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BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE



IN THIS ISSUE

**MY PAL,
THE KILLER**
A Crime Novelet
By W. H.
SWANBERG

FEATURING

***Murder's*
PLAYGROUND**

A Tony Quinn Mystery Novel
By **G. WAYMAN JONES**

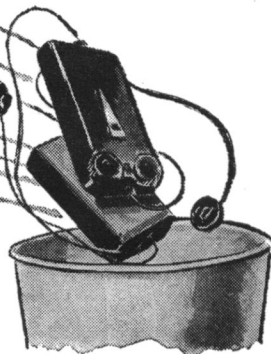


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BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE

Vol. XXVI, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

May, 1949

A COMPLETE BLACK BAT NOVEL



Murder's Playground

By G. Wayman Jones

When a city is rocked by a great wave of juvenile delinquency, Tony Quinn and his aides move in to stem the tide and ferret out the sinister genius of evil leading youth into the pathways of crime!

9

TWO COMPLETE NOVELETS

CANDIDATE FOR MURDER.....Nels Leroy Jorgensen 76

Through a maze of politics and gangsterism, Black Burton finds his way to the enemies of a gubernatorial aspirant doomed to death!

MY PAL, THE KILLER.....W. H. Swanberg 98

Rocky Stagg was young Johnny Koval's idol, but false idols have a way of betraying their most loyal admirers—when the heat is on!

SHORT STORIES

THUBWAY THAM'S RAFFLE TICKET.....Johnston McCulley 91

The little dip has his day when the law lets him collect money

LAST DEAL.....Will Oursler 113

What can a released convict do when a man like Hall awaits him?

DEATH IN THE WOODS.....George Metcalf Johnson 115

Clint Harding went on the hunting trip for big game—human game!

MORNING CHEER.....Ray Cummings 122

Dark nights and shadowy silence are Jake McGuire's stock-in-trade

AND

OFF THE RECORD.....The Editor 6

A live-wire department where readers and the editor get together

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OFF THE RECORD

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

TONY QUINN, the famous "blind" Assistant District Attorney, knew the time had come for the Black Bat to go into action. The case that confronted him was not an ordinary one. Angles to it were weird and mysterious. . . .

The murdered man had been beheaded. The weapon was a huge, strange-looking knife that apparently had come from the South Pacific region. On the blade of the knife was etched the figure of a panther.

Another peculiar fact was that the murdered man had just visited Tony Quinn and confessed that he had embezzled a million dollars. The man's name was Rex Duncan and he was one of the wealthiest of New York's wealthy. A man like that would have money enough of his own. Why would he have to steal a million dollars belonging to others?

The answer to that question was destined to send Tony Quinn on one of the most perilous manhunts in his life, a quest the dangers of which Tony's loyal helpers—Silk, Butch, and lovely Carol Baldwin—were to share with him!

The exciting adventure is told in full in the great new Black Bat novel, **THE MISSING MILLION**, by G. Wayman Jones, in the next issue of **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE**.

Trail of the Knife

Tony Quinn, putting on his Black Bat disguise, traced the mysterious "panther-knife" to an ex-G.I. named Stanley Kowal. But Kowal was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared from his home three days before.

"We're going to try and find Stanley Kowal who owned the big knife that killed Rex Duncan," the Black Bat told Butch, his powerful assistant. "Kowal's wife last heard from Stan when he phoned and said he had a job in Jersey and was heading there."

Butch and the Black Bat headed for the

spot over in New Jersey, and from there began to trace a car in which Kowal had been seen riding. The trial led to an old water-filled quarry. There all evidence of the car disappeared. But oil was on the surface of the water.

"I'll bet the car we're hunting is at the bottom of this hole," the Black Bat told Butch.

Stripping down to a pair of shorts, the Black Bat dived in the murky water. Sure enough he found what he was seeking.

The Black Bat swam ashore. A large crane was near the quarry. Taking its cable, the Bat succeeded in looping the strong wire through the car's windows and around its top. Then he gave a signal and Butch put the crane's motor in operation. Shortly the car was hauled up and set down to earth.

Victim Number Two

The Black Bat freed the cable and then peered inside the car. The body was on the floor, jammed down behind the driving wheel and the seat. The Black Bat worked it free, carried it over to a dry spot and laid it down.

This was Stanley Kowal. There was no question about that. The back of his head was caved in by a blow from some heavy instrument. Grimly the Black Bat began searching the corpse. But its pockets had been emptied!

Suddenly, the Bat heard the crane's motor whine again. He looked up and he saw that from the end of its cable now dangled a huge ball. It was one of those wrecking balls that weigh a ton or more and are swung at building walls to knock them down. And the ball was swinging directly at the Black Bat!

The Black Bat started running. But no human being could run faster than that deadly thing moved. The Bat threw himself flat just in time.

The ball swung past him. But the danger was not over. The crane brought the ball

back to a point directly above the spot where the Black Bat crouched. Then the ball began to drop. The Black Bat reached the water line in two big jumps, hurled himself into the pond and began swimming.

Trapped!

