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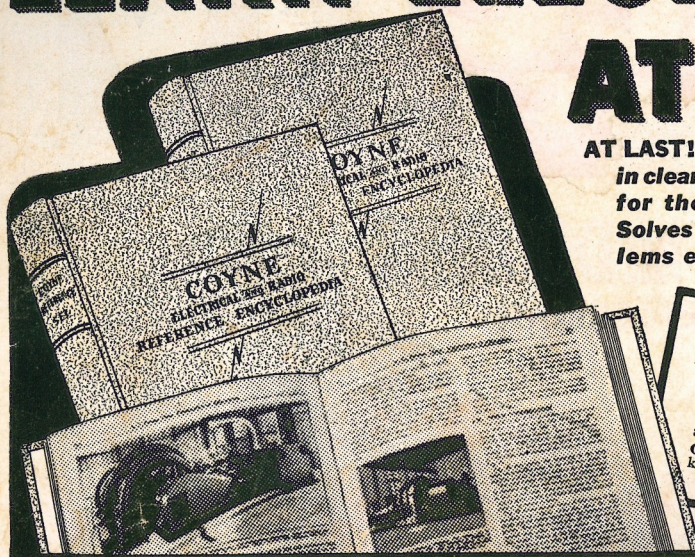
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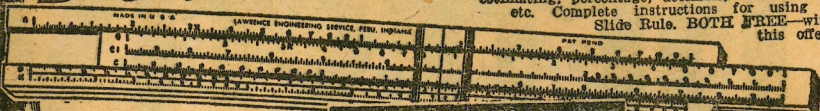
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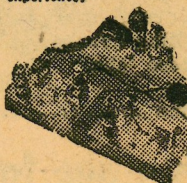
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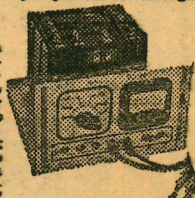
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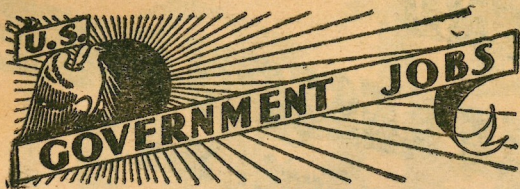
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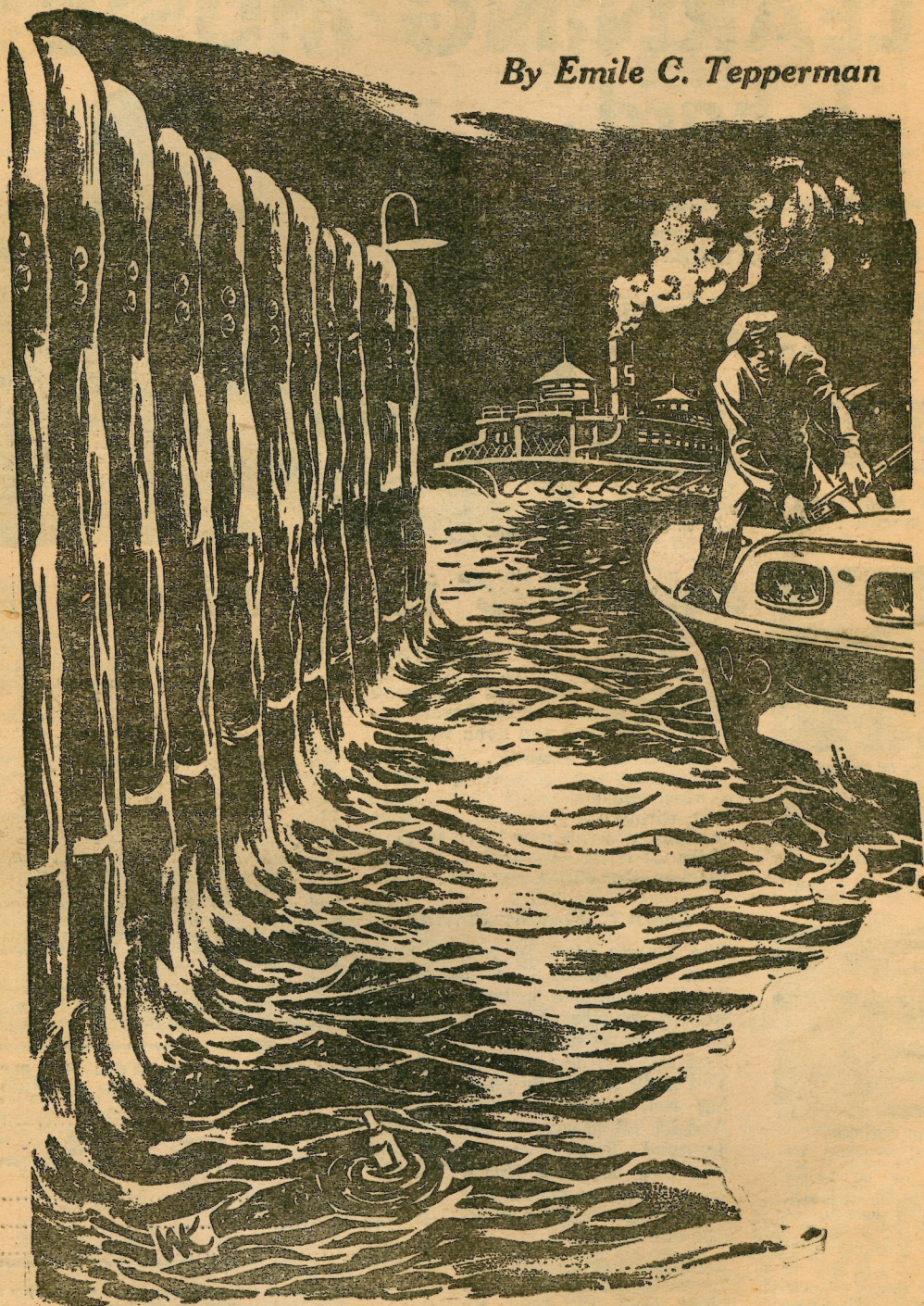
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CHAPTER I

MARTY QUADE didn't know a soul in Spartanville; and nobody knew him, which was just as well as far as Marty was concerned. He had no baggage, so he was one of the first through the platform gates. His eyes narrowed when he saw that two men were stationed at the gate, inspecting each person who

came out. They were hard men, cold-eyed, tough-looking customers. But they only gave Marty a cursory glance and made no effort to stop him.

Marty walked across to the newsstand and bought a street-map of Spartanville, and then he went over to a bench and studied it. He found where the Spartan County Criminal Court was located, and also where the

river lay in reference to the railroad station. Then he looked for the corner of Grove and Vine where Judge Sutherland's house was located.

All the time that he studied the map, he also watched the activities in the station. He saw that there were other men at the gates of other incoming-train platforms, and also that there were men at the various street exits of the station. None of these men wore badges. There was nothing to indicate whether they were officers of the law, or not. But one thing was certain—whoever they were looking for would not get through this station unobserved.

Marty's eyes were cold and hard as he arose from the bench and strolled over to the telephone booths at the other end. He had seen the two men from his gate walking over in that direction. Marty hurried just a little and came up close behind them. The two men were talking disgustedly.

"We been meeting trains here all day, Nick!" one was grumbling. "How long do we have to keep it up?"

"Only till midnight," the other told him. "Madrigal burns at midnight. All we got to do is watch till then. After that, we don't care if *fifty* of his brothers come to town!"

The other chuckled. "It must be tough on Madrigal—knowing his brother is trying to get through, and *knowing* that we ain't gonna *let* him!"

"Yeah," said Nick. "He must feel fine, sitting there in the death house, waiting for a reprieve that *can't* reach him on time!"

"Serves him right. He should never have tried to tangle with Cadogan!"

Marty fell a little behind as the two men approached a third, who was standing near the phone booths. This third man had a long sheet of paper in his hand, and he was marking it with a pencil. He looked up at the two and said, "No luck yet, huh?"

"He wasn't on the seven-fifteen from New York," said Nick.

"All right," said the man with the paper. "The next train in is the seven-

thirty-two from St. Louis. You can take that one. Track nineteen."

"Okay, Slagle," said Nick. The two men turned and almost bumped into Marty, who had come up close behind them again.

"Excuse me," Marty said, pushing in between them, and stepping into one of the phone booths.

The man with the paper—Slagle—gave Marty a keen look. "Say, mister!" he said. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

Marty stopped, just inside the phone booth. He half turned, so that he was facing Slagle and the other two men, who had stopped, sensing from Slagle's tone that this was no mere idle question.

"I beg your pardon?" Marty said.

Slagle's eyes had become very narrow. "I was asking if I didn't know you from somewhere."

"Could be," said Marty. Slagle *did* know him from somewhere. Marty had thought he would pass unrecognized in Spartanville, at least for a while. He hadn't counted on this. Five or six years ago, he had met Slagle, when the latter had been employed by a shady detective agency in New York. He had met Slagle under very unpleasant circumstances, and in the course of the meeting his fist had come into violent contact with Slagle's jaw. Slagle's recollection was distinctly an unpleasant one, as evidenced by his sour expression; but it was evident that he did not remember the exact event. Possibly, in due time, he'd remember.

"Listen," he said. "What's your name?"

"Evanevski," said Marty. "Nicholas Alexandrovitch Evanevski."

"H'm," said Marty. "I certainly don't recall that name. Mine is Slagle. Glad to know you."

"I doubt it," said Marty. He moved all the way into the phone booth and closed the door. He saw Slagle outside, peering suspiciously through the glass panel, but he turned his back on him, slipped a nickel into the coin

box, and dialed a number. He held the receiver against his ear while the phone rang exactly seven times at the other end. Then he pressed down on the hook, and the connection was broken and the nickel returned. He pocketed the coin, opened the door, and stepped out of the booth.

THE other two men had gone, but Slagle was still there, watching him. Suddenly, a great light dawned in Slagle's eyes. "By God!" he exclaimed. "I know you now! Quade! Damn you!"

"At your service," said Marty.

"You're here to help Madrigal!"

"Could be."

"Well, you'll never get out of here alive! I have fifty men in this station!" He turned and started to utter a shout, but Marty stepped up close to him, with one hand in his coat pocket. The gun in his pocket pressed close against Slagle's side.

"The last time we met," Marty murmured, "I broke your jaw. I see it's healed okay. But what this gun of mine will do to you won't heal so easy."

Slagle gulped hard, and swallowed the shout he had been about to utter. "Now wait, Quade. Don't be a fool. You'd never get out of here if you shot me—"

"Maybe not," said Marty. "Maybe we'd both go to the morgue together. So suit yourself."

"Take it easy, Quade. I won't yell."

"That's fine, Slagle. Just oblige me by stepping into that phone booth. There, that's a nice fellow. I knew you'd listen to reason!"

Slagle edged into the phone booth. Marty pressed in close behind him, blocking the entrance with his broad shoulders, and resting his elbow upon the telephone box so that his gun was raised above the other's head.

Slagle was sweating a little. "Now listen, Quade, I don't know where you fit in this game, but if you came to Spartanville to help Madrigal the smartest thing you can do is to take the next train back home."

"Cadogan framed Madrigal, didn't he?" Marty asked softly.

Slagle's eyes became veiled. "I don't know what you're talking about, Quade. All I know is, that Guy Madrigal is in jail for murder, and he's slated to burn tonight. Ned Madrigal, his brother, is supposed to be coming to town tonight. Ned phoned in to the district attorney that *he* committed the murder that Guy is slated to burn for, and the D. A. said there was only one way for Ned to save his brother and that was to come to Spartanville and give himself up."

"H'm," said Marty. "And you boys are on the watch for Ned Madrigal, eh? Your idea is to knock him off before he can reach the D. A.?"

Slagle shrugged. "All I can say is that Cadogan wants Madrigal to go to the chair tonight. And when Cadogan wants something to happen, it happens!"

"Well," said Marty, "here's something Cadogan wasn't counting on!" He brought his gun barrel down hard against the side of Slagle's head. There was a wicked *thump*, and Slagle emitted a long, painful sigh. He slumped down, and Marty stepped out of the phone booth, closing the door quickly. From out here, Slagle's body was not visible, for only the upper half of the door had a glass panel.

Marty slipped the gun back in his coat pocket, started to whistle a tune, and sauntered out into the street.

MARTY chose to walk from the railroad station rather than take a cab which might later be traced. On the way, he bought a local newspaper, and glanced at the headlines. One story read:

MADRIGAL DIES AT MIDNIGHT

Only a Reprieve from the
Governor Can Now Save
Convicted Murderer

Marty frowned and dropped the newspaper in a trash receiver. He walked north through the city, until he reached the corner of Grove and

Vine. Judge Sutherland's house was an old, ivy-covered mansion sitting incongruously on a luxurious corner plot, with a tall apartment building on one side of it on Grove, and a row of smart stores on the other side, on Vine Avenue. Though it was only eight o'clock in the evening, the house was entirely dark except for one window on the ground floor.

Marty did not go into the house. He walked past on Vine, on the opposite side of the street, noting the car parked near the corner, and noting the man who loitered on Grove in front of the entrance. He continued on, halfway down the block, and entered a drug store. He went into the telephone booth, and dialed the same number which he had dialed from the station. Once more he let it ring exactly seven times, then hung up and got his nickel back.

He came out of the drug store and stood at the curb, watching Judge Sutherland's house. In a moment, the light in the ground floor room was extinguished, then immediately relit.

Marty nodded in satisfaction. He crossed the street, loitered along Grove for half a block, then crossed over to the side of Sutherland's house and ducked into an alley between two apartment buildings. He made his way down the length of the alley to the rear, stopped there and waited in the dark. Pretty soon he distinguished the figure of a man approaching through the back yard. He whistled softly and the man replied. In a moment, the shadowy figure joined him.

Judge Sutherland was a tall man, with iron-gray hair, and a strong jaw.

"Thank God you got here, Quade!" he whispered, as they shook hands. "I was afraid they'd manage to stop you, too!"

The judge glanced nervously around, as if fearful of being spied upon, even here in the protective curtain of darkness. He drew Marty closer into the lee of the tall building.

"I got your signals, Marty, first

from the station, and then from across the street. Then I signalled back by blinking my light, and stole out the back way to meet you. It's lucky we arranged for those signals. They're watching me like hawks; and my phone is tapped."

"It looks like they have your friend, Guy Madrigal, sewed up tight, eh?"

"Indeed they have, Marty. Guy Madrigal has been the spearhead of the reform element in Spartanville county for years. Now, at last, he was in a position to challenge Cadogan's supremacy. He announced that he intends to enter the primary race against Cadogan for district attorney. Cadogan has been district attorney for five terms and is the political boss of the city."

"Ah!" said Marty. "If Madrigal is nominated and elected, he'll have access to all files. He'll be able to expose the stuff that Cadogan has been pulling in this county!"

Sutherland nodded. "It would be the end of Cadogan—not only politically, but in every other way. Cadogan has done a thousand things for which he could go to jail, maybe to the electric chair, if another man were district attorney. He's fighting not only for a continuation of his power, but for his very life. His back is against the wall. He's determined to see Guy Madrigal burn tonight!"

"I see," said Marty. "And I suppose it was Cadogan who prosecuted the case against Guy Madrigal?"

"Of course. It was Cadogan who started the ball rolling in the first place. It was Cadogan who jockeyed Guy Madrigal's younger brother, Ned, into a position where he killed a man. Then Cadogan fixed it so Ned Madrigal could escape; and he framed Guy for the crime."

"H'm," Marty said thoughtfully. "And now Ned Madrigal is on his way back, to give himself up?"

JUDGE SUTHERLAND laughed bitterly. "Ned Madrigal is frightened. He's yellow. It's only my daugh-

ter, Joan, who's forcing him to do the honorable thing. Joan is Ned Madrigal's wife. She chose to go with him when he fled from the city, and she's been with him ever since, trying to make him see that the only thing he can do is give himself up in order to save his brother. If he does, Cadogan will be compelled to ask the governor for a reprieve."

"So Ned's on his way in?"

"Yes. But Cadogan's men are everywhere, watching for him. They'll kill him when he shows up—and leave Guy Madrigal to go to the chair."

"And you want me to help Ned Madrigal get into town, past that cordon of killers?"

"I want you to do more than that, Marty. I want you to meet him, and see that he reaches Cadogan's office alive. And I want you to see that Cadogan asks for that reprieve. In other words, I want you to save Guy Madrigal's life!"

"All right," Marty said quietly. "I'll do it."

"There's not much money in this for you, Marty. I know you're the highest-priced private detective in New York. I know you're making a great sacrifice to come here and help an old friend—"

"Forget it," said Marty. "I told you once that you could call on me for anything at all. And I meant it."

"You see," explained Judge Sutherland, "it's my daughter, Joan, that I'm worried about. She's a high-spirited girl. She's only been married to Ned Madrigal for ten days. She should have left him when he got into trouble, right after their marriage. But not she. She said she married him for better or for worse, and she'd take what came along. So she went with him. And now she's trying to get him to do the only thing that a man can do—give himself up so that his brother won't die in his place."

"How's he coming into the city?" Marty asked.

"By ferry, from Oldenburg, across

the river. He'll be on the Exeter Street Ferry. It leaves Oldenburg at eight-thirty. It takes nine minutes across the river, so he'll be here at eight-thirty-nine. You haven't much time if you're going to meet him. He'll have a written confession with him, which he'll give to you—in case he's killed."

"They'll be watching the ferry, of course," Marty said.

"Naturally. They've been watching the railroad station and auto approaches to the city all day long. Cadogan fixed it so that a rumor spread that the Touhey gang was heading this way, and that gave them an excuse to set up barriers and stop all cars. He's brought hundreds of shady men in from New York and Philadelphia—men who are ready to kill for a price. He's deputized them, and placed them at every train, bus and ferry terminal. You don't know how vicious those men are—"

"I think I know," Marty said drily.

"How will I recognize this Ned Madrigal? Is he tall or short, fat or skinny, light or dark?"

"He's a young fellow, about twenty-five, and very slightly built. He's about five feet five, thin, only weighs about a hundred and ten. Dark hair." The judge paused, hesitating, then went on. "I arranged with Joan over the phone for him to wear an identifying mark, so you'd have no trouble picking him out. He'll have his coat collar turned up, and there'll be a little gold pin showing on the underside of his right lapel. It's Joan's graduation pin. But you see, the trouble is that I think my phone was tapped at the time I talked with Joan!"

"Ah!" said Marty. "So Cadogan's boys will also be able to pick him out easily!"

Sutherland nodded miserably. "And I have no means of getting in touch with him!"

"How nice!" Marty growled.

Judge Sutherland put a hand on his arm. "I won't blame you if you give this up, Marty. The situation is so

hopeless, I don't see how you can do anything. I—"

HE BROKE off, startled, as the scraping sound of a footstep sounded off to the left, in the darkness of the back yard. Marty tensed, his hand dropping into his overcoat pocket. The beam of a flashlight flickered into life, and swept along the yard, missing them by inches. A low voice spoke from behind that light.

"I'm sure the old bloke sneaked out the back way. I was watching in the back, all the time, but I just went around the front when you signalled me that he'd put his light out. When I got back, I saw the kitchen door swinging open, so I went in and looked over the house. The judge wasn't there."

Another voice said caustically, "Boy, will Cadogan be sore when we tell him we let the judge slip out without tailing him! He's probably gone to meet Ned Madrigal. It was just what we were waiting for, and we missed out on it!"

Hearing those two men talk, Marty pushed the judge close up against the wall, and brought the automatic out of his pocket. He waited, tense, with his finger around the trigger, while the flashlight swept out across the yard, then came back toward the mouth of the alley, where Marty and the judge stood.

The light splashed across Marty's taut figure, and the two searchers uttered sharp exclamations. A gun barked, and a slug *spanged* into the wall of the building, close to Judge Sutherland's head. But Marty's automatic was already spitting flame as he fired four times swiftly, into the eye of the flashlight. The light disintegrated, and a man uttered a sharp cry. Then another gun began to thunder as the second man began shooting. Lead spattered around Marty, and he turned to seize the judge's arm. "Let's go. We're late for the ferry. We can't stop—"

He broke off, gasping, as he turned

to see the judge slumped down against the wall, with his right arm hanging limp.

"Get going, Marty," the judge gasped. "The police'll be here in a minute. For God's sake, don't let them catch you—or you'll never get to the ferry!"

Marty's face was grim. What the judge said was utterly true. Though the unseen assailant had ceased firing, he might still be lurking out there in the dark, waiting for a chance at another shot. But Marty couldn't afford to stay—not even to ascertain the extent of the judge's wound.

"I'll be back!" he said bleakly, and slipped into the alley. Momentarily, he was silhouetted against the faint light from the street, and the unseen killer's gun blasted. A slug whined past his head, ricochetting off the side-wall of the adjoining building. But Marty didn't even turn to answer that shot. He bent low, and ran down the alley, hugging the wall at the right. No more shots came, but he heard heavy footsteps pounding after him, rounding into the alley. Then he heard a cry, and a sudden crashing fall.

"Damn you, you tripped me—"

Marty grinned thinly as he raced down the alley and swung into the street. The judge must have stuck a foot out to trip that running killer—to give Marty the extra time he needed to win free of pursuit.

Marty slowed to a walk as he came into the street. He heard a policeman's whistle around the corner, and the shouts of people sticking their heads out of windows, asking where the shooting had come from. His face expressionless, he forced himself to walk, not run, down the street, in the opposite direction from the policeman's rapidly approaching steps. At the corner, he turned off, and accelerated his pace. He saw a cab, and this time he did not hesitate to flag it. Time was growing short. It was eight-thirty, and he must be at the ferry by eight-thirty-nine.

And as the taxi rolled across town, he grimly removed the partly-used clip from his automatic and inserted a full one. Tonight, his life—and the lives of others—might depend on one extra cartridge.

CHAPTER II

FRONT STREET was a-hum with activity. Spartanville was a coal center for the mining country in the surrounding hills. Day and night, trucks came rolling into town; and day and night the coal was transferred from the trucks to the barges in the river. Up and down the waterfront from Exeter Street, as far as the eye could reach, coal chutes rumbled and winches creaked under the subdued glow of shaded electric lamps, and men sweated in the wintry night.

But Marty Quade had no eye for all of this. His watch showed that it was eight-thirty-five; out in the middle of the black and swirling waters he saw the ungainly shape of the ferry boat cutting across the stream from the opposite shore.

Soon it was heading in closer, and Marty could distinguish individual figures on the foredeck, waiting to step off as soon as the ferry docked. He moved out on to the pier, and at once spotted the men who must be watching for Ned Madrigal's arrival. There were two of them, just as there had been at the train platform.

They were standing at either side of the runway, down which the passengers would have to walk, upon leaving the boat. Each of those men had a hand in a pocket, and they were tense and wary. As the time grew closer to midnight, they would redouble their watchfulness, for they were sure that Ned Madrigal would attempt to come through. And if they had really had Judge Sutherland's wire tapped when he had talked with Joan, then surely they must know that Ned was on this particular ferry.

Marty glanced around the dock. He saw now that there were others,

watching from other vantage points. He spotted half a dozen other men, some engaged in idle conversation, others watching the approaching ferry with concentrated gaze.

Even as he watched, he saw one of those men exchange a signal with the watchers at the runway. Then those scattered watchers began to move forward, closing in on the ferry exit.

Marty's blood raced. He glanced down along the side of the pier where he stood, and saw a small motor launch down there, with two men in it. One had the wheel, while the other crouched up forward, holding a dark and bulky object close against his body. Marty caught a glimpse of an ugly black snout, and he knew that the object was a sub-machine gun. Both those men were watching the approaching ferryboat, their attitudes tense and wary.

This then, was the ultimate precaution which Cadogan's men were taking! If their quarry should scent danger, and should jump into the river in a desperate attempt to swim for his life, they would cut him down in the water with the sub-machine gun.

Now Marty understood the odds which faced him.

Cadogan's men knew that Madrigal was on this boat!

The odds against getting Ned Madrigal alive through this closing cordon of killers were fantastic. And the time was so short; a matter of minutes now, before the ferry would be nosing into the slip. . .

Even as these thoughts flashed through his mind, Marty was moving closer to the edge of the pier, until he stood directly above that little motor launch. And with the urgent pressure of time at his back, he took the automatic out of his pocket. He bent his knees, leaned forward, and jumped.

HE LANDED lithely on the deck, directly behind the man at the wheel. The fellow turned, uttering a

grunt of surprise; and then the grunt changed to a pig-like squeal as Marty's gun-butt came up in a vicious swipe to meet the fellow's chin. Metal crashed against bone, and the man's head snapped back. He staggered into the wheel. His body made a half-turn, and he collapsed on the deck, with blood streaming from his chin.

The man up forward with the sub-machine gun had swung around at the first sound. For a moment he did not comprehend what was going on behind the wheel-house. But then he saw Marty's shape coming around toward him, and he uttered a hoarse cry. He brought the sub-machine gun up, with his finger on the trip, but he never fired it, for Marty's automatic blasted once, and the slug caught him in the right shoulder, spun him around off balance, and over the side.

The man screamed as he went over, and let go of the sub-machine gun, throwing up both hands in a frantic effort to clutch at something that might save him. But there was nothing but air for him to grasp at, and he went over into the black water, between the boat and the pier, his scream cutting through the night with a sharp and frantic edge of terror. The machine gun thudded on the deck, and slid down between Marty's feet.

The man's scream brought a rush of people toward the edge of the pier; some of them the executioners who had been waiting for the ferry-boat to dock. But Marty Quade had already swung in behind the wheel, pushing aside the inert body of the man he had knocked out. He reached down for the starter, and pushed the button. The starter whirled as Marty choked her. On the pier, men were crowding close to the edge, looking down, not quite understanding what had taken place. And by the time they realized that an interloper was sitting in on their game, the engine caught, kicked, and roared into life.

Marty opened the throttle wide, and the launch leaped away like a fiery thoroughbred under the spur.

Marty felt the cold spray sweeping his face. The wind caught his hat and carried it away, and billowed his overcoat wide open, dragging it out behind him like some weird bat's wings. He gripped the wheel, fighting for a footing on the whipping deck, and headed the launch parallel with the pier, then swung her out across the bows of the approaching ferry-boat. There was barely ten feet now between the ferry and the slip, and Marty sent the launch darting into that space like a comet; then, before he passed the prow of the broad ferry, he threw the engine into reverse, and the launch almost stood on its head, but it stopped for an instant.

Marty threw her into neutral, and peered up at the crowded deck of the ferry, into the faces of the excited, jabbering passengers; seeking one face, a face he had never seen—seeking the slight figure of a man with his coat collar turned up, and a bit of a gold pin on his lapel.

Up above, on the bridge of the ferry-boat, a bell jangled as the cursing captain signalled the engineer for full speed astern to avoid running down the madman who had cut across his bows in that launch.

The ferry-boat jolted and jarred to a stop as the engineer obeyed; and for an instant both boats seemed to hang motionless upon the water, while the men on the pier crowded close to the end, with guns drawn openly now, understanding that their prey was about to be snatched virtually from within their jaws.

Marty's desperate glance ran up and down the passengers on the ferry, failing to spot the man he sought. He raised his voice and shouted into the night: "Madrigal! Where are you? Come on, you fool. Jump for your life!"

A GUN blasted from the pier head, and a slug gouged into the deck almost at Marty's feet; then a second and a third shot, coming uncomfortably close. Marty's heart sank. If

Madrigal wasn't on the ferry, Marty had made a prize fool of himself. More than that, he might finish up in the morgue with nothing to show for his effort but a collection of bullet holes.

He ducked down alongside the wheelhouse just as a second volley blasted from the pier. Bullets smashed into the deck, into the wheelhouse, and into the unconscious body of the man who lay on the deck. If Marty hadn't ducked, he would have been riddled.

It was getting too hot to remain here. The captain was leaning out of the window of his bridge, shaking his fist and yelling imprecations, and the fusillades from shore would soon make a sieve of the launch.

Once more Marty raised his voice, in a last try. "Madrigal! Are you there—"

As if in answer to a prayer, the slight figure of a man came thrusting out through the crowded mass of passengers on the ferry's deck. Marty's blood pounded with sudden fierce satisfaction. It was Madrigal. His coat collar was turned up, he wore a cap low on his head, and there gleamed the bit of gold pin on his turned-up lapel.

"Jump!" Marty yelled. At the same time he picked up the sub-machine from between his feet, and sent a short burst high over the heads of the snipers on the pier. It had the desired effect. They dropped flat on their faces, and the barrage ceased for an instant.

In that second there was a *thud* on the deck, and Marty glimpsed the slight figure of Madrigal landing on all fours.

"Hold on!" Marty yelled, and opened the throttle wide. The launch leaped away, clearing the ferry-boat in a second, and Marty guided her upstream, with a hail of lead pursuing them. But in another minute they were out in midstream, beyond range of the shore, and Marty had time to see Madrigal picking himself up,

gripping the rail hard with both hands.

"Well!" he grunted. "We got you out of that. Now, how the devil are we going to get you into town before midnight?"

Madrigal didn't answer. He kept his grip on the rail, and edged over toward the wheelhouse where Marty stood. His foot touched the body of the man who lay there, and he peered down and saw the scuppers full of blood. Madrigal put both hands to his face, uttered a little sound like a smothered scream, and swayed dizzily. Then his knees buckled and he sank down in a dead faint.

Marty Quade swore lustily. "You damned yellow little cur! This is no time to faint at the sight of blood!"

He closed the throttle down to idling, locked the wheel, and bent over the slight figure. He got hold of him roughly by the lapels, and lifted him easily that way with one hand.

"Snap out of it!" he barked, and slapped him hard in the face.

Madrigal's cap was jolted off his head by the slap, and thick golden hair, which had been piled high underneath, billowed out in a yellow cascade.

Marty's eyes popped. He almost lost his balance and went overboard.

"Holy Jumping Jehosephat!" he croaked. "A girl!"

CHAPTER III

SHE opened her eyes, and there was a silly expression on her face. Her left cheek was stinging red where Marty had slapped her. She put a hand up and touched it, and said wonderingly, "Did you hit me? Why did you hit me?"

Marty choked back the strong language he would have liked to use. Instead, he pointed to the bloodstains all over her clothes.

"You fainted when you stepped in the blood," he said. "Now—who the devil are you?"

She was still a little groggy but she

answered promptly, "Joan Sutherland Madrigal."

"I thought as much!" Marty grunted. "What was the idea of coming in that get-up? Did you have some idea of taking your husband's place?"

"I had to come," she told him swiftly, looking up into his face. "Ned went into a blue funk at the last minute. He—he couldn't face it. He refused to take the ferry. So I took his clothes and the signed confession, and came instead. I hoped that you might be able to do something with the confession."

"From what your father tells me," Marty growled, "we need Ned Madrigal here. He's the only one who can save Guy Madrigal. Here it's almost nine o'clock, and Guy burns at midnight!"

He swung away from her angrily, and unlashed the wheel. But his anger was not for her. Looking at her over the wheel, as she stood hopelessly, hanging on to the wheelhouse rail, with her golden hair streaming out behind her, he thought that a girl as gorgeous and as brave as this one deserved a better husband. True, she had fainted at the sight of all that blood; but it had only been a momentary reaction. She was keeping her chin up right now.

"What are we going to do?" she asked in a lost little voice.

Marty laughed harshly. He jerked his head down-river, toward the eye of a powerful searchlight which had suddenly sprung to life across the water. It was fingering out toward them.

"What we have to do right now," he told her, "is to try and get ashore in one piece. They're after us—and how!"

He opened the throttle wide, and the launch's prow rose high as she cut through the water. The vibration of the straining engine almost made the deck-boards dance under their feet.

Behind them, the pursuing craft gained, and the searchlight caught up

with them, bathing them in its merciless glare. And the huge eye began overhauling them.

Then, a burst of fire from the pursuing boat crashed into the stern of their launch, and another stream of fiery tracer bullets whined almost in their ears.

"Here, grab the wheel!" Marty shouted. He caught her arm, pulled her around in front of the wheel, and she put both hands on it.

"Keep her zigzagging!" Marty ordered. Then he picked up the sub-machine gun, and dropped to one knee. He pulled the trip back and swivelled the muzzle around, sending a sweeping hail of lead at the pursuers. Then he steadied the gun on the searchlight, and gave it another burst. He grinned tightly as the searchlight's eye died under the volley, leaving the river in sudden blackness.

"Hard aport," Marty ordered. "And then cut the engine!"

Joan obeyed mechanically. The launch veered over toward the opposite shore. The engine's staccato roar trickled into silence as she cut the ignition. They drifted quietly across current through the blackness.

NOW the only sound was the powerful purr of the engine in the pursuing speed-boat. The sound of men's voices carried to them across the intervening stretch of water.

"They must be drifting close by. Keep your guns ready, and your eyes peeled. We'll run close to them on this course. They can't drift far. The minute you hear a sound, gave it to them!"

"Where's the other boat? It ought to be here by this time."

"Here it comes! It's got a light. Now we can go to work!"

Almost simultaneously, another searchlight cut through the night, this one coming from up-river and the great bulk of a cabin-cruiser came sweeping down on them. The light played across the water, and picked up the other pursuing boat first, pass-

F D A

ing within a dozen feet of Marty's launch.

"We have to abandon ship!" Marty whispered in Joan's ear, "The minute they spot us with that light, they'll have us between them. Can you swim?"

"Yes."

Marty reached in and fumbled in the dark, inside the wheelhouse, and came up with two life-belts. He strapped one around Joan, and the other around himself. Then he put his hand on the starter button.

"Jump!" he ordered Joan. "Head for the Spartanville shore. I'll follow you in a second."

She hesitated for an instant, and he growled, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

She smiled at him in the dark, and he was barely able to tell that she was smiling. "I think you're okay, Marty Quade," she said softly. Then she took a clean dive into the river.

Marty waited while he counted sixty, to give her a chance to get some distance from the launch. The searchlight was sweeping back toward him, would catch him in a moment. Just before it reached the launch, Marty opened the throttle wide and set it. Then, crouching low, he jabbed the starter button with his finger, and catapulted himself off the deck in a low, long dive. Just as he hit the water he heard the launch's engine burst into life, and he caught a glimpse of the launch racing across-current through the water toward the opposite shore.

The life-belt kept him high in the water, but he didn't have to fear detection at the moment, for frenzied shouts went up from both hunting boats.

"There she goes! Get the light on her! Give her a burst!"

For the moment, the attention of both boats was focussed exclusively on that scooting little launch. They had no way of telling that their quarry had flown from its deck, for the searchlight only caught it momen-

tarily in its crazily erratic course. If anything, the crews of the two pursuing craft must have thought that the fugitives were wounded, and lying on the deck in their own blood.

Marty swam strongly toward the Spartanville shore, and in a moment he spotted Joan's figure, just ahead of him. She was doing a nice, competent side-stroke that carried her through the water at a satisfactory rate. Marty moved up alongside her and called out in a low voice, "Nice work, Joan. Take it easy. It's only about sixty yards more."

He turned over on his back, in order to get a view of the river. Out there, other searchlights had come into play, as more boats joined in the chase. He caught a glimpse of a long police boat nosing the launch over toward the far shore. Now they would discover that their prize was empty, and know that the fugitives had taken to the water.

Marty turned over in the water, and began stroking again. They were close to shore, a couple of miles above Exeter Street dock. Farther down the river, hundreds of people were lining the docks watching the exciting chase. But the alarm had not yet spread this far up.

"Go slow now, Joan," Marty warned. "We can't tell what we'll run into."

They were abreast of a low white building with a pennant and an American flag flying over it. There were several launches tied up here, and a companionway leading up to a catwalk along the rear of the building.

"It's a boat club," said Joan. "I know the place. There won't be anyone here this late, except the caretaker."

"All right," said Marty. "Up you go!"

HE followed her up the ladder. With the water dripping from their hair and faces, they clumped silently along the rear of the building. From here they had an excellent view of the river. The searchlights were

criss-crossing the dark waters, sweeping up and down as they sought the fugitives.

Marty grinned. "Pretty soon now, they'll get the idea that we made it into town!"

"What'll they do then?" Joan asked.

Marty shrugged. "They'll probably get an alarm out for Ned Madrigal and one John Doe. They don't know who I am, and they think you're Ned Madrigal. If we can only get some towels and dry clothes, we can go to work."

"To work?"

"Sure. The time gets shorter every minute. We have to work fast to stop Guy Madrigal's execution at midnight!"

She started to speak, but Marty suddenly clamped a hand over her mouth. They listened, and heard a man's heavy steps somewhere inside the building.

Marty put his mouth close to her ear. "The caretaker must be coming out to see what's going on in the river!"

They stood motionless, hugging the wall. The footsteps stopped, somewhere close by, and a lock grated in a door. A moment later, a door opened, just a few feet away from them. Already, Marty had his wet automatic in his hand. He moved like a cat toward that opening door, and when the figure of the caretaker appeared, he thrust the gun into the man's ribs.

"Don't move, pal!" he whispered.

The watchman had a flashlight in his hand, and a revolver holstered at his side. But he made no attempt to use the gun. He raised his hands in the air. "Don't shoot," he said. "Just take whatever you want, and beat it. We're insured. But there isn't much of anything, except some clothes."

"Clothes!" said Marty. He had moved over behind the watchman, so their victim couldn't see his face. He reached around and took the revolver from the man's holster. "I'm going to have to tie you up, pal. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead," said the watchman.

"I'd prefer it. Otherwise they might not believe my story."

Marty marched the man inside, and they found several lengths of rope in a locker. They got the watchman tied, and left him as comfortable as they could, and then moved into the main section of the clubhouse. Marty found the electric light switch, and turned on the lights. He grinned, and pointed to two doors. One said, "Ladies' locker room." The other said, "Men's locker room."

