot was a give-away. Fowler jammed his gun into its holster, lunged, and his strong arms closed around a firm, hard body.

Calling on judo and jiu jitsu, he hurled the man backward against the desk. But he came back, striking like lightning. Fowler tried a flat punch at the back of his neck, missed. He felt the sharp agonizing pain of a knee in his groin. His opponent knew all the tricks. Fowler doubled with pain, toppled forward. Two hands closed on his throat. He drove his arms between them and broke the grip.

He got a momentary arm hold, twisted, and heard the snap of a bone. Then the door into the main engineering room swung slowly open!

A flash of light pierced the foggy gloom. In that fraction of a second, Fowler saw the gun in the good hand of his antagonist aimed to blast him off the face of the earth. He whipped up his own weapon, for now his life was at stake and he did not know what odds were against him.

There was no chance of precision firing. But his bullet found a vital mark. The man toppled in an inert heap, blood spewing from his mouth. His own bullet splintered the floor.

The door opened wider. A hand groped for a light switch, and the resulting glare blinded Fowler. He saw a revolver come through the doorway, followed by a frightened white face.

"Stick 'em up!" came the command. "I'm comin' in shootin'!"

"Forget it!" Fowler ordered. "I'm a Government man."

The uniformed man looked around the office, saw the corpse.

"You show me your credentials," said the guard, still covering Fowler, "then I'll call Rennan."

"You tell Rennan," Fowler snapped, "that a midget mosquito named Fowler and an unidentified playmate just got into his plant. And don't shoot! After all, we're allies."

#### IV

Five hours after Dan Fowler had returned to the field offices of the F.B.I., reports on the man he had been forced to kill began coming in. Conklin, working chemical miracles on the clothing of the dead man, reported at dawn:

"We found traces of sea salt by vacuuming and running tests on the dirt we found in the cuffs of his trousers. That indicates a sea voyage of long duration, unless somebody dunked him in the Pacific with his clothes on."

"Any identification?"

"One single card and two oblong dog tags," Conklin replied.

The card was, Fowler saw with a start, a Class "A" pass identifying the bearer, Otto Kranz, as a sergeant in the United States Army! Conklin pulled out his wallet, dropped his own card beside that of the dead Kranz. He pointed to the printing.

"Pretty good copy of a United States printing office job, but it isn't genuine," the chemist and ballistics expert declared. "I was overseas for a year with the Eighth Army.

Take a look at mine, and you can see the difference in printing. See the trick tail on the E? And look at the S."

"What about the dog tags?"

"Made of brass. The government changed to monel metal some time ago."

"Did you check Washington?"

"Wirephotoed the card and fingerprints on it. There isn't any Sergeant Otto Kranz with that serial number in the Army. But there was a Hans Kroehler with the same fingerprints who was a bund member in the United States in thirty-nine and he got sent back to his dear fatherland that year for a passport violation."

Fowler stared at the fake pass.

"Very good," he said. "Now, send the card air mail to Washington and get a typographic expert on it. At the same time have the paper analysed and get a content report."

"Yes, sir."

When Conklin left, Fowler turned his attention to the report on Hayden Stone and Nora Roberts which Harshman, the agent who had been tailing them, had submitted. He noted with interest:

8:53. After having dinner at the El Cortez, I overheard Stone tell Miss Roberts that he had had a hard day and would take her home. They grabbed a waiting taxicab. By the time I could get another, I'd lost them.

Fowler glanced at his wrist watch. He had reached Hunt's desolate cottage at the end of Seacrest Lane shortly after ten o'clock. That would have given the plant engineer plenty of time to take Nora Roberts home and reach La Jolla. At the same time any other of the executives of the

aircraft company could have been at the cottage when he was attacked.

There was a ring of the telephone. As Fowler reached for it a muggy, murky dawn was beginning to break.

"Mr. Fowler," came a voice, when he lifted the receiver and answered, "this is Phineas Kent, Hunt's assistant. My apartment has been ransacked. I thought I'd better contact you before calling the police."

"You did right," said Fowler. "What's your address?"

Kent told him.

"I'll be right out," he said, and hung up. He got his car. Five minutes later he pulled up at Kent's address, went inside the building. Red-eyed, his thin hair mussed, the young engineer opened the door.

"Come in, Mr. Fowler," he said.

Fowler slipped a compact case from his pocket, dusted for fingerprints around a desk from which drawers had been pulled. He found several, compared them with those of Kent. They were all his. He repeated the process on bureau drawers, chairs and other pieces of furniture, with the same result.

"They must've used gloves," Kent guessed. "Do you think they had an idea I had the XB-91 plans?"

"Could be," Fowler replied.

"But I haven't!" Kent protested. "I don't know a thing about the airplane. I've told everyone that Hunt kept his work secret."

Fowler grinned.

"Maybe you didn't tell the right people," he said, and went to the door. He examined the lock, saw that it was intact, but that the door had been splintered around it, as if with a crowbar. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a set of

keys, carefully inserted one after another, until he found one that fitted. He turned it several times, looked at Kent.

"How was the door when you got home?" he asked.

"The lock was smashed," Kent replied. "I walked right in."

"Thanks," said the G-man. "I'll be on my way."

"But what about some kind of protection?" the engineer demanded.

"I don't think you'll be bothered again," Fowler told him.

He left the apartment and as he crossed the street he saw a small coupé parked up the block. He climbed into his own car and rolled down the hill toward the business district. Through the rear vision mirror, he saw the coupé swing out. There was a woman at the wheel. And the woman was Nora Roberts!

The raven-haired beauty did a poor job of tailing Fowler. At times she would be far behind and then, when he was slowed or stopped by a traffic signal, she would come up right behind him. When he finally pulled up in front of the field offices, she sent her coupé scooting on down the thoroughfare. Fowler looked after her with a puzzled expression on his face, got out of the car and went upstairs to the field offices.

He found Devlin at his desk.

"Kendal and Sally Vane just telephoned from the airport," Devlin said, and Fowler's tired face lightened with a smile. "They're sending their bags to the El Cortez and coming directly here."

"Swell!" exclaimed Fowler. "And now I need some more help. Hunt's assistant, Kent, just pulled a fast one. Said his joint was ransacked. Told me whoever did it smashed his door in. I tried my keys in the tumbler and the door hadn't

been locked at all. No fingerprints, either. I'd like to check up on the fellow, and also have a tail put on him."

As Devlin nodded, a girl's voice in the outside office asked: "Where'll I find Dan Fowler?"

The G-man's heart leaped at the sound of the warm voice he would know anywhere. Then blonde Sally Vane, her eyes flashing a welcome reserved for Fowler alone, entered. He kissed her.

Sally Vane, although listed on the F.B.I. personnel records as a secretary, had worked on scores of cases with Fowler and Larry Kendal, who entered the office behind her. Kendal was a shade shorter than Fowler, less rugged. The press described him as debonair. He stepped forward, a broad smile on his face, shook hands with Devlin and with his long-time companion in crime solving.

Fowler introduced Sally to Devlin, and then said:

"Let's get some breakfast. I haven't eaten for so long my stomach thinks I'm on a vacation."

"We'll have to go over the case," Kendal said. "We might as well eat at the same time."

## V

Over coffee, ham and eggs and fresh buttered toast, Fowler gave his two coworkers the entire story to date. He gave them a thumbnail character study of Willson, the president, Belden, the vice-president and general manager, Arne Renan, chief of plant protection, Reginald Britton, vice-president in charge of engineering, Phineas Kent, Hayden Stone, the plant engineer, and Nora Roberts. He told them how Nora had tailed him.

"Sally," he said, "I want you to make friends with Nora Roberts, and stick with her no matter what happens."

"Gals who stick their necks out by tailing G-men usually end in trouble," Sally said. "What do I do, specifically?"

"It's arranged for you to work in the next office to her at Amalgamated. You'll be secretary to an aerodynamicist. You're new and green and you don't know your way around, so you appeal to Nora. Find out everything you can about her, and don't let her out of your sight."

"Consider it done, Dan," Sally replied.

Fowler turned to Kendal.

"Your job, Larry," he said, "is to work on this TNT angle and also try to run down that car I chased last night. As far as the car is concerned, all I can tell you is that it's a well-kept '41 Ford sedan, painted gray, and that three numbers of the license are six—blank—2—5. That is, you have the last four numbers, one of which is blank. It might be either an eight or a six. Find the man who owns it. On the TNT, I want to know who hijacked that truck, where it is now, and where the hijackers are. As long as that stuff is loose, nobody in Southern California is safe. Try to find Sergeant Dailey, Evans, and their motorcycle escort. The morgues probably are your best bet."

Kendal smiled grimly.

"What'll I do with the TNT when I find it?" he asked.

"Just don't drop it," Fowler replied. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Sally Vane, after being rushed through the formalities of employment as a secretary and being assigned to the aerodynamicist, made the acquaintance of Nora Roberts. Five minutes after hanging up her hat and coat she asked the

raven-haired beauty how many carbon copies were required for an inter-office memo. A dozen more visits followed on similar pretexts. Sally realized Nora was under a great strain, but bided her time before inviting confidences.

It was Nora who suggested they lunch together. Sally tried to draw the girl out, but failed completely.

Nor did the afternoon yield any dividends. At five-thirty, the two girls walked out of the plant together.

"I'm having a terrible time finding a place to live," Sally ventured. "I'm at one of the big hotels, and it's too expensive. You don't know where I could find a room, do you?"

Nora gave her a sympathetic glance.

"I know what you're up against," she said. "I'd drive you around tonight so you could look, except that I've a date. Tomorrow night, perhaps."

"Oh, thank you!" Sally exclaimed gratefully.

They were on the street now, in the pouring rain, waiting for a traffic light to change. Suddenly Nora grabbed Sally's arm.

"I've got to leave you now," she said. "Here comes my boy friend."

"If you're going downtown—" Sally suggested.

"Of course!" A coupé swept to the curb. Nora climbed in and told Sally to follow. Hayden Stone was driving. Nora introduced them.

"Where can we take you?" Stone asked Sally.

"Broadway at Fourth," Sally replied, "if it won't be out of your way."

"Not at all," Stone said. "We're going to grab a bite at the Silver Lion."

When the car reached the intersection, Sally bade the pair a regretful good-by. But as soon as they drove off she found

a cab and ordered the woman driver to take her to the Silver Lion. She arrived just in time to see Nora and Stone enter. She told her driver to wait.

The couple emerged an hour later. They got into the coupé and Sally ordered her driver to follow it. Stone drove to the main entrance of Amalgamated, kissed Nora good-by and left her with the car. Nora slipped into the driver's seat and drove off.

"Keep right behind her," Sally said, and shadowed the car half-way across sprawling San Diego. Nora drove up to the entrance to a bungalow court on a quiet side street.

"What now?" asked the driver.

Sally passed her a bill.

"Let me out here," she said. "Drive ahead two blocks. Wait until this money runs out. If I don't show by that time, go on about your business."

"Okay," came the reply, as Sally got out of the cab and started up the street toward the bungalow court. She saw Nora alight from the coupé, lock it, and go into the court. Two men darted from the shadows. Sally saw that they were in army uniforms and the first fear that clutched at her heart subsided. Then she saw one of the soldiers grab Nora. She ran forward, her right hand groping into her bag. It emerged with a flat, compact pearl-handled .25-caliber automatic which Dan had given her.

She ran on the grass to avoid tell-tale heel-taps on the cement, and kept behind a palm trunk as she advanced. She closed the distance in no time.

"Reach for it!" she snapped, as she saw that both soldiers had Nora now, and one had his hand clamped over her mouth. Nora was struggling wildly, but could do nothing.

At the sound of her voice, the men looked up.

"Come on," one snarled. "Load this dame in the crate."

"Hold it!" barked the other. "This gal's got a gat—and looks like she'll use it!"

Both released Nora, raised their hands.

"Sally—you!" Nora exclaimed. "Oh, I—"

Then Sally felt strong arms close around her from behind. She struggled vainly, realizing that she had walked into a trap. There was a third man, probably the driver of the car. That was why the thug had spoken so loudly!

A big hand closed over her pistol and wrenched it from her grasp. A second hand clamped over her mouth. She watched the two uniformed men grab Nora again.

"Get both of 'em into the car!" the man who held Sally ordered.

The three men had their hands full with the fighting, kicking girls. As Sally was pulled and dragged to the waiting car she gave a start of recognition—it was the gray '41 Ford sedan which Dan had described! The battling girl couldn't see the license numbers, but she knew this was it as she clawed, scratched and bit in an effort to free herself.

"We'd better fix these babies up," one of the men said. "They're apt to cause trouble before we get there."

Sally and Nora were forced into the back seat. One of the men produced a can and Sally smelled the sweet, sickening odor of chloroform.

"Fix the blonde first, Joe," said the leader.

Joe and another man seized Sally and slapped a chloroform-soaked rag over her face. She tried to hold her breath, but could not for long. She took a deep breath, then another, and felt herself slipping down a deep, dark abyss.

When Sally regained consciousness, her first sensation was that of extreme cold. Gradually she recalled what had hap-

pened. She had tried to save Nora, and had been captured herself.

Sally tried to move her cramped wrists, and the effort produced nausea. She realized that they were taped. Her ankles were also taped. She was lying on a cold, dank floor somewhere. As her eyes gradually focused, she saw windows. The blinds were drawn, but from the pervading darkness she believed it was still night. A steady gurgling sound just outside a window must be a storm drain and it must still be raining. She was conscious of a violent headache caused by the chloroform. And her throat was parched.

"Nora!" she called hoarsely. "Nora! Are you here?"

She got no answer. Then, as her ears grew accustomed to the stillness she became aware of a vague hum of voices in an adjoining room. She saw the outlines of a door through which the sounds seemed to be coming. Beneath it was a faint glow of light. She inched her way to it across the bare floor, then could hear words distinctly.

"You'd better talk, sister," came a voice, "or you never will see your boy friend again. You know where those plans are. Hunt told you. Now, spill it!"

The speaker got silence for an answer.

"Good girl, Nora!" Sally said to herself. "Stick with it! Don't talk!"

Sally had been through such grillings herself, and knew the anguish the beautiful brunette was undergoing. Then she heard a dull thud, like the impact of a fist against flesh. She shivered. This was followed by a low moan and a louder thud. A body fell to the floor.

"You knocked her cold, Joe," Sally heard. "She ain't going to talk in her sleep."

Sally heard heavy feet coming toward the door. She rolled

into the same position she had been when she had regained consciousness.

"I'll see if the blonde's come around," Joe said. "I'd like to know how she fits into the picture, and so would the boss. Ordinary dames don't pack rods."

"Yeah," agreed his companion, "see if she's awake, and if she is, drag her in."

The door opened and a shaft of light cut into the gloom. Sally saw a bare room, and saw two men in uniform she recognized as her captors carry the limp body of Nora between them and dump her on the floor. The man called Joe bent over Sally. She relaxed every aching muscle in her body. He pushed her with the toe of his boot, then kicked her. Sally fought against showing any signs of consciousness. It was hard when he pinched and slapped her. Finally he stood up.

"Still out," he said disappointedly. "Look, Pete—these dames ain't going anywhere. Let's go out and get a cup of coffee. We'll work 'em over when we get back."

"Oke," replied his companion.

They stamped out of the room after examining the bonds of both girls. Sally heard them walk through the other part of the house. The slam of an outside door was followed by the click of a latch. She gave a sigh of relief.

She first turned her attention to her bonds. If she could only find a protruding nail, or a sharp corner, or anything that might serve to cut the adhesive! She could probably do better with Nora's help. She rolled to the girl's side and heard her heavy breathing.

"Nora!" she whispered hoarsely. "Nora! Wake up!"

The battered beauty stirred, sighed heavily, but did not answer. Sally called to her again and again, bumped her

body, tried to reach the adhesive tape which bound her wrists. But Sally's own hands were taped so thoroughly that she had lost all use of her fingers.

Then she rolled around the room, trying to find any kind of a projection which might tear her bonds, either from her feet or her hands. She suddenly realized that she was desperately thirsty. The sound of the water running down the drain outside aggravated her agony. Then she thought she heard Nora move slightly and give a low moan.

"Nora!" she repeated. "Wake up!"

There was silence for a moment, then convulsive sobs.

"Sally—Sally!" Nora muttered. "I thought I was dreaming when I heard your voice!"

"Tell me—what happened?" Sally persisted.

"Everything!" Nora spoke with an effort. "They think because I worked for Harold Hunt I know where the plans for the XB-91 are. They beat me, kicked me, tried burning matches under my feet, and stuck pins under my fingernails. Oh, it was horrible! Where are they?"

"They've gone out," Sally replied. "You're safe right now. We've got to try to cut this adhesive tape and get out of here."

There was a moment of silence, then Nora Roberts said:

"Sally, they'll torture me again. I might even—be killed. I do know something. It isn't much, but it might help—" She caught herself. "What am I saying? I don't know who you are, except you've been a friend."

"You'll have to trust me," Sally said, desperately. "I happen to be an operative for the F.B.I." Quickly, she explained how she had been "employed" at Amalgamated.

"My job was to find out all about you," she added. "We

thought you were involved in some way. Tell me what you know."

"An odd thing happened. The night before Harold Hunt was killed, he told me: 'Nora, there's something you should know. It's about A-27. If anything should happen—' Someone came into the office then, and he changed the subject."

"Who?" asked Sally.

"For the life of me, I can't remember. So many people were coming in and out."

"What in the world does A-27 mean?" Sally pressed.

"All I know is that we made an attack bomber designated the A-27, and I can't see any connection," Nora said. "I've racked my brains. I don't get it. Oh, if he'd only lived another day!"

"That's fate," said Sally, "and there's nothing we can do about it. The main thing is to get out of here. If I know Dan Fowler, A-27 will mean something to him."

She caught her breath. A wave of fear swept over her. Outside, she heard the dull throb of an automobile engine, faint but identifiable. Cold perspiration broke out on her body.

"We'll have to stop now," she said. "Pretend you're still unconscious. That'll give us a chance to get back our strength. Good luck, Nora."

"With you here," Nora said, "I can take it."

## VI

"Long distance for you, Inspector Fowler," said the receptionist over the telephone in the F.B.I. field offices just before closing time.

"Put the call on," Fowler replied. Then: "Hello, Larry. What's up?"

"They've found the five bodies up here above Oceanside," Kendal replied. "The two motorcycle escorts, Sergeant Daley and Private Evans, and a fifth private. Only the fifth private wears the old brass dog tags, same as those Kranz, alias Kroehler, had."

"Where were the bodies?" Fowler asked.

"Washed up on the shore," Kendal replied. "Looks like they were all weighted together and sunk in the Pacific. But the storm broke them free from the weights. They were spread out half a mile along the shore. Everyone of 'em was drilled, the two escorts apparently given a grace shot through the head. We probed the bullets. The phony soldier, Clyde Smith, had what looks like an army forty-five caliber in his stomach.

"Send the bullets down here to Conklin, Larry. Any luck on that gray Ford sedan?"

"I'm working with the Department of Motor Vehicles on it now."

"That looks like our best lead to date. Stick with it."

"Don't I always?" asked Larry. "I've got scars to prove it." Fowler grinned, told him goodbye, and hung up.

Special Agent Hall entered and held out a sheaf of papers. "Here's the report on Kent, sir," he said. "He's at home now. He slipped away from the tail a couple of hours ago, but he's been picked up again. He seems to be pretty smart. Got wise to me and told me I was just wasting my time to-night."

"Let's see your report." said Fowler.

It revealed that Kent came from a Mid-western family. He had studied aeronautical engineering on the West Coast

and had worked for two aircraft companies, being fired from both for gambling. He had come to work for Amalgamated six months before. Almost immediately, he had started betting on the races at Agua Caliente, and currently was in to the bookmakers for about six thousand dollars. The bookies were pressing him for the money. One had threatened him with exposure to the company if he didn't pay off within twenty-four hours."

The report further stated that Kent had been in his office throughout the day, attending to engineering matters, save for two absences. The first was for lunch at a bayside restaurant called Borodino's, where he dined alone and was approached by no one. The second was for a visit to the offices of Hayden Stone. The report continued:

A week ago Kent got some money somewhere. It was an even amount, but might have been race-track winnings. His bank account and deposit slip show a deposit of one thousand dollars.

Fowler scowled as he weighed the report.

"I think, Hall," he said, "you've uncovered something."

He surveyed the voluminous mass of reports on his desk and realized for the first time that he hadn't eaten since having breakfast with Sally and Larry. It was now after eight o'clock at night. He would grab a quick bite, and when he returned, he might have a call from Sally. . . .

The telephone was still ringing impatiently and insistently when Dan Fowler returned to the F.B.I. offices. He hurried into his office and snatched up the instrument hoping it was Sally.

But it was Arne Rennan, chief of Amalgamated's plant protection, wheezing and spluttering on the other end of the wire.

"Fowler!" he panted. "Where've you been? I'm going crazy! Since I found out about that camouflage wire letting you into the plant I've had it raised twenty feet. I've doubled the guards on the gates. I've added to my force. There isn't a nook or a cranny—"

"—that a midget mouse could get through," Fowler finished. "Come now, Rennan, what's the matter?"

"Matter! Great guns, man! One of my watchmen has found Hayden Stone with a skull fracture, that's what. Sprawled out on the floor of his office. I've got the company physician and half his staff on the way over. Somebody clipped him with a model airplane—one of those big metal ones—and got away!"

Dan Fowler's big hand gripped the telephone.

"I'll be right over," he said. "Don't touch a thing."

He grabbed his hat and raincoat, went into the soggy night and drove to the plant. He went directly to Stone's office. The engineer had regained consciousness, and was lying on a leather divan. The plant physician who was attending him said Stone's condition was serious.

"If the blow had been ten per cent harder," he added, "we'd be out a perfectly good plant engineer."

Fowler looked down at Stone. "Feel able to talk?" he asked.

The engineer nodded, his face white and drawn. "I was working late," he began. "The storm had raised the dickens with our drainage system. I—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Fowler. He turned to Rennan. "Get us a list from your gate men of every executive who was in the plant tonight."

"Yes, sir," Rennan replied. He waddled from the office.

Fowler turned back to Stone. "Go ahead," he said.

"I was going over the main lay-out. It details everything of a protective and functional nature. I alone have custody of it. It cannot be released even to the company's president, except in dire emergency and then only with the Army's consent. It shows fire hydrants, anti-aircraft emplacements, sprinkling and warning systems, power plants, the drainage systems which carry rain-water from the hills under the plant to the bay, and countless other details. Such information would be invaluable for sabotage, to cut off power, to prevent extinguishing fires, and—"

"I get it," said Fowler. "Where's this lay-out?"

"It's gone!"

Fowler clamped his jaws together. "Go on," he ordered.

"I was working at my desk with my back to the door. I thought I heard the sound of the door opening, and felt a slight current of cool air. I started to swing around. The lights went out. Something struck me over the head, and that's all I remember. The watchman who found me notified Rennan, and Rennan immediately flashed a warning to all gates to search everyone for the lay-out. It wasn't found."

Fowler looked at the bloody model airplane. "Has that been checked for prints?" he asked.

"One of Rennan's laboratory men dusted it," Stone said. "There weren't even latent prints."

"Any suspicions?"

"Well, I—"

"Come, Stone. Never mind your scruples. This means the safety of the entire plant."

"Phineas Kent has been prowling my office," Stone said. "I've found him in here on two occasions. He's always had a reasonably plausible excuse. But I didn't like it, and I've been investigating."

"So that," said Fowler, "is why Nora Roberts was watching Kent's apartment, and why she followed me?"

"We hoped to uncover something," Stone said.

Rennan puffed into the room holding a piece of paper. "Here's a list of all executives who came back to the plant tonight," he said.

Fowler took the list. "Very good, Rennan—thanks," he said. "Call Arch Devlin and have him pick up Phineas Kent. I'll see him at the office."

"Just a minute, Fowler," Stone said. "There's one thing more. Nora said she'd be home before nine and for me to call her for sure. I did just before I was attacked. There wasn't any answer. Nora always keeps her word in things like that. I'm worried."

Fowler smiled down at him.

"Don't worry," he said. At the same time, he remembered that he had not heard from Sally and, as she was trailing Nora, he began to worry himself.

## VII

"What happened was this," Phineas Kent said, squirming in his chair and twisting his hands in the F.B.I. office. "I gambled a lot and I got pretty much in debt. A tall man approached me one afternoon at Agua Caliente—you know, the race-track. I'd just dropped about four hundred bucks. He seemed to know all about me, what I did, how I was in debt, where I worked. He even mentioned Harold Hunt. He told me that there was an easy way out of my jam. He said all I had to do was to get the plant lay-out and turn it over to him."

"He said, 'Buddy, just to let you know I mean business,

here's a grand.' He handed me that much in small bills. He told me that there was another nine thousand when I delivered the plant lay-out to him. He said all I needed to do was to run an ad in the personal column of the Tribune-Sun saying: 'Darling—Mother and I have arrived in town. Please contact me at the same old place.'

"I made a play for Hayden Stone's secretary, hoping to find out where he kept the lay-out, and that didn't work. So then I started snooping. He got suspicious. I never did find out where it was, even as late as this afternoon, and I didn't go near his office tonight."

"You're on the list of executives who went into the plant," Fowler reminded him. "You evaded our men, who were tailing you, for two hours. What about that?"

"I went to my office to catch up on some detail work Harold Hunt left," Kent replied.

"And you pretended to me that your apartment had been ransacked," Fowler pursued. "Why did you do that?"

"I had the feeling that I was suspected, or being followed, or something, and I wanted to get the heat off," Kent said. "You know, make it look like I was a victim, too."

Fowler turned to Devlin. "Have Kent booked on charges of suspicion of assault with intent to kill," he said. "Have his office and home searched. He hasn't had time to run his ad, so if he stole the lay-out he'll still have it somewhere. We've got to keep him out of mischief—and we may be saving his life, at that."

He pulled open a drawer of his desk, and produced some pictures and handed them to Kent.

"You say you were approached by a tall, thin man. Ever see that fellow before?"

The pictures were of the corpse of the supposed Sergeant Otto Kranz.

"That's the man!" said Phineas Kent, excitedly. "That's him all right!"

Fowler gestured to Devlin.

"Take him away," he said. "I'm going to study this list of who was in the plant tonight."

Devlin rose, handcuffed Kent to him, and Fowler turned to the names Rennan had given him. Hayden Stone, naturally, was on the list. So was Henry Willson, the president; Richard Belden, the vice-president and general manager; Reginald Britton, vice-president in charge of engineering; Arne Rennan, and half a dozen others.

Then he lifted the telephone. He first tried to reach Willson, but there was no answer. Next on the list was Richard Belden. He got Belden at his office. Fowler identified himself.

"I want to see you immediately," he said. "I'll come up."

"I have important business," Belden objected.

"This happens to be more important," Fowler persisted. "Please wait in your office for me."

"Very well."

Fowler heard the angry click of the telephone. He grabbed his hat and went outside. It had stopped raining, at last, but the wind was chill. He drove directly to the plant, went to Belden's office.

"What is it now?" asked Belden. "Haven't you fellows investigated enough to satisfy the most suspicious minds?"

Fowler was looking at Belden's right hand. There was a cut on the forefinger.

"You ought to have that bandaged," said Fowler.

Belden looked down at the wound. "Perhaps," he said. "Just did it a little while ago. It's nothing."

"How?" asked Fowler.

Belden pointed to a flat sheet of metal on his desk.

"I was examining that Government emergency steel," he said.

Fowler glanced around the room, saw a barometer on the wall, one of the extremely expensive type. The needle had swung toward high pressure. Belden's glance followed Fowler's.

"Rain's stopped," said Fowler. "Think it'll clear?"

"Of course," snapped Belden. "What's my hobby got to do with your snooping?"

"Hobby, eh?" Fowler smiled. "Interesting. I was just asking about the weather. I'm tired of wearing my raincoat. By the way, Belden, did you know that someone had slugged Hayden Stone with a metal model airplane, and had stolen the plant lay-out?"

"I have Chief Rennan investigating. You don't by the wildest deduction connect that with the suicide of Harold Hunt, do you?"

"So Hunt's death is still a suicide to you?"

"Certainly."

Fowler produced several photographs of the dead Kranz. "Know him?" he asked. He saw Belden start.

"Why, yes. He was employed here as an engineer at one time."

"Thanks," said Fowler.

He left Belden's office, went to that occupied by Britton. The lights were out. The door was locked. He went downstairs, questioned the gate man.

"Mr. Britton must be somewhere in the plant, or went out

some other gate," the man said. "Nobody goes in or out at night without us knowing it."

"Check the other gates, please."

The man called several numbers.

"Mr. Britton is still in the plant," he said. "He hasn't gone out through any gate tonight."

Fowler went back to his office. . . .

## VIII

Larry Kendal, after reporting the finding of the bodies of the soldiers and doubling back for clues, found himself against a wall. He first traced down the Ford '41 sedan by a process of elimination, using the numbers six-blank-two-five. Only three Fords of '41 vintage in the state carried that combination of numbers, which filled in, gave him 6C-66-25. That license had been issued to one Homer Craft, of 2233 West Ninth Avenue.

Kendal hurried there. He found Craft busy packing.

"I was a defense worker until I got tired and quit," Craft told him surlily. "A man come up to me on the street and offered me five hundred bucks more than I paid for the bus. I'm no sap, so I took the dough and signed the pink slip over to him."

"Who was he?"

"Darned if I know. When you get that kind of dough, you don't ask questions. Besides, the buyer takes care of registering."

"What did he look like?"

"He was a tall, thin guy in a tweed suit. That's all I know. I'm leavin' fer Dakota tomorrow mornin'. No more aircraft plants for me. It ain't my war, anyway."

Kendal leveled a steely glance. "It could be," he replied slowly, and left the man.

His knuckles itched and he rubbed them. But socks on the jaw, nothing, could teach anything to a man like that.

His next step was to notify the police to be on the look-out for the car and to call the California Motor Vehicle Department at Sacramento. He found out that no change of ownership had been registered.

He then went to a local bank, where used gasoline ration stamps were turned in by distributors on large sheets to be checked by ultra-violet ray for counterfeits and then filed, and finally destroyed.

"What I want to know," said Kendal, "is where the owner of a California licensed car, registered Number six C—six—six—two—five has been buying gasoline."

"If your man has been using counterfeits, we'll have a record," the banking official told him.

After going through the suspected sheets, the man told Kendal:

"These sheets have come in within the last week and are suspected. Your man passed three C coupons at the United Station, Eighteenth Avenue and Ninth Street, two C's at the Louco station at Seventeenth and Eighth, three blocks away, and four C's at nineteenth and Ninth. If you can locate him, notify the OPA."

Kendal grinned. "I will," he agreed, "if he can still talk."

At each of the three stations he was told that the gas must have been purchased by a transient or by someone new in the neighborhood. No attendant could recall the car.

Kendal ate a sandwich at a hot dog stand and then, in his rented car, began cruising the neighborhood, covering all the streets which might be served by any of the three gaso-

line stations. Also, at intervals, he called Police Headquarters to find out if, as a result of his confidential request, prowler cars or patrolmen had spotted the '41 sedan. He received negative answers and his round of the neighborhood failed to reveal the car. Twice during the night he called Fowler at the field offices, but got no answer.

He spotted the sedan shortly before two o'clock in the morning. It was parked in front of a small bungalow on a side street. As he approached, two men in uniform closed the front door of the bungalow and started across the lawn. He saw them get into the car and waited for it to pass him. He followed. It drew up in front of an all-night restaurant, and the driver and his companion went inside. He parked and followed them, asking for a pack of cigarettes.

"Ham and eggs, cup of coffee and toast," he heard one of the men say.

The other ordered wheat cakes. Kendal knew, then, that he had a few minutes to investigate their hide-out. He took the cigarettes, and drove back to the bungalow.

After a few false tries with pass keys, he found one that worked and went inside. His flashlight showed him the living room in a state of complete disarray. Slowly, noiselessly, he prowled through a desk. He was surprised to find a stack of perhaps a dozen newspapers. A story had been cut from each. He tore out each clipped page and shoved them into his pocket.

These were the only things of interest he found in the living room. The dining room was littered with old newspapers, beer and rum bottles. The kitchen was a shambles.

Then he turned to the bedrooms. One was open, and revealed nothing. Another door was locked. Again he applied his pass keys and, as the door swung open, he heard a quick

intake of breath. His flashlight revealed a human bundle topped with wavy blond hair which could belong to only one person in the world.

"Sally!" he exclaimed.

"Larry!" came the reply. "For heaven's sakes, get us out of this! I heard your car outside and thought it was those phony soldiers, those murderers, back to torture us! Poor Nora!"

Larry swung his flashlight and saw Nora, her eyes bright with hope. He stripped the bonds from the girls' hands and feet. And, while he worked, Sally and Nora told him what had happened. Sally mentioned Hunt's remark about the A-27.

"Look, Sally," he said, as he pulled loose the tape as painlessly as possible. "Get Nora to a physician as quickly as you can. Tell Dan about the A-27, whatever it is." When Sally was free, he pushed a bundle of newspaper pages in her hands. "Have Dan check up on these and find out what the missing clippings are about. I've got to tail your phony soldiers until they lead me somewhere. But I'll get you to a cab first."

Kendal lifted Sally to her feet.

So serious was the beating that Nora had taken it was necessary for Sally and Kendal to support her. The trio headed for Kendal's car. He bundled the girls in, drove them to Balboa Park, hailed a waiting cab.

"Sally," he said, "tell Dan I'll be in touch with him as soon as I find out anything definite."

Dan Fowler, still puzzling over his reports, turned to answer the insistent jangling of the telephone. It was Washington calling him. He identified himself.

"Dan," Frank Jason of the main office said, "we've checked

up on that Class A pass found on Otto Kranz, alias Kroehler. In the first place, the type used to print it was some that didn't quite meet government specifications along about 1925. A Japanese firm put in a bid for it, and we shipped it to Tokyo. The paper is a pretty good counterfeit of our own Government paper—but it was made in Japan. I checked it against a lot of state instruments seized at the Japanese embassy. The brass dog tags are a give-away, too, as you know."

Fowler's forehead creased. "Thanks, Frank," he said. "I guess that cleans up your end of the case."

He hung up. First German bundists, and then Japs! First the theft or attempted theft of plans for the XB-91, America's aerial ace in the hole, and then the theft of the plant lay-out! Killers in Army uniforms, sullen plant officials, at least five murders and an assault. The whole plant in jeopardy! Dan Fowler rubbed his hands through his hair, then across the heavily lined features of his tired face.

A pounding on the outer office door jarred him from his worried thoughts. He leaped to his feet, energized by the possibility of some kind of a break which would untangle the maze. He darted for the door, swung it open.

Sally rushed to him, her hair awry, her make-up all but gone, her dress stained and creased and dirty, her hat askew. He took her in his arms, held her close.

"Thank heaven!" he exclaimed.

"Dan!" Sally gasped. "We've got to act fast!"

She told him first about the clippings.

"Get the newspaper on the telephone—it's a twenty-four hour sheet," he said. "Find out what those stories were."

In minutes she told him:

"Every one of 'em, for the past ten days, has been a weather report."

"Oh, glory!" exclaimed Fowler. "Days and nights of going batty and we get weather reports!" Then he stiffened. "Sally! Richard Belden, the vice-president and general manager, is an amateur meteorologist. Do you suppose—"

"You might have something there," Sally replied. "But get this—Nora Roberts told me that Harold Hunt, the day before his death, told her always to remember 'A-27'. He was going to tell her the rest and some man walked in—she doesn't remember who."

Fowler clenched his fists. "That number—A-27—where have I hit it before?"

Sally looked at him, wonderingly.

"Got it!" he exclaimed. "Harold Hunt had a plan for the A-27 in front of him when he was killed! Sally, that's the number of a plane, but he must have been trying to tell us something!" Abruptly he grabbed his hat. "Come on, Sally! We're going back to Harold Hunt's office. There's something that eludes me, and I think we'll find it there!"

Fowler led the way into Hunt's office, his flashlight playing. He clicked the light switch. He clutched Sally's arm, pointed over her head.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "I remember seeing it, now!"

Stencilled on the steel beam, which was painted gray, was "A-27."

"In large buildings of this type," he said, "every girder station is numbered. You can find your way over the entire plant by simply referring to the beam numbers. Wait—'A-27'!"

He eyed the beam intersection, grabbed a chair. A moment later he was on it, tapping the beam, working with a small, compact tool kit which he always carried. A bulge in the girder at the horizontal joint about seven feet off the floor led him to pry. There was a metallic snap. The entire

false superstructure on the girder snapped away, revealing a space at least two feet long, a foot wide and two inches deep. Out of it tumbled a welter of papers. Fowler studied them.

"The master plans for the XB-91!" he exclaimed. "Come on, Sally. We've got to get these in a safe deposit box!"

## IX

Thankful for the cloudless, moon-drenched night, Larry Kendal raced after the gray sedan. It had long since left the city and was twisting up a winding state highway which led to the new San Pablo dam. Kendal recalled reading about the huge project, designed to supply adequate water to the population of war-swollen San Diego. It had been completed only a short time before and was awaiting operation by the state.

Far ahead, the pursued car swung off the highway and headed for the base of the dam. Kendal turned out his lights and followed. He saw the sedan stop, its lights blink out. He ran his own car off the road, parked it behind a clump of bushes and darted forward, a flat .45 ready in his hand. As he sprinted, he saw his quarry enter a large opening in the side of one of the high granite cliffs beside the dam. He realized that this had been a by-pass tunnel used to carry the water of the now dry creek around the dam while it was being constructed. Then he saw what in the moonlight was recognizable as an Army ambulance emerge from the tunnel. It was followed by another. The puzzled G-man saw six in all roll out.

He darted toward the tunnel's mouth, dodging from tree to tree. By the time he reached the entrance all six ambulances had cleared. He ducked into it, advanced slowly through the darkness, his pistol still ready. After he had

gone about twenty-five yards, free hand extended, it struck something. He felt the chill of cold metal. He drew out a flashlight and guardedly threw the beam ahead. A huge crimson truck loomed directly in front of him. And as he flashed the light on the identification numbers, he realized that it was the hijacked TNT truck! He went to the rear of it. It was still half loaded!

"Enough to blow the San Pablo dam sky high!"

He had started around toward the front of the truck when a chill voice commanded:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Kendal saw the dim figure of a man in an Army uniform and the glint of the Garand rifle pointed directly at his stomach. Taking a long chance, he flashed his light, then hurled it at his challenger's head. The brief flash of light revealed the man as one of the two who had captured and tortured Nora Roberts and Sally Vane. The G-man lunged sideward. The rifle barked hollowly in the big tunnel. Kendal, knowing that the sound of the shot would probably bring others and that he would be trapped in the tunnel, blasted his .45. The bark of the weapon was followed by a low moan and choking gurgle. As Kendal darted forward, he heard the clatter of the rifle against the rock and the thud of a body.

He had not yet reached the entrance when he heard another challenge ahead of him. His gun spat a second time as he lunged to one side, to get out of the path of answering fire, and closed in. His second shot found its target and he raced out of the cavern. He heard heavy shoes pounding over the rocks from the direction of the dam. Shouts filled the night. Kendal realized the cleverness of his adversaries in placing a phony Army guard on the dam to keep everyone away from their operations, although this and other dams along the coast had not been guarded by the Army for

months as the result of the lifting of defense regulations. At the same time he realized that not only was the San Pablo dam in danger of being wiped off the map at any moment, but that six ambulances filled with TNT were bound somewhere for similar destruction.

And he was the only guardian of the law who knew it!

The knowledge that this section of the United States might be blasted loose from its hinges at any moment spurred him as he darted from tree to tree and bush to bush to dodge a fusillade of shots, which sped after him through the night. He dived into his car, swung it around and raced down the highway toward San Diego, hoping to pick up the death-laden ambulances.

As he approached the outskirts of the city, a neon light identified a roadhouse. He swung into the crowded parking area and raced into the establishment, packed with merry-making defense workers. He found a pay telephone booth and dialed the operator, and when she answered gave her a special number which would connect him immediately with the commanding general of the Fourth Defense Area. . . .

## X

Dan Fowler, his revolver on the desk in front of him, sat tense and waiting in Harold Hunt's chair in the darkened office of the dead engineer. He had been waiting, wondering if his well-laid plan would work. He had not expected to wait this long and was beginning to think that his scheming had gone awry when his trained ears detected catlike footfalls in the corridor outside of the office, followed by a turning of the doorknob. Coolly, now that his moment had arrived, he picked up his revolver and leveled it at the door. He had made arrangements for the lights in the main engi-

neering department to be turned out and the darkness was almost total. The door swung open and the dim figure of a crouching man, gun gleaming in his hand entered the room.

"That's all, Britton!" Fowler said in a low, steely voice. "Stick 'em up. I've got you covered."

At the same instant he switched on the desk lamp which he had turned so as to blind the intruder. Britton immediately straightened.

"Come, come!" he demanded defiantly. "What's the meaning of this nonsense?" He blinked several times. "Oh, so it's you, Inspector Fowler."

"Right," affirmed the G-man. "I think you'd better come along with me. You've got some mighty pretty explaining to do."

"I think I can do that very readily, Fowler," the vice-president in charge of engineering said. "This is completely unwarranted."

He reached over and lifted the telephone. "What are you doing?" asked Fowler.

"I'm calling my attorney and telling him to meet me at your office. I warn you that if any attempt is made to jail me, I'll have a writ of habeas corpus quicker than you can say 'Nazi'."

Fowler let the engineer place the call, then told him to come along. . . .

Two hours of adroit grilling by Fowler failed to shake Britton's story that Nora Roberts had come to him and had told him that Hunt had secreted the master plans for the jet-propelled bomber in Girder A-27, that he had gone to the plant to get the plans immediately and put them in a place for safe keeping, that a guard had admitted him without question, and that he had brought a pistol with him because

he feared he might bump into some enemy agent also seeking the plans.

"It seems to me," said Lawler, Britton's attorney, "that my client has given you a complete and satisfactory explanation of his presence at the company offices. I request that you release him immediately. You haven't one jot of evidence against him, which is understandable. I can assure you that he will be available for any further questioning, although I can't possibly see any reason for it."

Fowler turned to Arch Devlin, the agent in charge. "It looks very much, Arch, as if we've barked up the wrong tree. We haven't a single clue on which to hold Britton."

Devlin nodded agreement. Fowler turned to Britton and Lawler.

"That will be all, gentlemen," he said, making no attempt to conceal the disappointment in his voice and manner. "However, Britton, I'm checking your story about being passed by the guard at Gate Four, and it's possible you'll hear from us again."

Wordlessly, the engineer and his lawyer rose and left the office.

Devlin turned to Fowler. "It looks as if we're still in the dark."

Fowler smiled at him. Then both men looked up to see Larry Kendal, clothing disheveled, face flushed and panting heavily, barge into the office. He told of his experiences in concise detail.

"After I failed to find any trace of the six TNT-loaded ambulances," Kendal concluded, "I notified the commanding general of this area to close in on the San Pablo dam and prevent it from being blown up and to put every available man onto trying to locate the six ambulances. I also notified the city police to be on the look-out for them and

call you here if they discovered them. Where in the devil could those ambulances be going?"

During the latter part of Kendal's recital, Fowler's eyes had a far-away look in them. When Kendal finished he snapped his fingers and leaped out of his chair.

"Good heavens, Larry!" he exclaimed. "We've been blind! Put the evidence together. An organized gang knocks off a TNT truck. Hunt is murdered with the same gun that killed the soldiers. You find weather reports clipped from a series of newspapers. Hayden Stone is knocked out and the plant lay-out is stolen. It's all as plain as day now. That gang is going to try to blow up the Amalgamated plant! They watched the weather reports because as long as it was raining they couldn't get into the draining system underneath the plant and airport to plant the explosives. They stole the plant lay-out to find out exactly where those drains are located!"

Arch Devlin banged his fist on the desk.

"Jeepers!" he exclaimed. "You've got it, Fowler! It all fits in perfectly. Now that the weather has cleared, the drains are empty, they'll blow the plant higher than a kite at any minute!"

"Arch," Fowler ordered, "call all the men you've got and put them in the hills in back of the plant. Larry, you notify the city police. Tell 'em all to bring tommy-guns, tear bombs, hand grenades and everything else they can lay their hands on. I'll notify the Army and get Chief Rennan's plant police on the prowl."

As he spoke, he reached for a telephone. The other two men also sought instruments.

Dan Fowler got his first break half an hour later, when one of Rennan's men called in.

"There's six ambulances and a bunch of soldiers unload-

ing some cans into a big man-hole in front of 3254 Burma Street," he blurted excitedly. "Is that what you fellows wanted to know?"

"Yes," snapped Fowler. "Report to Rennan."

He hung up, turned to the others. "Gather up the arsenal, boys," he ordered. "We're on our way."

As they left the building for their car, Sally ran up.

"How about taking me?" she said.

"You go on upstairs and catch a call I'm waiting for," said Fowler. "It'll probably break the case."

Sally hid her disappointment with a shrug. "Very well," she said, as she gave the G-man's arm an eloquent squeeze. "Be careful, Dan."

"Thanks, darling," Dan replied brusquely to hide the warmth in his heart at her concern for him.

He piled into the car after Devlin and Kendal. In short order they reached the Burma Street address and found Rennan and a number of his officers behind a laundry, waiting for his command.

"Let's go, boys!" Fowler ordered. "Cover them and try to take them alive, but if they start anything, let 'em have it."

Under Fowler's direction, the score of men deployed and surrounded the ambulances. Fowler advanced, with tommy-gun ready.

"Hold everything!" he commanded to a group of men who were passing cannisters from the ambulances to the man-holes.

The men stopped short and swung around.

"What's the idea, buddy?" a man with sergeant's stripes on his sleeve growled. "Put that pop-gun away. You're fooling with the Army."

"The game's up," retorted Fowler. "Stick 'em up."

The opening shot came from behind one of the ambu-

lances. Fowler felt lead pluck at the side of his coat. The answering blast from his machine-gun sent the would-be killer sprawling in the street. Fowler dropped to his knees as more fire poured from the ambulances, and the men behind him, backing him up, returned it and started lobbing tear-gas shells. Fowler saw the "sergeant" dart for the man-hole, and practically cut him in half with a blast from his tommy-gun. He darted for the man-hole himself and from the corner of his eye saw Kendal coming after him.

He dropped into the sloping dark cavern which led under the plant and encountered an empty-handed man in uniform, coming back for another load of TNT. Fowler punched the tommy-gun into the fellow's stomach and Kendal slipped manacles on him. They continued down the incline.

Another uniformed man struggled up the culvert, gun raised. Just as he was about to fire, Fowler blasted. The man's body crumpled. Fowler reached a turn and from a tributary drain which he did not see, strong hands snatched at his gun and pulled him sideward. Kendal's ready weapon cracked behind Fowler and the hands which pinioned him lost their strength. Dan Fowler struggled downward through the darkness, found the culvert leveling off and heard the rumbling sound of vehicular traffic overhead. That would be Coast Boulevard. He plunged onward, bumping into a body in the darkness. With an upward swing of his tommy-gun he belted the man in the body. Kendall snapped cuffs on him also.

Fifty yards farther on the G-man found five men stacking the explosives by the wan light of a small electric lantern.

"Stick 'em up!" he commanded, and his voice roared and echoed hollowly through the subterranean passage.

The surprise was complete. The phony uniformed men,

startled and craven under the guns, raised their hands. Fowler, backed by Kendal, stepped into the dim light in the areaway. They manacled their white-faced, cowering captives in a trice. In the distance Fowler saw a pale shaft of light.

"Larry," he said to Kendal, "let's run these rats this way and see if we can get them out. It'll save us that long climb up through the culvert."

Minutes later they were forcing their captives up through a man-hole. Fowler looked around him.

"Good heavens, Larry!" he exclaimed. "That tunnel runs directly under the Experimental Building, and the XB-91's in it!"

They marched their captives up the hill to Burma street. The battle out there was over now. Several prisoners had been taken and police ambulances had been summoned to haul the wounded and dead away after the bloody encounter. Fowler instructed Devlin to go with the prisoners to the Federal Building and get statements. He was about to climb into his car when Sally Vane, blonde hair flying, ran up to him.

"Dan!" she exclaimed. "Are you all right? Is Larry hurt?"

"Not a scratch on either of us." He added sternly, "I thought I told you to stay at the office."

"But, Dan," Sally protested, "I've been looking all over for you. Agent Henderson has an important message."

"That's different!" Fowler cried. "Come on, Larry, we've got to get to a telephone."

He got permission to make a call in an apartment house nearby.

"Britton has just left his home," Henderson reported, "and our men are tailing him in a car. They just reported by two-

way radio that Britton has started circling Mission Bay on the Coast Boulevard and is heading for Rose Canyon. He's alone in his car and apparently is observing the thirty-five mile speed limit to avoid attracting attention to himself. Our men are well back of him and he doesn't know he's being followed."

"Fine," replied Fowler. "Join them and I'll pick them up immediately."

He went outside, summoned his coworker, and they got into Fowler's coupé. Ten minutes later they were tearing down the Torrey Pines grade. Five minutes after that they picked up the Government car at Leucadia. Fowler tooled his coupé ahead of the sedan carrying the other F.B.I. men and dogged Britton's tail.

The "break" came just north of Camp Pendleton, Britton turning off toward the ocean on a narrow, winding dirt road leading to a deserted fishing camp. Fowler extinguished his lights and followed, using moonlight, and the dawn which was just paling the eastern sky, for guidance.

Just beyond the white line of beach sand, Britton stopped his car and walked down the beach beside the bluff. Fowler and Kendal followed, hugging the shadows along the bluff. He looked back and saw Henderson and the four other F.B.I. men tailing some twenty yards behind him. As Britton advanced hesitantly along the sand, three men emerged from the shadows and accosted him. Behind them, in a small inlet, lay a speed boat. Several additional figures were around it.

What happened then was totally unexpected. As Fowler drew closer, to hear the men's words, he recognized the tallest man as Sadakichi Notomura, high in the ranks of Japanese Intelligence. The G-man had not only studied many photographs and read descriptions of the Jap, but had met

him several years before in Washington. Fowler caught his first words.

"Mr. Britton, you have doublecrossed us. You have brought American agents with you. We have had the road watched carefully. The penalty is death." Notomura's voice was high, shrill and sibilant.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about!" Britton faltered, shaken. "For heaven's sake, don't kill me! You've got to take me with you! My own countrymen will kill me if you leave me."

Fowler saw no mercy in Notomura's next words. And a Jap in the uniform of a Navy officer raised a weapon which glinted dully in the moonlight.

"Mr. Britton," said Notomura ominously, the coldness of death in his tone, "you have failed us."

Fowler saw the pistol in the hand of the Jap level, and his own weapon blasted. The two reports sounded as one. Britton pitched forward. The Japanese officer who had executed him, coughed, clutched his chest and sprawled on the sand.

The other masquerading officer grabbed Notomura and pulled him to the shelter of the bluff. Both Fowler's and Kendal's weapons spoke. The F.B.I. men deployed behind them and the men at the speed boat opened fire, filling the air with lead. As Fowler and Kendal plunged around the corner of the bluff to get Notomura and his escort into range, the engine of the speed boat raced and it started out through the surf.

Fowler, Kendal and the agents poured lead after the low, sleek craft as it bobbed through the surf and beyond it, although knowing that their chances of hitting it were slim. Then from the speed boat came three short flashes which were answered by three more flashes from a dark object on the surface of the water, far out at sea.

"They're heading for a submarine!" shouted Fowler. "Quick, Larry! We've got to make a break for Pendleton and notify Navy and Coast Guard planes to get out here—fast."

They ran to the coupé, raced onto the main highway and into the Marine Base headquarters. Fowler sent his demand for help over direct wires.

As he and Kendal left the building, dawn was lighting the sky. By the time they reached the other F.B.I. men waiting on the beach, sleek Navy patrol planes were circling overhead, dropping "ash-cans" on the submarine, which attempted to crash dive after taking Notomura and his men on board.

Cans of explosives came hurtling down, splashed into the sea, set the sea to rumbling and shook the beach. Finally, before the very eyes of Fowler, Kendal and the other G-men, the stern of the submarine rose slowly into the air and poised like the mast of a stricken schooner. Then slowly it slipped back into the cold waters of the Pacific, chalking up another victory for the combined forces of Uncle Sam.

## XI

As the sleek airliner headed eastward into the morning, Larry Kendal turned in his seat to Dan Fowler.

"Britton's dead, Notomura and the submarine crew are in Davy Jones' locker, and the entire sabotage organization is wiped out," he said. "But, Dan, there are a lot of things you haven't told Sally and me."

Fowler smiled his willingness to explain now.