Then he realized how little good his latest move had done him. So long as a murderer swung that crane and its wrecking ball, anybody in this pit was doomed. He scrambled out of the pit then, and ran toward where he had left his clothing. He managed to get on his trousers and shoulder rig before the murderer got his tremendous engine of destruction in operation again.

This time the Black Bat tried a different tactic. He timed it carefully. When the ball began to swing out, the Bat raced straight toward it. He made a flying leap, grasped the cable and wedged one foot against the top of the steel ball. With his right hand free now, he drew a gun from his shoulder rig. Then he fired at the operator of the crane. . . .

That's the kind of exciting action that fills the pages of **THE MISSING MILLION**, the gripping new Black Bat novel you'll read in all its thrilling entirety in the next issue of **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE!** We give it our personal endorsement as the greatest Black Bat story yet!

You'll want to follow the trail with Tony Quinn, tracing his every move as lone-handed he has to battle a vicious criminal whose cunning, time and time again, brings the Black Bat perilously close to death! It's a remarkable novel!

Another stirring yarn in our next issue will be **DEEP WATERS**, a novelet by the famous detective story novelist, Edward Ronns. This fast-moving adventure takes place in a single blistering night of treachery and death. Adam Bennett wakes up on the beach of a New England fishing town after having been slugged by a mysterious someone.

Bennett staggers to his lobster boat. There he finds that his partner Dave Olney has been brutally stabbed to death. A certain valuable chart is missing, and the whole thing looks like a frame-up—with all signs pointing to Bennett as the slayer! This is a shivery, suspenseful yarn, and we don't recommend it—if your nerves are weak!

(Continued on page 129)

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JACK'S HOAX RANG THE BELL WHEN...



murder's playground

*When a city is rocked by a great wave
of juvenile delinquency, the Black
Bat moves in to stem the tide!*



"Verne," the Black Bat said,
"you can shoot me in the back,
but not so fast I can't cut you
to pieces!" (CHAP. XII)

A TONY QUINN NOVEL BY

CHAPTER I

Cop Kill

IN THE quiet of the evening, Patrolman Thatcher contentedly walked his beat along the sedate avenue lined with smart apartments.

It was the hour between dinner and the

G. Wayman Jones

theatre breaks, when traffic was comparatively light and there were few pedestrians on the street. Which, to the strolling patrolman, was all to the good.

He could not have told just why his

Tony Quinn and His Aides Ferret Out the Evil

attention suddenly was attracted to the fourth floor apartment across the street, but it was, when lights winked on in the windows. But he gave the windows only a brief glance and looked away, for lights being turned on and off in these places was as common as breathing. He was vaguely conscious of a shadow as someone passed the window, and again Patrolman Thatcher looked up.

At once he became wary and alert, because he was fully aware of the large number of robberies which had been taking place these past six or seven months, especially in the better residential sections. So when he saw, starkly outlined against the window, a boy in a faded sweater, he came to an abrupt stop.

The boy—for although Thatcher couldn't see his face, the officer was sure he was seeing a boy, for the sweater was a boy's and so was the slim figure—held some sort of a sack that bulged a bit. And even as Thatcher was watching he saw the boy shove a piece of bric-a-brac into the sack. The patrolman didn't need any more evidence to indicate there were burglars at work to send him into swift action.

He leaped across the street and barged hurriedly into the building. Quickly he located the superintendent's apartment in the basement and knocked hard on the door. The super who opened the door was bent, grizzled and coal-streaked, as if he had just finished banking the furnaces for the night.

"Who lives in the fourth floor apartment, front, northwest corner of the building?" Thatcher demanded.

The super removed an old pipe from between his teeth.

"Mr. and Mrs. Motan live there," he said amiably. "Why?"

"Are they home? Do you know?"

"Nope, they ain't home," said the super. "Left for the Coast a week ago." He saw the policeman's grim jaw. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Plenty!" growled Thatcher. "That apartment is being robbed. Now listen carefully to these instructions, for I won't have time to repeat 'em. Hurry to the

corner of Eighty-fifth. You'll find another patrolman there. He calls in at about this time. Tell him to get here fast—not wait to telephone. But before you leave here, ring the nearest precinct and have 'em send radio cars. Got that?"

ALTHOUGH the super nodded, for a moment or so he did not seem to get it. But when the significance of the patrolman's words did sink into his somewhat thick skull, he became highly excited. He forgot to phone for radio cars and went rushing down the street for the other patrolman at the call box on the Eighty-fifth Street corner.

Thatcher, however, knew nothing of this, for he had already dashed away, heading for the elevator. He had had to trust the super because there wasn't time to make a call himself. He went up in the self-service elevator to the fourth floor, leaped out, took a tight grip on his night stick and drew his service pistol. He swiftly estimated where that Motan apartment would be, and as he moved softly toward it he passed by a fire stairway.

The door to the stairway was not quite closed tight. Behind it a skinny boy was smoking a cigarette and humming softly. When he saw the blue uniform pass by, he muttered something angrily, tossed the cigarette down the fire steps, pushed the door wide and started running toward the patrolman.