"Make it snappy, Joan," he said. "See you in five minutes. Don't wait to powder your nose. And don't leave anything to identify you!"

In the men's locker room, Marty found everything he needed for a dozen complete changes. There were yachtsmen's costumes and fishing clothes hanging in the open cubbyholes, and a plentiful supply of freshly laundered towels on a shelf. He got rid of his soaking clothing, removed everything from the pockets, and ripped his tailor's label from inside the coat.

He selected a very handsome blue yachting costume, with an appropriate stiff-visored cap. He found a blue shirt to go with it, and a bow-tie, and even some nice fresh underwear. In one of the cubbyholes he found shoes and he tried one pair. They fitted him well enough, and he sighed with relief.

For all his care in selecting the proper clothes, he worked smoothly and speedily. He was through, and out in the main room several minutes before Joan. When she appeared, her golden hair was braided neatly, and tied in a halo. She was ravishingly attractive in a pair of corduroy slacks and a corduroy blouse, and a pair of low-heeled, felt-soled shoes. She had her gold pin pinned to her blouse.

Marty left her there for a moment, and went back to the rear room where they had left the watchman tied up. He took several bills from his roll of damp money, and laid them down be-

side the bound man, weighting them with his flashlight.

"I'm leaving two hundred dollars," he said. "That should cover everything we took from here. I'm keeping your revolver, temporarily. I'll mail it back to you tomorrow."

He left him, and returned to Joan, and they made their way out through the front, to the street. As they walked west, away from the river, they made a very impressive-looking couple indeed. A police radio car was parked at the next corner, and Joan faltered, but Marty took her arm and urged her forward. The two policemen from the car were out on the sidewalk, one of them with their car's riot gun under his arm. Marty approached him and asked, "What's all that excitement on the river about, officer?"

"There's a couple of killers loose, sir," the cop explained. "We don't rightly know who they are, but they're desperate and well-armed. They seem to be trying to get into Spartanville. The radio orders are to block every street, and to shoot to kill. You better get the lady away from the waterfront."

"Thank you, officer, I certainly will!" Marty took Joan's arm, and hurried her past the two policemen. They walked three more blocks before they found a cab and got into it. Marty glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes after nine. Only forty minutes had elapsed since he had leaped down into that launch alongside the pier!

The cab driver swung the flag down, and asked, "Where to, please?"

"Criminal Court Building," Marty told him.

As the cab started, Joan uttered a gasp. "We—we're not going to see—Cadogan?"

"That's exactly where we're going!" Marty said grimly.

CHAPTER IV

AS THE CAB crept downtown, keeping well within the new speed regulations, Marty carefully

dried all the parts of his automatic, and made sure that the immersion in the Spartan River had not affected its efficiency. Joan turned on the radio, and they got in on the middle of a nine o'clock news broadcast from a local station. The announcer didn't yet have the story of the motor launch chase in the Spartan River, but he had plenty of other stuff.

"Tonight, Guy Madrigal sits in his cell, in the Spartanville County Jail, adjoining the Criminal Court House, awaiting execution for the crime of murder in the first degree. Though the case was ably prosecuted by District Attorney Cadogan, and Guy Madrigal was convicted by a jury of his peers, there are many who believe that the full story of the murder has not yet been told. People who know him say it is hard to believe that Guy Madrigal is a murderer. Yet he offered no defense at his trial, preferring not to take the stand. For some strange reason, Guy Madrigal—gifted orator and himself a candidate for the position of District Attorney at the next election—remained mute before the accusation of murder."

Marty glanced sideways in the cab, and saw Joan sitting tensely, with her little fists clenched hard in her lap. "He was protecting his brother!" she exclaimed in a low voice. "He knew Ned had committed the murder. But Ned is his kid brother. Guy has been taking it on the chin for him all his life. I—I didn't know anything about all that, when I married Ned. I thought Guy was going to ask me to marry him, but he didn't. I know now why he didn't; he was stepping aside for his kid brother!"

Marty grunted. "I hate these self-sacrificing men!"

The announcer was continuing:

"District Attorney Cadogan announced that he wished to give Guy Madrigal every chance for his life. He is waiting in his office until midnight, so that he can immediately phone the Governor for a reprieve in case any new evidence is presented. . . ."

Joan's face was flush. "That's not the reason he's staying in his office tonight!" she exclaimed. "He's wait-

ing there so he can *destroy* any new evidence that comes in!"

She dipped a hand into her blouse, and drew out an oilskin envelope. Out of the envelope she extracted a sheet of paper, and unfolded it. "Here's Ned's confession. You take it."

Marty took the paper, and read it swiftly. In that confession Ned Madrigal told how he had been married once before, while away from home for a year; how he had deserted his first wife in Toledo, and never seen her again; how he had married Joan Sutherland without ever getting a divorce from that other girl. He told how a certain man named Folger had come to him on his wedding night, and had whispered to him that he knew that Ned was a bigamist, and had demanded money for silence.

Folger was a cheap shyster lawyer who worked for Cadogan. Ned Madrigal had no such sum as Folger demanded, and he had shot the man to death in desperation. Then he had told Joan of his deed, and she had helped him get out of town.

That was the sorry, sordid confession of Ned Madrigal, and there was no doubt in Marty's mind as he read it, that Cadogan had sent the man, Folger, to blackmail Ned Madrigal.

He tapped the paper, and looked at Joan. "When did you find out about this?"

"The day we were married!" she said breathlessly. She shuddered. "I mean, about Folger. It was right after the ceremony that Folger took Ned aside, in another room. I—I didn't know what Folger wanted, but when Ned came out of that room, he looked wild. He took me into a corner and said, 'Joan, I've just killed a man!'"

"Nice," said Marty. "Hearing that from a fellow you've just married!"

SHE closed her eyes, as if to shut out a horrid picture. "I didn't know what to think. All I knew was that a girl marries a man for better or for worse. I told Ned to meet me at

the corner. I went upstairs—the wedding was in dad's house—and packed a bag. I sneaked out the back way and met Ned, and we took the ferry over to Oldenburg. Ned didn't tell me much—only that Folger had been blackmailing him, and that he had shot him. We went out to the outskirts of Oldenburg, and I waited in the road while Ned went and hired a room in a tourist house.

"I left him there, and returned to Oldenburg and took a room in a hotel. I've stayed in that hotel for the last ten days, trying to work things out. Once a day I would meet Ned at a little hot dog stand on the Oldenburg Highway. I tried to convince him that the only thing to do was to give himself up and save his brother. It was only yesterday that he agreed to sign the confession. Imagine my feelings when I learned that I was never his legal wife, that the thing Folger had been blackmailing him on was bigamy!"

"I can imagine!" said Marty. He put his big hand over hers. "You're a brave kid. You didn't have to do what you did. But you knew your duty. Damned few women would have taken the risks you did for a man who was a husband not even in name!"

Grimly, he stuffed the confession into his pocket.

The news announcer was saying:

"But there seems to be a jinx—a hoodoo of some sort—upon everybody connected with Madrigal. Only this evening, Judge Sutherland—Guy Madrigal's best friend, and the father-in-law of the missing Ned Madrigal—was shot behind his house by a burglar. He was taken to St. Mary's hospital, and is reported in good condition, but frantic about the fate of Guy Madrigal . . ."

Joan's face went white at the news. She looked at Marty. "Dad! You didn't tell me about that—"

"He'll be all right. Don't worry about him."

"I've got to go to St. Mary's—"

"You're going with me!" he told her harshly. "I need you tonight."

After midnight, you can go to the hospital and stay there as long as you like!"

She lowered her head. "You're right, of course. I'll do anything you say."

He handed her the automatic pistol. "Stick that inside your blouse," he ordered.

"But what about you?"

He showed her the heavy revolver he had taken from the caretaker at the boat club. "I'll use this one. The automatic will be a sort of reserve." He stuck the revolver in the waistband of his natty blue trousers, and buttoned the yachting jacket over it.

She forced a smile. "Then—then I'm to be a sort of gun moll?"

"Right, kid!" he said, grinning.

The cab pulled up in front of the Criminal Court Building, and they got out. They mounted the broad stone steps, and Marty said, "You know this building?"

"I've been here before."

"Take me directly to Cadogan's office. If anyone stops us, let me do the talking!"

She nodded, and led the way. The color was high in her cheeks, and she held her shoulders straight.

Inside the Criminal Court Building, there was a good deal of bustling activity, as there always is, everywhere, on the night of an execution. Reporters milled around, buttonholing anyone who looked like an official, demanding statements for publication.

Joan pushed through the crowds, with Marty close at her side. She avoided the elevator at his whispered suggestion, and led the way up two flights of stairs. On the second floor there were more reporters in front of a door marked: "District Attorney's office." A uniformed attendant stood before it, keeping everybody out.

One of the reporters recognized Joan and exclaimed, "Miss Sutherland—I mean, Mrs. Madrigal! May I have a statement, please?" His eager eyes swept over her corduroy outfit, then flitted to Marty's yachting cos-

tume. "Where is your husband, Ned Madrigal? Why did he leave town? What are you doing about getting a reprieve for Guy Madrigal?"

Joan smiled at the reporter. "I'll have a statement for you as soon as I've talked with District Attorney Cadogan. In the meantime, I can only tell you that we have new evidence."

They left the reporter and reached the door where the attendant stood on guard.

"We want to see Cadogan at once," Marty said. "We have new evidence in the Madrigal case."

"Name?" the attendant demanded.

"Tell Cadogan that it's Commodore Nicholas Alexandrovitch Evanevski."

The attendant was puzzled, but manifestly impressed by Marty's natty uniform. He opened the door a crack and poked his head into the office and spoke to some one inside. "Tell Mr. Cadogan that there's a Commodore Evanevski out here with new evidence in the Madrigal case."

Only a moment later a voice from inside said, "Mr. Cadogan wants that man brought in here. Don't let him get away!"

The attendant held the door open, and Marty passed through, with Joan on his arm. She looked up at him doubtfully. "What do they mean—don't let you get away?"

"I imagine it has something to do with a little incident at the railroad station this evening," Marty murmured.

CHAPTER V

THERE were two men in the reception room which they entered. Both those men had revolvers in their hands, and they covered Marty.

"Keep going!" one of them ordered. "Inside there!" He motioned toward an open door, which led to the private office.

Marty raised his eyebrows. "Tut, tut," he said. "I come in peace, and you point guns at me."

One of the men closed and locked

the corridor door. "Maybe you come in peace, but you'll go in pieces, Wise Guy. Get inside—you and the dame."

Marty shrugged. "Come, Joan. There's no use bandying words with gorillas with low foreheads."

He led her into the private office, the two men following. In there, District Attorney Oswald Cadogan was sitting behind his desk. He was a tall, thin man, with narrow-spaced eyes and a pointed chin. His black hair was combed meticulously back from his forehead. His ears were small, almost feminine, and they seemed to be pasted to his head. From the moment Marty entered, Cadogan's eyes never left his face.

At the side of Cadogan's desk stood an old friend of Marty's—the man Slagle, whom he had knocked out in the telephone booth at the railroad station. Slagle had a bandage around his head, and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. He drew his lips back from his teeth in a snarl. "That's the guy, boss! That's the guy that slugged me. His name ain't Evanevski any more than mine. He's Marty Quade, a tough private dick from New York!"

"So!" said Cadogan. "A tough private dick from New York!" He glanced swiftly at Joan. "And Mrs. Madrigal! Mrs. Ned Madrigal! So you managed to meet, eh?" He swung his gaze back to Marty. "You're the one who got Ned Madrigal off the ferry boat!"

"Really?" said Marty.

"Where have you hidden him?" Cadogan demanded.

"I didn't get Ned Madrigal off the ferry boat," Marty said mildly.

"Wasn't it you that jumped my men in the launch? Wasn't it you that cut off the ferry boat so Madrigal could escape?"

"I'm the one who took your launch."

"Ah! Then you admit that you got Madrigal off the ferry, and smuggled him into Spartanville!"

"I admit nothing."

"Well, Mr. Tough Marty Quade from New York, we have enough on

you to send you up for life!" He motioned to one of the two men with guns. "Frisk him, Franz. We can't take any chances with him."

Franz nodded, and said to his companion, "Keep your gun poked in his spine while I frisk him, Jake. Don't let him fool you by that soft way of talking. He's real tough. I've heard of him."

Marty offered no resistance while Franz frisked him thoroughly, and took the heavy revolver from his waist band. He put it on Cadogan's desk. "He's clean now, boss."

Cadogan nodded with satisfaction. "Now that your teeth are drawn, Quade, we can get down to business. We want to know where you've hidden Ned Madrigal."

"Why? So you can send men to kill him?"

Cadogan scowled. "I think we can teach you not to ask questions but to answer them." He motioned to Franz again. "Just a little treatment, Franz."

"Sure," Franz said cheerfully. He came around in front of Marty, hefting his revolver, and grinning.

Marty said, speaking to Cadogan, over Franz's head, "I wouldn't try that if I were you, Cadogan."

The district attorney was studying Marty's face, his narrow eyes shrewd. "Wait, Franz." He looked at Marty. "Maybe we *can* do better by *talking* to a man like you. What did you come here for? You said you had new evidence."

"That's right," said Marty. "I have a full confession, signed by Ned Madrigal, to the effect that he committed the crime for which his brother was convicted."

"Where's that confession?"

"Right here." Marty raised a hand to his inner pocket, but Cadogan called sharply, "Stop! Let Franz get it!"

Marty smiled twistedly. "Don't you take Franz's word that I'm clean?"

"Cadogan didn't answer. "Get it, Franz," he said.

Franz put his hand inside Marty's jacket, and brought out the envelope, and put it on Cadogan's desk.

Joan, who had been standing unnoticed, threw Marty a disappointed glance as if to say, *Is that what we went through that ordeal in the river for—merely to turn the confession over to Cadogan so he can destroy it?*

But Marty only winked at her.

CADOGAN drew the confession out of the envelope, and read through it swiftly. His eyes gleamed trium-

phantly as he raised his head. "So this is the best you could do, eh?"

"It's enough," said Marty.

"Not enough," Cadogan said emphatically. "I issued a statement to the papers. The law covers the case explicitly. A confession of murder by a person not in custody, will not serve to stay the execution of a convicted man. It would be too easy for anyone to write such a confession, thus achieving a stay of execution without peril to himself."

"This is different," said Marty. "If



you will call the governor and ask for a stay, we'll tell you where to apprehend Ned Madrigal."

"Sorry," said Cadogan. "It can't be done." His eyes were gleaming with vicious triumph. He tapped the paper with his finger. "This confession is witnessed by Joan Sutherland Madrigal."

"What of it?" Marty demanded.

"We'd have to use it as evidence to convict Ned Madrigal, wouldn't we?"

"Yes—"

"Well!" Cadogan's voice rose high on that same triumphant note. "We can't use this as evidence! Didn't you ever hear of the law that a wife can't testify against her husband on a murder charge? This confession is no good unless Joan swears that she saw him sign it. *And she can't testify to that, because she's his wife!*"

Marty Quade didn't seem in the least put out by that devastating statement. His voice was still low, soft, mild. "May I call your attention, my dear Cadogan, to the fact that Joan Sutherland is not the wife of Ned Madrigal? Since he was never divorced from his first wife, the marriage to Joan was never legal. She is *not* his wife, and she *can* testify against him. The confession is legal, and binding; and you—as District Attorney—have no alternative but to accept it, and phone the governor for a stay of execution!"

"Ah!" said Cadogan. He dropped his eyes to the document. He was silent for a long time, studying it. Slagle, at his elbow, fidgeted uncomfortably, and glared at Marty with hatred in his eyes. He put a hand up to his head, where the bandage lay. Franz and Jake kept their guns ready. They stood on either side of Marty, but their eyes were on Cadogan. Joan stood stiffly against the wall, breathing fast.

The electric clock above the desk showed that it was nine-fifty-six. The second-hand kept sweeping around inexorably. Four minutes of ten. Guy Madrigal would be communing with

his spiritual adviser in his cell. By this time, he would have given up all hope. In a few minutes they'd be coming in to slit his trousers, and prepare him for the electrodes that would conduct two thousand volts of electricity through his body. . .

At last, Cadogan looked up from the confession. His eyes were narrow and shrewd, and merciless. "I'm afraid you're right, Quade," he said. "This confession is legal. It would free Guy Madrigal. Therefore, I will have to destroy it!"

"You can't," said Marty. "We've already told the reporters that we had new evidence. They'll want to know what it is."

Cadogan smiled thinly. "Unfortunately, neither you nor Miss Sutherland will be here to tell them. You'll both be dead—lying here on the floor!" He picked up Marty's revolver from the desk, and hefted it.

"Miss Sutherland," he said thoughtfully, as if building the plan in his mind while he talked, "will have a bullet from this revolver in her heart. You, Quade, will be *full* of holes. Our story will be that you pulled the revolver and began firing, and hit Miss Sutherland, and that we had to shoot you down like a mad dog!"

"You'll have trouble making that story stick," Marty said. "I have influential friends in New York. They'll want to investigate."

"Let them investigate," said Cadogan. "Slagle and Franz and Jake will stick to the story through hell and high water. And remember that *I* am the district attorney!"

Slagle showed his teeth in a vicious grin. "Boy, and I'm the one that's gonna empty a whole clip into you, Mr. Tough Marty Quade! And the best part of it is that this place is sound-proofed. We can shoot you where you won't die right away. We can watch you die for a few minutes, and then open the doors to the reporters. They won't even hear the shots!"

Cadogan's face was a mask of re-

morseless cruelty. Slowly, he began to tear up the confession.

Marty's face was long and resigned. He moved over to Joan Sutherland, and put his arm around her, with his back to the others in the room.

"I guess it's the end, Joan," he said lugubriously. He held her close, with his right arm around her. "Keep your chin up, kid. Life isn't such a much that it's worth fussing about." As he spoke he held his left hand in front of him, between himself and her, and his fingers touched the automatic which lay inside her blouse. She uttered a little gasp, but quickly smothered it as she realized what he wanted. She undid the lower button of the blouse, drew the automatic out, and laid it in his hand. His left hand.

Marty's eyes glittered. Behind him he heard Cadogan say, "All right, Quade. Turn around. Let's see how you can take it!"

MARTY took his arm from around Joan's shoulders. He gave her a shove that sent her spinning away from him. He whirled, transferring the automatic from his left hand to his right, and flicking off the safety with a quick, mechanical motion. He saw Franz and Jake with their guns ready, and he pulled the trigger fast. The pistol bucked and barked in his hand, and slugs smashed first into Franz, then into Jake, hurling them back like puppets. He shot for the heart each time, and he didn't even stop to see whether his aim was good, but swung the muzzle around to cover Cadogan and Slagle.

The thunder of the shots in the close confines of the soundproofed room was deafening, drowning out the thud of the falling bodies of Franz and Jake as they hit the floor.

Cadogan had been holding the big revolver, but had not been planning to use it. He swung the muzzle around to cover Marty, but Marty fired a second before him, sending a slug into his right shoulder. Cadogan was pushed back into his chair as if

by a giant hand, and the revolver fell from his nerveless grip.

Slagle threw both hands frantically high in the air, and screamed above the reverberating gunfire, "Don't shoot, Quade! For God's sake, don't shoot!"

Marty moved in on him grimly, thrusting the muzzle of the hot automatic almost in his face. "I give you one chance, and one only, Slagle. You can turn State's evidence and spill everything, or you'll never stand trial. I'll put a slug right through your skull."

It was Slagle's third experience with Marty Quade. The first time he had taken a broken jaw; the second time a broken head; this time it looked like curtains. He caved in. "Let me talk, Quade. I'll talk for you. Don't shoot!"

Marty jerked his head at Joan, who was getting shakily to her feet from the corner where Marty's shove had landed her. "Get on the phone!" he ordered. "Call the governor!"

Three minutes later, he was talking earnestly into the phone, while he held the gun on Slagle and the wounded Cadogan. On the desk lay the torn bits of the confession—mute proof that Cadogan had tried to destroy evidence.

The clock showed seventeen minutes after eleven when he finished talking to the governor. "Just a minute, sir," he said, "I'll let Slagle tell you his end." He thrust the phone at Slagle.

The shivering gunman took the instrument and began to speak into it, glancing at Cadogan, who lay back weakly in his chair, the blood welling from his wound in the shoulder, through the bandage which Joan had applied.

For five minutes Slagle talked swiftly, then handed the phone back to Marty.

"I am granting a stay of execution, Quade," the governor said. "The state owes you a vote of thanks. I want you to come up here some time, and tell me just how you did it."

Marty grinned. "I did it by dumb luck, sir—and with the help of a gorgeous gal!"

He hung up, and met Joan Sutherland's glance. "All right, kid," he said. "You can open the door and let the reporters in. And you better hurry over to the jail. You'll want to be there when the governor phones the stay of execution."

Joan came over to him, stood on tip-toe, and kissed him. "I—I don't know what to say, Marty—"

She blinked hard, and hurried out to open the corridor door. Just as the reporters came trooping in, the telephone on the desk began to ring. Cadogan's bloodless face was twisted with pain. He did not have the strength to reach for the phone. Marty picked it up and said hello.

"This is Oldenburg Police Headquarters," said a voice from across the river. "Let me talk to District Attorney Cadogan."

"This," said Marty Quade, "is Mr. Cadogan's secretary. Can I take a message?"

"Yes. Tell him we just picked up a suicide. Man turned on the gas. We've identified him—name of Ned Madrigal."

"Thank you," said Marty. "I'm sure Mr. Cadogan will be glad to hear the news!"

He hung up, smiling, and his eyes met Joan Sutherland's. "Ned Madrigal is dead," he said. "Better hurry over to the jail."

Blindly, Joan turned and made her way out. Marty faced the reporters. "Gentlemen," he announced, jerking his thumb at Cadogan, "meet Spartanville's prize heel. The next time you interview him, he'll be in the cell now occupied by Guy Madrigal!"

"Who the devil are you?" demanded one of the reporters.

Marty shrugged. "Oh, just a private dick from New York!"

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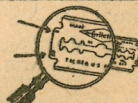
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Puzzle in Jade



By Greta Bardet

When Charlie Young paid two thousand dollars for that precious little statuette, he thought he was getting it cheap. But it was going to cost him plenty—only the remainder would be paid in blood.

CHARLIE YOUNG had been born and educated in this country, but he had keen oriental perception. He knew something was wrong the moment he placed the jade figure of Kuan-ti before his guest. His tong brother, Leo Ping, had come to pay his customary visit, to remind Charlie that the Tong was holding a meeting this evening, to raise funds for the China Relief Society.

"China Relief," Charlie Young said,

smiling wistfully, "is about all our society is used for these days. Once, we were colorful, romantic. Today, those customs have become traditions, our practices but rituals. Indeed, times have changed."

A frown of hurt creased the sensitive features of Leo Ping. "China Relief is a worthy cause," he said somewhat stiffly.

"Of course." Charlie hastily assured him. "I have expressed myself badly. I was merely speaking of our functions as a club."

And since he had made a blunder, he quickly hunted for a change of subject.

"I have something I must show you, Leo Ping. Yesterday my lowly establishment was visited by Duncan King. He is the son of Albert King, the banker. You know of him? Ah, yes. He had with him a jade statuette of Kuan-ti, which Duncan King thought I might wish to purchase. I but saw it, when it won my heart. I bought it for a small sum. Here, let me show it to you."

And so it was that Charlie brought forth the milky white loveliness that felt like satin to the touch of the hand. He set it before Leo Ping, so that he might admire it also.

He heard the ever so slight chill in Leo Ping's voice, as he murmured, "It is indeed beautiful."

Charlie glanced at him in mild concern. Leo Ping's expression had not changed, yet it was as if some unfriendliness had suddenly spread a thin mist over his lean face. It was an almost indiscernible look which conveyed to Charlie Young that everything was not as it should be.

He wondered if he had committed another blunder. He looked down at the statue, turned it between long slender fingers, trying to detect some flaw. But it was all smooth symmetry.

"Duncan King?" Leo Ping murmured with a fixed smile. "You are most fortunate. It is a lovely work of art. I must compliment you upon your most excellent taste."

Charlie Young inclined his head a little. "My taste is that of a coolie compared to yours. Duncan King seemed in need of quick money. A gambling debt, I gathered. His father had presented him with the statuette upon his birthday, and needing money he rightly thought I might buy it." Charlie chuckled, a little pleased with his luck. "It was his loss and my gain. I got it so cheaply. These occidentals do not understand the art of bargaining, as do my countrymen. I paid the small sum of two thousand dollars for it."

Leo Ping inclined his head. "You are fortunate."

But to Charlie Young, Leo Ping's attitude struck a false note. He became uncomfortable, for he thought he detected a glitter of disapproval in his friend's eyes.

"Is there something wrong, Leo Ping? You seem . . ." he gave a quick friendly smile, "a little disturbed."

Leo Ping smiled as he always smiled. "Charlie Young," he began earnestly, "have you seen the morning papers? The American ones?"

"No, I have not."

"I suggest you make haste and read them. As for tonight, we can expect you at our meeting?"

Charlie nodded. His eyes clouded with worry, for he now knew that something so wrong had occurred, that Leo Ping would "lose face" if he should tell him of it.

LEO PING rose to go, and after the usual politenesses which accompanied the departure of his friend, he summoned a servant, dispatched him for an American daily paper.

The moment the paper was in his hands, he hurried it open. There upon the first page, to his utter dismay, he read and understood at last why Leo Ping had been shocked when his eyes beheld the jade god.

Charlie's nostrils pinched with anger. He flung the paper aside. His handsome oriental features tightened into firm lines. He stepped over to a

small teakwood table, struck a bronze gong. He ordered the bowing servant who instantly appeared, to lay out a suit of occidental clothes.

He was going to pay a visit to Albert King.

Charlie reproached himself for not questioning Duncan King more closely. He had detected uneasiness in that young man's manner, but had thought it due to the fact that he was ill at ease in these oriental surroundings. They affected many people like that. He had taken for granted that the statue belonged to Duncan King, that he had a right to sell it if he chose.

Small wonder Leo Ping had been disturbed. There had been that distasteful affair of the Cranberry Diamond, just a short time ago, in which he, Charlie Young, had been accused of being a receiver of stolen goods. It had involved him in police investigations, publicity which caused murmurs of disapproval among his friends.

It shall not, must not happen again, Charlie told himself. Another scandal of that sort, and he would lose face.

A secretary showed Charlie in to Albert King's office. He approached the short, wizened-faced man, and noted the humorless mouth, the arrogant, shimmering blue eyes. Charlie introduced himself, and, as was the custom among the occidentals, launched into the mission which brought him.

"It is about the jade Kuan-ti that I have come to you, Mr. King."

"The one that was stolen from me?" The arrogant eyes narrowed. "Well what about it?"

"I am, to say the least, a trifle puzzled." He paused a moment, carefully choosing his words. "In this morning's newspaper, to my complete amazement, I read that this jade god was stolen from your home. That a thief gained entrance to your house and took it."

King's left eyebrow raised. He puckered his mouth. "That's right. I suppose you've come to tell me you know who has it?"

Charlie shifted uneasily. He did not care for the insolent implication in Mr. King's tone of voice. "That is why I am here, Mr. King. You see, sir, I have it!"

King's face hardened. "So!" he said, his mouth thinning. "You're the guy who stole it!"

Charlie stiffened with a sharp intake of breath. "One moment please. I am afraid there has been an error. I bought it under quite legitimate circumstances."

"Bought it!" King snorted. "Are you kiddin'?"

"It so happens," Charlie said coldly, "that I bought the jade last night, for the sum of two thousand dollars, from your son, Duncan."

King frowned, regarded Charlie thoughtfully. After a time of silence a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. A crafty expression took possession of his face. "Duncan," he mused. "I think I see."

RELIEF settled through Charlie. "And since that is settled and clear, I must ask you to retract the story of its theft."

The crafty smile widened. "Sorry! Can't do that. After all, as far as I'm concerned, it's stolen. Duncan had no business to sell it to you."

"Oh? I dare say you want it back then?"

The man leaned forward, struck the desk sharply with his fist. "Damned right I want it back!"

Charlie shrugged. "In that case, I am quite willing to return it to you for the amount I paid for it."

"Is that so!" King bit out, his eyes glittering hotly. "I'm afraid you're out of luck! You should have made sure before you bought that jade that it was Duncan's to sell. I'm afraid you'll just have to hand it over and stand the loss."

The unfriendly attitude with which this man handled the situation hardened a wall of stubbornness through Charlie. He resented the man's nasty tone, his tactlessness.

"You are being unjust, Mr. King."

"Unjust!" King cried out with rising anger. "That statue is *my* property. It doesn't *belong* to my stepson!"

Step-son! The word fell dismally on Charlie's ears. He had not expected to contend with this opposition.

"He stole it from me!" King continued. "Sold it under false pretenses. I intend to recover that jade, and I'll be hanged if I'm going to fork over two thousand bucks of my good money for a theft that conniving little stepson of mine committed! Duncan's a thief! He'll stoop to Hell knows what to get his way. He's a spoiled offspring of a scheming woman . . . my second wife!"

King exploded an angry breath and went on: "So I'll tell you something, Charlie Young. This is an opportunity to do something I've been aching to do for a long, long time. I'm going to throw them out—both of them. And if his mother won't get out with Duncan, I'll have him thrown in jail. I'll get rid of those two vultures once and for all!"

"All very well." Charlie spoke with mounting irritation. "Your personal affairs are no concern of mine. As for me, I can ill afford the loss of two thousand dollars. I do not see my way clear to return the jade, unless I am repaid the money I gave you for it. I think you are—"

"You have in your possession," King interrupted rudely, "a piece of stolen property, which is mine. Now, will you hand it over, or will I have the insurance company recover for me?"

"You need not raise your voice, Mr. King. I hear you clearly. We shall see. I shall consult my lawyer. I will see if I have legal redress in this matter." He stood up.

King set his head back and laughed in derision. "I have to hand it to you. You sure can pass the bluff. Why, I know damned well what you are—a fence for stolen goods! You're in on a deal with Duncan. I've heard about

you, Charlie Young—something to do with a diamond you stole, wasn't it?"

That was too much for Charlie. Anger flooded through him like a torrent unleashed. He poured his temper out in words, shaking his fist in King's face. Then, still boiling, he stormed from the office, colliding with King's secretary on his way out.

BACK in his home, his anger subsided considerably. He knew he was in a nasty predicament. He felt ill at having lost so much face by losing his temper like a common fish monger. He gazed helplessly at the lovely jade Kuan-ti, which was the cause of this furor. He still smarted from King's unjust accusation. He was about to call his lawyer, when the phone rang.

It was a woman who identified herself as Mrs. Albert King, Duncan's mother. Her voice was soft and purry and it was edged with tears.

"Mr. Young, I believe you have the jade Kuan-ti?"

"That is correct," he said icily.

"It's all my fault," the woman fretted. "Duncan did it for me. I had no idea it would lead to all this. Mr. King is *furious* with poor, dear Duncan. Please, Mr. Young, I must have that statue back."

"I will not re—" he began stubbornly, but her voice cut him short.

"I am quite willing to pay you for all this trouble," she said. "In fact, if you will please hurry over here with that statue, I shall be very happy to pay you *five* thousand dollars for it."

Charlie sighed, pressed his fingers to his brow. A nice profit. He shunned unpleasantness, but was after all, a business man.

"Please, Mr. Young, surely if you have a son, you can . . ."

"I have no son!" Charlie bit out still angered. "Your son committed a theft, and placed me in a most embarrassing position."

"Oh, no, no!" She hurriedly assured him. "That's not so. I gave it to him. I did! Mr. Young, please bring that

statue to me immediately, and I'll . . ."

"Does Mr. King believe that you gave it to your son?"

It was, Charlie knew, in the nature of a capitulation. Even as he spoke the words, he knew he would give in to her, regardless of Mr. King's reactions. He would be glad to be clear of this mess. Perhaps, in some manner he could explain the case to Leo Ping in the evening.

"No," Mrs. King replied, "but I'll think up something to tell him. Or perhaps you can. Orientals are ever so clever. Will you do this?"

"Yes. I will. Even though this has all been most distasteful."

She gushed happy thanks over the phone, and Charlie at last hung up. A three thousand dollar profit was the only pleasant note. Still, it didn't make him feel well. He understood a mother's concern about her son. He did not like Mr. Albert King, and bringing Duncan to his mind, recalling the vivid close-set eyes, the loose wet lips of a sensuous man, he realized that he did not like the step-son either.

However, he would donate the three thousand to the China Relief Society this evening, in addition to what he had intended to give originally. He would not hesitate to take this outrageous profit from the woman for such a worthy purpose. After all, Albert King was a rich man, and China needed so much.

Mrs. King let him in herself, explaining that the servants were out. She was tall, stout and austere. Her face was as coldly unsympathetic as was her son's. It disappointed Charlie a little, for from her telephone voice he had imagined her to be a bit more—well, soft.

She led him to a small ante-chamber, turning and mumbling all the way as to how dreadful the whole thing was, how furious Mr. King had been when he had come home a little while ago, and how sorry she was to involve Charlie in this family squabble.

CHARLIE kept bowing politely, but said nothing. He was feeling more ill at ease every moment. It was as if he were an usurper, clandestinely invading a place where he should not be. He again became a little angry that he should be involved. He felt as if he were the thief, who must sneak into a man's house to return stolen goods.

There was something wrong with the house too. An air, which sent anticipatory nerves dancing. It was all so quiet, so deathly still, ominously in tune with Mrs. King's hushed whispers and subdued gestures.

And suddenly Charlie found himself disliking this woman intensely. As he accepted this fact, fear crawled over him. He had a quick apprehensive notion that he was trapped, enmeshed in a maze through which he could not see.

He watched Mrs. King hurry to the table where her bag lay. She stuffed fat fingers into it, turned, and held out a sheaf of new bills. The band around it read five thousand dollars.

Charlie looked up at the woman, stared at her hard. Her hungry, dark eyes were fastened upon him like shining evil buttons. He reached into his side pocket, withdrew the statue. She took it quickly, set it down on the desk. He stuffed the money into his pocket without counting it. Bowing a little, he turned to leave.

It was then that young Duncan King stepped up to him with an, "Oh, hello? Everything settled?"

Charlie took Duncan's outstretched hand out of politeness. With a nick of worry he found the boy's hand sticky with sweat. The fingers were trembling.

Duncan clapped a hand over his shoulder. "I say, old chap, do you mind? The old man wants a word with you."

"With me—but I hardly—"

"Just this once." The young man insisted. "Give him a little soft soap. Say it was all a mistake. Mama's going to find the damned jade in a min-

ute or so. Tell the old buzzard you're wrong, that your statue isn't the right one. After all, you just made a three thousand buck profit. What's one more favor?"

Charlie's mouth went hard. Little flints of anger fired his black eyes. "I see that tact and diplomacy are not your strong points. Believe me, it is the most difficult money it has been my displeasure to earn. I fully realize that I stand between you and a sentence in jail. I realize that your mother is lying, that she never gave you this statue. You are paying me this money because you are desperately afraid of what Mr. King will do to both of you. However—we will finish this incident. I will go to your stepfather, and do as you ask."

Duncan said nothing. He led Charlie toward the library. All this while Charlie felt a tenseness in all his muscles, felt the quickening of his heart beat, and wondered vaguely why he should feel such fear.

Duncan motioned him to enter, stepping aside. Charlie adjusted a smile on his face, and flung open the door, stepping quickly into the room, glad that at last he was nearing the close of this affair. But he was wrong.

Albert King was at his desk, and when Charlie saw him, a wild jagged shock speared through him. King lay hunched over, blood seeping out of a bullet hole in his head. He was dead.

With a cry of consternation, Charlie spun around, but too late. He caught sight of Duncan behind him, saw the uplifted arm descend. He put up his hands to ward off the blow, but was not quick enough. Something in Duncan's hand cracked over his skull, and he knew no more.

He came to, and when the roaring in the back of his head subsided to a dull sickening ache, he opened his eyes. The room was filled with policemen.

DISJOINTED thoughts seethed through his mind. He tried to assemble them. Then he remembered. Weakly, he demanded to know the

meaning of all this, somehow gloomily sensing what the answer would be.

They accused him of murdering Albert King.

Charlie held his aching head. "You are mistaken," he mouthed feebly. "I would not shoot a man. I could not kill a man, I *would* not. When I came into this room, he was already dead."

The voices about him droned skeptically.

"But I have no motive for wishing his death. I—"

"No motive!" A deep voice cried close by, and Charlie looked up to see a tall, thick-set man before him. "Why, there's enough motive to hang a dozen like you. No motive, hey? Well, maybe we didn't pin the Cranberry Diamond job on you, or prove you're a fence. but you knew that if King sang out his story about the statue, his testimony would clinch everything!"

Charlie shut his eyes against pain. "I do not understand."

"We've got an open and shut case against you. Do you admit you came to see King in his office a little earlier in the day?"

"Of course I admit it."

"His secretary heard the quarrel you and King had inside. You came there trying to sell him back the statue, didn't you? And when he threatened to have you arrested, you almost killed him then, didn't you?"

"That is not so!" Charlie sprang up, not caring about the pains that beat through his skull. "It was not I who killed him, but. . . ."

"And the secretary says that Mr. King came out of his office shortly after you left, saying something about you bein' a damned thief, and having you put in jail if it's the last thing he does!"

"Of course he said that. But I can explain. It was not meant for me. He was speaking of his—"

"And you, realizing what a fuss like this would mean, especially with the Cranberry Diamond deal against you,

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knew you had to shut King up, but good!"