"The giant ring started," he said, "when Kranz and his gang were deported from this country to Germany. They were sent to Japan, trained, and equipped for the jobs they

tried to do. Notomura, who probably hatched the whole plan, had Kranz contact Britton who was so greedy for money that he would sell out his country. Then the gang was sent over, probably outfitted with the uniforms of our heroic dead at Bataan, and with phony identifications."

"Through Britton, Kranz went to work at Amalgamated, made the acquaintance and gained the friendship of Hunt. Hunt apparently trusted him to the last minute, when something must have warned him of danger, and he pulled the plan for the A-27 from his desk in a last-minute attempt to give us a clue. Kranz, covering every possible loop-hole, used Hunt's pistol to kill Sergeant Dailey when the TNT truck was hijacked, so that the dead Hunt might be blamed for the hijacking."

"But how in the world did you get wise to Britton?" asked Sally Vane.

"And why," pursued Kendal, "did you release him after you once had him in custody?"

"One at a time!" exclaimed Fowler tiredly, but good-naturedly. "I first suspected Britton when, after the plant lay-out had been stolen, and plant police on all gates were told to check everyone entering and leaving Amalgamated, Britton conveniently disappeared from his office. It occurred to me that, using the plant lay-out for his guide, he might have made his exit through one of the drainage culverts, since it had stopped raining."

"After finding the plans for the XB-91, which Kranz had failed to get, and which Britton was to turn over to the Japanese, I went to Nora Roberts. I asked her to go to the plant and request confidential interviews with all the men involved, hurrying quickly from one office to another shortly before six o'clock. She was to tell each man that before Hunt's death, he had confided in her that the plans were

secreted in girder A-27. She did this. I then had the Army defense office and Rennan establish special guards on all gates and permit no one, under any circumstances, to enter the plant after six o'clock. The guilty man, to whom the plans meant life or death, would be turned away at all entrances, and would seek some other means of ingress—in other words, the drainage system he had used before. I waited in Hunt's office and Britton appeared."

"And you let Britton go," Kendal said.

"Britton only thought I let him go," he replied. "Devlin had so many agents on his tail that he couldn't even blink without them knowing it. My purpose was to have him lead me to the higher-up, whom I was certain would be some foreign agent. That happened to be Notomura, and the Navy and Coast Guard planes closed his book. Belden's meteorological hobby made me suspect him, but I found he'd been a weather fan for years, and his hobby had no special significance."

"One of the trickiest parts of the whole thing, I think," said Larry Kendal, "was how they got those Army ambulances. They found out that a number of ambulances had been released to a Hollywood company which supplied them for motion picture use, and simply rented them to make a motion picture!"

Fowler sighed and glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Too bad we're heading East right now," he said. "Willson told me that the XB-91 would be in the air this morning. Too bad we couldn't see Harold Hunt's dream come true, and that Hunt can't be there either. But there isn't much time to pause and get your breath these days, or even to speculate about around which corner death lies waiting. I wonder why the Chief wants us back in Washington in such a hurry?"

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## DESIGN FOR SUICIDE

*By*

MYRON DAVID ORR

---

THE hot tropical night of New Guinea reeked with the stench of shiny, rotting vegetation. The house of the Reverend Frederick Hastings, a Methodist missionary who had established a mission in a native village a few miles outside of Port Moresby showed a single light through the darkness of the jungle.

A native boy tossed restlessly on an Army cot that Hastings had set up in the living room of the mission house. The flickering light from the kerosene lamp made grotesque shadows dance across the walls. Hastings mopped his forehead repeatedly as he listened to the chattering of the delirious and fever-stricken black boy.

The Reverend Hastings was not afraid of death, but he definitely was not going to take any chances with his life when he realized the knowledge he had learned from the delirious babbling might cause his early demise. As he watched, his patient gradually quieted down and began to perspire and breathe heavier.

The black boy was a truck driver for one of the suspected opium distributors of Port Moresby and had been a former mission boy in Hastings' mission. In his delirium the boy

had definitely connected Alfonzo, the Portuguese trader, with the opium racket.

Alfonzo was one of the most dangerous men in the Southwest Pacific. He had been charged with murder at least a dozen times but had always managed to escape conviction. Now the babbling of a delirious boy had given Hastings the information he needed to start the breaking up of the vicious opium traffic.

Hastings also knew that when Alfonzo found out that the boy had been sick and had been treated at the mission, he would immediately suspect that the boy, having been under the influence of the mission, might have talked.

Hastings was an ardent foe of opium. His work against the traffic in the drug had made him a special target for subtle and undercover attacks by unknown persons. There had been anonymous threats against his life, as well as an actual attempt to ambush and kill him one night when he was returning home from Port Moresby, after attending a meeting with the local authorities in charge of narcotic control.

If Alfonzo should become suspicious that Hastings might have learned about the opium activities in Port Moresby, there was no telling what might happen.

Hastings decided that the best thing for him to do was to get in touch with Dr. Edward Hagg, the superintendent of the Government hospital in Port Moresby for the criminal insane. Hagg was also the head of the Narcotic Control Commission for the territory of New Guinea.

As soon as it was daylight, he called his trusted Government-trained "doctor boy," instructed him how to take care of the sick boy, and left for Port Moresby to see Dr. Hagg.

Dr. Hagg was one of the most powerful politicians in Port

Moresby. He had backed the Reverend Hastings in his campaign against opium and had contributed liberally to the mission school. Many did not like Dr. Hagg on account of his overbearing air of superiority. They felt that he had a super-super conception of his own magnitude in the community. The swaggering manner in which he strutted down the street, the condescending tone of his voice when he talked, the smirk of self-satisfied ego that played around his lips gave most people a feeling of antagonism toward him.

Nevertheless, Dr. Hagg was highly respected in his profession. He had a brilliant record of remarkable achievements in the cure of mental ailments, and a devotion to those who had no money and needed medical attention. He made sizable contributions to charity and served without charge on many public commissions devoted to the welfare of the indigent.

The Reverend Hastings felt that Dr. Hagg's powerful influence would be able to reach out and crush Alfonzo and his racketeers, if steps could be taken immediately.

Arriving at the hospital he was admitted to Dr. Hagg's private office at once.

"Good morning, Dr. Hastings," Hagg greeted him cordially. "What may I do for you today?"

"May we talk privately?" requested Hastings, glancing at the doctor's secretary who was working at a filing cabinet.

"Certainly," Hagg answered agreeably. "Miss Stinson, do you mind?"

"Not at all, Doctor." She smiled and left the room.

"What's on your mind," inquired the physician pleasantly as he motioned the D. D. to a chair.

"Dr. Hagg," Hastings began, "you have always helped me

when I have needed a little assistance in my work to eliminate opium from this community—"

"I'm always ready to help," Hagg broke in, and took out of the desk a large check book. "How much do you need?"

"I don't need any money, Doctor," Hastings informed him. "I need your influence."

"Well, that's easy," laughed the doctor. "That is, if my influence amounts to anything."

"It will in this case, because I have just come into possession of information which absolutely places the responsibility for opium distribution in this district!"

A look of incredulity crossed Dr. Hagg's face.

"You mean you have at last found out who is at the bottom of the opium racket here in Port Moresby?" he asked, his tone skeptical.

"I have, Doctor!"

"Who?" Hagg's tone was staccato.

"The Portuguese trader, Alfonzo!"

The physician's eyes narrowed.

"How did you find that out?" he asked tersely.

"One of my former mission boys came back last night, terribly sick with a fever. I put him to bed and treated him. In his delirium he talked. He drives a truck for Alfonzo who sends him down to the docks to meet certain ships. These ships have cases of opium which are delivered to the truck, then taken to Alfonzo's Trading Emporium.

"Alfonzo has made an addict of this boy who is now a physical wreck. We will have to act quickly, because if Alfonzo ever finds out that this boy has been to my mission there is no telling what may happen. He isn't delirious at present, but there is no way to predict what he will do if he gets out of his head again."

"Did the boy mention any other names?" questioned the doctor.

"No one else."

"I think we had better send a litter out and pick him up," decided Dr. Hagg. "If we have him under our control, we won't have to bother about Alfonzo. Besides I think we will give him the cure."

"I think Alfonzo should be raided at once," suggested Hastings.

"I agree with you," Hagg answered emphatically. "But let me handle this matter. It's too dangerous for ordinary methods. We will have to act with caution. Let me take the responsibility. I will show that the boy talked when he was here at the hospital. That will keep your name out of the mess and save you from any retaliatory act by members of the trader's gang."

"That certainly is mighty fine of you, Dr. Hagg," Hastings said gratefully. "This community should be mighty proud of a man of your caliber."

"Forget it," answered Dr. Hagg quietly, as he arose to bid Hasting's good-by. "I'll have the boy brought in right away. If there is to be a goat, I'm much better fitted to be one than you. . . ."

One of Reverend Hastings' best friends was Archibald Sylvester Brewster McCann, an American anthropologist living among the natives in the small village a few miles from the mission school.

McCann was unique. He was about six feet six inches in height, as thin as a rail and didn't care how he dressed. He had a house in the native village so that he could study the habits and daily life of the natives at first hand.

He dressed as they dressed, and went barefoot much to the

disgust of the local Allied Military Governor, Lieutenant-Colonel James Holcomb, who tried to reason with him about lowering the dignity of the white man. However nothing could change McCann's way of living.

Besides being an anthropologist, McCann was a graduate physician and surgeon. He also had studied law in the United States and had served for several years as a district attorney in the City of New York. Unknown to every one except Lieutenant-Colonel Holcomb, McCann was an undercover agent for the Allied Military Government of the occupied territory of New Guinea. With his study of anthropology as a blind, his real objective was to ferret out any subversive activities that might be started among the natives by the enemy.

The Reverend Hastings was able to furnish him with many interesting details of native life, and he in turn assisted Hastings by treating the poor who came to the mission.

On the morning following the day Hastings had gone to see Dr. Hagg, McCann decided to visit the mission. He arose at daybreak, as was his custom, and ambled over to the house of the Reverend Hastings. As he approached the house he saw the minister's house boy squatting in front of the screened door.

"Where Masta Hastings?" he inquired.

"Masta sleeping," replied the boy. "Masta no like noise till masta wake up! Me stop long dis place til masta wake up."

"Well, it's time he was up." McCann grinned. "I'll get him up in a jiffy."

Entering the house McCann glanced around the living room, then walked over to the sleeping room where Hast-

ings slept. He could see him faintly through the heavy mosquito netting canopied over the bed.

"Hey there, Lazybones!" he called. "What do you mean by sleeping all day?"

There was no response.

"Hey, you!" he yelled louder. "Come on! Get up!"

Suddenly McCann realized that the room was unusually quiet. He opened the mosquito netting and peered inside. Hastings was lying on his back and his eyes were staring glassily upward. The left sleeve of his shirt was rolled well above his biceps. There was a gash on the inside of his upper arm. A mass of clotted blood spread over the white sheets of the bed around his arm.

"Hey, boy!" McCann shouted. "Come here, hurry up!"

The house boy hurried into the room.

"Masta Hastings, plenty much sick!" McCann informed him. "Masta maybe dead. What name fella come long see Masta?"

"No fella see Masta," answered the boy, his eyes bulging in terror as he saw the matted blood and the staring eyes of Hastings. "Masta here alone all time!"

"You here all time?"

"Yes, me here all time," the boy insisted, his teeth chattering in fear. "Me see Masta go long bed. No fella man come long dis place."

"All right!" McCann said, and hastily ordered, "You go long Port Moresby plenty hurry. Singout long Chief Police French long police station house. Bring Masta French dis place plenty much hurry up. Now go!"

As the boy flashed out of the house and sped along the trail to Port Moresby, McCann began to inspect the house. He was careful not to disturb anything. He found a small

kitchen knife lying on the bed beside Hastings' right hand. Both knife and hand were smeared with blood. McCann did not touch either.

Hastings was not undressed. He had on his shoes, pants and shirt. His white shirt was slightly rumpled. There were no signs of a struggle.

The entire house was in perfect order when McCann looked it over. He decided to wait until French arrived before making any further investigation.

The natural inquisitiveness of the natives began to manifest itself. They began to congregate outside the house. McCann went out and started talking to them. He told them that Masta Hastings was very sick; maybe dead. They insisted that no one had visited Masta Hastings during the day before, neither had anyone seen a visitor the night before.

McCann did learn, however, that Hastings had gone into Port Moresby early in the morning and had returned about noon. He also learned that one of Hastings' former mission boys who had been working in Port Moresby had been sick with fever at Hastings' house the night before, and that he had been taken to the big "sick place long Port Moresby" by litter soon after Hastings had returned.

By the time French arrived from Port Moresby with Dr. Yarrow, the local coroner, and several police boys, practically the entire village had assembled at the mission house. Their grief and concern was genuine as they walked slowly back and forth in front of the house, chanting hymns they had learned at the mission.

"What's the trouble this time?" French greeted McCann. "From what this house boy said I took it for granted that the whole mission was slaughtered."

"It looks as if Hastings has committed suicide," McCann told him solemnly.

"There's no telling what these religious fanatics will do," observed French. "What makes you think it's suicide?"

"Anthropologically speaking, it shouldn't be suicide." McCann smiled. "It isn't according to his behavior pattern!"

"Well, let's go in," French said impatiently. "I'll soon know what it is."

"He had no reason to commit suicide," McCann continued as they entered the house. "He has been unusually happy the last week, looking forward to the first of the month. He was going back to the States and see his wife."

"Has anything been moved?" asked French, looking around.

"Everything is exactly the same as I found it this morning," McCann assured him.

"That's good!" French nodded with satisfaction. "Glad you're here, McCann. It's better to have at least two people on a case like this."

French and McCann made a thorough investigation of the bed while Dr. Yarrow examined the body. Then the official and the anthropologist made an exhaustive search of the remainder of the house. Hastings' personal papers were examined minutely, but there was nothing to show a cause for his death, neither were there any clues which might shed light on the apparent suicide.

"You know, McCann," French said thoughtfully, "this is the first case I've ever had where I didn't have at least one or two clues to start on. There isn't a blasted thing here to show this is anything except plain suicide."

"If it isn't suicide," McCann decided reluctantly, "it's a perfect murder."

"Too bad you can't work your anthropology on this," French said, with a smile.

McCann didn't answer. He just grinned.

"Well, boys," announced Dr. Yarrow, "he bled to death. He severed his brachial artery."

McCann walked over to the doctor who was examining Hastings' body. He noted the incision. It was a clean cut. There were no ragged edges, neither were there any exploratory cuts near it.

"Where is the knife, Doctor?" McCann asked.

"There it is," Yarrow pointed to a kitchen knife carefully placed on a piece of paper on the floor. McCann stooped over as if to pick it up. "Don't touch it," warned the coroner. "Fingerprints, you know."

"I just wanted to look at it," McCann said.

The knife was an ordinary kitchen utensil with a pointed blade approximately four inches long. The handle was smeared with blood.

"Doc," McCann asked casually, "would you say that knife there is a sharp one?"

The coroner shook his head.

"No, it isn't particularly sharp," he answered.

"Wouldn't you say that the incision in Hastings' arm was made by a very sharp instrument?"

"Why—yes, I would say that," agreed Yarrow, taking a new interest in the wound. "Yes, it certainly is a clean cut."

"He must have had a lot of nerve to stick himself like that," McCann observed quietly.

"Yep, he surely must have wanted to die pretty badly," the doctor admitted, with a shake of his head.

"About through, Doc?" asked French, coming into the house.

"Yep, all through, Chief."

"Hey, you fellas!" French called to the police boys. "Bring litter inside house."

Hastings' body was placed on the litter and French and Dr. Yarrow took leave of McCann who stayed at the house to see that the natives didn't ransack the place.

After they had gone, McCann went back into the living room and slouched down in a big wicker chair. His eyes strayed restlessly around the room. He noticed that the plain boards of the floor had been newly scrubbed. And in numerous places on the boards were small beadlike indentations as though small BB shot had been partially pressed down into their surface.

These spots intrigued him. They were numerous around Hastings' desk, especially at the side nearest the center of the room. They scattered out and led into the kitchen. They also led into the sleeping room. These were more numerous than those leading into the kitchen.

McCann got up and went into the sleeping room. The indentation led directly to the bed and quite a few were at the side of the bed, though they were not so distinct.

"Somebody had round-headed nails in his shoes," decided McCann.

He called for the house boy.

"Hey, you boy, what time dis floor get wash?" he asked.

"Me wash floor yesterday time sun he go down in trees," answered the boy.

"What time long clock?" McCann inquired.

"Maybe five, maybe six long clock," answered the boy.

McCann's pulse quickened. This wasn't suicide! It was murder!

He sent the house boy for the *luluwe* (chief) of the vil-

lage, and while the boy was gone made a search for Hastings' shoes. He found several pairs. All had crepe rubber soles. He distinctly remembered the shoes Hastings had on when they found him in the bed. They'd also had crepe rubber soles.

When the *luluwye* arrived, McCann ordered him to keep a strict watch over the mission house and not to let anyone in until someone arrived who could take over officially.

Hurrying down the trail to Port Moresby, he soon arrived at the office of Lieutenant-Colonel Holcomb.

"Colonel," he announced unceremoniously as he walked into the colonel's private office without knocking, "Hastings was murdered!"

"What's that?" the colonel asked in surprise. "What's that?"

"I said Hastings was murdered!" repeated McCann.

"And I suppose you have the murderer all tied up and ready for us to bring in?" The colonel smiled.

"No, but I will have him in a short time," McCann assured. "I would like French and his fingerprint man to go with me when I get back from the hospital. I am going to see the sick boy who was taken there from the mission house yesterday. I believe that with Dr. Hagg's help we may be able to get something out of him. If you will have French over here when I come back we can all go out to the mission house together. I feel sure the answer is right in that house."

"Okay, Mac," agreed the colonel. "We'll all be waiting."

When McCann arrived at the hospital he was ushered into Dr. Hagg's office.

"I would like to talk to the boy who was brought in from Reverend Hastings' mission yesterday," he informed the hospital head.

Dr. Hagg looked at him searchingly.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, "but that boy had a bad heart. He was a very sick boy. We couldn't do a thing for him. He is dead."

McCann's eyes narrowed. "Dr. Hastings has been murdered!" he announced abruptly.

"What?" exclaimed Hagg, as he got quickly from his chair. "I saw him just yesterday!" He started pacing back and forth across the floor. "He was terribly upset, and . . . Excuse me a moment, will you? I'll be right back. I want to go to Police Headquarters and see Colonel Holcomb and Chief French, so if you will wait a minute, I'll drive you down."

As McCann waited for Dr. Hagg's return, he walked over toward the window behind the doctor's desk. The sun shone through it on the linoleum-covered floor. McCann stopped suddenly and started to scrutinize the shiny linoleum where the sun was shining, but lifted his head quickly as he heard the doctor returning. When Hagg entered, McCann was looking out the window.

"My car is out in the yard," Hagg said. "If you're ready, we'll go down the back way."

They were approaching the car when a patient who was being pushed across the yard in a wheel-chair jumped up and, with a blood curdling yell, rushed at the doctor. Dr. Hagg reached quickly in his pocket and as the patient grabbed him brought his hand up to the patient's face. There was a hiss of escaping air and the patient dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Without the least show of excitement or nervousness, the doctor continued on to the car after motioning to the attendants to remove the patient.

As the chauffeur drove them away, Dr. Hagg opened his hand and showed McCann a small cylinder about four inches long and an inch in diameter, with an escape jet and valve at one end.

"This is one of the most valuable weapons for protection I've ever had," he explained. "Ethyl chloride under high pressure. One squirt of that in a person's nostrils and he is out like a light. He won't come out of it until we have had sufficient time to get him into a cell."

"That's quite a handy gadget to carry," McCann admitted admiringly.

"I perfected it some time ago," Hagg told him. "It saves a lot of unnecessary exertion in handling shell-shocked boys—a most humane way of controlling them."

On their arrival at Police Headquarters they found French and Holcomb waiting for them.

"Colonel," Dr. Hagg said at once, "I have just learned of the death of the Reverend Hastings. I feel that I may be partly responsible for his death, because he came to me with certain information which I should have acted upon immediately. I want to do everything in my power to help clear this matter up. However, there are certain things I must do before we act officially. I want you all to know I am terribly grieved over this misfortune to our community. I will not rest until I have completely satisfied myself that we have found the murderer."

"We will certainly cooperate with you to the fullest extent whenever you are ready, Dr. Hagg," Colonel Holcomb said gratefully.

Hagg smiled a little. "I don't pose as any Sherlock Holmes," he said, "but I do believe we can successfully ter-

minate this matter to everyone's satisfaction if you will just bear with me for a day or so."

"I assure you we'll be glad to cooperate," said Colonel Holcomb.

"Chief French," McCann broke in, "I'd like to borrow your dusting powder and a powerful magnifying glass."

French looked at McCann inquisitively, and the anthropologist closed his right eye slightly.

"Sure—sure," French said quickly, "I'll send for them right away."

"I want to make a further investigation tomorrow," McCann explained. "Searching the mission house today, I found some faint marks made on the sideboard of the bed where Hastings right hand was. I've an idea he recovered consciousness before he died and tried to write something on that sideboard, with the knife for a pen. I want to look over the spot when it's fully daylight, so I guess I'll have to wait until tomorrow morning, because I can't get back to the house this afternoon before dark."

"You didn't mention those marks to me," Holcomb said, frowning a little.

"I know I didn't," admitted McCann, "but as long as we should check every clue, perhaps something may develop for us while the doc is running down his own leads."

"I'm sure you're right, Mr. McCann," agreed the doctor. "And now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll be on my way. I will report immediately, when we're ready to take action."

When Dr. Hagg had gone, McCann turned to Holcomb and French.

"All right, Colonel, let's go into your private office," he

suggested. "I want to have our plans thoroughly understood. . . ."

It started to rain about four o'clock in the afternoon and developed into one of the most violent thunder-storms the region had experienced for years. The *luluwye* who had been left to guard the mission house decided that there was no need to keep watch in such a storm and went home.

Lightning and crashes of thunder were continuous. Rain beat in torrents on the mission house roof and hissed through the screens of the porch.

A man in black oilskins approached the house cautiously. As a flash of lightning lightened the landscape, he would stand stock-still, then advance quickly between flashes.

He entered the house without hesitation and, drawing out of his coat a powerful flashlight, went directly to the bed where Hastings had been found dead. He bent over the bed and began to examine the sideboard.

"All right, put 'em up!" a voice came out of the darkness.

A beam of light flooded the bending man at the bed. He whirled in astonishment and flashed his light in the direction of the other beam of light.

"Well, Dr. Hagg," McCann drawled, "imagine finding you here!"

"What are you doing here?" demanded Hagg coldly.

"Just waiting for the murderer to appear," McCann said quietly. "You surely fell for that little trap I planned this afternoon, didn't you, Doctor? And there are no marks on the bed, are there?"

"Still playing the detective, I see," Hagg snapped icily. His lips curled in scorn as his flashlight played over McCann. "What makes you think I'm the murderer?"

"When I was in your office this afternoon, Doctor, I no-

ticed many shoe-nail marks in the linoleum around your desk. You will notice, if you look at this floor, there are also many nail marks. When I found out that this floor had been thoroughly scrubbed early in the evening before the murder, I had proof that whoever came into this house with nails in their shoes did so the evening of the murder."

"And how did you make such a wonderful deduction?" the doctor said sarcastically.

"Well, if they had been made before the floor was scrubbed there would have been a slight discoloration at the bottom of each indentation from sediment which would not be entirely removed by the scrubbing. There was none." McCann's eyes bored into Hagg. "I'll bet your shoes have nails that will fit in those marks. Do you mind letting me see your heels?"

The black fury in the doctor's eyes seemed to reflect the fury of the storm outside.

"Smart man, McCann," the doctor's voice cut in frigidly. "In fact, you are too smart. You think you are quite a detective, don't you—running around the country telling people how murders are committed and how suicides happen or don't happen? Well, this is once you are going to attend your own inquest."

"Why, Doctor!" McCann exclaimed in mock astonishment. "You aren't trying to frighten me, are you?"

"All right, McCann," Hagg snapped, and yanked a small pistol from his coat. "Don't move! I'd hate to spoil your last detective case."

"Threatening me, Doctor?" McCann bantered.

"Turn off your flashlight, McCann, and sit down in that chair in front of the desk," Hagg ordered.

"Just as you say," McCann answered agreeably, "but don't

try to sneak up behind me as you sneaked up behind Hastings to give him a shot of your ethyl chloride. I know enough not to inhale if you try that stunt."

Hagg moved slowly toward McCann. His eyes gleamed with deadly cold fury.

"Sit down, McCann!" he ordered, and his voice trembled with emotion. "I said you are smart—too smart. So you figured out the ethyl chloride, did you?"

"Yeah." McCann shrugged. "When I saw you work on that shell-shocked boy at the hospital, I suddenly realized how you had taken advantage of poor, unsuspecting Frederick Hastings. Only a coward would sneak up behind a man who trusted him and do a thing like that."

McCann's blunt statements jolted Hagg. All of his egotistical characteristics and mannerisms became evident as he glared down at the anthropologist lounging in the chair in front of the dead missionary's desk.

"No man has ever said that to me before," Hagg replied grimly. "Still, no one will know I was called a coward, because I am considering a good method of effecting a perfect suicide for you, Mr. McCann."

"You aren't clever enough to figure out a real murder with a perfect suicide set-up," McCann said derisively. "You have to have brains to do a thing like that. You have to be subtle and smooth. Besides, what satisfaction are you going to find in killing a man who has only contempt for your crudeness? As long as you have decided I must die why not give me the satisfaction of knowing that I'm going to be bumped off by someone who isn't a bungler?"

"I never bungled a job, Mr. McCann, and I do not intend bungling this one," Hagg said tightly. "I'm going to make you kill yourself!"

McCann laughed mockingly.

"That's interesting," he taunted. "But perhaps you miscalculated my personal resistance to such an ambitious scheme!"

"Don't worry," snapped Hagg. "I don't intend to consider your personal resistance. Neither do I intend to have my position in New Guinea jeopardized by stupid investigators. Your death will be a perfect suicide!"

"I'd like to make a last request before I die," McCann said. "Will you tell me why you killed Hastings?"

Instead of answering, Hagg walked over to McCann and placed the muzzle of his pistol against the anthropologist's temple. McCann's muscles tensed.

"I shall kill you in this manner, McCann," Hagg said coldly. "I shall then wipe all prints from this gun and press your hand and fingers around it. Your fingerprints will be the only ones on it."

McCann could feel his pulse throbbing wildly, but steeled his voice to steadiness.

"I still would like to know why you killed Hastings," he said. "Or are you afraid a dead man might talk?"

"Very well, Mr. Detective, I'll tell you—and also tell you something that with all your cleverness you never suspected. You are the one who is dumb. I control the sale of opium in this district. Alfonzo is my front. He's indebted to me for saving his life many times. He does not dare cross me.

"I order the opium for the hospital. When it arrives, I tell Alfonzo to pick up the shipment for the hospital. He takes it to his store and it is distributed under his orders to the different outlets. I have covered all suspicions, working as head of the Narcotics Control Commission. Now, McCann,

doesn't a man have to have brains to do a thing as well as I have done this job?"

"You surely pulled the wool over everyone's eyes," McCann admitted. "And I now see why it was necessary to eliminate Hastings and the boy—or didn't you kill him?"

"You should know the answer to that." Hagg smirked. "Super-sleuth!"

"Well, it didn't do any hurt to ask, did it?"

"Not at all. Is there anything else you desire before this interesting interview comes to an end?"

"Yes," McCann said quietly. "I'd like to give you a bit of advice before I die. When you try to make a cause look like suicide, don't make a clean-cut incision. Bungle it a bit! Anyone with common sense would know that a layman wouldn't know enough to do the job that was done on Hastings' arm."

"I assure you I'll be more careful in the future," Hagg snapped sarcastically. "If such a—"

"Steady, Doc!" a voice came out of the darkness. "Don't pull that trigger or we'll bore you!"

The doctor whirled. Two powerful flashlights blinded him, but not before he glimpsed Colonel Holcomb and Chief French covering him with drawn revolvers.

McCann grabbed Hagg's arms and twisted them backward.

"All right, Doc, drop your gun!" he ordered.

Hagg struggled viciously in McCann's powerful arms, trying to break away, but Colonel Holcomb quickly stepped forward and delivered a knockout blow to the doctor's chin. The killer collapsed to the floor.

"Let's look at his shoes," suggested McCann and Holcomb and French focused their flashlights on the doctor's soles.

"There are the nails, Colonel," McCann pointed out. "Let's see if we can match them to some identifications in the kitchen. He hasn't been there tonight."

The nails in the heel of Hagg's shoe fitted perfectly in the indentations made in the kitchen floor.

"It took him a long time to get his confession out, didn't it?" commented Holcomb as they returned to the living room.

"Yes," McCann said wryly. "I had to hit at his confounded ego to force him to brag of his cleverness."

"Weren't you nervous when he stood there with his gun at your temple," asked French.

"I'll say I was," admitted McCann, with a short laugh. "I was so nervous I forgot to tell him that if he killed me there wouldn't be any powder stains on my hands. Remind me to tell him about that when he comes out of his beauty sleep."



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# DEATH MEETS THE SKI TRAIN

*By*

SAM MERWIN, JR.

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## I

JAMES BURT wished he could take his eyes off Leslie MacMillan. The girl was gorgeous in her scarlet ski suit and skull cap atop the long brown bob which was flung back in careless perfection from her perfect face. But, as always, Burt felt that she was making fun of him.

"Be careful, James," she chided. "You might break a finger-nail."

They were standing atop a rise in the southern foothills of the Laurentian plateau north of Quebec. Behind them, at the end of the spur which had once been the outlet for a pulp paper lumber tract, the special train which had brought them from New York looked like a toy.

To the east were gentle rolling slopes, dotted with dark clumps of evergreens. Westward, the hill sloped away more sharply into a deep valley, beyond which rose the first of the mighty peaks that are part of the world's oldest land. Ahead was nothing—a dizzy drop which ended abruptly at a cliff.

Far below the cliff was a level, fir-clumped plain of snow,

and from this plain rose a series of jagged peaks that took huge bites out of the pale blue sky. James Burt considered this crazy drop doubtfully, shook his head.

"Getting a broken neck hardly comes under the head of a week-end's sport," he said.

"I'm going down and take a look," declared the third member of their party, a tall, tanned man with aquiline features, a slim, steel-and-whipcord body and thinning blond hair. He spoke with the accent of Central Europe.

"Be careful, Franz," said Burt, but the Austrian did not hear him as he took off in a swirl of powdery snow.

He slalomed down the frightening slope, moving fast, but under perfect control, taking each turn with the graceful Christie that had made him the pride of Interlachen before the sweep of war and terror over his native land.

"That chap can *ski*!" said an amiable voice on their left.

Bill Tappan, looking the perfect skier in black and crimson suit topped by a black beret, skidded to a stop beside them. He held his ski poles as if they were sticks of explosive, jammed them in to halt his progress. The points of his skis got crossed, and he took an abrupt header. A quarter of a mile below, Franz von Machen swirled gracefully to a halt on the brink of the precipice.

"He's very good, Bill," said Burt.

"He's terrific," said Leslie, her lips parted.

Bill Tappan got up and brushed off the snow that clung to him. Triply famed as expert photographer, night-club host and professional playboy, he was serving as cruise master and master of ceremonies for the trip.

It was a de luxe expedition, designed to stimulate upper case tourist trade on Canadian railroads during the long war-time winter. The five-car Pullman train—three stateroom

cars, a diner and a club car—had been filled with café socialites, successful professional people, a few Hollywoodians on the loose.

Thornton Wray, another member of the party came up with them then, moving with awkward determination. Craggy-browed, serious, he was Manhattan's best known model agency boss. He had brought along Leslie MacMillan and a Florida blonde who looked carved from soap, to pose for pictures in the name of Canadian railroad publicity.

On the gentle slope to the east, the rest of the crowd frolicked or sulked, depending on their moods. James Burt looked back at them, then watched the distant von Machen as he peered over the cliff ahead. Burt and von Machen had been brought along to provide the expert skiing the expedition demanded.

James Burt was doing his third year in a New York law office after taking degrees at Dartmouth and Harvard Law. It was at the Dartmouth winter carnival in his senior year that he had met Leslie. He had won the all-around skiing championship, and the girl, as carnival queen, had presented him with the cup.

"You looked as if you were skiing on eggs," she had told him afterward, with a hint of disapproval in her voice.

"I don't understand," he had said, puzzled.

"You didn't seem to be having much fun," had been her remark. "I always thought the idea was to enjoy games."

With which she had danced recklessly off with the runner up, whose chance of victory had been nullified by a bad fall when he had taken a slalom turn too sharply. James Burt didn't take such risks.

Burt had been brought up to regard living as a serious business in which one step succeeded another. His parents,

stuffy old-family New Yorkers, had seen to that. Having fun, as such, never entered into their scheme of things. They would never, for instance, approve of Leslie's gaiety and recklessness. He regarded the girl somberly, wondering if he hadn't been missing something he didn't understand. No one had ever called him Jimmie. He just wasn't the type.

"We'd better get some pictures while we have the light," said Bill Tappan then, unslinging a camera from the case he carried slung over his shoulder. "Brady wants to get the publicity shots in this morning. What a man!"

"He's probably right," said Thornton Wray. "Tomorrow might be stormy. He certainly seems to have the weather on his mind." The agency owner scanned the sky vainly for clouds.

"You're telling me!" said Tappan. "All work and no play—that's me on this jaunt. Brady hasn't even come out to say how do you do. He just sticks in his state-room and keeps the radio phone hot for weather reports."

"I'd like to meet him," said Leslie. "So far he's put on a swell junket. Why the Garbo act?"

"You may not know it, Toots," Bill Tappan said, grinning, "but running a trip like this across an international Border in war-time is a twenty-four hour job. He's catching up on his sleep now. You'll meet him later."

"Okay then, Leslie," said Thornton Wray. "Get ready to do your stuff. Where do you want to take them, Bill?"

Tappan pointed to the west slope, moved toward it cautiously on his skis. He looked a little frightened, laughed shakily.

"If I can ever get down to that bend by the trees, I can shoot with the sun behind me. Leslie, do a Christie as you come into the camera and don't stab me with your skis."

"I can try." She smiled, curtsying. She glanced at Burt. "How about having James take them with me if he doesn't think it's too dangerous?"

Burt flushed. He hadn't figured on serving as a model. Franz von Machen, he thought, was to do that chore. But von Machen was far down the slope, just beginning to her-ring-bone up, and Leslie had practically called him, James Burt, a coward. He knew he should ignore it, but he couldn't.

"All right," he said, and both Bill Tappan and Thornton Wray looked pleased.

"If they come out okay, I'll send you a check," said Tappan. He waved to von Machen, who waved back.

"Maybe Mr. Burt wants to keep his amateur standing," said Leslie, and Burt's flush deepened.

He listened while the plan for the picture was set, watched Bill Tappan sidestep down the hill cautiously. Once the photographer nearly lost his balance, and kept up-right only by a wild waving of poles.

"You chase me down," said Leslie, with an oblique glance. "That's a laugh, isn't it? I'll try not to make it too tough for the great Burt."

James Burt said nothing. His holiday week-end was fast becoming a nightmare of embarrassment. He wondered what he had ever done to the girl to inspire the needling he was getting. He set himself carefully, gauged the angle, hoped she was a good enough skier to handle it. It wasn't dangerous, but—

Then she was off in a swirl of snow, a lithe scarlet figure on that white slope, with dark hair streaming out behind her. She handled herself rather well, he saw, somewhat to

his surprise. He had supposed she looked at home only on the throne of a carnival queen or at a night-club table.

Then he was off in pursuit. He followed her easily, a little to her left. It felt good to have the mountains slipping under his skis again. He checked his exhilaration, reminding himself that this, as always, was a job, not fun.

Leslie was taking the slope too straight, he decided. She would be lucky if she didn't crash into the trees at the bend when she made her turn for the camera. They were picking up too much speed. He saw Tappan grow larger, crouched low over his camera directly ahead.

Then, at the last instant, Leslie made her Christie, skis lifting together from the snow. As he had calculated, her speed was too great. She slipped, took a header directly in the path of his own turn. He was going to run into her if he didn't do something and do it fast.

Master skier that he was, he did it. As he reached the turn, he risked a head-on somersault into the trees, jammed his poles into the snow and executed a perfect *gelaendesprung* over the fallen girl. He caught a glimpse of her face as he went by, was shocked to see her laughing. Good Lord! Didn't she know she had been nearly run down? He swung uphill and came to a quick halt.

"Perfect, terrific!" Bill Tappan shouted. "Do it again!"

"Like heck," said Burt. "Somebody might get hurt."

He could have bitten out his tongue as he said it. The girl shook her head, picked herself up, still laughing. And she was laughing at him for being afraid. Yet *she* had taken the risk.

They ran it again, this time, at Burt's insistence, more decorously. He followed the girl all the way down into the deep valley, carefully keeping his distance in case of another

fall. Her cheeks were bright from the wind when they pulled up.

"Whew!" she cried. "That was swell, James."

He looked at her curiously. Then he saw mirth leave her face, felt her mittened hand on his biceps as she stared at the slope to the west.

"James!" she said.

He followed her gaze, stared with her.

A speck was descending that abrupt slope—a speck that enlarged rapidly into a man on skis, coming toward them with the speed of a racing car. Once, twice, three times he slalomed to check his speed. He waved his arms, but whether he was waving at them or merely to keep his balance Burt could not tell.

Something went wrong then, as he was half-way down. He straightened out, seemed to take off like an airplane as his skis plunged straight ahead. There was no more attempt to check his speed. He swayed as he came at them, then fell forward, churning up snow, finally rolled almost to their feet.

"Lord!" cried James, rushing to aid him. As he reached the man, his eyes popped. "It's Dick Gunnerson!"

"Who's he?" the girl asked, bending over the motionless form.

"Canadian ski champ. I've run against him at Placid. I wonder what possessed him to try such a crazy stunt. He knows better."

"Not now, he doesn't," said the girl quietly, still bent over him. "He's dead—shot through the chest!"

## II

James Burt's first reaction was that the girl was playing some sort of a horrible joke. Then, as he saw the clean hole in the Canadian's green ski suit, saw the trickle of crimson on his chin, he realized that he was up against brutal reality.

"But who—why—" he sputtered.

The girl paid no attention to him as she coolly opened the heavy woolen coat. Coat and the suit coat under it were drenched with blood. She examined the wound with quick, sure fingers.

"Hadn't you better let somebody who knows about this sort of thing do it?" he asked.

There was something indecent about anyone as lovely as Leslie being in contact with anything as gruesome as poor Gunnerson's corpse.

"I trained to be a nurse," she said, without looking up. Then she rose, holding the dead man's wallet. Her white fingers bore a dark stain as she opened it.

"Look, James," she said. "It's Gunnerson all right."

"I know it," he said, almost peevishly. "Hey! Don't go through his stuff."

"Why not?" she countered. "Somebody has to. James, look here."

She held out a flap of the wallet so that he could read it. Curiosity conquered his distaste. He read:

Captain Richard Llewellyn Gunnerson, His Majesty's Royal Canadian Army. Finder will please return with full particulars of finding to Canadian Army Intelligence office, Toronto, or to nearest Canadian Army bureau.

"James!" she said. "There's something funny about this."

"I don't think it's funny. Dick was runner-up in the Nationals three years ago. It seems to me we—"

"Put it away!" the girl whispered sharply, digging an imperative elbow into his ribs. Involuntarily, he stuffed the wallet under his blanket suit, but felt like a criminal doing it.

"But, Leslie—"

"Shhhhhh!"

"What's this?" demanded a heavily accented voice behind them.

James Burt turned to look into the level blue eyes of Franz von Machen. The Austrian appeared tense and drawn, stared first at the corpse, then at Leslie and James. There was accusation in his glance. The muscles knotted around the corners of his mouth. Behind him was Thornton Wray.

"It's a dead man—can't you see?" the girl said coolly. "He came down that hill and fell at our feet. You can see his tracks.

"Yes," said the Austrian slowly. "I can see his tracks. But it looks to me as if he were shot."

"He's been shot, all right," said Leslie. She was flashing some frantic signal to James Burt with her eyes. He frowned. This certainly was no time for games.

"Do either of you know this—unfortunate?"

"Nope," said the girl quickly, cutting off Burt's attempt to give Gunnerson's name. "We never saw him before."

"Odd," said von Machen, turning away. "I don't like this."

He beckoned to the others, who were coming down the hill. As he did, Bill Tappan, who was in the van, trying to get himself and camera to the bottom, took another header.

"Hey!" shouted the photographer when he got close. "That's Gunnerson. What the heck happened?"

He asked more questions as he took pictures of the body, then suggested they get it back to the train. Thornton Wray, standing by, looked at Burt with an odd gleam in his eyes, and took Leslie under his wing. He seemed both angry and upset.

"Pretty funny business," he said. "Leslie, you get out of this and stay out. It's no place for a kid like you."

"Afraid I'll damage my lily-white reputation?" asked the girl with a grimace. "I didn't shoot him."

"Somebody did," said Wray, and his eyes bored twin holes in James Burt.

At the same moment Burt realized that everyone was looking at him oddly. He could feel sweat at the rim of his muffler.

"How could I shoot him?" he asked inanely. "I didn't have a gun. I didn't even hear the shot."

"It's funny you didn't know Gunnerson," said Wray. "You must have skied against him. He was pretty well known."

"I—" said Burt, then stopped.

He looked at Leslie for help, saw something like a hidden smile on her face. She was enjoying his discomfiture. He gritted his teeth, said nothing, and helped to get the body back up the hill.

Luncheon, a picnic affair served by the dining car waiters, developed into a matter of silences, lost appetites and cliques, all of which shut poor Burt out. He felt thoroughly guilty and angry at himself for feeling so until Leslie took pity on him and came over to bum one of his cigarettes.

"You're a swell friend!" he said sarcastically. "What do you want me to do with—" He put a hand toward the wal-

let under his ski suit, but she cut him off with a quick head shake.

"Hold it," she whispered. Then: "You looked so lost down there I couldn't help it. I'll bet you never were accused of anything in your life before. Cheer up. I know you didn't kill poor Gunnerson."

"Yes, but they all seem to think I did," he growled.

Somebody turned on a portable radio then, and a blare of swing rolled out over the hilltop. Leslie shook her head, and the banter dropped from her face and voice.

"This is the kind of a crowd that would dance on the lip of the grave," she said. "As long as it was somebody else's grave. Seriously, James, I think there's something wrong."

"That's an understatement," he replied. "But I don't see how my keeping this wallet will do any good. It said to—"

"Shut up!" she snapped. "Listen."

The dance music had stopped abruptly, and the overdramatic voice of a radio announcer cut through the cold air.

"—and so the lead story for today comes from our ally and friendly neighbor to the north, Canada. From Quebec comes word that Colonel Curt von Kress, Luftwaffe ace and reputedly one of Adolf Hitler's close industrial advisors, recently captured by the British when his plane crashed on an observation flight over English industrial areas, made a sensational escape from the train bearing him to a prison camp in Western Canada.

"His train was derailed less than a hundred miles west of Quebec, and in the attendant confusion the Nazi clouted a guard, broke through a train window and disappeared into the night before effective pursuit could be organized. As von Kress is well known in the United States, where he has conducted business for many years, and as he is reputed to

carry great weight with undercover Axis circles here, all Border guards have been redoubled. Both sides of the Border are on the alert."

The announcer went on to give the usual war communique and from them to lesser items of national interest. Leslie stared at Burt, and her dark eyes were serious.

"Do you suppose," she said, "that he could be heading here? If he could get on the ski train, he could get through."

"How?" Burt asked drily. "If we aren't stopped at the Border, they'll check and double-check us in Grand Central."

"But somebody must have shot Gunnerson, and whoever did it must have had a reason. People don't just get shot out here in the wilderness. Don't you see that—"

"Pardon me," said a guttural voice. Von Machen stood over them, holding a long cigarette. "Would you care to try a run with me, Burt? I've heard a great deal of your ability."

"I don't—" began Burt, but changed it to a hurried and harried assent at another nudge from Leslie.

As he rose, he realized that the Austrian was a half-inch taller than he. For no good reason, he felt a little afraid.

"The north jump is safe," von Machen said as they buckled on their skis. "I examined it closely this morning."

Burt wanted to back out of the whole thing. The run von Machen proposed was virtually a leap off a precipice. But the thought of what Leslie would have to say if he bilged kept him from doing what he wanted. Grimly he tested his straps.

He didn't want to make such a run with von Machen of all people on today of all days. He didn't trust the Austrian. He might be a refugee, or he might be something else. There'd been enough stories about Hitler's use of refugees.

At the top of the hill, he hesitated. It was crazy, foolhardy, perilous. And heretofore James Burt, for all his expertness, had been a safe and sane skier, using only well-run slopes, the sort selected for meet competitions. But, as he debated with himself, he felt his arm squeezed, looked again into Leslie's soft brown eyes. There was something in them he had never seen before, and he grinned a little.

"Take him, Jimmie," she said softly.

He was well on his way, timing his slaloms carefully so that he and the Austrian went down the quarter-mile slope in a series of graceful double figure-eights before he realized he had actually embarked on this foolishness. Girls, he decided, could raise the dickens with him. But no girl had ever before called him Jimmie.

As he nearly took a header on a turn, he snapped out of his dream. This hill was steep and tricky, as tough a run as he had ever undertaken. If he mistimed his approach to the jump, he would be in for it. He stood a good chance of breaking his neck. Suddenly he realized that he didn't care. The speed and risk were as exhilarating as champagne. He whooped as he swirled past the Austrian, Christied and swung back.

Then the thought struck him that von Machen might be leading him into a trap, though for the life of him he couldn't figure out why. He hadn't done anything. But if the Austrian led him to the jump at the wrong angle and then refused it, James might well go into nowhere.

With sudden panic, he remembered he hadn't even scouted the leap. He had no idea of what lay beyond the brink. Just getting there in jumping position or any position took all of his skiing abilities.

All of a sudden, it was upon him, and the Austrian, skiing

like the master he was, took it by his side. They sailed far out into the air, arms held wide and circling to maintain balance, bodies thrust well forward.

Far below them, James saw a clear slope, then a clump of trees. For a moment he felt as if he were fulfilling all the flying dreams of his childhood. Then the slope was there, and he came down with a jarring thump, struggled for balance, got it, then battled to slow down before colliding with the trees that rushed toward him.

To his delight, he outjumped the Interlachen expert by a good fifteen feet, was still well in the lead. He Christied, half right, half left, half right, half left again, felt his rate of progress decrease. Then he was into a narrow passage in the evergreens where the snow was soft, managed to sling himself sideways and come to a clean stop. He turned around, full of the joy of speed, as von Machen slid up smoothly.

"What a jump!" he cried. "Franz, you're a genius to think of trying it!"

"We can forget the pleasantries for a moment," said the Austrian, his voice soft but not gentle.

In his hand was a heavy automatic pistol.

### III

Burt felt his jaw drop. It didn't seem possible that things like this could be happening to him. But the gun the Austrian was pointing at him looked unpleasantly real. And the quiet determination of the man's light blue eyes was not reassuring.

"What do you want?" he asked. "I don't get it."

"Perhaps not," said von Machen. "But you have got it. I want the wallet you took from Gunnerson."

James Burt tried to be heroic, tried to say something gallant, but another look into von Machen's eyes sent his hand scurrying under his ski coat. Feeling like seventeen kinds of a fool, he gave Gunnerson's wallet to the Austrian. Von Machen took a quick look at it, then stuffed it away in his own pocket.

"Hello, down there!" came a faint voice from above them.

Looking up, Burt saw the top of the jump through the trees. Bill Tappan's head with its black beret was outlined in miniature against the sky. Burt filled his lungs to yell back, but a swift warning from the Austrian stopped him.

"You will make no noise now," von Machen said. "He cannot see us down here. I must have a talk with you."

Burt felt his temper rise beyond the point of control for the first time in his life. He had come up here for a week-end of pleasant outdoor sport, had been ribbed by Leslie, forced to rob the corpse of a friend, forced to take a jump he hadn't wanted to take with a man he distrusted. Now that man had forced him at the point of a gun to give up the wallet taken from Gunnerson. James Burt had taken all the pushing around he could stand.

Apparently von Machen considered him a harmless mouse, for he again turned his eyes away to peer through the pine boughs at the cliff above them. And at that moment, Burt's anger overcame him. He acted.

He didn't dash in as a movie hero does. In the first place, he was not a hero of any kind. And in the second place, he simply was not the dash-in kind. Thirdly, moving in on skis is a next to impossible operation. So he simply lifted the point of one ski sharply, to send von Machen's pistol flying from his fist into a pile of snow, turned tail and sprinted.

Discretion, he felt, was the better part of valor, in this situation.

A string of Teutonic oaths followed him, but Burt did not feel like stopping to listen. He was angry, bewildered, and scared half out of his wits. So he concentrated on losing his tormentor, made for a dip in the floor of the valley he had noticed on the run down. He ran along as hard as he could on his long wooden footgear to increase his speed.

His path toward the west brought him out of the clearing almost under the base of the cliff, too close for observation from above. A wind was rising, and the sun was already cut off by the peak ahead of him. He made the next clump of trees before the Austrian emerged, and kept right on going. He had no intention of making a clay pigeon of himself, and his regular life had kept him in better than good condition.

On and on he went, skirting the foot of the slope. Sooner or later he would reach the valley where the corpse had descended on Leslie and him, and from there he could get back to the train and safety. His pace began to tell on him, but still he had no wish to stop. His tracks lay behind him in the snow for the rankest amateur woodsman to follow.

The sky turned from gray to violet, and the first stars began to twinkle. Behind him, as he swung slowly south, the mighty Laurentian peaks lost their fiery reflections of the afterglow. The trees turned black, and the snow had long since lost its brilliance. And it was growing cold.

But James Burt, panting and sweating uphill through the valley, still dared not stop. Even in full night, the tracks of his skis would show. His mouth tasted coppery, and his lungs seemed unable to take in the thin air.

Then, almost without knowing it, he reached the place

where Gunnerson had ended his last run. The snow was a confused tracery of tracks here, and he had only another half mile or so to go. But, reaching this spot, which had been his one aim in his frantic flight for life, he suddenly realized he was done.

That last climb might as well have been Mount Everest. He was trembling in every limb. And he had no idea whether pursuit was near or far behind. Von Machen had a reputation as a skier which matched that of any man alive. Ahead loomed a thicket of spruce and cedar. Even in the near Arctic cold it offered haven. Von Machen could hardly track him in this trampled snow with full darkness almost here.

He dived into the brush, squatted on his skis facing his own trail, trying to get air into his tortured lungs. He longed for a cigarette, but did not dare to light one. He was unarmed, and his pursuer had almost certainly recovered his pistol.

Gradually he regained some of his poise and tried to rationalize the madness of the day. First, of course, was the gruesome business of Dick Gunnerson's murder.

He repeated the ugly word in his mind. Murder! A friend of his had been slain.

Furthermore, Gunnerson had been in the Intelligence Service of his country. According to the radio, a notorious Nazi was on the loose somewhere within a radius of fifty miles, if he hadn't been caught. Leslie, of course, had jumped at once to the romantic conclusion that von Kress had killed the Canadian.

It sounded crazy—but was it? In the light of his own melodramatic experience with von Machen, he was not so sure. Von Machen had come along on the trip with more

than sport in mind. He hardly would have been armed otherwise.

He was an Austrian, might well be a tool of the Axis.

And somebody had shot Gunnerson. It could have been von Kress. Which brought James Burt to another terrifying impasse. If von Kress were in these parts, he must have come according to plan. It was too much to ask of coincidence. If he had come according to plan, then the ski train was part of the same plan, was to be used to effect his escape into the United States.

Which suggested that a return to the train hardly represented safety for James Burt. Still, there were a lot of people on the excursion, and their numbers and normalcy represented protection of a sort. It would be a lot easier to get rid of him out here in the snows if von Machen or anybody else wished to.

He began to feel better. So far, von Machen had not put in an appearance, and it was growing dark. He began to think about making the short run over the crest of the hill. He wanted desperately to talk to Leslie, find out what she made of it. The girl was a beauty, but she didn't lack brains or the ability to use them. And she had called him "Jimmie."

It was full night by then, and there was no moon to brighten the snow. But as Burt rose and peered around him to see if he were still safe from pursuit, a sudden burst of golden light in the sky made him freeze.

Someone on the hill to his right had set off a flare. By its weird glow, Burt made out a strange tableau. Someone was coming down the hill, slaloming like a graceful demon. Directly ahead of him, von Machen loomed, jogging relentlessly along on his skis, using both poles as he followed

James Burt's tracks. And, down the slope which Gunnerson had sped to his death, another shape was coming.