Thatcher heard him coming and quickly swung around. His night stick came up and was held there, ready. The boy who was charging him like some young desperado couldn't have been more than sixteen, not judging by his build. But his face was adult, his scowl ominous. The face was what decided it. Thatcher swung the club, just before the boy flung himself forward.

Thatcher missed, and the boy opened his mouth and screamed a warning. Then instantly he wrapped two thin arms around the policeman and kept on yelling. The apartment door opened. A hard-faced youth looked out, motioned backward with his hand, and three more boys emerged. All four of them raced toward

Genius Leading Youth Into the Path of Crime!

the cop and his struggling prisoner.

For the boy who had attacked Thatcher was a prisoner now. The officer had him gripped by the collar and was forcing him toward the wall. Thatcher's back was toward the apartment door, but he heard the others. He let go of the boy he held and started to raise his service pistol. This was no time to try and figure out how old these boys were. It was a matter of life or death now, for the

This copper may have sent for help. Let's go!"

All five of the youths crowded into the elevator and they rode to the lobby. The leader raced across it, through the door, and his swift feet pounded on the sidewalk. Around the next corner he jumped into a shiny new sedan, started the motor, and swung the wheel. When he had the car headed toward the curb, he saw the building super and a patrolman running



THE BLACK BAT

youths all had guns and the one in the lead was already squeezing trigger.

Before Thatcher could act, the gun went off—twice. Thatcher doubled up. He tried desperately to bring his weapon to bear, but it was no use. He fell into a heap.

The young man with the still smoking gun looked him over and gave some rapid orders.

"This is all washed up," he said. "The elevator he came up in is still on this floor. We'll go down. You guys stay in the lobby until I bring the car out front. When I blow the horn, travel fast!

toward the building. He blew the horn savagely.

The patrolman had seen him, though, and had his gun out. He raised it and fired. The boy at the wheel hastily braked, went into reverse and started backing. If he could make the corner, he could kiss the cop good-by. But there were still his pals in the lobby, and he couldn't leave them.

But no—they were coming out now. One at a time and moving fast. Each of them took in the situation at a glance and headed toward the car which was still backing slowly.

The patrolman was too far away to identify any of them in the dim light from the street lamp. All he knew was that another officer had entered the building to surprise some thieves, and that that officer was nowhere in sight. Which meant he had either been killed or had been too badly injured to take up the pursuit. And he had not missed seeing the guns these fleeing men held.

The cop came to a stop. There was no use trying to overtake these men. Only a bullet could do that.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" he called out.

From the window of the car for which they were headed came a single shot. It went far wide of its mark, but that shot made up the officer's mind. He took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. One of the running figures threw up both arms, half turned, slowed, and staggered to the building wall. Then he slowly started sinking toward the sidewalk. His fingers dug at the wall bricks, trying to hold himself up. He yelled at the others but they paid no attention.

TRAFFIC lights meant nothing to the driver of that car. He shot past one, reached the next block before that light turned green, didn't see the cab that was coming out of the side street until too late. The driver of the new sedan gave the wheel a hard yank, intending to lurch



Handcuffed to a light pole, was Chet Conklin, mouthing curses (CHAP. XXI)

They kept on going. They piled into the car, which promptly backed into the side street, stopped for a second, and then shot out onto the avenue again, heading in the opposite direction.

out of the way of the cab, straighten up and then race on. But the car itself had other ideas. He had pulled the wheel too

hard, and he was traveling too fast. He did miss the taxi, but there was a crash as the sedan ran onto the sidewalk and hit a light pole head-on.

The boy hesitated, on the point of flight, then paused, bent over, and peered into the car. He helped another boy out. The third made it under his own steam.



The rear doors were sprung open by the impact. One boy crawled out, stood there as if dazed, for a moment, and then was brought abruptly awake by the sound of sirens. Radio cars at last were on the way, their colored flasher lights blinking.

"How about Joey?" one of them said, and called: "Joey! Are you okay?"

The boy behind the wheel didn't reply. He was hanging over what was left of the wheel and blood was coursing sluggishly down across his forehead.

"Gosh, Joey's dead—I think!" one of the boys said. "We'd better get out of here!"

They turned and fled. By the time the first radio car came to a screeching stop at the curb, they had vanished. One

of the radio patrolmen hurried over to the car, made a brief examination and called his companion.

"Some kid," he growled. "I'll bet a buck this car is stolen. The kid isn't dead—just knocked out. Put some cuffs on him before he wakes up. Some of these tough kids that think they're big shots can fight like wildcats. I'll run down to the address the dispatcher gave us, and see what's what. Too bad we didn't get the call earlier."

There were other cars in front of the apartment house when he pulled up. The patrolman on the neighboring beat whom the super had called was kneeling beside the boy he had shot. He looked up with eyes wide with horror.

"This is nothing but a kid!" he choked. "No more than thirteen or fourteen, and I killed him! He wouldn't stop. I didn't know he was just a kid. There was a bunch making a getaway, and somebody fired at me—"

A uniformed sergeant took the patrolman aside.