Charlie filled his lungs with breath. "Gentlemen! I assure you I would not shoot a man, don't you—"

"The way I figure it," continued the detective, "even if King wanted to buy back this jade, you couldn't give it back to him, could you?"

"I could not? How do you mean?"

With a knowing smile the detective pointed down to the desk. "Because we found this outside in your car! You broke the thing. So you couldn't give it back to him if you wanted to. You came here to kill King, because you couldn't get him to keep his mouth shut."

"Broken?" Charlie said dully, looking down at the pieces. "Oh, no. That lovely thing! . . . But this is all a mistake. Believe me, I do not even know how to fire a gun."

"Is that so?" the detective sang out. "I suggest you take a good gander at your right hand. While you were out cold we washed your hands with silver nitrate. They're covered with powder burns. And this gun," he pointed down to it, "has your fingerprints all over it. Yours, and yours only! Now don't say you didn't use this gun, because we have absolute proof that you did!"

Helplessly, Charlie looked around him. How did this all come to be? Then he saw Duncan. Mrs. King was at his side weeping into a handkerchief. Duncan glared at Charlie hatefully.

Charlie pointed to Duncan. "That man over there is the murderer of his stepfather. Duncan sold me this jade, which was not his to sell. His stepfather was about to turn him over to the police—not me! He killed Mr. King with the clever aid of his mother. Mr. King, himself, told me that she was a scheming woman. They are both guilty of this crime."

"Yeah, sure," said the detective, plainly unimpressed. "So answer me this—just what the hell were *you* doing here in this house?"

"I came here to—" Charlie broke off the words. He remembered how he had

come, and with a toneless laugh said, "Under the circumstances, Mrs. King would hardly admit that she ordered me to come here with the jade."

CHARLIE shoved his hands into his pockets, and as he expected the five thousand was gone. Even had he found that money, it would be difficult to prove a transaction. They had taken care of all the little details. Why had he not stopped to question the large profit? He understood then, that these two had enmeshed him in a most diabolical plot.

Duncan emphatically denied that he had sold him that jade. Mrs. King denied she called him to their home.

"Of course," Duncan complacently said, "he's trying to get out of this. As I already told you, I passed the library, heard them quarrel. I went over, heard my father cry out. Then I heard the shot, and flung open the library door. I saw this chink there, with the smoking gun in his hand. So I clipped him one with this book, preventing his escape."

Mrs. King said, "This man probably let himself into the house the same way he did last night when he stole the jade. I was in the ante-room when I heard the shot. I saw poor Duncan step into the library and strike down this—this *murderer*!"

"You are lying!" Charlie protested. "I would not shoot anyone. Believe me, gentleman, Mr. King was dead when I came into this room."

The detective faced Charlie squarely. "Now look, why don't you come clean? We got you dead to rights. Powder burns, fingerprints, motive. Why I've seen men get the chair on less evidence!"

"One moment please." Charlie shut his eyes and thought for a moment. "I believe I can—" He swung a sharp glance over to Duncan and his mother. "You two have been most clever. This excellent plot might have worked, had you chosen another man." He turned to the detective. "Is it permitted that I make a telephone call? I wish to

prove to you that an esteemed friend of mine, the Honorable Leo Ping, earlier this day, saw the Kuan-ti god in my possession, unbroken. I should like to call him, so that he can describe this statue to you."

"Sure." The detective shrugged amiably. "Only, you're forgetting something. This statue is broken. Your friend could describe me Venus, and I wouldn't know the difference."

"A small matter. I shall put it together while we await him."

Duncan sprang to his feet. "Are you going to let him get away with anything like that? He's a murderer. He's going to try to pin this on someone else. Don't forget these Chinese are clever! It's obvious he's trying to pin this murder on me. We all know these Chinese stick together. His friend will go to bat for him from here to hell!"

Charlie smiled faintly. "You do not know my honored friend." He went to the telephone, dialed a number.

Duncan appealed to the detective. "Have you forgotten that the jade was pictured in several of the morning newspapers? I'm sure this guy's friend will describe it beautifully."

The detective pursed his lips and nodded. "I know."

Charlie spoke to Leo Ping in Chinese and the conversation was lengthy.

"See?" Duncan said tightly. "How the hell do we know he isn't describing that statue this minute, or getting a band of his friends to come over here and rescue him from the police? Why don't you arrest him and get it over with?"

Charlie hung up. "He will be here presently," he said in a quiet voice, and turned to the desk, sat down, pulled the broken jade over to him, began to arrange the pieces.

DUNCAN'S face reddened. "You won't get away with this. You killed my step-father. Mother and I are witnesses to your crime. You're just fainting for time!"

"True! I prolong the agony of in-

carceration as long as I am physically and mentally able."

"You see?" Duncan cried. "He even admits it. Better watch him. He's trying to make a get-a-way!"

"I am not a man who runs!" Charlie told him, fingering through the bits of jade. "Ah! . . . The statue's stomach seems to be missing."

"Oh, the poor thing!" The detective cooed, sarcastically, leaning over the desk. "So you didn't pick up all the pieces, so what?"

Leo Ping shuffled into the room, looking out of place in his embroidered oriental robe. He bowed politely from the waist, his hands hidden in the sleeves of his gown, as was the oriental custom. His eyes, however, showed traces of worry as they went to Charlie.

"With your permission, gentleman, and Mrs. King," Charlie began, "I wish to prove two things. One, how the powder stains came to be upon my lowly hands, and two, why these two over here chose the wrong man upon whom to fasten this dreadful crime."

Mrs. King's movements were indignant. "I can't understand why you listen to the man! The very idea! Accusing *us*!"

Charlie Young ignored her. "As I have already told you, I came into this room, and Mr. King was already dead. Duncan King then struck me over the head. Now—I believe that while I was lying unconscious upon the floor, Duncan King took that gun, pressed it into my hands and fired it."

The detective laughed a little. "No good, Charlie. Guess again. No good at all! In that case there should be one more bullet hole in this room, and there isn't!"

"But can't you see? He fired the gun into the nearest thing handy, to put powder marks upon my hands. He fired it into the jade statue. The piece that is missing will either have the bullet imbedded in it, or the mark through which the bullet passed."

Charlie had the detective's thought-

ful attention, so he continued:

"You see, gentlemen, jade is a most hard substance. The artists who work upon jade use only the toughest, and finest of steel saws. Only something like a bullet fired through the jade could break it up so. You cannot break jade by dropping it. Not this solid piece of white-yellow jade. Believe me, it is so. The bullet it stopped, shattered it. And when you find this missing piece, you will find that *two* bullets were discharged from this gun!"

The detective sighed. "It sounds good, only you'll have to find the piece before I'll believe it. You gotta prove things to a jury. Maybe this is just a clever attempt to alibi your way out. Maybe you even thought of all this before you came here to kill Mr. King."

Charlie said nothing to that. "And now . . ." he held his hand out to Leo Ping, who gave him a piece of chalk. Chalk in hand, Charlie stepped over to the door. He marked a small circle, no larger than a copper coin, upon the face of the door, closed it, and turned, walked completely across the room. Leo Ping shuffled silently behind him.

"Watch out!" Duncan cried sharply. "He's trying to get away!"

"Please!" Charlie said quietly. "You will observe me most carefully."

There was a pause. All eyes were fastened upon him. It was a breathless moment, in which Charlie remained quite motionless.

All at once he snapped up his hand, called tersely to Leo Ping. Something came out of the sleeve of Leo Ping's garment. There was a flash as it came into Charlie's possession.

WITH incredible swiftness, Charlie's hand swung back, then forward, and an object whisked across the room. With a dull thud a small hatchet was imbedded in the door. It quivered dead center in the tiny circle.

"As I have pointed out, I would not shoot a man," Charlie calmly explained. "I cannot use a gun, and I would not use one. It is not only a ques-

tion of face, but it is that I am most skilled in the use of the hatchet. In our tong I am the hatchet man. I could kill a man with a hatchet even before he could draw a gun. Not that I *would* deliberately kill. The thought of killing with my hatchet is abhorrent to me! I keep up with the hatchet practice, only because it is a ritual, a tradition as a member of my tong. But—in the question of life or death—it would be a hatchet that I should use, never a gun!"

Charlie paused, took a deep breath and plunged on: "*Had* I come here with the intention of killing Mr. King, I should have taken my hatchet with me. It would be a question of face. Had I used a gun I should have been forever disgraced. My honorable ancestors would disown this unworthy person, to whom has been handed down this sacred office of hatchet man."

He turned to Duncan who had gone quite pale. "As I have said, you should have chosen a member of your own race to play the—er—shall we say—fall guy—for your scheme?"

Charlie then turned to the detective. "However, you are impressed, but uncertain. I may be a hatchet man, still I *could* have used a gun. And the missing piece of jade *could* have been just a colorful alibi concocted by me to point guilt to someone else. There is then, but one way left to prove without question of doubt that Duncan fired that fatal shot.

"I suggest that a nitrate test upon Duncan's hands is in order. If he too has powder marks—"

Duncan suddenly turned, tried to dash through the door. Leo Ping standing there, thrust out his foot. Duncan went sprawling in a heap. . .

"Nevertheless," Charlie Young said later to his friend Leo Ping, "I still maintain our tongs were more colorful in the days of old."

Leo Ping smiled as he always smiled. "Still, the tong plays a most important part in our lives."

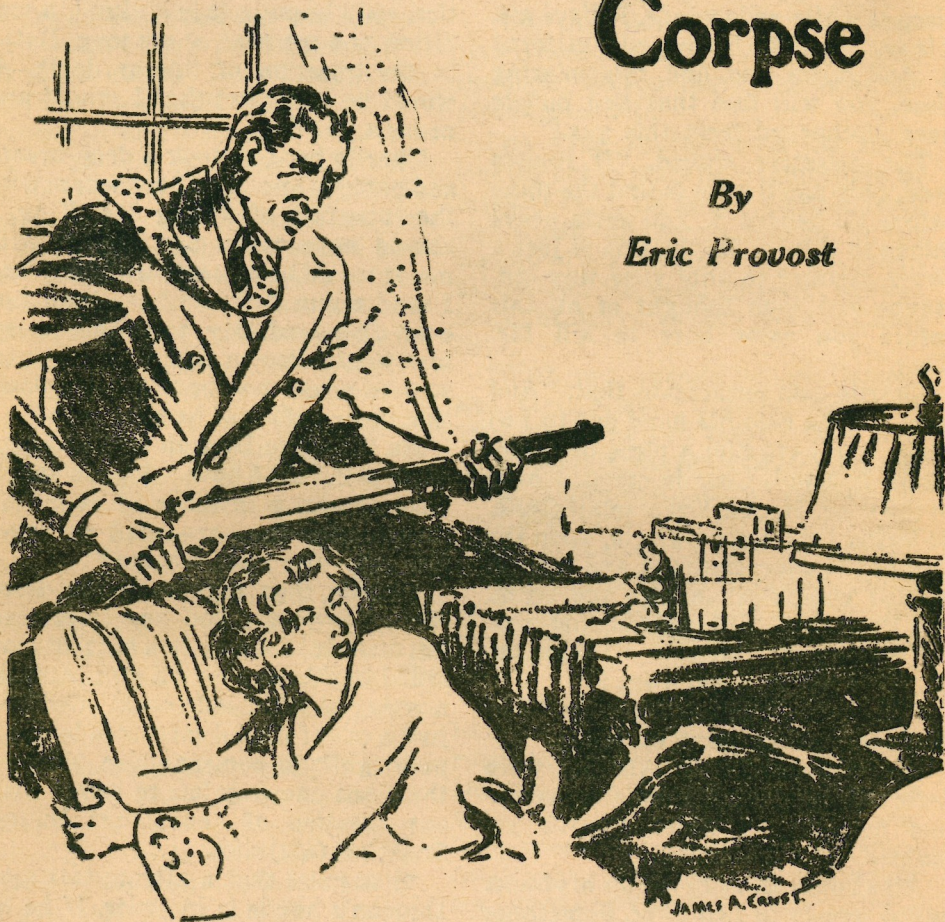
"Indeed!" Charlie agreed. "It has just saved mine!"

The cops laughed when Bill Gordon's wife vanished. But that laugh choked in their throats when a mocking voice said . . .

She'll Make a Gorgeous Corpse

By

Eric Provost



BILL GORDON, passing the length of his small living room for the fifteenth time, came face to face with a mirror. He looked at the image and frowned. His close-cropped blond hair was awry, his clothes disheveled, and his eyes were staring, anxious, bloodshot from lack of sleep.

He crunched a half-smoked cigarette among the heaped-up butts in

the ashtray. It tipped over, spilling the litter over the rug, but Bill didn't notice. He picked up the phone and dialed Police Headquarters.

"Captain Mahoney, please."

There was a murmur on the other end of the line and Bill said, "This is Gordon again, Captain. Have you heard anything?"

Mahoney's voice was irritable. "No. Not yet. I told you I'd get in touch

with you when I did. Stop worrying. She'll turn up all right. You aren't the only guy in Miami who don't know where his wife is."

Hot words came to Bill's lips but he choked them back. When he spoke, his voice was low and quaking slightly with the effort to control emotion.

"Listen, Mahoney, she's in trouble. I know it. What can I do about it? This waiting around is driving me crazy!"

"Are you sure she isn't in some friend's house getting over a binge?"

Bill's voice had an edge. "I told you she doesn't drink. I had no reason to lie about it."

Mahoney said, "Okay. We're doing what we can. If you hear anything, let me know."

The instrument went dead just as the doorbell rang loudly. It couldn't be Helen; she had a key. But it might be someone who'd seen her. He opened the door.

A man stood in the entrance. He was a stranger, tall, bright-eyed, and hatless. His clothes were sloppy. He didn't wait to be asked inside—he nodded to Bill and brushed by into the living room. His roving glance seemed to take in and catalogue everything in a moment.

Bill turned from the door. "Well," he said, "who are you?"

The tall man had an infectious grin. "I'm Connor of the *Times*," he said. "What's this about your wife?"

"She's gone." Bill's voice was numb.

"I know that. Mahoney sent me. What's it all about? Could it be a kidnapping?"

Bill's gorge rose. All this man wanted was a story, something sensational, good for headlines. But he choked back the feeling; after all, maybe the guy could help.

"Kidnapping's out," he said. "I haven't any real dough. In the second place—"

"With that first reason," Connor said, "you don't need a second. When did she go?"

"I dropped her at the corner grocery yesterday at five. She bought her supplies and came back here."

Connor's brows lifted. "How do you know she came back?"

"We were out of coffee," Bill explained. "She bought some. The can's in the kitchen now."

"Check," Connor said. "Then what?"

"She was gone when I got home last night at eleven. I thought she might be with some friends or at the movies. But I called her friends—and the movies were over by that time. At two, I phoned all the hospitals but no luck. Then I called the cops."

"Have you looked for a note?"

"Of course. There wasn't any. That proves—"

"How long have you been married?"

"Just a month. Why?"

Connor pursed his lips. "Well . . ."

Bill didn't like the way Connor was avoiding his eyes. "Go on," he said. "Say it!"

"The honeymoon was over—maybe she ran out . . ." Connor stopped when he saw Bill cock his right fist and take a forward step. He lifted his hands and backed off. He said, "Okay, okay. Don't get tough."

"Don't make cracks." Bill's tone was even, hard.

"I apologize. But you know lots of women get tired—"

"That's out. You can take my word for it. If she intended going somewhere, there would be a note. There wasn't any. Her folks are in Texas, too far away for a quick visit and anyway, all her clothes are here."

"I see. How about a picture?"

Bill pointed to a large silver-framed portrait on a spinnet desk in the corner. Connor took the picture to the window.

"Mmnn. She's nice."

"She's—" Bill tried to put it in words. It would sound silly to say that she was the sunrise in the morning after the black of night. That's

how he felt but he couldn't say so. "She's beautiful," he finished lamely, and the tone of his voice brought an understanding smile to Connor's face.

"She'll turn up, fella. I'm sure of it," Connor put the picture back and looked over the room approvingly. "You got a nice place here. What do you do?"

"I have a drive-in on the boulevard. The STOP-N-SNACK. Helen worked there for a while. That's how we met."

CONNOR nodded. "Have you another picture? We'll run it with the story. It may help locate her."

Bill took a snapshot album from a table drawer. "Take one of these."

Connor thumbed the pages and selected two pictures. He stowed them in a pocket and rose. "I'll bring 'em back. How about a description?"

Bill tried to be accurate. Helen was five feet five and weighed one-twenty. That much was easy. But when he tried to describe her hair and eyes, he ran fresh out of words. Her eyes were the deep green of the ocean, close in shore near a white beach. They were soft and warm and understanding. Her hair had the soft glow of dying embers, and there were lights in it like tiny tongues of flame. But they couldn't put that in a newspaper.

"Her hair," he said, "is reddish. Her eyes are green. Her figure—"

Connor tapped the pocket containing the pictures. "I know," he said, walking to the door. "I'll run a couple of sticks with the picture in the next edition. If she turns up, call me." He closed the door and a moment later Bill heard a car move off down the street.

Bill sank down on the divan and ran a hand through his hair. If, he thought. They weren't taking it seriously. Both the police and this reporter thought Helen was all right and would come home with a perfectly good explanation of her absence. Bill rubbed sweating palms on

rumped trousers. How could he convince them? He couldn't tell of an inner ache, of a premonition which, as far as he was concerned, amounted to knowledge that Helen was in trouble and needed him. That wasn't evidence and he knew it.

But he also knew that two people who love each other very deeply can sometimes sense what the other feels, without words, without visible means of any sort. It's just one of those things.

He didn't blame the police or the papers, but time was the essence of this problem. It might take the cops a day or two to get steamed up and then it might be too late.

He rose and stared out of the window. He didn't see the fresh green grass or the vivid flame vine on the wall of the house across the street. Instead, he saw troubled green eyes.

He forced down the lump in his throat and tightened his belt. "What the hell?" he said. "Detective work is only a matter of common sense. If the cops won't go to work, I will."

He dropped into Dixon's Drugstore on the next corner. He hadn't realized that his head ached, but now the pounding throb prevented clear thinking. He bought aspirin.

Dixon, the druggist, was a short, dark man with a gold tooth. He came up to Bill. "Has your wife come back yet?"

"No, she hasn't," Bill said shortly. He wasn't crazy about the druggist. The man was too ingratiating, over anxious in his quest for business. He said suddenly, "Did you see her last night?"

Dixon nodded. "She came in about nine for a package of cigarettes."

"Did she say where she was going?" Bill asked excitedly. This was the first lead he'd had.

But the druggist shook his head. "No. She headed down the street toward the movies. That's the last I saw of her."

Bill thanked him and left. He turned toward the theatre. Maybe

someone else had seen Helen last night. The streets were crowded at nine o'clock, but this Little River section of Miami was enough of a small town for its inhabitants to know each other. Years ago it had been on the outskirts but the growing city had swept up and around it and kept going. One of the reasons why he and Helen liked it was the small town atmosphere. People were friendly. They would help when they could.

He had reached the small neighborhood theatre. The picture was a Western, the same picture that had shown last night. But the girl in the box office didn't remember seeing Helen.

He spent two hours asking questions. Everywhere he met sympathy, interest, and offers of help. But no one had seen Helen. She might as well have gone to the moon.

The afternoon papers came out with her picture on the front page and the story of her disappearance featured. Heartsick, Bill retraced his steps. He'd go over the house again. Perhaps, in his anxiety, he'd overlooked something . . .

BUT his search of the house proved fruitless. He paced up and down and, unconsciously, began to chew a knuckle of the first finger of his right hand. It was an old habit, dating from childhood, when he had done it in time of stress. His mind went back to his schooldays in California. Someone had nicknamed him Bull and the thing had clung. Helen read it in a class book and called him that once. He'd protested that he wasn't bull-headed, he just didn't believe in admitting defeat. He didn't admit it now. It was his inability to fight against a tangible enemy that was driving him screwy. All he could do was wait.

The telephone brought him out of reverie. The voice was disguised but the words were clear enough. "Gordon?"

"Yes," Bill said. "Who is this?"

"Never mind that. Listen. If you

have any hope of seeing your wife again, do as I say."

Bill's hand shook. He had to fight down the red mist which obscured the room. The voice droned on.

"Tell the cops you've heard from her. Tell them that she's all right. Tell them—make up your own story. If you do your wife will come back to you in a few days. If you don't, you'll never see her again!" There was laughter on the line, laughter that was humorless, mocking, cruel. "She won't die an easy death."

Bill steadied the phone. The red mist of rage was rising again. "If you harm her, so help me God, I'll get you. Believe me, I'll do it. Go where you want, I'll kill you if it takes the rest of my life!"

The laughter mocked him again. "Just do as I say, and she'll come back. Otherwise I've told you what will happen. She'll make a gorgeous corpse!"

The phone went dead in Bill's hand. Frantically he dialed the operator and told of the call. She explained that it was impossible to trace local calls on the dial system.

He sank in a chair and wiped cold sweat from his face. The feeling of impotence maddened him. To have had the man on the telephone and not to be able to get hold of him! Bill looked at his hands, thinking how it would feel to have them around the neck of the man he'd talked to . . .

He brought himself to with a start. That stuff could wait. Now he had something to go on, something to give the cops. He dialed the number of Headquarters, but as the ringing drummed in his ear, he slammed the instrument back in the cradle.

The sweat started out on his forehead again; if he called the police and followed the kidnapper's instructions, claiming that Helen was all right, the search would be stopped. Naturally, that was what the man wanted. If, on the other hand, he told them of the call, it might mean a slow death to the woman he loved.

It was ten minutes before Bill made his decision. The criminal's word wasn't worth its echo, and the realization of this, in Bill's mind, tipped the scales. He picked up the telephone and dialed.

MAHONEY was outraged. He spluttered a moment, then he calmed down. He said, "The last time we had a kidnapping we had a posse of five thousand people out. We got the guy cold. We'll get your wife back, Gordon. Was there any mention of a ransom?"

"No. There's something screwy about this—"

"Wait," Mahoney said. "How about an ex-boy friend? That's an angle. We can't overlook anything."

"That's out," Bill said. "She came here from west Texas three months ago. There were no local boy friends. You can take that from me."

"Okay." Mahoney paused. Then, "Does anybody hate your guts?"

"Well . . ."

"I don't mean dislike. I mean a real honest to Joshua old-fashioned hate. How about that?"

"Not that I know of."

"How about business? You came here from the West coast, didn't you? You opened a new type drive-in. You're on your toes, you introduced new ideas, and you ran a couple of guys out of business. They lost their shirts bucking you. Is that right?"

"Sure, but I don't believe any of them would—"

"Let me handle that. And let me tell you something, son. A few years of police business will convince you that a human being can be mighty blasted low, given reason enough. I'm not overlooking a thing. Give me the names of those guys."

Bill mentioned two competitors, both of whom had gone bankrupt. Mahoney was about to hang up, but Bill said:

"Wait! There's something else. Keep this out of the papers. If the kidnapper finds out that I called you

—well, I told you what he said. A slow death."

"Right. Not a word to the papers or the radio. Leave that to me. You go back to work. I'll call you if anything turns up."

Bill lit a cigarette as he hung up. The cops were going all out now. If this was some crazy idea of revenge, the thing would come out all right. He tried to remember the voice; there had been a haunting familiarity about it, something that almost rang a bell in Bill's memory. The man had done his best to disguise it, and his effort had been good enough to make identification impossible. It was maddening.

He tried to remember the words. Was there a clue there? Did the man give himself away by using any particular phraseology? Bill racked his brains, but he couldn't find the right answer. He swallowed an aspirin tablet to relieve the headache and stretched out on the couch to think.

His mind wandered to the day he first saw Helen. She wore the costume he'd designed for his car hops: high-waisted slacks of rich blue, and a bell-boy jacket of orange silk, topped with a white shanko. She'd been hired by his assistant and Bill drove up that morning and parked. His car hadn't stopped before she was there, smiling, attentive, menu in hand. Bill had shaken his head. He'd said:

"Don't mind me, pal. I own the joint."

But it had taken him a minute to form the words. It had taken much longer than that to get acquainted. She'd been around. She was suspicious of bosses who wanted to take her out, and Bill didn't blame her.

He thought of their marriage. She'd worn a white suit, and the flame of her hair, the softness of her skin, the boyish verve of her personality, had almost taken Bill's speech away. His voice had been low, husky with emotion as he promised ". . . to love and to cherish . . . until death do us part

... "Death! That's what the guy on the phone had promised!

He swore to himself; it was half oath, half prayer, but he meant every word as he had meant few things before in his life, "God! Help me to get her back, unharmed."

The telephone bell interrupted. It was Connor, the reporter.

"Gordon, we've got a tip. Your wife was seen in Homestead about an hour ago. Mahoney and the sheriff are going down with a crew. Do you want to go, too?"

"You bet!"

"Okay. We'll pick you up."

The tip was a dud. Some woman had looked like Helen and somebody called the police. It was getting dark when they dropped Bill off at the house, and he climbed the steps to the porch.

A LARGE white envelope was sticking out of his mailbox. He withdrew it and unlocked the door. Inside, he looked at the envelope. There was no name, no address. He ripped it open. There was a typewritten slip inside. It read:

You should have obeyed. Now it's too late.

Bill fought down the sickening vacuum inside his stomach. Suddenly he had the sensation of no longer being alone. He spun around and a face disappeared from the living room window.

He dropped the note and plunged out into the street. No one was in sight. The street lights were not lit, due to dim-out regulations. He started around the house. The man might be hiding in the back. Bill didn't believe he could have got away that quickly.

He stumbled over something. It was a rock the size of a billiard ball, and he picked it up. The weight felt good in his hand.

He tiptoed around the entire house, hardly daring to breathe. He found no one, and stopped out in front. A slight

blur of white caught his eye on the lawn about ten feet from the sidewalk. He retrieved it. It was an empty match packet advertising a Fort Lauderdale restaurant.

Bill thought fast. There was no way of knowing what the clue was worth. Any passerby might have discarded it. And then again, he remembered what Mahoney said about revenge.

Inside the house, he put in a call for Mahoney. The Captain had just come in and Bill told about the note, the visitor, and the match-paper. Mahoney swore volubly.

"What's the name of the restaurant?"

"You wait there," Mahoney said. "Leave the note alone. We'll be right out. Lauderdale, huh?"

So Bill hung up and waited. He fumbled for a cigarette, but the pack was empty. He walked to the sideboard. There should be a carton or two. He took a pack, and something clicked in his brain. A missing piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"Damn!" he said. "Why didn't I think of that before!"

A moment later he was running down the street.

A boy was selling papers outside the drugstore. He looked at Bill, his urchin's face screwed up in query. "Find your wife yet, Mr. Gordon?"

"Not yet, sonny. But I'll get her back soon. Mighty soon."

The boy's eyes followed him into the store. Except for the soda jerker, who wiped the fountain with an eye on the clock, the place was empty. Bill ordered a drink. He sipped it and listened for some sign of activity in the back of the store. There was none.

"Dixon in?" Bill asked.

"No. He went out a while back. Anything you want?"

"Yes," said Bill. "May I use the typewriter back there a minute?"

The boy nodded and Bill strode to the back of the store and pushed through the swinging door.

The usual clutter of the pharmacist's trade littered the work table. There was a flight of stairs behind a partition, which led to the cellar, and a back door to the alley. Bill had to work fast—be gone before the druggist returned.

He wound paper in the small portable typewriter on one end of the table and began to type. If this didn't work out, there was no harm done. If it did, he would have something else to show Mahoney. He picked out the letters from memory: *You should have . . .*

There was an explosion in Bill's brain. The room swam in a dizzy pattern and then went dark.

BILL came to lying on his side. He was on the back seat of a small sedan, bound hand and foot with tape. There was some sort of gag in his mouth. The pulsing throb in his head came rhythmically and brought back the scene in the drugstore.

The driver's bulk was silhouetted against the glow of the headlights. There was something familiar about the man but Bill couldn't place him. He raised his head until he could look out, careful to make no sound, but the world outside the car was dark.

One thing he realized hopelessly—this wasn't the road to Fort Lauderdale. If Mahoney, when he found Bill gone, decided to look into the match-paper clue, it would lead him in another direction. The Lauderdale road was a main highway and Bill knew it well. Even with the dimout restrictions, he would have known it. He caught sight of a dangling bit of Spanish moss. They were heading back into the Everglades.

The pace of the car slackened. The driver shifted, then turned his head. Bill relaxed and watched through slitted eyes. The man took a brief glance, then faced front again, satisfied.

The car slowed still more, then turned into a bumpy lane. There were several of these roads, Bill

knew, leading back into the swamp for considerable distances. Some of them went to old sawmills, others to tomato patches on newly dried-out land.

He raised his head slowly. The glint of a drainage canal showed on the right. The driver's attention was concentrated on the road. It took three attempts for Bill to sit up. He drew his legs up high, wriggled until his back was firm against the cushion, then kicked out with both feet at the base of the driver's skull. One heel landed squarely but the kick was not hard enough. The man recovered and turned, cursing.

He stopped the car and reached for a hip pocket. Bill shot his bound feet out in short, sharp jabs, straight for the face. The driver tried to grab the flailing feet, failed, as a heel caught his jaw. He slumped to the seat.

Bill knew the man wouldn't be unconscious long. He felt the sweat stand out on his forehead as he kicked the door latch, then fell through the open space to the road. He managed to rise, lever the front door open with an elbow, and drag the man out.

He sat on his erstwhile captor's stomach while his fingers searched the man's pants pockets. A leather blackjack came from the hip. Bill dropped it and explored the others. Then he noticed a light gold chain running through the belt. He pulled on it, brought out a small gold pocket knife and three keys.

It was difficult to open the knife with his hands bound so tightly, but he managed. Just then the man moved. Bill lunged for the discarded blackjack as the man tried to sit up. The weapon was useless to Bill, bound as he was, so again his feet came into play and the form relaxed.

A moment later, Bill was free. The knife, held in his teeth, loosened his wrists and the rest was simple. He rose and looked down at the unconscious figure. He recognized the man. Bill had seen him several times at

Dixon's. Dixon, or someone, had called him Angelo. Bill thought he was a Cuban.

He ripped the laces from the man's shoes and bound his thumbs together behind his back. The laces were strong; a thumb would pull out of joint before they broke. He lashed the ankles with the leather belt, then dumped the form unceremoniously in the rear of the car. The knife, with the keys and the blackjack, he slipped in his pocket, then drove the car along the narrow road, wondering what he would do if he met someone. His jaw set stubbornly; he would cross that river when he came to it.

Angelo groaned, then cursed slowly and steadily. On a sudden impulse, Bill stopped the car. "Where is Helen?" he demanded.

The only reply was an increase in the volume of abuse. Bill smiled grimly and found a package of matches.

"You'll talk," he said. "You'll open your mouth when I hold the match to your bare foot."

The shoes were back on the lane. Bill had dropped them when he removed the laces. He struck a match and held the flame under an instep. Angelo writhed, shifting his feet away from the tiny flame.

"Okay," Bill said. "You haven't been hurt yet. But I can hold your feet and give you a taste of hell. Where is my wife?"

The man's eyes were wide in the light of the match flare. "God!" he said. "You'd do it! You'd burn my feet off!"

"If you've hurt Helen, I'll burn them to the knees! Where is she?"

Angelo broke abruptly. "She ain't hurt," he said swiftly. "I was waiting for—" then he shut up as abruptly as though he'd lost his voice.

It took a moment more for Bill to learn that Helen was in a cabin, which the road led to. Who, or what this Angelo was waiting for, Bill didn't know. The car leapt forward.

A MILE further on a clearing in the scrub growth showed up on the left. Bill twisted the wheel, followed the tracks of former cars. A good sized cabin was in the center of the clearing. Three windows stared blankly. There were no lights showing.

Bill piled out of the car, leaving the bound man. He ran for the door, thought of the keys he'd taken and got them out. The second key fitted the lock. He eased the door open slowly, found a light switch inside.

The room was well furnished. Comfortable over-stuffed couches and chairs were spread around. Bill noticed a huge radio in one corner. A gun-case on one wall held several shotguns. Strange, bulky drapes hung by the windows.

Two doors opened on bedrooms. In the second he found Helen, bound, lying on a soiled bed. Her eyes were wide.

"Bill!" she gasped. "How did you find this place?"

"No time to tell you now," he replied. "Let's get out fast."

The tiny knife blade flashed as he cut the bonds. A moment later her body was limp in his arms and he held her hungrily for a long moment. A thousand questions came to his mind but this was no time to ask them. Enough to know that she was unharmed.

He drew her to the door, out into the front room. He swung the front door open and stopped short, then backed a step and slammed the door just as a bullet nicked the lintel.

It was the sight of a second car in the clearing which stopped him. A second car, and two men coming toward the house with guns glinting in their hands! One was Dixon, the druggist, the second was Angelo.

A sweep of his arm hit the light switch, and the room was dark.

"The windows," Helen said, "have strong shutters on the inside. This place is a fort!"

They found the heavy shutters and

slammed them tight. The move was just in time. A sharp spat sounded and the tinkle of falling glass.

Bill fumbled his way to the gun case, pulled down a twelve-gauge. He found boxes of shells in a nearby drawer. Each shutter had a tiny loop-hole in the bottom, just big enough for a gun barrel. He was sighting, the gun ready, when the lights of two more cars tore up the lane and swung into the clearing.

"Lord!" Helen said. "That's the rest of them! This is the Rappoletti gang. They've been sizing up the Blanding payroll!"

Bill's grip on the weapon tightened. The Rappoletti gang! That rang a bell. They were bank robbers, bandits, killers—but they worked out West, not here in Florida.

He watched the first car, was lining up his sights when the doors opened and a figure dropped to the ground, running, cradling a sub-machine gun in his arms.

"Mahoney!" Bill gasped. "The police!"

The lights of the cars illuminated the figures of the two men outside the house. As other police followed Mahoney, the men raised their hands in surrender. Bill flipped the light switch and threw the front door open. Connor, the reporter, was right behind the police captain.

Mahoney looked at Helen. "Are you okay?"

Her smile was answer enough. She was trying to hide the strain of the past twenty-four hours.

"What's this Rappoletti business?" Bill asked.

Helen spoke quickly. "We must get out of here. This is the Rappoletti hide-out. They're in Starke, looking over the chances of holding up the Camp Blanding payroll. They will be here any time."

"No, they won't!" Mahoney said. "A government man in Starke recognized them. They are in jail. So you can talk right here, and you should have a lot to tell."

Helen sank weakly into a chair. Angelo's face was white. Handcuffs glinted on his wrists. "All of them?" he said. "All four in jail?"

"You heard me," Mahoney snapped. "You should have gone with them."

"I never go when they case a job," Angelo said. "I—"

"Shut up!" Mahoney barked. Then, to Helen, "Go on, please."

"It goes back to Texas, four years ago," she said. "I worked in a bank out there. The Rappoletti gang held it up, got away with several thousand, and killed a teller right in front of me. This man," she pointed to the manacled Angelo, "was the lookout. He was outside the bank and wore no mask. He came in when he heard the shot. He must have seen me too, for he remembered me, even after four years."

"How does Dixon fit in?" Mahoney asked.

"Dixon is not his name. He's Rappoletti's older brother. He built this place as a hunting camp and the gang thought they were safe here. They never robbed a bank in Florida, seldom this side of New Orleans. So Florida should be safe for them to hide in."

"My God!" Mahoney said slowly. "The Rappoletti mob, right under my thumb. And I never knew—"

Connor said, "They got too cocky. They let this punk come to town, after laying low for years. That drugstore was a perfect front. 'Dixon' could provide them everything they needed."

BILL was watching Helen. "I get it," he said. "You saw this lookout in the drugstore. He recognized you. Dixon told him you'd just come east from Texas, which was no secret."

"No," Helen said. "That's the trouble. I didn't recognize him. I should have, but I didn't. But he knew me. He came to the house under the pretext of hunting metal for the salvage drive. Naturally I let him in—"

side. The next thing I knew, I was bound in his car."

"If he recognized you," Mahoney said, "I wonder why he didn't kill you then?"

"I delayed him, threw him off," she said. "I played as dumb as I knew how. He talked about the bank, but I said I'd never been in the town in my life. He wasn't quite sure of himself; wanted to wait for Rappoletti to come back from Starke and let him decide."

"Why didn't you tell me about that holdup?" Bill demanded. "You never mentioned it. Why not?"

"I tried to forget," Helen said. "It is no pleasant memory."

"I'll bet!" Connor broke in. The reporter was scribbling furiously. "Come on, Cap," he urged. "I got to get to a phone!"

"Take it easy," Mahoney advised him. "There are a few more things."

Bill told how he'd been blackjacked while he examined the typewriter in the drugstore. "Now," he added, "I know who phoned me—threatened to kill Helen. It was 'Dixon.'"

"I checked the machine," Mahoney said, "with the note. You left the note in your house. We found it when we got there. You were gone. That match-paper business was a bum clue. I called the Lauderdale Chief and he

vouched for the restaurant. I looked for you and learned from the newsie that you went into Dixon's and hadn't come out. We had a lead. The typing matched the note. But it took too damn long to find this place. What led you to Dixon's? You beat us there."

"Two things," Bill answered. He looked at the druggist, held tightly by two policemen. "Dixon's" eyes were twin black beads in a paste-white face. "In the first place, when I talked to him in the store, he asked if Helen had come back. Later I remembered that no one but you, Connor, and I knew that she was missing. When he asked me, the papers weren't yet out."

Mahoney said, "What was the second thing?"

"He told me she came into his store at nine o'clock the night before. He said she bought a pack of cigarettes. But afterward, I found two cartons in our side-board. That set me thinking, and I remembered—"

"Nice work," Mahoney said. "We could use you on the force."