From this figure, fire lanced out, and the sound of a shot reverberated from the snowy slopes. Bewildered at this three-cornered meeting, James Burt dropped back to cover. Another shot rang out, and a bullet clipped cedar boughs within ten feet of him. Hastily he flung himself flat.

Not knowing what was happening, he stayed there, shivering from the cold. In the darkness that followed the flare, he could see little. And he hardly dared move. Voices sounded softly, indistinguishably, a little distance away, and someone groaned. There was a brief flashing of light, then after awhile the night was quiet once more, and Burt pulled himself upright and started off again.

All the way to the top of the hill, he felt panic lest for some reason the train should unexpectedly have gone away without him, leaving him stranded in this frozen wilderness. He herringboned as fast as his tired legs would carry him, only breathed when, from the summit, he saw the lights, bright and orange and warm, in the car windows. He let out a whoop as he skied easily down the home stretch.

"We've been going crazy!" Bill Tappan greeted him offering him a double tot of brandy.

Finally out of his ski clothes, Burt was stretched out comfortably in the club car.

"We were beginning to think something must have happened to you," said Thornton Wray, joggling a whisky and soda.

Pat Brady, promoter of the trip, who had finally put in an appearance, shook his head dolefully. He was a big, dark-haired man with a red face and heavy features.

"And this was supposed to be a pleasure trip!" Brady

grumbled. "Yes, Burt, we were beginning to think you'd met trouble. This Gunnerson business had us all jumpy."

"I did meet trouble," said Burt. "I got lost. Where is von Machen?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Brady grinned.

"Our two ski experts seem to be the only casualties," he said. "Von Machen fell down and cracked his head. He's in bad shape. A couple of the boys out looking for you just brought him in a few minutes ago."

Burt said nothing, but he was remembering the sound of voices, and that groan back in the valley. Leslie came in then, her face troubled and unhappy until she saw Burt. His grin matched her smile, and he motioned her to sit down beside him. But she shook her head faintly after making the right congratulatory noises about his safe arrival, and joined Thornton Wray across the car.

"Yes," said Tappan. "Poor von Machen really belted himself one. He's in a coma. We've had to cut the trip short to get him to a specialist."

As he spoke, the train jerked into motion, backing down the spur on the beginning of its trip back to New York. Everyone seemed relieved at the prospect of getting away from the place where so much that was unpleasant had happened in a few short hours. James Burt had to tell his story, or as much of it as he cared to tell, several times.

Since no one aboard the train seemed to want to mention the second shooting—for he knew von Machen had been shot, instead of having a fall—he decided to keep mum about what he knew about it himself. He told a tale of racing the Austrian around the mountain and of getting lost in one of the side valleys looking for a short cut. He hoped it would be swallowed.

Apparently it was. The worst of the situation was that, with von Machen removed from the scene, Burt did not know whom to watch. He was certain that von Kress was now aboard the train, but in just what guise he could not guess, nor whether he was in sight at all, being hidden by someone. The triple meeting he had witnessed could have meant nothing else but that someone had met von Kress. Yet that shot was inexplicable.

Weary and disappointed at Leslie's aloofness, James Burt went back to his state-room. He flung himself on the berth fully clothed, too tired to undress. What in blazes had he let himself in for? And what was he going to do about it?

The anger which had assailed him when he had temporarily disarmed the Austrian, returned. He had been pushed around, darn near killed, and now they were going to play nicey-nicey with him. He'd be blasted if they would! But what to do?

As he lay there, seething and trying to formulate a plan of action, he heard someone turn the handle of his door.

#### IV

Leslie slipped into James Burt's stateroom, looking cool and beautiful. But her dark eyes were troubled. She listened with her ear to the door for a few moments before turning to face him.

"Well, Jimmie?" she whispered, "What really happened?"

He told her. She listened intently, sitting beside him on the berth. By the time he had finished, her eyes were blazing.

"You did swell, Jimmie!" she declared. "But there's more. A little while before you showed up just now, a gang of

them brought von Machen in. He was out like a lamp, and his head was one solid bandage. All you could see was the tip of his nose."

"I don't get it," Burt said. "They're acting funny about him. Did you get a good look at him?"

"No," she said, and as she shook her head, he wanted to kiss her. He put the idea away as irrelevant. "They wouldn't let me near him," she went on, "and I studied to be a nurse."

James stood up abruptly.

"We've got to find out," he said.

He was beginning to get a new slant on how this thing was being handled. If he were right—but there was only one way to make sure.

"Who's watching von Machen?" he asked.

"Thornton Wray," she said. "Why?"

"You've got to get him out of the way for awhile."

The train swayed to a stop, then began to move forward. They were on the track for home now. Leslie cocked her head.

"I can try," she said. "But I don't get it—what you're up to."

"Never mind," he told her. "Offer to take his place so he can go get himself a drink."

He followed her to the car where von Machen lay bandaged, slipped into the vestibule washroom while she did her stuff. He heard Wray walk past, then Leslie's arm appeared through the slit in the green curtain before the washroom window, and beckoned. He followed her to the injured man's stateroom anxiously.

"I've got to be sure it's von Machen before I do anything," he told her as they approached the Austrian, who lay flat on his back, barely breathing, his head a ball of gauze.

Grimly the girl unwound the bandages. James Burt stood by, no longer tired. He said a silent prayer as she unswathed the last of the wrappings, hoping that he and Leslie were not, after all, impairing the life chance of a dangerously hurt man.

Bit by bit the face lay revealed before them. It was the Austrian, all right! James took a deep breath, his brows knotted. But something about von Machen's pallor, his breathing, seemed all wrong. His only wound was a furrow in his scalp.

The girl lifted one of the man's eyelids, drew in her breath sharply.

"Look at this, Jimmie!" she whispered. Von Machen's pupil was the size of a pinhead. "He's been coked to the cars!"

"Leslie," Burt said quietly, "I want you to do one more job for me. I want to use the radio telephone, and I don't want anyone else to know I've been using it. Will you go to Brady's office, tell whoever's there that von Machen's escaped and that Thornton Wray has vanished, too?"

"Yessir." She smiled, saluted, then kissed him full on the lips. "Be careful, Jimmie, please."

"I'm trying to be." He smiled, his head whirling. "I'm giving you all the dangerous assignments."

"I wish I could believe that," she said, shaking her head.

He followed her along the corridor to the promoter's car ahead. With another quick kiss for good luck, James Burt slipped past the girl and back into the men's washroom. There he waited, while she rapped on Brady's door. He heard it open, heard the low murmur of the two voices. As it was still early, the other occupants of the cars were still crowding club car and diner.

"This may be serious," he heard Brady say. His footsteps, then Leslie's padded by.

With his heart doing funny things in his chest, the young lawyer went to the promoter's door. It was ajar, and he blessed Leslie for managing that as he slid inside. It was a small, well-equipped office, surprisingly neat.

He picked up the two-way radio telephone after closing the door behind him, hesitated, then asked for long distance. As a lawyer, he knew how to handle this affair through the correct branch of officialdom, put it in the hands of the F. B. I. chief in New York. He could sense the excitement his call raised.

"Yes, I'm sure he's aboard," Burt said positively. "Yes, I'll sit tight and leave it up to you from here on in."

He hung up with a whoosh of relief, turned—and looked into the single baleful eye of an automatic pistol. Above it, Bill Tappan's handsome face was set in a sardonic grin.

"You may sit tighter than you want to," Tappan said. "So the Boy Scout solved the secret code, eh? How come?"

"You made one fatal error," Burt said quietly. "You shouldn't have pretended you couldn't ski. I saw you look over the rim of that jump on the mountain. The jump itself was five hundred yards down a terrific grade. It took all the ability I possess just to get there upright. And you, who couldn't even stay up standing still, were there just a few seconds after we went over. When I added up, it gave you away. I thought von Machen was it. He scared the day-lights out of me. But I guess he was on my side. You wouldn't have him all bandaged up and full of cocaine if he were on yours. And you wouldn't have shot at him when you met von Kress."

"You're not being funny," Tappan said unpleasantly.

"I'm not trying to be. My guess is that you didn't want to call attention to the trip. If von Machen were missing when we reached New York, you'd get attention plus. So you've had to bring him along, doped. The Canadian authorities will cover up poor Gunnerson's murder. Well, I guess that's that. You can put your gun away and take it easy. I just called New York. There's nothing you can do."

"Oh, no?" said Tappan. He was almost bland. "Do you think we're unprepared for such a contingency? We've thought of everything. Why, for instance, do you think we have such a charming young lady as Leslie McMillan aboard? We—"

He must have heard footsteps, for he stopped short. Then someone knocked on the door four times. Bill Tappan opened it. Leslie came in, followed closely by Pat Brady, the promoter.

"What goes on here?" Brady demanded sharply.

"Oh, cut it out, von Kress," said James. "You're cooked. You can take your pick of prisons in Canada or the U. S. A.—if they'll let a fellow like you in. Cut the melodrama."

The amiability of the man who had called himself Brady slipped from his face. Swiftly he pushed Leslie down onto the small couch. Then he moved to where James Burt sat behind the small desk and pulled a flat automatic from under his coat.

"How'd you find out, Burt?" he asked tightly.

"Well," James Burt said, as coolly as though he were not looking straight into the bore of an automatic, "once I had von Machen's rôle established and knew that Bill Tappan was the agent on the other side, it wasn't hard. Yours was the only new face aboard—the face of the promoter who had not before shown himself. Don't blame Bill. He did a swell

job of putting you in people's minds as the phantom promoter. But once I was onto him, it wasn't hard."

"You blundering fool!" von Kress said softly to Tappan. "We've got to get off this train before it's stopped."

"Don't blame me," snapped Tappan. "If you hadn't let Gunnerson get through, none of this would have happened."

Kurt von Kress glared at the American fifth columnist, shook his head and ground his teeth in controlled rage. With an effort, he centered his attention on James Burt.

"I don't see how we can afford to leave you behind," he said quietly. "You understand, of course, Burt."

"Of course," said Burt and, somehow, he did. He nodded toward the girl, eyes on von Kress. "What about Leslie?"

"I'm sorry." Von Kress shrugged heavy shoulders. "But I fear she knows entirely too much—as you do. Without either of you to give personal evidence, your F. B. I. will have a difficult time proving anything against us if they do catch us. I prefer a prison camp in Alberta to a firing squad."

"I thought you fellows enjoyed dying for the *Vaterland*," said Burt.

He caught Leslie's eye, opened his mouth wide and thumped his thighs with his fists. He looked like a man having a cramp in his stomach and suffering from strangulation at once.

"*Was ist los?*?" snapped von Kress.

His voice was cut off by a shriek from the girl which seemed to split the steel walls of the room. For a short moment, both Nazis' attention was focussed willy-nilly on Leslie McMillan. Which was all James Burt wanted.

He took von Kress without benefit of prize ring rules. Moving in low, he sent both fists into von Kress's abdomen.

Then, as the Nazi doubled up in agony, the young American simply lifted his head sharply, catching his enemy on the point of his square chin with the hardest part of his skull.

There was a crack like a pistol shot, and the German was through for the night. Still low, Burt stepped away from him, yanked the pistol from unconscious fingers and had the pop-eyed Bill Tappan covered before the young photographer, host, playboy and foreign espionage agent, knew what had happened.

"Take him, Leslie!" snapped Burt.

Swiftly, the girl took Tappan's pistol away from him. She stood in front of him, a little to one side. Her look was one of open contempt. Then, without warning, she jabbed a hard-toe shoe against the man's nearer shin. He howled like a wolf, bent over to massage his injured limb—and ran his jaw into her small fist.

She kicked him again, repeated the slugging process, then stood back to let him slip to the floor. Half-smiling, she blew on her skinned knuckles.

"There!" she said. "I've always wanted to do that to one of these café society Ratzis."

"Whew!" Burt said thankfully. "I'm glad you got my cue to go into a scream."

"For a moment, I thought you were drowning," said the girl. "Then I remembered we weren't under water and got the idea. You wanted me to divert their attention. Wasn't that it?"

"That was it," said Burt. "One thing they didn't want was noise. That's why I figured they'd think before shooting."

"I'm glad you figured right," said Leslie. "Look at this von Kress's jaw. I think you must have broken it."

"I know I did," said James, turning away. He tried to remind himself that he was a man of thought, not of action. "Come on, Leslie, let's put these boys to bed."

They tied them together with adhesive tape and laid them out on the couch.

Then Burt got on the phone again, put another call through to the F. B. I. office.

Near Quebec, the train was boarded by the military authorities. James Burt came in for congratulations. But, beginning to suffer from both fatigue and let-down after the day's events, he was glad when the grilling was over and he could return to the club car with Leslie.

"I forgot to ask you," he said. "Why did you make me keep poor Gunnerson's wallet?"

"I thought something must be going on when I saw the secret service card," she said. "I—I didn't trust von Machen, I guess. I thought he was a Nazi. You'd never pick him for a government agent, would you?"

"They had to use good skiers on this job," said James. "Von Machen is a champion. So was Gunnerson."

"And so," the girl said softly, "are you—Jimmie."

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# THE QUADRUPLE CROSS

*By*

WILL LEVINREW

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## I

"Wanted:—One young man in the last stages of consumption. To the man who qualifies a very attractive proposition will be made, a proposition that will permit him to live the rest of his life in comfort, even in luxury, such luxury as is enjoyed by few persons. For interview and examination call between eleven and twelve, Wednesday, at 1435 River Road, Dover."

LESTER BOYLE, who stood on the rear platform of the suburban trolley car, glanced several times from the above clipping in his hand to the houses that lined the road of the speeding vehicle. The houses were becoming fewer in number and more imposing in appearance as they left the center of the little town behind them.

At last Boyle signaled the conductor and, waiting until the car came to a complete stop, got off at a pole marked "Stop Station," about a hundred yards from the house he sought.

He walked slowly to the grilled gate that enclosed the well

kept grounds of the house numbered 1435. He opened the gate and walked, still more slowly, up a graveled path that led to the wide porch surrounding the house.

Here he waited patiently for a long time after he pushed the button. He knew that the bell had rung because he heard its faint far away tinkle.

Then, without having heard the sound of a footfall behind the door, with a suddenness that indicated he might have been scrutinized through the curtains draping the glass panel, the door was thrown open. He was gazing at the most ferocious looking negro he had ever seen.

The man was six feet six inches tall and of tremendous girth. He was pockmarked and his face was criss-crossed with old scars which seemed to throb and writhe. One of the scars ran diagonally across his mouth giving him the appearance of having both upper and lower lips split. At the point where the scar crossed his lips they were shorter, giving one a glimpse of huge yellowed teeth.

When Lester Boyle held out his clipping, the other nodded and stepped aside making room for the young man to enter. As the door closed behind the visitor he was seized in the huge arms of the negro and dragged into a room off the well furnished foyer.

Here, without uttering a sound, the negro frisked the young man with a completeness and thoroughness that aroused in the visitor a feeling of admiration. The young man did not resist. Never had he experienced such enormous strength as when the servant had first seized him.

After the search he was led up a beautiful curved oak staircase and shown into a severely and plainly furnished room like an office. Here he was face to face with an incredibly thin, tall man who wore a tightly fitting skull cap. This

individual's face was heavily lined. Of his eyes Boyle could see nothing because he wore dark blue tinted glasses.

When the negro left the room the tall man pointed to a chair on one side of the desk which would place Boyle's features squarely in the light streaming in from the tall window at the back of the desk. The strange man now took a stethoscope from one of the desk drawers and placing it at various areas of the young man's chest and back listened carefully. Then he subjected him to a long scrutiny, once raising one of his eyelids and peering at his eye intently.

Boyle suffered this to be done without protest. Finally the other sat down with his back to the light and spoke. His voice was surprisingly deep and resonant:

"You came in answer to the advertisement, I take it."

"Yes."

Once more Boyle was subjected to a long scrutiny. His clothes were of excellent quality, but much worn; his collar was immaculately clean but slightly frayed at the edge. Here was evidently a person who had had financial reverses recently. His shoes were brightly polished but getting thin at the soles with the heels slightly run over. The tall man behind the desk spoke again:

"How long have you been sick?"

"Six years."

"What is your name?"

Boyle spoke calmly:

"I have answered your ad because it attracted and interested me. I made a real sacrifice coming here today. The carfare I spent coming here, even though it is a small amount, represents a day's food. You know all about me you're going to know, until I know something about you and your proposition."

This was said calmly, without heat or resentment.

The man behind the desk nodded as if satisfied with this stand:

"Just one more question, if you please. How long have you known that you were incurable?"

"For about a year and a half."

The man behind the desk drummed the green blotter with a paper-knife for a moment, then he spoke:

"My name is Doctor Korne, K-O-R-N-E," he spelled it out carefully. "I have been engaged for some years in research work on tuberculosis, research work that will be of incalculable aid to humanity."

"I have developed a specific that will positively cure the most advanced stage of tuberculosis. It is a serum. While it is designed to cure the condition I spoke of, if used judiciously, it is also capable of much harm if used by upscrupulous persons."

"I had prepared a large quantity of this substance when some persons with criminal tendencies who heard of it raided the laboratory one night and took it all away. Not only that, they wrecked my apparatus and took away the formula that it took me years to find."

He stopped and tapped the blotter once more with the paper-cutter, then he went on:

"I need a young man of some refinement to help me recover this substance. You seem to be the kind of person I need. The young man I want must also have courage and resource. If you succeed in getting this substance from the persons who have it it will mean life to you. It will mean more."

"While you are engaged in this work, you will receive five hundred dollars a week. I shall ask you nothing more ex-

cept your name. When you tell me that, I shall tell you what you are to do and give you in advance your first two weeks' pay."

He took from the desk a sheaf of bills from which he counted ten bills of one hundred dollars each and laid them indifferently in front of the astonished Lester Boyle.

For the first time during the interview, Boyle showed some eagerness. He leaned forward.

"You mean that you actually have something that will cure tuberculosis?"

The passionate eagerness with which he asked this question was pitiful. The two bright spots of color high up on his cheek bones seemed to become brighter. His eyes were burning in their intensity.

"Yes, I have and you must help get it back for me."

There was something almost uncanny in the voice coming from this individual whose eyes could not be seen. The deep resonant voice went on:

"The persons who took this substance are the most dangerous in New York, perhaps the world. I shall tell you how to find them. After that you must expect no help from me."

"But the police—" began Boyle.

"The police cannot help me in this."

There was a cold air of finality about this last utterance that impressed Boyle with the futility of pursuing this tack further.

"What is the name?" asked the voice.

"Lester Boyle."

"Mr. Lester Boyle, this money I give you ought to do you for two weeks. In two weeks you ought to either get back this substance that was stolen from me or you may be dead. Do not try to communicate with me in any way. If your

money should run out and you think you are making progress come here any time day or night and more money will be furnished. This paper contains instructions. That's all."

He laid a sealed envelope on top of the small sheaf of bills and pushed them to the edge of the flat topped desk. Boyle, after a brief hesitation, picked them up and without saying a word, bowed himself out of the room.

As he was about to open the outer door he saw a vision that startled him. A young woman came out of one of the doors leading out of the foyer and held her finger up to her lips. The whiteness of her skin was startling in contrast with the deep red of her lips and the coal black eyes which were glittering with a strange fire.

As he paused uncertainly at the door she glided up to him swiftly and put into his hand a folded paper, then turned abruptly and went back to the door through which she disappeared without giving him another look.

Restraining his curiosity with a powerful effort of his will, Lester Boyle left the house and boarded the first trolley car that passed Dover-bound. So powerfully had the young woman's appearance impressed him that it was at her paper that he looked first instead of the instructions enclosed in the envelope which with the one thousand dollars in bills, nestled closely in his breast pocket.

The note began abruptly without salutation or signature:

"You look like a man who values his honor. If you value your life or your honor, drop all thought of Dr. Korne. Forget that you ever saw him. If you are too scrupulous to do such a thing, return his money by mail. But for God's sake put as much space between yourself and Dr. Korne as you can. Destroy this note."

He read it twice more until the words were firmly and indelibly engraved on his mind, then, with a whimsical smile he tore the note into small bits and let them flutter out of the open window.

He had been so absorbed with the happenings of the past half hour that he had failed to take his immediate surroundings into account.

Now he looked up and was startled to see that the figure beside him of which he had been conscious was that of Dr. Korne. He blinked his eyes but there was no mistaking the high brow, with its heavy lines, the bushy eyebrows and the blue tinted glasses. The resonant voice that had been ringing in his ears since he had left the presence of the man of mystery now spoke close to his ears. There was something foreign in the other's accent now.

"Mr. Lester Boyle, you will do well to pay no attention to the note you just read. You will read and follow my instructions. I can see far and my reach is long. It is also strong. I can crush you as I would a—"

His long prehensile fingers wound themselves about Boyle's upper arm in a casual gesture. To others who might have been observing them it might seem the gesture of a man addressing another confidentially. Boyle was conscious of the pressure of those claw-like fingers.

His arm was being crushed as though in a vise. He almost cried aloud when the pressure was released. He was conscious of a burning intensity behind those blue tinted lenses.

Dr. Korne stood up and with a bow strode to the front platform, where the motorman stopped at his signal to let him off.

## II

Lester Boyle smiled grimly to himself at the instructions addressed to him in a copper plate handwriting. They were simple: Lester was to obtain in some manner left to his own discretion, a package the size of a good sized trunk and deliver it to the home of Dr. Korne. He was also to obtain a paper containing the formula for the precious substance.

His grim smile was occasioned by the fact that the name, given in the communication, of the man who was responsible for the theft of the serum and the formula was the name of the most powerful figure in the underworld.

The man was known under the name of "The Barker." No one knew the genesis of the name. Some thought it had been bestowed because its owner was once a barker at a side show traveling with a circus.

Boyle was threading the alleys and streets on the western edge of Greenwich Village as though he were familiar with the territory. He was moving swiftly through a narrow, dead-end street, when his sixth sense told him of imminent danger. But he had no time to set himself.

He felt the impact of a body at his back. An iron arm encircled his throat in a deadly strangle hold. Boyle went limp in the other man's arm. The assailant relaxed his hold, when the young man suffering the last stages of tuberculosis went into explosive violent action.

Both his hands grasped the wrist of the assailant where a few seconds before it had been placed in the deadly hold.

Boyle, holding his assailant's wrist over his shoulder, as a fulcrum, stooped suddenly, at the same time executing a wide circling motion. His larger opponent rose, his legs describing an arc. Boyle finished his stooping motion with a

snap and let go the other's wrist. The body flew with incredible speed against a nearby brick wall where it landed with an unpleasant crunch.

Boyle sprang to the prostrate form that was now groaning and stirring slightly. He brought down the heel of his hand with the motion of a man swinging a hammer, on the man's jaw. The prostrate form lay still.

Boyle was swiftly going through his assailant's pocket, when he heard a swift cat-like tread behind him. He leaped aside just in time to avoid a swinging blackjack.

The swish of air fanned his cheeks as he turned his head aside. He leaped clear of the prone figure and stood, with his back to the wall. The newcomer straightened up and was returning to the assault when he stopped short.

Even in that dim, uncertain light he saw the reflection of dull blue glinting from the weapon in Boyle's hand. The other stood facing Boyle, his beady eyes remaining fixed in their intent stare at the weapon. After a short pregnant silence, Boyle spoke:

"Well, did you—"

He did not finish his sentence. The man who had been knocked out had stirred and opened his eyes. One of his reaching hands seized Boyle's ankles and a sudden jerk sent the young man sprawling, his weapon flying in the air, being discharged by the spasmodic contraction of Boyle's finger on the trigger.

A light in a window above the struggling group, was extinguished at the sound of the shot and a head emerged from the window. The head was immediately withdrawn and the narrow lane was silent, save for the gasping grunts of the three bodies that were now struggling furiously.

With the sound of the shot, the two strangers, as if mak-

ing common cause, had pounced on Boyle who was momentarily stunned by striking his head against the wall.

But his inaction was only momentary. A large hand groping for his throat seemed to act on him like a galvanic current. He squirmed away from the reaching hand, shaking himself physically and mentally to rid himself of the nausea that was gripping him.

A violent kick at a soft yielding part of the body of one of his assailants elicited a grunt of pain and surprise. The man who was kicked went down, to rise again almost immediately. But this gave Boyle his chance.

He was now on his feet. He was just in time to kick the weapon half way toward the end of the street as the larger of his assailants was reaching for it.

Then he found himself in a bearlike hug. He was held as helpless as though he were a baby. The pressure the man exerted was becoming almost unbearable, both his hands held as in a vise. He relaxed as he had done at the first attack, but it did not work again. The pressure merely increased. He could not get one of his arms loose for one of the deadly jiu-jitsu punches that he knew so well.

He was straining desperately against the pressure and the huge bulk of the other, when help came from an unexpected quarter.

To his ears there came the heavy pounding of feet from the open end of the alley. Two uniformed men were coming in response to the shot; both had their guns drawn.

The terrific pressure on the ribs of Lester Boyle was released as his bulky opponent stepped back. One of the policemen now threw the rays of his flashlight in the faces of the three combatants.

The man whom Boyle had kicked stood blinking in the

rays of the light. But Boyle in the momentary flash saw a flicker of fear, deadly fear, contort his features. The more obtuse policeman who had not seen this, moved the beam of light to the faces of the other two.

After a swift glance at the ground the policeman holding the light asked:

"Who fired that shot?"

The larger of Boyle's assailants answered nonchalantly:

"Nobody, officer, there was no shot fired here. One of us had a little too much hootch mebbe and—"

"Oh, yeah there wasn't any shot fired, huh?" He spoke to his companion without turning his head.

"Frisk 'em Jerry—and listen you birds. One move outa any of you and I'll drill you sure as—"

The sentence was cut off and ended in an incoherent grunt. The smaller of the two men who had attacked Boyle, the one who had shown fear, now acted with the speed of a striking copperhead. At the request to Jerry, the latter had put away his weapon to facilitate his frisking of the three men.

The beam of light for the time being was on the pale features of Lester Boyle, who was still gasping from his exertion. From the thickening shadow which represented Boyle's slighter assailant, a fist encased in brass knuckles shot out and connected with the temple of the policeman holding the light and gun. He went down like a poled ox.

Jerry snatched at his gun, when he saw his companion fall, but he was too late. With a speed that matched the other's, Boyle now also struck. There was a sharp smack as his fist struck Jerry squarely on the button and the large body of the policeman sank to the pavement with a thud.

Boyle was standing there as if in uncertainty but he was

permitted to stand thus for only a split second. As if actuated by the same impulse, his two erstwhile assailants grasped him each by a hand and dragged him toward a nearby doorway. The door opened apparently at a touch of one of his companions; and, still holding him firmly the two men dragged him into the enclosure. He wondered what was in store for him.

He was then dragged through a long hallway that he could sense in the dark. He heard several doors open through which his captors led him and finally he was thrust into a brilliant glare of light.

### III

Boyle stood swaying slightly after the two men released him and blinked in the garish glare in which he now found himself. After a moment he could see that he was in a large square room, the center of which was occupied by a long bare oblong table. He had evidently been brought into the midst of a conference or meeting of some kind.

An even dozen persons, nine men and three women, sat about the big table. At its head was the figure of the man who had become in a few short years the uncrowned king of the underworld, a man whose likeness was known to every newspaper reader in the metropolitan area.

Boyle was looking at the "Barker." There was no possibility of mistaking the half-closed eyes, with lids and brows denuded of every particle of hair, as was his head. This hairlessness of face and head struck one with an unpleasant chill, as does the sight of some slimy denizen of a swamp. The loose folds of flesh hanging from his jaws and neck added to the repulsiveness of his appearance.

He spoke, in a high, thin piping squeak.

"Well?"

Boyle's two captors left him standing where he was, and approaching the head of the table spoke in an undertone. Lester's larger and first assailant stood there quietly, occasionally uttering a word here or there. The other, who had laid out the first policeman with brass knuckles, spoke quickly, nervously, with animated gestures.

At last the Barker looked toward Boyle with his venomous lidless eyes, blinking in the way members of feline species do. His voice in spite of its high piping squeak, was that of a man of culture and some education.

"What were you doing in the lane out there?"

"I was coming to visit."

"Whom? It's an alley less than a block long. I know everybody who lives there." The voice was cold, precise.

Boyle stood silent. The Barker went on.

"Why did you hit the other policeman; they might have helped you."

"I don't like cops."

"Not trying to get away from them are you?"

"Well, in a sort of way I am, yes."

"Why do they want you?"

A smile flickered across the features of Boyle, who was now standing at his apparent ease facing the Barker. With an air of complete frankness, he said:

"Well, I'll tell you how it is. Last week I parked overtime and a cop left a ticket on my car. I didn't show up in court, so—"

There was a roar of laughter from the men and women about the table. Even the Barker's features relaxed in a grim smile. His voice was now heavy with sarcasm.

"So that's it? To avoid paying a two dollar fine you as-

sault a cop and run the risk of a long stretch." Then his voice turned icy.

"We haven't much time to waste on fools, young man. People who come to this neighborhood usually want something. Sometimes," with deep significance, "they get it. You'll get—"

Boyle had during this speech backed against a wall where he stood negligently looking at the man at the head of the table. At this point, there appeared in his left hand as if by magic his other gun, a weapon—on the dull blue of which the garish light glinted.

"Sit still everybody!"

His voice had the harsh rasp of a sergeant on drill parade.

"You," Boyle's voice and gesture were directed at the man who was staring at him from the head of the table with his venomous eyes.

At the same time every man and woman in the room facing him felt that the muzzle of the gun was pointed in his or her direction. Boyle was talking crisply:

"Listen to me. I was out there minding my own business. Your thugs assaulted me. I protected myself. Then a couple of cops came and because I prefer the company of thugs to that of cops you are asking questions. Why I don't like cops is my own business. DROP THAT!" His voice was chillingly convincing as his eyes turned full on a man near the center of the table who was making a furtive movement.

"One more move out of anybody and I shoot, and the first bullet will be for the gentleman who asks so many questions."

The movements of the man at whom this was directed subsided. Boyle continued:

"Now I'm tired of these questions. I'm going out of here.

It won't be safe to follow me. And what I said before goes." The gun pointed squarely at the Barker, "You get the first bullet. I can't miss at this distance."

He began sidling toward the door through which he had been brought. As he was about to reach out for the knob, the Barker's high piping squeak stopped him.

"Just a minute now, you can't get out of here, you know. My men will stop you."

"But you won't stop me. If your men go after me before I leave this room you'll be too dead to care whether I leave or not."

The high piping squeal went on:

"And suppose you do shoot me, what then? You've only got one gun, the other is in the alley. What happens to you if and when the gun in your hand is empty?"

There was a pregnant pause, then the hairless man went on:

"I like you, young man, and I need you. Even if I don't give orders to stop you before you leave this room, you won't get out of the alley alive. And starting shooting here won't do you any good either. So—"

He paused significantly, staring unwinkingly at the young man. Boyle appeared to be in deep thought, then he nodded and put away his weapon, saying:

"I get you. Now what's it all about?"

The big ungainly head at the head of the table nodded with satisfaction.

"You've got some sense after all. Now go into that room there," pointing to a door behind him, "and make yourself comfortable with a book or a magazine until I get through here. You'll find cigarettes and something to drink, too."

Boyle, after a momentary hesitation, did as directed. He

shut the door of the smaller room behind him and found himself in a comfortably furnished room with deep chairs and lounges adding to its appearance of coziness. He noticed that after he shut the door he did not hear a sound from the room behind him. Since the noise and talk from that room had been shut off abruptly with the closing of the door he made up his mind that the door and walls were soundproof.

He now gazed about him curiously. Evidently this was the private sanctum of the much advertised Barker. The room was lit by scattered reading lamps, casting here and there a splash of bright yellow to contrast with the semi-gloom of the rest of the room.

He stepped to the bookcases which lined one wall and saw there well-thumbed books that explained the cultured accents of their owner. The magazines scattered about the center table were also the kind devoted to art and literature. A harp with a music stand at its side accounted for some publications devoted to music that were on the table.

He had been sitting there at ease in a deep upholstered chair when the door opened behind him and his host entered. The latter nodded in satisfaction at Boyle and busied himself for a moment turning up another lamp and lighting a cigar.

He dropped into another deep chair facing Boyle, uttering a weary sigh and, after puffing contemplatively for a moment, he said:

"Now we can talk without interruption. You know me, of course. My picture's been in the papers enough to make my face familiar to most newspaper readers."

"You," he leaned forward and stared at Boyle intently, "are wanted by the police. Even without your silly story

about illegal parking which you expected nobody to believe I should have known that. A young man of your kind who is perfectly sober doesn't slam a policeman in the course of his duty especially when that policeman came to help him from an assault."

"I can use a man like you; I need a man who can look, talk and act like a gentleman. Now tell me all about yourself and perhaps we can do some business."

This was said with an air of perfect candor. Someone listening to him without prejudice might almost forget the utter repulsiveness of his personality. Boyle answered promptly.

"The police in New York don't know me." The other did not show by a sign that he noticed the emphasis placed on the name of the city. "No one else here knows me or anything about me. I am safe as long as this is so, reasonably safe. If we do any business, you and I, I can be of much greater use to you if the situation remains as is: namely, that *no one should know anything about me.*"

The high piping voice squealed out.

"But if you tell me—" The sentence was left suggestively unfinished.

Boyle shook his head slightly and sat smoking his cigarette comfortably.

The Barker carefully licked the loose leaf on his cigar. He took a few puffs and then seemed to come to a decision.

"All right. Are you willing to trail with me?"

Boyle nodded.

"How far are you willing to go?"

"The sky is the limit, if it pays."

The big hairless head craned further forward toward his visitor. He was about to speak, when his head jerked sharply

backward. With a catlike agility that was amazing in a man of his loose bulk he left his chair and was at the door through which both he and his visitor had entered the room. One hand held a flat automatic while the other jerked the door sharply.

Boyle saw from his position that the other room was now empty of occupants. The lights were still on, bringing into sharp relief every detail of the room. The Barker gazed about him with a puzzled frown. He stepped out into the larger room, then he returned and closed the door. After a moment he opened the door once more and leaving it thus he returned to his seat. He turned to Boyle.

"I thought I heard something move against that door; did you hear it?"

Boyle, who had also been conscious of a slight slithering movement against that door, shook his head. With another puzzled frown and shake of his head, the Barker addressed Boyle:

"Here it is in a nutshell. A German scientist, by the name of Dr. Korne, found a formula for making cocaine synthetically. He made it as cheap as so much salt. He's been in this country a long time and he knows his way about, can't teach him anything new in the way of crookedness or graft of any kind."

"He had a large trunkful of the stuff made and was beginning to put it out, when we got wise. A couple of my men made a raid on a barn he had here in the village where he was making the stuff. We had information about him and his place. We got tipped off that the formula for the stuff was in a secret compartment of the trunk, where the prepared cocaine was kept."

"My men got the cocaine but the compartment that was

supposed to hold the formula was empty. After the raid, Dr. Korne disappeared. We'll find him sooner or later. I don't know that he's hiding specially, but he left the laboratory where he used to make his experiments."

He stopped and leaned forward. His voice became more shrill.

"Find the formula and bring it here and you can write your own ticket."

Boyle sat still. A vision of the blue spectacled man rose before him. Synthetic cocaine was worth its weight in gold—worth millions to an unscrupulous man like either Dr. Korne or the Barker.

He looked at the Barker. The latter was staring at him fixedly with his unwinking stare. He seemed to read Boyle's thoughts. He spoke slowly, his high piping voice coming in a squealing hiss:

"I've been double-crossed, young man. No one who has ever done it is alive today."

His ungainly head, on its grotesquely long neck, shot forward like that of a snake. His voice dropped still lower until Boyle could scarcely hear him:

"And young man, I can give the Chinese and the red Indian cards and spades when it comes to using the methods that were so well understood by the Spanish Inquisitors. I assure you, if you double cross me in this, you'll die a very unpleasant death."

Boyle sat imperturbably, returning the stare, then he asked:

"Who made the raid?"

The Barker looked at him a moment, then he said sardonically:

"I get you, but you're barking up the wrong tree. My

men know me too well to do such a thing. No, the formula was simply not there."

Boyle nodded and then went on:

"Nevertheless, I'd like to talk to the men who made the raid and ask them just how it was done. I may get some idea—"

The big man without answering lifted a hand phone from its resting place and spoke into the mouthpiece. The door opened, after a moment, and a quiet pale individual stood in the room. The Barker ordered:

"Tell this man," jerking his head toward Boyle, "about getting the stuff from Korne."

The man ran his tongue over his lips. He spoke in short jerky sentences.

"Got the old guy alone. Before he could pull a gat we has him. Tied 'im up and went t'rough d' dump. Used to be a barn y'know. I goes up in what was d' loft, hay loft I guess, an' in one of d' rooms I finds d' stuff."

"Up in the attic or loft alone?" piped the Barker.

The pasty-faced individual nodded.

"Mind taking me where that laboratory was?" asked Boyle.

The eyes of the pasty-faced individual widened, but he merely looked at the Barker, who nodded. The Barker asked one more question, putting special emphasis on the words:

"Sure you were up in the loft alone and no one opened the trunk?"

The other once more ran his tongue lightly over his lips and nodded.

"All right, wait in the other room and then you can take him to the laboratory."

"Who's he?" asked Boyle.

"Frisco Pete. Finest cracksman in the world. Can open any lock as easy as Houdini could."

"And if I find the formula, or bring in Dr. Korne?"

"Then you'll get yours. But don't hold Dr. Korne too lightly. Now go and take a look at the barn for whatever reason you have in mind and report back."

#### IV

As Boyle strode along beside Frisco Pete he entered into casual chat. Then as if uttering a thought aloud he said:

"Wonder what became of that formula."

His companion did not answer but he turned to look at him. Then he ran his tongue over his lips while his hand brushed lightly on his vest and then hooked its thumb over his belt under the vest.

He answered:

"The boss would give his right eye to know w'ere dat is. Guess Korne got away wit' it."

Boyle nodded absently as they entered the yard facing the barn. The door was open and they entered without being molested. Only a dirty boy playing in the filth of the yard looked at them with casual interest while he stopped playing with some old discarded tin cans.

In place of the ladder that used to offer access to the loft there was now a rickety staircase. Frisco Pete preceded Boyle up those stairs. He was about to turn when he reached the loft, to talk to his companion when he froze in his tracks. The muzzle of a gun was poking firmly into the small of his back.

"Put 'em up!" said Boyle softly.

Frisco Pete's hands went up instantly and he stood rigidly as if made of stone.

"Step away a little and turn around," said Boyle, still in the same soft tone.

The cracksman turned and looked at him with his beady eyes gleaming wickedly. There was no fear in his eyes, just a wary catlike watchfulness.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"Give me that formula!"

Fear, stark, deadly fear sprang up in the beady eyes of the cracksman. His hands made a spasmodic movement. Instantly the gun in the hands of the other stopped its waving and was aimed at him rigidly. The upraised arms were still. His tongue ran over his lips.

"D' formula?"

"Yes, the formula."

"Yer crazy. I don't know what yer talkin' about."

Boyle spoke softly:

"Afraid of the Barker, aren't you?"

Again that stark fear sprang up in the eyes of the cracksman. The white of his pasty complexion turned a faint greenish tinge. His tongue once more licked his lips. It was this characteristic gesture that had given him away to the other.

"Take your choice, Peter. Either give me the formula or give it to the Barker. If you don't give it to me I'm going over there to tell him you've got it. And believe me—"

The other had recovered his poise by this time.

"What makes you think I've got it?"

"You've got it all right. You've either got it in the lining of your vest pocket or in your belt somewhere. But I haven't got much time to waste. Do you give it to me or—"

"Oh, all right. You win."

Frisco Pete began lowering his hands.

"*Keep 'em up!*" The command came like a whip lash. "Turn your face to the wall."

The other obeyed. Boyle's hand went over the other's clothing quickly and skilfully. He took from the other's outside jacket pocket a small flat automatic and from a shoulder holster its twin. Then Boyle cautiously felt in the lining of the vest pocket where he had seen the other brush his hands so caressingly. Not finding another thing he felt of the other's belt.

Here his fingers encountered an obstruction; the belt had a pocket. Being unable to undo the belt with one hand with the cracksman facing the wall, Boyle carelessly put his other hand still holding the weapon about the other's waist.

Boyle was conscious of a jerk and a blinding pain. The cracksman threw the weight of his body against the hand holding the weapon. The back of Boyle's hand came into scraping grinding contact with the rough brick wall. He nearly cried out in pain and dropped the weapon. Frisco Pete kicked backward violently as he whirled about to face Boyle.

Boyle ducked a swinging pivot punch that would have ended the fight—and then closed in. Here he learned that his superior size and weight did not give him much advantage. His adversary had the wiriness and quickness of a jaguar and had no more regard for the rules than that animal.

Boyle quickly realized that this was a fight for his life. A glancing blow high up on his scalp convinced him that the other's punch carried dynamite. Therefore getting at one of

his weapons was out of the question, with Frisco Pete closing in.

In their first rush his own weapon had been kicked down the stairs. In a moment he realized that the other was trying to maneuver him into a position where he might be sent to follow his weapon.

Once he bored into a clinch and barely escaped the deadly rabbit punch on the back of the neck which would have put him effectively out of the fight. In another clinch he barely avoided having one of his eyes gouged out.

During all this time, the catlike cracksman had not uttered a word. He fought with a savage fury that would shortly overcome one less able to take care of himself than Lester Boyle. Once Boyle slipped and was staggering back toward the open well of the staircase with Frisco Pete following him, raining punches on him with animal ferocity.

Boyle could avert disaster only by permitting himself to fall. He squirmed aside barely in time to avoid the other's heels as he took a running jump at his face.

He scrambled to his feet. A solid blow high up on the cheek forced Pete to raise his guard. Boyle took instant advantage of this. He went under the guard and his hard bony fist was planted in the other's solar plexus.

The cracksman went down, his eyes glassy, his body writhing in the agony of that punch.

Boyle took no further chances. With some bits of rope he found on the floor he tied the other's hands and feet securely. Then he removed Pete's belt and quickly located a flap from which he extracted a paper and a considerable sum of money.

A quick glance showed him the paper covered with chemical formulae. He now waited until Pete recovered, then he spoke.

"This is a tough spot for you, but I'll give you a break. I'll untie you and you can do what you like. You know what will happen if the Barker hears about this. You've got a chance to get away. Take my advice and do it."

He untied the prone cracksman and cautiously felt of the steps as he went down backward, watching his late adversary carefully.

On the lower floor of the barn he once more looked at the precious paper, enclosed it in an envelope, wrote an address on it, put it in his pocket and walked out, casting one more look at the trap-like opening that led to the loft.

## V

Boyle was received in the Barker's sitting room. The big ungainly head was lolling on the high back of one of the overstuffed chairs. Two other men were with him, when Boyle was escorted into the room. He took a seat in response to a gesture, where the two men were out of his sight, as he sat facing the repellantly bald man.

Boyle began at once:

"Now, if you'll tell me more about this stuff Dr. Korne manufactured and something about Dr. Korne himself to help me find him, I'll get at it. You're sure he's got the formula?"

"No, he hasn't; the formula's been found."

"Did you get Korne?"

"No, not yet, but we've got the formula."

"Where is it?"

"Right in this room," squealed the high piping voice, the unwinking eyes staring at Boyle.

Boyle was conscious of a prickling along his scalp and a

tingling of his spine. He made a spasmodic movement as if to rise from his chair. He was conscious of the big head in front of him nodding.

Two pairs of hands seized him and held him helpless. His hands and feet were tied tightly and then he was disarmed. His struggles were futile; he convinced himself of that quickly, then he sat quietly, looking intently at the grotesque head that was still staring at him unwinkingly.

When he was disarmed, the big man ordered:

"Search him for the formula; he's got it."

But a thorough search revealed nothing. These men were past masters at this sort of thing. They did it as thoroughly as would a corps of French detectives.

They carefully went over every bit of lining in his outer garments, his linen, his underwear and his shoes. They even examined his collar for a hidden flap. Finally one of the men who was searching turned to the Barker.

"What would this formula look like, boss?"

"I don't know, a paper of some kind. Find it."

"He ain't got it, boss."

"What!" This was a shrill piping squeal as their leader bounded out of his seat. He thrust forward his head until his eyes were six inches from those of Boyle's.

"I told you something about unpleasant inquisitorial practices, didn't I? Well, if you don't give me the formula, I'll convince you I wasn't bragging. I'll give you just five minutes to tell me what I want to know, then I'll make you sorry you were ever born."

Boyle spoke coolly:

"What makes you think I've got the formula?"

A sneer that distorted his face into that of a gargoyle twisted the hairless features. He looked over Boyle's shoul-

der as they heard a catlike tread and Frisco Pete walked into the room.

He nodded toward Boyle:

"Y' got 'im, huh. It's like I tole you over the phone. He fin's d' paper in a sort of sliding panel in d' wall. I ask 'im what it is and he hits me a swipe on d' head and knocks me cold. When I come to he tells me he's goin' to tell you he finds it on me. Then he beats it, thinkin' I'm going to beat it, which I'm goin' to do when I thinks it over and thinks it's best to put you wise and you tells me to come in."

"But the paper isn't on him," said the Barker coldly.

"I sees him take it, I tell you."

The Barker turned with blazing eyes toward Boyle. The latter looked up at him and said easily:

"Now let me tell my story. When you spoke to this bird," jerking his head toward Pete, "about the paper he licked his lips. He was scared blue. Then I mentioned the paper several times and he did the same thing. When I wondered audibly where it was, he gave himself away by unconsciously putting his hand where he kept it."

"When we got up to the attic I took it away from him. But you didn't trust me or maybe you didn't trust him. You had us trailed. The two sweet persons who trailed me knocked me out on the way over here and they must have taken the formula. You can satisfy yourself that I'm telling you the truth about Pete by examining his belt. You will know that your two shadows took the formula away from me because you probably won't see them any more."

The Barker turned a terrible face toward Pete. The loose gray folds of flesh were suffused, even the skull taking on a purplish tinge. Pete had started furtively toward the door. But the big man reached him with a spring. One of his huge

hands grasped the cracksman about the neck. He shook him as a playful puppy shakes a rag.

Then he dropped him and said to the other two men:

"Take him downstairs."

"Please boss, please. I didn't—"

This was cut short. The other two men dragged him out of the room.

The Barker said to Boyle:

"What did you mean by saying you'll go after Korne?"

"I also said I was going to try to get the formula. To tell you the truth I wasn't going to tell you Pete double-crossed you. I was simply going after those two in my own way and—"

The other was looking at him intently. He stooped and untied his bonds, saying:

"I'm not altogether satisfied that you're telling the truth. If you're not, better get in a hole and drag the hole after you. Pete will get what everybody gets who double-crosses me, and so will you if you try it."

Just then the faint tinkling of the telephone bell attracted his attention. The Barker lifted the hand piece from its cradle. He put it to his ear saying:

"Yes?"

At the first words that were uttered at the other end of the wire Boyle saw him stiffen to attention. Boyle stood up and turned his back to the other fingering an object on a small side table. Shielding the act from the other by his body, he put the object in his coat pocket.

When he turned once more toward the Barker that individual was still listening intently at the phone, casting an occasional glance at Boyle. Finally with a monosyllabic grunt he laid down the instrument.

He stood up and looked long and fixedly at the younger man. Then he moved a chair out of his way; he did this idly as if it were an unconscious gesture. Finally he said, his words coming in almost a whisper:

"So, my two men knocked you out and took the formula away from you, did they? And you're the bright young chap who'll come to the Barker and double-cross him, will you? Actually made me believe that three of my trusted men would—"

He lurched forward, his hand streaking to his hip pocket. The movement was never completed.

As the big man lurched forward, his hand going for his gun, Boyle's hand lifted the corner of his coat without leaving the pocket. There was a dull muffled explosion and smoke was seen curling up from a tiny hole in the pocket. The hand now came out with a levelled automatic, but it was not necessary.

The Barker had stopped in mid-stride. An air of surprise spread over his features. A small round hole appeared between his eyes. He fell as a tree falls, slowly, then more swiftly, a trickle of dark stain began bubbling out of the hole between his eyes. Finally he fell with a crash overturning a chair in his fall.

There were racing footsteps in the adjoining room. Boyle did not wait. He turned the key of the door and lifting the window sash swiftly leaped out. Here he found himself in a cluttered yard where after a moment's search he found an exit.

## VI

Just forty-eight hours after his first visit, Boyle was once more ringing the bell of the well-kept house at 1435 River

Road, Dover. The young woman with the startling white skin and very red lips answered his bell this time.

He smiled at her reassuringly and Boyle's best smile was something that most young women took into account. But this young woman now looked at him coolly, impersonally. She took his message and returned in a short time, escorting him to the room where he first met Dr. Korne.

Once more he found himself seated opposite the thin individual with the massive brow whose eyes were hidden behind blue-tinted glasses.

"Well?"

"I found the formula."

"Have you it with you?"

"Yes, here it is." The sheet he had taken from Frisco Pete was laid on the desk.

"And the serum?"

"Is coming up in a trunk."

"How did you do it?"

Boyle recited his experiences since he had parted from Dr. Korne two days before. Korne interrupted at one part of the recital:

"Where was the formula when they searched you?"

"I knew that I was being followed. When I turned a corner and was out of their sight, I dropped it into a post box. I had addressed it in the barn, looking forward to such an emergency."

"Very clever. Go on."

"The Barker told me that the serum you made was synthetic cocaine."

The man in the blue spectacles did not move. Boyle went on easily:

"Of course if it is cocaine that puts another aspect on—"

"It is not cocaine, my young friend. I told you that in unscrupulous hands my serum might be put to dangerous uses. That is why the Barker wanted it."

He paused for a long time and then said in a low tone:

"Too bad that a clever young man like you should not have a longer life before him. That a life like yours should be cut off—"

"Do you mean my disease? You told me that this serum of yours would cure me if I got it back for you and if I brought back the formula."

"No, I do not mean the disease." His accent was discernable now. "I mean that in spite of your cleverness you may be a very indiscreet person. Although what the Barker said about this being cocaine is not true, you may tell the story to someone. If you did, it might have unfortunate complications for me."

"It is fortunate, perhaps, that you did not anticipate living very long anyway. It is also fortunate that you are the kind who likes to play a lone hand. You will not suffer, I'll see to that, but decidedly it is best that you disappear. You—"

Boyle moved swiftly, but he froze to attention at the sharp metallic click. High up in the wall behind Dr. Korne a small panel slid open. Framed in this opening there was the hideous face of the negro who had received him on his first visit. In his hands was cuddled a rifle of large calibre which was held rigidly with its muzzle trained on the young man.

Dr. Korne, without turning his head, said:

"As I said, you are very rash for playing a lone hand, but it is fortunate for me. If you move you will die. His weapon has a silencer and it will not be heard out of this room. But I can make it even more painless if—"

At this moment the young woman came to the door.

"Some men are here with your trunk," she said tonelessly.

"Ah, my valuable serum," turning to Boyle. "You were thorough indeed. So fortunate that—"

The young woman interrupted.

"The men say they will not deliver it to anyone but you personally. They must have your personal receipt."

"Yes, I am coming down," turning to Boyle. "I shall return in a minute."

Boyle listened until the footsteps outside the door faded. Then he looked up at the negro in the opening, saying:

"The three men bringing the trunk are my friends. They will grab Dr. Korne as soon as they can lay their hands on him. They will bring him up to this room. If you kill me you will die in the chair—for murder. Your master will also die in the chair, for being an accomplice. Do you understand that?"

At this moment there was a scuffling at the door. It was thrown open and Dr. Korne, held firmly in the grasp of two men dressed in the conventional garb of truck drivers came into the room followed by a third man. This third man after a quick look about the room said to Boyle:

"Are you all right, Les? The young woman said something about a negro and a gun—"

"I'm all right now, but for a minute or two I was very far from being all right."

He turned to Dr. Korne.

"You see, you're mistaken about me playing a lone hand." Suddenly there was a change in the quiet voiced, sickly-looking young man. His voice was now hard.

"There are some things our Uncle Sam won't stand for. Selling dope is one of them." He turned to one of the men.

"Show your badge, Jimmy." The three men unbuttoned

the straps of their overalls and displayed gold shields. Boyle continued:

"I thought I might be searched again, so I left mine home. We almost had you, Dr. Korne, when the other gang stole your stuff and your formula. It is you, Doctor, who are unwise in playing a lone hand. You needed outside help and you advertised for it. Fortunately we knew before the Barker did where your new quarters were.

"A young man dying of tuberculosis, a young man who seemed to have seen better days, suited your purpose perfectly, didn't it, Dr. Korne; a young man doomed to an early death by his disease to whom you could promise life. If you were really a doctor my tuberculosis gag would not have worked, of course. If such a young man was killed by the Barker and his gang, it didn't matter, did it?"

He stopped with a look of repulsion. Then he nodded to the three other men.