"Now look, Jack," he said admonishingly, "don't get all worked up like this. It isn't your fault. You had no way of knowing this was a boy. Do you understand? You can't be held to blame, and you shouldn't blame yourself."

The patrolman pushed his hat back and brushed his hand across his forehead.

"Who cares about being blamed?" he groaned. "I've got a boy the age of this one I killed. Kids like that can be plenty wild. But I killed this one. I didn't give him much of a chance."

Another officer hurried up to the sergeant, before he could argue further.

"I've phoned for an ambulance," he said soberly. "Thatcher is upstairs on the fourth floor. They plugged him twice—through the abdomen. He looks pretty bad. An apartment up there has been looted, but we found the swag in suitcases. The thieves didn't have time to take it along when they had to make their getaway."

"I'll be right up," the sergeant said grimly. He faced the still harrow-eyed policeman who was staring in horror at the crumpled figure of the boy. "Did you hear that?" the sergeant asked gruffly. "Thatcher has been shot. By this kid or one of his pals. That ought to make you

feel a little better."

The worried cop nodded slowly. "Honest, Sarge, it wouldn't be so bad if I didn't have a kid of my own. Sure, they're hellions—I know that. But so were we when we were kids."

"Uh-huh." The sergeant turned away. "Only we never lugged guns and used them. We were not cop-killers. Look, find a telephone and call Headquarters. Tell 'em I need some brass here. And have 'em step on it. This sure has all the earmarks of a fine mess."

CHAPTER II

Quinn Breaks the News



HE brass hat whom the sergeant wanted arrived after twenty minutes in the person of Captain McGrath of the Homicide Squad. McGrath stepped out of his car, a sturdy, hard-looking figure, but distinctive in his own way. He wore a dark suit and a derby hat. The clipped mustache under his nose seemed actually to bristle as he surveyed the scene. He looked all cop in his square-toed shoes. After years of pounding a beat he couldn't wear anything else. He was an efficient detective, however, whom miscreants had reasons to believe was of the cold-blooded variety. Though he had his moments when a certain softness of heart could not be disguised.

Two passengers were emerging from an expensive sedan which had pulled up behind Captain McGrath's car. The driver was a slim, dapper man with a narrow, sensitive and highly intelligent face. He ran around the car, opened the door facing the curb and helped out a blind man.

"They are just carrying away somebody in a basket, Mr. Quinn," he said. "I suppose it's that boy the patrolman shot, the one you were told about."

Tony Quinn thrust a white cane before him, leaned forward and touched it to the sidewalk, and got out of the car. "Silk" Kirby, the narrow-faced driver, who had spoken to him, was instantly at his side to assist him. Together they

walked toward the entrance to the apartment house where a policeman shoved out a thick arm to bar them. The instant he spotted the white cane, though, his manner changed. He glanced at Tony Quinn's face and his arm movement switched to become a snappy salute.

"The Captain said you are to go right up, sir," he informed.

"Thank you," Quinn murmured, and his sightless eyes stared straight forward.

His cane raised from the sidewalk and moved in a narrow arc until he had gauged the width of the door. Then he went through, on Silk's arm.

In a few moments he and Silk had reached the fourth floor, with a policeman in charge of the self-service elevator. Once, as they moved down the hall, those apparently sightless eyes of Quinn's flicked just the slightest as he passed the spot where Patrolman Thatcher had fallen. There was a dark stain on the rug to mark it. Quinn could feel his lips tightening. He didn't like killers of policemen.

Captain McGrath, derby perched at the back of his head, notebook in hand, walked toward them as they approached the looted apartment.

"I'm glad you came along, Tony," he said. "Lucky you were at Headquarters when the flash about this business came in. You'll want to know about it. It's another of those kid jobs only this one is the most serious of all. It looks like murder this time."

"Tell me about it, Mac," Quinn urged. "What happened here?"

McGrath, who had been busily collecting what facts were known, consulted his notebook.

"Patrolman Thatcher," he said, "must have seen something which led him to believe an apartment in this building was being ransacked. He found out from the super whose apartment it was, and sent him to get help. Instead of calling for radio cars that boob of a super ran out to the street for a patrolman. Thatcher came up here. I don't know exactly what happened after that—so far. But those kids must have plugged Thatcher before he had a chance to take direct action."

"How bad is Patrolman Thatcher?" inquired Quinn.

"I don't know that either," said McGrath, "but any man with two slugs in his stomach can't be any too healthy. After the shooting, the kids went down to the lobby and one of them must have sprinted out before the others to bring around their getaway car. Meanwhile the building super found Patrolman Maxwell on an Eighty-fifth Street corner—where the patrol box is—and they came back here at a dead run. Maxwell says the kids were running for it then. He couldn't see them plainly enough to tell how old they were and when the one in the car started shooting, so did Maxwell. He killed one of the kids who was running for the car."

"And the others?" Quinn's face was impassive as he asked the question.