"Not a chance," Helen broke in. "He has his job cut out. I'll run the drive-in for the next few years. The Navy has given him a commission. The letter came yesterday. That," she smiled proudly, "takes a priority, even over me!"



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Crime Is My



By
Norman A. Daniels

Alex Clark followed that ominous ruby even though the trail led to the grave. For the stone bled whenever 'a murderer touched it—and Alex's hands were red with blood.

CHAPTER I

GEM OF JEOPARDY

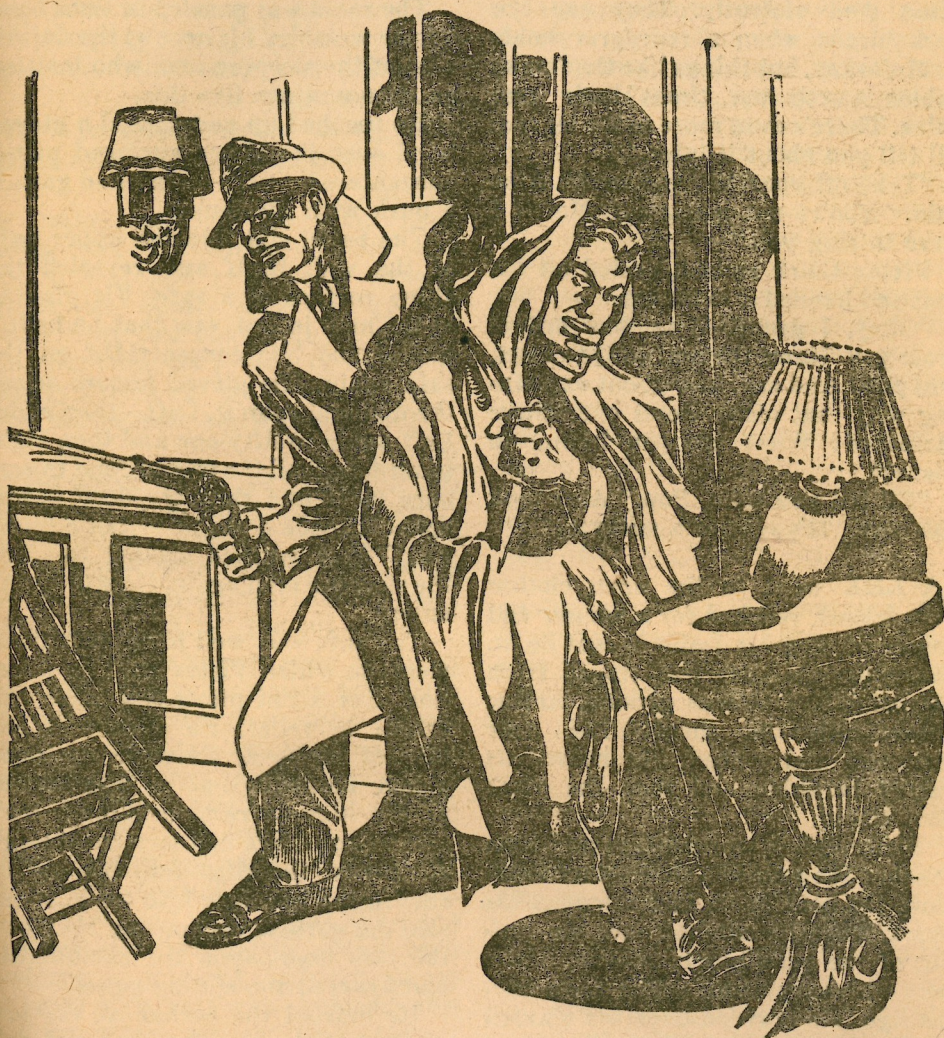
"YOU can't do it, Pop," Alex Clark protested. "Another conviction means life. You just got out of prison this morning."

Victor Clark, fifty, a little pale from five years in prison, looked over at his twenty-year-old son.

"You don't know the circumstances, kid. A guy like me can't get a job, even in these times. We're both broke, but

Heritage

*Unusual Detective
Novelet*



I've got a sure thing. One little job, practically framed for me and we get twenty thousand. Enough to quit on—get a little farm some place and settle down."

"You'll settle down to life imprisonment," Alex Clark said bitterly. "There is no such thing as a framed-up job."

"But I tell you this one is. Look, I go to Risdon's house—he's a rich guy on Blakely Lane. I sneak in, open his

safe and take out one little rock. Why, I even got the combination. I meet a guy later on, hand him the rock and he gives me twenty grand. It's a setup. Maybe the guy I'm going to rob is back of it. Insurance stuff."

"Sounds like a frameup all right," Alex Clark said. "Only you're going to be the picture all wrapped in the frame. Pop, you can't do it."

"I've got to, kid. Either that or both of us go on the bum. I promise not

to swipe another thing except that bleeding ruby."

"Bleeding ruby?" Alex gasped.

"Yeah—silly stuff. This rock has a long history. People who owned it often died violently. They say the rock bleeds when a murderer holds it. Mularkey, but things like that make rubies worth ten times their real value. There's even more to the legend. I'll tell you about it later."

"Take off your hat and coat," Alex said. "You're not going out. Not if I have to slug you."

Victor Clark sighed, peeled off his coat and handed it to his son.

"Okay, I promised to take orders from you. Hang the coat in the closet, will you? And say, how about explaining why that other closet over there is locked? What are you hiding in there?"

"I'll tell you soon, Pop." Alex took the coat. "It's sort of a surprise."

ALEX went to the open clothes closet, reached for a hanger and began putting his father's coat on it. Suddenly, the coat was ripped from his hand, and he was given a terrific shove into the closet. The door slammed and locked. He heard his father laughing and then the outer door closed.

Victor Clark worked fast and soon reached the rear of a three-story mansion. He bent down and removed his shoes. Then he climbed onto the railing of the back porch, shinnied up a pole with surprising agility for a man his age. He crawled over the slanted rooftop to a window that was raised about an inch.

In stockinged feet he crossed the floor of a vacant bedroom, reached the hall and moved along this. It was very dark, but Victor Clark had always possessed an instinct for not bumping into things. He stopped in front of a closed door, put his ear against the panels and listened. Not a sound reached him.

He opened the door and stepped into the room. Enough moonlight

streamed through a window to show that the bed was occupied by a man who seemed to be sleeping very soundly. Victor grinned and tiptoed over the deep rug toward the farther wall.

The room was paneled in light blue. Victor wrinkled his nose at the daintiness of the sleeping man who insisted on surroundings like this.

He reached up and passed a gloved hand over the silken surfaced panel, encountered a hard object and gave it a push with his thumb.

The panel slid into the upper part of the wall itself and revealed the shiny surface of a safe. Vic glanced at the man in bed, saw that he hadn't moved and Vic concentrated on the safe again. His gloved fingers seized the dial and spun it. Left—then right. Left again to fifty-one and then right to zero. Left all the way around to zero once more and then the door swung open. It made a slight metallic sound and Victor whirled around to study the sleeping man again. He still hadn't moved.

The safe was well filled with documents to which Victor paid no attention. But a red plush box made him exhale in relief. He opened it and blinked his eyes. Even in the semi-gloom, he knew that he was looking at the biggest ruby he'd ever seen, and Victor Clark had seen them large. He thrust the ruby into his pocket, shoved the box back into the safe and also the various documents. He closed the safe door, spun the combination and lowered the sliding panel.

He skirted the corner of the bed, glanced at the sleeping man and suddenly Vic went sprawling on the floor. He'd hooked his foot around the leg of a chair and he and the chair crashed with a horrible racket. Vic arose instantly. There was no longer much use to be quiet. Everything depended on how fast he could clear out of this house.

He sped to the door. He thought it was odd that the sleeping man hadn't challenged him. There was no time to look back. Vic didn't go back to the

window. He leaped down the stairs and headed toward the front door. Speed was most essential now and he cursed himself for not noticing that chair.

Vic unhitched a heavy burglar chain, turned a night lock. Just as he moved out of the house, he heard someone call in a loud voice.

He took the front porch steps in one jump, landed heavily and with such emphasis that he remembered his shoes—parked behind the house. Vic turned back, slipped through carefully tended bushes around the house where he suddenly stopped and crouched.

SOMEONE was following him. He didn't even dare breathe. It might be a watchman and that meant he'd have to attack the guy. Vic didn't like the idea at all, but the longer he delayed, the more dangerous his position became.

His follower came slinking closer. In the darkness, Vic couldn't see who it was. He leaped out at the man, curled a powerful arm around his throat and drove home a mighty jab to the chin. The stalker went limp.

Just then, lights flashed on in the windows of the house. Vic glanced at the man he'd knocked cold, now plainly visible in the yellow light from the window. Vic gasped and swore softly.

"Alex—kid. You doggone idiot! Now what the devil can I do?"

He picked up his son and started to run. Vic's only ambition now was to put plenty of distance between himself and this house. The job seemed afflicted by a curse. First, the chair he'd stumbled over and now he'd knocked his own son unconscious.

But Vic's troubles were only beginning. As he cleared the estate, headlights swung around a corner, and for a moment he was encompassed in their gleam. Sirens were wailing in the distance and Vic didn't need a crystal gazer to tell him that was a police car which had caught him in the head-

lights, nor that more police cars were closing in.

He dived back into the garden, ran as fast as he could with a hundred and forty pounds dead weight in his arms. His reasons for getting clear were more than doubled now. The cops would say Alex had helped him with the job and that meant Alex would go to prison too. Above all else, that must not happen.

Then Alex Clark stirred and groaned. Vic set him down, slapped the kid sharply and brought him around.

"Listen, kid," Vic said softly, "we're in a jam and you didn't help it any by coming here. The cops are closing in. Can you navigate well enough to run?"

"I—I'm okay." Alex rubbed his jaw. "Pop, you pack a wallop like a mule. Come—let's get out of here."

Vic led the way because he knew the layout—every inch of it. When he pulled a job, the whole region around the place of action was blueprinted on his mind.

Ten minutes later they were in a quiet street and walking briskly along. Seeing a cab, they wakened the sleepy driver and piled in. Vic stretched his legs luxuriously.

"My first ride in an automobile in five years. They sure improved 'em."

Alex leaned forward and gave the driver an address clear across town from where he lived in a boarding house. Then he noticed that his father wore no shoes.

"Oh, yeah," Vic grinned. "I took 'em off. No matter. What's a pair of shoes when I just copped something that will put you and me in the clover."

The cab dropped them finally. They were in a section where small stores remained open at all hours. Alex entered a store and bought a secondhand pair of shoes. Vic put them on and they walked quickly to the nearest subway station.

"We're going straight back to my room," Alex said. "You're going to

pack your things and beat it—alone, Dad. I'm not going with you."

VIC looked worried for the first time. "But listen, kid, I only did this for you. Give me an hour and I'll get rid of what I found in that house. We can go away together."

Alex shook his head. "No. It's impossible. I'm going away—tomorrow morning at six o'clock sharp. Wait, it's twenty after twelve. It's this morning. Hurry, will you?"

Victor Clark peered around the neighborhood of the seven-story building where Alex boarded. They went in and Alex opened the door of his room. His father closed it again and twisted the lock. Then he drew off his gloves, plunged a hand into his pocket and brought out the ruby.

Here, in full light, the deep redness of the stone was more evident. As Alex reached for it his father scooped up the stone and held it tightly in the palm of his hand.

"Oh, no you don't," he grinned. "I know what's on your mind, kid. You want me to send this rock back. Nothing doing. Inside of an hour, I'll meet a certain party, turn over the rock and get paid twenty thousand dollars. Enough for a real stake. For you and me, kid."

"Look, Dad," Alex said patiently. "I told you I was going away alone. I meant that and it still holds. Let me see the stone again. I can't figure anybody paying twenty thousand for a thing like that."

Victor Clark turned his fist, palm down, over the table. He dropped the deep red stone and it sparkled alluringly.

"This baby," he said, "is worth a hundred grand, Kid. To the right people, I mean, and on account of its history."

"They call it the Blood Stone and it's supposed to leave a trail of blood behind it. Seems originally the thing was part of some altar. Heathen stuff. It's centuries old; they used to sacrifice people so the blood ran over the stone.

That's why they say it leaves a trail of blood. Sounds crazy, but it makes the rock worth twenty times its regular value."

Alex didn't seem to be paying much attention.

"Dad," he said, "you've almost always been a crook. A good one, maybe, but still a crook. Yet I never knew you to hurt anybody. You didn't carry a gun or a knife. Dad, you didn't break that record tonight? You didn't kill to get this stone?"

"Kill? Aw, kid, I'm no murderer. A good crook doesn't have to carry a rod or a knife. Me, I work with my wits."

"Dad," Alex said softly, "if you killed no one, how does it happen that your right hand is all covered with blood?"

"Blood? Are you crazy? I—"

Victor Clark raised his right hand and stared at the palm and fingers. They were bloody. Real blood, too—fresh blood, as crimson as the ruby that lay sparkling on the table.

"Kid," Victor said hoarsely, "I swear I don't know how—"

The door almost fell off its hinges from the pounding it took on the outer side. Only cops knocked like that.

CHAPTER II

CURTAINS FOR AN EX-CON

ALEX scooped up the ruby. "Take it, Dad," he whispered. "There's a ledge outside my window. You can reach the room next door. It's vacant. You hide there while I'll see if I can get rid of the police. Hurry, this is no time for explanations."

"Yeah—yeah, I know," Victor said. "But I didn't kill anybody. Honest—"

"Whether you did or didn't makes no difference now," Alex said. "They'll break the door down in a minute. Scram, will you? I'm sticking no matter what happens."

Victor climbed out the window, secured a toe-hold and worked his way to the next window. He disappeared.

Alex turned around, stripped off his shirt and tie, rumbled his hair and mussed up the bed. Then he stumbled across the room and unlocked the door.

A tall, heavily set man elbowed past him. Two uniformed patrolmen stood just outside the door.

"Where is he?" the big man demanded.

"Where is who?" Alex asked with pretended sleep-fogged wits. "What's the idea?"

"I'm Detective Sergeant Jenkins. You're Alex Clark and I'm looking for your father. He got out of prison yesterday and went right back to his regular work. Only this time, Vic slipped."

"What do you mean—he slipped?" Alex asked with growing horror.

"Listen," Jenkins sat down on the edge of the bed, "I've known your old man for years. I sent him away the first time, I nailed him the last. I'll say one thing, Vic never put up a fight. Never made any trouble—just took his medicine. Just between the two of us, I liked him as much as a cop can like a professed thief. But this time he broke into a house and knifed the owner when he woke up and challenged him. It's murder!"

"Murder?" Alex gulped. "There must be some mistake. Pop wouldn't kill anyone. Sure, he's a crook. I never admired him for it, but he wouldn't hurt a fly. There's a mistake, I tell you."

Jenkins shook his head. "Nix. I never make a mistake. We found Vic's shoes—the same ones issued him by the prison—parked outside the back door. Vic was seen running away. Recognized without the slightest question—and you were with him. Maybe you did the knife job. Maybe you're a crook too, but without the ability of your old man to pull a job and get clear. You had to use a knife."

Alex leaned against the back of a chair, using both hands to cling to it.

"Sergeant, I'm gong to tell you the truth. Pop did pull that job tonight. He—"

Jenkins scowled. "Shut up. I don't need a confession from you. In fact, I hope you resist arrest. Trying to throw the blame on your old man because he's got a record. You knifed Risdon. The evidence is right there on your hand. I got here so fast you didn't have time to wash it off."

Alex looked down at his two hands. The knuckles were white as he gripped the back of the chair, but something red shone between the fingers too. Something red, like blood. He gasped, turned his hands over and uttered a sharp cry of horror.

His right hand was smeared with blood, just as his father's had been. The Blood Ruby, that was it. The legend surrounding it was true. The thing did leave a trail of blood.

"Sergeant," Alex said, "I can explain this blood. Pop had some on his hand too. He swiped a ruby tonight. He told me this particular ruby was part of a sacrificial altar. That it had been soaked with the blood of victims for centuries, and it left a trail of blood wherever it went."

JENKINS stared for a moment and then reached toward his hip pocket as he arose. Alex saw the butt of a service pistol, but Jenkins only dragged out a pair of handcuffs.

"Come on," Jenkins snapped. "Put out your paws. You're under arrest for murder. A ruby that leaves a trail of blood. Are you starting to pull an insanity defense already? I'll pick up your old man later. I feel sorry for him. He won't be proud of you."

Alex backed away a step until he was shouldering the two uniformed cops who'd quietly moved into the room. He glanced at them and shivered. He knew now how his father felt when they came for him; how all crooks felt. Alex knew then that if he ever had the slightest tendency to go wrong, memory of this moment would straighten him out.

"It's the truth," he told Jenkins. "Pop got the ruby. I trailed him. I was going to try and stop him, but he was

too fast for me. I waited outside the house. I was going to make him take his loot back, but I didn't have a chance. He thought I was a cop or a watchman and knocked me cold. He carried me away."

Jenkins extended the cuffs. "Are you going to let me slip 'em on without trouble, or do I really knock you cold? Of all the cockeyed stories I ever heard. Rubies that leave a trail of blood . . . trying to stop your old man . . . Aw, what's the use talking?"

Alex felt the world slipping from under his feet. A world he'd built up—very high in the sky. A new world which he intended to occupy beginning at six o'clock this morning. Five hours away . . . five weeks . . . months . . . years. . . Forever, if Jenkins made his murder rap stick.

Alex's brain reeled under the impact of the thought. He hardly heard the shrill scream that seemed to originate directly outside the window. Jenkins heard it, whirled and raced to the window. He leaned out and the ray of his flash shot down to the alley six stories below. He ducked back into the room, his face grim.

"It was Vic," he said gently. "He took a dry dive, kid. He was at the end of his rope. The minute I knew he pulled a job in which murder was involved, I figured he might try this. Maybe he heard you pinning the rap on him."

"He—jumped?" Alex barely murmured the words. Then he gave a cry of horror and rushed to the window. There were other cops below, apparently posted outside by Jenkins. Their flashlights played on a grayish face that seemed to come rising up toward him—a dead face. The face of his father.

Alex turned back into the room. "Sergeant, Pop didn't jump. He had no reason to because he wasn't a killer. Sure, this job would have meant life maybe, but he could take it. He didn't jump, I tell you. This whole thing is a frameup. He was murdered. Go on down there and you'll find the

ruby on him. You'll find his right hand covered with blood. It came from the ruby, I tell you. The Blood Ruby! At least, please take a look. Every minute you waste means the killer gets that much farther away."

Jenkins frowned. He glanced at the two patrolmen.

"Go downstairs," he ordered. "See if what this kid says is true. I'll take care of him. Yell up what you find."

The two men hurried away. Jenkins sat down again, fiddling with the handcuffs.

"Why not come clean?" he suggested. "And, Alex, don't blame that murder on your old man. I know he couldn't have done it. He and I have been on opposite sides of the fence since we were boys. But if Vic had gone straight, there isn't anyone I'd rather have had for a friend."

"Thanks, sergeant," Alex said. "I believe you. Pop did not commit murder, but neither did I. Wait, those cops will find the ruby. They'll get bloodstained from it, just as I did. They'll find blood on Pop's hand, too."

SOMEONE called Jenkins' name. He went over and leaned far out the window. Alex stood beside him.

"Sarge, we frisked the body. No ruby. His hands are clean, too. That kid is pulling a phony."

Before Jenkins could pull himself back into the room, Alex's hand shot down and seized the gun protruding from the detective's holster. He stepped back a few paces.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, sarge," he said tightly. "I don't blame you for not believing my story. It does sound fishy, but it's true and I've got to prove it. I've got five hours to prove it and I will. When I do, you can come in and take the glory."

"Alex," Jenkins said, "it won't do you any good to pull that trigger. The shot would draw my men up here like flies. I'm coming for you—now."

Alex backed up swiftly toward the door. He suddenly shoved the cylinder of the police positive out, shook it

hard and the bullets clattered to the floor. He snapped the cylinder back into place and tossed the gun at Jenkins.

"I wouldn't shoot anybody. No more than my father would have done. But I'm getting out. I'll prove I'm innocent and that the ruby Pop swiped did leave a trail of blood."

"Alex—" Jenkins stood there, holding the gun just as he caught it—"Your father broke into that house, but he didn't steal anything. Nothing was missing. Risdon woke up before Vic could start work."

Alex bit at his lower lip and the pain cleared his wits. He moved into the hall.

"It makes no difference. I've got to clear Pop's name and my own, too. Don't try to stop me, sergeant. I've only got five hours to do it. I need every second."

Alex turned and fled. He pounded down the steps, disdaining the rickety old elevator. He shot through the lobby doors and kept on going.

Back in his room, Sergeant Jenkins slowly picked up the bullets and thrust them into the gun. He had the look of a badly worried man. There was sadness too, written on his face. What had happened would hardly increase his prestige as a cop. Letting a kid like that get clear. Jenkins wasn't thinking of Alex.

His mind was concerned with blood-stained hands, a ruby that left an eerie trail of blood. With Vic Clark who could take it without flinching—his twenty years old kid who seemed to be made of the same stuff. Sergeant Jenkins was beginning to believe an impossible story.

Alex ran madly away from the vicinity. He slowed down as he neared a public park. It was very dark there these nights. The dimout even made the streets gloomy, but the park was as black as coal. He sat down on a bench.

There wasn't time to think about his father's death except to know he'd never taken his own life. The time for

sorrow would come later, but Alex fervently hoped he could temper it with an explanation of the Blood Ruby and the sight of the real murderer behind bars.

HIS mind went back over the last thirty-six hours. His father had come direct from the upstate penitentiary on a train. Alex had met him at the station, and they'd been together every moment up to the time when Victor Clark slipped away to pull this last job. That meant one thing. Victor had either encountered some crook in prison who had rigged the deal, or it had been discussed by a visitor.

In the five years he'd been in prison, Victor Clark's visitors comprised two people. His son and his attorney. Alex began to think of that smug, portly little man who'd defended his father. Attorney Varno specialized in criminal cases, but had won no outstanding successes. Furthermore, Varno had visited Alex's father only three weeks before his release.

Alex spent another few moments trying to solve the mystery of that weird ruby which left a trail of blood behind it exactly according to the legend. He went off on another tack. His father planned to meet someone and dispose of the ruby. Had that person come to the rooming house, heard or seen Victor crawl over the ledge of the vacant room and encountered him there? The ruby was gone, indicating the presence of another person unless Victor had hidden the stone, which was highly improbable.

Alex's brain reeled under the impact of these questions until he threw them all out and concentrated on Attorney Varno. He left the park, pulled his hatbrim down and kept to the darker streets until he reached a drug store. There he risked a few moments with a telephone book and came out with Varno's residence address. It wasn't very far away.

He went there, studied the fairly elaborate house for a moment and

then marched up on the front porch and rang the bell. Varno himself answered and the man was fully dressed, as though he had just come home.

"I want to talk over a case," Alex said. "It's very important."

"Come in," Varno grunted. "Why you men can't pull your jobs by daylight and let me sleep nights is more than I can figure out. Got any money?"

"Plenty," Alex replied. He followed Varno into a small, comfortably fitted study and sat down in a leather chair. Varno got behind his desk and looked at Alex inquiringly.

"My name is Alex Clark," Alex began. "My father was Victor Clark."

Varno tapped fingertips together and bestowed a questioning glance on his new client.

"Vic was released today, I think. Hasn't he come home or are you in trouble, too?"

"He came back, pulled a job and the police say he murdered someone. They also think I might have had a hand in the killing. You can't let me down, Varno. You can't—because Dad is dead. He was murdered for a strange ruby he stole."

Varno looked surprised. "So they finally got Vic. I warned him he was too old to go back to his profession. They never listen. Excuse me just a moment, my boy. I'll dig up my file on your father and we'll try to arrange some kind of a defense for you. If he is dead, the police will chuck all the blame on you. We must be very careful."

CHAPTER III

HOUSE OF MURDER

VARNO left the room. Alex gave him about two minutes and then he cat-footed after the man. He heard the lawyer speaking—a one-sided telephone conversation. Alex paused outside the door to listen.

Varno said, "Better send two or three men. He might not want to go quietly. And don't let him know I

tipped you. Just say you had my home watched because you figured he'd come here. That's all I ask in return for this favor. Yes, I'll stall him until you get here."

Varno hung up, arose and turned. He shrank back because Alex was slowly advancing toward him. Varno tried to reach a drawer in a table for the gun he kept there, but Alex was much too fast. He shoved Varno into a chair.

"So that's the kind of a lawyer you are. Tip the cops so your client is sure to be arrested."

"I don't take murder cases," Varno gulped. "You—you're no good. Just like your old man. No good at all."

"Listen," Alex said softly, "my father was a crook. He'd admit it to anyone. But he never hurt a soul beyond relieving them of their valuables. He was no plug-ugly and no murderer. Good? He was just that. No better burglar ever did business. You should know, Varno, because you picked him for the job that cost his life."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Varno yelled. "You're crazy."

"My father told me all about it." Alex went on. "That means I can hook you too, when the cops come. How do you like that?"

Varno forgot that he was an attorney then. Forgot such things as traps in cross-examinations and the fact that he was falling for one himself. He could only see prison bars and ugly policemen who never had liked him anyway.

"You can't prove anything," he yelled. "It's my word against yours."

"Ah—so you did arrange it. Thanks for letting me know because I was bluffing, Varno. Now we'll just wait here until the police arrive and tell them the whole—"

Alex stopped short. Varno wasn't looking at him any longer, but beyond him. It couldn't be the police who slipped quietly into the house because Varno would never have exhibited that amount of terror. Alex started to turn around. At that moment a thick

portiere came down over his head. He was trapped and rolled in the long piece of heavy, stifling cloth until he felt like a fish in a net.

A gun roared. Alex stopped moving for a second or two and then he went frantically back to the task of getting free. He knew someone was close by and, on a sudden hunch, Alex balled one fist and raised it to resemble his head protruding beneath the portiere. He gave a cry of pain one moment later because a gun butt had come down with murderous intent. If that had been his head, he'd have been finished.

As it was, Alex let himself go limp and hoped the killer wouldn't try again. He heard retreating footsteps and then a door closed. Alex reached into his pocket, got out a knife and slashed the portiere. He extricated himself from its imprisoning folds, arose and turned deathly pale. Even though he knew what he'd find, still it was a gruesome sight.

Attorney Varno still sat in the chair, but his head was thrown back and he had developed a third eye between the two he originally had. The third one was a bluish hole through the head.

Outside, brakes were gently applied, but they squealed a little anyway. That would be the cops. Alex saw a gun on the floor. It would be wiped clear of prints so the murder could readily be blamed on him. This, most certainly, was no place to be found by the police.

ALEX raced for a window, raised it and did a nose dive outside. He scrambled to his feet, held his battered hand in the other, and began to run madly into the night. Someone called a command to halt and a flash-light's beam picked him out.

Alex veered crazily, and the two bullets that were fired only whined past with a reasonable distance to spare. He dove into the brush, kept going and vaulted a hedge. Five minutes later he was standing in the door-

way of a darkened store, trying to make himself as invisible as possible.

Radio cars were moving around the neighborhood to seek him out. One went by and Alex hurried across the street, walked rapidly north and ducked every time he saw the dimmed out lights of a car. A glance at his watch told him it was one-thirty. He groaned. There was only four and a half hours left. Two hundred and seventy minutes to a deadline he couldn't fail to meet.

There wasn't a moment of time to be wasted. Alex set out for the house which his father had robbed. There would be the answer to all this. Sudden death, a fantastic ruby and a double-crossing attorney who'd been murdered to keep his lips sealed. Alex used tactics identical with those his father had assumed. He sneaked around to the back and was extremely careful because half the house was lighted up now.

Reaching the back porch, he climbed the pillar and crawled over the roof to that same window. Like his father, he removed his shoes to insure quiet progress, but he wisely tied the laces together and linked them around his neck.

He knew the room in which his father and death had visited almost simultaneously and he went there. The corpse had been removed but the rumpled bed was bloodstained and the room still smelled a bit from police technicians' work with cameras and fingerprint powder.

Alex didn't dare turn on the lights. He carefully canvassed the room, looking for the wall safe. By firmly pressing the flat of his hands against the blue silk covers on the paneling, he located the circular safe door. Another five minutes were spent in finding the release which raised the panel and exposed the steel door.

Alex eyed the thing with considerable disillusionment. His father could crack safes, but not one like this—not without the use of "soup" anyhow and the safe certainly showed no

signs of having been damaged.

Someone was coming up the steps. Alex looked around, trapped and desperate. He beat a quick retreat to a closet and closed the door all but a fraction of an inch. He was just in time, for the lights flashed on and a tall man of about twenty-eight ambled across the floor. He came to a dead stop, gasped and turned around again. Alex heard him pounding down the steps. He'd seen the exposed safe.

Alex couldn't stay there. They were bound to make a search. He hurried into the hall, slipped through a door and found himself in another bedroom. He stayed there and watched the tall young man and two other men hurry up the stairs and disappear into the murder room.

Alex beat a hasty retreat downstairs then. He couldn't leave the house. Not until he knew the answer to that ghastly ruby, the murders of his father, the owner of this house and Attorney Varno. Downstairs, he sought refuge in a spacious cloak room. Three topcoats and hats were neatly hung on a crossbar.

Quickly slipping his hands into the sleeves of each coat, Alex grimaced a bit and then searched the pockets in a vain hunt for that ruby. The others were coming downstairs now and they all went directly to a study which Alex had spotted on his way down the steps.

He hoped there'd be no prowling servants in the house as he set his back against the wall and sidestepped noiselessly toward the study. The tall young man was talking.

"I tell you that panel was closed last time I saw it and none of us went upstairs. Not since I returned from the undertaker's, anyway."

"We're all being silly—especially you, Turner. We're upset. As Risdon's lawyer, I happen to know quite a lot so don't pretend you are sorry he's dead. Turner, you're Risdon's nephew, but you'll get a surprise when you read his will."

"I knew the old goat wouldn't give

me much," Turner said. "What does it amount to, Stephens? You drew up the will. Come on, tell us."

"Yes," the third man said. "Why not? I'm his closest of kin. A brother has a right to know about such things."

THE lawyer chuckled. "His body is scarcely cold and you're fighting over what he left already. I can't tell you, not now—except that you both share in the estate and there isn't enough left to keep either of you more than six months."

"What do you mean?" Turner barked. "Uncle Mart was rich. Wasn't he, Corey? He trusted you—told you everything. You're his brother and you should know."

"Listen," Corey Risdon said tartly, "my brother liked me about as much as he enjoyed losing money. I always understood he was wealthy. What happened to his money, Stephens?"

The attorney shrugged. "Fortunes aren't too secure these days. There were unfortunate investments, he gave away a lot to charity."

Turner lit a cigarette and sat down heavily. "Damn the money. If we could locate that ruby, there'd be something. I tell you that safe panel wasn't open before. One of you was trying to get into it, thinking the burglar hadn't managed to lay his hands on the stone."

"Nonsense," Corey Risdon snapped. "I sent you to the undertaker's along with the body. I went out to wire relatives. Stephens left with me and we told the servants to go home until we called them. All of us returned at approximately the same time."

"That's correct," Attorney Stephens declared. "Your suspicions are foolish, Turner. Anyway, none of us knows the combination to the safe. However, it might not be a bad idea to search the house. That burglar might have had a friend who is still looking for loot."

"All right," Corey Risdon said. "There's nothing like being sure."

Come on, we'll begin at once. Turner, you take the second floor along with Stephens. I'll start on the first floor and then go to the cellar. If we hear or see anything suspicious, we're to sing out."

Alex beat a quick retreat to the clothes closet and wondered what to do next. Corey Risdon was bound to search it, but there was no other place to go. Alex remembered how he'd been trapped at Varno's house and he hastily seized a heavy coat, held it high and waited.

Corey Risdon didn't take long to reach the closet. As the door opened, Alex brought the coat down, smothering Risdon's yell. He wrapped both arms around the man, pushed him into a corner and then stepped out of the closet. He closed the door, turned the key and withdrew it.

This was no place for him right now. He exited through the front door just as Corey Risdon started to kick the door and yell his head off. Alex skirted the big porch and streaked toward the shelter of some bushes. He got behind them and watched. Somehow, he doubted these men would call the police.

He'd heard enough to know that all three were none too saddened by the death of Mart Risdon. Turner, his nephew, and Corey Risdon, his brother, were interested only in the estate while Attorney Stephens maintained an aloof attitude that was not mixed with any particular amount of solicitude for the bereaved men.

A branch snapped behind Alex. He had no time to turn. A gun was jammed against the small of his back.

"Okay," Alex said tonelessly, "I know when I'm licked."

There was no answer, but a hand dipped into his coat pocket. It was withdrawn and a moment later so was the gun. A hissing voice whispered in his ear.

"You can have a break if you don't move for three minutes. Stay just as you are."

ALEX nodded curtly, kept his hands up and counted the seconds. Just why one of those men should give him a lease on life was more than he could figure out, but he didn't try to fight good luck. The three minutes up, he thought of the short space of time still allotted to him and glanced at his watch. Less than four hours left.

He reached into the pocket which the stranger had searched. There was a folded piece of paper there. He drew it out, tilted the paper so the moonlight would shine on it and saw that it contained a series of figures.

"Combination numbers," he gasped. "They must open Risdon's safe—the one Dad cracked."

Alex tried to guess the significance of an armed man who supplied him with such help. He couldn't even begin to think of a reason for it. There was a snap to the autumn air and his feet were very cold. He sat down, and put on his shoes and felt a little better.

Surveying the house, which was lighted from top floor to cellar now, he knew he'd be compelled to wait until the three men finished searching the place for him. Then he'd have to wangle an entrance somehow, reach that safe and open it up. He didn't need an engraved invitation to tackle the safe. That bit of paper was plenty.

Now and then he saw shadows pass against the curtained windows. They were certainly doing a good job of it. Almost an hour went by and Alex became more and more worried. If he had a gun, he would have forced his way in and be damned to what those three men thought. Time was getting shorter and shorter. Six o'clock was the absolute deadline.

Then the front door opened and the three men emerged. Alex watched all three walk off the porch and separate. Attorney Stephens headed toward Alex. Turner went around the left of the house while Corey Risdon took the other side. Stephens, apparently, was assigned to cover the front.

Alex drew off his shoes again,

locked them around his neck and started moving cautiously. Stephens passed within half a dozen yards of the spot where Alex was crouched. The lawyer kept on going and Alex padded softly in the other direction.

The front door was invitingly open and he went in. He proceeded straight upstairs to the murder room. Dropping to hands and knees, Alex crawled beneath the window so that he'd create no shadow on the curtain. He sent the panel sliding up to reveal the safe.

With the piece of paper that mysterious gunman had placed in his pocket, opening the safe was a matter of no more than two minutes. Alex began to remove the contents. He found a red plush box, held his breath and touched the spring. The lid flew open and Alex groaned. The box was empty.

Working fast, he kept digging deeper into the safe until he found a plain white cardboard box. This contained a wad of cotton which he carefully fingered. Raising the cotton he caught the dull red gleam of the ruby.

"Now how in the world did it get back into this safe?" he asked himself half aloud. "Nobody here can open it—or so they claim. Why should anybody murder my father to get this ruby and then bring it back here, where it belongs?"

The answer to those questions, he felt, lay in this house. It rested with one of the three men who were now busy searching for him. Alex dropped the ruby into his pocket, stowed the empty box far back in the safe where he'd found it and stuffed the documents and other things back. He closed the safe door, brought the sliding panel down, but it stuck a bit. He pressed the spring again. The panel went upwards.

AT THAT moment, the lights went out. Alex turned swiftly and ducked. He was just in time for a fist swung through the air exactly where his head had been.

The room was plunged into extreme

darkness, for the attacker had closed the door as he extinguished the lights. A tiny yellow streak emanated from beneath the door, but it didn't help Alex identify his attacker.

The man was murder bent without question, for he bored in fast, using his fists and his feet. Alex took a terrific jolt to the cheek. It hurled him sideways, but he bounced back again, heard a swish and fell flat. A chair landed on his shoulders. If he'd remained standing, the chair would have brained him.

His hands flailed around in the darkness. One encountered a leg. The other hand shot out to join the first and Alex gave a mighty tug. The chair hit him again, but this time his attacker went off balance as Alex yanked at his ankle. With a crash that shook the house, the man came down. Alex wriggled toward him, straddled the man and his fingers closed around a throat. He meant to keep them there until this killer was unconscious.

But whoever this was, he possessed plenty of strength and skill at dirty fighting. Fingers fumbled against Alex's face, seeking his eyes to gouge them out. Alex threw back his head as far as possible, but still those inquisitive fingers kept digging into his cheeks. Then a knee came up with considerable force. Alex lost his balance and those hands of his also lost their grip.

The man slithered around, smashed a healthy blow at the back of Alex's neck and he fell forward, half dazed. Now it was his turn to feel a choking grasp. There were two knees pressed against his chest until he wondered why his ribs didn't cave in. Things started to swim, the darkness took a ghastly shape composed of dizzy stars and deeper blackness. In about one more minute, it would be over unless he did something.

Full realization of his desperate position lent Alex strength. His right fist came up from the floor and smashed against a jaw. His attacker rocked back and Alex sucked in lungs—

fuls of air. That steadied him and he drove his fist back again.

Once more, he sent the man caroming away. Alex gave a mighty lurch and got to his feet. The attacker was unseated, and before he could get up Alex landed on him. He delivered two terrific blows to the jaw and the man dropped flat and lay still.