"Take him away. There will be no more synthetic cocaine for some time. Take him away. There is one matter I've got to attend to here before this thing is cleaned up."



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## ONE TRIAL LESS

*By*

TED COUGHLAN

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WAYNE WRIGHT, old Judge of the Criminal Court in Miami, Florida, stood irresolute before the ornate door of the automatic elevator in the foyer of his apartment hotel. He pressed the "down" button with his stubby, gnarled finger and glanced at his watch without seeing it.

"I can't remember for the life of me," he thought with weary annoyance. "Was I supposed to meet them in Room Eleven-thirty at twelve o'clock, or Room Twelve-hundred at eleven-thirty?"

As a judge, an officer of the local rationing board, and member of the Civilian Defense Corps, Judge Wright had too many things to think of at one time. Margaret Sinclair, his efficient young secretary, kept track of all his appointments, and she had reminded him of this one.

He was selling the building. His appointment with his attorney and the prospective purchaser at either eleven-thirty or noon was to close the sale, which would enable him to retire to his beloved rose farm.

Again he looked at his watch. The elevator door opened and a heavy-set, gray-haired man stepped out. He was Har-

old Jackson, the lessee of the apartment hotel. His shrewd black eyes took in the Judge's indecision.

"What's worrying you, Judge?" he asked, in a loud, hearty voice, "You look lost."

Judge Wright impatiently shook his bushy white head.

"Good morning, Jackson. I was just wondering . . . have you seen either Caldwell or Barnes this morning? I have an appointment with them."

"They're both waiting for you in 'Eleven-thirty'. I took Caldwell up some time ago."

"Thank you, Jackson. How is everything?"

Jackson shrugged his broad shoulders. His voice grew less cordial, as he complained:

"I'm sure sorry you didn't give me another chance to take up that option. I really wanted to buy this building before my lease expires. I suppose it's too late now?"

"That's what I came to see my son-in-law about. Alexander Barnes is my attorney now, you know. If Mr. Caldwell buys the property, I'll see that you get your option money back." The Judge's kindly blue eyes twinkled benevolently.

"I'd rather have the building," Jackson grumbled, as the judge stepped into the automatic elevator.

The door to Eleven-thirty was unlatched. Pushing it open, he looked at the familiar furnishings. Absent-mindedly he recognized the heavy desk, littered with law books, as his own. This was the suite he reserved for himself as a refuge when he became too weary, after a strenuous day in court, to make the long trip to his country home.

He took off his shapeless Panama, and dropped it on the desk, then started toward the studio couch near the window, to rest a few minutes.

Rubbing his veined hand across his tired eyes, he moved toward the large brown couch, then stopped and stared. Two men seated on it, held stiff, unnatural poses. They were leaning toward one another, their heads lolling rather than resting halfway down the back cushions, their legs stretched awkwardly and too rigidly forward.

The judge's stubby fingers fumbled in his breast pocket. He found his glass case, snapped it open, put his thick-lensed pince-nez to his eyes, and peered again at the stiffening bodies of his son-in-law Alexander Barnes, and Joseph Caldwell, president of the Caldwell Realty Company.

There was a dark hole in the center of Caldwell's forehead. A smear of dried blood stained his too-white face.

Horried, Wright looked closer. Was Barnes also . . . yes, a bullet hole yawned in his right temple! His hand, dangling over the edge of the couch, gripped an automatic revolver.

Judge Wright stumbled toward his desk and groped for the telephone. He dialed a number with palsied fingers. When Margaret's voice answered him, he realized that he had automatically called his office instead of Police Headquarters. His secretary spoke to him three times before he asked her to put the call through for him, then he dropped the receiver and slumped unconscious, his head resting on the edge of the desk. . . .

Reviving slowly, Judge Wright heard an excited babel of voices in the room. He looked up into the anxious, lean face of Inspector Holland, head of the Homicide Bureau. His face, at first a blur, gradually took on shape. He recognized the full, petulant mouth, snub nose, deep-set gray eyes and high, sloping forehead of the detective. Passing his hand over his eyes again, the judge sat upright.

"What's happened, Inspector?" he asked.

Holland shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Don't you remember calling me about this?" His square, hairy hand pointed to the sinister couch.

Still dazed, the judge looked around the familiar room. The place was now crowded with uniformed policemen. He met the compassionate and frightened glance of a slim blonde whom he recognized as his secretary, and he saw the superintendent of the building, a red-headed man in blue serge, its janitor, and Jackson.

Sudden, shocked remembrance returned to the judge. He hesitated, torn between the desire to go to his bereaved child and the necessity of assisting the police. He steadied himself.

"I remember now, Inspector," he said. "What do you make of it?"

"Obviously murder and suicide. How did you happen to discover it?"

The judge stood up shakily, and walked toward the two bodies. He looked at them for a long time, before answering.

"I had an appointment with them at noon," he said. "When I walked into the room they sat exactly as you found them. I called my office instead of you—from force of habit, I guess—then went out like a light. It's a common occurrence with—a shock, and out I go. The old ticker isn't what it used to be. Has the M.E. been here yet?"

Holland shook his head.

"He's on the way. His verdict will only be a formality. I can't understand why your son-in-law killed Caldwell and himself. Can you throw any light on it?"

Judge Wright sorrowfully shook his grizzled head.

"No. If it were the other way around, perhaps I might."

He leaned over the bodies again, examining them more

closely. When he stood up, he was shaking his head slowly and thoughtfully.

"I'm sorry to make it harder for you, Inspector—but, but it's double murder. Alexander wouldn't and couldn't possibly have killed Caldwell."

The inspector jumped.

"What? You don't know what you're talking about, Judge. Why, just look! The only fingerprints on the gun are Barnes'. He certainly shot himself after murdering Caldwell."

"On the face of it, yes. But look again. Alexander has been dead much longer than Caldwell. I'm not a physician, but even I see that."

While the inspector was verifying the judge's diagnosis, Margaret Sinclair unscrewed the cap of a bottle, spilled a capsule into the palm of her hand, and handed it to her employer. His face twisted into a grimace, and he turned his head away.

"Come now, Your Honor, you know you must take it."

"My dear, this is no time for pills." Judge Wright made a wry face. "Why did you come over here, Margaret? Is there anybody in the office. Have you called Mrs. Barnes?"

"Of course. Here, take your pill. You know you need one any time you have an attack." The corners of her mouth were turned up in a half-smile, but her large, speckled hazel eyes held a concerned look, and a tiny frown furrowed her smooth, high forehead.

"Please, Your Honor!" she insisted.

With an exasperated sigh, the judge picked up the pill, and obediently swallowed it. She smiled at him as if he were a small boy who had done his mother's bidding without too much quibbling.

Inspector Holland pointed his stubby finger toward the taller policeman.

"Mulligan," he ordered, "find out if any other tenants heard the shots! And, Scott,"—he indicated a plainclothes man—"you take those people into the next room and keep them there until I send for them."

"All of them, Inspector?" the detective looked bewildered.

"No, numbskull. Those four." Holland pointed to the three men and the girl, then suddenly asked the superintendent of the building, who had been standing moodily in a corner: "Who are you?"

"Paul Delancey, superintendent of the building. You sent for Mr. Jackson and me."

Holland nodded, looking at the janitor.

"And you're Cox. All right, take them out, Scott."

Before they left the room, the judge suggested:

"Margaret is an excellent stenographer, Inspector. You can use her until your own man arrives."

"Okay. You stay here, Miss Sinclair. Got your note-book with you?"

"Of course." Trying to act composed, Margaret sat down in the desk chair, her pencil poised over the open pad. "Do you want me to take down everything, Inspector, or just your questions and the answers?"

"Everything." Holland's frown changed to a semblance of a smile as he looked the girl over for the first time. "First of all, where were you when the murders were committed?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Inspector, unless you tell me when they happened."

"Never mind. I just wanted to see if you had a head on your shoulders."

Appeased, the girl transcribed the question and answer. When she had finished, Holland asked the judge:

"How long do you think Barnes has been dead?"

Wright's bushy gray eyebrows met over his Roman nose.

"About three hours. Caldwell must have been shot just before I came into the room. His body is still warm. Why hasn't the doctor shown up? He can tell you much better. I never finished my pre-medical course."

"He's on the way. How well did you know both men, Judge?"

"Hmm . . . I bounced Barnes on my knee." The old man's eyes grew moist. "He's been my personal attorney ever since he married my daughter. I hardly knew Caldwell before he tried to buy the building."

"Do you know anyone who would want to kill them?"

"Alexander being a criminal lawyer, had plenty of enemies—half the present and recent occupants of the State prison. I don't know about Caldwell."

"You're a lot of help, I must say." Holland chewed thoughtfully on the end of a pencil, then blurted out: "You've probably learned more about criminals through trials than I have by catching them. What do you suggest?"

"About the only thing I've learned by listening to the evidence on both sides of murder trials is what not to do when you kill a man. Right now, I don't think of anything the murderer overlooked."

Mulligan barged in and slammed the door behind him.

"Not a one of them heard a thing, Inspector," he announced loudly. "And I ain't surprised, with so many of them bombers flying around."

"Go into the next room and tell Scott to send Mr. Delan-

cey in," Holland said contemptuously. "Then telephone Headquarters and find out what's keeping the M.E."

Mulligan left, chastised. In a few seconds, his bull-like voice was heard from the next room.

"Inspector, come in here! They're all dead!"

With a muffled oath, Holland left the room, followed by the judge and Margaret.

Next door, they found Mulligan ruefully biting his nails and staring at three men lying huddled in a corner. Holland rushed toward them, knelt down for a moment, then swore again.

"Get out of here and find the doctor!" he bellowed. "They're only stunned. Have him drop whatever he's doing and come over. Hey, where's Jackson?"

Holland poured a drink from his pocket flask and poured it down Scott's throat. The bulky plainclothesman spluttered, then opened his eyes. Groggily, he sat up, supporting himself against the wall.

"What's been going on in here?" Holland demanded. "I leave you to watch three unarmed men, and—"

"Honest, Inspector, I don't get it. I went out for only a minute. Mr. Jackson wanted to go to his room and get himself some cigars. Just to make sure, I called downstairs to the cop on the door to see to it that he don't try to leave the building. I seen him to the elevator, and soon's it started up, I come back here. Soon's I opened the door, something slugged me. Next thing I knows you're pouring that drink down my throat."

He looked longingly at the flask, but Holland ignored the unspoken plea.

"Who hit you?"

"Sure, I wish I knew." The Homicide man's heavy eye-

brows met in a frown over his bulbous red nose. "It could have been either of them, then again—" He glanced toward the now stirring victims. "Maybe he can tell you more," he suggested lamely, as the door swung open again, and Jackson walked in.

Holland pounced on him.

"Where have you been?"

Jackson stared unbelievably at the janitor and Delancey. They were showing signs of returning consciousness. He shook his graying head.

"Up to my room for a cigar. Scott allowed me to leave here for a few minutes."

Judge Wright's sensitive nostrils contracted as he sniffed several times.

"I wonder why Mr. Jackson isn't smoking," he suggested, in his mildest voice. "It seems to me, if he wanted a cigar that badly he would have one lighted."

Holland looked quickly at Jackson's breast pocket. It was flat and empty. There was a challenge in his voice as he demanded:

"Well, where is the stogy you went for?"

Jackson's broad shoulders sagged slightly. His voice dropped, as he admitted:

"I didn't even look for a cigar, Inspector. I have an accountant working down in the office. I wanted to see him, and also to call up my attorney."

"What do you need an attorney for? Nobody's charged you with anything—yet." It was impossible to miss the significant pause Holland made.

The corners of the judge's rather small mouth rose ever so slightly.

"I think I can answer that, Inspector," he answered for

Jackson. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Jackson, but didn't you tell your attorney to put in a bid for this building? Now that Caldwell is dead?"

Jackson nodded his head emphatically.

"I didn't want to bother you, Judge, but you know I was sore about losing my option before."

Holland was not through with Jackson.

"Why do you have an accountant going over the books now?" he asked. "It's not the end of the year."

"My lease is about out," Jackson answered promptly, "and I want a check on everything before the judge sells the building. I'm glad I thought of it, too. The accountant says that Delancey was taking me for a ride. He ain't sure for how much, until he gets through."

Holland's glance shifted from Jackson to Delancey and back again. Then he saw that the janitor had come to.

"What happened, Cox?" he asked.

The janitor shrugged his heavy square shoulders. He rubbed the top of his touseled head with his none too clean, rough hand.

"That's what I'd like to know. I was sitting over there, waiting for you to get through, when all of a sudden it felt like the ceiling caved in on me, and out I went."

"Did you see Mr. Jackson leave the room?"

"Sure, he went out with the Headquarter's man. I didn't see neither of them come back, though."

Judge Wright was listening to the questioning, while slowly wandering around the room, examining it minutely. He stopped long enough to help the building superintendent off the floor, then walked toward the window and stared out thoughtfully. When the Inspector spoke to Delancey, the Judge turned and listened.

"Well, what can you tell me about the attack?" was Holland's first question.

"Nothing more than the others, but—but—" Delancey stopped, and glared at Jackson. "I was sitting with my back to the door. I heard a thud, and started to turn around, but before I could make out what was going on, I was struck down myself. I wouldn't be sure, but—" Again he stopped, this time significantly.

The judge spoke up, as if addressing a hesitant witness. His voice had a sharp edge to it.

"Why don't you say what you're thinking, Mr. Delancey? It's plain to me that you are under the impression that your employer knows something about the assault."

Delancey shook the dust off his sharply pressed trousers, and wiped his face with a handkerchief. His well-modulated voice was still hesitant.

"I'm not certain of it, Your Honor—that is, not certain enough to accuse him directly. But he appears to be the only one of the four of us who escaped unhurt."

Jackson flared up. His full face reddened.

"Why, you—" he shouted and swore vehemently. "You know I left the room before you got slugged."

Holland let them argue for a while, then stepped between them.

"Did you see Cox get hit?" he asked Delancey.

"No," Delancey again insinuated, "but I still think Jackson knows more than he admits. He could have slugged your policeman out in the hall, then come in here quietly and knocked both of us out. The thud I heard must have been Cox falling."

Jackson's bulk lunged at the superintendent. The Inspec-

tor pulled him away, told him to keep quiet, and listened as Delancey continued.

"He is sore at me. He blames me for queering his chance to buy this building. With this present real estate boom on, he'd do anything to get it."

"Why, you—you cursed swindler! What are you trying to do? Make the inspector think that I killed them?"

This time Delancey flared up. He snatched up a chair and threw it quickly at Jackson. It missed him, and crashed against the wall.

"You're a fine one to accuse me of anything!" he snarled in a coldly furious voice. "Why don't you admit that you killed them, instead of trying to blacken my reputation to cover yourself up?"

Inspector Holland had trouble separating the two men. He dragged Jackson away by the arm and pushed Delancey into a chair.

"That'll be enough from both of you!" he snapped. "You, Jackson, tell me where you spent the morning."

The answer came fast and pat.

"In my office with the accountant. I only left long enough to have a cup of coffee."

Judge Wright's mild voice contrasted with Jackson's below.

"Is that where I saw you going?"

"Where and when did you see him, Judge?" Holland turned sharply toward Wright.

"He was coming out of the elevator as I entered the building. He told me that he had admitted Mr. Caldwell to my room."

"Then he's going down to Headquarters for questioning." The inspector turned to Scott, the plainclothesman. "Have

him booked for investigation! Let him get away and I'll have your head."

The detective handcuffed Jackson and hurried out, anxious to avoid any further threats. Holland shook his head wearily.

"Where did you spend the morning?" he asked Delancey.

"I've been busy ever since eight o'clock. This is the first of the month. I have been collecting rents, showing apartments and checking up."

"Did you leave the building at any time?"

"Yes, about ten-thirty I went to the bank to make a deposit."

"Do you have the slip to prove it?"

"Of course." Delancey handed it to the inspector.

"Hmm . . . this doesn't prove *you* were at the bank."

"I don't understand you, Inspector. Surely you wouldn't suspect me."

"I do. Especially if what Jackson charges is true. I suspect everybody until I find out who did it."

Holland turned as the door opened and a short, slim elderly man, carrying a doctor's bag, walked into the room.

"Well, what's your rush, Holland?" he drawled.

"Oh, so you finally woke up, Pearson," the inspector said sarcastically, pointing to Delancey and Cox. Look them over. They got sluggish."

Dr. Pearson examined both men's heads, dived into his bag, brought out a bottle of iodine, swabbed their injuries, and dismissed them.

"Superficial cuts," he said. "Neither of you were hit hard enough to swat a fly. Take an aspirin each and go back to work." He looked around the room. "Well, where are they, Holland?"

"In the next room. Let me know when they were killed, then you can cart them off to the morgue."

As Pearson was leaving the room, Judge Wright asked hesitantly:

"Doctor?"

"What is it, Your Honor?"

The judge waited until he heard the elevator door click.

"Were either Cox or Delancey hit hard enough to make them lose consciousness for a few minutes?"

"I can't answer that truthfully without a more detailed examination, but Cox was apparently hit the harder. The same blow, which would kill one man wouldn't even stun another. It depends to a great extent on the thickness of the individual's skull, his general condition."

He launched into a technical explanation which none of his listeners understood. Noticing the blank expression on their faces, he broke off in the middle of his clinical discourse, and left the room.

"Rats!" Holland's biting words followed him.

"Call those men back, please," Judge Wright said, and his even voice held a slight edge of excitement, "and have the doctor examine them more thoroughly, as soon as he is through with the bodies."

"Why?" Holland stopped staring out through the window. "What difference does the thickness of their skulls make?"

"Please do, Inspector," the judge insisted. "I assure you that it will help clear up this case."

"It seems to be cleared up. Jackson will tell the whole truth in a hurry, when I crack down on him."

Judge Wright wagged his head.

"If he knows it," he said cryptically. "If you want to be sure of a conviction, you'd better listen to me." He walked over to the window and pointed. "Did you notice this before, Inspector?"

"What?"

"A brand new sash cord." Wright fingered the rope.

"Sure. What about it? Cox must have replaced the old frayed one. He's a good janitor."

"Yes, but why did he leave the window closed? He knows I'm a fresh air fiend."

The judge raised the sash. As soon as his hand left it, the frame slammed down again. He pulled on the cord, and it came loose.

He peered closer. The end, which should have been tied to the sash weight, had been cut away.

Holland also examined the cord then anxiously looked toward the elevator. He saw the indicator moving upward and waited until it stopped. Officer Mulligan, a smile of satisfaction on his flushed face, followed Delancey and Cox out.

The inspector herded them into the apartment and slammed the door in Mulligan's face. Inside, he took Cox by the arm and led him toward the window.

"When did you put in that cord?" he asked.

The janitor's bushy eyebrows went up.

"Yesterday. I didn't want to wait until the old one broke."

"Why didn't you finish the job?" Holland pointed to the cut end of the cord.

"I fixed it right, opened the window, and went about me other jobs."

"Do you have a knife, Superintendent?" Judge Wright asked Delancey pointedly.

Delancey's slim, long-fingered hand went toward his trouser pocket. He kept it there when he saw the door open and Detective Scott return with Jackson. Dr. Pearson also walked in.

"Caldwell was killed around eleven-thirty to noon," the M.E. reported to the inspector. "Barnes has been dead since about ten o'clock. Can I send for the wagon?"

"First take another look at those men. I want to know exactly how hard they were hit."

Pearson motioned to the detective to sit down. When Scott took off his hat, the doctor examined his head painfully. In answer to the judge's inquiring look, he explained:

"He got a nasty bump. Enough to knock him out for a minute or two." He reached into his bag, and took out a bottle. "Here, take one of those, then go home and take it easy for a day or two. All right, Cox." He motioned the sullen janitor to sit down.

"Aw, I'm all right," Cox said shamefacedly, as he put on his hat.

Delancey stopped glaring at Jackson long enough to say to Cox:

"Well, what are you scared of? Maybe I was wrong after all, and you—"

Before he could finish, Cox jumped at him. He swung both fists, and connected. Delancey staggered and bumped into Jackson. All at once, they were engaged in a fierce free-for-all fight. Both the inspector and the judge tried to separate them.

The judge stumbled, tripped over the M.E.'s bag, and fell to the floor, taking Pearson with him. Before he could rise,

he heard the sound of breaking glass, and looked toward the window.

Delancey appeared bent on pushing the inspector through the narrow window frame. He had one hand on the Homicide man's shoulder, and was trying to force him through the opening. Jackson's manacled hands were holding his other arm.

Holland braced the lower part of his body against the window ledge. He kicked upward savagely, missed Delancey, and caught Jackson in the stomach. The blow knocked the wind out of the man, and forced him to relax his grip on Delancey's arm.

Detective Scott, who was looking on amazed, apparently unable to coordinate his movements quickly enough to help his superior officer, sprang to life. He grabbed the inspector's arm and pulled him to safety, then swung a hamlike fist, and struck Delancey full in the face.

The building superintendent staggered, made a half turn then pitched head-first through the window.

The sudden silence in the room was shattered by a piercing scream. The doctor, Holland and Cox rushed toward the broken window. Judge Wright paid no attention to them. Picking himself off the floor, he went slowly over to Margaret, and patted her trembling shoulder.

"Who needs a pill now?" he asked.

Margaret Sinclair tried to avert her eyes, but they remained riveted on the broken glass. She gasped with amazement, when she heard Holland's voice.

"Hey, Scott, give me a hand."

The bulky detective leaned out the window, then stepped over the ledge and disappeared. In a second, his head reap-

peared, then his shoulders. The girl gasped again when she saw him shove Delancey into the room.

"It's all right, my dear," Judge Wright soothed her. "He only fell three feet. Don't you remember the balcony outside?"

Dr. Pearson, seeing that Delancey was conscious, resumed his examination of the janitor's head. After looking him over, he motioned to the superintendent to come over.

"I'll get my own doctor to look me over," Delancey objected.

"Is that so?" Holland forced him into the chair. "You do as Pearson says."

"It's no longer important, Inspector," the judge intervened. "Just ask him one question."

"You ask it," Holland growled. "I'm listening."

The judge pursed his thin lips, sighed, then took the plunge.

"Will you tell the inspector why you knew no more about the attack than Scott or Cox?"

"Because I didn't."

"Then how did you know what they told me?" Holland roared at him. "You were still unconscious when I questioned them. Or were you? Go ahead, Doctor—take another look at that head of his!"

Dr. Pearson bent over Delancey. Judge Wright beckoned Holland to the window, raised the lower frame, and pointed to its bottom.

"Is that hair red?" he asked agitatedly.

Holland saw the light. He yelped and pounced on Delancey, but the doctor waved him aside.

"This wound could not cause unconsciousness," he announced. "It's a mere scratch."

"So when they left the room," Holland's voice rose in accusation, "You knocked out Cox, waited for that dumb Scott to come back and slugged him. You cut the cord on the window sash, carefully let it drop on your head, and faked unconsciousness, to make me think that Jackson did it!"

"Jackson did it!" Delancey reasserted.

"How could he slug all three of you?"

Judge Wright called his secretary.

"Come, my dear, we must go and comfort my daughter. Now that the inspector can prove that Delancey dropped the window on his red head after hitting Cox and the Homicide detective. I'm sure he has ways of getting a confession from him."

"You're right about that, Judge. But—his motive?"

Again Judge Wright sighed, exasperated. He indicated Jackson.

"He can explain it to you. What more do you want from me? I found the victims, I caught your criminal, and showed you how to convict him. Aren't you satisfied?"

Jackson held out his still manacled hands to the judge.

"Thank you, Your Honor! My auditor swears that Delancey was embezzling funds, so the inspector will be satisfied. Delancey queered my first deal for the building, because he wanted it for himself. It'll be a gold mine, with the housing shortage. He bumped off Caldwell to keep him from buying it."

"That was after my poor son-in-law had confronted him with an earlier audit," Judge Wright interrupted. All the suppressed weariness and heartbreak looked out now from his sunken eyes, as he forced himself to continue. "Delancey could see no other way out. He killed my son-in-law, then when Caldwell found him, he committed the second mur-

der. He thought he was clever enough to get the police to arrest Jackson for the double killings." He pressed his hands to his palpitating heart. "It's just as well that I'll have to disqualify myself. It will be one trial less before I can retire."

Delancey sank into the nearest chair, and glared at the judge as he wearily left the apartment. Inspector Holland removed the handcuffs from Jackson, and put them on Delancey's limp wrists.

His scowl changed to a compassionate smile, when he heard Miss Sinclair insist:

"Your pill, Judge! You've had too much excitement for one day."

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# THE CRIMSON CLOWN

*By*

JOHNSTON McCULLEY

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## I

POLICE INSPECTOR THAD BLURNEY'S sound sleep was disturbed. Something seemed to be trying to wrench him out of a state of peaceful slumber. Trained by long experience to act swiftly in emergency and react instantly to a menace, he came awake instantly, opening his eyes only to mere slits at first, remaining motionless while he strained his ears to catch every sound.

He was stretched on his right side, so he found himself looking at a wall of the room only a few feet away. The first thing he realized was that the small night light on the table on the opposite side of the room was burning. It certainly had not been burning when he had turned over to go to sleep some time before.

So somebody must have entered his bedroom and turned on that light. Some intruder was in Inspector Thad Blurney's bachelor apartment. But he could not hear the slightest sound to indicate that another human being was in the bedroom.

For some years, Thad Blurney had been a busy and effi-

cient police officer and a terror to evil-doers. Certain well-known citizens of the local underworld had sworn to handle him in a manner not pleasant to contemplate. Perhaps, he thought, he was being visited by one or more of them now.

Beneath his bed, on the right side, Blurney always kept a gun at night in a little rack fastened to the bedstead, so he could slip his hand down and get it quickly. He kept it there in anticipation of just such a moment as this.

He continued to breathe audibly and regularly, like a man asleep, as he moved his right hand gently beneath the covers. When his hand was free, he would drop it over the side of the bed in a natural manner, grab the gun, and spring out of the bed to astonish the intruder.

Fighting against an impatience which would have induced haste and possibly disastrous results, he moved his hand slowly and cautiously until he could finger the edge of the bed. He breathed heavier and shifted his shoulders a trifle, like a man about to change his bodily position unconsciously while asleep, and under cover of the movement dropped his right hand to the gun rack and touched it.

The gun was not there.

Somebody not far from the bed chuckled.

"It was a good try, Blurney," a soft voice said, "but it didn't get you anything. I removed the gun long ago. Turn over carefully."

Blurney growled an imprecation, loosened the bedclothing around him, and started to turn, wondering what he would see. The voice had been one he could not identify as having heard before.

Perhaps some lawbreaker he had sent to jail had been released and was here to take revenge. Some friend of a malefactor he had sent to the Big House might be about to square

accounts. Or perhaps some criminal he was pursuing now thought the trail was getting too hot and that he should be stopped.

Blurney turned slowly, adjusting his vision to the light. An instant later, he had propped himself up on one elbow, his lower jaw had sagged and his eyes were bulging in an expression of amazement.

Sitting on a chair a few feet from the bed, in the shadows just outside the circle of bright light, was a man. At least, Blurney supposed it was a man. But he was no scowling thug baring his teeth in a snarl as he held a weapon ready to blast the life out of Blurney's body. Instead he observed something extremely strange.

Blurney saw a human being dressed in a crimson clown suit which enveloped his entire body loosely. The costume had a hood which was pulled up over the head. A white mask covered the entire face. Hands were covered with thin white gloves which gleamed like silk. Eyes glinted through slits in the mask, and in the faint light Blurney could not even determine their color.

"What's this?" Inspector Blurney growled. "If you're one of the Headquarters bunch playing a prank, let me tell you that I'm trying to catch up on sleep."

"Take it easy," the costumed man cautioned. "This is no prank, Blurney. You might call this a sort of official visit. I'm the Crimson Clown."

"You're the—" Blurney blurted, thoroughly awake now. "What's that? The Crimson Clown, did you say? The pest who was so active a few years ago?"

"I suppose I was a pest to some persons, and I certainly was active."

"I wasn't on the Force then, or I'd—"

"Or you'd have nabbed me?" the Crimson Clown asked pleasantly. "You'll have an opportunity to try that now, Blurney. It'll be a chance for you to win fame and promotion. But don't count on it too much."

Blurney could see now that the Crimson Clown was holding a weapon ready for use. Cautiously the inspector tossed aside the bedclothing and sat up on the edge of the bed.

He made every move slowly, but he was thinking rapidly enough.

He had heard considerable about the Crimson Clown, who was reputed to work alone always, who stole merrily from men who could afford to lose, and boasted that he always gave half the proceeds to charity and kept the other half for expenses.

Also, he knew the Crimson Clown was feared and hated by criminals. For, though a thief of a sort himself, the Clown seemed to be on the side of the law otherwise. He robbed criminals of their ill-gotten gains, and turned them over to the police when he could.

Blurney remembered, also, how the Crimson Clown had always disappeared mysteriously just at the moment when his capture seemed imminent. And he used a strange weapon, a pistol which discharged a small cloud of vapor instead of a bullet. One whiff of that vapor, and the victim lost all strength, dozed off, and awoke an hour or so later none the worse for his experience.

"How'd you get in here?" Blurney demanded.

"Through your service door," the Crimson Clown confessed. "I merely unlocked it and came right in. I am well supplied with all sorts of keys."

"Mean to say you got into this building and up here without being seen?"

"That was not difficult, Blurney. This is a huge apartment house. There are several entrances. And there's a big party downstairs tonight, and the lobby is jammed with people. Nobody honored me with special attention. I even came up in the elevator. Of course, I did not have my costume on then."

"Now that you're here, what do you want with me?" Blurney demanded.

"I merely want to inform you that I am about to become active in our fair city again. Your police are letting the crooks get out of hand. And the police don't know as much about them as I do."

The inspector laughed mirthlessly.

"Oh, we don't?"

"You don't," the Clown agreed. "I mix with them unsuspected, study them, learn their habits, and get a thrill out of it. You need my help. Some big-time crooks are operating in town now, because of the great number of war workers here, and the big payrolls."

"We know all that," Blurney interrupted.

"But you don't seem to be getting far in the game of rounding them up, Blurney. So I'm declaring myself in the game. I haven't had any fun for a long time. I'll hand a crook over to the police whenever I can. And I'll play my own game, because I must make expenses."

"Just a minute!" Blurney roared. "Have you the nerve to suggest that the police let you operate unmolested if you turn in a crook now and then?"

"Certainly not. I'm not trying to make such a deal with you, Blurney. If you didn't make every effort to catch me, it would take the spice out of life. Dodging police and crooks both at the same time—that's a great game!"

"You turn a trick in this town, and I'll land you!" the inspector threatened. "I'm not playing games. I'll tear that mask off your face and let the world know who you are."

"So we're going to have fun," the Clown said.

"If I remember correctly, you used to mail notes to the police, telling in advance where you'd be and what you'd do. And you often telephoned—"

"Oh, I'll do all that again! It's a part of the game. I'll make it as interesting as I can for you."

"Just where and when do you intend to start your new activities, then?" Blurney asked, sarcastically.

"Oh, I don't mind telling you that. Possibly tomorrow evening. There's to be a disgraceful affair at the Civic Auditorium."

"Disgraceful?" Blurney interrupted. "It's to be a big society circus and bazaar to raise funds for the War Orphans' Relief. What's disgraceful about that?"

"On the surface, it appears to be an admirable project," the Crimson Clown admitted. "But I am acquainted with some of the inner details of the scheme."

"Such as?" Blurney questioned.

"The affair has been promoted by a certain Chris Griston, a crook. An old-time carnival man gone wrong. He makes a business of going from city to city and promoting big shows, and he's good at it. They're usually benefits, and they always turn in a big profit—for Chris Griston."

"But I understand that two-thirds of the net profits are to go to the Relief Fund."

"That's the misunderstanding many persons have," the Clown replied. "Don't forget that word 'net'. Chris Griston is a wonder at altering books and doctoring accounts. His

right-hand man, Lou Morse, is another. They'll reap a harvest tomorrow night."

"There'll be a big turnout," Blurney admitted.

"The cash will pour in. Two dollars admission, with service men free. The usual catch-dollar booths with girls selling kisses and contributed articles being auctioned. There'll be a show put on by professional talent and two name dance bands—for which Chris Griston pays. Other acts will be contributed."

"What's wrong with that?" Blurney asked.

"All the money from all sources will be collected and rushed to the office, where Griston and Morse will make up the accounts and do the auditing. There'll be two sets of records, one the real thing and the other to hand to the committee in charge. The payrolls will be padded, and advertising costs and incidental expenses tripled. Griston deducts the amount on his distorted expense sheet and takes a third of the net. And in it will be included even a third of what comes from the booths, where he's at no expense."

"Legally, that's between this Griston and the fool committee which didn't write a proper contract," Blurney admitted.

"That's right. One of those places where the police can't get at a crook and only the civil courts can. Members of the committee won't want scandal, and they'll let Griston walk away with the pot."

"A man who'd do a thing like that, when the show is given for such a cause—" Blurney began.

"Yes, I know—worse than an ordinary crook," the Crimson Clown interrupted. "But Griston doesn't care what's thought of him. He's done the thing often before. He'll hold that he's the boss and is actually giving something away."

"He makes money out of charity affairs. You may be sure he'll fix the books so you can't prove anything. He'll rob the war orphans and the people who contribute time and money."

"Where do you come in?" Blurney asked.

Matter-of-factly, the Crimson Clown answered:

"It's in my mind to take some of the money from Chris Griston and send it anonymously to the Relief Fund. If I get active in the matter, I'll hold out a little for expenses, but I'll take it out of Griston's share."

"So you're going to rob Griston and his gang?"

"If somebody else doesn't do the job before I get around to it," the Clown replied. "Ever hear of Silky Darwin?"

"What experienced cop hasn't? The Darwin gang specializes in big stick-ups and jewel thefts. But they've steered clear of this town."

"Silky Darwin and his boys are in town now," the Crimson Clown informed him.

"What?" Blurney cried, sitting up straight on the edge of the bed. "I'll phone Headquarters and have 'em picked up and held for investigation."

"You may be sure they're under cover. And they've been planning something. No doubt they'll be at the big show tomorrow night. Ladies will be showing off their jewels, and Silky loves jewels. And he may have an eye on the box-office."

"I can fix it so neither Silky Darwin nor the Crimson Clown bothers the box-office," the inspector declared. "That'll be easy enough. And thanks for the tip about this Chris Griston's methods. I'll drop a hint to Simon Watter-son, who's chairman of the Relief Committee, and he'll have

the books and accounts double-checked. As for you, Clown, if you make a wrong move in this affair, I'll get you!"

"Good hunting!" the Clown said.

"The police can get along without your help."

The Crimson Clown chuckled again, got up off the chair and stepped nearer the bed. Blurney had been listening carefully to the Clown's voice during the conversation, and knew it was disguised. Standing, the Clown was a tall man, but there were several thousand tall men in the city. The baggy clown costume obscured all other details of his form. Blurney had nothing by way of identification.

"This has indeed been a pleasant chat, Inspector, but I must tear myself away now," the Clown said. "I just wanted you to know that I'm active again. Perhaps I'll communicate with you later."

"Oh, please do!" Blurney replied, sarcastically. "Drop in at Headquarters any time you feel like it. The door will always be open for you. The door of a cell, too."

"Your offer of hospitality overwhelms me," the Clown declared.

"Seriously, Clown, I'm out to get you! The motive behind your work may be a noble one, at least in part, but your acts are illegal, to say the least."

"Good hunting," the Clown repeated. "Oh, yes! You'll find your gun in the closet. And now—"

As he spoke, the Crimson Clown suddenly jerked up the weapon he held. A jet of vapor shot into Inspector Blurney's face. He gasped involuntarily, sucking a whiff of the vapor into his lungs.

He tried to spring up from the bed, but fell back upon it. He tried to shout for help, and only gurgled. Strength

seemed to leave his body with a rush. He felt paralyzed, and his vision grew dim.

"You'll sleep for a short time, Inspector, and awake feeling fine," he heard the voice of the Crimson Clown saying, as if from a distance. "We'll meet again at the Civic Auditorium."

## II

Mr. Delton Prouse surveyed his appearance in a full-length mirror. He was tall, lithe, with a lean face, dark eyes, black hair touched with gray at the temples. He wore a black lounge suit, white shirt, flowing black tie. In appearance and manner, as well as in fact, he was a suave, polished gentleman.

His small penthouse apartment was a place such as many bachelors dream of having. The furniture was rugged, masculine. The library room was stuffed with books for use as well as display. And one end of it held articles which would have been coveted by the curator of any museum.

Scion of a leading family, and now the last of his line, Delton Prouse had been reared and educated to be a gentleman. A romance gone wrong in his college days had soured him on people to an extent and condemned him to a self-imposed bachelor life.

A little money had been left him, and he managed to live well, dress well, and maintain his social position, though it strained his resources at times. He was a brilliant engineer, and earlier in life accepted some high-grade engineering assignments in off-the-track places.

He was always coming back from some odd corner of the world to play the gentleman again, and was always welcomed. He went on several important exploration trips.

Adventure and excitement called to him. He risked life and liberty happily to get a thrill.

In the first World War, he had been an Intelligence officer, and had made an enviable record. But he was a bit over the age limit for active service, so the Army said, when the present conflict began. Delton Prouse smiled a little at that. He planned and executed adventures which called for as much endurance, celerity and cleverness as an Intelligence officer was asked to have. He was fighting the war on his own front.

Of social position, a cultured gentleman, courteous and debonair, a man inclined to frown with annoyance if his cravat did not set exactly right, Delton Prouse at times disappeared from his apartment, changed his appearance and manner, changed his voice and his language, and entered another world—the underworld. There, he mingled with crooks, whom he despised, studied them, learned their tricks and artifices and invented ways of circumventing them.

Delton Prouse was the Crimson Clown.

Tonight, he was to go to the affair at the Civic Auditorium. He had been asked by elderly Simon Watterson, chairman of the committee, to contribute an act to the program. Delton Prouse was an amateur magician of renown.

His "bag of tricks" had been checked and was ready. It was a leather box about three feet long, eighteen inches wide and two feet deep. In it, Delton Prouse kept the paraphernalia he used to amuse and mystify his audience.

And he was prepared otherwise, too, for the evening's adventure. Beneath his shirt, on either side of his body, was a flat package so thin that only a careful search would have revealed it. Each package was a crimson clown suit of thin

opaque silk, chemically treated. Attached to each was a tiny vial containing a certain acid.

Mr. Prouse, being a man of repute, an auxiliary policeman in the Civilian Defense Corps, and a special deputy sheriff, had a permit to carry a gun. He wore it now, in a flat shoulder holster.

At first sight, it was an ordinary automatic. The shells it contained looked ordinary, too. But the bullets were only molded and hardened chemicals. And the shells did not contain ordinary explosive, but an active acid. When the gun was fired in the ordinary manner, a chemical reaction resulted. The victim got a jet of vapor in the face instead of a bullet in his head.

Prouse put on his hat, called for a bell-boy, and had his box of tricks carried down. He engaged a taxicab and rode to the Civic Auditorium.

People were thronging into the huge building, from which came strains of music. Society leaders, prominent citizens, well-known professional men were on parade. They rubbed elbows with war workers, white collar men, college girls and men in uniform.

It seemed to Delton Prouse as he got out of the taxicab that there were thousands of men in uniform. All branches of the Service were represented. Girls in uniform, too. They had free admission to the affair, and some of them were helping in the booths or otherwise making themselves useful.

Prouse got a soldier to help him with his box of tricks. It was taken to a little room off the stage, and left. Then, Prouse mingled with the crowd.

In one great hall, the program of entertainment was to be given. Acts on the stage, circus acts with apparatus stretched

high above the audience, had been planned. In another great hall, there was continuous dancing.

Delton Prouse knew the lay-out of the Auditorium well. He had "cased" the building for this adventure as well as a criminal ever had cased one where he intended to pull off a robbery. He strolled through the crowd now, greeting acquaintances, speaking with them a moment and passing on.

It was said of Delton Prouse that he was a man with thousands of acquaintances and no friends. His faith in human beings having been shattered in his youth, he seemed to fear to make a close attachment.

Though he seemed to be only strolling around and enjoying himself, he was making a tour of inspection. He stopped at various booths and spent his dollars like the others. He went into the big dance hall. He watched the stream of people entering the Auditorium from the night.

Inspector Thad Blurney, he perceived, had been active. Policemen in uniform and plain clothes were scattered everywhere. Unobtrusive detectives were keeping close to society leaders who flashed valuable jewels. The short stairs which led to a mezzanine where the offices of the building were located were under guard, and the short hall above, off which the offices opened, also were being watched.

Delton Prouse caught sight of Chris Griston near the front entrance. The promoter was a short, fat, jovial man. His face was all smiles this evening. He foresaw a big profit from this affair.

Lou Morse, his right-hand man, was with him. Morse was tall and thin and almost sickly-looking, and did not smile at all. He always had the appearance of a nervous man. A fine pair of rogues, Prouse thought.

He went on through the crowd. In particular, he was

looking for members of the "Silky" Darwin gang. He did not know all of them by sight, but he knew a few. He knew, also, that Darwin had been planning something, and guessed it had to do with this affair tonight.

He saw Silky Darwin presently, and smiled slightly when he did. Darwin was wearing a soldier's uniform. With him was "Chuck" Fanning, who had been Silky's lieutenant in iniquity for several years. Fanning was wearing a uniform also.

Dressed so, they passed through the throng with little fear of detection. Nor was it difficult for them to avoid trouble by conversation with other soldiers. If accosted by another man in uniform, who might be liable to question them about their outfit and camp, they could brush by quickly like men hurrying to join their comrades.

Silky Darwin was medium-sized, about forty, and could get into his face an expression which stamped him as a clod. Chuck Fanning was tall and slender, about the same age, and was known as the gun of Darwin's outfit.

Delton Prouse followed them for a short time and saw them contact a couple of other men in uniform. He glanced sharply at these. One he knew as a member of Darwin's gang, and the other was a stranger to him, but evidently another man of the band. Going back into the main auditorium from the ballroom, Prouse found that the program was about to begin. Somebody was on the stage making a speech. His own act of magic was far down the program, so there was no hurry. He stood near a doorway, nodding to acquaintances who passed, and watching the police guards who were scattered around.

Then he saw Inspector Thad Blurney again.

Prouse and the inspector knew each other slightly. They

had met on several occasions, especially during the formation of the Civilian Defense Corps.

"Good evening, Mr. Prouse," Blurney greeted, as they met. "I see by the program that you're to entertain the crowd later with a few tricks."

Delton Prouse smiled. "Yes, I hope to entertain with a few tricks," he said, with double meaning. "How are you, Inspector? Pardon me for saying so, but you look tired, worried."

"A thing like this is enough to get me worried," Blurney declared. "Society dames prancing around with fortunes in jewels hanging on them, and the doors of the place open for every crook in the country to walk in!"

"A likely place for a gem thief to work," Prouse admitted.

"Dollars being scooped in by the thousands from the box-office and booths and collection jars! People will be running around later with bundles of bills in their hands. A fine invitation for every holdup man and strong-arm gent! And they say the police have it easy."

Delton Prouse laughed a little. "Oh, I think you can handle the situation, Inspector," he said. "I've always heard that you're very efficient."

"Well, thanks!" Blurney purred. "I'm glad somebody appreciates me. See you later, Mr. Prouse."

"Undoubtedly," Prouse murmured, as the inspector hurried away to speak to one of his men.

Delton Prouse walked down an aisle to find a seat and watch the performance.

"All the actors are here and the stage is set," he was thinking. "There'll be a dramatic performance tonight, but it won't be on the stage in front of me."

## III

As a magician, Delton Prouse was never in better form than on that evening. Standing on the stage between his box of tricks and a small table, he delivered patter in a delightful vein that amused his audience and brought laughter.

He went through the usual card tricks deftly, displayed a few of his own, bringing bits of apparatus from his box, working with them, and returning them. He held the close attention of his audience. He called a soldier in the audience to his assistance, and pulled eggs from the young man's ears.

Then he caught sight of Inspector Blurney near the stage, and called to him. Blurney shook his head, but Prouse insisted, and the inspector went upon the stage. After all, it wasn't exactly good politics for a police inspector to refuse a chance to become known to thousands of the citizens.

Prouse had Blurney sit on a chair, pretended to perform an operation to expose the inspector's brains, and the audience roared when a stream of sawdust cascaded from where Prouse had pretended to bore a hole in Blurney's head.

That ended Prouse's act. He and Blurney stepped off the stage and into the wings together, and a stage attendant carried off Prouse's box of tricks.

"This affair seems to be a great success," Prouse observed. "Been bothered officially yet, Inspector?"

"Not yet. I've got about half the Force scattered around the place, though. We're watching for certain well-known crooks."

They talked for a moment longer, then Blurney excused himself.

The voice and mannerisms of Delton Prouse were nothing like those of the Crimson Clown. He was like another being

when he was Delton Prouse. And Blurney never had the faintest suspicion that he was talking to the man who had entered his apartment the night before.

Prouse left his box of tricks in a dark corner backstage and went through a door and passed a row of dressing rooms to another door which opened upon a hallway. He had been watching carefully just before his act and, during it, and he had seen one of Chris Griston's men hurry up the stairs to the mezzanine offices with a black bag, and knew it held box-office receipts. He had seen some of the volunteer workers going up the stairs, too, and knew that receipts from some of the booths had been sent in for checking.

Going to the end of the hallway, Prouse found a policeman on guard at the outside door. Evidently, he knew Prouse by sight.

"Good evening, Mr. Prouse," he greeted. "Wish I could have seen your act. Heard the audience howling."

"I was having a little fun with your Inspector Blurney," Prouse told him. "It's stuffy in here. Think I'll go outdoors and get a few whiffs of fresh air. Will you be stationed here when I return?"

"Sure. I'll let you in, Mr. Prouse."

The policeman opened the stage door, and Prouse stepped out into the night. He found himself in the alley behind the Auditorium. It was dark there except for a single dirt-stained bulb glowing over the door.

Prouse walked along the alley slowly, his head tossed back, inhaling deeply. The night was cloudy, and there was a suspicion of mist. Sure he was not observed, he stopped at a door in the back of the Auditorium building, brought out a key he had fitted long before in preparation for this night, unlocked the door, and got inside and locked it again.

He was in a huge prop room which was almost empty. From it, a stairway wound upward into the fly gallery. Delton Prouse went up the steps swiftly, making no noise. At the back of the fly gallery, he went along a catwalk. Far below him was the stage, with a group of dancers performing on it.

At the end of the fly gallery, he opened another door and entered a narrow hallway which appeared to have had few visitors in years. He came to another door, finally, and prepared to unlock it. Several nocturnal trips to the Auditorium during the past couple of weeks had made this journey an ordinary thing to Prouse. On the opposite side of that door, he knew, was a narrow hall which ran *behind* the row of offices on the mezzanine.

His fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, and he drew out the thin, flat package which had been pressed against his left side. He unfolded it, shook it out, and proceeded to get into the clown suit. It enveloped him completely. Even his shoes fitted into it. He adjusted the hood and mask, and brought out his vapor pistol.

Unlocking the door after listening a moment, he slipped into the hall and went rapidly along the wall, to stop at a door on the other side of which he could hear voices. He identified the voices as those of Chris Griston and Lou Morse.

"Good pickings, Chris," Morse was saying. "It's going to be better than we thought it'd be."

"What you got there?" the Clown heard Griston ask.

"Box-office, a little more than four thousand."

"We'll put twenty-two hundred on the swindle sheet and keep the rest," Griston decided. "Some of our people han-

dled the door, and the roll tickets had their numbers doctored."

"I checked that," Morse said. "It'll work out all right."

"Hundreds of men and women in uniform in the place, and they had admission free. If the crowd is mentioned, point to that. Anything else?"

"Here's almost a thousand from a kiss booth. Those cuties sure are selling kisses tonight. I spotted one I'd not mind kissing myself. The girls were keeping count of receipts at first, then business got brisk and they merely tossed the bills into a box. The girls changed, too. I did a quick count for them and got away with the roll."

Standing outside the door, the Crimson Clown heard more of the financial report. From the conversation, he knew Chris Griston was doctoring a report sheet, and that currency was being bundled together. The Clown prepared to intrude.

But he stopped just as he was ready to unlock the door and enter to face the swindlers. He heard another voice, one charged with excitement. He knew the voice, too. It belonged to Simon Watterson, chairman of the committee.

"It occurs to me, Mr. Griston, that the receipts should be audited by members of the committee as well as by you and Mr. Morse," Watterson said.

"Do you doubt my integrity, sir?" Griston thundered.

"I'm not saying that. But it'll be a protection for us all. Do you refuse to let a couple of the committee help you check the receipts?"

"It is rather irregular," Griston replied. "This is a business with me, you know. And I don't like the implication. I came here to put on a society circus. I had the idea that we

could combine it with a benefit for war orphans, help feed the little mouths and patch up the torn little bodies—”

“We appreciate all that,” Watterson interrupted. “But just as a matter of form—”

“Very well, sir!” Griston broke in, with indignation in his voice. “Select two of your committee and return here with them in about half an hour. By that time, most of the receipts will be here, I’ll have all the expense bills, and we can audit the entire thing.”

“Very good,” Watterson replied. “In about half an hour.”

The Crimson Clown heard Watterson leave the room, and then Griston’s lowered voice:

“Lock that door, Lou. We’ve got to work fast. Somebody has put a flea in Watterson’s ear.”

A moment later, the Crimson Clown inserted a key in the lock of the door and turned it carefully while one of the men inside was speaking, so the slight sound would not be heard. He opened the door a crack and peered in.

Griston and Morse were sitting at a big desk not far away, with their backs to him. They had sheets of reports in front of them, and were working feverishly. Bundles of currency were on one end of the desk.

The Crimson Clown stepped inside swiftly and closed the door behind him. The men at the desk jerked around when they heard the door catch snap. They saw the Crimson Clown before them, saw his menacing weapon.

“Not a sound, gentlemen!” the Clown ordered. “I am the Crimson Clown. Possibly you heard of me when I was active a few years ago.”

“Is this a stick-up?” Griston asked hoarsely.

“Not in the usual sense. I’m merely collecting from you the money you intend stealing. I know all your tricks, Gris-

ton. I have no intention of robbing the Orphans' Fund or of letting you do it. I've estimated tonight's take. What you have piled on the end of the desk is probably about the committee's share of the money turned in so far."

"If you take it, you'll be stealing from the Fund, won't you?" Griston asked.

"I'll send most of it to the Fund," the Crimson Clown replied. "Then we'll be sure they have it. And I'll carry away one of those reports on the desk—the one which shows the true financial statement of tonight's affair, which I'll mail to the district attorney. A man who'd steal from such a cause deserves the worst that can happen to him, Griston."

"See here, whoever you are! Can't we—well, make some kind of deal?"

"You and your man Morse stand against the wall, quick!" the Crimson Clown ordered, his voice stern. "Move!"

Menaced by the weapon the Clown held, they obeyed. With his eyes glittering at them through the slits in his mask, the Clown stepped to the desk, scooped up the bundles of currency, and stuffed them away beneath his costume. He glanced at the financial reports, selected the one he wanted and tucked that away also.

Then he stepped toward the pair standing against the wall with their hands held over their heads.

"Let this be a lesson to you crooks," the Clown said. "If you try the same game in some other city, you may find me visiting you there, too."

Chris Griston opened his mouth to reply, and at that instant the Clown discharged his pistol. A jet of vapor struck Griston's face. A second cartridge was discharged at Lou Morse.

"Not a sound from you!" the Clown warned.

They were stunned an instant by the unusual assault. Then they started slipping down to the floor. Griston gurgled once, and was still. Lou Morse tried to prop himself against the wall, but toppled over.

The Clown waited a moment, then darted to the door which Morse had locked, listened an instant to be sure nobody was in the outer office, and unlocked the door. He ran across the room to the door by which he had entered, darted through it, locked it, and hurried along the narrow hallway. A moment later, he was through the door which opened to the fly gallery, and had locked that.

He stripped off the crimson clown suit, made a heap of it, broke the tiny vial and poured acid on the pile of chemically-prepared silk. A wisp of grayish smoke spiraled upward. The Clown glanced at it, and turned to hurry on. In less than a minute, the costume would be only a pinch of ashes.

It did not take him long to get down from the fly gallery to the prop room and let himself into the alley unseen. And a moment after that he was at the stage door, which the accommodating policeman opened for him.

"Get plenty of fresh air?" the policeman asked.

"A little too much," Delton Prouse replied. "It's misting. Think it's going to rain."

He walked into the wings of the stage, to the dark corner where he had left his box of tricks. Opening the box, he seemed to be checking his apparatus. Finally, he locked the box, left it there, and went through a side door and into the auditorium. The audience was watching the stage and laughing at the antics of a popular comedian.