"They piled into the car," said the Captain. "The driver backed into a side street, turned the car around and started away, but he was going so fast that in avoiding a crash with a taxi, he ran the car up on the sidewalk and hit a pole. The driver was knocked out. We've got him. The others got away."

Quinn sighed deeply. "What a price to pay!" he said sadly. "One dead boy, one under arrest. A policeman shot and perhaps dying. Mac, we've tried to squash this wave of delinquency among boys, but now we must redouble our efforts. It's got to be stopped."

McGRATH was the practical cop, and looked on the matter in a practical way.

"If more of 'em took hot lead like the kid that Maxwell shot did," he said bluntly, "the rest of 'em might think twice before they set out to be racketeers. Tony—do you know that there have been more than five hundred burglaries pulled by the young devils? Even more muggings—and only a fraction of those are ever reported? Cars are stolen by the dozen every night and abandoned after a wild ride. Kids do that—and get away with it. They're getting beyond control."

Quinn nodded. "Yes, I know. It's become a decidedly serious situation. Have you identified that dead boy?"

McGrath lifted his heavy shoulders and nodded. "Papers in his pocket say he was

George Taylor of Oak Avenue. Number Sixty-two. That's a slum area, as you of course know. I'm going to send a couple of the boys down there to break the news and see if they can get a line on the others involved in Thatcher's shooting."

"I'll take care of it," Quinn said slowly. "I want to discover, first hand, what sort of an environment this boy had. And, Mac, I'm asking the D. A. for complete charge of this affair. Juvenile delinquency is a matter I have taken deeply to heart."

McGrath thrust a cigar between his teeth and talked around it. "You won't have to ask," he declared. "The D. A. always hands you the tough and disagreeable jobs. That's why he consented to appointing you as a Special District Attorney. Sure, take over. I won't be sorry. These kids who are turning this town upside down are harder to handle than the toughest mugs who ever ran amok."

Quinn's cane tapped the floor as he turned around in the direction of the elevator.

"Silk," he said, "we'll go down to Oak Avenue at once. And Mac—that boy who was driving the getaway car—have him at my office in an hour. That is, of course, if he isn't too seriously injured."

"He's not," McGrath grumbled. "And he could have done with a little more knocking around. They got cuffs on him before he woke up, but cuffs or no cuffs he put up an awful battle. Tough as rawhide, Tony. He must have been weaned on tiger milk, that boy. . . ."

After leaving the smart residential district, Silk Kirby drove Tony Quinn straight to a less interesting section of the city—the slum section, which the Special District Attorney so greatly deplored.

Silk brought the car to a stop in front of a four-story, wooden walk-up tenement. The first floor was ornamented by a café from which raucous laughter floated out to the accompaniment of the inevitable juke-box. The smell from the drink emporium reached to the curb, and it was sour.

Adjacent to the café was a run-down poolroom, its windows obscured by green shades and fly-specked posters. There wasn't a crevice through which the mysterious interior could be seen.

It was after ten in the evening now, but the neighborhood was far from being asleep. Boys and girls of no more than seven and eight were playing stick-ball in the middle of the road. Slightly older boys had congregated around lamp posts. A lively game of penny pitching occupied about a dozen teen-agers. And here and there were small groups of two and three boys who eyed Tony Quinn's shiny sedan speculatively.

"If we find the tires left intact when we come out, I'll be surprised, sir," Silk said. "Maybe we ought to wait for the cop on the beat and have him stand guard."

"We'll go in," Quinn said calmly. "I'm interested in seeing just what will happen. Your arm, please. There are seeing eyes, too, you know."

Silk led him into the hallway between the café and the pool hall. Here the aroma of stale beer and staler tobacco smoke was fairly choking. A sharply inclined stairway faced them. The bannister was rickety enough to be dangerous. Once the stairs had been covered with linoleum, but now there were only shreds of it left, making the ascent decidedly hazardous.

A rusty mail-box on the wall of the hallway indicated that Mrs. Rose Taylor lived in 4B. Quinn and Silk mounted the stairs, with Quinn's white cane tapping accompaniment to his steps. They went down the dismal upper hallway, found a door with a brass number and letter nailed to the panels, and Silk rapped smartly.

THE door was opened almost at once and a lad of about eighteen eyed them without a trace of friendliness. His eyes were hard and knowing.

"You're in the wrong tepee," he said. "Scram."

Silk's hand pushed the door wider. "Are you a member of the Taylor family?" he asked.

"So what if I am?" the youth demanded.

"My name is Quinn," Quinn said, in a quiet voice. "I'm with the District Attorney's office, and I'd like to talk to your mother."

From somewhere deeper in the flat came a woman's half strangled scream.

"It's about Georgie! Let them in, Walter. Let them in! Something has happened to Georgie—I know it has!"

Walter Taylor stepped aside, but the malevolence in his eyes didn't abate any. Silk led Quinn into a poorly furnished room which was a combination kitchen, dining room and bedroom. An unmade cot occupied one corner beside an old-fashioned ice-box. The oil range was old, beyond any possibility of ever again being clean. The floor was bare, but spotless enough, showing signs of many hard scrubbing.