Breathing heavily, Alex grasped at the foot of the bed for support. His lungs still ached, there were deep scratches on his face and sweat dripped from his forehead. He bent over the man and searched him rapidly. There was a nickel-plated revolver in one pocket and he appropriated this. Alex also found one other highly significant item.

He reeled over to the safe, raised the panel and used the combination which he'd memorized. The door swung open. He hastily pulled out the contents until he reached the plain white box. Two minutes later Alex closed the safe door, twisted the combination and brought the panel down again. Then he stepped lightly to the door, listened a moment and opened it.

Looking back, he noticed his attacker sitting up, back toward him. The man would be in action in another moment and Alex had had enough of that brand of fighting. He went down the steps fast, crossed the porch and sped away into the night.

CHAPTER IV

CLUE IN RED

NOT three minutes after Alex had vanished, his attacker left the house through the rear door, hurried around to the front. Turner, Corey Risdon and Attorney Stephens met on the porch.

"One thing we're sure of," Turner said. "Whoever prowled around has gone. I didn't see a sign of anyone."

"I didn't either," Attorney Stephens said glumly.

Corey Risdon looked significantly at the wide open front door. "Did it ever

occur to you simpletons that the man we want might have returned, entered and is hiding inside the house again? One of us should have stayed behind."

"Which one?" Turner grunted. "We don't trust each other and you know it. For my part, I think we ought to get down to business and settle this thing now. Stephens, you know how Corey and I felt about Mart. He wouldn't help his own brother. Wouldn't give him a dime when he was in trouble."

"Mart Risdon didn't like gamblers," Stephens said gently, "even if his own brother was one. And he didn't like you, Turner, because you were so obviously hanging around to be included in the will. However, I see no especial point in keeping you in suspense. Come in—we'll sit down quietly in the study and I'll tell you what's what."

Turner prepared highballs and all three drank gratefully. Stephens stroked his chin for a moment.

"It's unethical, but I thought this might happen after I learned that Mart was dead. I brought along the will. It's in my brief case. I'll get it."

Stephens left the room. He was gone about three or four minutes and returned with an expensive brief case. He opened it, took out a fat envelope and broke the seal.

"Prepare yourselves for a shock, gentlemen," he warned. "Your respective uncle and brother cashed in most of his wealth for the sole purpose of purchasing a huge ruby with great historic value. He meant to leave this ruby to some museum where it would be displayed as a monument to himself."

"The ruby was stolen. All that is left consists of this house which is not worth a great deal, a car in the garage, and a bank balance of four hundred and sixty-three dollars. You two share in that inheritance. Here is the will. Read it yourselves."

"I'll fight it," Corey Risdon shouted angrily. "I'll spend every cent I've got."

"That wouldn't retain you as a

freshman in law school," Stephens grunted. "You're broke, Corey. If I were you, I'd take what was left and be glad it wasn't all gone. Perhaps some of the furnishings here will bring a few dollars. I'll attend to that."

The doorbell buzzed. Stephens beckoned the others and all three approached the door. Stephens opened it. He sprang back. Alex Clark stepped in and there was a nickel-plated pistol in his fist.

"Who the devil are you?" Stephens blurted. "What's the idea of the gun?"

Alex smiled crookedly. "I need the gun for my protection, gentlemen. I'm Alex Clark. My father is the man who robbed the safe upstairs."

"And who killed Mart Risdon," Stephens snapped. "You were probably in with him. Don't tell me you came back because you forgot something."

"Yes," Alex nodded, "I did. A ruby—a most peculiar ruby. Its history is as gruesome as the string of murders that has followed it. A ruby that bleeds, that stains whoever kills to gain its possession. Sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it? Well, my father had it for a time and his hand was covered with blood from the ruby."

"Well, what do you want with us?" Stephens demanded. "You got the ruby—or your father did."

"Move back into the living room," Alex commanded. "I'm not so sure we did get the ruby and that's why I came back. Just to make sure, gentlemen. Now keep your hands raised. Get going."

THEY marched into the living room. Alex followed to the door, and then he seemed to be listening intently. With a hissed warning, he hurried to the front of the house, but was gone only a moment. When he returned, the three men were still standing there but without their hands in the air.

"Get 'em up," Alex commanded. "Now turn around. I'm going to search you because I think one of you

has the ruby. No tricks. I'll shoot fast if there is a phony play."

Alex frisked them one by one, but there was no trace of the ruby. He ordered them to turn and face him. Then he slowly backed toward the door.

"Looks as though I made a mistake, gentlemen. I'll be going."

"I'll say you made a mistake," someone said behind Alex. He turned quickly. Detective Sergeant Jenkins, service pistol in hand, stood there looking stern and dour.

Alex let his revolver drop to the floor, raised his own hands and moved aside.

"Wait, sergeant," he begged, "you must understand this. My father broke in here to get a ruby. He knew all about it, even to the combination of the safe and he was told all this while he was still in prison. His lawyer, Varno, took care of that."

"Varno is dead," Jenkins grunted. "Maybe you know something about that, too."

"I know more than you think," Alex answered. "Varno was killed because the real murderer was afraid he'd talk. Varno arranged things with my father. The idea wasn't half so much to steal the ruby as to create a motivation for the killing of Mart Risdon. Risdon was dead when my father entered the room."

"How are you going to prove all this?" Jenkins asked. "Risdon is dead. So is Varno and your father."

"Listen—all of you." Alex faced the group. "I happen to know a few things about that ruby. It does have a gruesome history and it does bleed when a murderer holds it in his hand. The murderer knew this legend, but didn't believe in it. He created a duplicate stone. Not a ruby at all, although a perfect likeness."

"This fake ruby contained a solid substance that looked like blood. The heat of the hand melted this substance and caused it to flow through minute openings, and the hand of whoever held it was covered with what seemed

to be blood. The stuff liquefied very slowly and its supply was practically inexhaustible. My father got the fake.

"The murderer trailed us—or knew where we lived. He saw my father leave the room, crawl along the wall to another room and he went there to meet him. He was supposed to pay over a lot of money. Instead, he took the fake ruby and pushed my father out of the window."

"Look," Sergeant Jenkins said patiently. "This all sounds very nice, but either produce the murderer or take the rap yourself, Alex."

"All right, I will," Alex said. "The killer is one of these three men. Now brothers rarely kill brothers, but that doesn't necessarily eliminate Corey Risdon. Turner is the nephew of the dead man. Stephens was his attorney. One of these three has the ruby—the real one. He didn't dare let it remain in the safe. I searched them, found nothing. The only answer is that the killer is holding the real ruby in his hand right now."

Utter nonsense," Stephens said angrily. "Why don't you arrest this man, Sergeant? He confessed to the crime."

"Open your hands," Jenkins snapped. "Let's see if the kid is lying."

Stephens shrugged, extended his hands and then gave a cry of alarm. The right palm glistened dully red. It was covered with a substance like blood.

"That's it," Alex cried. "Stephens is the man. He planted a fake ruby, laughed at the legend that went with the real one. But he was holding the real one a moment or two ago and it bled. It bled real blood. The legend is true."

STEPHENS bit at his lip, pivoted suddenly and started a mad dive toward the door. Two bulky detectives barred his way. Stephens glanced at his reddened hand again, shivered violently and sank into a chair.

"He has been telling Corey Risdon and Turner how the dead man's estate

shrunk," Alex said. "I think Stephens looted it. He contacted Attorney Varno, had him arrange with Dad for the robbery and killed Risdon before Dad arrived. He killed Dad too, got the phony ruby and knew if Dad was arrested before he got to him, the story of a ruby that bled would be laughed at in court. Any judge or jury would say Dad was getting soft-brained in his old age. He'd be sent up and that would be that.

"Stephens didn't dare keep the real ruby on him so he put it back in the safe upstairs. Only he could open it, so he figured it was secure. He took it out a short time ago, but he didn't bargain on the fact that the ruby would really bleed and convict him."

Stephens looked at his stained hand again and gulped. Then he drew a handkerchief, touched the edge of it to the stain and gave a yowl. Alex pushed him back into the chair.

"You recognize the stuff. Fake blood! Sure—as fake as the duplicate ruby you had made. The phony gem you took from my father before you murdered him. The gem he got out of the safe upstairs. After he left this house, you put the real ruby back in the safe. You carried around the phony one—until that fight we had. While you were unconscious, I opened the safe. I switched the real ruby to your pocket, the phony one to the safe.

"Upon recovering consciousness you hid the ruby in your pocket, thinking it was the one that bled. You then opened the safe and took out what you thought was the real ruby. It bled and scared the daylights out of you. Your possession of the false gem convicts you of my father's murder, Stephens.

"You half believed the legend about the stone. You really thought that was the real ruby bleeding in your hand. There were other things, too. You killed Varno and hurried back here. I wasn't long after you. I hid in the clothes closet in the front hall. Your coat was there, along with Risdon's and Turner's. Your coat was still

warm, showing you had just arrived. The other two coats were cold. The man who shot Varno had to hurry to this house and create an alibi. I suspected you after feeling of the coats, but the bleeding ruby clinches it."

Sergeant Jenkins was using the red blinker lights on the police car as he raced downtown. Alex kept looking at his watch.

"I have only half an hour, sergeant. Thirty minutes. Can't you make this bus really roll?"

"You'll get there," Jenkins said. "Want to stop by the rooming house for your uniform?"

"Then—you know?" Alex asked.

Jenkins nodded. "Sure, I looked around your room. Found a locked clothes closet and opened it up. Your uniform and your papers were there. You're a lieutenant in the Air Corps. You got orders to report at six this morning. Probably to go over and pay the Nazis a visit. You didn't tell your father because you wanted to let him have some peace right after his release from prison.

"When I found that uniform, I knew you were no killer. Imagine—a lieutenant in the Air Corps pulling a robbery just before he heads for battle. I gave you a free hand, Alex, to pull yourself out of this mess and you did a good job of it."

"Thanks," Alex said. "Sarge, I can't even stay to take care of things. Will you do it? Pop always liked you. He wasn't so much of a guy, but—"

"I'll take care of everything," Jenkins said.

Alex was silent for a moment or two and then he looked up. "Sarge, somebody put a gun in my back and the combination to the safe in my pocket. Pop probably had that combination on him. I can't figure out who gave me that break. Getting the combination made everything easy."

"I can't figure it out either," Jenkins pursed his lips. "Wouldn't be ethical for a cop to do anything like that. Guess we'll just have to call it one of those great mysteries, eh, kid? Now get that uniform of yours and let's go. I'm banking on you bringing down a few enemy planes."



Satan Spins the Wheel

Chance Casey, a dick with gambling fever, figured he had the lowdown on that cold-decked roulette setup. But the little ball rolled into a bloody slot—and left Casey holding the bag with morgue stakes.



By James A. Kirch

I SAID, "A thousand bucks is peanuts, Mike. Plain peanuts." I slid my hat off his desk and started for the door. I had twelve bucks in my pocket and the gambling chill that always hits me in the middle of my stomach, but I kept a smile on my

face and moved steadily. I was betting Mike wouldn't let me go.

I lost.

Little Joey Ricci laughed, a nasty choked giggle, but Mike's voice was quiet. "You're playing big," he said, softly. "For a broke private dick,

you're turning down heavy dough. But that's *your* business, Chance. I'll get someone else."

I said, "Sure, Mike," and kept on going. When you've lost on a bluff, you've got to run it through, even though business is from hunger. I'd played this thing wrong, somehow. Okay, so I'd lost. The thing was, I couldn't see where I'd played it wrong.

Mike Trevitch had the chips, if he wanted to use them. He owned the Novelty Concession Company, with a virtual monopoly on the sale of gambling equipment in the state. He turned out the best roulette wheels in the Midwest, and he didn't peddle to states where they'd clamped down on Lady Luck. All nice and clean and legal, and if he'd had to pressure some of the other boys out of the field, that was poker chips over the table. He was Honest Mike Trevitch, whose wheels bore the seal of purity.

That's why he'd tried calling me in. A lad who played the black and red at Ed Jordan's *River Jordan Inn* had passed the word around that he had proof Jordan's wheel was fixed. If that was so, Mike wanted to know it. One crooked wheel, with the Novelty Concession mark on it, could bust Mike's business to hell. The kid—a redheaded guy named Dick Trotter—was supposed to have said the wheel was a louse, and that he'd figured the fix. And then he'd disappeared. Like that, vanished.

That was Mike's story; and now Mike wanted him found—found and held until he could question him. And he wanted him—in spades—kept away from Ed Jordan.

It was funny, though, when I left Mike's office, keeping a smile on my face, and headed back for my place, how I still felt that cold, gambling chill in the pit of my stomach. The chill that tells me the horses are right, or the wheel is spinning hot. I had a hunch, then—a strong hunch, in spite of what Trevitch had said.

The chill told me the deal wasn't dead.

That's why the envelope didn't bowl me over. The uniformed kid who left it shoved a slip at me and ducked out, fast, before I could match him double or quits for the tip. I knew I'd have won, the way my luck was starting to break.

There was no note in the envelope, no word from Mike. But I didn't need a racing form or a bookie bill to know that Chance Casey's luck had pulled through. There were four crisp bills—two thousand bucks—in the envelope.

I was in. All that was left was to find Red Trotter.

I found him, all right. And when I found him, the chill was still on me. But it wasn't the gambling chill. It was morgue ice.

Ed Jordan's was my first stop; a nice place to stop. It rambled over a full block on the outskirts of Nevo, built in tiers, with the sign *River Jordan Inn* blazing like a red crown at the top. The doorman threw me a salute, the hat-check girl tossed me a smile, and a thin-faced kid tried to steer me into the lounge bar at the side. I pushed by him and climbed the Y-shaped stairway to the gambling rooms.

I'd forgotten what a neat layout it was. There were three new roulette wheels, Trevitch-built, with two-bit, buck, and five-dollar minimums. There was a sucker's setup of chuck-a-luck in the corner, near the door that led to the crap game. The place was jammed.

FLUSH CREAGER, Ed's right-hand bower, spotted me and threaded his way through the crowd. Flush had a rock-candy face, with a marshmallow complexion. He was a hard little guy, built on tough lines, but his skin looked as if he'd never come up out of the cellar. His voice had the same damp touch.

"I'll get you in, Chance," he told me. "There's a dame there who hasn't

TDA

played a dime. She just likes to watch the ball spin. We'll ease her out and give you the spot."

I stood there a minute, watching the crowd at the wheel and listening to the whirring noise the ball made as it skimmed over the slots. I liked the sound, and I liked the idea, but the chill wouldn't come. I knew better than to play then. I've got to have the feel, or I'm wasting my dough.

"I'm looking for Ed," I told Flush. "Private matter."

He nodded. "Third door," he said, pointing. "Straight down the hall. I'll ring him you're coming." He nodded again and moved to a boxed phone at the side, to tip Jordan off.

The catch on the door buzzed as I reached for it and the door swung open easily. I kicked it shut behind me and walked down the narrow hallway to Jordan's office. I could feel his eyes on me all the way.

He was too small a man for his office. The room was big, sprawling out to cover a full corner of the Inn, and the furniture was Italian style, with thick carvings of half-nude women. It was the sort of a setup that needed a lot of man to match it. Jordan was only a slice.

He was built like a tired grasshopper; long, thin legs, scrawny arms, and a head that was pointed on top. He had a queer habit of cocking his head to the side and looking at you through half-closed eyes as he spoke. He did that now, squeaking the words.

"If it's a check, Chance, okay. If it's cuff money you want, no dice. Half the town is in to me now."

I grinned at him, squatting on the chair nearest the door. I hung my hat on one of the naked women the designer had worked into the arms, and stretched back, still grinning. He wasn't fooling me, and he knew it. Nobody had ever been into Ed Jordan for more than coffee money and, unless his brain snapped, they never would be. And he knew I wasn't looking for credit.

"I can struggle along, Ed," I told him. "This is business. Got an order to locate a young guy who plays here."

His head cocked the other way. His voice still squeaked but his eyes weren't sleepy now. "A lot of guys play here," he offered. "Some of them are maybe young."

"This one's different," I told him. "He's nuts." I went on quickly, warming up to the lie. It wasn't a bad story, considering it was mostly ad lib. "His family have dough and they keep him under wraps, as a rule. But a while back he slipped the halter, and they've been trying to trace him ever since. They got a tip he was here in Nevo and wired me to check. They want him back before he loses his shirt, goes nuts completely, and winds up in Mental Observation."

"Don't blame them," said Jordan. "Who is he?"

"Trotter," I said. "A redheaded lad named Dick Trotter. I figured you might have his address."

Jordan's face twisted to a scowl. "Address?" he said. "I've got more than an address for that guy. He's been filling in a place at my five-buck wheel for weeks, playing the minimum. He wins or loses chicken feed every night, and claims he has a system."

"So he's nuts," I said. "Anybody with a system is nuts. You know that, Ed. The only way to play is to wait till you've got the feel."

Jordan grinned. "That's *your* system," he cracked. He stopped smiling and took a long cigar from the box on his desk, biting off the end. He didn't light the cigar, just sat there like a studying insect. Finally he nodded and put the cigar back in the box.

"There could be a stink," he said. "If he's screwy, like you say, there might be a stink about this. You'd better send the guy home." He shot open a file drawer at his elbow and

pulled out a card, sliding it across the desk.

Dick Trotter—Approximate age, 28,
Occupation, unknown.
Prospects, steady player, too light.
Address: 2203 Cliffside Road, City.

"How's your luck, Casey?" he asked abruptly.

"Running," I said vaguely. "Running one way or the other." I thanked him for the card and threw him a grin on the way out. The grin came easily. For my money, my luck was hot.

The way I figured was this. If I'd started hunting Trotter, Ed would have heard of it. And if he'd been going to pressure him, I'd have just been speeding up the job. Fronting him this way, I gave myself a show-down reason for checking, and threw a joker in Ed's deck besides. If he thought Trotter was slap-happy, he might lay off.

Smart? No, I didn't think I was smart. I just thought I was playing my cards right. I was, too, for the game I'd been dealing.

The trouble is, I was dealing the wrong game.

I didn't find that out right away. I didn't even guess it as I climbed the dingy steps to Red Trotter's apartment and pressed the buzzer. I didn't expect to find the kid at home. You don't earn two thousand bucks that easy.

I was right—and wrong.

I GAVE the bell two or three rings, to make sure the place was empty, and then I went to work on the lock. The third skeleton key slid the bolt back, and I opened the door halfway, stepped inside, and closed it behind me.

If Red Trotter believed in system, it didn't show up in his room. The place was the worst mess I'd ever seen or ever expected to see. The cot mattress was on the floor, with a neat slit down the middle. None of the stuffing had been dragged out;

it was a smooth job, as if a lad who knew his business had cut it like a surgeon down the center and explored the insides.

The window shades were heaped in a corner, the fabric torn loose from the rollers. The coasters had been slid out of the bureau legs and tossed on the mattress, with the drawers stacked neatly behind them. The rug had been turned over—not just rolled, the way an amateur might do it. The final touch was the way the guy had taken the lighting fixtures from the walls, to look inside them. That was neat. The whole job was one you had to admire.

But it had flopped. I was willing to bet on that. The point was, the guy hadn't stopped looking until he'd checked everything in the place. That meant that unless he found what he wanted in the last place he'd tried, he hadn't found it at all.

The half-open door at the rear showed a white tile floor. I started in to check on how well he'd gone over the bathroom. I started—but I didn't go all the way. I just stood there in the doorway, staring. I'd found out that Red Trotter's room wasn't the worst mess I'd ever seen. Not by a long shot, it wasn't.

Red Trotter was.

He was sprawled over the side of the tub, his head hanging down, his soggy hair bunched like red sea weed. The water was colored as if dye had run out of his hair—but it wasn't hair dye that tinted it. There was a hole in his throat the size of a black widow spider.

I stood there for a full moment, staring at the tub, and I felt a cold, clammy chill creep up the back of my legs to my stomach. Not the one that means the dice are rolling okay; not this time. This was a fever—like morgue fever.

I left in a hurry. I didn't close the bathroom and I didn't lock the apartment door after me. I didn't give a damn who found Trotter now. I only wished I never had.

When you gamble, there's one thing you learn early. If you're licked, take your losses. I hadn't been back in my office an hour before I telephoned Mike Trevitch.

"This is Casey," I told him. "Chance Casey. I want out."

Mike's voice was puzzled. "I don't get it," he said. "Out of what?"

"The Red Trotter deal," I said. "The chips are too hot. I'm sending your dough back."

"My what?" He still sounded puzzled.

"Your dough," I repeated. "D as in dynamite, o as in odor, u as in undertaker, g as in gambler, h as in hung."

"Nice words," Trevitch said. "Those are nice words. I see why you want out. What I don't see is how the hell you got in."

He was playing it dumb. Maybe he'd heard Trotter was dead—maybe he'd just guessed it from what I'd said. Whatever it was, he had two grand coming back to him, fast. I told him that.

"Two grand?" he repeated. His voice took on an edge. "Listen, Casey. Don't try to cut me in anything. I offered you a grand to find Trotter—alive. You turned it down. I haven't seen you since."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Wait a minute, now, Trevitch. You mean to tell me you didn't send a boy here with two grand?"

"I haven't seen you, Casey," he said, slowly. "And I haven't sent anyone over." His voice dropped to a whisper. "If I have to—it won't be a boy. So if you're jammed somehow, and need a fall guy—lay off Mike Trevitch."

I said, "Why in hell would I need a fall—" and then I stopped saying it. My office door was open and the reason was standing inside. I said, "I'll take ten bucks on the nose," and cradled the phone.

Carl Shinber said, from the doorway, "That's no future book bet, I hope, Casey." Shinber had too soft a

voice for a homicide cop. He had a granite face, cut for his job, and then this soft, pleasant voice, like a preacher's. They claimed he could make corpses confess. He came into the room slowly, closing the door behind him, and went right on talking, without waiting for an answer. "If it is, I'd cancel it. You may not be around to collect."

I don't like cops in my office. Especially homicide men. When those babies climb three flights of stairs and push open the door marked *Chance Casey*, it's on business. And trouble is their business. Trouble for Casey.

I let Shinber study the room a while, waiting until his eyes came back my way. "*Deal*," I said, finally. "*I can't play till you deal*. What's up?"

HE WORKED his thick body into the chair opposite me, hooking one leg over the side. He was set for a nice, quiet chat. "A favor," he said pleasantly. "The police force is helping you out. We heard you'd been hunting Dick Trotter. I know where he is."

I grinned at him. "Swell," I said. "That'll save me some leg-work." I pulled a note pad towards me and looked up expectantly, but Shinber didn't give. He drew a fat gold watch from his pocket and squinted at the dial. "Taking pictures," he said vaguely. "They'll be taking pictures still." He snapped the watch shut. "Give us twenty minutes, or twenty-five at the edge, and you can pick him up. One twenty-two Crone Street."

I wrote "122 . . ." automatically, and then I stopped writing, letting the pencil fall loose on the desk. Shinber was feeding it slowly, but he was feeding it tough. One twenty-two Crone Street is the Morgue.

"So he got it," I said dully.

Shinber's voice smiled. He could handle that voice like a Bergen, though he couldn't manage a grin on

his face. "He got it," he repeated. "So now what do you get?"

"Rooked," I said wearily. I sat there a minute, keeping my mouth shut, until the wheels in my head stopped spinning, like a roulette stops, and I managed to figure my play. *Straight*, I told myself. *This thing is so crooked, I've got to play straight.*

"Two thousand bucks," I said aloud. "It cost me just two grand, and the rent isn't paid."

I gave him the rest of it—practically all of it. I left out finding the body—and I left out my phone call to Mike, but I came clean as a cue ball with the rest. When I'd finished, Shinber was standing up, leaning over the desk.

"The two grand," he said gently. "That could be evidence, I guess. I'd better keep it for you."

I could have beefed, sure. I could have raised a stink, and held on to the cash, if I'd wanted it. I just didn't want it. By handing it over, I kept everything nice and clean and legal. I handed it over.

Shinber had me initial the bills, and then scrawled out a receipt. "You might get it back," he said pleasantly. "In a case like this, though, there's generally a claim. I've got an idea it'll go to the heirs."

"Heirs?" I repeated.

His granite face ducked in a nod. "Usually," he said, "it happens the dead man has heirs."

"Dead man?" I said. "You mean Trotter? Why in hell would Trotter have sent me two grand?"

"He wouldn't have," Shinber said softly. "Not if he could help it, he wouldn't have. That's something to think about, Casey." He slapped the pocket he'd stuck the two grand in and turned, walking to the door. At the threshold he swung around slowly. "About that bet, Casey," he said. "The one you were laying when I came in. If it's a future book bet, I'd cancel it. It might come up murder."

I waited until the creak of Shinber's

footsteps had died in the hallway, and then I grabbed my hat and headed for the street.

I was at the second landing when I met the girl coming up and stepped aside to let her pass. She was something to step aside for. She wore a dark green suit that almost matched her eyes, and she wore it the way it was meant to be worn. Her tight green hat was pulled low on her forehead. Her skin was like cool milk.

She hesitated when she reached me, turning my way, and I felt a quick shock. Her eyes were hot and dry, a shade too bright. The lady was keyed up.

"Can you tell me," she said, tightly, "where I'll find Chance Casey?"

They come to me that way! Dreams dreamt to a turn and shipped to my office. I didn't believe it. I stood there for a second, trying to drink it in, and then I noticed her hands.

The left one gripped the handle of a green cloth purse, the knuckles tension-white against the strap. The right hand was out of sight, buried in the bag. The end of the purse had been worked to an ugly, revealing bulge.

I got it, then.

"Upstairs," I told her. "Second door to your left. A big guy, with blond hair. You can't miss him."

I flattened myself against the wall to give her plenty of room, grinning like an idiot as she went by. When she'd taken five or six steps, I shifted a little to get a look at her from behind. I took just one look, a glimpse of the hair curled up under her tight hat, and then I got the hell out of there, fast.

The little Venus was a redhead.

Things were working out fine. A girl whose red hair spelled Trotter's sister was on the loose with hot eyes and a gun that wanted heating. It looked to me like we were nearing the homestretch. It was a case of win, place or blow. The safest bet was to blow.

I took a cab to the Hotel Claring. I walked two blocks and took another

to the Wilmont. After five changes I wound up at the Deering, a medium-sized dump on the North end. I registered as Hubert J. Filman and went up to a cell-sized room to sweat. I did plenty of sweating.

THERE was me, Chance Casey, sitting on the edge of a creaky tourist bed, adding myself into the chair. I could figure the score, all right. Ed Jordan had framed his wheel and young Trotter had got on to the fix. He'd shot his mouth off too freely until Jordan had stopped him. Then Ed had shipped me the two grand I'd thought Trevitch had sent, and had tipped the police and Trotter's sister that I'd killed the guy for his roll.

There were holes in it, sure. Like why the dead man's apartment had been turned inside out. Somebody'd been looking for something, something that tied in with the murder. And they certainly hadn't been looking for me.

I sat there that way, in the dark looking for a way out. The sun was forcing its way through the grimy mist of the city before I realized I'd been muffing the thing. I'd missed the one point I should have got.

My point was Flush Creager, Jordan's right-hand man. I pushed myself off the bed, left the dingy hotel and headed for Creager's.

Just hitting the open helped clear the cobwebs. I kept seeing Creager as maybe the key man in the whole jam, and I got the idea that if I could crack Creager I could smash it apart. By the time I reached Flush's apartment, I felt the gambling chill creeping up on me, and I knew things were beginning to break. I was pulling at the bit for the finish, stepping high and hard, when I rang Creager's bell.

I slowed to a walk.

There was no answer to the ring. I pushed against the door and it swung open slowly. I let it go halfway, and then I grabbed the knob and pulled it closed, hard. I stayed with my hands

flat against the panels until the clammy feeling left my knees, and then I opened the door in a hurry and stepped inside.

The job was the same as the one at Red Trotter's, except for the body. The furniture was piled in the center of the room, the rug was turned over, the bureau drawers were stacked on top of the slit mattress. The guy had taken his time about it, again. By this time he'd been caught. Flush Creager had come in at the wrong time—the wrong time for Creager.

He was stretched out alongside the door, his hard little body doubled in the middle. His white face was a shade grayer than in life. The bullet had gone in the left side and kept right on going. He had his right hand tucked under his coat, as if he'd made a quick stab for his gun before the bullet had hit. His left hand was wrapped around a small green object, the size of a camera.

I forced myself near him and knelt down for a closer look. It was a portable radio, in smart green alligator, with the initials "T. T." in gold on the front. It was what you'd call a woman's model, which was one hell of a funny thing for a tough guy like Creager to carry.

It took me ten minutes to pry his stiff fingers loose from the handle, and when I finished my own hands were as cold as his. I juggled it for a minute, like hot ice, and then I opened the strap at the back and shook gently, catching the stuff that came out.

Two small batteries, with three inches of wire and a metal plate attached, two folded slips of paper, and a bankbook. I said, aloud, "That ain't part of a radio," and, as if to prove it, the back of the box swung shut on its hinges and the portable started to play. So they weren't radio batteries.

I hardly heard the music. I kept the radio balanced in my hand and unfolded the first slip of paper. The note was typewritten, and brief.

Tricks: 6, 8, 11, 14, and 25.

When I give the signal . . . R

The second slip was in handwriting crude enough to have been Flush Creager's. It was a list of winnings, with the date of each win marked alongside. The total came to close to sixty grand. But it was the last date I liked the most; the night before Red Trotter was murdered. *Two thousand dollars.* And all of it, the whole total, had been paid to *Tricks Trotter.*

So the girl had done the winning. I turned to the bankbook—which I'd already figured was hers. It showed nice, steady deposits—twenty dollars a week, like a high-priced wage slave. I stared at it a while.

"Sixty thousand dollars," I said, aloud. "Six hundred centuries. Now who the hell got it?" I looked down at Creager's body as I said it and the fingers I'd pried open seemed to jerk together, as if he'd heard the words and was trying to grab at the dough. In the distance, like the warning signal for the last round, I heard the shrill whine of a police siren.

I tucked the radio under my arm, the batteries and papers in my pocket, and left Flush Creager alone.

The warning signal gives you time to get set for the bell. You can use it to shake the cobwebs from your brain, so when you come up off your stool you'll be standing nice and straight, to be knocked cold, or, if you're not too slap-happy, you can start figuring your moves for the last round. With nine rounds behind me, I was just figuring mine.

The first one took me to the South end, to a fancy warehouse with the sign NOVELTY CONCESSION CO. blazoned over the front. I pushed my way through the glass doors, into a super-modern office, and banged on a desk. The place stayed empty. I yelled, "Hey!" and a door at the rear opened and an old man in Civil War uniform shuffled in. He had a half deck of cards in his hand and the dazed look of a solitaire player in his eyes.

"Anybody here?" I asked.

He nodded carefully. "Me. I'm the watchman."

I HAD lots of time for his wise-cracks. "Trevitch," I said. "Mike Trevitch, or one of his boys. Aren't they here?"

He shook his head. "I'm watchin' the fixtures," he said. "Case somebody steals them. Can't be too careful." He came closer and stared at the radio under my arm. It was still giving music. "You one of them jitter-bugs?" he said curiously.

I said, "I'm a tune detective," and then the music went off and the announcer's voice shrilled out.

". . . and now for the news. Chief of Police Danver has announced that the investigation into the murder of Richard Trotter is nearing a close. An all-state alarm has been sent out for a so-called private detective known locally as Chance Casey. His description follows: Five feet nine and—"

I twirled the dial and turned, heading for the door.

The old man caught my arm. His fingers stung like needles of ice. "Wait a minute," he said. "Wait a minute, mister."

I turned back slowly, keeping my hands in close to my sides. I tried to keep my voice casual. "Yeah?"

"That thing," he said. "On the radio there. We maybe should listen. There could be a reward out for him. You never know what'll happen."

My arms dropped and I threw him a grin. "Sorry, pop," I said. "I've got a date. And I just heard the bell."

"Bell?"

"Yeah," I said. "The last round. The party is on."

I threw him another grin from the doorway, but I wasn't grinning when I hit the street, and I wasn't grinning when I reached Ed Jordan's. I'd been on the mat three times in this fight, and if my knockout punch failed I'd go down for the fourth. And this time I wouldn't get up.

I called headquarters from the corner and tipped them to send Shinber to Jordan's. Then I called Trevitch. I told him I was over at Ed's, and I'd figured the fix, and then I hung up on

him. I wanted company on this—lots of company. The trouble was, I got more than I wanted.

I'd never have gotten in if Flush Creager had been around. Flush had kept the outfit going, kept the boys on their toes. As it was, I went in through the kitchen, even tossed a nod to the cook. A flunky at the Y-shaped stairway started towards me and I said, "Got an appointment with Jordan." I kept going, up the stairs to the game rooms, and the guy was too lazy to stop me. It just wasn't his job.

The game room was empty, like I'd figured; the long tables still covered with heavy green cloth, like over-size coffins. I circled the end one, the money table, and threw back the cover. Just the sight of the trim little wheel gave me a thrill. I like those things. I can't help it; I just like them. But this one was a louse. The sides were covered with a hard black substance, that should have been all rubber. Should have been—but wasn't. It took me maybe five minutes to find the spot I wanted.

I pressed my pocket with Trotter's batteries in it against the table and stretched over to look at the wheel. I had to do it three times before I was sure. Then I took the batteries out of my pocket and dropped them on the table.

"Got it," I said softly. "Got it."

The voice behind me said, "You will." Nice and quiet and smooth, like liquid ice. I had company, all right—but the wrong one. The red-headed Venus.

She was still wearing the green outfit, with the red hair tucked under her hat. Her eyes were still hot and dry and deadly, and she was still carrying the green cloth purse with the gun at the bottom. The bottom was pointed my way.

I said, "Lady, listen, lady . . ." and then I knew she wasn't going to listen, and I just kept saying "Lady . . . lady . . . lady . . ." over and over, like a fool.

She took a step my way and her

head started shaking a little, as if she knew what she was going to do was a horrible thing but couldn't help doing it. I kept thinking of Shinber's crack about future bets, and I wondered where in hell Shinber was.

THAT'S when he came in. Right when I was calling off all bets, his thick body pushed through the doorway. Mike Trevitch was a half step behind him, and Ed Jordan was crowding their heels. I started to grin when I saw them, but I stopped grinning, fast. The lady still had the gun.

Death in a bag.

Shinber's preacher voice was like a last prayer. "You're wanted, Casey—for murder."

I shifted a little towards them, taking my eyes off the girl. If it came, it came. I wouldn't watch it coming. I said, slowly and easily, so I wouldn't jar the wrong nerves, "It could be Jordan you want, Shinber. Ed Jordan."

I jarred Jordan. He hopped forward and cocked his queer little head at me. The grasshopper was nervous. I wanted him more than nervous.

"He's got a rigged wheel," I said. "There's a conductor instead of rubber at the sides, with wires in the table. When you press a battery in the right spot, it sets up a circuit. Not much of a circuit, but enough. It spreads the spokes, so the ball will fall in the right numbers."

Jordan squeaked, "It's a lie. My wheels are square! I make my dough on the cut."

"Take a look," I told him. "Ease up here and see." I pressed the battery against the table and waited until he'd moved to the wheel. "They don't shift much," I admitted. "They don't have to. Just enough to squeeze shut a little on all but five numbers." I gave him the numbers, from the slip found at Flush's: 6, 8, 11, 14, and 25. "Red Trotter and his sister played the numbers and handed over their winnings. It was a neat racket."

"You lie!" That was the girl's voice.

A voice with plenty of strain behind it. "Dick had a system. He told me what numbers to play, and I played them. You killed him to steal his system."

I didn't look at her. I was afraid if I moved once, I wouldn't move again. I said, "Maybe you thought so. My guess is he was hired alone, and dragged you in as a cover. They'd be less apt to catch him that way, if somebody else did the winning."

I took a step away from the table and the girl's bag shifted an inch, following me. "Trotter turned in his profits, taking a salary. But he must've got greedy and asked for a cut. That's when he got killed. He got killed, but they didn't find the batteries, or the note with the numbers. He must have known the pressure was on. He'd stuck them all in his sister's radio, and let her take them home."

"So the killer didn't find them, but Flush Creager did. He smelled crooked work at the wheel and started tracking it down. He was a smart little guy who eagereed around once too often."

Jordan had been studying the wheel, pressing the spokes. He said, hollowly, "You're right, Casey. This wheel's a louse."

"The two grand," I went on. "That was the dirty part. That was my coffin bait. The guy who sent it had me figured for the fall. He knew I'd grab at the dough—that was one point. But there was another angle. He thought the bills could be traced to Dick Trotter, after Dick was a corpse. He never figured Dick had a stooge; his sister. There was only one guy could make *that* mistake."

Jordan said, "Trevitch!"

"Yeah," I said, softly. "Honest Mike Trevitch." I took a chance on the girl and turned toward the door. Mike's thick face was set like a trap. He opened the jaws and the words came out stiffly.

"I've got a business, Casey. A million-dollar business. It took me years to build it up. Would I smash it

for a few dirty dollars?" He had something there. He looked at Shinber as he said it and the cop's eyes narrowed.

Jordan said, "No. It doesn't make sense."

Behind me, I heard the girl take a step forward. It was the girl had me worried. It was time for the knockout.

"You *had* a business," I said, carefully. "That's what you gambled on. The rep that your wheels were honest—because it paid you. That's how you sold a crooked wheel to Jordan, without him taking it apart to check up. You were honest enough, when it paid. But your business is over. Novelty Concessions is through."

Jordan said, "What the hell—" but Trevitch didn't say anything. He took a step to the side, away from Shinber, and his thick lips started working like fat worms. He was getting ready in front—the girl was ready behind. The others were the audience—I was the show.