## IV

Near the bottom of the stairs which led to the mezzanine, Prouse found Simon Watterson talking to Inspector Blurney. He nodded and would have passed on, but the inspector beckoned him.

"Prouse, you've been around a lot," Blurney said. "You know men pretty well, and you've got nerve, I've heard. Maybe you can help Mr. Watterson."

"We have a suspicion, Mr. Prouse," Watterson explained, "that the man who promoted this affair may deal with us dishonestly. I am going up to the office again now. I've sent word to James Bentley, the attorney, and Judge Williams, members of the Relief Committee, to join me there. It may take my messenger some time to find them. I wonder if you'd wait here, join them, and come along? We want to audit the accounts."

"Be glad to do it, sir," Prouse said.

Watterson hurried up the stairs toward the offices. Prouse knew that in a few minutes he would find the victims of the Crimson Clown and raise an outcry.

Inspector Blurney made some remark about the crowd. His words were drowned by a woman's scream.

"My pearls! I've been robbed!"

Prouse and Blurney glanced in the direction of the scene of excitement. The screaming woman was a pretty brunette, evidently about thirty, and smartly dressed. Now she seemed on the verge of hysterics.

Her wild cries started a tumult. For other women in the crowd suddenly found that necklaces or bracelets were missing. Their shouts and cries added to the din.

"Jewel thieves at work!" Prouse said.

"And I'm ready for this," Blurney declared. He pulled out a whistle and blew a blast. "That'll make my men guard every exit and stop anybody trying to get out," he said to Prouse. "I've been expecting a jewel raid."

Blurney hurried toward the girl who had made the first outcry. Prouse did not follow him. He knew that girl. She was Merle Layne, one of Silky Darwin's gang. There was something phony about her scream.

In the first place, Merle Layne, if wearing jewels, would be on guard against thieves, since she knew all the tricks. In the second place, she was well-known to the underworld, and another jewel thief would not have dared lift a pearl necklace from one of Darwin's people. So she had not been robbed. Yet she had made that wild outcry and started a tumult, and Prouse knew it had been only to cause confusion.

No doubt members of the Darwin gang had collected jewels and slipped from the building with them. Merle Layne's outcry made other women look to their jewels, made them screech when they found them missing. The act must have been for some purpose.

Standing aside, Prouse watched sharply. Then he understood. The excitement had drawn the police guard from the bottom of the stairs, and the one above had come hurrying down. And two men in military uniform darted up the stairs now. Prouse recognized them as Darwin and Chuck Fanning. No doubt they had gone up to the office to hold up Chris Griston and Lou Morse.

Good planning, Prouse decided. Only they would find that most of the loot had been taken already. And they would encounter Simon Watterson, too, and might run into trouble.

The tumult in the auditorium continued and spread into the dance hall, where other women found they had been robbed. Blurney had men guarding all exits, and others mingling with the crowd trying to get people quiet so they could gather information.

Prouse was watching the stairway. Darwin and Fanning did not come down. They had been up there long enough to lift everything loose, he knew. Chris Griston and Lou Morse would still be unconscious from the vapor gun, and Darwin and Fanning could have tied up old Simon Watter-son and taped his eyes and mouth.

He saw a woman start up the stairs, carrying a box he knew contained money from one of the booths. As she went up, Darwin and Fanning finally descended. Their eyes were gleaming. They reached the bottom of the stairs and slipped into the milling crowd. Prouse smiled. The pair did not know that all exits were guarded.

He glanced toward where Inspector Blurney was blowing his whistle again.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Blurney shouted. "Please be calm. Jewel thieves have been at work among you. But we have every exit of the building guarded, and we will check everybody who passes out. Let the dancing and entertainment continue. When you do leave, those of you better known will go to the north exit, where you can be checked out quickly. Don't all go at once. We will hold and investigate anybody of whom we are suspicious."

They had grown quiet to listen to him. When Blurney had finished, there was a mild applause. The greater part of the crowd returned to the dance hall or resumed their chairs in the Auditorium. Jewel thieves did not bother the great majority of the big audience.

Before it became noisy again, a woman's wild scream struck upon the ears of the crowd. They whirled to see a woman running down the stairs from the mezzanine.

"Murder! Police!" she was crying. "Mr. Watterson has been murdered!"

Her screams started the tumult again. Blurney fought his way to the foot of the stairs to meet the woman, and Delton Prouse was instantly beside him.

"I went in with the money," the woman was saying. "Mr. Watterson was on the floor of the office, dead! I—I think he had been shot in the chest. The blood—"

"Be quiet!" Blurney admonished her. "You'll cause a stampede. Lower your voice."

"And the other two men—Mr. Griston and his assistant—they're stretched on the floor, and seem to be dead," she added.

Blurney beckoned to a couple of his men and ordered them to stand guard at the foot of the stairs. He called a couple of detectives, one a member of the Homicide Squad, and started up the stairs with them. He caught sight of Prouse.

"Come along, Mr. Prouse," he called. "You used to help the police on homicides at times, I remember. It'll take some time for the entire squad to get here. And I know how Mr. Watterson admired you."

Prouse hurried up the stairs and with the others into the front room of the double office.

The body of Simon Watterson was stretched on the rug. Blood oozed from a wound in his chest. His eyes were open and fixed.

"Shot right through the heart!" Blurney said. "With all

that racket below, the shot wasn't heard. But the other men who should have been here—where are they?"

They rushed into the rear office. Chris Griston and Lou Morse were huddled against the wall, and both were muttering.

"They're not dead," Prouse offered.

"Act drugged," Blurney decided.

He ordered one of his men to telephone Headquarters for the Homicide experts, told the others to look around.

Delton Prouse noticed immediately that the papers on the desk had been disturbed, and the drawers of the desk were open. The pockets of Griston and Morse were turned inside out, as if the men had been searched.

Prouse could imagine Darwin and Fanning barging into the office and finding Watterson with the two unconscious men, probably trying to revive them. He could visualize one of them covering Watterson with a weapon while the other sought for money he could not find. Handkerchiefs over their faces for masks was enough, since they were in uniform and uniforms look more or less alike to civilians.

Perhaps Watterson had made a break, had tried to get out and give the alarm. So he had been shot.

Prouse turned to where Blurney was kneeling beside Griston and Morse. They were regaining consciousness. Blurney was shaking Griston vigorously.

"Wake up!" he ordered. "What's happened here?"

Griston brushed a hand across his eyes and gulped. Lou Morse groaned again and opened his eyes. Blurney gestured, and his men lifted the pair and led them to chairs.

"We—we've been robbed," Griston muttered. "A man—in a clown suit—"

"Talk quick!" Blurney ordered. "What about Simon Watterson? Who killed him?"

"Watterson? He—he wasn't here when we were robbed. We were alone. The thief took all the proceeds!"

"Watterson's been shot and killed!" Blurney said. "Understand?"

"The—clown—shot something like smoke at us," Morse mouthed.

"I know about that," Blurney snapped. He turned to Prouse. "Mr. Watterson must have come in after these men were doped, and caught the thief here. This clown these men mention—he's the Crimson Clown, I suppose, who was active around here a few years ago."

"I've heard of his exploits," Prouse admitted.

"How did the clown you speak of get in here?" Blurney asked Griston. "We thought we had you well-guarded."

Griston pointed to the door through which the clown had entered. Blurney found it locked, but one of his men opened it with a skeleton key, and they investigated.

"A hallway that leads to another, and to the fly gallery," was the final report. "From the fly gallery, he could have gone in almost any direction, probably down into the auditorium again, or out into the alley."

Blurney straightened.

"I want the Crimson Clown!" he said. "I want him for the murder of Simon Watterson."

## V

Facing a charge of murder did not appeal to Delton Prouse, especially a charge of slaying Simon Watterson, the elderly man he always had admired.

He realized instantly that he was in a dire predicament. The condition of Griston and Morse, the two tricksters, especially after the Clown's visit to the inspector the night before, told Blurney plainly enough that the Crimson Clown had really robbed them. Also, they had told about the man in the clown costume.

It looked to the police, naturally, as if the Crimson Clown had committed the murder also. Silky Darwin and Chuck Fanning had come up the stairs to the offices, but only Delton Prouse had recognized them and knew it. And Delton Prouse dared not tell the inspector that fact. Blurney might want to know how Delton Prouse happened to be so well acquainted with the crooks, and might become suspicious.

Chris Griston and Lou Morse were stammering details of what had happened to them. The men with Blurney were going around the two offices searching for anything that could be termed evidence, while they waited for the Homicide Squad to come and take over.

Prouse looked at the desk, glanced at the telephone to get the number on the dial, and approached Blurney.

"I'll skip downstairs," he suggested. "I'm only in the way here. I think Mr. Watterson's nephew is in the audience. If I can find him, I'll tell him what's happened, so he can break the news to the family."

Blurney nodded, and Prouse went through the outer office, along the hall and slowly down the stairs. A plan was forming in his mind. He saw Merle Layne, who first had screamed about the loss of jewels, talking to some of the other victims. He noticed Silky Darwin pass not far from her and give her a peculiar glance. Merle Layne clutched her evening bag tighter and made the mistake of glancing at it.

"Ah!" Delton Prouse thought. "The girl's not well-trained."

His plan was complete now. He went into the wide main corridor of the building and to one of the public telephone booths there, dropped a coin in the slot and dialed the number of the office upstairs.

"I want to talk to Inspector Blurney," he said, when the call was answered.

"Blurney speaking!"

"Oh! Good evening, Inspector. This is the Crimson Clown. I have some information for you."

"You're wanted for murder, Clown, and we'll get you!" Blurney blustered. "Murder and robbery! You've played one game too many."

"Control yourself, Blurney. I didn't kill Simon Watterson. I took ill-gotten gains from Griston and Morse, yes. I know who killed Watterson, though."

"I'm listening."

"That's better, Blurney. Do exactly as I say, and you'll soon have your murderer. That girl who yelled that her pearls had been stolen and started the riot—remember? She's Merle Layne, and she's one of Silky Darwin's gang. Pick her up quick, before she can be contacted. And Darwin and Chuck Fanning, his right-hand man, are in the auditorium. They're wearing soldiers' uniforms. Got anybody in the house who knows 'em by sight?"

"One of my bunco squad does, and he's downstairs now," Blurney said.

"Good! Line up everybody in uniform, go down the line and pick out Darwin and Fanning. Take them and the girl to Dressing Room B, on the left of the stage. Don't have but one officer with you. Play square with me, and I'll pin the

murder on the guilty man. And watch the girl closely. Don't let her ditch anything."

"So you're in the building, Clown?" Blurney asked.

"Certainly. I know what happened. Will you do as I say?"

"I'll do that much. Thanks for the tip, if it's okay. If you pin the murder on somebody else, Clown, I'll thank you for it, though I know you're doing it only to clear yourself. But I'll not forget the robbery. I'll grab you for that."

"Good hunting!" the Crimson Clown said.

"Wait a minute! If I take these people to the dressing room, how'll you let me know what to do? How'll you expose the murderer?"

"Leave that to me," the Clown replied. "And don't go to the trouble of tracing this call, Blurney. I'm talking from one of the fifty booths in the lobby."

Delton Prouse hung up the receiver, left the booth and wandered into the crowd, his face a mask. He had been talking in a changed voice, and had no fear that Blurney had recognized him.

He watched from the milling crowd near the bottom of the stairs. Several policemen came down and began contacting other policemen. Prouse saw Merle Layne accosted by two officers who led her aside as if to get a better report on her loss. And in a few minutes came an announcement from the stage that all men in uniform were to line up in the corridor.

Prouse watched while this was done, while officers searched through the crowd to be sure every uniformed man had obeyed. He saw a group of officers go down the line, a sharp-eyed detective leading. He was near enough to hear when identification was made.

"This is Chuck Fanning," the detective said, pointing. "A little thinner, but the same Chuck."

Fanning was pulled out of the line and handcuffed. The group went on. The detective stopped in front of Silky Darwin.

"The notorious Silky!" he announced. "Shaved off your toothbrush mustache, haven't you? But you've still got that scar on your chin, Silky, still got the same snake's eyes."

"What's all this?" Silky asked, as he was handcuffed.

"There have been some jewel thefts, Silky, and that's right in your line. We want to ask a few questions. Also, Silky, I'm quite sure you and Fanning have no right to wear and desecrate those uniforms. Uncle Sam may want to punish you for that, if we ever get through with you."

Darwin and Fanning were led away toward the stage. Delton Prouse went rapidly along the wall, unobserved, and got ahead of them and also of the officers who had the girl in charge. As he reached the front of the stage, he saw some members of the Homicide Squad going up the stairs to the mezzanine, and Inspector Blurney following his men and the prisoners.

Prouse went through the door, got behind the boxes and so gained the stage. There was no risk in that. If questioned, he could say he was there to get his box of tricks, which had been left in a corner.

The show was over, the curtain down and the stage deserted. Prouse went quickly through the shadows to a flight of steps which led below it. Here furniture and props were stored, here were the trap-doors worked if a play needed them. Prouse was thankful now that he had spent hours studying the Auditorium.

He felt his way around the furniture to the left of the

stage, and came to where a trap-door was in the floor above him. Without making a sound, he pulled a box below the trap-door, so he could stand on it and lift the trap.

He heard steps above, heard voices, and knew the three prisoners were being taken into Dressing Room B. Prouse reached up and lifted the trap cautiously, listened again, shoved the trap aside and pulled himself up. He was in a deserted dressing room, one locked on the outside and which had not been used for some time. It was Dressing Room C, adjoining the one where the prisoners were being held.

So far, there had been no danger. If found there now, Prouse could say he had been following somebody who had been prowling around beneath the stage, and probably would be believed. But now the moment of danger came.

From beneath his shirt, he drew the second clown suit, shook it out, listened a moment, then got into it. He adjusted the mask, put on his gloves, got out the vapor pistol, in which eight shots still remained.

He listened at the door connecting the two dressing rooms. Blurney was asking Darwin and Fanning routine questions about their presence in town, their place of abode, their reasons for being in town at all. He was questioning the girl, too.

The Clown had a skeleton key which would unlock the door between the dressing rooms. He turned the key in the lock while Silky Darwin was indulging in a loud tirade against the police, and the sound was not heard. Then, holding his vapor gun ready, he opened the door and stepped into the room.

He had been judging the positions of the persons in the room by the sounds of their voices, and found he had judged correctly. The girl was sitting before a make-up table. Dar-

win and Fanning were standing against the wall. Blurney was in front of them as he asked questions, and the officer with him was standing at the outside door on guard.

"Steady!" the Clown snapped at them. "No bad moves, Blurney! This weapon may not be my vapor pistol this time, remember. Try anything on me now, and you'll never know what I said I could reveal."

Blurney gestured for the policeman at the door to stay still.

"Do your talking, Clown," he said.

"Silky Darwin planned a double raid here this evening," the Clown said. "He and some of his men, Fanning included, helped themselves to jewels—"

"We've been searched!" Darwin shouted.

"Shut up!" the Clown barked. "Even as ignorant a crook as you would know enough to pass the jewels on as soon as possible after they were lifted. In this case, the young lady came in handy. Have your man at the door watch these three, Blurney, while you investigate her handbag."

The girl gave a cry of fear as Blurney wrenched the bag from her hands. He snapped it open, turned to a small table at his elbow, and dumped the contents from the bag. Jewels glittered in the light.

"Quite a haul," the Crimson Clown observed. "So much for the jewel thefts. But there's something else. Darwin and Fanning had planned to rob the offices and get the evening's take, too. And their effort ended in murder."

## VI

Silky Darwin snapped erect.

"What is all this?" he roared. "What are you trying to pin on us? If that girl's got jewels in her handbag, it's nothing

to us. We don't know her. Who's this guy in the trick suit?"

"I am the Crimson Clown, Darwin. Possibly you've heard of me. It'll do you no good to lie, you know. The girl is Merle Layne, and she's one of your gang, as I happen to know. Just a fool girl who thought there'd be excitement in a life of crime. Now, she's on her way to the electric chair."

"No, no!" the girl cried. "Don't talk like that!"

The Crimson Clown looked at the inspector again. Then he faced Silky Darwin.

"Darwin," he said, "after you finished getting jewels and turning them over to the girl, you and Fanning went to the bottom of the stairs leading to the mezzanine. You signaled Merle Layne, and she put up a howl about losing pearls, and started a small riot among the women. During the confusion, you and Fanning dashed up the stairs. I saw you."

"That's a lie!" Darwin cried. "Who else saw us, if we did it?"

"Oh, wait till I've finished," the Clown implored. "You went up the stairs and along the hall to the offices, after the police guard had been lured away by the racket. You and Fanning intended to rob Chris Griston and Lou Morse of the evening's receipts. But you found them unconscious on the floor, and an elderly man working over them.

"You probably had handkerchiefs over your faces. I don't know for sure, and it really makes no difference now. Anyway, you tried to get the money, and there wasn't any money. Because I'd been there before you and lifted the roll for certain reasons. You ransacked the place, and found nothing. Then the elderly gentleman must have tried a get-away, for you shot him."

"Who shot him?" Darwin cried. "Who saw it done? The cops are trying to pin something on us, but they can't do it!"

"Neither of us has a gun on us," Fanning added.

"Of course not. You passed it to Merle Layne. There it is on the table with the other stuff dumped from her handbag. Your fingerprints are probably on it. If they aren't, ballistics can prove the lethal bullet came from that gun. You should have dumped the gun somewhere, Fanning. But I know why you took the risk of passing it to the girl. It's a special, small gun of foreign make, very handy and very valuable. It'd be hard for you to get another."

The Crimson Clown turned his head slightly, and his eyes glittered through the slits in his mask as they met those of the girl.

"A pretty little girl gone wrong," he said. "Traveling with crooks, accepting stolen jewels, letting them pass a murder gun to her."

"Oh, no!" she said. "I—I didn't know they'd killed anybody!"

"Shut up!" Darwin howled at her.

"She's said enough already," the Crimson Clown observed. "And if she's wise, she'll say more. If she tells everything, she may get off with a light sentence, instead of going to the chair as an accessory to murder."

Merle Layne broke down, began sobbing and trying to talk.

"Keep quiet!" Inspector Blurney ordered her. "We'll question you later. Well, Silky, and you, Fanning, we've got you. You'll burn for this."

Silky Darwin lost all control. He whirled toward Fanning.

"You—always wanting to be so blasted quick with a gun!" he shouted.

"Well, the old coot was makin' for the door," Fanning said.

"Go right on talking, boys," the Crimson Clown urged them. "The inspector enjoys the conversation, I'm sure."

The Clown backed slowly to the door between the two dressing rooms, holding his weapon before him. Blurney turned slowly to face him again.

"Thanks for clearing this up for us, Clown," he said. "We can go on from here and finish the case, easily enough. You had to do it to clear yourself, but thanks anyhow for doing it."

"The pleasure is all mine," the Clown assured him.

"But," Inspector Blurney said, "there remains the matter of the robbery. The Crimson Clown robbed Griston and Morse of several thousand dollars. You admitted it here, too."

"Oh, I admit it again," the Clown declared. "Those cheap swindlers had it coming. The money will go to the Orphans' Relief Fund."

"Perhaps so," Blurney said. "One thing seems to have escaped you. The money isn't out of the Auditorium. Every person who leaves the building will be searched for it, men and women. It's a big bundle and can't be hidden easily. Moreover, Clown, I have you right here and now."

"Steady!" the Clown warned. "I've got you covered. I could blast you, Blurney, then get your man at the door before you could get me. I'm going right out of here as I came in."

As he spoke, the Crimson Clown reached his left hand behind him and swung the door of the adjoining dark dressing room open. He pressed the trigger, and a jet of vapor left the gun. Inspector Blurney had been expecting it. He shut

his eyes and stopped breathing for an instant, and lurched forward through the smoky cloud.

In that instant, the Crimson Clown was through the door, and had slammed and locked it. Two bullets came through at him as the policeman in the other room fired. He dropped flat, got down through the trap and pulled the trap-door shut behind him. Then he scrambled over the old stored furniture and got beneath the stage.

Behind him, he heard a smash as the door between the dressing rooms went down. Somebody was shouting. The trap was opened as the Clown got to the other side of the stage, beneath it.

A flashlight gleamed behind, and exposed him for an instant. He darted behind a pile of boxes as a shot came. Working frantically, he stripped off the clown suit, wadded it, broke the vial of acid and tossed the contents upon it, then fled up the flight of steps to the stage.

On the other side, policemen were charging toward the dressing rooms. Delton Prouse ran almost noiselessly behind the scenery and came to the dark corner in the wings where he had left his box of tricks.

On the opposite side of the stage, he heard Inspector Blurney and some other man pounding up the steps. Delton Prouse began yelling, knocked a piece of scenery over, fell on the floor and got up again, charged wildly out upon the dimly-lighted stage as Blurney appeared.

"Almost had him!" Prouse panted. "Somebody in a clown suit. Ran right into me. I was after my box of tricks."

"Where'd he go?" Blurney demanded.

"Toward the door that opens into the hall behind the boxes."

The inspector charged on, howling for some of his men to

join him. Delton Prouse returned to his box of tricks and opened it. He stowed his vapor gun away, closed the box, straightened.

There was another tumult out in the auditorium. Prouse saw officers taking the three prisoners from the dressing room to the stage door. He waited another moment, then picked up his heavy box of tricks, went through the door and behind the boxes, and into the auditorium himself.

Policemen were shouting that everybody must be searched before leaving, unless they were very well-known indeed to the officers. There were roars of protests, as is usual in such cases. Delton Prouse almost smiled. Inspector Blurney and his men had a long, tough job ahead of them, and it would avail them nothing.

He found Blurney near the foot of the stairs.

"You catch that fellow?" Prouse asked.

"He dodged us, whoever he was. But we'll get him."

"I've had enough for one evening," Prouse complained. "I'd like to get this box of tricks of mine into a taxi and get home. Hope I can be searched and sent on my way soon."

"Come over to this door, and I'll fix that," Blurney offered. "Glad to hasten you on your way, Mr. Prouse."

"I insist on being searched the same as the others, Inspector. It wouldn't be right to ignore me."

Blurney called an officer aside, and Delton Prouse was searched. The loot was not found on him.

"My box of tricks, too, please," Prouse said, opening it.

The officer searched. He found magician's paraphernalia and nothing else.

"Clean bill of health," he said.

"Wish I could find a boy to carry this box to a taxi,"

Prouse muttered. "Not that I'm too weak. But I never like to pack things around."

Inspector Blurney laughed. "Prouse, you mean you're too fastidious a gentleman to do a porter's work," he declared. "I'll carry the thing for you."

"Oh, I couldn't let you."

"Nonsense! Come along. Want a whiff of outside air, anyway."

Blurney picked up the box and went through the door with Prouse, carried the box out to the street and hailed a taxicab. And he never knew that in the box of tricks he carried, inside a false lining, was the money that had been taken from Chris Griston and Lou Morse, and also the vapor pistol used by the Crimson Clown. But he learned, the following day, that the War Orphans' Relief Fund had received through the mail, from an anonymous donor, a bundle of currency which had made members of the committee bulge their eyes.

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## SHEEP ARE SHEEP

*By*

CHARLES S. STRONG

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JAN PIETER VAN BRONCK turned his Cape cart between the two aloes that stood at the gateway of his farm, and headed up the macadam lane leading to his house. Abruptly he stopped, listening. An excited babble of voices came from the veranda of the sprawling farmhouse. Hearing the lusty voices of outdoor men, and the baaing of thousands of sheep, he knew that the shearers were at the farm.

Jan Pieter smiled. The fleece would be in the gathering. Then the Dutchman frowned. The second discovery was perfectly normal, but the first one puzzled him. He urged the bullocks up the lane, his eyes filled with expectation. Jan Pieter stopped in the middle of a line of his favorite "Stellenbosch Boys." He stopped sucking on his long-handled clay pipe, too, and the dottle turned from glowing red to gray ash.

As the cart came to a halt before the house, a native boy hastened forward to take charge of the animals. Jan Pieter pulled down his Norfolk jacket, brushed the brim of his black felt hat, and leaped nimbly to the ground. Then, in a graceful waddle, he headed for the veranda.

There were four people there. He recognized all of them. Two of them were his neighbors, one was his overseer and the fourth was the sergeant of the local South African police post.

"What's going on here, Carl?" Jan Pieter asked the overseer.

"Someone has robbed the farm safe of ten thousand dollars!" the overseer grunted.

A curious smile crossed the ruddy face of Sergeant Baldwin.

"Looks like someone has taken advantage of you while you've been away worrying about other people's troubles," he chuckled, without mirth.

Jan Pieter did not bat an eyelash. The loss of the money, while a good deal in itself, would not prove crippling to the Dutch farmer. Being a good distance from town, he found it necessary to keep a large amount on hand to meet the payroll and other expenses.

"Exactly what happened?" Jan Pieter asked promptly, his analytical mind already working on the problem.

"It happened during the night," Carl Boomer declared. "I heard the explosion when the safe door was blown open, and came here immediately. As soon as I discovered what had happened, I placed trusted riflemen on the boundaries fully armed. Two men are patrolling the roads. Then I telephoned Sergeant Baldwin." He paused. "I don't think our robbers have gotten very far. They may still be on the place with the loot."

Jan Pieter nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Then he greeted his neighbors, Douglas Campbell and Leslie Biddeford, more cordially and proceeded to light his unfinished pipe, and puffed away.

Luongne, the native boy, was back from the stable, and preceded Van Bronck into the house. The spacious room that Jan Pieter used for an office was now littered with white dust-plaster that had rained down from the ceiling. The safe door was up against the heavy desk. The papers in the safe were all mussed up, but the cash compartment was out on the floor, and had been completely ransacked.

Jan Pieter examined the remains, then motioned to the native boy.

"Clean that up, Luongne," he said.

"Aye, B'wana." The native nodded, and immediately set about his job.

His orders given, Jan Pieter went on into the dining room, motioned his white companions to take chairs. The native cook brought in a steaming bowl of *rijstaffel*, but the visitors had declined the meal. The two neighbors, Douglas Campbell and Leslie Biddeford, had come over to help with the shearing, and at Carl Boomer's invitation, they went with him to the pens where the gasoline-operated shearing machine was *putt-putting* away.

Van Bronck joined them about fifteen minutes later. If one were to judge from his actions during the next few hours, it would appear as though the loss of the ten thousand dollars was a small matter to the plump Dutch farmer. In reality, Jan Pieter was weighing and balancing every individual on the place, trying to determine if any of his men had perpetrated the crime.

This was not the first theft that had occurred on the Van Bronck farm. Before going away to Paardeberg, Jan Pieter had been plagued by sheep-stealers and had been forced to put armed guards about his property. Thus, he reasoned, this alertness would have made it almost impossible for an

outsider to get into the farm, up to the house and away again.

That the thief was still on the place, Van Bronck had no doubt. All the neighbors were at the Van Bronck place to help with the sheep-shearing, and Sergeant Baldwin would know of any strangers in the district. Besides, only a local man would know whether Jan Pieter's safe was worth robbing or not.

Carl Boomer, the overseer, he dismissed without a second thought. The overseer had been born on the Van Bronck place, and his father had been overseer before him. He was thoroughly to be trusted.

The lusty Scotchman, Douglas Campbell, was a sheep raiser who occupied the grazing land to the east of the Van Bronck place. He ran thousands of sheep, as did the Dutchman, and during the years they had known each other, they had got along well.

Leslie Biddeford also ran a sheep ranch. His property adjoined Van Bronck's on the south. Biddeford had been attracted to the area in the vicinity of the Karoo by the increased demand for wool and mutton developed by the war. The Government was looking for material for uniforms and blankets, and additional meat for the fighting forces. Men like Biddeford that had spent most of their lives in Cape-town, Kimberley or Johannesburg and had saved up a little money, had come out on the veldt to capitalize upon this new opportunity.

The head of the shearers, Jed Payson, was a lusty, broad-shouldered individual. He had a reputation in the Cape Colony of being as honest as they came, and the men he hired were usually classed in the same category. There was

a possibility that a floater might have joined up with him, but Jan Pieter was inclined to discount this.

The wily Dutchman stood at the shearing pen and examined his stock with a practiced eye. His glance ran over the hundreds upon hundreds of long-legged, hairy sheep. The Van Bronck animals were famous for their prominent Roman noses, large but not drooping ears, and the dewlap on the throat and chest. The ewes were hornless, but the rams had short, thick and somewhat goat-like horns.

Jan Pieter talked to Jed Payson for some moments, asked pointed questions about the new shearers, then moved on through the sheep, sniffing now and then at the odor of the sheep dip. He started back toward the house, slowed as he saw Carl Boomer coming up toward him.

"Yes, Carl?" he asked.

"About the other sheep," Boomer said. "Shall I have them brought in?"

"How many are out?"

"Two flocks," replied the overseer. "But only one will be clipped. There are a thousand head running with Kurt Stein and five dogs. They're over at the edge of the Karoo near the sweetwater well. Eight hundred are penned up near the wire fence facing the Campbell place. Campbell wants to buy them for breeding. They are some of the Lincolns that you've been experimenting with."

Jan Pieter nodded. "We can sell them, all right. They ought to make good stock for him."

"Shall I go after Kurt Stein?" Carl Boomer asked.

"No," Jan Pieter replied. "I'll go myself. Maybe Kurt has seen something of our sheep thief."

Moments later Jan Pieter Van Bronck was before his stable, and Luongne was saddling one of the small yet sturdy

Cape horses. When the plump Dutchman perched in the saddle, he looked like one of the legendary gnomes ready to ride to a midnight rendezvous.

Long before Jan Pieter reached the fold where Kurt Stein was holding the thousand sheep, the Dutchman sensed that something was wrong. That it was connected with the loss of his money was a foregone conclusion. The thousand sheep were scattered all over a hundred-sixty-acre field, but there was no sign of the five dogs that should have been bunching them in. Jan Pieter whistled a signal, and headed toward the sheltered cabin in a copse of trees where Kurt Stein lived.

There was no answering signal. Suddenly the little Cape horse halted, snorted and reared up. Van Bronck quickly reined him in, slid to the ground and moved ahead through the deep lucerne grass. There he found the body of one of the collie dogs.

As he moved ahead, Jan Pieter found the dead bodies of the four other dogs scattered about within a radius of fifty yards. An empty feeling took possession of the Dutchman. He had loved those dogs deeply.

Leading his horse behind him, Jan Pieter headed slowly toward the little cabin. Instinctively he knew what he would find. Standing in the doorway, he spied the remains of Kurt Stein. The Dutch sheep-herder was half on and half off his little cot. His face was blue from strangulation, and the marks of throttling fingers were still visible on his throat. Over his forehead there was the mark of an abrasion.

Jan Pieter hastened forward, dropped to one knee and took the hands of the herder. There was no sign of a pulse. Tenderly he lifted Stein back onto the cot, and as he did so a tally book fell to the floor. It was the practice for Stein to keep a record in this book of the size and disposition of his

herd. The stubby pencil that usually rested between the pages of the book was clutched in one of Kurt's fingers.

The paunchy Boer farmer pulled the rough woolen blanket over the sheep-herder's face, then picked up the tally book and opened it. The top sheet had been torn off hurriedly, as though the killer had been in a hurry to destroy the evidence that Kurt Stein tried to leave behind him. There was a piece of oak-tag revealed beneath the torn top sheet.

Jan Pieter took this out, revealing the carbon sheet beneath. The killer, in his haste, had overlooked this. Van Bronck's eyes opened as he read:

I know who has been stealing the sheep. Find  
Cam—

That was all. Stein had died before he could finish.

Jan Pieter muttered a prayer, then patted the form of the herder and said:

"Rest easy, Kurt. I'll get him."

The sheep-herder had been referring to the theft of scores of sheep, losses that Jan Pieter had been suffering for the past few months. These losses, ordinarily, would not have troubled the Dutchman. He knew that there were times when the Karoo received too little rain to feed the cattle and sheep of the Kaffirs. Then the natives would rob the husbandmen of enough to feed themselves and their children.

Jan Pieter had been trying to teach his native neighbors to conserve water, and to carry on scientific dry-farming to make the most of the rainfall that the Karoo did get. As his flourishing peach, apple and orange orchards, his fields waving with corn, and the prize cattle that stood deep in the

lucerne grass, could testify, he had been very successful about it.

But Jan Pieter knew now that the theft of his sheep was deeper than the simple depredations of the hungry natives. No native would have slain the five dogs and murdered Stein. There was something more horrible behind all this. After rounding up the scattered sheep, he headed for the holding pens.

As he rode along he scanned Kurt's note again. Obviously the "Cam—" was the beginning of a name. Could Kurt have meant Douglas Campbell? Recalling the earlier trouble he had had with the neighboring sheep rancher, Jan Pieter could understand why Kurt might have suspected the Scotsman. But the dying man didn't leave that note to outline idle suspicions. There was some deeper reason for the accusation.

Jan Pieter tried to reconstruct Kurt Stein's meeting with the killer. Undoubtedly the murderer, fresh from his assault on the farm safe, was heading across the sheep-folds in the darkness. The collies would have immediately given tongue. Therefore it was necessary to silence them.

Even though Kurt happened to be asleep, the disturbance of the dogs would have been enough to bring him out on the run. And he had come out, only to be met by the bludgeon of the killer. Once discovered by Kurt, the killer had to make sure of his silence.

Obviously, the murderer had his own ideas about getting rid of the money, but the clue to the theft of the sheep was something that he had not anticipated. When he discovered Kurt Stein writing this information in his tally book, he had to kill him and destroy the evidence. Now it was possible that a piece of carbon paper would write his death sentence.

The problem was still in Jan Pieter's mind when he turned the sheep into the pens for shearing. Carl Boomer sensed that there was something wrong and came hurrying to his aid. The Dutchman told the overseer of his gruesome discovery. Boomer said nothing, but his eyes were filled with rage.

In the house the men were seated about the dining-room table, eating. Neither Jan Pieter nor Boomer were hungry, but they joined the others. Sergeant Baldwin had been investigating throughout the day, but had nothing to report. Jed Payson announced that the shearing was finished, and that he was planning to move on to Campbell's place in the morning.

"But you can't do that," Baldwin broke in. "While the investigation of the robbery is going on here, I'll have to ask everyone to remain here."

Jed Payson bridled angrily. "You don't think I have your money, do you?" he asked Jan Pieter.

"No," replied Jan Pieter frankly. "But this isn't merely a robbery any more. It's a murder case, now. Someone murdered Kurt Stein, during the night."

The announcement was like a bombshell in the little room. But none of the men present betrayed anything that might have appeared like guilty knowledge.

"Even so," the Dutchman went on, "I don't think it will be necessary to hold Mr. Payson and his men. I suppose Douglas Campbell will want to be going along, too."

Campbell nodded. Sergeant Baldwin shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply. He knew how Jan Pieter worked, and thought it best to follow the Dutchman's suit and let matters stand.

Now, Van Bronck turned the conversation to the matter

of sheep-raising. Campbell and Biddeford followed his lead.

"What are you specializing in now, Campbell?" the Dutchman inquired.

"Oh, I'm building up a nice line of Cotswold, Shropshire and Hampshire," Campbell said. "And when I get that Lincoln herd of yours into breeding, I ought to have about as much variety as I can handle."

"You, Biddeford?" Jan Pieter asked.

"I have only the Wensleydale breed at the present time," announced the Cape school-teacher. "But I'm taking half of Doug's Lincoln herd. That ought to give me a good start."

"Wensleydale is a good breed," Carl Boomer agreed. "The wool has a bright luster and is of uniform staple. The mutton is of a superior quality, and the rams cross-breed very well. You're starting off in this business in the right way, Biddeford."

The novice sheep-rancher was pleased with the compliment from the old-timer overseer.

Jan Pieter stoked up his long clay pipe, thrust it between his teeth and then suggested that they retire to the broad parlor. Excusing himself, Carl Boomer went out to look at the sheep and to inspect the riflemen around the farm.

The visitors resorted now to the usual means of relaxation on a veldt farm in the early fall. They listened to the radio and read papers and books. Campbell spent some time before the well-filled book-cases, then picked out a volume and settled in one of the chairs with it. Biddeford and Payson also selected books to suit their tastes.

Jan Pieter looked up from time to time to study his guests.

"How's the lamb crop this season?" he suddenly asked the Scotsman.

"Nothing to speak of," Campbell declared. "You know how it is."

"I'm doing all right," Biddeford said. "Beginners' luck, I guess."

Jan Pieter nodded, then glanced at the book the sheep-rancher was reading. It was Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey*.

"One of my favorite books," the Dutchman boomed pleasantly.

"What's that?" inquired Biddeford, looking up.

"*Iliad and Odyssey*," replied Van Bronck.

"One of the best," agreed the school-teacher. "Look what the Germans have done with the Trojan Horse idea. They lifted that right out of Homer. The old boy sure had ideas."

Campbell nodded, and went on with his reading. Jan Pieter bade the neighbors good-night, then headed outdoors. He plodded toward the barn. When the Dutch farmer came the overseer looked up.

"What are you going to do now, Jan Pieter?" Boomer asked.

"I'm going out in my wagon. I don't know when I'll be back. But when I come back, it'll be with the hide of the dirty killer that throttled Kurt Stein. Have the riflemen come back to the house. They'll have plenty to do with preparing the fleece and picking out the mutton sheep for the slaughter. I'll take care of this other matter."

Carl Boomer nodded, knowing that his plump boss would not rest until the murderer had been caught.

Minutes later the *voortrekker* cart moved out of the yard. The tramp of the oxen was lost in the dust, and the cart-wheels turned soundlessly on well greased axles. There was a rifle under the canvas below the seat on which Jan Pieter

sat, and he carried a pistol under the Norfolk jacket he wore. His black hat shaded his eyes.

Night on the Karoo always sent strange feelings running through Jan Pieter's bulky frame. All about him there was the compelling solitude. Now and then there was a rustle in the grain and lucerne grass, telling him that a solitary jackal was slinking along. One of the oxen snorted as it sensed the springboks grazing on the dewless scrub.

Jan Pieter was heading along his fence line to the point where the eight hundred Lincolns were bunched for movement onto Doug Campbell's property. They were nearly five miles from the house, and it took the lumbering bull-ocks something like an hour and three-quarters to make the journey.

It was midnight when Jan Pieter climbed down out of the wagon, walked toward the little fire that marked the site of the herder's lonely vigil. He recognized one of Douglas Campbell's men, and greeted him cordially.

"Hello, Bert," he said.

"Good evening, *Mynheer* Van Bronck."

"Are you ready to move the sheep?"

"Yes, *Mynheer*," answered Bert. "I am waiting for word from Mr. Campbell."

"You can go on through now. Mr. Campbell is going home in the morning."

Bert nodded, started to strike his tent and bundle up his supplies. While he was so occupied, Jan Pieter Van Bronck went among the sheep and ran his hands over some of them. All of these animals were like children to the kindly Dutchman. There was a soft, yet hard light in his eyes as he stared into the star-studded sky.

Jan Pieter watched Bert as the herder started the sheep

through the opening in the fence onto Campbell's property. Then he headed back for his wagon. When he was on the seat, and had the cart turned around, he flashed a light and looked at the folded packet of bills he had in his hand. While he had no means of proving it at the moment, he was convinced that the money he held was a part of the ten thousand dollars that had been stolen from his safe.

How had it come here to the sheep camp of Douglas Campbell, and into the custody of Bert, the herder? Somehow the wily Dutchman could not visualize the stolid herder as capable of plotting a safe-blowing job. And how could Bert have been able to leave his herd of sheep to travel the width of the farm to murder Kurt Stein, without attracting some attention from the armed guards patrolling the fence?

Did Bert's possession of the money point back to his employer, Douglas Campbell? The note in the dying hand of Kurt Stein might well indicate that, but Jan Pieter Van Bronck was not one to jump at conclusions.

Suddenly, Jan Pieter was conscious that he was not alone in his wagon. A movement in the rear of the bullock cart brought the portly Dutchman around on the seat, and he spun the flashlight with him. But before he could focus the beam on the intruder, the light was knocked from his hand by a savage blow from a metal rod. He recognized the weapon immediately as the barrel of his own rifle.

Anticipating his own murder, he instantly hurled himself to one side. But he was not quick enough. His head exploded in pinwheels and he toppled off the seat to the ground, lying there motionless while the bullocks carried his assailant off on the run. . . .

Jan Pieter Van Bronck did not know how long he lay on the ground, blood seeping from his temple. When he recov-

ered consciousness, it was to see Bert bending over him, running cold water onto a rough cloth, and swabbing the clotting blood.

"I heard a shot," Bert explained, "and I ran here as soon as I could. What happened?"

"Someone tried to kill me," Jan Pieter replied briefly. "I think I'm all right now." The Dutchman climbed to his feet slowly. "You'd better get back to your sheep," he commanded, "or they'll be scattered all over the landscape."

"All right," agreed Bert. "If you think you'll make out okay."

"I will," Jan Pieter declared. He turned then and strode off into the darkness, in the direction his bullock cart had taken. Minutes later, he caught up to it where the bullocks had stopped to crop grass. The wagon was empty. The rifle was still there, and wedged under the front seat, Jan Pieter discovered the little wad of bills. This last discovery surprised him. Now, the quest for his assailant became more confusing than ever.

In any case, Jan Pieter felt that he had learned all he could out here on the veldt. He climbed into the wagon and headed back for the farmhouse.

Eight o'clock the next morning, Campbell, Payson and the shearers were leaving for the Campbell place to continue their shearing. Van Bronck's men were busy with the washing and bagging of his crop of fleece, and had time only for the briefest farewells. Jan Pieter explained his head wound by saying that his rifle had been accidentally discharged. Now he was planning to ride to the Campbell place on the little Cape horse. Sergeant Baldwin would remain at the Van Bronck farm and continue his own line of investigation.

When the party was about a mile from the Campbell

ranchhouse, Jan Pieter saw Bert moving ahead of them with the eight hundred Lincolns.

"Looks like your sheep are going to get home at about the time you will," the Dutchman pointed out to his Scotch neighbor.

"That'll be fine," Campbell replied. "I'll give you a check for them as soon as we reach the house—or would you prefer the cash?" He cocked his eye toward the sturdy Dutchman.

"I'd prefer the cash," Jan Pieter declared. "The robbery has left me a bit short of ready money, and I'd like to pay off Jed Payson and his boys, so they won't have to make another trip to my place."

Campbell nodded.

Not many minutes later, the party was turning into Campbell's ranchyard. Hired men took charge of the horses and Jed Payson began assigning his men to their usual tasks. Leslie Biddeford settled down in one of the split-bottomed rockers on the porch and began humming a song. Jan Pieter went inside with Campbell, and a queer smile spread across his face as he wondered whether he was going to be paid for his sheep with his own stolen money.

If he had had any thought of tricking Douglas Campbell into an exposure in this way, those hopes soon faded. Campbell opened his safe and took out packets of brand-new banknotes, still bound with the paper wrappers bearing the printed legend of the Royal Bank of Bloemfontein. Jan Pieter took the money, put it in the inside pocket of his Norfolk jacket and turned over the receipt and bill of sale to the Scotsman.

"I wish you good luck with them," he said jovially.

"Thanks," declared Campbell shortly.

Jan Pieter went outside, wondering whether he had erred in permitting the men to leave his place before the twin mystery was solved. But his old Dutch intuition indicated that he was taking the proper course, and this peace of mind satisfied him.

About a hundred yards from the house, Bert was now turning the Lincolns into a holding pen. Leslie Biddeford had gone down to watch the process and was talking to Bert. Jan Pieter walked over to them.

"How are you feeling today, *Mynheer* Van Bronck?" inquired Bert, indicating the wound on Jan Pieter's head.

"Oh, fine," replied the Dutchman, grinning broadly. "Picking out your sheep, Mr. Biddeford?"

"Yes," the Capetown school-teacher said. "I think I'll be driving them home this afternoon. It's only a short distance to the south, and we might as well get the sheep used to their new quarters, as soon as possible."

"I'll go along with you, if you don't mind," Jan Pieter suggested.

"Not at all, not at all," Leslie Biddeford replied. "Glad to have you."

Jan Pieter stood puffing his pipe and humming snatches of the *Stellenbosch Boys*, his favorite tune, while Biddeford nonchalantly counted out the four hundred Lincolns that he would drive to his home ranch. Van Bronck could see no identifying marks that would particularly stamp the sheep Biddeford was separating from the others.

An hour later, the two neighbors were riding along the highway between the wire fences, with the sheep herd sprawled out in the ditches on both sides. Twilight was nearing when they finally approached the folds where Biddeford's sheep were kept. Barking dogs and burning fires

marked the camps, and here and there men waved greetings to the pair on the road.

The Dutch *voortrekker* rode close to the fence and looked over a fold, then turned to Biddeford.

"Are these some of your Wensleydales?" he asked, indicating a group of six hundred sheep penned up in one of the pastures.

Biddeford nodded. "Those lambs ought to grow into fine big sheep by the end of next year. Some of the men have suggested that I send them to Bloemfontein, or even to Cape-town for the Christmas holidays. They ought to bring top prices. Fall lambs always do, I understand."

Jan Pieter Van Bronck let his eyes rove over the six hundred small animals. The biggest of them was only about a foot and a half high at the withers.

Then they were approaching the yard gates and turning the Lincoln herd over to the native herders. When the job was completed, Leslie Biddeford sighed deeply.

"That's that," he said, grinning. "Now let's go inside and get something to eat."

Jan Pieter was agreeable, and they were soon sitting down to the full meal of the veldt sheep rancher. After it was over, Jan Pieter was content to settle down in a chair in the spacious living room and smoke his pipe. But his ever alert eyes were roving around the room.

"Make yourself at home," Biddeford invited. "I'll have a room made up for you and you can stay the night. I'll be outside if you want anything."

Jan Pieter nodded slowly, picked up a book to read. Leslie Biddeford had been gone for about ten minutes when Jan Pieter bestirred himself. He balanced his body on the balls of his agile feet, went to the door. He hefted the weight

of his pistol, then slipped from the lighted room into the darkness outside.

Once away from the house, he ran speedily to the fold where the four hundred Lincolns were being kept. The animals were milling about in the fenced area. Jan Pieter halted at a corner of the fence, and his sharp eyes peered through the dust-filled air.

But a circuit of the sheep fold showed that there was no human being near the sheep. Jan Pieter slipped through the fence rails, caught one of the bell-wethers in his ample arms. He ran practised fingers over the animal, beneath the fleece, from head to tail.

There was no tell-tale packet of currency concealed in the animal's wool. He repeated this procedure with a dozen other wethers picked from groups of the flock. But without success.

He was inclined to think that he had guessed wrong, but there was the evidence of the small wad of money he had secured from one of the wethers of this same flock in Bert's camp the night before. Besides, someone had considered Jan Pieter's investigations dangerous enough to make an attempt on his life.

There was only one other possible solution to the problem. If the money was not hidden in this batch of Lincolns, then it must be hidden among the four hundred animals left at the Campbell place. Kurt Stein's dying note was the key to the entire mystery. And if this were the truth, there was no time to waste.

Without waiting to say good-by to Biddeford, Jan Pieter hastened to the stable, saddled his little Cape horse, and minutes later was on the road heading back toward the Campbell place.

The sustained baaing of the penned sheep drifted on the night air as Jan Pieter approached the Campbell ranch. He was still about a quarter of a mile from the house, when he brought his mount to a halt and tied the reins to one of the strands of the wire fence. Then he was moving toward the ranchhouse on foot. There was one light showing in a front room of the house. Jan Pieter climbed the hand-hewed wooden steps, moved across the porch to the window.

Sergeant Baldwin was in the leather-backed chair. There was no one else in the room. Whistling softly, the Dutchman drew away from the window, retraced his steps to the stoop and moved off through the night-shadowed yard, heading for the pen where the four hundred Lincoln rams and ewes were being held. He heard voices coming to him on the relative stillness of the night, and nodded. Then he was at the sheep fold.

There was a restless movement among the sheep. The ewes baaed plaintively, and several of the larger rams expressed themselves in more aggressive fashion. Jan Pieter marked the black-clad back of a man moving among the penned sheep. His hand went to his holster and he unsheathed his pistol. Noiselessly he circled about the pen until the human game he stalked slithered through the rail fence and, crouching low, hurried toward the house. The night prowler had taken one step when the barrel of Jan Pieter's pistol jabbed into his side.

"I'll take that money!" Jan Pieter gritted.

A heavy foot rose and fell, tramping on Jan Pieter's instep. A rock-hard fist buried itself in the Dutchman's paunch. Concealed muscles repelled the full force of the blow, but still Jan Pieter was forced off-balance and his gun was discharged harmlessly in the air. Savagely then, the

fingers of his adversary closed over Jan Pieter's wrist. The strength of desperation was in the thief's grasp.

As the two bulky forms rolled around in the sand and débris of the ranchyard, struggling furiously, Jan Pieter's keen ears heard other footsteps approaching. He was breathing heavily, but the man he was fighting was wheezing like an unprimed pump. The Dutch detective did not know whether the new arrivals would be reinforcements for the cold-blooded killer he was fighting, or would be inclined to aid him.

Steeling his muscles for a final effort, he gathered himself together, broke the hold of the murderer. Then, with a deft movement of his bulky body, he swept his adversary into the rolling position that gave the Dutchman new leverage, and executed a flying mare that sent the fellow crashing against the heavy, peeled pole of the sheep fold.

When the battered figure didn't arise, Jan Pieter had a new grip on his pistol, and was waving it in an arc that covered the four men that now formed a semi-circle before him. Three of the newcomers were standing with curious expressions on their faces. Sergeant Baldwin was in the vanguard, holding a gasoline lantern.

"What have you got there, Jan Pieter?" he demanded.

"I've got the killer that murdered Kurt Stein and ran off a flock of my sheep," Jan Pieter said coldly. "And he's the one that broke into my safe and stole the ten thousand dollars."

"Who is it?" Baldwin inquired.

Jan Pieter strode forward, his pistol ready, and turned the semi-conscious body over, until the face was revealed in the light of Baldwin's lantern.

"Leslie Biddeford!"

Douglas Campbell and Jed Payson echoed the identification as they came forward. Jan Pieter called their attention to the scattered green bills that were all about them.

Biddeford was conscious now. He climbed to his feet and leaned against the pole gasping.

"You're making a mistake, Jan Pieter," he got out. "I'm not your man. I've been trying to help you. Douglas Campbell is your killer."

Campbell started to protest, but Jan Pieter motioned for silence.

"How do you figure that?" the canny Dutchman asked.

"I got the idea last night at your house," Biddeford went on, "when we were talking about Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey*. I was talking about the Trojan Horse and how it was being used nowadays. Thinking about your loss and Homer's stories, I recalled the story of the Cyclops. You remember that, don't you?"

Jan Pieter nodded, looked at Douglas Campbell. Sergeant Baldwin and Jed Payson could not follow Biddeford's reasoning at all.

"When Ulysses blinded the Cyclops," Jan Pieter explained, "the members of Ulysses' crew were in the cave with Cyclops' sheep. As the sheep came out to graze, the Cyclops ran his hands over each one of them, to make certain that none of the crew members were escaping. But Ulysses' men outsmarted the Cyclops by gripping the fleece on the underside of the sheep, and permitting the animals to drag them to safety. Our modern Homer tied the stolen money to fleece on the underside of this Lincoln herd and permitted Bert to drive the loot off my property. He came here tonight to retrieve it."

"That's the way I figured it," agreed Biddeford. "I hur-

ried here to make sure that Campbell didn't get away with the money while you were at my place."

Jan Pieter shook his head. "Kurt Stein left a note," he said coldly. "In it he gave me the clue to this whole business. It was a direct lead to his killer. The killer thought he had secured the note, but didn't consider the possibility of a carbon copy."

"But Kurt Stein wrote Campbell's name in the note!" Biddeford burst out triumphantly. Then his face went white. Jan Pieter said nothing. Instead he fumbled in his pocket for the tally book of the dead herder.

"How did *you* know what the tally book said?" he asked pointedly. "I haven't shown it to anyone until now."

Biddeford realized that he had trapped himself by his slip, but none of the others sensed this at once. Instead they looked at the carbon copy of Kurt Stein's scrawled note. It read:

I know who has been stealing the sheep. Find  
Cam—

"By George," muttered Sergeant Baldwin. "He did start to write Campbell's name, at that." The police sergeant snaked his gun out of its holster, brought it around to bear on Douglas Campbell. But even as he moved, Jan Pieter Van Bronck said:

"Not Campbell, Sergeant. It's Biddeford. The word Kurt was trying to write when the murderer strangled him, wasn't Campbell. It was Cameroon!"

The Dutchman realized that a desperate Biddeford was tearing the patch pocket from his Norfolk jacket as he whipped out Jan Pieter's pistol. A doubled fist sent Biddeford sprawling on his back, and a moment later, Baldwin's

gun cracked and a bullet crashed into the Cape school-teacher's shoulder. The Dutchman's pistol fell from the killer's fingers.