The whole place was clean despite its decrepitude, and apparently Mrs. Taylor did her best, but she couldn't cope with such problems as were hers in trying to make a home.

When she appeared she proved to be an angular woman whom Quinn judged to be no more than forty, but who looked at least fifteen years older. She wore a cheap cotton house dress and an apron. Her hair was streaked with gray and not too carefully arranged, and her shoes were run down at the heels. But in her face was that horror which comes to all mothers when they sense that something has happened to their children.

"What is it?" she asked quickly, anxiously. "Tell me — what has Georgie done? I must know! You must tell me . . . Oh! Oh, you are blind. Walter, bring the gentleman a chair. Can't you see he is blind? Walter!"

"Okay—okay, I'll bring him a chair," Walter grumbled, "but as far as I'm concerned, anybody connected with the D. A.'s office can stand up until he flops for all of me."

Quinn sat down. "Thank you," he said, his sightless eyes turned in the general direction of Walter Taylor. "Thank you very much. Mrs. Taylor, I have nothing but bad news for you. Very bad."

She bit her lip, but her shoulders went back and she waited for the blow. Walter stepped in front of Quinn.

"Spill it!" he demanded. "What are you trying to do—make a song and dance of Georgie being pinched?"

"He hasn't been arrested," Quinn said softly. "He is dead."

MRS. TAYLOR did not cry out, did not make a sound, but she turned abruptly and disappeared into the next room. The door slammed behind her. Walter Taylor, somewhat less antagonistic now, had grown white-faced.

"Who killed him?" he demanded. "Tell me who killed him and, so help me, I'll get the guy! You won't need any cops on that job!"

"You'll have to attack all of society if you maintain that attitude," Quinn told him soberly. "Your brother was shot to death by a policeman as he was running away from a robbery. I might add—"

"A cop killed him!" Walter shouted. "So that's it! A cop killed him. And he'll get a medal for that. Sure, they'll have a parade in his honor, because he knocked off a fifteen-year-old kid! They'll yap about how brave he was—"

"Shut up!" Quinn snapped. "Listen to the rest of it before you draw senseless conclusions. That policeman shot only after some of your brother's companions shot at him. He feels as badly as your mother does, over having unknowingly shot a boy. It wasn't his fault."

"Yeah," snarled Walter. "You'd defend him. He's one of your kind, but Georgie was my brother. I'll find out who that cop is! I'll get him for this! I swear I'll get him!"

"Walter," Quinn said, in a tight voice, "you are under arrest. . . Silk, if he tries to get out of here, you have my permission to use any form of restraint you require—including a blackjack."

Walter laughed hollowly. "So I'm pinched. My kid brother gets killed by a cop and I get pinched. Ain't that one grand and glorious joke! It'll make Ma feel fine. Sure—just great! What am I pinched for?"

"For your own good," Quinn said seriously. "Go bring your mother here. I have no desire to torture her—or you—but there are some important facts I'm going to find out no matter who gets hurt."

NEXT ISSUE

THE BLACK BAT in THE MISSING MILLION

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CHAPTER III

Background for Crime

ALTER TAYLOR walked over to the wall, put his back against it and sneered at Tony Quinn. Silk left Quinn's side. Walter was taller and huskier than Silk and, of course, much younger. He began to smile as Silk approached him. This was going to be easy. Then

Silk reached out. One hand grasped Walter's right wrist. With an expert twist Walter was jerked clear around, his arm brought up until a groan was forced from him by the pain.

"You heard what Mr. Quinn said, Walter," Silk said. "Fetch your mother and stop acting like a fool. Keep that mouth of yours shut, too. Every time you open it, you dig a deeper grave for yourself."

He released the youth. Walter rubbed his wrist, scowled, but went after his mother. Red-eyed, she faced Quinn a moment later as she dragged herself into the room.

"You heard the facts, Mrs. Taylor," Quinn said. "What happened isn't your fault—and probably not George's either. It's the fault of a society that forgets some people have to fight for their fun and what few luxuries they even can get. And that sort of fighting becomes tedious after a while. Boys in particular tire of it fast, and take steps to short-cut their way to more money and more pleasure. Nobody can really blame them, least of all I."

"You're a good man," Mrs. Taylor said. "I can tell a good man when I meet one. My husband was a good man. It didn't get him anything, but he was good. If he'd been alive, this would never have happened."

"Shut up, Ma," Walter snarled impatiently.

She paid no attention to him. "First," she went on stolidly, "it was Walter who got into trouble. He rolled a drunk. Him and some of his pals. They caught him and I had to go into Juvenile Court

with him. They let him off, but it didn't do any good. He's been bad ever since. George followed him, almost worshiped him. Walter could do no wrong so far as Georgie was concerned. Now Georgie is dead. He died the death of a criminal—at fifteen. I'm not proud of it, Mr. Quinn, but I'm not ashamed of what I tried to do. It just wasn't enough."

"I'm sure you did try to do your best, Mrs. Taylor," Quinn said. "Can you tell me the names of the boys who might have been with your son tonight?"