"Priorities," I said. "The government figures we can get along without wheels and games. They've got a better use for supplies than putting more fat on Mike Trevitch. That's why your warehouse is empty—that's why your last wheels were crooked. You were scraping the dead bones clean of fat."

Shinber was coming alive. He was trying to cover the room—the whole room—with his eyes. He knew one of us would make the play, and it was his job to beat him. It was too much of a job.

"Calling me in," I said, "Pretending to hire me, but putting it so I'd hold out for more dough. That was a smooth one, Trevitch. A smooth guy like you should slide right into the chair."

That was what got him. That's when he made his play—the wrong play. His right hand ducked to his pocket and came up with a gun, pointed my way. He was fast, all right, for a big guy. He was faster than me, or Shinber. He was the second fastest man in the room.

The grasshopper—Jordan—shot him three times before he fell. Jordan kept his thin little arm up there, resting on the table, pumping shots like a tough guy, until Trevitch sank to the floor. When he'd finished, he dropped the gun on the wheel and stared at us, his thin eyes open wide.

"THE louse," he said. "The dirty louse murdered Creager."

Can you tie it? Sixty grand of his dough gone, and he worries about a punk like his front man! He was half crazy, I guess.

I walked across the room to one of the chairs at the side, resting my arm on a table. I was wet, and hot, and tired. I watched Shinber throw a cloth over Trevitch, and I watched the girl's purse drop to her side, and I didn't give a damn about either of them. I

didn't give a damn about any of it, until Shinber looked up at me.

"The way you tell it, Chance," he said pleasantly. "The way you tell it, this two grand I got belongs to the girl." He nodded cheerfully, and his granite face started to crack.

I said, "Shinber. Now, listen, Shinber." I braced my hand against the table to get up and my fingers hit a dish filled with salt-covered pellets. The stuff Jordan put out for his guests. I looked at my hand and then looked back at Shinber. For the first time in his life, he was grinning. He meant it, all right.

I just sat there, looking at him, and then at my hand covered with salt. It was a hot one, I guess—for his money.

You see what I mean? Like I told Mike, at the outset. I'd been working for peanuts.



STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE
ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933
Of Ten Detective Aces, published monthly at Springfield, Mass.,
for October 1, 1942

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Ten Detective Aces and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business manager are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Maurice J. Phillips, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Business Manager, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Periodical House, Inc., 67 West 44th St., New York, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th St., New York, N. Y.; Rose Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Warren A. Angel, Rockville Centre, N. Y.; C. & A. Publishing Co., Mount Morris, Ill.; E. Campbell, Mt. Morris, Ill., and E. L. Angel, Rockville Centre, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

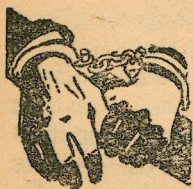
A. A. WYN, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 16th day of September, 1942.

SHIRLEY L. BERICK,
Notary Public, Bronx Co. Clk. No. 220
Certificate filed in N. Y. County No. 1085
Commission Expires March 30, 1943

The Wicked Flea

By Fredric Brown



THIS guy
Howie. Howie
Smith, I
mean. He got me
doing it, finally, so
I told him his name
ought to be Howie

Hurts. Shows you what associating
with a guy like that can do.

What I mean is, no sheriff of a re-
spectable, if not oversize
county ever got stuck with
a punk like Howie Smith
for a deputy, except me.
And that was only because
what with the war taking
everybody that defense
didn't take, I just didn't
have much choice.

Howie was a young punk, army
age, but the army wouldn't take him
because he had a heart murmur. Any-
way, that's what they said. His real
disability was a mouth murmur.

"Howie," I keep telling him, "what
you should ought to do is go to New
York or maybe Hollywood. They need
gag-men those places. Me, I don't."

He says, "Aw now, Pop, you don't
mean that." And then his face got
serious and I should have suspected.
"Pop," he says, "you got gypped on
that watchdog you bought yesterday."

"I got him for practically nothing,
Howie. So how could I be gypped?"

"That's why, Pop. A bargain dog
never bites."

I gritted my teeth and kept on
walking. We were almost down to the
railroad yards by then. I generally
drop down there about once a day,
and it was safe this time to take
Howie along. He'd already pulled the
one about knowing that a train had
just gone by because he could see its
tracks. Yeah, I'd even bit on that one.

"Howie," I'm telling him, "you
ought to be a gag-man, not a deputy.
Or else instead of thinking about
wise-cracks all the time, you should
ought to learn to observe and de-
duce."

"De Deuce you say!" says Howie.
Well, that was about his worst to
date, and when I'd been talking seri-
ously to him, too.

He got a look at my
face, I guess, because he
said, "Sorry, Pop. Honest.
Listen, I'm not so bad at
either observation or de-
duction. Honest, I've been
studying both of them,
and—"

"Howie," I says,
"there's a tramp coming toward us.
Look him over and tell me whether
or not we should ought to bag him.
And why."

"I've been noticing him, Pop.
Here's one thing I'll tell you; if he
doesn't turn in that store he's just
about to pass, then he's broke."

I watched a minute and he came on
past. "Why?" I asked Howie.

"They sell cigarettes and tobacco,
Pop. Didn't you see him, just before
he got there, pull out a cigarette pack-
age and throw it away? So he's out
of cigarettes and probably he wanted
a smoke, and if he had money he'd
have turned in."

"Hmmm," I said. I *had* noticed that
business about the cigarette package,
but I hadn't tied it in with the store
like Howie had.

"Not bad, Howie," I told him
"What I had in mind was that he's
had money recently. He's got on new
yellow shoes, and when a bum gets
money, new shoes is the first thing he
buys with it. Shoes are important to

*A barbed-tongued
deputy uses a wise
crack to crack a
wise egg.*

a tramp. And the fact he was smoking tailor-mades proves it too, more or less. But—"

The guy was only a few feet from us now and I stopped him.

"Got any business in Burkeville, buddy?" I asked.

His eyes stayed on my star instead of meeting mine. He said, "Uh—I guess not, Sheriff. When's the next rattler out?"

"It'll highball any minute now."

"I'll be on it, Sheriff." He turned and hiked back for the yards, walking fast.

Howie said, "I think we should have picked him up, Pop."

"What for? We can't give free meals and lodgings to every damn 'bo that wants to stem the town."

Howie shook his head. "I don't know exactly why. He—he didn't look *right* somehow. He had too good a haircut, and those shoes weren't exactly new, but they were stylish and expensive. Not the kind a 'bo would buy. And that cigarette package he threw away, it looked like a Burley Hill pack. They're expensive fags for a 'bo."

I grunted disgustedly. "Howie," I told him, "you're getting imaginative. That looked like a Twenty Grand package to me. And anyway—"

WE WERE now just about at the place where he'd thrown it down. And just to prove Howie wrong, I looked down in the grass between the sidewalk and the curb, and there was the package. But it was crumpled and lying edgewise.

I reached down and picked it up. Grudgingly, I'm afraid, I said, "Yeah, they're Burleys. But that don't prove—Hey, there's something in here."

That package didn't feel flat as it should have felt. It didn't feel like cigarettes either.

I opened the pack and pulled out a wad of green paper. Yeah, bills. The ones on the outside were fives.

Howie'd seen it, too. He was already running for the yards and I

lumbered after him. Howie already had the guy when I got there, and we took him back to town and put him in the jug.

I questioned him, with Howie listening and not saying anything, and then I made out a warrant for vagrancy and put him back in his cell.

Howie says, "Well, Pop?"

"Well, what? He won't talk. What can I do? I don't go for this rubber hose stuff and after all it ain't a crime to throw away money. I mean, it ain't a crime we can hold a guy on very long unless we can figure out what he done it for."

"Did you see the flea, Pop?"

"That one that crawled down on the back of his hand and he acted so funny about? Yeah, I noticed the disgust he swatted it with and he acted like he ain't used to fleas. That's what you meant, ain't it, Howie?"

"The wicked flea, Pop," he said. "Ever read the Bible?"

"Sure," I says, "but there ain't no fleas in it that I remember."

"Not fleas, Pop. One flea. *The wicked flea when no man pursueth.*"

"Howie," I says, wincing, "this is the end, absolutely the end. You are hereby and henceforth—Hey, wait, you still ought to be shot for putting it that way, but I get what you mean."

"Sure," said Howie. "The guy had something on his conscience. He saw you and your star and figured he'd probably be picked up as a vag. If we picked him up broke, we'd just make him move on. But he figured if we found that money on him, he'd be investigated and—and maybe we'd pin his real crime on him."

"Ummm," I said. "A hundred and fifteen bucks he threw away. It must be something pretty bad, Howie. But we *are* investigating and he threw it away to no good end, but where does the investigating get us?"

"Maybe to Centerville, Pop. Did you think of that?"

I hadn't but I do now and I jumped out of my chair. Heaven only knows

how I could have not thought of it myself. Three days ago there'd been a murder in the Centerville railroad yards, a murder committed by a tramp, for robbery.

"Howie," I said, "you're going to hold the fort here and I'm going to pop over to Centerville. I'll take a plane and I'll be back tonight."

He said, "Pop, you oughtn't to get up in the air over things."

I restrained myself because Centerville *had* been a bright thought of Howie's. I still don't know why I hadn't thought of it myself.

I took a plane to Centerville and I took a plane back.

I SAYS, "Howie, no dice."

"How come, Pop?"

"It might or might not be the guy, but if it is, nobody can ever prove it. They ain't got a thing on him, not a clue."

"Um," says Howie, "then why did he throw away the money?"

"You tell me, Howie. Listen, here's what's known about the Centerville murder. *All* that's known:

"The guy that was killed was named Burchard, according to identification found on him. They ain't traced back to where he came from, yet. He was in a sleeping car that was on a train stopped in the Centerville yards, see?"

"Go on," said Howie.

"So he must have got off the car and tried to find his way to the station and got lost in the yards. He was found dead in the morning. No money on the body. It's a logical guess it was a tramp that slugged him, but—look, this 'bo we got could be the one all right, but we couldn't prove it in a million years. All we *got* on him is we saw him throw away money when he saw us because he thought he'd be picked up and got panicky."

"And the shoes," said Howie.

"Huh? New shoes don't mean anything because they ain't that new. They weren't bought within three days."

"That isn't what I meant, Pop."

"Then what did you mean?"

"Maybe those shoes are important, Pop, not because they're new but because they fit his feet."

"Huh?" I said, and hunted it for a gag, but I couldn't find one. It was just something that didn't make sense.

"I'll bet I got it, Pop. The wicked flea."

"Howie," I said, "if you don't quit talking balloon juice—"

"I'm not talking balloon juice, Pop. Don't you see you got hold of this thing by the wrong end, like a guy holding a midiron by the head and wondering why he can't hit the ball anyplace with the handle?"

"I don't play golf, Howie. Just tell me what you're talking about."

"The murder, Pop. Look, the man in the sleeping car had money. The tramp didn't. So you assume that a man with money is honest and the one without the money robbed him. Maybe it was the other way around. Maybe the man from the sleeping car killed and robbed the tramp."

"Robbed him of what?"

"His identity, his clothes. All but the shoes; he knew if he was going to pose as a tramp for a while, he'd do a lot of walking, so he kept his own shoes because they fitted his feet—not because they were newer."

"But *why*, Howie?"

Howie grinned at me. He said, "I told you, Pop. The wicked flea."

I glared at him. I was dog-tired and I didn't want to play games.

"You mean," I asked, "that the way he acted when he found that flea on him showed he wasn't used to being a bum?"

"No, Pop, I mean he fled when no man pursued him. I'll bet he did that the night he murdered the tramp, just as he kind of fled—by throwing away money—when he saw the law walking toward him."

I said, "Go on, Howie."

"The Centerville police haven't traced back the man from the sleeping

car to where he came from, which means the name Burchard was probably an alias. Let's say Burchard—we'll have to call him that—was a crook running away from the law. Maybe he's an amateur, because he's scared stiff. Don't you see how that would explain things?"

"Well, Howie, I do and I don't. Go on."

"So somebody gets on the car he thinks is a cop. Or something happens to make him think he's being followed, that they're on to him. He takes it on the lam, and robs a tramp of his clothes to give him a change of identity. If he's got his loot with him, he hides it somewhere, and keeps out only a little of it—a hundred bucks or so.

"Then he thinks he's going to get picked up as a tramp, and realizes if he has even that much money on him, he'll be investigated. So he tries to get rid of it before we arrest him. It's probably only pin-money to him, anyway."

"Um—" I said, "we got a drawer full of reward circulars. Maybe we better—"

"I did, Pop," says Howie. "I went all through them, and there's one that could be. No photograph and no prints, but there's a good description that fits. A real estate broker from Washington, D. C., who absconded a week or so ago with about seventy thousand dollars. Name of Burmeister. Has a strawberry mark on his left forearm, just above the wrist."

"Well, did you look—or didn't you?"

"I thought I'd wait till you got back, Pop. And listen, the five hundred reward—"

"It's yours, Howie, if it's the guy."

"I don't want it, Pop. What I was going to say—let's give it to the USO, huh? Since neither of us can get in, otherwise."

I told you Howie Smith was a swell guy, didn't I? Well, the strawberry mark was there, and I sent Burmeister to Washington to have identity established there, and from then on the Centerville business would have a better leg to stand on. And it did; he confessed on that when they confronted him with a lot of details supplied by Howie and had the Pullman porter identify him as Burchard.

But I made *my* mistake in letting Howie Smith take him to Washington, and telling Howie to take a couple days off while he was there. I should have known better, with a guy as ambitious as Howie.

He phoned me the second day. "Pop, I'm sorry, but I'm not coming back. Got a job with the government here."

I tried to pretend not to be disappointed. I said, "Yeah, Howie? Thought I told you the right job for you was a gag-man."

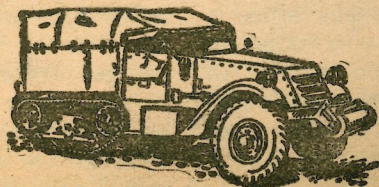
"That's it, Pop," says the telephone into my left ear, "that's just what they hired me for."

"Huh?" I said. "Gag-man? What department in the government is hiring gag-men?"

"The censorship department, Pop. I got a pretty good job there."

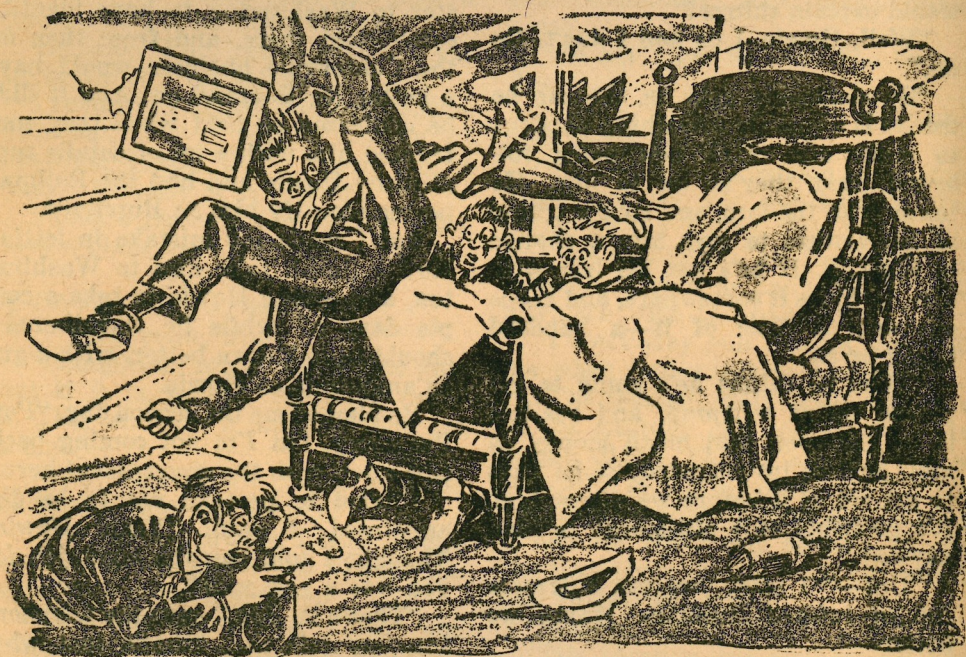
What can you do with a guy like that?

But just the same, I'll bet any Nazis wanting to code information out of the country will have a sweet time trying to put anything over on Howie. And if the Republicans ever take over Washington and kick Howie out, he can always get a job with at least one of his former employers. I mean me.



Rough on Frats

"Dizzy Duo Yarn"



By Joe Archibald

¶ *Snooty Piper's emblem of love turned into a key of doom when it made him a charter member of a homicide fraternity.* ¶

THERE are times when citizens like Mr. Guppy who owns the *Evening Star* forget that real detectives are nothing like the ones you get in books. Most of the criminals do not read books and so do not think to leave a clue or two around so that the flatfeet's task will be finished by Chapter Twenty-two.

It has been three weeks since a certain citizen's corpse was found on the steps of the public library in Somerville. The remains wore nothing but some old white cloth tied around the middle and there was a sign around the neck that said:

I AM MAHATMA GANDHI

The medical examiner had performed an autopsy on the defunct one and had told the gendarmes that the citizen's stomach proved to him that he had been handed a sweet-heart of a Mickey.

"The way it looks to me," the stiff-groomer had opined, "this guy was in his cups and somebody handed him the delayed sleep. He had time to stagger from where he was to the lib'ary where he succumbed. He was too oiled to care how he was dressed. This is the craziest murder I ever saw. Yeah, he died from slow poison."

That was the way it was. They found out the deceased was quite a prominent citizen of Allston and owned a rug cleaning establishment. His name was Alfred Sorgum. Alfred's family admitted he was something of an imbiber, but they never remembered him coming home loaded. He did not have an enemy in the whole world.

The funniest thing about the rub-out of Alfred Sorgum was that Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy did not arrest anybody by mistake.

I remember me and Snooty Piper looking at the corpse before it was hustled off to the icebox. There was quite a gallery of citizens who were on their way to work and they were laughing even though the poor victim was as dead as last year's catch of halibut off the Grand Banks.

"One clue I see," Snooty Piper said. "The stuff on the placard around the victim's neck was written and not printed. The murderer does not cross his t's. Iron Jaw, there is another possibility. Check back on radio programs in Boston since six o'clock yesterday. Maybe he was a loser in a 'Get It Right or Suffer the Consequences' program."

Iron Jaw got thick and for a minute I thought he was going to pick up the corpse and slug Snooty with it. Iron Jaw is the kind of detective who belongs in a pie-throwing two reeler.

ANYWAY, like I said, three weeks have gone by and nobody has solved the strange assassination. Mr. Guppy and other editorial writers keep demanding a shake-up in the gendarmerie and one morning me and Snooty saw Iron Jaw scanning employment ads on Washington Street.

We are sitting in the Greek's now and I feel sorry for Snooty as he has to admit a perfect crime has taken place.

"No motive, Scoop," Snooty sighs. "Only thing I could think of was he got loose from a lodge, but Mrs. Sor-

gum said Alfred belonged to nothing but the Audoborn Society. Well, I got to see a doll in a half hour. She is leaving for Smith tomorrow, Scoop. She is a Wave. It looks like this is serious this time, Scoop, as I know now I am goin' to miss her."

"Is it the Wave with the white cap?" I ask. "The one in the cafeteria on Avery Street?"

"It is not. This gal worked in the advertising department at the *Star*," Snooty says. "She is a B.A. She is different from all other dolls I know."

"Then she has no harelip, huh?"

Snooty gets quite huffed and even looks insulted so I know he is all out for the female. He asks if I want to come with him and I laugh in his face.

"I will see you tonight," I says.

Snooty takes something out of his pocket wrapped in paper. He opens it up and I see it is a gold pin.

"It is what I got years ago for going so steady to Sunday school, Scoop," Snooty tells me. "I have heard guys give dolls frat pins when they want to keep them from sittin' under the apple tree. That is how serious I am."

"I hear larks singin'," I says. "The buzz of the honey bees. Kiss me, Snooty."

"In just about two minutes, Scoop Binney," the half-wit says, "I will give the cops a murder that will be easy to solve." He goes out muttering and I sit there and shake my dome.

Snooty comes in at ten o'clock that night and his eyes shine like newly wiped beer glasses. He says the whole world looks different.

"It is just the dimout," I mention and turn back to my magazine. "Wipe the lipstick off your pan. Did she plight her troth too?"

"It is all too sacred for you to discuss, Scoop," Snooty says. "Why shouldn't everybody settle down sometime? She swapped pins with me."

"A B.A. that way about a B-3," I sniff and forget about Snooty as I

get to the murder in the serial I am reading. The killer leaves a swell clue behind and spoils it for me. I toss the mag away and knock off.

It must be about six o'clock in the A.M. when I am rudely awakened out of a dream. "Okay," I yelp at Snooty. "Okay, sarge. We are here to fight. Give me my gun and we'll take Bataan back before break—Snooty, you are no topkick an'—where am I?"

"It is a murder," Snooty says. "A cop who I give my spare tire to called me up and said to hurry. It is on the Commons."

"Huh?" I says, pulling on my pants. "That is nice, bein' so handy for a change. Maybe this corpse will be wearin' a grass skirt and a wreath around his neck."

WE REACH the scene of the brutal crime in twenty minutes and Iron Jaw and a lot of cops are there. There are some citizens on hand also and they are snickering all over.

"Lookit the drunk," a guy says. "Sittin' in the fountain. What a bend-er he—"

"Shut your face," Iron Jaw howls. "This is a murder. And all of you get back before I start wipin' you all off the grass."

"For heaven's sake," I says. "The corpse is sitting in the fountain and is being well irrigated. First we get a character in a loin cloth and now—"

Again the appraiser of citizens' remains takes over with his little black bag. We all help get the character out of the fountain and lay him on the dewy green sward.

"Another drunk," Snooty says. "He was lookin' for the Fountain of Youth. If it would peel off a lot of years, he would be about six weeks old right now."

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is in a nasty mood. He has dropped his derby in the drink and has got both feet wet. We leave him alone for a while.

We see that the victim is about forty-five years old and is a nice look-

ing corpse with gray hair at his temples.

"He has not been drinking," the medical expert announces. "Somebody broke his skull. Papers here say his name is Bartholomew Bitz and he lives in Cambridge. He has a hardware store in Everett. Wasn't robbery as this character has almost a hundred bucks in his poke."

They take all the valuables off Bartholomew and give him over to the dead wagon. The stuff is dropped onto a big hanky and we scootch down and look it over. Snooty reaches for one item of jewelry and Iron Jaw steps right on his fingers. I bet they heard Snooty's wailing all the way to Cape Cod and thought it was an air raid alarm. The next day we found out that the civilian protection setups of eleven communities went to work and that four P-38's took off from the East Boston airport.

"Huh," the M.D. says. "It looks like Bartholomew was a bachelor as he makes no mention of a wife on his identification cards. Why—er—O'Shaughnessy, what do you make of this letter he's got in his pocket here? Read it."

Iron Jaw does the best he can. He says: "Dear Waldo: As a dear friend of Waldo Frisbee, I am warning you I know all about you and Mrs. Frisbee. If you keep seeing her while Frisbee is away, I will feel it my duty to tell Waldo and you know what he'll do to you, Bitz. A Friend!"

"It serves him right," Snooty Piper says. "Home wreckers deserve everything they get."

"Well," Iron Jaw grins, "we will go and see this Waldo Frisbee."

That is what Iron Jaw does. We trail the big flatfoot to a house on Maple Street in Malden. Waldo Frisbee is about middle age and has a build like Gargantua after the ape has consumed forty-two cases of Swheaties. He is a very gruff person and is just on his way out of the

TDA

house as the law enters. He carries a big brief case.

"What ya want?" Waldo yelps. "I got to catch a train so hurry it up. I got my dog licensed an' I got my pail of sand and a shovel in the attic an'—"

"Don't hurry," Iron Jaw says. "You know Bartholomew Bitz?"

"Yeah. He's a rat," Waldo says.

"Was," Snooty corrects and Iron Jaw pushes Snooty back off the porch.

"Huh?"

"He was knocked off las' night," Iron Jaw says. "We found him sittin' in a fountain on the Commons and the back of his noggin had been bashed in. Where was you last night?"

"Me? Here in the house. Hey, Mamie!"

"Who you yellin' at?" a doll's voice says and out comes Mrs. Frisbee. She is busy putting on war paint as she sweeps into the room and she has a nice rose-colored negligee on. She is much younger than Waldo.

"BITZ was killed las' night," Waldo says. "They think I did it, which I wished I had if you know what I mean. Tell these cops we was together all last night."

"No kiddin'," the dame says and grins at Waldo like she had lynx blood in her. "Why should I lie to the cops, you big gorilla?"

"Huh? Listen, Mamie—" Waldo gulps and drops his brief case. "You kiddin', flatfoot? Lissen, Mamie, tell the cops—"

"He wa'n't with me last night," the dame says. "He didn't get in until three this morning. What did you slug him with, Waldo, that blackjack?"

This Waldo Frisbee gets an awful sickly look on his face and he feels his way toward a chair and sits down.

"A blackjack?" Iron Jaw grinds out. "No kiddin'? Why do you carry one, junior? That is illegal."

"I'm an air raid warden," Waldo says. "The OCD says wardens can go into houses an' turn off lights. So the other night, durin' a test, I do it

and a guy pokes me one. Then another time, I order two tough babies to douse cigarettes durin' a blackout and one belts me and the other takes my bankroll. It was for pertection."

"Hah!" laughs Mamie Frisbee. "He told me he heard about Bitz comin' to see me an' takin' me out to a hot spot once in a while. Well, he said he'd kill Bart if it kept up which it did. You think I'm goin' to sit here an' count my tootsies while he flies around the country sellin' brushes?"

"Who cares?" Snooty says. "This is a rub-out! It was a very foul crime, Waldo."

"Where's the blackjack?" Iron Jaw asks and holds out a hand big enough to hold a peck of apples.

Waldo Frisbee is struck dumb and he goes to the clothes closet and gets the skull duster.

"I am innocent," he says.

"Yeah?" Iron Jaw says. "And Goering is a choir boy in Westminster Abbey. We got the letter your enormous friend sent."

"Anonymous," Snooty says, and toys with the pin the doll gave him and which is hooked onto his dollar watch chain. "It looks like we have no more business here, Scoop. Let's go back to Boston."

"Answer me this one," I says to Snooty Piper when we reach the Greek's. "Why would anybody bother to knock off Bartholomew Bitz if he was crossin' the Commons with him, and then pick him up and put him in a fountain? It's as screwy as the idea of making a corpse look like the Hindu with the diaper on."

"Nice goin', Scoop. Here is what it looks like from where we sit. This Waldo did not look like a zany to me. He would not slay a fellow man without planning it very nice first. They are still talking of a fiend who killed Alfred Sorgum. The papers all claim a maniac did the crime. So Waldo figured to make his murder look crazy too, so that all the cops would think the fiend had struck again.

"Murderers all have quirks in their

skulls. Waldo figured his ball and chain would alibi for him, but it looks like she hates her life partner so bad and loved Bartholomew so much, that he slipped up there."

"Dolls," I sniff. "Are you still rice-minded, Snooty? Look what one does to her own hus—"

"I must call and see Athalea's mother, Scoop," Snooty says. "It is amazing that Athalea's pa who is deceased should have owned a skull and quill pin like the one worn by Bartholomew Bitz—the pin I have on right now, Scoop."

"What?"

"That is right," Snooty says. "Did you ever hear anythin' crazier? It sounds like frat—ricide. Get it?"

"This is all too much for me," I says, and call for another stiff one.

THE papers that night say that Waldo Frisbee has been arrested as a suspect in the Bitz slaying and the sob sisters go to town on the Eternal Triangle.

"It looks like they might save Waldo from the jolts with the unwritten law, Snooty," I says. "At last Iron Jaw has a chance for a conviction."

"It is creepy," Snooty says. "I can't stop shiverin' when I think of the two crimes. If you will recall, citizens laughed when they got a look at the remains both times. Who could help it? They did look like drunks at first, didn't they?"

"What are you gittin' at?"

"I wish I knew, Scoop."

Three days later, Waldo Frisbee is still in the hoosegow without bail. Four days later, me and Snooty Piper see Mamie Frisbee. It is about nine o'clock at night in front of a bistro off Park Square, and she looks like Rita Hayworth she is that dolled up. A big sheiky looking male number is wearing her on his arm.

"How are you, Mrs. Frisbee?" Snooty says politely.

"I never saw you before!" the dame says. "What's the big idea?"

"Skip it," I says and start running.

Snooty catches up with me a couple of blocks distant. "Don't do that!" I snap.

"I have a hunch," Snooty says. "It won't help Iron Jaw, though. Not that I have any idea who killed Alfred Sorgum or really killed Bartholomew Bitz."

"Now you are talkin' sense, as how could you?" I ask him. We walk down Boylston and over to Tremont. Suddenly Snooty grabs my arm and pulls me into a cigar store. He makes a phone call. When he comes out of the telephone booth I have to grab him. He looks like he had just given six pints of blood to the Red Cross.

"Tell me," I says. "Will I call an ambulance?"

"I—called—up Mrs. Alfred Sorgum," Snooty says. "I asked the widow did Alfred wear a pin with a skull on it and a quill run through one of the eyes. She said he didn't wear one."

"Amazing," I snort. "Snooty, are you really an epileptic?"

"But she said he had one. He kept it in his collar button box on his dresser," Snooty goes on. Then I have to clutch him so I will not fall down myself. We pull ourselves together and stagger out. But the worst is yet to come. We walk toward Scollay Square on Tremont and as we draw abreast of a cinema, a very well dressed character calls to us from behind. It seems like I have seen the taxpayer before, but can't be sure.

"Pardon me," the stranger says. "I have been looking for you." He looks at Snooty. "I noticed you the other morning when that terrible murder took place. The pin you have on."

"Yeah," Snooty tremors. "It belonged to—"

"I know, I know," the character says. "Where can we go and talk privately? Oh, this is terrible. There is unity in numbers. All that can save us is—" The citizen sweats copiously and wipes the beads of brine off his brow with a colored hanky. He is an ordinary looking number who could be anybody's father.

"I don't get it," Snooty says.

"You will. Please let us go where—"

"I will feel safer in the Greek's," I says. "That is, if I am expected to go along. Maybe I better scram, Snooty, so—"

"Don't you dare leave me, Scoop!"

WE GO TO the Greek's. The stranger introduces himself as J. J. Jones. He shows Snooty Piper a pin just like the one on Snooty's chain.

"We are marked men," the stranger says.

"Huh?"

"There is a fiend afoot. Alfred Sor-gum and Bartholomew Bitz were murdered by the same man. A madman!" Jones says. "Because they were members of the Skull and Quill Club when they were at Hornell up in Vermont. Oh, there is nine of us left and we will die one by one if—"

"Another drink, please!" Snooty says as the Greek brushes by. "M-make it th-three. You w-were say-in'" he tosses at Jones.

"There was a man named Uriah Ricker," Jones says after gulping a triple rye. "He had a brother named Ulysses and one night we initiated him into the Skull and Quill. We—er—had rather a stiff initiation, Mr.—"

"Piper," Snooty says.

"All harmless starting out. The usual hazing. Then we opened a bottle and poured half of it into Ulysses who was a teetotaler. That was the joke. He got stinko if you will pardon the phrase—"

"Just a sissy," I says sourly and tried to stop my knees from imitating the dry bones.

"Then we took Ulysses out to the village green and put him on the back of a horse that already had General Grant on it," Jones said. "It was funny at the time. We figured to let Ulysses come home by himself when he got sobered up. The next morning they found him. He had fallen off the horse an'—ugh! Everybody thought he was

drunk and kept laughing. Then when they saw he was—"

Snooty Piper is shivering all over and I order another rye.

"Uriah Ricker left school the next day and said we would pay," Jones gulped out. "We thought it was just an idle threat—until Alfred Sorgum was found with the placard around his neck. Everybody laughing—you begin to understand, gentlemen. Uriah wanted to have people laugh at them when they— It is terrible. Even now Uriah might be stalking me. We've got to band together an'—"

"What time can I get a train out for Montreal?" I says. "I had nothing to do with it, but there is always the company you are seen with and cases of mistaken ident—"

"Pull yourself together, Scoop," Snooty chokes out. "Like I am tryin' to." He picks up some bridgework that was shaken out of his mouth and tries to put it on his watch chain.

"I have the list of those who are left," Jones says. "We will wire them and meet in a hotel room here. They must be warned. Once Uriah wipes out the ones in Boston, he will start for those in other cities or towns."

"Why not tell the police?" I ask. "Or is it their business, Snooty Piper?"

"They couldn't find Uriah," Jones says. "Maybe he is disguised anyway and twenty-five years is a long time and you forget. We got to join up and plan a way of trapping the madman. Before—"

"He sticks a quill through our jugulars and fractures our skulls," I finish up for the scared character. "The things a dame can get you into, Snooty! I should start running right now and not stop until I am with the A.E.F. in the Aleutians. It is safer there as when you see a Jap you know he is after you. Maybe we should just take Mr. Jones to the cops."

"Not yet. You think they'd believe that story?" Jones says.

"No more than I do," I snort. "Or do I? Look, pal, Snooty's doll give him

the pin. The crackpot never saw a college. He left the fourth grade when—"

"Uriah swore he'd get the next of kin in case any of the members died before he wreaked his terrible vengeance," Jones says with a shudder.

"My doll!" Snooty howls. "She will git murdered, Scoop. We must stick with Jones."

"Thank you," Jones says and takes a list of names out of his pocket. He hands them to me.

"We will go and send wires now," Snooty says. "Let's get a room in the Kenway on Beacon Street as I can get a due bill on it. We must hurry."

"All the others will have read about the two murders," Jones says. "They will not be sleeping."

THE three of us go to the telegraph office and go to work. Snooty says for me to read off the names and he and Jones will write out the telegrams. Jones writes the first one. It says:

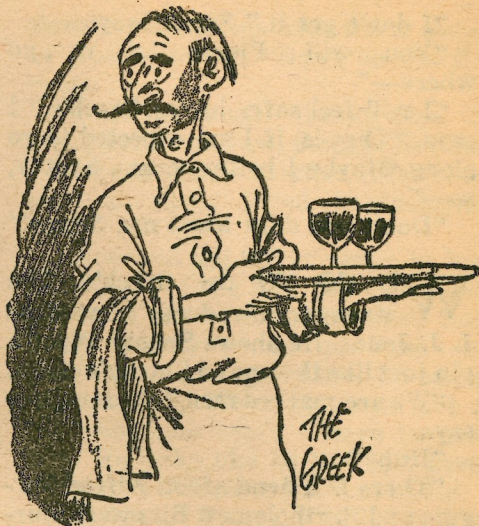
COME AT ONCE STOP URGENT BROTHER. GROTTO KENWAY HOTEL ROOM 1108. UNITED WE STAND DIVIDED WE FALL STOP URIAH HAS STRUCK STOP PASSWORD GENERAL GRANT STOP THIS IS THE CALL.

When we are finished and Jones pays the bite for the public utility, I fold up the list and put it back in my pocket. Then we go over to the Kenway and Jones takes over the room where the Skull and Quills will have a rendezvous.

"They should start arriving tomorrow morning," Jones says. "They should all be here by Wednesday night. I will call you when the list is complete. Keep on your guard, Piper. No doubt he knows you wear the pin. He'll think you are a next of kin—"

That's enough for me.

"G'night," I says in a voice as weak as beanery tea. "Snooty, I would rather walk home alone if you don't mind. You are a marked man and I would catch pneumonia sittin' in a fountain. G'night."



All that night I toss on my bassinet and try to think of something and don't know why.

Me and Snooty arrive at the city room at ten o'clock. Dogface asks how everything is in the Solomons as since we did any work we must have been that far.

"The biggest story of the year is about to break in our laps," I says. "It is lucky the *Evening Star* hires us, Dogface. We must have a little expense money."

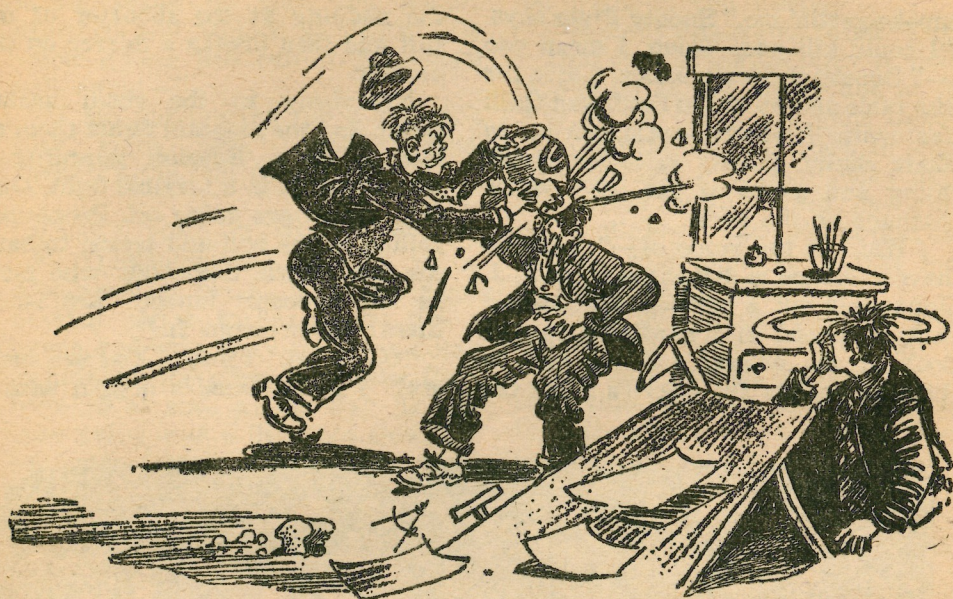
In the street and no kidding, five minutes later, Snooty is wondering if he has a chance to sue Dogface as he got hit with a paste jar.