"But I don't understand how you uncovered it all!" wailed Biddeford. "I was so careful about everything, even though I did overlook the carbon copy. When I saw the original note, I was inclined to leave it there. I knew your reputation for sleuthing, and thought that with a direct line to Campbell I would be able to get away clean."

"You overlooked other things, too," Jan Pieter pointed out. "In the first place, you didn't expect me to come back to the farm when I did. You expected to be away from the place long before I had a chance to begin any investigation. Then, you should have stuck to your Wensleydales and been satisfied with one lamb crop a year. I can understand how the rising wool and mutton prices might tempt a man that has never had much money, but that isn't all there is to sheep raising."

"I still don't understand," Sergeant Baldwin broke in.

"When I was riding home with Leslie Biddeford this afternoon, he showed me six hundred sheep and told me they were his Wensleydale fall lamb crop. It's almost impossible to get a fall lamb from a Wensleydale ewe. The only breeds that lamb in the fall are Dorset and Tunis sheep. The sheep he showed me this afternoon were those he stole from me."

"But you have no Dorsets nor Tunis either," Campbell protested.

"I know it." Jan Pieter laughed. "What Biddeford thought were lambs were actually full-grown Cameroon pygmy sheep. The animals are extremely small in size, and a full-grown ram stands only nineteen inches at the withers."

Growling, Sergeant Baldwin took charge of his prisoner

and marched him toward the ranchhouse, where Biddeford's wound would be bound up before he was taken to Bloemfontein.

Douglas Campbell and Jed Payson walked beside Jan Pieter.

"I still don't see how Kurt Stein could have written any kind of note, if he was strangled to death," Campbell said wearily.

"He was strangled *after* he wrote the note," Jan Pieter pointed out. "There was a bruise on his forehead where Biddeford first struck him. Biddeford actually found the note, and might have committed the perfect murder, if he had taken the time to look for the carbon copy. But a killer is usually excited and in a big hurry. Had he destroyed the carbon copy of the note after strangling Kurt Stein, my investigation would not have been nearly so easy."

"You've made even more difficult cases look simple, Jan Pieter," said Campbell affectionately.

Jan Pieter said nothing. He tamped tobacco into his pipe, lighted a match and puffed thoughtfully on the clay stem at the same time that he pursed his lips for the opening bars of *Pack Your Things and Trek*. He would be heading back to his farm and Kurt Stein's funeral in the morning.

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# NEGATIVES OF GUILT

By

NORMAN A. DANIELS

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## I

VALERIE GREY, blonde, blue-eyed and decidedly pretty, did not look like a crack reporter as she hurriedly passed through the main office door of the *Gazette*, one of the big town's biggest newspapers. It was after nine o'clock. She should have been angry because she had waited more than two hours for dinner, but it did not really make any difference—not so long as her dinner companion, late or not, was Johnny Wells.

Johnny's car was at least parked at the curb. Valerie envisioned a nice evening—leisurely dinner, a few laughs and, perhaps, a movie. She opened the car door and gazed upon her date. He was a very large young man with an air of indolence that hinted at explosive energies beneath his easy-going surface. His hair was dark and close cut, his face a healthy tan. As a rule he was nattily dressed and raring to go.

Just then he was slumped behind the wheel. Over his left shoulder was a leather candid camera case. Over his right, another leather case held flash-gun bulbs. His tie was un-

loosened, his collar open. His hat brim was down over his eyes. Both shoes were off and parked on the seat. And . . . Johnny Wells was snoring lightly and contentedly. Valerie got into the car, closed the door and shook Johnny awake. He opened his eyes, straightened up and grinned sheepishly.

"Hello," he said, "did it take you that long to break away from the office?"

Valerie wrinkled her nose. "Johnny, it's not five minutes since you called upstairs—and you fall asleep waiting for me. What kind of an evening do you expect we'll have? And look at you. Anybody would think you dug ditches for a living."

Johnny gave a weary sigh.

"Honestly, Val, a ditch digger has it easy compared to the job I've had the last two days. I'm so tired my bones ache. My eyes won't stay open. Have a heart, Val—I can't help it."

"And what has the famous Johnny Wells been doing the past forty-eight hours to wear him down like that?"

"I've been going around with Mrs. Lollingworth. She has twelve kids in the armed services, and she won a prize for it. They gave her a trip to New York, and I had to take her around. Lady—I've been led like a dog on a leash. That woman is fifty-eight years old, and she ran me ragged. If her kids can fight as she can gallivant around, the war is over."

"Pish," Valerie said. "Taking an elderly woman around to museums and things. Johnny, you're old before your time."

Johnny slipped into his shoes and wriggled more erect behind the wheel.

"Mrs. Lollingworth saw not a museum, but every museum

in the city and there are—before I gave up counting—twenty-one.

"Then she wanted to see Coney Island. Coney is about one hundred and fifty miles long and seven hundred wide. She never got a chance to come east to see the World's fair, so we went out there, and that covers more miles.

"Then we went to the Stork Club for dinner. It turned out she likes to dance. Imagine rumbaing after that ten-thousand-mile walk? My hips nearly departed from my body in protest. That was yesterday. Today we went to the Empire State Building roof. Then we took in the induction center at Grand Central Palace.

"They wanted her for some woman's affair at one of the big hotels for lunch. I had a nap then, thank you. The afternoon consisted of a little stroll to every famous store on Fifth Avenue. At three-thirty she remembered Grant's tomb and thought she'd like to walk there. We walked. That is, she did. I stumbled along behind her. Then she thought of the Zoo. By then I was getting humps on my feet bigger than the ones on the camels in the park. From there, it was dinner and we walked. Seems a taxi driver scared the wits out of her, and she could see more walking anyhow. After that, I turned her over to Bill Collins."

Valerie laughed.

"I guess I can't complain. She certainly deserves all this. Did you take lots of pictures?"

"I took them from every angle in every inch of Manhattan and environs," Johnny groaned. "Now she and Bill Collins are headed for Greenwich Village—on foot. That lady has more stamina than a Commando. Honestly, Val, if I don't get some sleep, I'll freeze somewhere in a standing position and have nightmares."

"I guess you have a case, Johnny," Valerie sighed. "Okay, I'll go home and listen to the radio. Provided—and get this, my sweetie-pie—that you go home and sleep. Then tomorrow night we'll do the town. Right?"

Johnny patted her hand.

"Thanks, Val. I knew you'd understand. I'll drive you home and then head for my own bunk. I'll make it up to you tomorrow."

They got along well, these two. Valerie was a crack reporter on the *Gazette*. Johnny Wells was an ace photographer for one of the big syndicates. He'd met Valerie when he came to New York from a small town, still green behind the ears, and been handed an impossible assignment by a wise-cracking city editor.

Johnny filled this assignment and in such a manner as to break a murder case which had the police stumped. Valerie took him in hand then, and Johnny soon rose to the very top of his profession.

He knew every trick a camera could perform. He liked crime assignments and had a standing order to work on any important case. The police were glad to have him around. Many of his theories and practices worked better than theirs.

Johnny drove to Val's apartment house and dropped her off there, then headed for home. The dimmed lights of a diner attracted his attention. He craved a hamburger loaded down with ketchup, some apple pie and coffee. He was downright hungry.

He found a place to park his car about a block down the street, shifted the weight of the flash bulbs and camera, walked back to the diner and ate his fill. That made him feel a little better although his eyelids were heavy, and each step seemed to be an effort.

He approached his car. As he did so, a taxi pulled to the curb just ahead of it, and a man got out. It was so dark at this particular spot that Johnny didn't have more than a look at an average male back. The man wore a dark suit and a dark hat. As he slid out of the cab, his coat got caught somehow and pulled aside to reveal a gun stuck in the hip pocket.

Johnny quietly moved closer to his car where he was concealed by shadows. The taxi rolled away. The man never looked around. Johnny saw him take the gun from his hip pocket, spin the cylinder, then drop it into a side pocket. His hand stayed there with it.

The man walked rapidly along for about twenty feet, then made an abrupt turn into an alley.

"Burglar or stick-up artist!" Johnny grunted.

He quickly removed the camera from his case, adjusted the shutter and lens for fast shooting and connected his flash gun. He dipped into the leather case of flash bulbs and discovered he only had three. He screwed one of them in place as he moved after the gunman.

Johnny's good intentions about going home and to bed were shattered at the sight of the gun and the man's furtive actions.

The photographer went down the same alley carefully. He moved like a large cat in the debris-laden, dark passage. Johnny visualized making a picture just as the crook either clambered through a window or was busily engaged picking a back door lock.

As Johnny neared the courtyard at the end of the alley, he heard voices. One was querulous, the other was muted, stern and hoarse. Compared to this courtyard, the alley was a brightly lighted passage. Towering buildings rose on all

four sides, shutting off any light from the streets. Only a patch of black sky showed above.

He crouched, just around the corner from the alley, listening to those voices, trying to determine where the two men were located. The querulous voice spoke first.

"You're insane. Don't point that gun at me. You're mad, I tell you. Don't—"

Johnny distinctly heard the click of the hammer. He couldn't do anything to help. Both men were too far away to give him a chance to interfere before the gun went off.

Johnny did the next best thing. He aimed his camera in the direction of the voices. As his finger contacted the shutter release, the darkness was broken by two jets of crimson flame. The murderer's gun roared deafeningly in the confines of that courtyard.

The fingers of flame gave away the murderer's location. Johnny swept his lens in that direction and pressed the release. The flash bulb went off.

In its momentary glare, Johnny had a fleeting glimpse of a man falling to the ground, a glimpse of the killer's back.

Johnny swore softly, advanced the film another frame and replaced the flash bulb with another. He did all this quietly, efficiently, as he listened for sounds of the killer attempting to escape. He heard nothing except a few feeble moans from the man on the ground.

## II

Camera ready again, Johnny held his finger tight against the shutter release. The two shots were bound to attract attention. There might be another exit from the courtyard, but the killer would have to make some noise reaching it.

Johnny heard a scraping sound. His second flash bulb

went off. This time he wasn't able to see the man with his naked eye beyond a half glance that indicated the killer still did not face the camera.

Still working fast, Johnny started to change film and bulb. A gun fired—this time at him. The bullet whizzed past his head, hit the brick wall behind him and ricocheted dangerously. Johnny threw himself flat. He crawled on his knees for about a dozen yards. As he moved, he worked to arrange the camera for a final shot. He had one flash bulb left to get a full-faced picture of the killer. The man was stalking him too.

Johnny lay flat, making a difficult target of himself. He held the camera up, however, and waited. He hoped the shots would attract the police. Nobody would be in the buildings at this moment, for they were all lofts.

His next move might be his last, but he had to take the chance. His plan was to force the killer into shooting. When he did, he'd be facing the camera, and Johnny would have the chance he sought. Very deliberately he scuffed his shoe. When nothing happened, he spoke.

"You can't get out of here, you murderer."

Instantly the gun blazed. If Johnny had been kneeling, the bullet would have plowed through him. As it was, it burned past his ear. He pressed the shutter release, with the lens facing straight at the source of the shot.

As he pressed it, the man fired again. This bullet was even closer. It hit the wall and, like the other, ricocheted. It smashed against Johnny's head, well to the back and high. Fortunately the bullet had lost most of its momentum, but there was enough left to deliver a stunning blow.

Just before he was hit, his flash bulb went off. He knew he'd moved the camera at the wrong instant and probably

didn't get a good picture, but he did get a glimpse of the killer's face.

It wasn't an ugly face, although it was twisted in rage. The features were thin. The man had a lantern jaw, was of average height and weight. That was all Johnny saw before he was hit. It was sufficient. He'd remember this man anywhere, even if he didn't have a picture.

He slumped to the ground, not unconscious, but stunned. He knew the killer might come closer, find him helpless and pump a bullet into his skull.

Vaguely, he heard a shrill whistle and the sound of pounding feet. Police were finally coming. He also heard a savage oath from the man in the darkness and more scampering feet. A flashlight beam slit the darkness, swept across the courtyard and rested on the victim for a second.

Johnny's legs twitched and scraped. The flash leaped toward him. A policeman ran in his direction.

"Don't move an inch," he ordered. "Just raise your head and, so help me, I'll bust it open with a thirty-eight."

Johnny tried to speak, tried to tell the cop that the real murderer had probably swarmed over some fence to safety. But he couldn't speak yet.

More policemen dashed into the courtyard, more flashlights were trained on him. Then a pistol was literally placed under his nose.

"Say—this is Johnny Wells," someone gasped. "He's hurt. Help him up."

Johnny was raised to his feet. He swayed giddily, staggered back and sought the sturdy support of the wall. He wiped a hand over his eyes and managed to grin.

"Thanks, whoever you are, officer. See how that poor chap is. And send out an alarm for the killer. I saw him. Fol-

lowed him here and tried to prevent this murder. I couldn't, but I can identify the murderer."

He said nothing about having taken pictures. If he had, the police would have taken the camera from him and Johnny knew what a sensational scoop might be inscribed on the sensitive surface of the film. Nothing like them had ever been snapped before. He managed to walk to the victim. He was dead. One bullet had ripped through his stomach, the other through his heart. He eyed the greying face a second, then whistled.

"That's Walter Cartwright!"

"So what?" one policeman said.

"So what!" Johnny repeated. "Listen, that fellow is—was—a millionaire. Nobody ever gave so much money to charity. Brother, when you kill a man like Walter Cartwright, you make headlines. He was famous."

"Well," the same policeman grunted, "he's doggone dead right now and a fresh headache for Homicide unless you can pick out the killer fast."

"I'm going to look around," Johnny said. "Maybe find the gun. My camera case is back there too. Don't go away now."

In the darkness, he grinned tightly. Once Homicide got on the job, they'd be hours questioning him. Their idea was to catch the killer and let the pictures wait.

Johnny's job was pictures. They came first, then the killer. He wanted those shots developed fast so they'd make the morning editions all over the country. Pictures of a murder actually being committed—talk about candid camera shots! These were candid-plus.

He found his camera case and slung it over his shoulder. Picking up the leather flash bulb kit too, he quietly retreated

out of the alley. As he climbed into his car, he saw detective cruisers pulling up. He stepped on the starter. Now that the dangerous game was over, he felt fatigue again. But there was the story to write, the pictures to be developed and printed.

Johnny drove uptown to the offices of his news syndicate. As he was whisked upwards in the elevator, he glanced at his watch. If he wanted to get the picture on the radio-photo machines and his story on the regular wires, he would have to sacrifice something.

There wasn't time both to develop and print the shots and get his story out too. Johnny rushed down the corridor after the elevator discharged him. He went between the desks, waving to other men at work, reached a stout door labelled DARK ROOM and KEEP OUT. Opening the door, he went in. A thin-faced young man was at work over the developing trays when Johnny entered.

"Where's Ben?" he asked quickly.

"He's off tonight." The young man peered at him through big shell-rimmed glasses. "Can I help? Or do you want to develop your own stuff as usual?"

"Haven't time," Johnny said. "Listen, Tommy, you're new here, but your work is good. This time it's got to be ultra. I've got pictures of a murder being committed and, I hope, a picture of the murderer. While I write the yarn, you print these shots and be careful."

Tommy Skinner whistled, and his eyes grew saucer-large behind the big glasses.

"Oh boy—hot stuff, eh? I'll be careful, Johnny. I won't spoil 'em. I promise. You really got a picture of the murderer?"

"Not sure." Johnny was edging toward the door. "He

shot at me just as I pressed the shutter release. I may have missed him. You bring these out right, and I'll see that you get a steady job here."

"Thanks, Johnny," Skinner said. "Thanks very much. I need the job. It gives me money enough to buy first editions."

Johnny thought anybody that paid money for first editions was crazy, but he made no comment. Coming out of the dark-room, he winced under the white light. His eyes felt as if someone had sandpapered his eyelids. He made his way to a small private office where he maintained his desk and typewriter.

He made a telephone call to George Jensen, his editor, and told him just what had happened, then contacted the switchboard and told the operator that if the police came, he wasn't around. Then he pounded the typewriter keys. Taking pictures and developing them were his greatest asset. Writing a story was definitely lower on his scale of accomplishment, but he stuck to it, dragging every word out of his tired brain.

He didn't mention the fact that he'd seen the killer. If that full-face shot didn't come out, such information was better held back. If the picture did come out, the police would probably have him by the time the newspapers carried the story and the picture.

There were forty-five minutes to deadline. He worked diligently, and nobody disturbed him, on orders from the editor. When he finally tapped out his tag, the relief accompanying the completion of his job, brought back heavy exhaustion.

Hardly aware of what he did, Johnny placed both arms on top of the typewriter, laid his head gently down against this

pillow and, in two seconds, was fast asleep. He awoke as someone shook him hard. Blinking, Johnny sat up. He saw Tommy Skinner holding some dripping prints, and things came back in the flash.

"How'd they come out?" he cried eagerly. "Did we get a shot of the killer's face?"

"They're pretty good," Skinner reported. "I hated to wake you up, Johnny. I waited quite a while and it got near deadline time, so I came in . . ."

"For which you have my hearty thanks." Johnny all but snatched the prints out of his hands.

He spread them on the desk. The first one showed Walter Cartwright crumpling to the ground and a beautiful picture of the murderer's back. The pistol showed and a gloved hand holding it, but nothing else was identifiable. The second picture was similarly unproductive. The killer had apparently been searching for Johnny in the darkness and swung around in the opposite direction. Again there was a beautiful view of his back.

Johnny held his breath as he reached for the final print. Then he groaned. It merely showed blank wall at a crazy upward angle. He'd shifted the direction of the lens toward the upper part of the buildings. George Jensen looked over his shoulder.

"No pictures of the killer's face, eh? Never mind, Johnny. Boy, what a picture! Noted philanthropist going down under the impact of two bullets. Killer standing there, gun still smoking in his hand. Skinner, touch it up. Get going. These pics go on the wires in twenty minutes."

Tommy Skinner hustled away to complete his job. Johnny leaned back in a swivel chair.

"Doggone the luck!" He berated himself. "My nerves

must have been worn. I never ducked a bullet before—not when my camera was pointing at a killer.”

“You’re all in, Johnny,” Jensen put a friendly hand on his shoulder. “What you did accomplish will make history. You’d better get yourself some shut-eye before you cave in.”

“Sleep—now?” Johnny grimaced. “Maybe I didn’t get a picture of the killer, but I saw him. I could pick him out in a crowd. And I’ll do it—if I have to scour the whole city. This is my case, Mr. Jensen. Remember, I watched Walter Cartwright murdered.”

“It’s all yours, Johnny,” Jensen granted. “Carry on, pal, but when you find a chance, get yourself some sleep.”

Johnny went to the darkroom and asked for the negatives. Skinner handed them to him. Johnny held them to the light and grunted in exasperation. That last shot should have been a honey, and it was worthless.

“Thanks, Tommy,” he told Skinner. “Do as much for you sometime.”

“Aw, that was only my job,” Skinner retorted. “Just the same, if you ever see any good first editions—not too expensive—let me know, will you?”

“Sure, Tommy. Finish retouching and get the pics to Jensen right away.”

### III

Johnny put his car in the garage, but instead of entering his apartment building, he crossed the street to Police Headquarters. He lived as close to Headquarters as possible. It enabled him to get on cases fast. He knew the police wanted to see him, and, now that his journalistic job was finished, he wanted to see them.

He walked into the office of Sergeant Andy Orr, on the Homicide Squad. Orr gave a gasp of relief.

"Kid, I figured on sending out an alarm for you. The boys are sore because you didn't stick around. How about them pictures?"

Johnny took out some prints Tommy Skinner had given him. "Here they are, Sarge. Bum shooting. I never got the killer's face."

Orr looked at the prints and whistled. "Believe me, this is pretty good. I've been a cop for a long time, but I never saw a picture of a guy dying on his feet with the killer standing there, still holding the gun. Know who did it, Johnny?"

Johnny shook his head. "I wish I did, Sarge. I saw him. If I lay eyes on that chap again, I'll recognize him. That's why I came here. You probably have suspects lined up."

"*Suspects!*" Orr grunted. "Heck, we haven't even developed a motive. I was in charge of the case for about five minutes. Then Captain Peabody took over. Let him have it. Peabody wants to see you, and he don't mean perhaps."

Johnny wrinkled his nose. He knew Donald Peabody—a slim, good-looking movie cop, who knew it; Peabody was no fool. But he liked to strut and could be ruthless at times—especially if things went wrong.

Captain Peabody was putting on his hat and spending a long time getting it just right to show off his profile. Then he donned a topcoat and cream colored gloves. He glared at Johnny.

"I ought to throw you in the can," he stormed. "You chaps think more of printing a story than getting the murderer. Well, give me the lowdown."

"Come off that high horse," Johnny said. "I'm too tired. However, here's what I know."

He related the story in detail, produced the pictures and took some sarcastic censure from Captain Peabody.

"They say you're a slick photographer, but I don't see a picture of the killer's face. Slipping, Johnny?"

"Yes." Johnny bristled. "I sure am. All I had to do was lie flat on my tummy while that thug fired away at me. I got an egg on the back of my head from one of his bullets."

Peabody laughed. "I'll see that's printed—in the opposition newspapers. I always thought your skull was pretty thick."

Johnny smiled. This was no time to arouse the ire of a man who could shut him off from following the mystery to its conclusion. He could have traveled alone, but police help was essential at times.

"Sure," Johnny said. "My skull is thick. It's more than two hours since the murder happened. Can I go down to the cellroom and see the killer? Now, Captain, don't tell me you haven't got him yet."

"Beat it, squirt," Peabody grumbled. "Sergeant Orr, we're going to Cartwright's home, and I don't want the place cluttered up with a lot of reporters. Especially sleepy ones with crew haircuts."

"But, Cap—" Orr started to protest.

"You heard my orders." Peabody took a last look in the mirror. "No reporters."

Johnny parked himself on a corner of Peabody's desk.

"Okay, Skipper, but you're going to feel like an awful fool when I identify the murderer. Because I saw him, you know."

"Come on." Peabody glared. "I wouldn't have left you out anyhow. I was just trying to get your goat."

"Not yet," Johnny said.

Outside Headquarters, Johnny piled into a police car with Sergeant Andy Orr. Peabody got in too, and the atmosphere was frigid. Finally the car stopped in the winding driveway of the home of the late Walter Cartwright.

Inside the big old house, Johnny Wells found the dead man's relatives gathered. He estimated the lights, set his shutter and got ready to make some pictures. Peabody changed his mind for him.

"You stick that camera in anybody's face, and I'll have you tossed out. These are important people."

Johnny growled and let the camera hang from the strap around his neck. He looked over the people in the massive living room. He knew most of them. He had often helped Cartwright put over his more important charity drives and had come into contact with Cartwright's people.

There was ruddy-faced Marcel Leblanc—a pretty good chap. He'd been Cartwright's secretary for at least eight years. Leblanc wasn't handsome, but he had personality.

Slumped in one of the big chairs was Stewart Frederick, an ex-partner of Cartwright. Frederick was about sixty, but didn't look it. He was muscular, bright-eyed and clever as they came.

Then came Cartwright's granddaughter. Ella Cartwright wasn't exactly a beauty. She was very thin, and her clothes hung on her like burlap bags. She used no makeup, affected square-toed, flat-heeled shoes and wore her hair tightly pulled back into a knot. She looked perpetually scared to death and, incongruously enough, wore nose glasses that sat astride her thin, pointed proboscis as a gawky man straddles a bicycle.

With her, was a young fellow who had wavy hair, a soft complexion, eyes that were actually pretty and shoulders

broad enough for an all-American halfback. His name was Pat Kirk, and he was engaged to Ella Cartwright.

Captain Peabody asked each person to give his alibi for the time of the murder which had been officially set at nine twenty-seven.

"I don't know why we have to answer silly questions," Frederick put in angrily. "You're indirectly accusing us of murdering Walter. I'll have you know he was my dearest friend."

"Very glad to hear it," Peabody said. "Now where were you at nine twenty-seven?"

"In a taxicab, riding home after dinner. I don't know the name of the driver, I don't know the street we were on and I don't even know the color of the cab."

"No alibi," Peabody grunted. "Put that down, Sergeant."

Johnny wandered over to where Ella Cartwright and Pat Kirk were sitting. He looked down at her and thought of a witch.

"Hello," he said pleasantly.

"Who are you?" Ella's voice was unpleasant.

"Just a reporter," Johnny said. "Don't pay any attention to the captain. Nobody here murdered your grandfather."

"How do you know?" Ella demanded quickly.

"I saw the murderer," Johnny told her, "and he isn't among those present. If he shows up—*bingo*—we have him."

A servant begged his pardon and told Ella that a Mr. Murray McClain had arrived.

"Oh yes," she said uncertainly. "Show him in. Mr. McClain and grandfather were very close."

Murray McClain walked briskly into the room and—

Murray McClain was the murderer. Johnny said nothing. He eased over to Sergeant Orr and whispered to him.

"This new chap is it, Andy. I'll get a shot of his face, and then you land on him like a ton of bricks. Watch Peabody's face get red."

Captain Peabody was shaking McClain's hand energetically.

"You sure?" Orr asked in a worried voice. "McClain's a big shot. He and Cartwright were just about tops in the philanthropic world. You got to be sure, Kid."

"I've got eyes," Johnny retorted. "Put the cuffs on him after I take his picture. I'd know that face anyplace."

He made sure his camera was ready for business. He walked up to Murray McClain and turned the startled man around so that he faced a strong light. Johnny backed up a little, raised the camera to eye level and took an excellent picture.

Then Sergeant Orr suddenly seized McClain from behind and pinned his arms firmly.

"Okay, killer," he snapped. "Got you! Hey, Cap, search him. This is the guy Johnny saw."

Captain Peabody looked surprised and pained. He searched McClain and found nothing of significance. He turned to Johnny.

"You're sure about this? I'm taking your word for it. If you're wrong, no one can help you."

"I'm not wrong," Johnny said. "How can I forget the face of a man I saw committing a murder?"

McClain looked puzzled. "Will someone tell me what this is all about? I came here to offer my sympathies and help. Now I find myself accused of murder by a wild-eyed man with a camera. Who is in charge?"

"I'm Captain Peabody," that worthy put in. "Wells here swears you're the killer, and I have to take his word for it. You're under arrest, Mr. McClain—unless you've got an iron-clad alibi."

"I'm not going to talk until I see my attorneys. If I'm arrested, put on handcuffs. A jury studying damages, always regards the act of handcuffing a man worth a lot more money."

Sergeant Orr clamped the cuffs in place. McClain refused pointblank to say anything more. Sergeant Orr and Peabody led him away.

Marcel Leblanc walked up to Johnny.

"Gosh, I hate to see a nice fellow like you stick his neck out, but I think there's a mistake. McClain isn't the killer type."

"Would you think, by looking at a smiling, bowing, scraping Jap that he was capable of the rottenest kind of murder?" Johnny countered. "I saw what I saw, and it was McClain."

"It does seem odd." Leblanc frowned. "For my money, Johnny, I'd rather you identified that answer to a homely maiden's prayer, sitting over there holding Ella's hand. Pat Kirk is after Ella's money, and he'll be more persistent than ever now. She'll be one of the wealthiest girls in the nation."

"She's an odd looking duck," Johnny commented.

"Odd acting too. Old man Cartwright was scared somebody would marry her for her money, and he threw Kirk out several times. But Kirk always came back, and Ella always welcomed him. She was never given any money. In plain English, the old man's charities stopped outside his front door."

"Look," Johnny said, "how about escorting me around the

place? Cartwright's study—all that personal stuff so I can do a good human interest yarn about him."

"I'd like to oblige, but Ella is boss now, and—oh, what the heck, I'll be fired, anyhow. Come on—just pretend we're headed for the front door."

He went upstairs with the secretary and checked on the dead man's library, study and music room. Leblanc suddenly brushed past Johnny and went to a desk in the study.

"Look behind you, Johnny," he said so suddenly that Johnny spun in his tracks. "Those books—they're worth a fortune apiece. I thought you'd like to see them."

"Good gosh!" Johnny grunted as he turned around. "Anybody would think six murderers were behind me the way you yelled."

Johnny didn't comment further, but Leblanc's quick motion of stuffing something in his pocket hadn't been lost on him. Johnny figured it was some personal detail Leblanc didn't want anyone else to see. After all, the murderer was already under arrest. He brushed past Leblanc, suddenly grabbed him and pushed him against the wall. He took a crumpled bit of paper from the frightened man's pocket.

"I was crazy to do that," Leblanc said. "It's my resignation. We had an argument, and I intended to leave before he got back tonight. When you brought me up here I remembered it and figured it might be turned against me."

Johnny read the brief note of resignation and handed it back to Leblanc.

"I don't suspect anybody of killing Cartwright except Murray McClain. Didn't I just have him arrested for the crime? Take it easy."

Leblanc straightened his clothing.

"If you worked for Cartwright, your nerves would be shot,

too. He was a driver. Anyway, thanks for—well, for not saying anything about the note. I know you won't. I might be mentioned in the old man's will. I—what's your hurry?"

"I've got to go," Johnny said. "By the way, have you any idea what Cartwright was doing in that alley tonight?"

"Uh-uh." Leblanc shook his head. "When the old man left here, he was going to Pier Ninety. A shipload of exchange prisoners was coming in from Portugal. The old man was to help greet them."

Johnny returned to his office, had the picture of Murray McClain developed and printed and set about writing more copy. He thought of Cartwright's last charitable act—helping exchanged prisoners of war. He sent for details on the arrival of that ship. That would be good human interest stuff.

A boy brought in copy on the arrival of the ship. Accompanying it, was a big picture of the welcoming crowd. Johnny laid it aside. That would make nice additional copy in the morning. When everything was set and the presses grinding out the whole story, including that of the arrest and the picture of McClain, his nerves refused to bear up longer. He cleared his desk, stretched himself across it and used an old topcoat for a pillow. In two seconds he was fast asleep.

#### IV

A gentle shake awakened him, and he blinked sleepily up at Valerie Grey.

"Good morning," she said. "Nothing like leaving your lady fair on the pretext of being so tired you can't hold your head up and then going to your office for a nice nap on your desk. You big ox!"

Johnny swung his legs off the desk, grinned at her and disappeared into the wash room. Emerging, he was fresh as a daisy, shaven, teeth brushed, hair slicked down.

"I had," he said with a laugh, "a diversion on my way home last night. How did the spread look on the morning paper?"

Val unfolded an early edition. There were the pictures—one showing Cartwright sinking to the ground, the second showing him dead, both of them presenting a very good view of the murderer's back. There was a large, framed shot of Murray McClain with the word *murderer* below it.

"Nice stuff," Johnny winked at the girl reporter. "Things like this get a fellow raises. A couple of more and we'll. . ."

"One more like this, and we'll go into the poorhouse *after* they let you out of prison. Johnny, what on earth got into you? Murray McClain was formally charged with first-degree murder at your instigation and stayed in a cell all night."

"So what?" Johnny cocked one eye suspiciously at her. Val was excited about something. "It was no worse than me sleeping on my nice, soft desk."

"Johnny, listen to me. I—oh, there it is." She folded the newspaper to the picture of the crowd welcoming the prisoners of war. "You must have been terribly sleepy last night. Everybody else in this place was asleep, too."

"Val, what are you driving at?" Johnny showed the first signs of worry.

She placed a finger just below one of the men in the crowd scene at the dock. A lot of people had turned around to gaze at the camera, the man she indicated among them.

"That shot," she explained, "was taken at the end of Pier Ninety at nine-twelve last night. A precious few minutes

before you saw Murray McClain murder Mr. Cartwright. Only that man in the crowd happens to be Murray McClain. He's got an alibi to beat all alibis. The papers carry this picture. Your news service released it last night along with the defamatory shots of McClain proclaiming him a murderer."

"No!" Johnny said in cold horror. "It can't be. I tell you I saw him. It was McClain or his twin brother."

"Johnny, be reasonable. It's miles from the pier to the spot where Cartwright was killed. McClain couldn't possibly have made it. The pictures are indisputable evidence. McClain's attorneys produced witnesses who will swear he was in the crowd. He had a reason to be. Cartwright was going to meet that boat, backed out and asked McClain to go in his place."

"Why?" Johnny asked quickly, on the defensive now. "Why did McClain go there?"

"Look, Johnny—McClain and Cartwright were engaged in distributing packages to those war prisoners. They handled their affairs free of charge. Naturally, either one of the two men would want to be there and greet the people they had helped."

Johnny sat down slowly. "I wonder what will happen next?" he asked vaguely as he studied the picture. It was McClain all right—mugging at the camera.

"I can guess," Val said. "Captain Peabody is hunting for you. They stalled him at the front office. Sergeant Orr is ready to be fired off the force, and the powers that be in this building are considering your discharge. It's a very lovely doghouse for you and Andy Orr. Besides that, McClain is filing suit against Orr and against this syndicate for two

hundred thousand dollars. Johnny, how did you ever make such a mistake?"

"Yes—how?" Johnny asked in the same puzzled voice. "I don't get it."

"You will—when they land on you collectively. You've got to slip out of here and go some place until the heat dies down."

"Go some place, my eye!" said Johnny. "I saw McClain there unless he has a double. I've either got to find the double, or prove McClain is the murderer."

"Val, I'll need your help badly. First of all, scout the way out of here. If it's clear, wave from the hall door, and I'll scoot out. Something tells me Mr. Jensen won't be pleasant to face this morning."

Two minutes later, Johnny was on the street. He popped into a cab with Val, told the driver to head slowly north.

"There's something herring-like about this," Johnny muttered. "If McClain had that alibi, why didn't he shout his head off about it last night? No—he let the arrest be made, let us print the pics and then squawked. He wanted to start a juicy civil action."

"Johnny, McClain is a wealthy man. He's only protecting himself. He didn't talk last night, because nobody told him when the murder took place. He was afraid to open his mouth. Where are you going now?"

"To Cartwright's home. I've got a friend there. I want a good look around. Find the reason why Cartwright was killed, and you'll have the murderer. Better get out at the next corner, Val."

"Why should I?" she demanded. "You might need me to stop you from printing more pictures of innocent men proclaimed as murderers."

"You'll get out now," Johnny grinned. "What if we run into something? You'll write a story, and if it was a framed incident like the McClain thing, you'll get fired, too, and we'll never eat. Out, you delicious meal ticket, and can you let me have ten bucks? I don't dare go to the bank and imagine—this is payday."

Val gave him the money and watched the cab vanish in traffic. Johnny gave orders to be driven to the Cartwright home. He paid the driver off outside the gates and walked up the curving drive to the big house. Ella Cartwright was sitting on the porch.

She was dressed in black, but even that looked like an Eskimo's sleeping bag on her. She blinked behind the big glasses and said nothing.

"Remember me?" Johnny asked.

"You're the reporter," she said. "The one who had Mr. McClain arrested. He's going to sue you for that. Maybe I will, too. You brought disgrace to my house."

She eyed him complacently and began to move back and forth in the rocker she occupied. Johnny couldn't figure out if she were stupid, vindictive or clever to an unusual degree. He noticed she'd taken possession of the house already—at least mentally.

"That was all a terrible mistake," Johnny said apologetically. "What I came for this morning is a pleasant story. Of course, with your grandfather dead and not yet buried, this may seem a bit improper, but—are you going to marry Pat Kirk when it's all over?"

"Why?" she asked stonily.

Johnny laughed. "She asks 'why.' Good gosh, woman, don't you realize you're big news now. I want the story. It'll be as big a scoop as anything I've ever come across. Es-

pecially if it includes a picture of you and Pat. Say, he's a pretty handsome chap. Best looking fellow I ever laid eyes on. I'll bet he's photogenic."

She sat bolt upright and made a rapid-fire speech which seemed amazing coming from such a taciturn woman.

"Oh, yes. He is. I've got pictures of him. You can use one if you like. We're going to be married. We arranged it last night. He asked me before the will was read, so nobody could say he married me for my money. Some girls may not have looks like other girls, but if they have brains and can talk about things, that makes up for it, doesn't it? I'll get the pictures . . ."

Johnny wondered how she ever said so many words without drawing a breath. He got the idea that if super-handsome Pat Kirk married her for the money he could grab, he'd earn every nickel if he had to live with her for more than two days.

"I hope I can find the one where he is in uniform. He was in the British Army, you know, and was wounded. If Marcy hasn't torn it up like he did the others. Marcy is very jealous. He tears all of Pat's pictures up."

"And who," Johnny queried, "is Marcy?"

"Marcel Leblanc. We all call him Marcy. He's in love with me, too. I had a terrible time trying to choose between them, but Pat is cuter, don't you think so?"

"Oh, most assuredly," Johnny said.

He wondered if this matter was developing fresh angles. Two young men—both probable money chasers—were after this same girl. Neither of them would give her a second look under other conditions. Old man Cartwright might have guessed what was up. One of them might have killed him for it. Murder had been committed for less.

But no—Johnny contradicted his own thoughts. He'd seen McClain do it. He'd never change his opinions about that. He stopped thinking about anything else. McClain was the man—or McClain had an amazing double.

## V

Ella Cartwright left Johnny in the reception hall and went off to locate the pictures she wanted to give him. Johnny lost no time. He went upstairs, too, prowled several rooms and came to the bedroom of the murdered master of the house.

He opened drawers, ran his hands through the clothes they contained and, beneath a pile of shirts, he found a tin can. It was a tall, rather narrow can with a slot in the top and labelled with a white wrapper on which was printed in large, black letters, CHINA RELIEF. It was one of those tin cans solicitors for charities use in collecting coins on the streets.

He knew of Cartwright's vast interests in philanthropic organizations, but they were all on a large scale—nothing as petty as picking up a few coins from passersby. On a hunch, he tucked the tin can into his pocket. There was nothing else of interest in the room. He went further down the hall, located a narrow stairway to the top floor and proceeded up the steps. The third floor was a large storeroom. It was gloomy as well.

Johnny inspected part of these premises and decided there was nothing there for him. He headed for the stairway again and then paused. He heard a dismal groan from far back. Instantly, he rushed toward the source of the sound.

He located a small room, hardly more than a closet and equipped with a very stout door. It was ajar.

He opened it quickly. Someone was curled in a ball in a further corner. Johnny dropped to his knees beside the figure, turned it over and saw that it was Marcel Leblanc. He'd been struck over the head. A little blood oozed out of a scalp wound.

Then, suddenly, everything went black. Johnny twisted himself around. The heavy door had been slammed shut. He sprang toward it and recalled the door was equipped with a heavy lever-like handle which locked it. He hit the door hard and went hurtling back. He stumbled over Leblanc, and the secretary let out a louder moan.

"Listen, Leblanc," Johnny said tensely, "we're in trouble. This is Johnny Wells. Somebody hit you on the head, threw you in this clothes closet or whatever it is, and I heard you groaning. I came in and now both of us are locked here. Wake up, Leblanc."

"I—I'm all right," Leblanc said weakly. "I was in the attic. Looking for personal stuff of Mr. Cartwright. Somebody hit me. I—did you say we're in a closet?"

"Looks like one to me," Johnny said. "With enough time, perhaps, we can break the door down or make noise enough to attract attention. Here, I'll help you stand—"

"Johnny," Leblanc said breathlessly, "this is no ordinary clothes closet. It's used to put furs and woolens into. Then some sort of a chemical is melted by electricity and the fumes blown into this closet. The whole apparatus is on the outside. The stuff is deadly. If whoever put us in here starts it going . . ."

Johnny attacked the door again. It wouldn't even rattle. He heard Leblanc cough and went back to him. Bending

to help the man arise, he got a whiff of a sharp odor that seemed to penetrate clear to his toe tips. He coughed too. The poisonous chemical had been turned on!

"It takes ten minutes before the stuff generates heavily," Leblanc explained. "Then it just pours in here. If we don't get out, we'll die."

"Well I don't feel like a moth," Johnny said, "but my state of mind resembles a worm. People regard me as such, but doggone if I want to die like one. Let's try the door again."

Leblanc had recovered sufficiently to add his weight to the attack against the panels, but even their combined efforts did no good. Johnny lit a match. It flared up and went out, smothered by the gas that was rapidly filling the small room. In the momentary flash of light he saw exactly how serious their predicament was. This room had been strongly built so there would be no air holes, no leaks. Even provided with a sharp axe, he doubted he'd be able to smash down a wall before the gas took full effect.

"Start banging on the floor," Johnny said briskly. "No matter what—we won't give up while there's a breath left in us. Got any idea who did this, Leblanc?"

"Only one man could have done it," the secretary gasped. They both began jumping up and down, clattering their feet on the floor and alternately kicking the walls. "It was that rat Kirk. He's after Ella and her money. All right, so am I. He knows it and figured by killing me the way would be clear for him. When you came along, he got you in here, too. I'll even go so far as to bet he killed the old man."

Johnny didn't answer. He was too busy making a racket. The gas was slowly rising. When it reached their heads, they'd be smothered by the poisonous fumes or choked to death as the gas displaced whatever air was in the closet.

Five minutes later, Leblanc collapsed. Johnny took a quick breath, bent and hauled him up. He held him erect, using almost all his waning strength to do it and kept on banging his feet.

The acrid stuff was creeping into his nostrils now. He guessed he had about two or three minutes left before he'd be overpowered too, when both he and Leblanc would sink to the floor and die. His knees were shaking, his lungs seemed crammed full of cement. Even the darkness began to spin and then—a gust of fresh air swept in. Someone, coughing badly, invaded the little room and led him out. His eyes were filled with tears. He wiped them away, sucked in more air and felt better.

Leblanc was coming out of it, too, under the ministrations of Stewart Frederick, the middle aged ex-business partner of Cartwright. Frederick looked up at Johnny.

"Close call, eh? I was on the second floor and heard you kicking. Took me quite awhile to discover where the sound was coming from. What in the world happened?"

"We were locked in there," Johnny said, "by somebody with very dishonorable intentions. Thanks, Mr. Frederick. You're a real friend."

They all went downstairs after shutting off the apparatus. Leblanc went to get himself a drink. Frederick and Johnny remained on the second floor in one of the guest rooms while Johnny stood by an open window engaged in ridding his lungs of the chemical. Frederick eyed him narrowly for a moment.

"Wells," he said, "I suppose you wonder what I was doing in here? I'll be frank. I was searching for a copy of Cartwright's will. I'm not wealthy any more. Lost everything I had, and Cartwright doled out a little money to me. He

promised I'd be taken care of in his will. I wanted to find it and see what Cartwright meant by 'being taken care of.'"

Jerry turned around. "Brother," he said, "you didn't lock me and Leblanc in that closet or you'd never have released us. Therefore, I don't think you're the killer and if you want to hunt Cartwright's will, go to it even though your admission just now, certainly makes you suspect—if Cartwright did leave you a substantial sum."

Frederick smiled wryly. "You're in hot water yourself, Wells. Murray McClain is pretty warm under the collar. What on earth made you decide he was the killer? Good heavens, son, he's wealthy, and he was a close friend and associate of Cartwright."

"Then who did it?" Johnny asked.

"If anyone we know was responsible, you can bet it was Pat Kirk," Frederick said. "Cartwright ordered him out of the house last week and accused him of being a fortune hunter and a confidence man. When Cartwright made an accusation like that, bet on it, he had facts to back him up."

Johnny nodded slowly. "Kirk is a good prospect, but I still maintain McClain is the man. I saw him do it. My own eyes. . . ."

"It was Kirk," Frederick said moodily. "He was in the house a few minutes ago, and even Ella didn't know it. He had the best opportunity to lock you in there."

Downstairs, Ella was calling Johnny's name. He winked at Frederick, went down and found Ella a little put out by his disappearance. In one hand she held a silver-framed picture of Pat Kirk.

He took it gingerly, holding it as lightly as possible.

"Nice picture," he said. "I'll run it if you like. Not until after your grandfather's funeral, however. Ella, I'm very

grateful. Pat gave you this with his own hands, I'll warrant."

"Oh, yes," she said. "I kept it hidden. Nobody ever touched it except Pat and me."

He fondly wrapped the silver-framed, glass-covered picture in his handkerchief. "You don't know how grateful I am." He smiled warmly. "I'll come back later, and we'll talk about the story, eh? It's got to be good. After all—an heiress—a girl with so much money—deserves the very best in publicity."

"I'll see my hairdresser tomorrow." Ella flicked a strand of coarse, oily hair out of her eyes. "He'll make me look pretty. Money can do anything, and I've got so much now. I was going to have it done for the funeral, anyway."

Johnny excused himself and turned to leave. At the door he asked if Kirk had been around recently and received a negative answer. He asked about McClain. Ella, it seemed, had not seen him either.

Johnny started back to his office, remembered that he was probably wanted there for very unpleasant business and shied away. He went, instead, to his own apartment across the street from Police Headquarters. He even entered like a crook for fear that Captain Peabody might spot him.

Once there he phoned Sergeant Andy Orr.

"Listen, Johnny," Orr growled. "I shouldn't even talk to you on the telephone. They're routing a nice beat for me someplace so far out in the sticks I'll be able to communicate with my wife only by radio. This is a heck of a mess."

"Sarge, you spoke a mouthful," Johnny said. "But it's up to us to prove I'm right. Nothing else will save our necks. Come on over to my place, will you? And don't tell any-

body. McClain has the sheriff hunting me with papers I wouldn't enjoy reading."

"I already read 'em," Orr groaned. "They found me. Okay, I'll be right over."

He got there in three or four minutes. Jerry showed Sergeant Orr the portrait of Pat Kirk.

"We have to work on the theory that I might have been wrong, Sarge, so I'm digging up suspects. If we bring in the killer, and even if he doesn't prove to be McClain, we're still in a position to do a little gloating. I think the original of that picture, is a crook. I've looked over the frame and glass. It's full of fingerprints. Some are Ella Cartwright's, but others are too big and must be Kirk's. See if you can bring them out, check them and let me know if he has a record."

"Okay." Orr took the picture. "But see here, Johnny. Even if I find Kirk has a record six miles long, we make no pinch until we have the goods on him. If I'm ever sued again. . . ."

"Get going, Sarge," Johnny urged. "We've no time to lose. Call me as soon as you know anything. Oh, yes—take a look at this tin can. It's one of those things charity workers shove under your nose on the street. I haven't seen anybody doing that lately. How come?"

"The stuff is crooked," Orr grunted. "The collector gets twenty percent, the big shot behind him seventy percent and the charity ten percent. We pulled in every person who tried to get money that way."

Johnny nodded. There was a new gleam in his eyes. After Orr left, he phoned Val. He asked her to procure the negatives of the pictures he'd taken of the murder—all three of them, even if she had to burglarize the place. Val promised to help, but she was a little doubtful about his motives.

"I hope you know what you're doing. And, Johnny, don't try to contact me except by phone. McClain's bloodhounds are watching me in case I meet you. They've got papers. I'll send the negatives over by messenger, if I can get them."

Johnny promised he'd stay away and then sat down to wait. He rotated the tin can between his fingers slowly. Then, suddenly, he jumped up. He took his camera, hurried downstairs and got his car. Half an hour later he stopped along a street in Chinatown and got out. He walked along the narrow streets until he saw a man proffering one of those tin cans at every Chinese who went by. Coins clattered into it every time the container was extended. Johnny watched the man for a few moments. He was white, not Chinese. He thought over the problem mentally for a few moments.

It seemed to him that if this were on the level, Chinese people should be doing the soliciting. After all, they were the most directly affected and could get more money than a white man. But if it were crooked, no assembly of thieves, no matter how powerful or clever, could get a Chinese to take part. These soft-footed, yellow-skinned men were the epitome of honesty.

Next, Johnny drove to the Chamber of Commerce offices, where his recently acquired reputation hadn't yet spread its aroma. He was known there and was helped willingly.

"You bet those charities are rackets," one of the junior secretaries told him. "We did some research on the subject. One fairly large city provided a take of three hundred thousand dollars in two years. Of that figure something like five thousand was used for the purposes for which the money was collected. Wells, those rackets are big business."

"And dirty business." Johnny made notes on more figures, thanked the man and hurried out. Things were shaping up,

but in all directions save the one which it was necessary for him to travel. He needed a route straight to Murray McClain if he wanted to remove that stigma from his name of mistaking a murderer.

He heard his telephone ringing when he returned to the apartment. Sergeant Orr reported that Pat Kirk had an alias—Pasquale Soretti—and that he was on record as a confidence man with a special knack for preying upon lonely women. He'd spent three years in Sing-Sing on one count where it was suspected he had had murder designs upon one of his victims.

Val's messenger arrived shortly afterward with a small envelope. In it were the three negatives of the pictures and a note from the girl reporter.

I burglarized the dark room at your syndicate because I'm crazy enough to help you on anything, Johnny. That youngster in charge of the darkroom was out, so I didn't have a very difficult time. Try to replace the negatives if you can, or send them to me, and I'll try. How do you like being hunted by deputy sheriffs with legal papers, you big ox?

He grinned, went over to a window and held the negatives up to the light one by one. He studied them most intently and became especially interested in the one his camera had shot just as the murderer fired at him—the frame in which only the upper walls of the buildings were evident.

He tried to think back, to remember if he had tilted the camera upwards, but he couldn't. He'd been so exhausted at the moment that it was highly possible he'd done just that. Then he squinted closer at this frame, held it up for comparison with the others and uttered a grunt so loud it even startled himself.

## VI

That night Johnny ate a solitary dinner and barely tasted his food. His mind dwelt too strongly upon the mystery of who killed Walter Cartwright. He'd skipped McClain's lawyers and sheriffs successfully so far, but he knew it would be impossible to keep ahead of them forever. He considered others involved in the case besides McClain. In fact, he all but thrust McClain out of his mind.

Pat Kirk seemed a very logical suspect. A man with a record, Kirk was trying to marry Ella Cartwright for her money. A man who'd been kicked out of the house by Cartwright, he had motive and character for such a murder as had been committed. Also, he'd been in the house when Johnny and Leblanc were locked in the gas treatment closet.

Leblanc was a self-confessed aspirant for the hand and the money of Ella, but he seemed to be out of the picture because he'd endured the same fate with Johnny of being locked in that deadly closet.

Stewart Frederick likewise seemed too honest. He admitted being in need of money, living on Cartwright's charity and eager to discover if he'd been remembered in the old man's will. Although Frederick had probably saved Johnny's life, Johnny held no overly sympathetic ideas about his motives. It wouldn't be the first time a murderer had trapped a victim and then released him to build up an impression of innocence.

But Murray McClain was the man the photographer wanted to convict. Trapping someone else for the crime would be beneficial, of course, but he couldn't see it. Leblanc, Kirk or Frederick did not resemble McClain in the

least except, possibly, in build. Johnny's eyes had seen the murderer, and he had looked like McClain.

After eating, he walked south to a dimly lighted street where bookstores stretched for two full blocks. Rows of them, all dealing in second-hand volumes and first editions. He knew Alec Hodgson who ran one of these stores and Hodgson was genuinely happy to see him.

Hodgson was white-bearded, watery-eyed and as spry as a cavorting colt. His store was musty, but did a good business.

"Alec," said Johnny, "it's good to see you, but this isn't a social call. I need help and badly. Furthermore, helping me involves some risk."

"Just tell me," Hodgson said. "I'll never forget how you and your camera aided me once. I would have paid a lot of money for a fake edition."

"I want," Johnny said, "a first edition worth about twenty-five thousand dollars. You're to put it on a shelf with other cheaper first editions. The asking price will be six thousand. While you recognize the book as being valuable, you don't know just how great its value is. Get the idea?"

Hodgson did. "I've got the book—an autographed, handwritten edition of 'Through the Looking Glass.' I've had offers up to thirty thousand. You're sure it's safe?"

"I'm not sure at all," Johnny said. "If it doesn't work out right, I won't be in a position to pay you the cost of the book for about fifty years. But I'll do everything possible to insure the return of the volume."

"All right. Even if it is swiped, I'm ahead of the game on account of your help before. That deal involved a hundred thousand dollars, remember?"

"I never forget those things, pal. They come in handy when you want a favor. Now the person who'll buy this

book will be a skinny youngster wearing glasses. He'll go directly to it and so identify himself. One more thing—he pays cash."

Hodgson chuckled. "Leave that to me. When will this prospective buyer show up?"

"Tonight, I hope. Stay open until midnight, will you? I hate to ask all this, Alec, but my neck is being burned by a rope some chap has around it. He'll tighten that noose if I don't come through. You'll enable me to do so."

Johnny left the bookstore, got into his car and drove to the newspaper syndicate offices. If he ran into Jensen, there were going to be fireworks. He might even be banned from the place, but getting into the dark room was absolutely essential.

He sidled up to the telephone operator. She signaled with her eyes toward two seedy looking men sitting on one of the benches in the waiting room.