Walter sprang in front of his mother. "Don't tell him a thing, Ma!" he ordered sharply. "He's nothing but a cop, just like the one who killed Georgie. Don't tell him a thing, Ma!"

"Be quiet," Mrs. Taylor said. "Why shouldn't I tell him? I'd like to do something to help him, so that he can save those other kids from dying as Georgie just died. I'll tell you all I know, Mr. Quinn."

"Ma, if you open your yap, so help me, I'll smack you one!" Walter raged.

Silk moved over beside Walter, his steps as quick and graceful as those of a dancing master. But his eyes were harsh.

"You'll smack whom?" he asked softly.

Walter remembered the speed with which he had been subdued, recalled the surprising strength in this man who was so thin he seemed almost scrawny. Quickly Walter stepped back while his mother gave Quinn the names of all the boys her dead son had known. Silk jotted them down with one eye on Walter.

Quinn arose then, both hands clasping the crook of his white cane. His knuckles were almost as white as the cane.

"I'm taking Walter with me, Mrs. Taylor," he said. "There are certain formalities he is better prepared to handle than you. You understand, I know."

"That's a lie!" Walter burst out. "I'm being pinched. He said so when you were in the other room. They're going to throw me in some crummy cell. These guys are all the same, Ma—you ought to know it—and you had to sing. You had to tell them everything!"

"I wish I'd had more to tell—even if it was about you, Walter," she said with ineffable weariness. "Whatever these gentlemen propose to do with you I know must be right and honest. What happens

to you can't hurt me now. At least I'll know you are alive, because they want to keep you living."

Silk gripped Walter's arm tightly. "Come on, son," he said. "Be sensible about this."

Walter pulled himself free, slipped into a coat and put on his hat.

"I'll be back," he told his mother. "I know how to get sprung fast. I'll be back in an hour, and don't tell anybody else a thing. Not one thing, Ma, you hear?"

I OUTSIDE, they found the car stripped of its hub caps, something which gave Walter Taylor a great deal of twisted satisfaction. He laughed raucously as Silk started to leave his side in pursuit of four boys, then hesitated and came back to seize Walter's arm again.

"Another ten minutes and they'd have been at the seat cushions," Silk grumbled. "Only the hub caps are gone, sir. What's come over all these boys anyhow? Can't they respect anything, or anybody?"

"Never mind that," Quinn said. "Put Walter in the back seat with me, and drive us to the morgue."

"The morgue?" Walter drew back, startled. "Listen, what's the idea?"

Quinn's voice was patient enough as he told the boy, "It's necessary that your brother be identified. You wouldn't want your mother to have to do it, would you?"

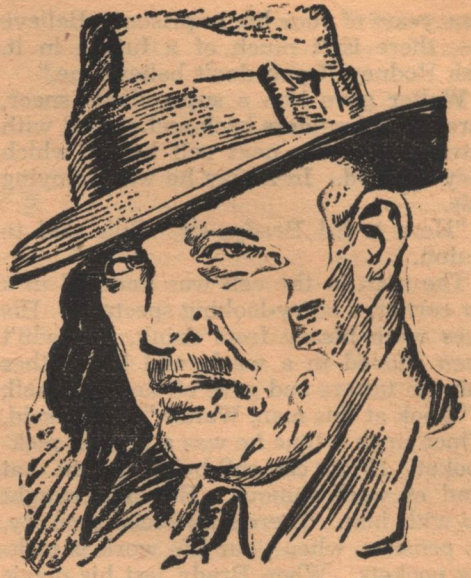
"N-no," Walter said hesitantly, thoughtfully. "No, I wouldn't want that. Okay, I'll do it, but what happens to me afterwards?"

"We're going to have a little talk, you and I, in my office," Quinn said. "If you behave yourself and cooperate, you may go home tonight. I think your mother might like that. Don't you?"

"Yes—sir," Walter replied, and looked down at the floor. . . .

In the morgue after he had viewed his young brother's body, he grew chalk-white and turned away from the slab with his eyes tightly shut. He stumbled out of the place with Quinn and Silk, and never said a word during the trip to Quinn's office. When they were almost there, Quinn suddenly changed his mind and ordered Silk to make a stop at the Raymond Street jail.

Walter looked up now, worry plain in his eyes. "You said I could go home,"



McGRATH

he objected. "Why am I being taken to jail?"

"We're simply going to pay it a brief visit, Walter," Quinn told him. "I want you to see something."

A few moments later Silk led Walter before one of the many cells in the large jailhouse and stopped.

"Mr. Quinn," Silk said, "this is the cell of Rodney Curtis."

"Oh, yes," Quinn nodded. "How are you, Rodney? The last time we met was in a courtroom five years ago. You were going straight if the judge let you off, you said. He didn't, so now you're back with us."

The man behind bars gave them a toothless smile. "Okay," he said hoarsely, "so the judge wouldn't deal and I didn't keep my word. Mr. Quinn, you're level. Give me a break this time. Please! Just a break is all I need and then I'll get a job."

"How old are you?" Quinn asked.