"I'll see you sometime this aft," I says wearily. "I want to see how much to borrow from the Horace Plan so I can go to welding school."

We meet at three. We call up the Kenway and Jones says three scared Skull and Quill alumni have already checked in.

The papers that day say that Waldo Frisbee still can't make an alibi stick and that he has been indicted for the murder of Bitz. The sob sisters say that Mrs. Frisbee will not forgive Waldo even for the papers.

At six o'clock on Wednesday night, we call Jones again and he says the boys are all there. All except one who is a colonel on Guadalcanal. It



looks like Uriah won't catch up with that member for some time.

Me and Snooty enter the big room of the Kenway where eight citizens and J. J. Jones are huddled. The clan of the Skull and Quill are jittery and are biting their nails between drinks. The tobacco smoke in the place is thick enough to slice.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Jones says. "Have a drink?"

"Make it two," I says.

"Er—I think I gave Mr. Binney the list of members," Jones says when everything is set. "If you will call the roll, Mr. Binney. I do hope you did not leave the list in your other suit."

"What other?" I sniff and dig down into my pocket.

Jones makes a very doleful speech and says everybody in the room is in danger of assassination.

"I happened to come to Boston on business the day after poor Alfred, our brother, was killed," Jones says. "Then poor Bartholomew—I knew then that Uriah—Think of it, we can be murdered in our beds by the fiend. Perhaps I shall never get home to give my daughter her birthday present you seen on the table.

"Think of what it means to us if we do not capture the fiend. We will draw straws and see which one of us will venture out as a decoy. Three others will watch from the window to see if the brother is followed. Read off the roll, Mr. Binney."

I TRY, but my teeth beat out a honey of a Voodoo drum chant. My spinal column is writhing like an angle worm on a hook, and there is a very big cold lump where my ticker should be. Snooty grabs the list out of my hand and pushes me away. I catch myself near the table and look at the pretty square white package on the table. It says on the wrapping: JEMMS & STONEHAM, Jewelers, Boylston Street.

Snooty takes a hooker, clears his throat, and starts reading.

"T. L. Buscock!"

"Here!"

"H. J. Weevil."

"Present."

"T. J. Tattershall, L. D. Weskitt, T. F.—"

Snooty's legs wobble and he starts reeling like a Keystone comedy drunk. I grab him and ask what is wrong.

"Ah—er—it is the hootch an' the

smoke gettin' me," Snooty Piper says. "I could kill you, Scoop. I mean you —" Snooty suddenly makes a dive for the table and all of the Skull and Quill fraternity brothers straighten up in their chairs. Snooty yells out something and grabs at the little white package on the table.

"What in the name of—" I do not have a chance to say anymore as J. J. Jones lets out a screech that should only be heard in a panther's cage. I look at the citizen and his face is twisted up like Dr. Jekyll's when the

the padding at the shoulder of my suit and then breaks a mirror on the dresser.

Everybody in the room rushes Uriah and the assassin fights them all like he is a Russian guarding a wheatfield. It is a terrible fight. Outside, sirens are going off. People are yelling in the hall and trying to bang the door down. Somebody who must be the manager howls, "Let us in there! We're comin' in!"

"Go ahead," I yelp. "You are suckers!" I graze Uriah's noggin with a



Mr. Hyde elixir starts working. Snooty is going to throw the package out the window and changes his mind. He has it balanced on the palm of his hand and is yelling for somebody to tell him where to throw it.

J. J. Jones takes a gun out of his pocket and pumps lead at Snooty and then Snooty does heave the package out.

"It is Uriah right in here with us!" Snooty howls as he flattens out and lets three slugs chug into the wall. "It is a trap, Scoop! The fiend—"

Then there is an explosion that would not have been ashamed to take place in front of Stalingrad. The room shakes. The whole hotel shakes. Smoke comes up from the court and boils into the room. Uriah Ricker is screeching just like a fiend when he fires his last shot. It goes through

Gideon Bible and then throw a framed picture of the Kenway hotel at him. Four Skull and Quill frat boys climb him and weigh him down with numbers alone. The door crashes in and there is a big house dick waving a gun. He walks right over Snooty Piper who has been knocked almost into the Styx by Uriah's right hook, and calls for everybody to put up their hands.

"You will have to help me lift mine," I sigh and sit down.

"This is the killer of Alfred Sorgum and Bartholomew Bitz," Snooty says, pointing to where Uriah is spread-eagled. "Now stop askin' silly questions."

"Who tried to blow up the hotel?" the house dick yowls. "It blew the whole top off the kitchen down there in the court. A chef fell headfirst into

a big kettle of soup and almost drowned and scalded to death. The whole dinner was ruined. Somebody will sweat—"

"I am not looking for a bearskin coat right now," Snooty says. "Where's the real policemen?"

THEY come in later. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is with them. Also some of the F. B. I. and some firemen. Uriah Ricker laughs like a hyena and says the bomb was going to blow all the other Skull and Quill boys up at once as the way he had been going was a little too slow. He confesses to everything and asked wasn't it funny though the way he fixed Alfred up as Ghandi.

"I was there when they found him," Uriah babbles. "I laughed until I couldn't laugh no more. Blast you, you in the green suit! You cheated me. Let me git my hands on his windpipe! Ha-ha—"

"Scoop, you nearly got us all killed," Snooty yells at me as they send out for a strait-jacket for Uriah. "I could slug you! Of all the dopes I ever—I always said you didn't have no brains. Oh, when I think—"

"Uh," I says. "Now what did I do?"

"Look," Snooty says. "The names on that list Jones made up! No t's crossed. Like on the placard around Sorgum's neck. When I spotted them names, I knew we was inches from

death's door. You dumb—"

"Go away and let me faint," I says.

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is sitting in a chair in the corner and at first I think his ticker has gone back on him. Just as the boys come in with a strait-jacket, Iron Jaw looks at me and moves his lips. "Look, how did he do it, Binney? How did he get next to that wild man, huh? Just begin at the beginnin'—"

"It is all because his doll joined the Waves," I says. "That is all."

Iron Jaw goes off his beam and for some time the cops do not know who to fit the strait-jacket on first. It goes to Uriah because it is only about big enough to be put around Iron Jaw's biceps.

"Look, Iron Jaw," I says. "I really wasn't kiddin'. I—"

"Shut up!" Snooty says. "Isn't he bad enough as it is? I think I would like to go home and lay down. When they finally draft me, the war will seem tame to me."

"You ain't kiddin', Snooty," I tell him. "But this Mamie Frisbee. If Waldo was innocent—"

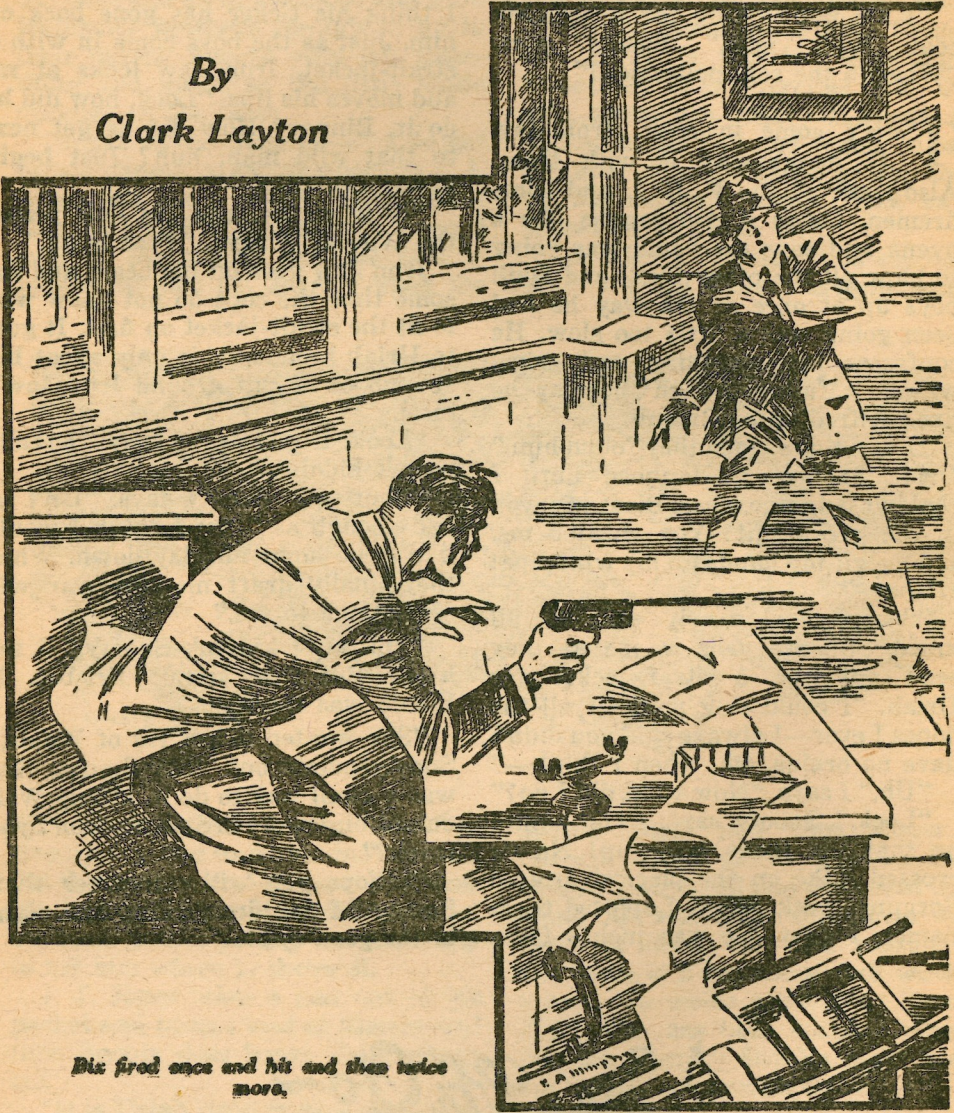
"She wanted to get rid of Waldo," Snooty points out. "She figured that was a swell way to do it, killing Waldo's alibi. Dames are poison, don't you think?"

"I hope you will remember that, Snooty," I tell him, looking him right in the good eye.



Debut in Murder

By
Clark Layton



Bix fired once and hit and then twice more.

When Boss Bix gave Joey Bellers his trigger promotion, Joey didn't see that the bullet diploma might also be his death certificate.

I WAS stretched out on the window seat in Bix's office, listening to the sleet rattle against the windows. I felt kind of uneasy, which was a funny thing. Generally on a night like this I could get a glow just out of being inside, getting an earful while the Boss and some of his boys spilled the low-down.

They knew all the angles, Bix's crowd did. There wasn't a chump in the lot. He picked them for brains, see, and for guts—and if one of them started to slide, he was out. So a punk like me, just breakin' in, could usually learn plenty.

Tonight, though, it was different. We were alone in the office, the Boss sitting at his desk chewing a cigar, not saying anything. It was the way he was sitting that gave me the tip-off; I was getting smart at sizing things up.

He was hunched forward in his chair, his elbows resting on the desk, only resting isn't the word. He was using his arms like canes to hold himself up. Every few minutes his hands would drop down and slap the desk top. He started making a sort of rhythm of it, holding his hands up straight for a minute, then dropping them to pound on the desk. It got on my nerves. On account of the night I guess, or the two of us being alone. Anyhow, I spoke out of turn.

"Ring'll maybe turn up, Boss," I said idly. "Ring or one of the boys."

He jumped like I'd hit him. His body unfolded like a jackknife and he leaned over the desk, his barrel chest heaving. There was something wrong with his eyes. They weren't calm and figurative like usual. There was something wrong with them.

"What's that?" he said hoarsely. "What the hell do you mean?"

All right, so I was scared. It don't pay to cross Bix. He's a right guy but he's nobody's sucker. And he don't like to be riled. I let my feet drop to the floor and swung around in a hurry, shaking my head. "Just that, Boss," I said. "Just I figured you was gettin' the blues, with nobody here three nights running. I was sayin' one of the boys oughta show up."

He kept his eyes on me with that queer light still in them. "Cripes," I said. "I didn't mean nothin'."

The light went out of his eyes and a figuring look crept in. "All right," he said. "It's all right, Joey." He

circled the desk and came over next to me, dropping his hand on my shoulder. He pushed back the curtains and looked down into the street. The street lamps flickered like candles in a shooting gallery. "Think you could hit one, Joey? From here?"

He knew the answer to that. I could knock the spots off it. There was only one guy in the crowd could shoot better than me—Ring Saster. Of course that's target shooting I mean. I'd never had any of the real stuff yet.

I just grinned at the Boss the way Ring might have grinned, and he slapped my shoulder and walked back to his desk. He walked easier, with a quick step, like he was feeling better.

"Joey," he said suddenly. "One of the boys has stepped out of line."

I could feel his eyes on me, hot and heavy. He was weighing me in. I hadn't done nothing. I said, "Boss, I haven't—" and he waved his hand, cutting me off.

"I don't like it," he said softly. "It looks as if he may squeal."

I sat up straighter, a chill going through me. I knew what the Boss had been worried about now. But I couldn't see why it was bothering him. Even I knew how that should be handled. There was only one treatment for squealers.

"So one of the boys'll take care of it, huh?" I suggested. "Ring, maybe. Yeah," I said carefully, like I'd been considering it, "That's Ring's job, huh, Boss?"

He sank down in his chair, bracing his hands on the sides. His voice was harsher than I'd ever heard it before. "Not this time," he said slowly. "This is no job for Ring." He gave a laugh that was close to a creak. "This is one he wouldn't touch."

I said, "Ring wouldn't touch it?" and then I got it. Like that, I got it. But I didn't believe it. "Cripes," I said. "It couldn't be. Ring wouldn't get out of line. He wouldn't squeal, Boss." I shook my head but the Boss

just sat there staring at me. So it was straight. "Why?" I said dully. "Why would Ring . . ."

BIX rubbed his thumb over his palm. His eyes lidded a trifle and his thick lips twisted to a scowl. "Give a man the shirt off your back; treat him like a brother. And the first chance he gets, he'll sell out. Like a Judas."

I never heard of Judas, but I guessed he was another wise guy who'd tried to cross up the Boss. It could happen, I knew that. But I never would've figured on Ring. It just goes to show you what a young punk can learn.

"So he's done," I said heavily. For my money, he was already a stiff. When a guy goes off the handle that way he's like a mad dog, it don't pay to leave him around. He asks for it and he gets it. That's all there is to it. "Who'll you get?" I asked Bix. "For the job, I mean. Who'll do it?"

He didn't say anything for a while. He just sat there in his chair, his eyes burning into me, his big head nodding slowly. Like he was sizing me up. *You see what I mean? Like he was sizing me up!* He didn't say a word.

I felt a thrill creep up from my stomach and my head got light as a feather. I braced my hands against the window bench and they slid along the wood leaving damp streaks on the varnish. I was crazy sure. He couldn't mean me; a punk who'd never even gone along for the ride. This was a job for a man. He'd never give it to Joey.

"Like a street light," he said softly. "As simple as that."

His eyes were big like hot, glowing coals. When I looked at them, I couldn't see the rest of the room. I could just see his dark eyes glowing and then blackness behind him. I wet my lips with my tongue and forced out the words.

"Me?" I said. "Boss you don't need a punk like me. What you need . . ."

"Is a man I can trust," he finished.

"That's what I need, Joey. A man I can trust."

That was *me* he was talking about. Joey Bellers, the punk. I could feel his eyes burning into me. This was big. Cripes, this was big. I tried to say something and the words stuck in my throat. I just stayed that way, staring like a kid, until I got hold of myself and remembered how I should act.

I got up slowly and crossed the room to the liquor cabinet the way I'd seen Ring do it. I took out a glass and bottle of the Boss's best stuff and poured myself over three fingers. I leaned against the cabinet, steadying a little, and downed the drink at a gulp.

He didn't say a word! Get it? *Me*, Joey Bellers, the punk, drinking Bix's liquor like a pal. That was one for the book. I took a cigarette out of my pocket and tamped it down, letting it hang neatly from my lips. The Scotch was warming my stomach now, and the palms of my hands were tight. I looked out the window, instead of at the Boss, and kept my voice casual and easy.

"Well," I said. "Well, Bix. When do I start?"

The Boss had had it figured already. You see that? He'd known he could count on me. While the rest of the guys had been treating me kind of careless, like a kid, Bix had been grooving me for the slot. He could tell when a guy had the stuff and he'd gone right ahead with the plans. Like getting the gun. The right gun. The fact it went haywire wasn't his fault anymore than it was mine. It was just in the cards, that's all. In the cards. Bix had figured it smooth.

All the way to Sol Bleinheim's, I kept thinking of how he had told me to handle it.

"Casual and easy, Joey," he said. "You know what I mean."

I knew what he meant all right. And I knew how to do it. It was just that I'd never bought one before. For a hot job, I mean. I went past Blein-

heim's three times, crossing the street and doubling back, so no one would tag me. The third time, the shop was empty and I ducked in fast. An old man with a face like a frog hopped to the counter, his lips spreading to an oily grin. I tabbed his as Bleinheim.

I tugged the brim of my hat down and stepped back, half behind the door. "Bix sent me," I said shortly. "Bix Barrows."

His eyes flickered behind his glasses, then went blank. He gave up the grin. "So?" he said.

"So I want a gun," I told him. "A nice clean gun. With no history."

He picked up the word. "History?"

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, history. I don't want to get nabbed for no other guy's dumb ones." I used the Boss's name again to prod him along. "Bix ain't got all day, Solly."

HIS eyes flickered again but he couldn't hold the light in them. I had his number all right. "Yes sir," he said. He slid open a drawer at his elbow and laid a forty-five on the counter. It was a beauty. Just seeing it there made my fingers itch. I crowded to the counter and lifted it up, hoisting it for the feel. It fit like a glove. I drew a bead on Sol's stomach and his eyes snapped shut. With that baby, you could strip a guy's buttons.

"Clean?" I asked.

Sol's eyes opened halfway. "Like a baby," he said. "That's new, mister."

I broke it open, sniffed at the barrel, then twirled it. Balance, boy that baby had balance. I ran my finger into the barrel to check. Black, my finger turned black. New; maybe, but she'd been greased. Just in time I remembered the makers do that. Boy, Sol would've labelled me a chump. I covered my finger with the gun and wiped the grease off on the serial stamp. "How much?" I asked.

"Eighty-five dollars," he said. "Cheap, mister; but for Bix—"

I took four twenties out of my wal-

let and laid them in front of him. "Eighty," I said. "And with a load."

Sol said, "Listen, mister—" but I just stood there staring at him over the counter. His eyes flickered and dropped. "For Bix," he said, "okay."

For Bix, hell, I thought. For Joey. Joey Bellers. The minute I got the feel of that baby, I knew nothing could stop me. That gun was a pal. Joey's pal. When Sol took it in the back room to load up, I felt lost. I started getting the jitters. Somebody might've come in and seen a kid like me buyin' a gun. There were too many angles to this. I closed the door to the shop and flattened against the wall. "Hey," I yelled. "Hey, hurry it up." Sol came trotting back with the gun.

It was okay, then. The minute I got the feel of that rod again, it was okay. Hell, nothing could stop me. *Me, Joey Bellers.* I threw Sol a growl and swaggered out of the shop. I didn't even care was I seen. I took a cab back to the office, and I kept pattin' my gun all the way.

The Boss was primed to leave when I got there. He was dressed smooth, all right. A neat, new double-breasted tux, black homburg, white scarf and the trimmings. He was even carrying a cane.

Not bad, I thought. I wouldn't look half bad.

He stood up at his desk holding the cane in front of him, polishing the handle.

"Okay," I said.

He didn't ask any more. He didn't have to ask any more. He'd picked his man for the job, and his worries were over. Leave it to Joey. Everything was okay. He knotted the scarf and tucked the loose ends under his coat.

"Luck, Joey," he said, like he'd always told Ring. That's all he said. He opened his desk drawer and laid a box of Coronas on the desk, and he waved his hand at the liquor closet as he went out, but he didn't say anything else. He maybe knew I was hot.

A guy's bound to be hot. Hell, Ring might have been worse than I was at

times. It's like a horse waiting for the break at the barrier. On edge. Keyed up. That don't mean he won't race the shoes off the field. I sat down on the edge of Bix's desk, tapping my ring against the wood, studying. It was all right. It was like a bull's-eye on the range. It was all right, see?

My hands felt funny; cold and damp. It was so damn hot in the place my hands were sweating. That's the kind of an office Bix kept. So damn hot it made your hands sweat. I got up and opened the window, letting the sleet drift in over the window seat, but it didn't cool the place off much.

"You can't do it," I said aloud. "Damn it, a guy can't fire a gun with wet hands." I wiped my hands on my trousers and walked over to the cabinet, pouring a drink. I downed it in two gulps, and looked up at the clock. It was only ten-thirty.

That's it, I thought. The barrier ain't down yet. That's what's wrong with you. You got itchy feet.

Itchy feet, that was funny. I had a laugh over that one. Itchy fingers, I meant. I had a laugh and a drink and then I looked at my hands again. They were still wet.

"Gloves," I said. "I'll be wearing gloves. The hell with my hands." It was funny how you could get stewed up over something that didn't matter, like that. I took the bottle back to the window seat and closed the window again. Bix's office was a louse. First it was hot, then it was cold. You couldn't keep it right.

Ring'll be sitting at the table in Terry's now, listening to Val Hammond. He'll be parked there like he owned the place, grinning like an ape at his babe. He'll wait till she's finished her show, and then he'll sneak back to her dressing room for a drink. They'll laugh, maybe, about how he's crossing the Boss. He'd better laugh good.

I had to watch out on the Scotch. I could take little gulps of it, like when the office got too hot or too cold to kind of even things off, but I had

to watch out for it. I didn't want to get dizzy.

I looked at the clock. Eleven.

She's on her next to last number, and Ring'll be sitting there, drinking her in with his eyes. She's likely the reason he went sour. A babe like that could easy be it.

I HAD five minutes left. I wiped my hand on my trousers and slid the gun out of my pocket to try for a sight. Just kind of to get the feel again. It was lucky I did.

Something was wrong with it!

That's how on edge I was, see? That's what it means. You get things like that. You're watchin' every minute for an angle. Nine times out of ten, anybody would've missed it. But not me—not when I was hot.

The gun was too clean. The minute I looked at it, I knew it. Sol Bleinheim. Bleinheim, the dirty, double-crossing rat. He'd wiped it off where I'd smeared the grease.

To clean it? Don't make me laugh. In a pig's eye to clean it. I knew where I'd wiped the grease off my fingers, and I knew why a guy would polish it after me. It didn't take much figuring to know what he wanted to see.

The serial numbers.

That was it, see? That's what they were doin' to Bix. The rats leaving the ship. Only this ship wasn't sinking.

I could picture the lay-out. It was curtains for the guy who got caught with that gun. The dicks probably had the numbers by now. I wasn't dumb enough to use it—don't kid yourself. The deal was off.

But it couldn't be off, that was the worst of it. I got that right afterwards. If Sol was crossing Bix too, he might tip off Ring. I couldn't let that happen.

If Bix had been there, I'd've asked him. But Bix wasn't there, and the pressure was on. I had to think for myself. And I didn't have much time for the thinking.

I got Bix's thirty-eight out of the

top drawer, the one he always kept at his elbow. I left the forty-five in its place, for Bix to get rid of. He'd know how to handle Sol, all right. That was his job. My job was Ring.

I looked at the clock. *Eleven-fifteen.* I pulled on my gloves, tugging them down over my fingers. A guy needed bigger gloves, that was it. These were too snug—made your hands feel damp. I stood at the door for a second, checking over the room.

"Well," I said tightly. "Well, okay."

I should have taken a Scotch along with me. It was cold and wet in the alley. The walled terrace above me was only twelve feet away, but it didn't take the bite out of the wind. I was crouched down in a slot between trash-cans, my hat pulled low on my eyes, and I could still feel the chill eating into me.

My hands were all right, though. I had Bix's gun out, holding it ready, so I wouldn't lose any time. Inside the club, I heard the final blast of the encore, the band building Val Hammond up to a send-off, and I shifted a little, making sure my right arm was free.

Ring would be getting up, heading for the back. He'd have his quick drink with Val, and then she'd send him out, like Bix said she always did, while she dressed. He'd come out on the terrace for a smoke.

"A guy shouldn't smoke," I thought. "My old lady always said, a guy shouldn't smoke. You see what it gets you?" I shook my head, hard. I was getting silly. It was too damn cold to be crouching out there, and I was letting myself get silly. Ring would come out in a minute. I started counting the minute.

I was at fifty-nine when he came.

The terrace door opened and closed behind him, leaving him half in the dark. Half wasn't enough. It was Ring, all right. I'd have known the guy anywhere. He was dressed like Bix had been dressed; like a big shot. I was close enough to've knocked his hat off with a stone.

"Okay," I thought. "Well, okay." I

raised the gun slowly, resting my arm on the trash-can. I had him in line, neat. His hands went to his pockets and came up again, joining right where I had him. "Here it is," I thought. "Ring, here it is." My fingers started the squeeze.

His hands flared yellow and he cupped them up towards his face, lighting a smoke. I saw his eyes and his lips both at once, like the same thing. He was grinning. Happy. The damn fool was happy. It was Ring, riding high, with a date with his babe, and a smoke, and a dirty little rat crouched in an ash can ready to blast him to hell.

I said, "Ring!" and my finger finished the trigger squeeze just as the gun fell from my hand.

HE WENT out of sight, under the wall of the terrace, his cigarette trailing sparks to the ground. The echo of the shot died in the alley, leaving it quiet as a tomb. If it had stayed quiet, I could never have moved.

It didn't stay quiet. A woman screamed from a window high above me, and a needle seemed to jab at my spine. Without even thinking, I ran. That's all I did, ran.

I got back to Bix's, somehow. Not right away. First off, I couldn't think. I couldn't make myself do what I wanted to do. I couldn't do a thing. I could see Ring lightin' his smoke, and then the blast of my gun. My hands were like ice. My hands were like ice and my throat was burning inside. I stood on a corner, watching people go by, shaking my head. Standing there like a dope, shaking my head. I couldn't make a move.

A guy stopped in front of me to light up a butt. A guy, like Ring, lighting a butt. I just stood there, looking at him, shaking my head. I pressed my hands up to my throat, but they didn't cool it off. They were cold, but the thing inside me wouldn't stop burning like hell.

"I got to think," I said aloud. "I got to think what to do."

Bix. I had to tell Bix.

I hailed a cab. Like a sucker, like a guy who walks in his sleep, I hailed a cab and climbed into it. "Six-thirty-four Murden," I mumbled. All I knew was I had to tell Bix.

He was back in his office. He had his cane and his hat in front of him, and he was sitting in back of his desk like he'd just come home from a brawl.

"Bix," I said. "Oh cripes, Bix."

His eyes hit me hard. Not studying. Half-closed. Like when he's made up his mind. He stayed where he was when I opened the door, and he didn't move as I came on into the room.

"Listen, Bix—" I couldn't get the rest of it out. I needed a drink. I needed something to take the edge off my nerves. I had to tell him about it.

"So you cracked." That was Bix, but his voice wasn't right. It stung like a whip. "When the job was over, you cracked. Your stomach couldn't take it."

He didn't mean to get nasty. When he knew how it was, he wouldn't take it nasty. He could see how it was, once I told him. If I just had a drink, I could explain. I crossed the room to the Scotch cabinet and poured out a slug. I couldn't even drink it. I just stood there, holding the glass in my hands, trying to straighten myself out. I said, "Listen, Boss—" I started to turn as I said it.

"Don't turn around." That was wrong. It was Bix, but it didn't sound like Bix. He said it again, slowly and carefully, like he was warning me. "Don't turn around."

I didn't get it. I heard the receiver click as he lifted the phone, and then I heard him dial a number, but I didn't get what was up. He had me in the corner, like he was covering me. He'd said, "Don't turn around." Like he meant it, he'd said it.

"Lieutenant Carver," he said. "This is Barrows."

Carver was a dick. Bix wouldn't be calling the cops. Why in hell would Bix be calling the cops?

"A guy who worked for me some," he was saying. "He seems to be doped . . . either doped up or crazy . . . Yeah, it looks like he's carting a gun . . . Make it fast."

I had it. I had it, but I still didn't believe it. "Bix," I said. "Cripes, Bix! What're you doin'?"

A VOICE from the doorway said, "Nothing. Bix isn't doing nothing no more."

Ring. That was Ring. I'd been trying to tell Bix that I'd muffed it. I didn't have to tell him now. He could see it.

I turned around slowly. I heard Bix gasp, and then all I heard was my heels crunching the floor as I turned.

Ring was in the doorway. He was still dressed like a big shot, his white scarf knotted at the throat, and he was wearing grey kid gloves, like the Boss. His lips were grinning, the way he'd been grinning on the terrace, but the grin was gone from his eyes. They were flat and cold. Like a dead man's. He had Bix's gun in his hand.

"With your own gun, Boss," he said evenly. "I picked it up in the alley. The same one you missed me with. This time it ain't gonna miss."

"My gun?" Bix said. "My gun?"

I didn't look at Bix. With Ring there, I couldn't look at Bix. All I could see was Ring, his flat, dead little eyes, and his arm poised like a snake. He was waiting to strike. He was waiting till Bix knew what was coming, and then he'd be ready to give it. He waited too long.

Bix caught him once before his arm even came up. The Boss must've had his hand in the drawer while he was talking to me, and he fired without even raising the gun. He fired once and hit and twice more and missed, and then Ring's arm came up like a snake. Ring only shot once.

Bix had got it. I could see Bix had got it, from the way he sprawled out on the desk. He had a hole in his throat the size of a dime.

"Ring," I said. "Ring—"

He grinned at me. "He don't always miss, Joey. He missed on me earlier, but he don't always miss." He let his legs slide out in front of him, sitting down on the floor like a drunk. "Get out of it, kid," he said, tightly. "You ain't got the stomach for it. And what does it get you?" He was still grinning, his head shaking in quick little jerks. "Cripes," he said. "And me and Val getting ready to blow." His arms stopped holding him up and he went over backwards. He was dead.

The cops. I remembered Bix's call to the cops. I had to get out of there I had to get out of there fast.

I just couldn't do it. I stayed where I was, staring at Bix, sprawled like a dead frog on his desk. He still had the gun, *my gun*, like an ugly black rat in his hand. A big shot—he was a big shot. A stinking, two-timing crook. I'd fallen for it, neat. Me, Trigger-man Bellers. That was a laugh.

The whole thing was a laugh.

"Double-crosser," I said. I had to say it before I could believe it. Bix slating me for the rap. Bix and Sol Bleinheim framing me with a gun, and then tipping the cops. Bix Barrows, the big shot. I said "Double-crosser," again, and then I put the whiskey glass on the table and sat down on the window seat. I was still sitting there, staring at Bix, when the cops came.

They let me off easy, all right, for coppin' a plea. Two years for buying a gun. Two years for Joey the punk. Plenty of time to add up the score.

You're smart, ain't you, kid. You can figure the angles. You know where the dough is. Murder's a pipe, like bustin' a street light. You're maybe even pals with the big shots. You're movin' up fast. Yeah, you're movin' up fast.

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NAME..... MY NAME IS.....

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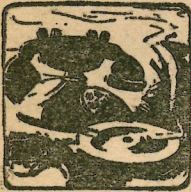
CITY..... STATE..... CITY..... STATE.....

If You Desire More Than One Package Enclose 25c Additional For Each Gift You Order And Use A Separate Sheet Of Paper For Other Addresses.

Alibi in Red

By David X. Manners

¶ Fingerprints don't lie—but sometimes they bear testimony ¶
that is subject to change without notice.



ED TOBIN'S mouth hooked up into a crooked grin as he eavesdropped on the conversation going on in the office adjoining his. It was

after hours, and voices echoed clearly through the barnlike offices of the Kwickclean Soap factory.

"You pay up," one voice said, harsh and sharp. "You pay up or we'll let it out. How long do you think they'd keep you on here in the paymaster's office if they found out your father was in the pen?"

"For Heaven's sake," pleaded a second voice that Ed Tobin recognized as Ralph Childs'. "Not so loud! Somebody might still be around. All right, I'll pay. I'll pay what you ask, tomorrow. I'll get it somehow—borrow it, or—"

Very shortly after, Tobin heard the outside door slam and through a window he saw two men walking away. They were the blackmailers. Tobin could hardly keep from chortling. So this was the real lowdown on Ralph Childs, the favorite of the bosses, the fair-haired boy who was always getting pushed into promotions ahead of Ed Tobin!

Ed Tobin turned away and walked back toward the washroom. He was glad now that he had to work late. He wasn't grumbling about it any more. The Kwickclean offices and the company plant were located together down in the grimy, dilapidated warehouse and wholesale district that trailed along the river front. At night, when the rumbling trucks and wagons were

gone, and the people were gone, and the day's business was at an end, it became a deserted and terrifyingly lonely place.

That, however, wasn't what usually bothered Ed Tobin. He was used to working by himself at night. At one time—until a bullet caught up with him—it was the only sort of work he did. But he did object to working late when he knew he wasn't getting paid for it. Tonight, he had been amply paid. He had learned enough to blast the fair-haired Mr. Ralph Childs right out of his pretty new office into the gutter.

Tobin allowed himself one last laugh as he closed the door on himself in the washroom. For a long time he'd been wanting to crack that safe in the paymaster's office, but he'd been leery of it. Now Childs fit perfectly into the scheme.

Tobin hurried to dig up a fistful of Kwickclean's special powdered toilet soap from a box beside the sink, and proceeded to wash. He splashed soap and water all about himself on the clean tile floor, and then tracked his feet through it. He didn't care how dirty he made the place. The porters could clean up.

He dried his face on a towel, and then took a new clean one and shined his shoes with it. He dropped it on the floor. What if there was a sign saying: *Please put discarded towels in the soiled-linen hamper?* That sign was for dopes like Ralph Childs. Ed Tobin? He was an out-and-out individualist. He did as he pleased.

Reaching for another towel to take an extra wipe at his shoes, Tobin acci-

dently knocked a razor blade off the window sill. It looked as if it had fallen in the soap.

Tobin peered in the box of softly sifting soap. He wasn't sure the blade went in the box. He didn't bother to look too carefully when he didn't see it. It was second nature for him not to bother about things like that.

Tobin met Ralph Childs just as he was about to leave the building. Childs' youngish face looked pale and drawn.

"Good night, *Assistant Treasurer*," Tobin said, in his most menacing tone. He calculated that it might make Childs wonder if this Ed Tobin had overheard any of his conversation with the blackmailers. Then Tobin flashed Childs a knowing grin, and was on his way. As he walked, he figured the details of what he was going to do.

IN HIS apartment, Tobin took a pair of red rubber gloves out of a locked drawer. His eyes fell on the fingertips of the gloves, and he ran his own fingers over them.

Tobin, during his checkered career, had once studied dentistry. He had learned how to take impressions in soft rubber velum. Of course, dentists always took impressions of teeth, and it had required a lot of ingenuity to take fingerprint impressions. But here they were: a perfect, five-fingered, two handed set of Ralph Childs' fingerprints transposed to rubber gloves.

Tobin rubbed the fingertips across his hands until they had acquired a greasy film from the contact. Tonight, "Ralph Childs" would rob the Kwickclean Soap Company and accidentally leave his prints on a give-away spot. Tomorrow Ralph Childs would no longer be assistant company treasurer. Tomorrow Ralph Childs would be in jail.

Tobin thought the entire scheme over as he proceeded to a red-front cigar store. He had planned this job for a long time. His one stumbling-block up to now had been the fear that

no one would ever believe that Childs, the assistant treasurer, could be guilty of a crime. Now, the blackmailers had supplied an answer to that.

Tobin contacted Childs on the phone. He disguised his voice and made an appointment to see Childs in front of the Kwickclean plant at eleven o'clock that night. All Tobin had to mention was that it concerned Childs' father, and Childs readily assented.

After he had hung up, Tobin paused for a moment. Childs was such a lamb for the slaughter, it was almost cruel to do this to him. Childs had a wife, too. That was why he had not been called to the army. Tobin had a bullet in him—supposedly from a hunting accident. That had been responsible for his own rejection. Then Tobin's mouth hooked up in a crooked grin and he forgot all misgivings.

It was five after ten when he slipped his passkey into the lock of the office entrance to the Kwickclean Soap Company. The place was as dead as a cemetery. Tobin went directly to the small partition-enclosed treasurer's office, and from there it was only a step into the assistant treasurer-paymaster's office. The safe stood out in the darkness like the shadowy entrance to a vault of another kind. Tobin pulled down the window shade and went to work on the safe. It was not the first safe he had ever opened, but it was the first time he had the advantage of knowing the combination. He switched on a small desk lamp to help him see.

He got the safe open and found the cash in an inside compartment. Rifling quickly through it, he was disappointed to find it amounted to no more than twelve hundred dollars.

He fed the money into his pockets. Tobin was wearing the specially prepared rubber gloves. He took out a handkerchief and prepared to wipe away some of the fingerprints. He didn't want to make this look amateurish. He'd leave those fingerprints in just a few selected spots.

A cracking sound toward the front

of the office whirled Tobin around. Footsteps!

Tobin doused the light. Immediately, he heard the gruff nerve-taut demand of a cop: "Who is it? Who's in there?"