"Process servers, and they have a present for you," she told him. In a loud voice, she greeted him. "Oh, hello there, Mr. Strubenheimer. Long time since you've been around." She dropped her voice again. "Slip me the camera, Johnny. It's a dead giveaway, but those fools haven't tumbled yet. Say, Jensen has worn down his desk to a footstool from pounding it and yelling his head off for you. Want to see him?"

"No!" Johnny breathed. "I want to sneak into the dark room. When I get out of this, it means candy, perfume and some front row tickets to six of the best shows on Broadway for you and the boy friend."

"What if Mr. Jensen sees you?" the girl asked.

"Tell him I'll replace the front door that I'll smash going through without opening it. See you later."

Johnny held his head high, glared importantly at the proc-

ess servers and tried to increase his height. He must have been successful, because both men resumed reading their newspapers.

Stepping into the main office, he raised a hand and put a finger to his lips. He got a score of assorted nods. He reached the dark room without drawing a breath. He opened the door and gasped in relief. Young Tommy Skinner was at work over his trays. He looked up and gave a nervous start.

"Gosh, Mr. Wells, I didn't think you'd have nerve enough to come here."

"Tommy," said Johnny, "I want a shot of Cartwright immediately. Can you get it?"

"Right away." Tommy wiped his hands on a chemical stained towel. "I won't say anything about your being here, either."

As soon as Skinner disappeared, Johnny took the negatives from his pocket and replaced them in their proper spot in the files. He was examining some of Skinner's work when the young technician reappeared.

"Thanks." Johnny took the proffered picture of Cartwright. "By the way, maybe I can do you a favor, too. I happened to go into a book store on Varick Street today. It's owned by a man named Alec Hodgson."

"I've been there often," Skinner nodded.

"Good. I know a little about first editions, too. Can you raise any dough?"

"Well, it was payday today," Tommy said eagerly.

"Chickenfeed," Johnny grunted. "Hodgson has a handwritten, autographed copy of 'Through the Looking Glass.' It's worth a small fortune, and he isn't wise. He realizes it isn't a ten-cent object, but the full value has escaped him."

Tommy Skinner's eyes grew round. "Boy, what I'd do to get that book! How much does he want?"

"He's got it parked alongside of some others, and the asking price seems to be six thousand dollars. If you could raise that figure, you'd make a neat profit. I'd buy the manuscript myself, but me and six thousand dollars are complete strangers and it looks like we'll never meet after what happened in connection with McClain."

"That was tough," Tommy agreed. "Imagine, six thousand dollars for that book. I could sell it for thirty thousand tomorrow. Maybe I can get the money. If I can, you'll be rewarded, Johnny. Honest, I'll make it up to you."

"Make it up to me for what?" Johnny asked quickly.

Tommy started fishing in the trays again. "I meant—well, you might have bought the book yourself or never told me about it. I owe you for that, don't I?"

"Forget it, kid." Johnny whacked him on the shoulder.

## VII

Outside, after running the gauntlet of the reporters and the two process servers still in the waiting room, Johnny drove his car across the street. He had retrieved his camera and equipment from the telephone girl. He slumped down behind the wheel and tried to make himself invisible.

Half an hour went by, and then Tommy Skinner emerged on the run. Skinner started maneuvering through the fairly crowded streets and seemed to be headed toward the subway station. Johnny got out of his car, cursing the luck that forced him into the open. He followed Skinner at a respectable distance. It began to look as if the trap were closing slowly but surely.

Skinner went into a drugstore and entered a phone booth. Johnny would have given six months' pay to know what number the technician dialed. Soon he emerged, a gleeful expression on his face. This time he disappeared into the subway entrance.

Johnny followed, on his toes against being spotted. He hadn't only Skinner to watch, but deputy sheriffs and process servers as well—to say nothing of detectives whom Captain Peabody had probably given orders concerning one Johnny Wells.

Johnny crowded into the same car with Skinner, but stayed on the rear platform and concealed himself behind a burly man. From here on he could watch his quarry. Far uptown, Skinner dashed out of the car and Johnny almost lost him. On the street, he picked up the trail again. Skinner was half running, half walking, and paying no attention to anyone around him.

Finally he stopped to check the number of a big apartment building and went inside. Johnny followed cautiously. As he stepped into the lobby, an elevator door slammed shut and the lift rose. Its indicator showed it went directly to the fourteenth floor. Johnny didn't succumb to the temptation of going up after it. Instead he returned to the foyer and studied the names of tenants, especially those living on the fourteenth floor.

He should have given a cry of elation at what he saw, but instead his shoulders sagged. The man implicated in this mystery who lived here was Stewart Frederick, self-confessed near pauper and aspirant to some of Cartwright's cash—a logical contender for the doubtful honor of being the murderer of the old man.

It should have been Murray McClain to make things come

out perfectly, but Johnny had now decided he must have made a mistake in identification. He had been very tired the night of the killing. It had been extremely dark except for those intense flashes of light from his camera gun. All told, his eyes could have played tricks on him.

Anyway, he had to see it through, no matter who the murderer turned out to be and hope that McClain would be satisfied so long as the real killer was caught. Jensen, the editor, would storm and rant, but he would have Johnny write the story and do the picture work. He'd print an apology to McClain and try to close the mess for good.

Johnny opened the leather flap of his camera case, set the shutter and lens for fast work and started walking toward the elevators. If it was possible, a picture of Skinner and Frederick might clinch the evidence.

"Hey—you!" a gruff voice called out.

Johnny turned. Two men were coming toward him—burly, officious looking men—and they meant business. One grabbed his arm.

"Crew cut, big baby, camera. Yep—you're Johnny Wells."

"So what?"

"So we're a couple of deputy sheriffs, and we got a body warrant for you."

"Okay," Johnny said. "Hand it over and breeze along. I'm busy."

"Listen, pal," the big man grunted. "I said body writ. That means we don't just hand you a paper. We pinch the body, get it? And I'll turn the pinch into a punch unless you come along quietly. Put the cuffs on him, Matty."

The other man clumsily draped handcuffs over Johnny's wrists and clicked them shut so hard that Johnny winced.

"What is this?" he demanded. "You don't arrest people who are being sued."

"What do you think we're doing? Playing games?" the burly one growled. "When a guy without a dime blasts somebody's reputation to pieces, the law says he can be locked up, and that's what is going to happen to you. Now shall we do this quietly, or do you want a push right on the kisser?"

"Quietly," Johnny groaned. "I know when I'm licked, but if you stumblebums had stayed away—say, how'd you know I was here anyway?"

"We tailed you, pal. Saw you riding the subway and figured you was the guy we'd been hunting. Okay, let's go."

Johnny entered a sedan, and one of the pair accompanied him. The other manned the wheel and headed the car further uptown.

"Can't you take these bracelets off?" he begged. "They're too tight. At least loosen them."

"Keep your shirt on," the sheriff said. "We're not going very far."

Johnny glanced out of the window. The car was riding along a speedway. He frowned. There were no courts with local jurisdiction as far away from the city as this. He gave his companion a side glance and came to the rapid conclusion that he was playing squarely into their hands. They'd been posted outside Frederick's apartment house with orders to stop anybody who looked like Johnny Wells and kidnap him if he admitted his identity.

He was now being taken for a ride. He pondered his chances of leaping from the car with his hands cuffed. It was travelling too fast. He considered a bold attack on the man beside him, but noticed that individual kept one hand

resting against the lapel of his coat. There was a spring-holstered gun a couple of inches away from his fingertips.

Then he saw an outlying traffic stand with a patrolman patiently waiting for a car to come along. Traffic was at a minimum. Johnny got set. If only the cop would stop the car to let something else go by. Then it happened—two big vans lumbered toward the intersection, and the officer held up his hand. The driver of Johnny's car immediately slowed down.

Johnny edged forward on the seat. As soon as the car stopped completely, he intended to step out and walk away. These two were not likely to start shooting when there was a policeman close enough to do some shooting himself.

A gun jabbed his ribs. The man beside him laughed. "Pal, I got a hunch you want to get out and walk, but we'd rather have you riding with us. Sit back. Make one move as we go by the cop, and I'll plant a slug through him and another through you."

"Shoot the policeman?" Johnny pretended awe. "What kind of deputy sheriffs are you?"

"Very special," the man grunted. "Now shut up."

He relaxed. His hopes had risen high and been plunged back to earth so fast he was still a trifle dizzy. He was helpless and knew it. He began laying plans, but none of his ideas went very far.

The car had left the city limits and was rolling down an old state highway now not even used by trucks. There wasn't a chance of escape. Johnny's guard kept a sharp eye out. Finally the car turned off the highway onto a lane and came to a stop around a sharp bend. Heavy foliage and big trees isolated the spot. There wasn't a sign of life anywhere, and only a few forest noises reached his ears. As the car made the turn, Johnny realized this was the end of the trail

for him. There'd be nothing fancy—just a quick push out of the car, the bark of a couple of guns.

Desperate circumstances called for desperate measures. He was fumbling with the back of his camera case. The camera fell out, landed in his lap and he put both hands over it. He coughed as he opened the back of the camera because there was a distinct mechanical click. He inserted a finger beneath the strip of film and began pulling it off the rollers.

As the film strip came loose, he wadded it down between his knees. The man beside him noticed none of this. Johnny's flash bulb kit was suspended from one shoulder. This slid off and landed on the seat alongside him.

"Can I hoist that case up again?" he asked. "I don't want to make any moves so you pull that trigger."

"Hoist it up, what do I care?" the crook snapped.

Johnny muttered his thanks, lifted the case and got tangled up in the strap. The case opened and a flash bulb rolled out and landed on the floor of the car.

"Leave it there. Where you're going a camera won't be much good anyhow. We're pals of a certain guy who wants you taught that it's very unhealthy to make crazy statements like accusations of murder. Get it?"

"What happens to me?" Johnny asked uneasily.

"We bat your ears off. Get out of the car."

Johnny muttered something and began to climb out. Suddenly he went limp and landed on the floor. The man kicked him, not very hard, because he didn't have room enough to draw back his foot.

"Can you imagine that?" he grunted. "The guy passed out, and he's supposed to be tough. Matty, get out and help me drag him. He's cold."

"Maybe he is, and maybe he ain't." The driver was in-

clined toward caution. "We were told this mug is tricky. Watch him now."

And Johnny Wells bore watching. He lay on the floor, huddled over his opened camera. His cuffed hands were busily engaged. As he came down, he hit the flash bulb on the floor with one circlet of steel and broke it. He screwed the broken bulb into its socket and affixed the flash gun to the camera. It was synchronized to go off when he touched the shutter.

The flash bulb was full of exceedingly thin magnesium, still clinging to the element which would set it off. He thrust the magnesium and the element beneath the crumpled ball of film so he could pick up the whole business quickly.

He began to groan as he felt the car creak when the driver got out. He sat up, apparently dazed, clung to the camera over which the film was draped.

The man on the seat watched him. He was grinning broadly. Johnny grasped the edge of the seat and started to haul himself up. Suddenly he dropped to both knees, raised the camera into the crook's face and pressed the shutter release.

Two small batteries went to work. Their charge ignited the magnesium. It went off with a burst of white hot light. Johnny thrust the blazing mass upwards. The highly inflammable film caught fire, and the whole thing was only an inch or two from the crook's nose.

He let out a scream as flame leaped around his head. Johnny felt the fire too, curling down over his wrists. He dropped the camera, twisted himself slightly and grabbed the crook's gun hand. He gave it a savage twist, and bone cracked. The gun dropped, and Johnny scooped it up, using

both hands by sheer necessity, for the links between the cuffs were very short.

The driver yanked the door open and stuck a gun inside. The one on the seat was slapping his face and hair to put out the fire and screaming madly. Johnny never hesitated. The gun he held spoke first. The driver doubled up with a yell. He gripped the pit of his stomach, reeled away and dropped. He lay there moaning.

Johnny opened the door beside him, slid out and kept the gun trained on the other crook, who was still slapping his face and trying to figure out what happened. When he did, there was a gun muzzle poked at him. He raised his hands and began to whine. Johnny ordered him to lie down on the floor of the car. When he obeyed, Johnny grasped the gun by its barrel, raised it high and smashed the butt against his head. That put an end to the whining.

Then he ran around to where the driver lay. He was badly hurt. Johnny helped him up and stowed him in the back seat. He took time to frisk both men, made sure they were no longer armed and then he got behind the wheel. He rolled that car at top speed down the highway after he'd turned into it. There was an outlying hospital not far away.

## VIII

Johnny delivered his prisoners to the hospital, phoned Sergeant Orr and had him arrange for a police guard to be furnished at once. While he waited for this guard to arrive, he did his best to explain to doctors and nurses why there were handcuffs on his wrists. Press cards and the fact that some of the hospital staff knew him, simplified matters. A

search of the prisoners' clothes revealed no handcuff key. Johnny sighed in despair.

He asked for and was provided with a private room. There he picked up the telephone and called Alec Hodgson's book store.

"He came all right," Hodgson reported. "Pretended he didn't know the real worth of the book and shelled out six thousand dollars in big bills. I let him have the book. Please, Johnny, get it back intact. Do your very best."

"Thanks, Alec," Johnny said. "I'll make sure it's unharmed. See you later."

The police guard arrived, and Johnny didn't want to explain all over again about the handcuffs nor take chances on the fact that Captain Peabody may have ordered his arrest. He sneaked out of the hospital and used the crooks' car again.

He drove back to the syndicate offices. He found a thin blanket in the back of the car, folded it over his cuffed wrists and ran through the lobby to the elevator. On his floor he burst into the reception room, rushed through it and across the spacious floor of the main office, heedless of the calls from his fellow workers. He entered the dark room, called Tommy Skinner's name and received no response. He snapped on the light. The room was empty. Someone tapped him on the shoulder and he spun around to face Jensen.

"So," Jensen grunted sarcastically, "the pigeon finally comes home to roost. What's the matter, did sheriffs get you, you crop-headed baboon?"

"Please, Jensen," Johnny implored, "never mind the compliments. I've got this business solved. Where is Tommy Skinner?"

"He blew out of here tonight and didn't come back. What's he got to do with it?"

"Give me his home address. Tommy is either dead or going to die very soon—Unless I reach him first."

Something in Johnny's voice must have been convincing, for Jensen went off at a run, something he hadn't done in years. He yelled the address across the room from where he was consulting files. With the blanket held close to him, Johnny rushed from the office and went back to the street and his commandeered car.

He reached Tommy Skinner's address in twenty minutes. It was far downtown and turned out to be a boarding house. He tried the door, found it locked and rang the bell. A woman answered.

"I'm a friend of Tommy Skinner," Johnny explained. "I've got to see him right away. This—this blanket belongs to him, and maybe he thinks it's stolen."

"You're awful excited over an old blanket." The woman moved her head in the direction of the stairway. "Room three C."

Johnny rushed up the steps, reached the room and turned the knob. The door was open. Tommy Skinner was stretched on the floor. There was a knife buried hilt deep in his back. The valuable first edition lay just beyond his outstretched fingertips.

Johnny picked up the book, backed out of the room and closed the door. He left the house as quietly as possible and drove back to the syndicate office. Jensen was waiting and grabbed his arm. The blanket dropped away and revealed his cuffed wrists.

Jensen gasped. "Well I'll be blowed. Did they pick you up already? Or are you just practising for when the sheriffs

come? Johnny, in the name of all that's decent in this profession, what's the matter?"

"Murder," Johnny grunted, "and more murder! Come into the darkroom with me. I've got plenty to say."

"So," Jensen opined somewhat savagely, "have I. Brother, what I'm going to tell you will make that cropped hair curl. I'm sore, the syndicate is sore, the police are sore, the process servers say you're a ghost. But you ought to hear Murray McClain rave. He says he's going to put you in jail, and maybe he can."

Johnny entered the dark room, turned on the lights and closed the door. He began pacing up and down, eyes dark, face brooding. He didn't even feel the pain induced by the handcuffs nor the burns on his wrists. He'd been too late to save Tommy Skinner, thanks to the unexpected appearance of those two gunmen. It hurt to think he had helped to bring about Skinner's murder. The lad hadn't been all bad, just a little weak.

Johnny suddenly stopped walking. There was a very crude poster of sorts pinned to the wall above Skinner's work bench. On it, was a poem.

In Flanders Field the poppies grow  
Between the crosses row on row . . .

That was all. The poem was unfinished, and a few childish poppies had been drawn with red ink to decorate the poem.

"That"—Johnny pointed his manacled hands toward the wall—"wasn't there the last time I came in here and talked to Tommy."

"Have you gone crazy?" Jensen frowned. "What's that fool thing got to do with all this? We're being sued. For a

quarter of a million dollars on account of a mistake you made, and you point to part of a poem and some flowers and talk nonsense."

"Murder isn't nonsense, and that poem means something. I'll explain later—as soon as I get the people connected with this matter up here. Stick around, Mr. Jensen, and hear what happened to Tommy Skinner."

Johnny picked up the telephone and called Police Headquarters. He asked for Captain Peabody and got him quickly. Peabody talked for three full minutes in complimentary terms anent one Johnny Wells.

"All finished?" Johnny asked when the police captain had to stop for lack of breath. "Then I'll tell you why I called. Send a squad to one hundred ten Vine Street, room three C, in the boarding house at that address, and you'll find a young man named Tommy Skinner lying on the floor. There's a knife in his back."

"What?" Peabody cried. "Are you there now? Don't touch anything, you hear?"

"I've been and gone," Johnny said. "Listen, will you? After you send the squad, round up everybody connected with this mess. I want Ella Cartwright here and her two boy friends, Pat Kirk and Marcel Leblanc. Get Stewart Frederick over to the syndicate office, too, and bring Murray McClain if you have to use handcuffs and a persuader."

"Johnny," Peabody exclaimed, "if you're bungling this any further. . . ."

"The bungling," Johnny retorted with some heat, "is being done by a cop named Peabody. Will you do as I say? And tell Sergeant Orr to come along, too. If you don't, there's going to be an officer with an awful crimson face when he reads all about how two murders were solved under

his nose and the whole matter exposed in newspapers before he even knew the crimes had been solved."

"I'll be over," Peabody grunted. "But, so help me, if this isn't the McCoy, you'll come back to headquarters with me for an indefinite stay. I'll cook up a charge to hold you if necessary."

## IX

Murray McClain was the last to arrive. He was accompanied by a process server who immediately thrust a paper into Johnny's hand. Johnny dropped it on the workbench of the darkroom, closed the door and locked it.

"I want it distinctly understood that I came here merely out of curiosity," McClain said. "I want to see how Wells will further bungle things. I have been fully cleared of suspicion of the murder of Walter Cartwright, which was a foolish idea in the first place."

Val had arrived and stood beside Johnny. Two fingers of both hands were crossed very hard, but after a careful look at the photographer's face, she uncrossed them. She knew confidence when she saw it.

"So far," Johnny said, "no motive has been developed for the murder of Walter Cartwright. Cartwright, as you know, was very much interested in charity work. But we all can be quite certain that if Cartwright discovered any other charity organization bent upon making a profit, he would be the first to expose it. My theory is that Cartwright suspected something of the sort and went to that dismal alley the night he was murdered because he expected to meet someone there with information."

"*Theory!*" Stewart Frederick exploded. "Look here,

Wells, you've got to have a lot more than theory. This is murder."

"Why Cartwright went to the alley is the only theory I'll offer," Johnny said quickly. "I can prove that someone controls several charitable organizations specializing in picking up small change from pedestrians. You are all familiar with these solicitors who stick a tin can under your nose and rattle the coins in it. Our murderer operated in that manner. His men patrolled the streets, picking up cash. It all went into one till. The aggregate take, in various cities all over the country, was astounding. Consult the Chamber of Commerce of the Better Business Bureau for more details."

"Of this take, about ten percent was given to charity. The rest went for operating expenses. Most of these were incurred in the soft living of the man who headed the outfit. Now Cartwright got wind of this, performed an investigation on his own and got the facts. He even had one of those tin cans in his house. Evidence which the murderer didn't want anyone to find."

Marcel Leblanc was looking over the assembled group. "I get it," he said. "The murderer came to Cartwright's house looking for the tin can. He must have been searching the attic for it when I came up. Then he heard you, Johnny, and decided to trap both of us. He knocked me on the head, stowed me in the closet and when you entered, he slammed the door and turned on that deadly gas."

"Exactly," Johnny said. "Therefore, we can assume the killer knew the layout of the house—which points to no one in particular because everyone connected with the mystery had free run of the house. Ella, for your benefit, your fiance is a crook. His name isn't even Pat Kirk, and he has a po-

lice record. His only assets are a handsome face and polished manners. Take my advice and kick him out."

Kirk stepped forward. "Are you insinuating I had something to do with the death of Mr. Cartwright. Why, I'll start a civil action so big it will dwarf Mr. McClain's."

"Calm down," Johnny snapped. "Nobody is accusing you. Even though you had a swell motive for the crime. Cartwright was either wise to you or he would have been very soon. However, you don't possess even the cowardly nerve of a killer."

Captain Peabody received a phone call at that moment. He listened intently and then hung up.

"The boys I sent to Skinner's home," he explained. "He's dead all right. What about that, Wells?"

"I witnessed the murder of Walter Cartwright. I swore the murderer was Murray McClain, and I hoped I had a picture of him which would have been indisputable evidence. It seemed, however, that, as I took the picture of him, I tried to dodge a bullet at the same time, and my lens was accidentally pointed upwards. I have the negatives of the three pictures I took. Peabody, examine them."

Captain Peabody picked up the three small frames and held them to the light. He cocked an eye in Johnny's direction, silently asking what it was all about.

"In the first two frames, showing the murder taking place," Johnny explained, "you will notice there are no shadows of any kind on the building walls. It was very dark in that courtyard. Now examine the third shot—the one showing the building walls higher up. There are some shadows and, believe me, they must have been strong, because a flashbulb will usually wipe them out."

"Okay," Peabody said, "I notice them. What do they mean?"

"That while I took all three of my pictures within the space of two or three minutes, the negative you just examined for shadows, was taken later on. Taken by someone who wasn't a particularly good photographer. He went to the scene of the crime armed with a camera similar to mine. He took his shots, probably posing as a reporter. But the courtyard was full of police cars with strong lights, and they threw shadows. Shadows which were not present when I took my pics so—we know that third negative wasn't snapped by me."

Sergeant Orr let out a grunt and moved closer to Murray McClain. "I get it," he said. "Somebody took this picture and passed it off as one you took. That means you did get a picture of the murderer."

"It does," Johnny agreed emphatically. "Tommy Skinner developed my pictures that night. He recognized the killer, and realized he'd found a chance to make a lot of money by blackmail. He procured a camera like mine—there are several around the office—took this picture and passed it off as mine. Then he contacted the murderer and started his little blackmail racket. It had to be Skinner, because nobody else had an opportunity to molest the pictures."

"And Skinner has been murdered," Peabody muttered with a growing respect for Johnny in his voice. "That ties in."

"Sure it does," Johnny said. "I feel sorry for Skinner though. I framed him into visiting the murderer to get more money. I trailed Skinner to the apartment where you live, Mr. Frederick. There I was seized by two crooks who were

part of the murderer's mob specializing in the charity racket."

"My apartment house?" Frederick gasped. "But I tell you I'm not connected with this terrible business."

"I know it," Johnny said. "Murray McClain is the murderer. I really saw him that night and got his picture."

McClain laughed harshly. "To prove that, Wells, you'll have to produce the picture you allege that Tommy Skinner withheld. You'll have to explain how I could be murdering Cartwright and, at the very same moment, be greeting exchanged prisoners of war just landing at Pier Ninety."

"The last part," Johnny said, "is the easiest. Skinner merely provided the pictured alibi. He developed the shot of the crowd at the pier and offered to superimpose your face on the shoulders of someone else. That's a simple matter for a good technician, and Tommy was good. The witnesses who will swear you were at the pier won't hold up under questioning, I'll warrant. They are probably members of the gang you control."

"He talks a lot and produces the original negative of the crowd scene at the pier, but he didn't destroy the picture I got of you, McClain. Blackmailers never destroy their evidence. When your men realized I was tracking Skinner and reported the fact to you, you knew I was on the right track and that Skinner wouldn't bear up under pressure. So you murdered him."

"The evidence which Skinner held over your head is hidden somewhere. Skinner knew you were dangerous. If you did kill him, he wanted you to pay for it, so he provided a clue as to the whereabouts of the picture I took."

"Produce it," Peabody snapped. "You've talked sense, but

it's still just chatter. We can't do a thing unless we have that picture. Where is it?"

"I don't know," Johnny admitted ruefully.

McClain gave a loud, raucous laugh and turned around to head for the door. Sergeant Orr stepped in front of him.

"Get back," Orr said in a silky voice. "You're staying until this is finished. Try to get away, and I'll stop you with a bullet through the leg."

"More threats," McClain raged. "I'll begin new actions to recover damages. I'll . . ."

"There," Johnny pointed out, "is a good idea of McClain's nature. If he really is a wealthy man—and I expect he is because the take was so big—he shows greed. He'd really go through with those suits and profit as much as possible."

"Johnny," Val whispered softly, "show them the picture you took. We'll be going to press pretty soon."

Johnny pointed toward the poem which Skinner had tacked to the wall.

"That little epic wasn't there when I last saw Skinner. He had a reason for putting it there. The poem offers us a clue as to where he hid the picture. A tiny negative is very easy to conceal, but Skinner would have wanted it available quickly and hidden where someone else could find it if things went sour. In a newspaper office like this, one of the best places to hide such a small article is in the morgue."

Editor Jensen emitted a groan. "McClain will die of old age before we can search all those files."

"And that is what Skinner wouldn't have wanted," Johnny said. "This poem—or the part he wrote and fastened to the wall—shows wherein those files he put the negative. Jensen, contact the morgue and ask Lewis to search the files on battlefield burying places."

Jensen made the request and hung up for what seemed to be hours.

"Nothing," he told Johnny.

"Check under the heading of poppies and the files on Flanders," Johnny suggested.

They proved unproductive too. Johnny began to sweat and McClain laughed louder with every passing moment. Johnny had the files searched under every title the words of the poem implied, and all without result. He began to pace the floor.

"It's there," Johnny said stubbornly. "It's got to be there."

"Johnny," Val said, "if it is true that Skinner concealed the negative in the morgue files, he must have placed it in an envelope which wouldn't be apt to be disturbed. There's no telling when something will turn up in this business, so the morgue files will be examined. He put it in an envelope he knew wouldn't be touched because the file on the subject is dead."

"*Dead!*" Johnny shouted. "Jensen, a man named Paul Flanders died six months ago. He was a nut inventor and made the columns now and then. We ran his pic at his death. His name would never come up again. His file is dead."

Jensen called the morgue again. He hung up.

"And Flanders isn't the only man who'll be dead," he announced. "The negative was there. Even Lewis in charge of the morgue, could recognize the subject of that negative. It's McClain all right."

McClain made a wild pass at Andy Orr, missed, but whirled to head for the door. Orr merely took a few steps after him, brought down an inverted gun butt, and McClain crashed to the floor.

Johnny held up both hands, still manacled. "I've been so doggone excited about this I forgot to ask to have these bracelets removed. Andy, you got a key?"

"Sure." Orr fumbled in his pocket.

Valerie stepped in front of Johnny.

"They stay on," she said. "The only way I can keep track of him is to have him tied up. Just give me the key, Sergeant."

"Well, I—" Orr hesitated. "What about it, Johnny?"

"Whatever she wishes," Johnny winked over Val's shoulder. "I'm taking her dancing. Once I get my arms around her, I won't be able to remove them. Leave them on, Sarge."



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## HEIR OF THE DOG

*By*

CARTER SPRAGUE

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TELEPHONE poles flicked past the rain-etched windows of the sedan as it sped through the dark. Through the rear window, the lights of the city made a mushy orange aurora. Ahead, the car's lights faded quickly against the downpour, revealing a gleaming wedge of tarred road.

Alone in the back seat, Ray Holman lit a cigarette. By the flame of the match, he saw the fold of flesh at the base of the driver's neck. It was marked with a scar where a carbuncle had been lanced long ago.

The man was a robot driver, a robot with the bulky shoulders of a Jap wrestler, menacing as a Buddha reared by some outlaw branch of the great Eastern faith, a Buddha at peace neither with man nor the devil. Holman could feel the cold-footed insects of fear crawl up his spine.

Then the match burned out and, abruptly, the illusion vanished. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax against the cushions. It was sheer asininity to feel fear anymore. This was home, America, safety.

He guessed he was like the dog on which the great Russian scientist, Pavlov, had experimented by ringing a bell

whenever he gave the beast food. After awhile the dog's mouth would water when only the bell rang and no food was given him. Conditioned reflex they called it.

In Holman's case, the night was a symbol of peril. He was just back from six months of hair-raising Air Forces work heading a weather mission dropped by parachute on the desolate, Jap-held Kuriles. To Major Ray Holman, the dark itself was enough to give him a sense of danger.

Oddly enough, he hadn't felt it until he was rescued—until the big plane had turned up, he had been too busy saving his mission and his skin. The turmoil of being welcomed back as a hero returned from the dead hadn't exactly helped to calm tortured nerves.

There was still another pressure on his nerves. He had come back to find his father, Marcus Holman, dead a month. Thus, unexpectedly, Major Ray Holman was not only back safely on leave, but chief heir to an estate which, even after taxes were paid, would amount to a million and a half dollars.

The old man, after kicking his mother and himself out to marry a younger woman, had made his son heir after all, instead of deciding in favor of the gaudy stepdaughter his second wife had brought him. Holman's mother was dead now, unable to enjoy the comfort it might have given her.

He could still envision Marcus Holman as he had appeared in a newspaper photograph just before Pearl Harbor, looking like a raffish St. Bernard in his evening clothes as he bent over his burnished bride with a plate of ice cream at some swell affair. The stepdaughter, Anne Leonard, had been looking on without expression from a long, loose blond bob.

Holman hadn't recognized her when she came into his

hotel suite this afternoon, wearing a feather cut. For some reason, he had been surprised at being able to see the back of her neck without the aid of a stiff breeze and had said so like a stupid dope, before he'd caught himself.

Only then had he noticed the diamond on her fourth finger and identified it with the softly handsome, dark young man who had come in after her. His embarrassment had been relieved by the arrival of suave, shrewd, ruthless, white-haired Turner Lord, long Marcus Holman's attorney.

Lord had explained the invasion smoothly, insisted that the girl had maneuvered it. With the report of his death in action, she had succeeded to the Holman estate. Not that she was a pauper. Certain properties of her mother had become hers when the late Mrs. Holman—the *second* Mrs. Holman, of course—had been killed in an airplane crash.

"So sorry," Holman had said in Jap fashion, then had felt a fool when neither the girl nor the urbane Turner Lord nor even the callow fiance, whose name was Horace something, had ceased being polite. From the point of view of Holman's visitors, his mother's poverty had been her own fault. She had refused alimony of her own accord, hadn't she?

It had taken a few minutes for the idea that he was a rich man to sink in—minutes while lawyer Lord had talked on, his eyes cold and the tip of his nose wiggling like a rabbit's with each syllable.

The girl had sat there smoking, full-lipped, lovely, impassive as a window dummy in a Fifth Avenue shop. He had wanted to take her apart and see what she was stuffed with, this twentieth-century Mona Lisa. Then he had caught Horace something reading his thoughts and turned a hot red.

"Just how did my father die?" Holman had asked. Somehow, Marcus Holman had seemed like a force of nature, like

an Aleutian wind, a thing of vast violence and power that went on and on, unchecked and uncheckable.

"They called it a cerebral hemorrhage."

The girl's voice was sharp and clear, not mouthing social amenities. His quick glance found something in her unexpected green eyes, something of disbelief. Like him, she knew the towering strength of the old man that had proved so mortal after all.

Oddly enough, the terms of the will hadn't mattered much. Money wasn't important when in a few weeks you'd be going back to Nimitz knew where, a meteorological advance man for the soon-to-come invasion of the desolate Japanese islands for which weather was such an all-important factor.

The girl was a lot more interesting. He had wondered a lot about women in the Northwest Pacific, where there were none. Why was she engaged to this Horace? What did she think about, what did she feel? Illogically, since her one remark, he felt stirred by her presence.

He'd been looking out the hotel window after they'd gone, thinking about her, when the telephone rang. The voice in the earphone gave its name as Sid Lanin of the Gazette. He'd thought himself done with the press for the day. He had done everything but lay cornerstones for them.

Now, it seemed, he was not only a hero but a big shot. They would be coming back in force. Lanin, it appeared, had the jump on the field, had dug up the dope on the inheritance. He sounded excited, a little hoarse.

"The millionaire corpse claims his own," he said. "That's the slant the city desk wants. If I take a cameraman out to the old homestead, how about coming out there and letting us have some shots?"

"What about the rain?" Holman had asked, knowing he was going to accept. He wanted to see Anne Leonard again before she moved out.

"Don't worry," had been Lanin's reply. "I can send a press car around for you. This will give me a beat, Major. How about it—okay?"

"Well," he had said, and that was that.

He thought of the curve of the girl's lower lip, of the slight tilt of those green eyes.

The car hit a hard double bump, jolting him out of his reverie. At once the cold-footed insects swarmed back up his spine. War might sweep the world, empires might fall and whole peoples be enslaved, but the city street repair department still refused to fix surfaces beyond the limits.

He knew that bump! It was a good half mile past the turnoff for the big house, on the dirt road that led to the old quarry. Flattening his nose against the side window-pane, he tried to make sure that he wasn't suffering from some new form of illusion. The double jolt had shaken him.

No, his senses had not betrayed him. Faintly, he could make out the low curves of hills to the south against the black blanket of the rainy sky. He leaned forward and yelled at the driver's impassive shoulders.

"It's okay, boss," that worthy replied. "It's just a short cut."

He didn't even look around. He knew what he was doing, all right, where he was going. That meant he wasn't supposed to take Holman to the big house—and that could mean a lot of things, none of them good.

Holman leaned back and drew on his cigarette. He couldn't pull much in a car hitting fifty over a wet and bumpy road—not when his target was the driver. There was

no sense in showing the man he was aware of something wrong. And—faint chance—he might add the element of surprise.

Holman had learned a lot on the islands, hiding from Japs, fighting them, killing them. Recent experience had prepared him for this sort of thing. Now that the prospect of action was unfolding, his fear was gone.

Whatever lay ahead had been carefully planned, unless he was just dreaming this all up. There had to be more than one person in it unless the ugly driver had done it all alone, which was more than doubtful. There might well be more of them waiting, and in that case it could be bad.

He was tense and ready as the car slowed after taking another curve. They were close to the old quarry now. He felt the rear wheels mush sideways as the driver applied the brakes, stopped the car. The burly one looked back at him.

"Something's wrong, bud," the fellow muttered. "I may need a hand."

"Sure thing," said Holman, puffing the end of his cigarette to a hot coal. "What do you think it is driver?"

"Left front tire," answered the burly one.

Only his left hand showed on top of the seat. Holman wondered what his right hand was holding, but his eyes were on the darkness around them. No shadows moved out there. He sighed with relief. It was going to be a man-to-man affair then.

The driver remained in the front seat as Holman got out. He was stupid to reveal his plan so openly, but he was strong, and he was armed. All Holman had as he moved forward toward the front wheel were speed, sinew and experience. Cautiously, he cupped the lighted cigarette in his hand.

He didn't think the fellow would shoot him. Bullets leave holes, and the sudden death of a war hero would be hard to explain at best. But it was a bad moment. Holman hunched his shoulders under his trench coat. They were playing for big stakes, whoever they were.

A slight sound, the rustle of a garment, a quick intake of breath for the driver was Holman's signal to action. Something swished through the air as the man's right hand came down toward his skull. But Holman crowded inside of the blow, felt the attacking arm bounce off his clavicle. It hurt like sin, but the bone failed to snap under the impact.

With his left hand, Holman grabbed a coat lapel, pulled the fellow off balance as he followed through, dragging him halfway out of the car so that their chests touched. Then, with the speed of a snake and the nice deliberation of a portrait painter putting in a highlight, he uncupped his right hand, poked the red hot cigarette into the man's near eyeball.

Swiftly he stepped aside and yanked as the fellow screamed and fell out of the car onto his hands and knees, dropping his swishing weapon. The man screamed again, staggered to his feet and ran in circles, clawing with both hands at his eyesocket as if to pluck the eye by the roots.

Ignoring his anguish, Holman stooped to pick up the weapon from the ground. It lay heavy and oddly soft in his hand. It was a heavy woolen sock with the top sewn tightly, a sock packed full of sand.

For a moment he didn't hear the driver's screams nor feel the rain beating down on him. He saw only the tough, vital old man who had been his father, heard only the girl's words—"They called it a cerebral hemorrhage." This simple weapon he held in his hand could have done such a job.

This driver would talk. He'd have to tell Holman who

was in it with him, how far back the conspiracy ran. Quickly, he moved toward him, but the man, still screaming and staggering around, didn't see him. The Jap torture trick Holman had used would leave him half blind, but the major felt no pity for him. He was dealing with a killer.

"Here, you," he began.

Knocking him senseless would be the best way. Then the police back in town could fix him up and make him talk. But the man must have sensed Holman's approach, for he broke away, tripping and stumbling out of the twin cones of light cast by the headlights.

Too late, Holman saw where he was headed. One minute he was there, ducking backward, the next he was gone with one last, suddenly ended shriek. The rim of the quarry showed up unexpectedly in the rain-swept darkness. Beyond lay a fifty-foot drop to a cruelly jagged stone floor.

Holman looked after him and swore. The man would never talk now. He walked slowly back to the car, got in and started the motor. There was, of course, nothing wrong with the front tire. He drove back toward the main road, trying to make a sensible pattern of what had happened.

Anne Leonard answered the door herself, her every golden curl in place, her white shoulders gleaming softly above a low-cut, golden evening gown. The curves it revealed would have been worthy of the glory spot on any Nissen hut wall in the whole chain of the Aleutians and Alaska too. Her eyes fed on his, dark, unfathomable, like twin cryptograms.

"I didn't expect you this evening," she said.

She might have been talking to a door-to-door salesman, a plumber, perhaps, rather than the man who, returning from nowhere, was to take home and fortune away from her.

"You hardly could have," he told her, wondering how she meant it.

Was she surprised at his coming to dispossess her so soon? Or hadn't she expected him to arrive ever? Her quiet poise gave him no clue.

"You see," he went on, looking at the weighted sock in his hand, "I had to kill a man to get here—it was up by the old quarry."

She didn't even stare—just looked at him as if he might have gone crazy. He supposed he must seem so, coming in unexpectedly out of the night and making such a statement. But that was to believe she had no guilty knowledge, which was no way to get at the heart of things.

"What's that thing in your hand?" she asked him finally.

"Take a look."

He tossed it to her. She caught it expertly, then dropped it as its unexpected weight forced her fingers open. Perhaps she didn't know what it was, or maybe she was an actress. All women were.

"It's heavy," she observed, and stooped gracefully to pick it up. "Why, it must weigh pounds. What is it?"

Her eyes were wide—with mere interest? Looking at her there in that gold dress, he would have given a big lump of his newfound wealth to find out. She was a lot of twenty-four carat girl.

"A word vulgarly used to describe a hard blow is derived from it," he told her.

He might have been lecturing a class in meteorology. But kids in khaki didn't turn into something he'd rather not see. They weren't green-eyed golden blondes sheathed in cloth of gold to begin with.

"You mean a sock?" she said, punching the air with a free fist.

"On the beam," he told her. "*Sock!* A sock with that sock, dished out by an expert, can knock a man cold. It can even burst the blood vessels in the brain without mussing up his hair. A lot of victims of this weapon have been pronounced dead due to a sudden 'cerebral hemorrhage.'"

"Oh!" she cried. He could almost see her mind working as she grasped his implication. Then, quickly, "I think you're out of your mind."

"Maybe," he said, "but I doubt it. May I use your phone?"

"It's *your* phone," she told him.

He flashed her a cynical glance as he went to where it sat smugly on a table against the slanting wall of the big stairway. He got the Gazette number from Information, asked for the city editor. When he gave his name, he was surprised at the warmth of his reception. He had briefly forgotten he was now hot news.

"Do you have a reporter on your payroll named Sid Lanin?" he asked.

Looking up, he saw the girl staring at him with a speculative stare.

"Sid? Sure," was the somewhat unexpected reply. In his perplexity, Holman had fully expected to learn there was no such person. "He covers City Hall, Major. But he's off for the night."

"Do you know where I can reach him?" Holman asked.

There was a wait while the editor dug it up for him.

"He's over at Turner Lord's place. You know, the lawyer—but then you ought to. He handled your father's affairs."

He gave Holman the address.

Holman thanked him and hung up. He went over to the

girl, stood in front of her and stared down at her, his eyes hard. He was getting results—better than he had expected. If Turner Lord were behind the assassin who had tried to kill him, she almost had to be in it.

"You're coming into town with me now," he told her.

It was an order.

"I've got a date. I can't stand him up," she replied.

Her lower lip stuck out a little. She looked stubborn—and worthy of a man's desire, no matter to what depths her self-indulgence might have led her. But he was having none of that.

"Get your wrap," he said brusklly. "I wasn't kidding when I said I killed a man just now. I had to. He tried to kill me with that thing." He nodded toward the sock still in her hand. "We're going to find out who was giving him orders. I think we can both guess why."

She looked at him for a moment, and again her green eyes showed nothing. Then she rang for an elderly maid who came in with her wrap, a swagger, box-shouldered short cape of ermine.

"Call Mr. Weir, Marie," she said, "and tell him Major Holman is driving me in."

Her voice was loud, much louder than usual.

"Yes, Miss Anne," said the maid in oddly flat tones. "Do you want me to wait up for you?"

"You needn't," the girl all but shouted. "I may be late getting in."

"Is Mr. Weir the Horace something you're engaged to?" Holman asked.

"Why Horace *Something*?" the girl asked as they reached the porch.

She paused a moment on the steps of the porte-cochere,

didn't seem to hear his reply as he suggested that "Something" was as good a name as any other in a democracy like America. He guessed he had gone too far.

She was silent all the way back into town, and the longer she remained quiet, the more Holman was able to bolster himself against the appeal of her poised young beauty.

He found Turner Lord's house without difficulty. It was a dignified red brick structure in a costly residential district of the city. Half of the lower floor was brightly lit up.

A big man with close to three hundred pounds of hog-headish frame opened the door and peered at Holman with puckered brows. Then he saw Anne Leonard behind him and opened the door wide to let them in.

"Hello, Sid," she said quietly, stepping forward. "Are you keeping company with Turner while he drowns his sorrows?"

For one thin-eyed moment, Holman thought he had walked into a trap. He studied this big fellow, Lanin, as the three of them stood in the hall. The reporter was sloppy, with a none-too-clean shirt collar and a tie that had strayed under one ear. He was also extremely drunk.

"Why should Turner Lord drown his sorrows?" Holman asked.

Lanin looked at him, blinking, then shook his head as if he were a dog.

"You're kidding," said the big man.

He laughed inanely, turned to the girl, who stood there, still wearing her ermine wrap. Holman had shed his trench coat.

"What did you want to bring him here for, Anne? Don't tell me you're just another—"

"Major Holman has a curious story to tell," she said sharply, cutting him off. "He thought you should hear it

for some reason. He made me come along with him. I think maybe you'd better."

"But Turner—he's, well, he's hard hit."

Lanin led the way to the living room where a man lay sprawled out on a sofa, a half-empty drink on the carpet beside him. It was the dignified Turner Lord. He made a picture lying there. His face was lax, his hair mussed, his clothes rumpled. Lanin went to him, shook him hard, but failed to rouse him.

"You see," the reporter said stupidly. "He's in no shape to hear a story. Wouldn't want to hear it from you if he were. It's not your fault, Major, but your coming back from the dead cost him a lot of money. The Holman estate was about all he had left. Little Anne was going to give him a chance to go on with it. You"—he paused, ran a tongue over his lips—"to heck with it, I'm going to make you a drink."

"I'll go along and lend a hand," said Anne unexpectedly.

Flashing Holman a look that might have meant anything she followed the big reporter as he weaved his way through the hall door. Suspiciously, Holman stared after her retreating back. What sort of a plot was she going to hatch against him now?

He focused his attention on Turner Lord. The lawyer looked almost too perfect, lying there dead to the world. Holman had to know every factor in this picture. Even an older man like the attorney might be a decisive force if it turned into a free-for-all.

He dug into his tunic pocket for a matchbox, ripped half a dozen free, planted them without too much caution in a row in the side of one of Turner Lord's shoes. Lord snored faintly, but made no other move. Holman's masseter muscles corded his cheeks as he got the match ends even.

A sextuple hot foot would tell him whether the man was

shamming. He pulled out a seventh match and lit it. The other six matches caught and flamed up brightly. He stood there, watching them burn down, his attention so tightly focused that he barely saw the motion of the girl's arm.

He could move like a cat and did. He caught her wrist, pulled it away from the burning matches. Lord's shoe was beginning to blacken as the flame devoured the leather. Holman saw him stir slightly as the girl kicked him smartly in the shins, forcing him to give full attention to her. He had to wrestle her a moment, wished she weren't hating him.

"Why did you do that, you sadist?" she finally asked him, panting.

He let her go. The matches had burned out, leaving a charred, cracked patch on the leather, and Turner Lord had not awakened. The lawyer was really out cold, whatever that meant.

Holman spread his hands slightly.

"Believe it or not, I had to," he replied. "I had to know if he was really asleep. It was the only sure way. Hey—where are you going?"

"To call the police," she said, moving toward a telephone table.

But Lanin came in then, carrying three drinks in his hands like a waiter. He planted himself in the girl's path, mulishly, drunkenly, forced her to take one of them. Holman had to smile. It was a good act all right, a timely one.

She hesitated, sipped her drink and made a wry face as Lanin gave one to Holman then killed half of his at one draught. He hiccuped loudly, staggered a little. He was either continuing to fake, or he had taken a few bartender's nips while mixing them up in the kitchen.

"Hey, Lanin," said Holman, pushing him into a chair.

There were a few things he wanted to know in a hurry,

just in case the big reporter was on the level. "How come you made a date with me at Anne's—at my house, for pictures and then didn't show up? Is that nice, man?"

"I made no date with you, Major," the reporter asserted, shaking his head stupidly from side to side. "Why should I? I don't even know you."

"You said you had an advance tip on my—er, good fortune and wanted to get pictures of me taking over the old family estate. Remember?"

"I had the tip all right," Lanin agreed. He paused to finish his drink, said the rest with his chin reposing on his tie. "But old Turner asked me to keep it quiet for a day or so. Old Turner's my best friend. Always slung dope his way on his cases. He did same thing for years. I wouldn't do anything to cross up old Turner. Check it easy enough. . ."

His eyes closed. For some reason, Holman believed him. The guy was drunk to his marrow. A fellow like this would not be planning murder. It didn't make sense. But someone had tried to kill him, and now lay at the bottom of the quarry. The killer's car was parked outside for proof.

"You—you're serious about this," said the girl suddenly. "I mean, you're not shell shocked or anything."

She was still standing by the phone, but her hands were at her sides. She began to look scared.

"Did you think I was fooling?" Holman said grimly.

"Yes—no. Oh, I don't know. You came in, looking so wild, with this crazy story about killing a man and about father being murdered. I was afraid of you. I was going along just to humor you. Then I saw Mulcahy's car outside. I knew you must have killed him. I let you bring me here to turn you over to the police. Perhaps you'd better tell me—"

"Okay," he ran a hand through his brown hair. "So that's why you shut up so suddenly back there on the house steps.

You knew the car. Do you mind telling me just who in blazes Mulcahy is—or was?"

"Why," said the girl, looking toward the man on the sofa, "he was Turner Lord's chauffeur. I know he looked like a pug, but he always seemed nice enough. He even drove Horace and me to the country club dance the night that father . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and she put a hand to her mouth.

"The night my father and your stepfather was killed," Holman finished brutally. This was no time to be soft. "Now tell me this. Why should this Horace somebody have Lord's man Friday driving him around on a date?"

"But he's Turner Lord's secretary," countered the girl. "Why shouldn't he?"

"And he's young, and ambitious, anxious to get ahead," added Holman.

There was acid in his tone. The girl looked at him, stung.

"Is there anything wrong with that?" she asked angrily.

"Not necessarily," he replied. "You went dancing with Horace the night my father was killed and Mulcahy drove you to the party. You were going out—dancing from the look of you—tonight with Horace. And Mulcahy picked me up and tried a little mayhem while on the way to get you." He paused, let his words sink in. "Doesn't it look a little odd?"

"I don't know. Oh, of course it does," she said, frowning. "But even if it is so, Mulcahy is dead. You said you killed him."

"Do you think a goon like Mulcahy could plan and carry through a thing like my father's murder? Don't make me laugh. He was just muscle."

"Then who"—her eyes wandered first to Lanin, then to

Turner Lord. "I hope you're wrong, oh, I hope you're wrong. But if Marcus—"

"You know I'm not wrong," said Holman quietly. He sat down in an armchair. "And I know how you feel. Marcus Holman was a heartless old dog in some ways. He did my mother a lot of harm. But you couldn't hate him long. And he was my father."

"I know," she said, closing her eyes. "I hated him like poison for marrying mother. But when she was killed, he was wonderful. I can remember the night he died as if it were now. I had just come back from the dance with Horace. Horace"—her eyes opened—"you don't mean?"

"Sorry, but I'm afraid he does," said a voice from the hall doorway.

Though it was not hoarse now, it was a familiar voice, carrying the same timbre as that of the fake Lanin who had called at the hotel to send Holman to his death. Its user looked like a movie juvenile in his dinner clothes. Smiling faintly, he covered Holman with an automatic pistol.

"So Mulcahy botched the job," he went on. "I suppose I should have handled it myself. My manners are more disarming. But Mulcahy was so much more experienced at that sort of thing." He sighed, shook his head. "By the way, Major, the name is Weir—W-E-I-R—not 'Something.'"

"Horace!" the girl exclaimed, her voice low and heavy with emotion. "What are you going to do?" Agitatedly, her left hand went to her throat.

"So much emotion," he murmured smiling. "Let's continue in the hall. I'm only going to do just what you would do in my place, darling."

He waved them into the hall with his gun, and it was there the girl turned on him.

"I'd never be in your place, never!" she declared hotly.

He merely grinned.

"You'll have a time convincing the police you aren't already in it if you don't help me cover this up," Weir told her. "After all, you're the big winner in the deal—by a million and a half or so."

"Oh, my soul!" exclaimed the girl.

Holman, stealing a quick look at her out of the corner of his eye, saw that she was beaten. Her knuckles gripped the portiere, and her face was absolutely drained of color. She was trapped in a vicious corridor to which there was no apparent end.

Holman got it now—all of it. Later, if there was a later, this Horace Weir would make an interesting study in viciousness. Weir appeared to be the complete opportunist, utterly immoral, utterly charming when it suited his purpose, as utterly evil should conditons demand evil of him.

He had the girl, had her in a vise as surely as if she were a block of wood in a carpenter's work room. He'd mock her, drain her dry, rivet her to him with a thousand bonds of terror until he had all he wanted of her. Then, in one way or another, he would eliminate her.

Just forty-eight hours before, he had had the game in his hands without trouble. Marcus Holman had been eliminated safely, thanks largely to the maid, Marie's, deafness. The girl was his. He undoubtedly had Turner Lord trapped, and Sid Lanin wouldn't betray his old friend. There was no unpleasantness in store for him. Once wartime priorities were relaxed, there would have been a lot of planes to Palm Beach—and then on to Rio, Buenos Aires, the restored Riviera, the idle watering places.

Holman's resurrection must have been a nasty shock. It had taken the money right out of Weir's hands when he

could almost touch its crisp, silk-threaded substance. It had demanded instant, drastic action, forced the repetition of successful murder. Now, even if Weir did win, it would never be the same victory. The unpleasantness of the future would not belong to the girl alone.

Holman stared at the killer, saw that, for the moment, his eyes were on the girl. But he wouldn't shoot her, he dared not. If he did, he would lose the whole game, without a chance of salvation. Tensed and waiting, Holman measured the distance between them with suddenly narrowed eyes. It was a good eight feet, not much of a chance. But Holman knew he'd never get another as good. Once Weir got him in the car outside, he was finished.

Flashlike, he leapt sideways from a standing start to make himself a more difficult target, used the momentum to come in on a diagonal. But Weir was quick, was keyed for murder and ready for it. His gun spat fire almost before Holman had left his position. The bullet half spun Holman around as it slashed across his right side under his armpit, splitting a rib in its progress, barely missing a lung.

The involuntary spin saved Holman's life as a second shot blasted the air where his body had been. Then Holman was in on him, thrusting up Weir's gun-bearing arm, taking a savage left hook on the side of his neck as he closed. He swung his own right, but the first bullet had cut a muscle or tendon, and the blow was weak as a baby's.

Desperately, Holman used everything he had left—knees, feet, and his one good arm. But it wasn't enough. His left was occupied in holding off the gun, and it wasn't going to be able to do the job indefinitely. Weir was a sinuous, savage fighter, who knew a few commando tricks of his own.

What an ironic way to die! The thought flashed through

Holman's head as a leg-thrust tripped him, forced him to stagger clear of his assailant. If only one or both of the men in the next room would come to. He was wide open for the finishing shot now. Had he survived months of life-and-death brushes with savage Jap patrolmen as well as the encounter with driver Mulcahy, to be slain by this gigolo?

He had hurt Weir. It showed in the man's twisted stance, in the tight line of his lips as he brought up the long-barreled gun for the kill. But hurting him hadn't been enough. It was Weir who had the pistol. Regaining his balance, Holman stood there, panting a little, waiting for the inevitable.

Then he saw the girl's arm move in a flashing arc of white and a single glittering diamond bracelet. Somehow she had moved from her spot by the portieres. She must have been stalking them during the wrestling match. As Weir's pistol arm came up, her arm flashed down—and it was wielding something shapeless in slim fingers with rose-tinted fingernails.

Mulcahy's sand-weighted sock hit Weir in time, just back of the ear. His pistol went off into the rug as he pitched forward on his face, unconscious. Sobbing a little, the girl stood over him, staring down at her victim as if he were some large insect she had been forced to crush.

"Thanks, Anne," Holman said, using her given name for the first time in his life.

She shrank away from him as he came toward her. Oddly enough, he understood. She still felt contaminated by this shameful man who had dominated her for so long. But it would pass. He touched her lightly on a bare shoulder, went past her to the phone.

"Police headquarters," he told the operator. "I want to report two deaths."

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# DEATH WEARS A MASK

*By*

HENRY KUTTNER

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## I

**B**EN HATCH, Special Agent for the Los Angeles Division of the F. B. I., walked right into murder that night at the Magic Window. The Window was a night-club, where the lights were dim so you couldn't add the figures on your check. It had other attractions—notably a large glass panel at the end of the long room, set up above floor level so you could get a good look when the floor show was on.

The real trouble started about ten minutes before Hatch arrived. Rudy Lannigan, an F. B. I. agent in the Narcotic Division, was sitting in a booth, his hard, lean face impassive. It was difficult to see far in the dim green lighting. But near the bar, a stocky bald man in evening clothes was watching Lannigan with keen interest.

The ordinary crowd filled the Window. People out for fun. Young fellows, from nearby war plants. Older men who had come to drink. Lovers, finding a rendezvous in the dim lighting. A man with a beard who looked like Orson Welles. A gang of chorus-boy savages were cavorting around

in the soft green glow of the center of the floor, doing an African samba. They wore fuzzy black overall suits like bear-pelts, and had grotesquely painted plastic masks over their faces. They jumped about like puppets and howled above the din of the orchestra.

A waitress came over to Lannigan's table. She was a slim blonde, looking as though she had been carefully poured into her black evening gown.

She caught her breath at sight of the stocky man at the bar. Lannigan put out his hand to stop her as the girl tried to pass by him.

"Martini, Janna," he said softly. "Bring it yourself. Everything okay?"

There was sudden fear in her blue eyes. "Get out of here," she murmured. "I shouldn't have phoned you."

Lannigan looked at her impassively. "What made you change your mind in the middle of the call? You were going to tell me something. Then all of a sudden you started talking about something else. Who was listening in?"

Janna's red lips twisted. "I told you to forget it!"

"It took me only ten minutes to get here," the agent said. "I came right away. I figured I'd better. What have you got to tell me?"

"Nothing. I—I was wrong."

"There's a chap named Hatch meeting me here any minute," Lannigan said icily. "He's in the Narcotics Division. I phoned him to come along, just on a hunch."

"Narcotics Division," Janna repeated almost inaudibly. "I didn't say—"

"You didn't have to. I was in here two nights ago. Who gave you that snow?"

"I—it wasn't. It wasn't!"

"Sniffing dope, for the thrill of it!" Lannigan said disgustedly. "It's up Hatch's alley, so you'll have to talk to him." The agent's face softened a little. "Better break down and tell me about it, kid. You're not so tough as you think."

Janna shook her head angrily. "Just leave me alone!" she snapped, but there was a note of hysteria in her low voice. "I can take care of myself. I always have. You can't prove I phoned you!"

With that feeble spark of defiance she turned, vanishing into the dimness. At the end of the bar she waited for the order to be filled. The stocky man in evening clothes watched her with hooded eyes, filled with a cold, deadly fury and a curious sort of questioning. Janna apparently did not notice. With the Martini on a tray, she started back toward her customer.

One of the grotesque masked dancers lurched against her. The glass on its tray tilted precariously.

"Look out, stupid!" Janna snapped, though quietly.

The dancer, still keeping time with his feet, reached out to steady the glass. In the faint green glow no one saw a trickle of powder sift down from the man's palm into the Martini. He whirled away and was gone.

Janna went back to the table. Lannigan scowled at her.

"Sit down here," he said.

"No. I'm not supposed to sit with the customers. Keenan doesn't let us."

"Then he's changed his policy," Lannigan said. He gulped the Martini. "How'd you know I was a Government agent?"

"I—I—"

"Keenan told you, didn't he? What's he worried about?"

I come in here for a drink on my way home. That's all. So what did you need a Government agent for, eh?" The interrogative snapped like a whip-lash.

The masked dancers had finished their turn and disappeared toward the back. The stocky man signaled the bartender, who placed a bottle and a glass before him.

"Something up, Boss?" the bartender asked, sotto voce.

Keenan didn't answer. He lit a cigar and turned to watch the Government man reflectively. Janna was shaking her head again. A faint gleam of satisfaction showed in the curve of Keenan's mouth.

Lannigan half rose, but the girl eluded him.

"It's time for my turn," she said defiantly. "Unless you want to arrest me!" But there was an undernote of nervousness in her bravado.

She went toward the back, with a quick glance at Keenan, who apparently didn't notice. Lannigan grunted and looked around. He wondered what was keeping Ben Hatch. If this turned out to be a narcotic case, Hatch would be helpful. But maybe it wasn't. Except that two nights ago Janna certainly had been playing around with the stuff. Crazy little fool!

The blackout curtains hid the windows, so Lannigan could not see Ben Hatch's approach. The door swung open, and a short, wiry man of about thirty, with stiff red hair and vivid blue eyes, walked into the Magic Window. He discovered Lannigan instantly, and moved forward, sliding into the booth opposite the G-man.

"'Lo, Lanny," he said. "I got your message. What's up?"

Lannigan didn't answer. He shivered, his hard, aquiline face without expression. Suddenly the lights went out.

"What the devil!" Hatch said, and looked toward the back, where a large square panel was lighting up.

It was the peep-show. A silhouette became visible through the glass. Two silhouettes.

One was that of a girl. She whirled to face the other, a figure hunched low, oddly blurred at the edges. The shadow of a long knife was lifted and plunged hilt-deep into the girl's chest. Her attacker jumped back and vanished from view.

The screen became transparent. The girl became clearly visible—a blonde, with a few scraps of chiffon tacked on to her here and there. They didn't conceal much. They didn't conceal the knife sticking out of her chest, or the blood crawling down the white skin of her body.

"That isn't staged," Hatch said tonelessly. "Come on!"

He exploded out of his seat and dived toward the back of the room. He could still see the girl standing behind the peep-show window, her body rigid, tense, arching with agony. Then she fell. Vanished. A spatter of applauding palms sounded.

Hatch went through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE," and found himself in a fair-sized room, cluttered with theatrical odds and ends. A man was lying crumpled beneath a switchboard panel—a slim chap in overalls. On Hatch's right a flight of steps led up to a platform with curtains all around it.

Hatch leaped to the stairs and yanked at the curtains. They slid aside. Something smashed down at his head.

He had a glimpse of the blonde's body lying on the floor of the platform, a grotesque masked figure looming before him, and then a gun-butt crashed stunningly against his temple. He was falling. The attacker leaped away.

But Hatch had seen his assailant in time to deflect the blow's full force. He fell heavily, painfully, on the steps, a jutting edge digging into his ribs. Fighting to retain consciousness, he saw the masked man yank open a door near the switchboard and vanish, slamming it behind him.

The room went dark. No—the lights were still on. But Hatch couldn't focus his vision. He tried to move limbs that were suddenly heavier than lead.

Where was Rudy Lannigan?

Hatch staggered to his feet. He lurched to the door, opened it, and saw a lighted hall, empty. Behind him voices rose in a crescendo, but Hatch did not turn. He saw an open window at the end of the passage. Had the killer made his escape that way?

Low voices came to him through a door at his side. Hatch slid down—he could hardly stand up, anyway, with his head throbbing in agony—and looked through the keyhole. What he saw made him jerk erect and try the knob. The door didn't open.

The voices beyond it ceased.

Hatch wasted no time. A light automatic came from inside his coat, and he shot out the lock, kicking the door open at the same time.

He lurched across the threshold into a well-furnished office, with a huge mahogany desk taking up half the wall space. Directly across from him was an open window. Through it came the sound of a car's retreating motor.

There were two men facing Hatch. Both wore the furry overall suits and plastic masks of the chorus boys. They dived at the special agent as he came through the doorway. One of them threw something—a paper-weight—that numbed Hatch's hand and sent the automatic spinning from

his grasp. He was still almost out on his feet from the blow the killer had given him.

"Where's Lannigan?" he thought, as a heavy body crashed against his knees and brought him down.

His shoulders thudded against the door so that it swung shut. This was not the moment for speculation, though. The two masked men might be chorus boys, but they were plenty tough.

So was Ben Hatch. His short, wiry body went into action almost automatically. Hatch was still groggy, but his muscles reacted instinctively. Short, pistonlike blows hammered against yielding flesh. Hatch brought up his knees, kicking out furiously.

"Lannigan!" he yelled.

The blank, inhuman masks swayed before his eyes. His fists caromed off fuzzy fur—the overall suits. The salt, acrid odor of blood was strong in his nostrils.

It was like fighting robots—featureless, vicious, terrible. But these robots could be hurt. One of them doubled up, gasping and retching, as Hatch's hard fist sank into his midriff. The other sprang away. As the agent tried to rise, he saw a heavy shoe driving toward his temple. He dropped flat under it, caught the man's leg, and yanked. The breath was smashed from his lungs as his attacker fell on him.

Hatch felt his head being batted against the floor. In a minute it would explode. Gasping, almost out, he had sense enough to go limp. For an instant his assailant was tricked into relaxing his grip.

That was enough. Hatch's fist shot up, cracking against the man's jaw. It was not a hard enough blow to stun, but it gave Hatch a chance to roll free and slide head-first after the gun that had been knocked from his hand. He got it.

The cool metal was comforting against his sweating palm.

He whirled, centering the automatic's muzzle between the two masked figures. Both were moving toward him.

"Hold it!" Hatch said.

He dragged himself up, his back against the wall, trip-hammers pounding inside his skull. The gun was fearfully heavy. He could scarcely hold it. But if he lost consciousness now it would be all up with him!

The masked men were closing in. Neither of them spoke, but a slight, imperceptible glance passed between them. They were going to rush, Hatch knew.

He bit his lip. Briefly the pain cleared his brain. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"I said, hold it!" he snapped.

"What's going on here?" a new voice broke in.

The door, with its broken lock, stood open. Framed in the oblong was a man in evening clothes, stocky and harsh-faced, his bald head shining with sweat. He gestured at the masked men, and they drew back, to stand near the desk.

"Who're you?" Hatch said.

"Jen Keenan. I own the Window." Keenan stared at the automatic.

"Ben Hatch—F. B. I.," Hatch said. "These gorillas work for you?"

Strength was coming back to the agent now. With it came fury. He brushed back his bristling mop of red hair.

Keenan nodded. "They're not gorillas. Just what is this all about? One of my waitresses has been stabbed."

"I know," Hatch said. "Stabbed by a guy in a monkey-suit like these lads wear. He made his get-away through the hall outside."

"There's a window at the end of it," Keenan said. "And it's open."

"Yeah." Hatch's blue eyes were narrowed speculatively. "I happened to look through the keyhole into this room, and saw a hole in the wall closing up. Secret panel stuff. Maybe the murderer didn't go out a window. Maybe he went into the hole in the wall."

One of the men who had attacked Hatch pulled off his mask, revealing a swarthy Sicilian face with unshaved blue jowls.

"Look, Boss," he said. "We're waiting in here when this guy busts down the door and comes in waving a rod. Naturally we jump him."

"Waiting?" Hatch asked. "With the door locked? This your office, Keenan?"

The stocky man nodded. "Sure. What about it?"

"The door wasn't locked," the Sicilian said. "This cop must have made a mistake."

"I didn't make any mistake about that secret panel," Hatch said grimly. "Open it up, Keenan, and explain why your thugs were fooling around with it."

Keenan tried to look angry. "That the truth, Joe? You been watching through keyholes too?"

The Sicilian took the cue instantly. "Yeah. I seen you open it, so I—"

"You got curious," Keenan finished. "Okay. Think you can open it again?"

Silently Joe went to the desk, manipulated a hidden spring, and stepped back as the heavy piece of furniture slid out at an angle. There was a black gap in the wall.

Keenan went over and switched on a light. Hatch followed him. He looked down into a small square room,

quite empty, with unbroken bare walls, lit by a single bulb in the ceiling.

"There's no way out of it," Keenan said. "You can look around if you like. The boys shouldn't have been fooling around. Hardly anybody knows about this hide-out."

"Hide-out?"

"I got enemies." Keenan smiled. "It's a sort of bomb shelter—just in case."

Hatch nodded. "Okay." He turned to the other masked figure. "Let's see what you look like."

The second chorus man had a sallow, unhealthy, thin face, and untidy yellow hair. He evaded Hatch's eyes.

"Look, Mr. Hatch," Keenan repeated. "One of my girls has been stabbed. How about it?"

"I heard somebody run past in the hall, just before you busted in," Joe broke in.

Hatch rubbed his jaw. "Yeah. I don't think you guys did it. The killer had a gun. And you'd have used a gun on me if you'd had one. Still, I'm not taking any chances. Keenan, will your little pals stick around?"

"Sure," the stocky man said. "Won't you, boys?"

The boys nodded sullenly. Hatch remembered Lannigan. He told Keenan to call the local police and, holstering his gun, pushed through the crowd into the night-club proper.

It was seething with confusion, but Lannigan, Hatch saw, still sat motionless at his table.

Lannigan kept on sitting there, rigid, and slumped back with his arms dangling at his sides, even when Hatch, his pulses pounding, bent to peer into the agent's face. Lannigan's eyes were open, the pupils dilated. There was a small polished chromium tray on the table, on which the Martini

had been served. Hatch held this to Lannigan's open mouth and drew it away unfogged.

He lit a match before Lannigan's eyes. There was no contraction of the pupils.

Hatch felt his stomach turn over. He touched the corpse's chest, felt the muscles flaccid and loose. Then something made his eyes widen. He slid his palm inside Lannigan's shirt.

The dead man's heart was beating!

Under his hand the slow beat hesitated and stopped. Had it been merely imagination? Hatch didn't think so, but he made certain it was not some gadget that he had felt.

Presently he stepped back and stared at the body, his eyes clouding. He had known Lannigan for a long time. It was tough for Rudy Lannigan to go out like this—dying even as Hatch had sat opposite to him in the dim-lit booth.

Poison? The olive in the Martini glass was untouched, and there was a tiny puddle of gin and vermouth left. Hatch smelled the glass, but the odor of the drink was all he could catch. The Martini's strong taste must have effectually disguised the poison.

There was a noise from the back room. Hatch went there, shaking his head to clear it of the pounding ache. The man in overalls had recovered. Surrounded by a group of the club's performers, with Keenan in the front row, puffing at a cigar and stroking his bald head, he was gulping a drink someone had given him.

Hatch shouldered forward. "Let's have it," he said curtly. "What happened to you?"

The overalled man looked at Keenan, who nodded.

"Yeah. What happened, Bottley? Spit it out."

"That guy must have been hiding on the platform," Bottley said. "Behind the curtains."

"You mean the murderer?"

Bottley shuddered, his wrinkled face twisting. "Yes. He did kill Janna, then? I was at the switchboard, working the lights, when she went up on the platform. I worked the switches, same as always, and then this guy comes rushing off the platform and swats me over the head with a gun."

Hatch narrowed his blue eyes. "He was wearing that screwy outfit—false face and all?"

"He was. Like the rest of the dancers."

"I get it. Our little friend hid on the platform, behind the curtains, stabbed Janna, jumped out and socked Bottley. He worked fast, all right! Then he heard me at the door, and dived back on the platform just in time to hide."

"I phoned the police," Keenan said. "They'll be along directly."

Hatch pulled him away from the others.

"Listen, Keenan," he said. "There's a dead man out in the club. Poisoned."

The cigar jerked. "Yeah?" Keenan said.

"Yeah. He was a Federal agent, too. Man named Lannigan. Take a look. You can see him from the door."

Keenan obeyed and came back with his eyes hooded.

"I see. This'll be sweet publicity for the Window, I don't think."

"Ever seen Lannigan before?"

"I have. He's been coming here off and on for a week."

"Tonight—what happened?"

Keenan's harsh face remained impassive. "I didn't see him come in, but I noticed him at that booth."

"Janna was with him for a while," someone said.

The club owner's teeth clamped with soft savagery on his cigar. "That's right," he said. "She served him a drink."

The bartender who had interrupted Keenan before spoke again.

"I served the drink to Janna. But it wasn't poisoned."

Hatch looked at the man. "She took it straight to him?"

"Yes, sir. She did."

"You saw that? She didn't stop anywhere?"

The bartender shrugged. "No. Except one of the dancers bumped into her, but it didn't spill the drink."

"There it is," Hatch said. "All wrapped up. Our friend the murderer again, disguised as one of your chorus boys, Keenan. He managed to drop poison into that Martini."

Keenan didn't say anything.

"Headquarters will have the rest of that Martini analyzed," Hatch went on, "but I've a hunch it was calabar bean—African ordeal poison. When you take that, you stay conscious to the last, but you can't move. You're paralyzed. And your heart keeps beating for a while after you're dead. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Not a thing," Keenan grunted. "You figure it was one of the dancers, eh? Want to question 'em?"

Hatch shook his head. "The killer just used that disguise. You had extra monkey-suits and masks, didn't you? I thought so. Well, in that dim light one extra man wouldn't be noticed."

He hesitated. What next? Who had killed Lannigan, and why? Why had Janna called the Federal man to this rendezvous with murder, as Lannigan had told him she had done? A hundred questions raced through Hatch's mind, but none could be answered yet.

The siren of a squad car sounded outside.

The next ten minutes were a swift blur of questions and answers. A sergeant drew Ben Hatch aside.

"Is this Federal business?"

"An F. B. I. man's been murdered," Hatch said grimly. "That's our business, all right. But you'd better take over. I've a few ideas I want to follow up. Will you send that Martini down to the Department to be analyzed?"

He went in search of Keenan, who was in his office, sitting imperturbably behind his desk listening to the tinkle of an old-fashioned music-box.

"I collect 'em," he explained, showing the little cube to Hatch. "What now?"

Hatch sat on the desk's corner. "Who was this girl Janna?"

Keenan found another cigar, clipped and lit it.

"Janna Duquesne," he said. "I hired her two weeks ago. Don't know anything about her, otherwise."

"Let's have her address."

Keenan opened a drawer of his desk, took out a card file, and copied an address on a note pad.

"Here," he said. "I think she lives with her sister. Janna used to work for an escort service. That's where I met her. I liked her looks and offered her a job."

Hatch didn't comment on the fact that, a moment ago, Keenan had said he didn't know anything about Janna Duquesne. He pocketed the address, grunted, and turned to the door. There was a faint touch of mockery in the low voice that followed him out.

"Good luck, G-man."

The address Keenan had given was a small frame bungalow on Serrano, a quiet street where tall palms masked the sidewalk lamps into dim obscurity. Hatch killed his motor

and let the light coupé slide silently in to the curb. A few other cars were parked along the block. That might mean nothing, or a lot. He got out, went quietly to the bungalow's porch, and hesitated.

There was no light from within. Janna's sister might be out. Hatch's head was still throbbing. He rubbed his flaming thach and tried the bell.

The sound rang shrilly, disturbingly, through the dark house.

Then Hatch saw that the door was ajar—not much, but a significant dark line showed. Instantly he had swung it open, stepped in, and closed it behind him. Or, rather, he tried to close it. The door had expanded, and grated in protest as he forced it into its frame.

Hatch's eyes narrowed in the darkness. Someone—some intruder—had left the door ajar, so it wouldn't stick in the jamb and slow down his get-away. Unless he'd already made a get-away!

What next? Hatch wished desperately that he had a flashlight. A blaze of light from the electric fixtures would betray him to the killer, who might be waiting for that move. All this on the assumption that someone was actually in the house—someone who didn't belong there.

A slight sound warned Hatch. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the obscurity. He made out a dim rectangle—a doorway. Beyond it was darkness, and from that darkness came an almost inaudible rustle that made the short hairs lift on Hatch's neck, though he could not have said why.

He slipped like a shadow across the threshold and flattened himself against the wall by the doorway, his gun cold against a sweating palm. There was silence.

Dim light came through the window. It revealed the body

of a girl, a blonde like Janna, slim and pretty, lying motionless on the faded carpet. She was wearing a negligée over pajamas, and there were dark splotches on her throat—bruises that had been made by fingers. But her chest moved slowly. The killer had not had time to finish his job.

And the murderer was still in the room with Hatch. The Federal man knew that, with a vivid certainty. There was the feeling of another presence!

Nothing was visible but the girl's body, and the lighter rectangle that marked the doorway. He could not see the murderer. The reverse was equally true.

And the killer dared not fire at the girl, though no doubt he had a gun. The flash would have revealed his location to Hatch.

Silence. A breeze rustled scratchily through the fronds of palm trees outside. Hatch closed his eyes and opened them again after a moment or two. But the darkness was still too intense for him to make out anything more.

The girl on the floor groaned and opened her eyes. Instantly a low whisper cut through the blackness.

"Don't shoot, fella. She's all right. I haven't hurt her."

Hatch didn't answer. He was trying to discover just where that voice came from.

"I thought Ruth knew something," it went on tonelessly, "but she doesn't. I'd have killed her if she did. But she doesn't know anything."

Something hurtled through the room, crashed against the window with a splintering of glass. For a second Hatch swung toward it. His gun blasted. Then he realized that the killer had thrown a chair through the window.

It was too late then. A heavy body hurtled against him, sent him sprawling over some piece of furniture. Struggling

to swing his automatic into line, Hatch was in time to see a figure dart through the doorway and vanish. He bounded up.

"Stay here!" he said to the girl. "I'm going after that killer!"

There was no time to make sure she understood. Hatch leaped into the front room and saw the door standing ajar. He plunged on to the porch, gun ready.

A black sedan was already lurching away from the curb. Its engine roared as it swung on two wheels around the first corner, fifty feet away. It was gone.

Pursuit, Hatch felt pretty sure, would be useless. The killer would abandon his car almost immediately, and lose himself in a maze of black alleys. Meantime, Janna's sister would have been unguarded.

He found her hunched over the telephone, trembling as she tried to dial Police Headquarters.

"Don't bother about that, Miss Duquesne," Hatch said.

She stared at him, eyes wide with fright. Hatch showed her his credentials.

"Now—how do you feel?" he asked. "Hurt bad?"

She touched the ugly black marks on her white throat.

"No. You came along before he had a chance to do much."

Without invitation, Hatch lowered himself into a chair. The girl had switched on the lights, and he saw that the room was clean, neat, ordinary, and feminine. Janna's sister was almost a ringer for the dead girl, except that her face was softer, rounder, and weaker. There still was fear in the dark eyes.

"Who was that man?" Hatch asked.

"I don't know," she said, without hesitation. "I got out of

bed when the bell rang, and there was a man on the porch wearing a mask, and a fuzzy sort of suit."

Hatch nodded. So the killer was still wearing his Magic Window floor show get-up. A convenient disguise, easily donned or discarded at a moment's notice.

"He switched off the light and forced me back into the bedroom," Ruth Duquesne went on. "He didn't say anything. He just choked me. That's all I know."

Hatch took out a pack of cigarettes and held it out.

"No? Well—I think you do know something, Miss Duquesne. Something important to that killer."

She shook her head. "Honestly, I don't." Her red lips trembled. She pulled the negligée closer about her.

Hatch's blue eyes went bleak and dangerous.

"Listen," he said grimly. "That man intended to kill you. I stopped him. He didn't dare shoot you, because I'd have fired at the flash. So what did he do? He waited till you woke up, and said—apparently to me—that if you had known anything, he'd have killed you. That was a warning to you—and you got it, all right. A warning to keep your mouth shut."

She looked at him like a bird fascinated by a snake. But her mouth was stubbornly tight.

"Don't be a fool," Hatch said. "He won't trust you to keep quiet. He'll be back. Did you know your sister was murdered tonight?"

The thrust was intentionally brutal. Ruth Duquesne shrank back, the color flooded her cheeks, and then she went ghost-white. Her hand flew up.

"No!" she said. "No!"

"Somebody stuck a knife in Janna Duquesne's heart," Hatch said. "He won't hesitate to do the same to you. If

you talk, I'll see that you're protected. Otherwise—" He stood up and began to walk toward the door.

Ruth leaped after him, dragging at his arm.

"I'm sorry! I didn't know! Please come back! Janna—"

Hatch got her a glass of water from the kitchen and waited until the girl had calmed.

"Okay," he said at last. "Now what's the answer?"

Ruth was shivering. "I don't know. Honestly! I'd tell you if I did, but . . . There's only one thing."

"Well?"

"For the past few weeks Janna's been nervous. Once she said we'd soon have plenty of money, and then shut up like a clam. But—but there wasn't anything else."

"Could be you might have some information without knowing it," Hatch said. "Suppose you answer a few questions."

She was willing to talk. Ruth Duquesne worked for an escort service, had been working there since coming to Los Angeles from Iowa three years before. Things had fallen off a lot since the war, though. Men didn't have to phone an escort bureau to find a girl to take dancing or to a show. A month ago Janna had joined her sister, running away from home to come to California. She, too, had tried the escort bureau, but only for a week.

"Keenan took her out, eh?"

Ruth frowned. "Why, no."

"He said he did—and offered her a job at the Window."

The girl looked puzzled. "That wasn't the way of it. Somebody told her to go see Mr. Keenan."

"Who?" Hatch asked quickly.

"One of her escort service dates. Wait, I've got his name and address here somewhere. Janna always left those with

me before she went out on dates. Just in case. Sometimes the men try to get funny. But Janna could take care of herself."

Hatch lifted an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. He watched Ruth go to a secretary in one corner and fumble through copies of old movie magazines, letters, and papers.

"Here," she said. "This is the name of the man—Dyke Carnevan. A man from Des Moines who wanted to kick over the traces."

"What do you know about him? Anything?"

"No," Ruth said. "I don't even know if Janna ever saw him after that once."

"And he told her to see Keenan, uh? Look, you two kids lived here together. Didn't Janna ever say anything you thought was funny? That made you wonder?"

Ruth bit at a fingernail, scowling in concentration.

"N-no. Except . . . Oh, that wasn't anything."

"Let's have it," Hatch said.

"Well, she got in awful late a few nights ago, and I could tell she was excited. I thought she was tight. She'd been on a party. That was funny. She wasn't tight at all, but she acted like it."

The G-man's mouth hardened. "Did you notice her eyes?"

"Her eyes? I don't understand."

"Reefer party," Hatch said. "Or worse, maybe. What'd she say? Mention any names?"

Ruth nodded. "Just this Dyke Carnevan—the client who told her to go to the Magic Window. She said he'd met Mr. Keenan in Des Moines a year and a half ago. That was all, really. She kept repeating it and laughing a lot."

"And that's all?"

"I'm afraid it is. I—I wish—"

Hatch stood up, rubbing his jaw. "I'll phone for somebody to guard you here. But first I'd like to look over your sister's stuff."

Silently Ruth led the way into the bedroom and pointed to a chest of drawers. She watched as Hatch swiftly went through them. He found nothing until, at the bottom of the lowest drawer, his eye lit on a magazine lying face down under a pile of feminine toggery. He drew it out—a true-detective magazine, with a slip of paper sticking out from the pages. Something was scribbled on that paper—a few words only.

### He's a masked murderer

That was all. Hatch shoved the magazine into his pocket and turned. He was just in time to hear Ruth scream, and see her go down, in the doorway, under the impact of a gun-butt that was swung viciously against her temple. The figure behind her was grotesquely masked and wearing a fuzzy overall suit. He jumped back out of sight as Hatch lunged toward him.

Hurdling the girl's body, the G-man halted on the threshold, as he saw the masked man standing across the room, looming against the front doorway, signaling with one furry arm!

Hatch went for his gun. The strange figure hurtled toward him, and behind came others—two, three, four—disgorged from the darkness outside the house.

A sound behind him made Hatch leap aside, but too late. More of the masked figures had entered through the bedroom window. He went down under an avalanche of attackers, fighting desperately. The automatic was wrenched from his grasp.

He slugged, kicked, cursed, and fought against the gag that was forced into his mouth, but it was useless. There were at least six of the masked men. Hatch relaxed only when he lay bound and motionless on the floor. As though by some prearranged signal, his captors lifted him, concealing him between them, and went out of the house.

There was a light truck outside. Apparently it had slid up with the engine off, a trick Hatch himself had used. The agent was carried to the back of the truck and shoved in roughly; five of the masked thugs followed. The sixth swiftly stripped off his disguise, tossed it into the lap of one of his fellows, and ran to take his place in the driver's seat. He was a man Hatch had never seen before.

The truck swung forward, the tires humming on the road as it picked up speed. Inside the back of the truck was only darkness, and silent menace. Hatch furtively tried to loosen his bonds, but could not. One of his captors used a flashlight which blazed blindingly into the G-man's eyes.

"Don't try it," a low voice said. "You can't get away."

The flashlight was turned off. Hatch lay motionless, thinking hard. As the truck lurched, his face smacked painfully against the floor of the light, closed delivery truck.

Then the pieces began to fall into place in Hatch's mind. His wiry body tensed with sudden fury. He knew, now, what lay behind these killings.

Time dragged on. The truck, Hatch guessed, was heading into the Hollywood hills, by way of one of the canyons.

After about half an hour it slowed and stopped. The back doors were swung open. Hatch was carried out.

The moon had risen—a full moon, bright and lambent, silvering the California night. The truck was standing in a

driveway that ran from the road along the side of a bungalow to a garage.

Hatch managed to look around as he was carried. This was, apparently, what was left of a hill subdivision that had failed. There were no other houses near, and the distant ones Hatch saw on the neighboring slopes were dark, empty. He was carried toward the open doors of the garage. A lantern swung from a beam there, casting a pale yellow glow.

Hatch was dumped roughly in the center of the floor, on a dark stain that had once been oil, long since dried. One of the masked figures took the gag from the agent's mouth. Hatch coughed and choked, his tongue feeling like a dry, swollen sponge.

When he could speak, he said sharply:

"Joe!"

One of the bizarre figures automatically turned a masked face toward him—and paused. There was the sound of a muffled oath.

"Is Keenan here?" Hatch said. "I want to see him."

"Very well," a low voice said. "Here I am, Hatch."

Jen Keenan walked into the garage, chewing a cigar, his bald head yellow under the lamplight. His face was set in harsh lines of brutal triumph. He jerked his head at Joe.

"Okay," he ordered. "Get the boys busy. We haven't much time, and I want to talk to this wise guy."

"Right, Boss."

Joe led the six masked figures out of the garage. They went toward the truck which, Hatch saw, was parked in the driveway by a side door of the house.

Lying flat on his back, bound and helpless, he looked around. There was nothing in the garage that could help him. The lantern was out of his reach, and though the

joists of the walls were studded with dozens of nails and hooks, placed there by the former tenant, he could not reach them.

A bundle of what looked like canvas was up on a beam; ropes hung from it. On Hatch's left was a window, which had no glass in it. There was a hook on each side of the frame, and from one of these an old, patched inner tube hung disconsolately, its days of usefulness long since over. But the cement floor of the garage had been cleared, and held only dirt.

Keenan stood staring down at his prisoner. Then, deliberately, he kicked Hatch in the side.

"Wise bird," he said, his voice coldly vicious. "I figured I'd better find out just how much you know. And how much the Feds know."

Hatch glanced past Keenan, down the moonlit driveway. The masked thugs, he saw, were carrying boxes out of the house and loading them into the truck.

"Sure," he said wearily. "I'll tell you what I know, punk. We'll trade information."

Keenan laughed. "What'll you do with it?"

"Janna Duquesne found out about your dope racket," Hatch said. "She was at a coke party a couple of nights ago. Afterwards she got scared and phoned Lannigan at Division Headquarters. You overheard her phoning, and she knew it. That's right, uh?"

"A friend of mine heard her," Keenan said. "He told me about it."

"So you killed her."

"I don't kill women!" the gangster blazed suddenly. "Listen, Fed. I got on top the hard way, by knocking down men tougher than I am. But I don't kill women."

"No? Maybe not. You just peddle the stuff to 'em."

Keenan shrugged.

"You've been keeping dope in that secret room in your office," Hatch went on. "Your yarn about using it for a hide-out was pretty weak. There wasn't any ventilation in that room. The walls were perfectly blank. It wasn't a hide-out. It was a store-room."

"Well?"

"After Janna phoned Lannigan, you had a couple of your thugs start clearing out the store-room. Only Lannigan showed up quick—too quick for you. By that time you'd threatened Janna and scared her into keeping her mouth shut, but you were still afraid Lannigan might investigate. So you moved the dope through your office window into the light truck that was waiting outside. And the truck brought it here. By the time I got around, the job was almost done, and Janna and Lannigan were both dead."

"Not my doing," Keenan said. "I'm not kill-crazy. With me it's business. Like rubbing you out because I have to."

"Who's Dyke Carnevan?" Hatch asked.

"Who?" But the gangster's gaze had flickered momentarily.

"Carnevan. The man who told you to give Janna Duquesne a job."

Sudden, raging fury blazed in Keenan's eyes. He ripped out a string of searing curses.

"Carnevan, eh? I'll tell you who he is! The bozo who messed up my whole racket, that's who? Left me holding the bag! That's what I get for stringing along with"—he spat—"Carnevan!"

"Who is he?"

Keenan took out a gun. "I'm saving this load for him, if

he's fool enough to show up around me again. The truck's full," he added, glancing toward it. "So we'll roll. This merchandise goes out of town tonight. As for you, Fed, I told you I'm not kill-crazy. But you've found out too much. It's got to be this way. And don't worry about Carnevan!" He knelt beside Hatch and carefully tested the prisoner's bonds. "You'll do."

He took a corrugated metal ball, the size of a grapefruit, from his pocket, and stood fingering it, his teeth bared in a grin.

"I'll say good-by. And leave this with you. In five minutes after I set it, you'll go to blazes."

The cement floor was cold against Hatch's back.

"Wait, Keenan," he said. "What about Lannigan, and Janna Duquesne?"

"What about them? I didn't kill them."

"I know you didn't," Hatch said. "That's where you made your mistake—getting excited. Janna wasn't talking to Lannigan about you. She didn't know you peddled dope. She had some other information—information about a killer. She told Lannigan, but the murderer was too quick. He had disguised himself as one of your chorus boys, and managed to stick a knife in Janna and slip poison in Lannigan's Martini. Then he made his getaway."

Keenan shrugged impatiently. "Get to the end of it. I'm in a hurry."

"That was what gave you the idea of using the same disguise on your thugs when they came after me. Ruth Duquesne saw only one man when you captured me at her place. She thinks it's the killer. But listen, Keenan! The murderer made one attempt already tonight to bump off

Ruth Duquesne. He'll make another. And she's lying there in her front room unconscious!"

Keenan shook his head in mock sympathy. "Too bad! But maybe Ruth knows more than she should, too. It's nothing to me if she gets a knife in her gizzard. If the Feds are looking for that killer, they won't have time to check up on me too close."

He turned and called to his men.

"Start her up! We've got five minutes."

Masked thugs clambered into the truck. The engine purred. Keenan pulled a pin out of the bomb and laid it carefully on the cement floor. He went out hurriedly, closing the garage doors and locking them.

"So long, G-man!" his voice said, from outside. "Good luck!"

But Hatch was already busy. Five minutes. That was all. And he was bound and trussed like a mummy. His hands were tied together in front of him, but the knots were hard and tight.

The window? He might manage to clamber out, but he couldn't get far enough away from the garage to be safe before the bomb went off. Maybe he could throw the grenade, though. There must be some way!

He heard the truck start up, its tires screeching on gravel.

Hatch rolled to the bomb and picked it up in his bound hands. There was no way of making the thing harmless now, of course. Gripping it carefully between his palms, he got his back against the wall and edged himself up, splinters digging painfully into his skin. But at last he was standing before the window.

His heart sank. The ground outside was overgrown with

weeds and underbrush. With his hands fettered as they were, he couldn't throw the bomb more than a few feet.

Thirty feet away was the road and, far beyond it, the distant, sprawling lights of Hollywood.

The inner tube dangled from its hook on one side of the window. That was it! The inner tube! It was a long chance, but the only one. And it might work.

Hatch still held the bomb between his palms. Keeping his balance with difficulty, he leaned over, gripped the rubber between his teeth, and managed to hook the tube's free end over the hook on the other side of the window. Now the double loop of thick rubber hung across the empty window frame, like a sling-shot.

How many minutes had passed? Hatch couldn't guess. It seemed like half an hour at least. With aching, fumbling fingers he got the bomb in place. Bracing himself, he leaned back, stretching the inner tube with its deadly missile. If the rubber broke . . . There was sweat on Hatch's cheeks.

Then he saw the truck swing into view on the road thirty feet away, its lights probing out through the night. Instantly he released the catapult.

*Whup!* The rubber sang as it snapped forward. Hatch went over backward, thumping his head painfully on the cement. Briefly he imagined that the roaring explosion he heard was only within his skull. The ear-shattering detonation blew in one side of the garage, and that convinced Hatch that his trick had worked.

Gasping, he dragged himself to what was left of the window. The bomb had exploded, all right. Probably within a few feet of the truck. And that grenade must have been loaded with super-dynamite!

Hatch went to work on his bonds. There were plenty of

nails here and there, pounded into the joists, and it did not take long for him to wear through a few strands of rope. After that it was comparatively easy.

Free at last, he went cautiously to the scene of the explosion. What he found there convinced him that Keenan was dead. So were his thugs. The truck itself was scrap metal.

What about Ruth Duquesne? The thought lanced into Hatch's mind. She might still be unconscious, at the mercy of the killer, who was almost certain to return.

The G-man found a gun, wiping it clean of the blood that stained it. The only way to get back to Hollywood was to walk, until he found a car. He took a short-cut down the hillside, brambles clawing at his clothing, whipping at his face. But presently he found a more frequented road, and stopped the first car that came along.

The boy who drove it gulped when he saw Hatch's identification. He wanted to come along, but Hatch dropped him at the first gas station and shoved down the throttle. He was in a hurry.

The street lamps blended into a blur. As he drove, he drew the true-crime magazine out of his pocket and flipped the pages, precariously snatching glances at it. One page was marked. A picture was outlined, that of a man with a beak of a nose, thick, fleshy lips, and a mop of light hair. The caption read:

Charlie Doppler

Wanted for Murder and Robbery of a Federal Bank

Doppler. Hatch knew of the man. A shrewd, cunning, vicious killer, whose flaming guns had blazed a trail of murder through the Mid-west. A man trying to wear Dillinger's shoes. A woman-killer. He had been captured a year and a half ago in Des Moines.

Des Moines! And Keenan had been in Des Moines a year and a half ago.

The authorities had never recovered the eighty thousand in currency that Doppler had stolen. He had cached it somewhere, where it had been waiting when he broke jail after serving a year of a life rap.

That was the answer!

Hatch turned into Serrano, with a screeching of rubber. He was out of the car before it stopped, racing toward the porch of Ruth Duquesne's cottage. It was still dark.

His shoulder struck the door, and he went into that room like a catapult. His gun was in his hand. He heard the crash of a shot, and felt hot lead fan his cheek.

Moonlight slanted in through the open door. It showed a bare patch of carpet. That was all.

But now Hatch knew the lay-out of this room. He climbed over the sofa like a cat, thrusting it out from the wall, dropping behind it as a bullet thunked into the upholstery. His groping hand found a lamp standard. Gingerly he levered himself up, sought for the switch, and turned it.

Light filled the room.

Ruth Duquesne was lying motionless on the floor. Hovering over her was the killer, still wearing the grotesque mask and furry overall suit that had disguised him from the first. His gun spat at the moment Hatch's own did.

The bullet smashed into the G-man's arm, swung him half around. Hatch kept his pistol leveled. He fired again.

The killer's body jerked convulsively. His gun swung crazily, centered on Hatch, but only for a moment. Then it dropped from a limp hand as the masked figure crumpled.

Ruth was not hurt. Hatch had arrived in time. She bandaged his arm as they waited for a response to the agent's

phone call to Headquarters. The girl was as white as paper, but her curiosity was stronger than feminine weakness.

"You gave me one clue when you said Janna went out with Carnevan in the escort service," Hatch said. "Carnevan was hooked up with Keenan, at the Window. That's why he was able to get her that job there. And he kept seeing her—and he talked. Remember that snow party a couple of nights ago? Carnevan must have been hopped up to the ears. So much that he not only told her about Keenan's dope racket, but about himself, too. Who he was, I mean."

"Who was he?" Ruth murmured, moistening her lips.

"Charlie Doppler." Hatch pointed to the true-crime magazine, open in the girl's lap. "Remember when Janna came home that night, acting queer and talking about how Carnevan had meet Keenan in Des Moines a year and a half ago? That was the time the Feds caught Doppler—Carnevan. But they didn't get their hands on eighty grand he'd stolen. Now look. Six months after Doppler's broken out of the pen, he's here in Los Angeles, with Keenan."

"You mean he gave Keenan the money before he—"

"I think we'll find out that's what happened," Hatch said. "Doppler had some hold over Keenan. Probably Keenan sank the dough in narcotics. Or maybe after Doppler collected, he decided to cut himself in on Keenan's racket. Only he talked too much to Janna, and he was kill-crazy. He was afraid she'd give him away to Lannigan. As for Keenan—well, Janna knew about the snow hidden in his office, of course, and he was trying to smooth down that end of the game."

Ruth nodded toward the dead man on the floor. "He isn't

the same as the one in the picture," she said, touching the true-crime magazine with an unsteady finger.

Hatch had already removed Doppler's mask, revealing a tanned, hard face, with a pug nose and thin lips. Dark hair was blood-stained on the carpet.

"Charlie Doppler—Dyke Carnevan," Hatch said. "Compare the initials. They're reversed, but crooks have a habit of using their own initials when they take an alias. Besides, Janna left the explanation on that sheet of paper stuck in the magazine. She wrote, 'He's a masked murderer.' But the mask was Doppler's own face. Ever heard of plastic surgery?"

Ruth's eyes widened. Hatch nodded.

"Yeah. He got a surgeon to give him a new face, and came out here to hide out for a while. But he couldn't keep away from women. He didn't know anybody here, so he looked up an escort service—and Janna figured out the right angles. Only she didn't figure out all of them."

A police siren sounded outside. Hatch sighed and got up.

"I'd better let the boys in," he remarked. "They'll be wondering what this is all about!"

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## FALSE NOTE

*By*

OWEN FOX JEROME

---

A TRIM, competent-looking detective lieutenant met Carter just inside the door of the Parakeet Club in the East Fifties. He looked at the F.B.I. agent with undisguised curiosity. Neither man paid attention to the insidious rhythm of the expert rhumba band beating out its tempos beyond the velvet cord.

"I didn't know you fellows were interested until I got your call," said the detective. "What's wrong?"

"Nylons—bootleg nylons—to the tune of two hundred thousand dollars a month," said the G-Man quietly. "Somebody high up was smuggling the compound out of the Cole Chemical plant."

The detective whistled. "So you were closing in, and the weasel took the easy way out," he said.

"Let's take a look at the body," said Eddie Carter. "I see you haven't closed the club for the night."

"It's open and shut," said the detective. "Everything happened upstairs in one of the private rooms. Why deprive two senators, five correspondents, a judge's wife and most of the columnists in town of their fun? Closing this place is

about like closing the Stock Exchange on a busy Friday morning."

The luxurious small dining room was garishly lighted. In one of the two chairs at the small table in the center, a man wearing a dinner jacket, still sat, head resting on his forearms. The fingers of his right hand still grasped the stem of a wine glass in which a trace of some white, crystalline matter showed among the dregs. On the table opposite him was another almost-drained glass like the one the corpse still held. There were two bottles on the sideboard, one of sherry, one of tawny port. Both were of old and almost unprocurable brands.

"Guess this Herbert Lowery must have accused Cole and walked out on him. Then Cole got scared and did the Dutch. He left a note and everything."

"Let me see it," said Carter.

The detective handed the G-Man a single sheet of paper on which a short message was scrawled. It read:

The F.B.I. is closing in tonight. Carter as good as told me so yesterday—they've just been waiting until our quarterly inventory was complete. I can't face disgrace, I guess. I alone am guilty of diverting the nylon compound to illegal channels. None of my associates was in on it or knew anything about it. May God forgive me.

STEPHEN COLE.

That was all. The G-Man finished reading it a second time, stared at the corpse, bending down to study it more closely. He was scowling.

The detective lieutenant rubbed his hands together briskly. "Open and shut," he said again. "According to the waiter,

they had these little get-togethers every three months. They were partners, you know."

"I know," said Carter quietly. He shook his head as if to clear it. "There's just one hitch—the dead man isn't Cole. It's Herbert Lowery."

"Yeah," said the detective. "We've got a pick-up out on him right—*what!*"

"That's right," said Carter. "This is strictly snafu. But our friend here happens to be Lowery, not Cole."

"I don't get it," said the detective, and Carter could not help smiling at his open consternation. "Why should he write a suicide note and then have somebody else do it for him? It don't make sense."

"Maybe not," said Carter, "but it happened. I'd like to talk to that waiter before the Medical Examiner takes over."

"Sure," said the detective, still bewildered. He turned to give the order, but the words were suspended on his tongue as Stephen Cole was ushered into the room.

Superficially Cole looked a lot like the corpse, and the fact that he too wore a dinner jacket didn't damage the impression.

"I don't under—" he began, then saw the body and stiffened. "Herb!" He turned to the G-Man. "Glad you're here, Carter. What happened?"

"Perhaps you could shed some light on that," said the F.B.I. agent.

"I don't see—" the chemist began, paused to stare again at the corpse. "We had our regular quarterly dinner here to-night. It—well, it wasn't a pleasant occasion. I'd had time to check up on certain things since our talk yesterday. I learned enough to know that my cousin was indulging in black market dealings," he went on. "I accused him of it,

told him he had brought disgrace to the firm and to me, let him know his hours were numbered. He had charge of the business end. I run the laboratories."

"How did he take it?" Carter asked quickly.

"Surprisingly well. He didn't blow up. In fact, he seemed pretty repentant and ready to take his medicine like a man." Cole paused, shuddered. "I never dreamt he meant it like this."

"What did you do then?" the G-Man asked.

"I went outside for a walk after we finished a glass of wine."

"Do you usually drink wine at these occasions?"

"Yes," said the chemist, puzzled. "It may sound silly, but these quarterly dinners have become sort of a ritual. We never have—had much time to talk things over at the plant. And our social tastes were far apart. We keep a special supply here at the Parakeet. I drink sherry, Herb liked tawny port."

"Is this your writing?" Carter handed Cole the suicide note.

"It looks like it," said the chemist. He read it with growing consternation. "But this is insane. I never wrote it."

"The handwriting experts will probably bear you out," said Carter.

"I suppose you'll want to arrest me for murder," said Cole. His eyes reflected complete awareness of the thin ice on which he stood.

"'Want to' is hardly the phrase I'd use," said the G-Man. He paced the room, looking about him, his brows drawn together in a frown. The detective lieutenant and the chemist followed him with their eyes. Suddenly he stopped short, looked at Cole.

"Tell me," he said, "is anything about this room different from what it was when you and your cousin were dining?"

"I don't know," said the chemist. He wrinkled his brow in perplexity as he stared around him. "The chairs aren't in the same places."

"That isn't what I mean," said Carter with a trace of fatigue in his tone. It had been a long, sleepless investigation. "When I walked in here, I got the definite impression that something about this room was wrong."

"Now you mention it, so did I when the minions of the law pushed me in here just now. But I can't put my finger on it."

"Neither can I," said the G-Man.

"Shall I take him down town now?" the detective asked Carter.

The F.B.I. agent shook his head.

"Not yet. Get that waiter in here."

The waiter, a thin, trembling man of premature middle-age came in, looking ready to flee in terror at a harsh word. Carter smiled at him, offered him a cigarette to put him at his ease. The offer was refused.

"You served the drinks?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said the waiter. "But I didn't know there was anything wrong with them!"

"I believe you," said Carter warmly. "Tell me, what did you do when you discovered the body? I want every little detail you can remember."

"At first I thought Mr. Co—it's Mr. Lowery, isn't it, and I was sure . . . At first I thought he had taken a drop too much, though it hardly seemed possible. I came in to clear the table. Then I saw his color and the crystals in the glass.

I went downstairs to report it, and the manager called the police."

"Very good," said Carter. "Didn't you do anything else? Think, man, even if it was only putting your hand in your pocket."

"Let me see," said the waiter. There was a long pause. Finally he said, "I picked up Mr. Cole's napkin. It was on the floor. It was then I got a look at his"—a nod toward the corpse—"face. Then I turned on the direct lighting to get a better look, and—"

"That's *it!*" said Carter exultantly. He hastened to add, "I hope it is."

"What, sir?" said the waiter. "I don't understand."

"You and me both," said the detective.

"The lights," Carter went on. "Never in my life did I see a dining room in a place as costly as the Parakeet, with such garish lighting. That's what was wrong. It's too bright for the ladies' complexions. Let's see it as it was."

With trembling fingers, the servitor went to a wall switch and turned it. For a second, there was darkness. Then the switch snapped again, and the room was suffused with a soft, indirect, rose-amber glow.

"Of course," said Stephen Cole. "But I don't see how the lights. . . ."

"You will," said Carter grimly. He moved to the sideboard, found a pair of wine glasses, poured one full of sherry, one full of tawny port. "Take a look now."

The soft glow made the ruby of the port almost orange, close enough to the shade of the sherry to be very deceptive.

Carter turned back to the waiter.

"One more thing," he said. "Did you have to leave the glasses at any time between pouring and serving them?"

"I—come to think of it, I did," said the waiter, trembling so that he could hardly talk. "Mr. Cole sent me out for more coffee. When I came back, Mr. Lowery was at the sideboard as if he was going to serve the drinks. But he sat down and let me take over."

"'You can have your upper classes, with their villainous demitasses,'" quoted Carter, almost humming. He turned to the chemist, paraphrased, "'But heaven will protect its Stephen Coles.' That extra coffee you ordered saved your life. You'll back the waiter's testimony?"

"Under oath," said the chemist. "It's coming back to me now." A sudden realization of what his cousin had planned struck him. "Why, the crook—"

"An understatement, if anything," said the G-Man.

"I'm still in the dark," said the detective. "Who did it?"

"Unless I'm sadly mistaken, it was murder, all right—only, thanks to the rose-amber lights, the killer murdered himself. He was the man I was after, but I'd have had the devil's own time proving it if his scheme had worked. You might see if he has any of the poison on him."

He did—a packet of cyanide of potassium in a jacket pocket. The detective looked at it, then at the corpse.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle!" he said.



# CACTUS AND SAGEBRUSH

EDITED BY

LEO MARGULIES

In a nation of individualists, the American cowboy was the greatest individualist of all. Untrammelled by convention or inhibitions, he rode on his way, working where he pleased, and for whom he pleased. Earning his pay by bitter and dangerous toil, and carelessly throwing away a month's wages in one night of wild frolic. Often the only law he knew was that he carried on his hip; but the code by which he lived was stricter than any law put down on paper, and more religiously adhered to.

The cowboy is America's most glamorous legend, America's most colorful tradition. He is King Arthur and the Round Table. He is Jason and the Golden Fleece. He is Ulysses, Hector, Esau, and Ishmael.

He is history and tradition; but, if the expression be allowed, he is contemporary history and tradition. In the West are vast stretches, such as the Big Bend country of Texas, where the soil has never known and never will know the scrape of the plow. Rangeland, where the cowboy rides today as he rode in yesteryears—rides with adventure and romance as bridle companions, as glamorous, as individual, as unique as when the first brand was run on the hide of a bawling steer.

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