TOBIN stiffened on the spot. He hadn't figured on a cop. He had banked only on the fact that the soap company had no night watchman. Tobin considered a quick jump through the closed window of the office. It was the ground floor. A getaway would be easy except for the glass. That glass might leave a cut. One cut would be enough to brand him as guilty!

"Come on out of there. I've got you covered. The light was on before, and now it's off, so I know somebody's in there. Come on now! No trouble!"

Tobin heard the footsteps coming toward him. He squatted low, then lunged forward. He ran into the oncoming figure, went down. A gun's fire flared shatteringly through the darkness in deflected aim.

Tobin felt legs wrap around him. He clutched desperately at a wrist that was forcing a gun around to bear on his body. He twisted the gun aside. Then it went off in a muffled roar and Tobin felt the policeman's body go suddenly limp.

Tobin's hand slipped over thick brass buttons and searched futilely for a heartbeat. Then he was on his feet, fleeing in terror. He calmed himself as he reached the street. He ducked into a doorway just in time to avoid someone walking toward the Kwickclean building.

It was Ralph Childs.

Tobin's panic dissolved then. He remembered how Childs was to fit into this frameup—and he still fit. He hadn't meant to pin a killing on him, but now there was no other choice!

Tobin went back to his apartment, disposing of the pair of rubber gloves in a sewer. He had hardly reached the apartment when the phone rang and a grim voice called him back to the Kwickclean offices.

Police, photographers and reporters were everywhere when Tobin entered the soap company building. Ralph Childs was there. So was the gray-haired president. He swung about at Tobin's entrance.

"There he is!" he shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Tobin. "There's the man we've been talking about!"

An officer in the uniform of a police captain grabbed Tobin then. "So you're the killer, eh?" he snarled.

Tobin played dumb. He acted insulted and outraged until even the police captain grew doubtful. But he insisted, "We got this against you. There are only two people who know the combination to the safe, beside Mr. Stokes here. You're one of them. What's more, you were seen leaving this building immediately after the robbery and murder."

"By whom?"

The police captain hesitated. "By Ralph Childs."

Tobin didn't grin, but laughter was warming inside of him. "Now let me tell my story," he offered confidently. "Just after I got home tonight I had an anonymous phone call, asking me to come down here to the plant at eleven o'clock. Needless to say, I was very suspicious. I did come down. But I hid in a doorway across the street to watch developments. When I saw Ralph Childs coming down the street, too, I left, for that confirmed my suspicions that he was up to something. You see, I knew it was Childs who made that mysterious phone call."

Tobin paused, studying the effect of his speech. "I'm sorry to have to say this," he concluded, "But I happened to overhear a conversation this afternoon between Childs and some men. It seems that Childs' father is in the penitentiary, and these men were asking for hush-money. And though no payday is coming for another three days, Childs promised to pay them off tomorrow!"

"Ralph Childs' father in the penitentiary?" George Stokes, the soap company's president interjected.

"Well, this does throw a new light on things. Childs, you never told me—"

TOBIN felt more comfortable and more secure now. It was George Stokes who had taken Childs under his wing, so to speak. Maybe his confidence in him was more than a little shaken now.

Then, on top of that, the fingerprint man came in. He looked steadily at the police captain through his horn-rimmed glasses. "The fingerprints on the murder gun are those of Ralph Childs!" he declared.

Ed Tobin turned away. He couldn't stand to look at Ralph Childs's face when that awful blow fell. He knew all along that it would be considered an inside job. A big safe like that one in the paymaster's office wasn't opened by trial and error. You either knew its combination or didn't. That made it a toss-up between Tobin and Childs, the only two employees who did know its combination. And Childs, the poor sap, got it in the neck when the little matter of fingerprints was gone into!

"But they can't be my fingerprints," Childs sobbed. "I wasn't here. I couldn't have—"

The fingerprint man just wagged his head helplessly. "Fingerprints don't lie," he said. "There's a perfect tie-up between the right-hand prints we found on the gun, and your own right-hand prints on file down at the surety company. Take a look at these."

Out of his briefcase he had taken some print pictures. Childs was pale,

feverish. But then, suddenly, grim excitement swept him.

"Those prints," he cried. "They aren't mine! My fingerprints have changed since those surety-company prints were taken!"

Tobin started. What was this poor sap saying? Fingerprints never changed. What—?

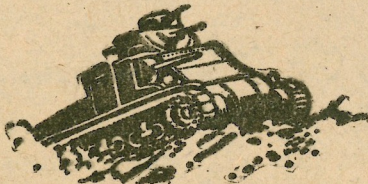
"The coroner says that the murder was committed no earlier than ten o'clock, doesn't he?" Childs went on excitedly. "Well, if the murder had been committed at nine o'clock those would have been my fingerprints. After nine o'clock my prints were different! You see, I worked late, and when I washed up to go home, I cut one of my fingers on a razor blade. I can't figure how a blade got in the soap box, but it was there. Had to have my finger stitched. That cut and stitch naturally altered my prints. The prints on the gun don't show that stitch, which shows—"

Childs was holding up a bandaged finger, was ripping the bandage from it.

"Which shows it must be some kind of transfer work," put in the expert.

Ed Tobin's head was reeling. He came out of the daze he was in long enough to feel a gun poking in his ribs and steel cuffs closing on his wrists.

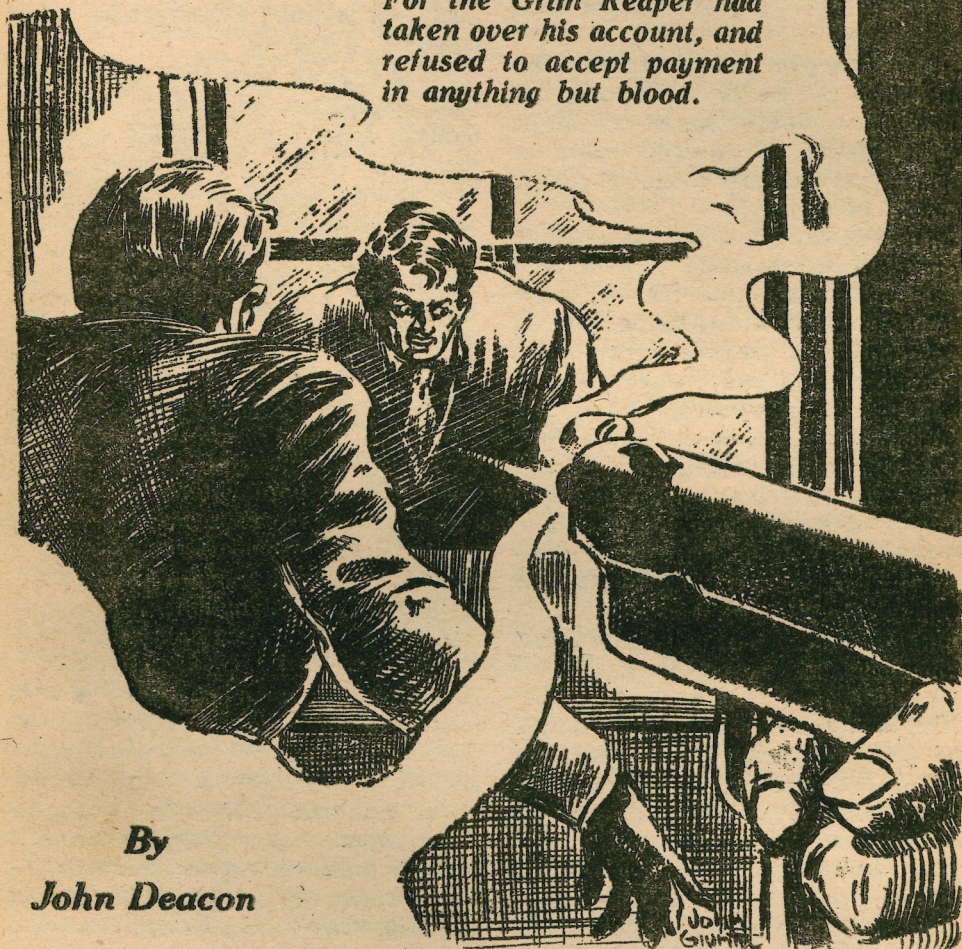
"If you want to live," the fingerprint expert was saying, "you might explain your method to me. I'm writing a book, and that's your one bid for immortality. Cop killers don't live long."



**KEEP'EM ROLLING!
BUY BONDS!**

I. O. U. Death

Bill Deems owed a debt that had to be paid on the line—and not with money. For the Grim Reaper had taken over his account, and refused to accept payment in anything but blood.



By
John Deacon

BILL DEEMS was on the spot. His normally cleancut countenance was shadowy with beard. His blue eyes were like steel as he watched big Abe Samter fingering a pile of I. O. U.'s. Every slip bore the name of Bill Deems.

"One grand, forty-five bucks," said Big Abe, drawing a pencil line through the total. "Call it square for an even grand."

He sank back into the deep tapestry

chair behind his desk. Deems could feel the scrutiny of the gambler's beady eyes.

Deems spread his hands helplessly. "No got."

Big Abe dipped ashes from a mammoth cigar. He settled a fat head into the creases of an accordion pleated chin and speculated. But Deems didn't expect a break. He had no illusions. Abe was a gambler, not a humanitarian.

"Then go and get it," Abe said decisively. "I don't encourage welching."

"I've tried everywhere," said Deems testily. "You'll just have to wait."

Abe was tense. "You lost fair and square at Honest John's table. Nobody in town deals a squarer blackjack card than Honest John. It happens that Honest John works for Abe and Abe wants his dough."

With that Big Abe elevated a frame well over two hundred pounds to a standing position and signaled that the interview was at an end.

Deems arose. "And," he queried, "if I can't get the dough?"

Big Abe looked with interest at the cigar. He shrugged. "Who knows," he said, putting the pile of I. O. U.'s in the desk. He locked the drawer from a key on a ring attached to his vest. With the job completed he looked at Deems knowingly. "Maybe the *Morning Sun* will be looking for a new sports columnist to replace Bill Deems."

Deems got it wrong. "So you think I'll take a powder."

Big Abe almost snickered. "You're too dumb and sentimental for that," he said derisively. "You can't keep away from the lights. I got you figured right. No, you won't lam."

"What's to stop me?" Deems jabbed, not liking the sucker picture Big Abe was drawing.

Big Abe just ignored it. "You'll do just one of two things," he said. "You'll either pay, or you'll go for a one way swim."

"A novel twist."

"It's civilized," said Big Abe, dusting off the cigar and coming to the front of the desk where he faced Deems. "And so much cleaner."

"Supposing I don't scare easily," Deems came back. "Maybe I'll get the paper on your tail."

Big Abe lost his humor. "Shake up a new one, kid," he said angrily. "You're not bargaining with me. You have your choice. Now get out!"

Deems grabbed the knob of the

office door, turned back to Big Abe as he swung the door open. He was about to make another threat of exposure but this froze on his lips. Big Abe's face was wreathed in petrified fright. Then Deems began to shiver as a cool voice began speaking at his back. The voice belonged to someone standing in the door opening.

"Keep your place, buddy," the voice said.

Big Abe struggled for control. "Put it away," he said, trying to master the throbbing in his voice. He hadn't taken the cigar from his mouth. Deems saw it wobbling as Big Abe tried to swallow.

"I'll put it away," agreed the voice. "Right where it belongs."

The sound of a sharp ping echoed in the room. This was followed by a metallic clatter. Deems saw the automatic at his feet. The sound of steps in the marble hall grew faint and faded.

DEEMS was alone with Big Abe. And Big Abe looked like he was sick. One hand was trying to brace his huge frame on the desk. The other pressed itself against the protruding stomach. The cigar hung at a crazy angle from puffy lips. As Big Abe's eyes began going upward toward the ceiling his great hulk toppled sideways and piled itself on the floor.

Something like a clock was ticking in Deems' mind. It telegraphed: Think fast, think fast! Deems closed the door. Quickly he unfastened the key ring from Big Abe's vest. He opened the desk drawer, scooped out the pile of I. O. U.'s. He eased his conscience for he wasn't welching, these could easily fasten the murder rap on him. He replaced the key ring, wiping prints off with his handkerchief. Then he retreated toward the door, taking in the room.

He opened the door, holding the knob with his handkerchief, closed it the same way on the outside.

Then a voice burned at his back.

"Where can I find Mr. Abraham

Samter?" it said, startling Deems.

Deems whirled to confront a small milk-toast type of man, carrying a leather brief-case. He wore horn-rimmed glasses, and stared owlishly at Deems' discomfort. The man stepped back momentarily but Deems was rooted to the spot. The gold lettering spelling the name of Abraham Samter was at his back.

He stalled for time. "Mr. Samter is busy at the moment. May I help you?"

The little man looked gratified. "My name is Jonathan Wilks," he offered. "I have a letter here from Mr. Samter." He struggled nervously to extricate it from the envelope and then passed it toward Deems. Before releasing it from his grasp, he inquired, "Are you connected with him?"

"I'm a business associate," lied Deems.

Deems took the letter, went over it quickly. It was sucker bait, promising rich dividends on investments. Something always happened to Big Abe's investments and the investors were always hand-picked. Like Jonathan Wilks, nature's meeklings.

Deems decided to give the guy a break. "Mr. Samter spoke to me about you," he said. "The investment he intended for you hasn't turned out just right. He'll probably get in touch with you when the time is ripe."

Wilks was disappointed. "But," he insisted, "what about the ad in the paper"

"Just forget it pal," said Deems. "Save your dough for another time. You don't want to lose it?"

"No," Wilks gasped, "I certainly don't."

"Well, just make believe I did you a favor."

Wilks thanked him profusely. "But maybe I should see Mr. Samter," he insisted, "just to let him know."

Every minute the sap was there Deems realized was just added time for him to better remember Mr. Samter's "business associate."

"Just run along and forget it," Deems said impatiently.

Wilks seemed resigned. "If you think it's best?" he said sadly.

"I certainly do."

Wilks moved away. Deems watched as he rang for an elevator, fearing the recognition that might leap from those owlish eyes when the news of Big Abe's murder hit the newspaper headlines.

After Wilks entered the elevator Deems became acutely conscious of his precarious position. He had to act quickly. He had to unearth the murder before Wilks came scampering to the D.A.'s office. At the outside this would be a scant forty-eight hours.

WHEN Deems got back to the office he tapped out his daily column "Behind The Plate," got it into the hands of a copy boy and continued to speculate on the possibility of unearthing a clue. This deadline, he concluded, was going to be tough.

He tried cataloguing the voice he had heard but it failed to fit any he knew. But it could easily have been masked, especially if the murderer were aware he was known by Deems. Everything led into a blind alley. No suspect was in the alley except Deems, waiting for the spotlight of publicity to make known his presence.

In the midst of meditating the operator called over to him. "Telephone for you. Want it?"

"All depends," said Deems. To someone for free admission tickets this was his day off.

But the girl sang back, "Pop Martin."

Deems gulped. Pop Martin was in reality Inspector Martin of the homicide squad. A call from him wasn't unusual for Pop Martin had got Deems this job, he'd been his father's close friend. It made this situation all the more difficult.

His heart racing, he signaled to connect the call.

Martin's voice came over the wire, loud and cheerful. "Hello, kid. Thought I'd let you in on something that might give you a scoop. It's got a

sport angle. Right up your alley."

"Yeah." Deems' voice was quivering.

"Abe Samter just knocked himself off."

Deems was silent.

Martin's voice jabbed into the earphone. "Hello, hello, you there?"

"Yes," said Deems dazedly.

"Want in?" asked Martin. "We're over at his office now. Looks like he got a twinge of conscience. Don't ask me how. I know it sounds screwy. Maybe that sucker investment scheme finally broke down his thinker. Coming over?"

"Right away," said Deems. He slung the receiver into its cradle and tried to figure this new angle. But after a minute he gave it up and left to pay his second visit to Big Abe's office.

Pop Martin, puffing on an ancient stogie, was in the death office supervising the work of the coroner and a police photographer. When Deems entered, Martin nodded toward the picture taker. "The rise and fall of Big Abe in one act," he jested.

Deems executed a grimace he was far from feeling. For considerable renovation had taken place in the office within the last couple hours. Big Abe was sitting in the tapestry chair back to his desk. The same Maxim-silenced automatic that Deems earlier had seen near his own feet was now clutched in Abe's right hand pointing at a dark red smear somewhat larger than a silver dollar in Abe's middle. The police photographer, angling for more pictures, had his word of wisdom. "The bigger they come, the harder they fall. Knocked himself off. Just like a stew bum."

Martin was examining the contents of Big Abe's desk and Deems instinctively felt for the packet of I.O.U.'s in his pocket. They burned at the feel of his hand. They should have been destroyed.

"I never gave Big Abe credit for having a conscience," said Martin as he went through sheafs of papers. "That's the only thing that stops this

case from being open and shut. The more I hang around here the more I feel that a red herring is being pulled right across my nose."

There was someone pulling a red herring all right. Deems knew that but he couldn't grasp the reason. It didn't shape up. Why should the murderer come back and frame a suicide? He already had a perfect setup with a perfect fall guy to take the rap.

A patrolman walked in with a Western Union messenger. "Here's the kid that found him," he said.

Martin looked up, not unkindly, at the nervous boy.

"What do you know? Tell us what happened."

The messenger fumbled around with his hat, took a scared look at Big Abe and stuttered, "I—I had a telegram for—" he motioned toward Big Abe—"for him. I make lots of stops here—but—I just always walk in—well, I just walked in and—"

"And what?" prompted Martin.

The kid got practical. "And then I ran like hell."

"Let's see the telegram," said Martin.

The patrolman took the crumpled message from the boy's hand and brought it to the inspector.

"Okay," said Martin, nodding toward the boy, "take him away and release him after you get his name and address."

After reading the message he exclaimed. "Another sucker who couldn't waste time with the mails to get taken over."

Martin bent again to the task of assorting the miscellany of papers in Big Abe's desk. Finally he picked up a newspaper clipping, read it hastily. He whistled, passed it over to Deems.

"Take a look. Maybe there is no red herring."

Deems read from a suburban paper several days old:

MARTIN TAYLOR SUICIDE

Martin Taylor, well-known local merchant was found dead this morning from bullet

wounds which, according to the police, were self-inflicted.

It was known that Taylor was worried about several investments which had turned out badly . . .

Deems looked toward Martin, seeking explanation. Martin handed him a long typewritten list.

"The latest sucker list," he said, "and, lo, Taylor's name leads all the rest."

SO Martin was willing to fall for the suicide fraud. It was a perfect out for Deems but he resented that the murderer should get off so scot-free. When he read down toward the bottom of the list he got another reason for wanting to change the aspect of this case. For the last and most recent sucker on the list was named Jonathan Wilks.

It would be extremely odd if Mr. Wilks did not make a personal appearance to give the authorities any information within his grasp. For to Jonathan Wilks, Big Abe was still the financial wizard who almost led him to riches.

"The setup begins to look more normal," said Martin. "Big Abe clipped this news-item. Maybe he got in his cups. He brooded over it. Then he knocked himself off. I know it still isn't logical," he admitted, sensing a difference of opinion in Deems' glance, "but I'm no magician and that's all I can make of it."

"I don't like the setup," said Deems. He realized he was loud-mouthing himself into trouble but the words just came out.

Martin was quick to agree. "Neither do I. But if I dragged a hundred petty touts and gamblers into tomorrow's line-up, they'd coil spring right out. I'd have the town laughing.

"Anyway," Martin went on, "I'm going to arbitrate with my conscience!" He took the list Deems was holding. "I'm going to drag in every sucker on this list and give him the

once over. At least I'll feel better satisfied."

Here it was, thought Deems. Now he had no choice. He had to work and work fast before Martin interviewed Wilks. For there wouldn't be any trouble finding a man to fit Wilks' description of the gambler's "business associate."

When he was finally able to leave, it was with the idea that now he had to gamble—but he had to win. In the city street, noisy with people, cars and loud talk, Bill Deems was in a personal vacuum. He couldn't belong to all this again until he got rid of the sword swinging over his head. The more he thought, the more he was conscious that he had only one slender thread to follow. Honest John!

It was hardly eight in the evening when he arrived at the Cafe Royal, the swank eating, dancing and gambling emporium that Big Abe had set up. It didn't make dough but it was Big Abe's show place where he could sit in judgment on those who got off to a better start in life than himself.

The early spenders were playing bridge. The real gambling came later. Honest John was ensconced in a comfortable chair behind the vacant black-jack table reading a magazine. He kept the magazine to his face as Deems sat in a nearby chair.

"I'd like to try my luck," said Deems.

Honest John slid the magazine past his bronzed and puffed face and looked vacantly from under heavy brows.

"Got what it takes?"

"Some."

Honest John pushed away the magazine, selected a new deck of cards, pushed them toward the columnist who began shuffling. Deems pushed them back and Honest John began dealing. Deems was noticing the powerful bronzed hands, the strong physical structure of the dealer. He was easily capable of lifting Big Abe from the office floor and hefting him into a chair. Honest John was really a trusted lieutenant. But he was ambi-

tious. Deems knew that. But why the suicide set-up?

"Too bad about Abe," Deems said suddenly, his eyes full on the dealer's face.

"Yeah," said Honest John. "Got soft, I guess."

Deems won the first deal. He shuffled and Honest John dealt again.

"Break you up any?" said Deems.

"When you win the first hand," said Honest John, "it ain't such good luck."

"I mean about Big Abe," persisted Deems.

The dealer raised his brows. "Abe was a nice guy."

"He wasn't the kind of a guy to bump himself off," said Deems. "It don't add up. And figures don't lie."

Honest John brought his eyes from the pasteboards he was flipping across the table. "You're right, buddy. Especially when they're I.O.U. slips and they add up to over a grand."

Deems was quick on the trigger. "Lots of guys owed Abe money. That doesn't have any connection."

"From what I hear," said Honest John, with great sincerity, "the police ain't never found those I.O.U.'s. Now where do you suppose Abe would hide them?"

"So what?" said the columnist, for lack of something better. He signaled for another card, went over the limit, and lost.

"So nothing," said Honest John. "Nothing out of my pocket. I can forget anything except when aggravated. And I could get plenty aggravated if anybody started the word around that maybe Abe didn't knock himself off. I'd feel bad, him and me being close as we were."

Deems stopped Honest John as he was about to deal.

"I got enough," he said.

"You got sense now," was the reply "You oughta spend more time on your column."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," said Deems rising.

"It's your head," sighed the gambler.

WANT TO BE THE KIND OF A WOMAN MEN FLOCK AROUND?



Would you like to have that "something" that draws men like a flower does bees? Any woman or girl of ordinary intelligence, beautiful or plain, can learn to be attractive to men. It's the way she dresses—and the cute way she smiles. The eager and interesting way she talks—and the poised and graceful way she walks. It's her enthusiastic manner and gay personality—and it's always so easy and pleasant to be with her. Every little thing counts—and it all adds up to cast that spell, that "something"—called CHARM!

YOU can develop that magic charm! YOU can make yourself attractive, interesting and desirable. CHARM IS LIKE A BEAUTIFUL DRESS! It can be acquired and put on. Learn how in amazing, new book, **BETTER THAN BEAUTY**—"A Guide To Charm" by Helen Valentine and Alice Thompson (famous beauty, fashion and personality authorities). This complete book covers EVERYTHING—the beauty aids, the clothes, the grooming, the etiquette, the personal manner and the active mind—which all together give you that power called CHARM! If you have a large nose, small eyes, short neck—if you are short, tall, fat or thin, or have any other physical fault—this book tells you EXACTLY what to do. If your clothes never look well—if you don't know what to talk about—if not sure of your manners—if you are moody—if you have a rasping voice or giggling laugh—or troubled by any problem—this complete book will guide and help you to minimize or correct every difficulty or fault.

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On the outside Deems realized that it was truly his head. And that head was slightly dizzy from the events of the day. With Honest John he had drawn a straight bust. He was confident that the card expert's finger was in the pie somewhere. To prove that was something else again. He couldn't prove it in the cooler. So the first object was to stall for time.

He grabbed a parked cab, flung himself inside giving his destination as Westchester. As the car slid along into the dim-out, Deems realized that his present trail was a poor substitute for a real clue. But he had to be doing something.

IT was minutes later that he got the sensation of something being wrong. His sense of direction was good and he was certain they were not heading for Westchester. He took a quick glance outside. They were definitely heading in the opposite direction.

Deems put his hand on the door knob. As the cab slowed down to make a right turn he pushed himself from the car and rolled into the street. He got to his feet and raced to the shadow of a fringing building just as a dark sedan followed the cab around the turn. A hail of slugs spattered against a nearby wall, peeling off brick and plaster. It was a case of bad marksmanship. For men who worked for Honest John it would be inexcusable.

Deems wasted no time, he wasn't playing host to a return engagement. At least he now had a definite place to go. He grabbed another cab on the main arterial, gave the same destination and settled back.

He paid off the driver on a darkened suburban street and started on his hunt for the address. He was forced to use a pencil flash in spotting the number plates. He suddenly put the flash in his pocket as he neared the house. Simple caution made him careful. After all, Honest John had other lieutenants. Where there was shrubbery so also there could be death.

He eased close to the house, looked into the living room. At first glance it seemed empty, then he saw a woman's legs. They were in a strange position as if their owner was lying on the floor. Some premonition made Deems decide to be extremely cautious. Staying in the shadow of the building he got to the front door, tried the knob. It opened easily. He stepped gingerly from the darkened porch into the living room. Then he reeled back.

The woman was definitely lying on the floor, and she was just as definitely dead. The Maxim-silenced automatic was pointed at a dark red smear in her abdomen. The picture was too much like the death scene in Big Abe's office.

Deems reasoned that this was Taylor's wife. A perfect stooge for suicide because of her husband's action. But Deems realized that something was definitely out of gear. The red herring was out of the water again.

He looked around the room. It was expensively furnished with period furniture. Over a solid mahogany mantelpiece a huge metal coat-of-arms caught his eye. It was the symbol of what historians call a lion rampant flanked by two flowers. So the Taylor guy also had ancestry. But no clue there.

Deems looked down at the firm, aristocratic face of the woman. A psychologist would never call her a suicide. Well, here it was. And there was nothing for Deems to do but scam back to the city and pray that Martin wasn't taking this case too seriously. For Deems could see no out for himself. He was further from a solution than before.

The door was still ajar. He was careful to wipe handprints with his handkerchief as he had done that afternoon. He also wiped the outside handle. He almost snickered at the fate that had put him in these two beautiful spots. He was about to turn around after putting the handkerchief back in his pocket when he felt

the pressure of a revolver in his back and heard a cool voice in his ear.

"Just take it easy," it said, "and come quiet like."

The next instant a blindfold had been whisked over his eyes. He was turned about and hands led him into a car. The car, he reasoned, counting his steps, must have been parked half-way down the block. They must have been waiting for him, ready for the pounce.

"What's the angle?" he asked. He wanted to hear voices. With the blindfold over his eyes that voice could be catalogued. It might match the one he had heard during the afternoon. What he would do then even Deems couldn't figure. But he got no answer.

For the next half-hour he jounced between two men in the back seat. He could feel the bulge of an automatic in the pocket of one.

THE car finally stopped and he was led out and up a flight of rickety stairs. Deems reasoned it was a tenement. He was pushed into a room, the blindfold removed. It was a barnlike room, consisting of a table, two chairs and a dirty looking studio couch. The columnist was waved to the couch. The two men sat in the chairs. One held an automatic at an even line with Deems' middle.

"What's the angle?" said Deems for the second time, only to get the same silence.

Both men were swarthy. One had slim features while the other looked bloated and overfed. The slim one was nervous, kept crossing and uncrossing his legs. His companion was steady. He was chewing on a toothpick and he held the gun. They had one thing in common, thought Deems. Neither spoke. That's why he made no move. They meant business and they wouldn't hesitate to use the automatic.

But Deems tried again, "How long you going to keep me here?" They had no answer. "Come on," he argued. "Let me in on it. If it's for long



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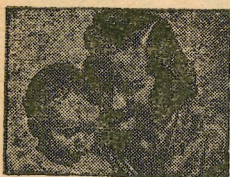
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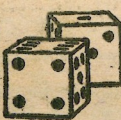
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Regardless of their lack of answer Deems couldn't stay awake. His eyes began swimming around. He leaned against the wall. He pinched his face but he couldn't shake it off. Finally he rolled over on the couch and fell asleep.

The light bulb that swung from the ceiling still flared when his eyes opened. He closed them to slits and brought the two men into range. They were playing cards. The revolver lay on the table near the hand of the heavy lug.

Deems prayed for inspiration. By now he had the idea that he was being held until all chance of exposing the phony suicides had passed and until he, himself, was well on the hot seat. He had to get out. But how? Two men and a gun were like a stone wall. To reach the door he had to hurdle that stone-wall for it was directly at their backs.

The card game was rummy. Deems waited for the deal, waited for the psychological moment when both men gave their hand a first glance. At that moment he sprang from the couch, clutched the bulb cord like a trapeze, rooted it from the socket and plunged the room in darkness. In the next second he was flattened on the floor while one of the men sent bullets whistling around the place. One of the lugs got wise and moved toward the door. Deems hunched, went into a flying tackle, sending both himself and the watcher crashing through the panels.

Two bullets streaked after him as he rolled into a ball and toppled down the rickety steps. He crawled out the door, staggered across the street and into the darkness of a hallway. From there he could see the cautious exit of his stocky captor. In the street the man kept the automatic in a coat pocket as he searched. After a careful glance up and down he headed for a corner stationery. Deems guessed he was using the phone to break the bad news to his boss. At any rate this was Deems' chance and he

took full advantage of it. He broke from the hallway and darted toward the main thoroughfare. Once here he grabbed a cab. In another half hour he was in his own apartment, doors locked. His body ached from exertion. He went to the bedroom intending to relax. There was nothing else to be done this night. His lips were taut. Tomorrow was a different story.

In the morning he cooled his heels outside Pop Martin's office until that individual made a belated appearance looking the worse for lack of sleep.

After greeting Deems, he said, "I'm getting Big Abe's suicide off my chest this a.m. And right in my lap I get another whacky case. Taylor's widow knocks herself off."

Deems tried to act surprised when he got in Taylor's office. The inspector seated himself behind a desk and pressed a buzzer. "Anyway," he said, "you're going to be in on the kill. I've rounded them all up and questioned most of them."

"You mean the list that Big Abe had in his desk," said Deems quickly.

"Yes," said Martin, "and I got nowhere."

When the sergeant appeared, he said, "Bring them in."

IN a moment five additional men cluttered the room. Deems was watching as Jonathan Wilks entered. As their eyes met Wilks started to exclaim but the sergeant motioned for silence.

"You'll get your chance to talk," he said.

Besides Wilks there was Honest John, suave and unperturbed, taking the chair indicated by the sergeant. He had a faint smile on his lips. The other three were a thin, emaciated man of fifty named Rube Adams; a pompous, corpulent person named Sam Jones. The last was a shift-eyed, rat-faced man with beady eyes. He jerked to his feet when Martin queried:

"You Jasper Gray?"

"Yes," said the man snappily, "and

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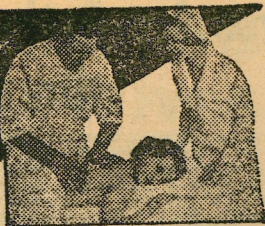
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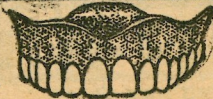
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all I know is I lost my money. And I mean to get redress. . .”

Martin waved for silence and the man resumed his seat.

“We’re investigating murder.”

“Suicide,” Honest John corrected.

Martin disregarded the statement. He pointed to Ruby Adams and that gentlemen took full advantage of the dramatic possibilities of the situation. But Martin cut him short.

“Where were you yesterday?”

“I was in my summer home in Connecticut,” the man admitted ruefully, as though this cut him off completely from the case.

Martin went to the next. “Sam Jones, explain your actions of yesterday.”

Jones went into detail. He was in the clothing business and they had bad hours. Yesterday he’d worked from nine in the morning until ten at night. He wanted to be out of the whole thing, he admitted.

“I know I was a sucker,” he said, “but I wouldn’t do anybody in.”

Martin signaled that he was finished and motioned toward Wilks. This individual had been fuming at the delay. He thrust a finger dramatically at Deems.

“I went to visit Mr. Samter yesterday and that man was in front of his office door. He wouldn’t let me in. When I read the papers this morning I got suspicious right away.”

Both Martin and Honest John pulled themselves out of their chairs. The police sergeant pushed Honest John back. Martin walked to Deems.

His face was a mask of sadness. “Bill, what’s this?” he asked.

“I’ll talk,” said Deems. Martin sank back into his chair, eyeing everyone in the room as the columnist spoke.

“I was in Samter’s office yesterday. I came there to plead for time. He had over a grand in my I.O.U.’s.”

Deems saw Martin wince as he put the noose around himself.

He explained the situation in detail and then looked at the expression on Martin’s face. It wasn’t pleasing.

Wilks was furious. "He's the murderer and he made it look like suicide to implicate other innocent people."

"Shut up," said Martin angrily. He turned to Deems. "What about the Taylor woman? Were you there last night?"

"Yes," admitted Deems. "I realized I was in a spot unless I found big Abe's murderer. First I went to see Honest John. Through a strange coincidence somebody took a couple of shots at me while I was on my way to the Taylor house. That was the only clue I could work on. When I left the house I was nailed by a couple of Honest John's gorillas. I gave them the slip. And that's the truth."

Martin didn't look like he believed it but help came from an unexpected source.

"I think I'll back him up," said Honest John, "because I know when he's bluffing and he isn't bluffing now. I had my men plant the suicide angle on Big Abe after we found his body. It was self defense. I knew I'd be on the spot with Big Abe being knocked off and I wasn't taking any chances."

"Go on," said Martin, excitedly.

"When he grabbed a cab in front of my place I had it fixed. I didn't want him to explode the angle until the boys ran down the murderer. Well, he got out of the cab. We weren't really trying to knock him off. Just throwing a scare into him. We got the address from the cabbie, figured it was a live clue and hauled up there and we find the dame knocked off. We're in a spot again so we give it the suicide touch just to keep things even. We nailed Deems outside and..."

"Kidnaped him," suggested Martin.

Honest John didn't bat an eye. "Just protective custody," he said.

Martin looked baffled. "If all this is true then we're in a worse jam than when we started.

But Wilks, Deems' nemesis, refused to be stalled off. He pointed to the columnist again. "This man did it, I tell

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you. Even if it's all true what was said. He still could have done it."

Deems' mind started clicking. Something had happened in the last minute that brought him to his feet. He reached for Wilks' hand, grasped frantically for the ring finger, brought hand and all flat on Martin's desk.

"I want you to take a good look at this," he said. "This guy has on a ring with a lion rampant and two flowers. It's a family crest. I saw it over the mantelpiece in the Taylor home last night. Ask him what he's doing with it."

Wilks turned white. He stuttered. "He's trying to make me the goat. I—I picked up this ring in a second hand store."

Martin took a look. "No, buddy, I don't see many rings like that floating around. Come clean, what's your name?"

Deems snapped, "He's Taylor's brother, let him tell you that. He knocked off Big Abe because he ruined his brother. Nobody's squawking about that. He's the guy who stood in back of me in the office yesterday. He came back to establish a perfect alibi and put me on the spot. When he got back to Westchester his sister-in-law must have become suspicious so Wilks knocked her off. That's where Honest John barged in again and pulled the suicide stunt."

"Start talking," said Martin. He was looking at Wilks. The man backed away, staring like an owl through his glasses. The police sergeant edged over. Every man in the room bent forward. As if propelled by their motions Wilks suddenly turned and threw himself toward the windows fronting the street but the police sergeant was quicker. He got him by the feet and drew the frothing and berserk man from the room.

Honest John was on his feet. He walked over to Deems. "I told you to spend more time on your column," he said.

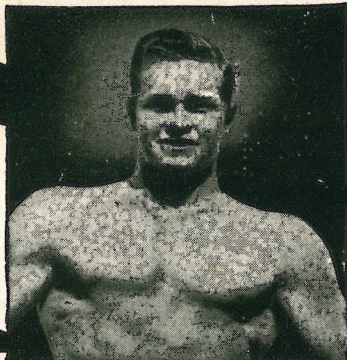
Deems agreed. "Think I will from now on."

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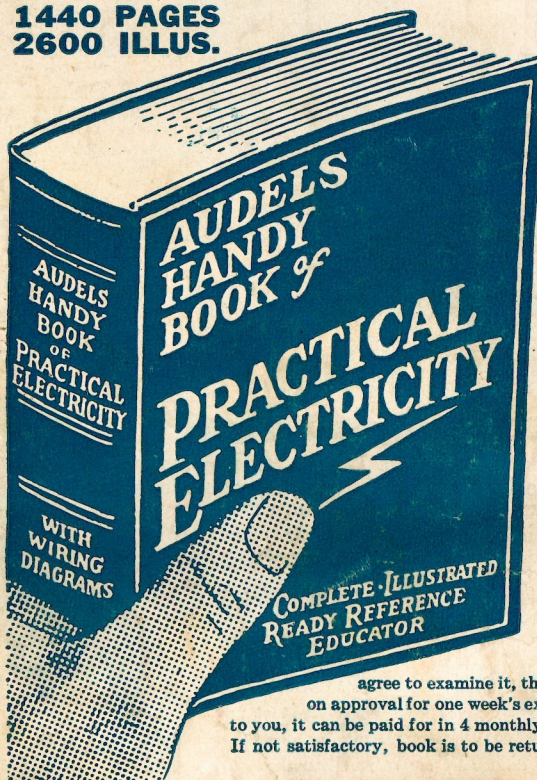
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