"Forty-nine," the prisoner said eagerly. "I can still make a living."

"How many years have you spent in prison?"

"Twenty-two. But half the time I was framed."

"Let's go on," Quinn said, without commenting on that. "Walter, how would you like spending twenty-two of forty-

nine years of your life in prison? Believe me, there isn't much of a future in it. Ask Rodney if you don't believe me."

Walter gave him a supercilious sneer, threw his shoulders back and peered with interest into the next cell before which they stopped. In a way he was enjoying this.

"Here is Ed Brady, sir," Silk said to Quinn.

The man in the cell was huddled in a far corner, a sorry-looking spectacle. His eyes were bleary from drink, he hadn't been shaved in a week, and his clothes were in tatters and gave off an evil smell.

"Look at this man, Walter," Quinn said. "Once upon a time he was a famous pick-pocket. If you can call being tops in that kind of work famous. But age caught up with him. There's no social security, no pensions when your life work is picking pockets. When Brady lost his magic touch, he became a lush. Right now he is ready for an alcohol cure at some farm. It won't help him. The moment he is free, he'll go back to drinking. It's all he knows now, the only way he can get away from himself. Are you interested, Walter?"

"Why should I be?" Walter demanded airily. "These guys are just punks."

"I see," Quinn nodded. "Silk, show us where Morison is."

THE man inside the next cell swaggered up to the bars, cleared his throat and laughed. Then he began to curse, and kept on cursing. He was a toad of a man. Short, flabby, small-eyed and dissipated.

"Meet a killer, Walter," Quinn said. "You don't consider killers as punks, do you? They're the big shots. This man is a big shot. He ran booze—most of it poison—got himself a stake, and went in to the slot machine racket. He kept climbing. Right now he has a lot of money, but success went to his head. He shot a man last week because he didn't like the color of the man's necktie. He was so important that killing some poor fellow on a whim was quite all right so long as it provided this important character with amusement. For twenty-odd years we've been waiting for him to slip, Walter. He slipped, right off the top rung, and he'll land in the electric chair.

The law doesn't forget. So here you have a big shot—so stupid that he became bloated with his criminal success and came to believe murder was his right and privilege."

"What are you trying to do?" Walter asked. "Scare me?"

"No." Quinn shook his head. "You're the type who won't scare. You're cold-blooded, gimlet-eyed. You're the kind to hold a gun steady and take your time killing a man. You sweat under police lights without talking. You're no squealer."

"You said it!" Walter said grimly. "If you think this show you're putting on is going to make me talk—"

"Nobody wants you to talk unless you feel like it," Quinn observed drily. "But I would like to show you a chap who is a perfect example of what you'd like to be. Find us Lansing, Silk."

Lansing was twenty, slim, dressed in a two-hundred-dollar suit and pointed brown shoes. The shoes didn't have any laces and his tie had been taken away from him. He was a sickly green and his fingers curled around the bars until the knuckles shone whitely as he stared out at them with haunted eyes.

"How are you feeling, Lansing?" Quinn asked in a friendly tone.

"How do you expect me to feel?" the prisoner snarled and turned away. But he came back quickly. "I didn't recognize you, Mr. Quinn. Look, you got to help me! I didn't know what I was doing when I plugged that guy. I just blacked out, is all. My father died in an asylum—you know about that. That ought to help me, Mr. Quinn. Maybe they'll give me life, huh? Maybe you can fix it for me, Mr. Quinn. I didn't mean to kill him. Honest, I didn't!"

Again without commenting, Quinn reached out a hand, encountered Walter's shoulder and followed it down until he got his hand under Walter's elbow. He piloted him away from the cell.

"Lansing isn't crazy, Walter," he explained. "Not in a legal sense, that is. He was a stickup artist. Pretty good, too. He gave the police a hard time of it before they finally caught up with him. Clever he was, or at least he thought so. But you see, Walter, Lansing shot his

last victim down in cold blood. Why? Because the man had less than two dollars on him. A tough boy, isn't he?"

"I've seen them tougher," Walter derided.

"I doubt it, Walter," Quinn said evenly. "Lansing took everything the police handed out. He cursed them, spat at them. He battled them every chance he got. Then he was locked up. Two nights ago he tried to kill himself—couldn't take it when the showdown came. That's why I asked him how he was feeling. He had a razor blade secreted in the lining of his coat and used it to slash his ankles. The moment the blood spurted, though, he screamed for help. Oh yes, he's tough—when he has a gun in his hand and those he faces have no guns. . . . We'll go to the office now, Silk, and Walter and I will have that little talk."

CHAPTER IV

Walter Cooperates



QUINN moved with the deliberate slowness of the blind to a hat-rack in a corner of his office. While young Walter Taylor watched him, and waited uneasily, he hung up his hat, tapped his way across the large room and reached out with one hand until the fingertips touched the

edge of a mirror. He called Walter to his side.

"You can recall what those four men we saw in jail looked like, Walter, can't you?" he asked. "Suppose you look at your own image in the mirror. Does it remind you of them, of any one of them?"

Walter studied a handsome, clean-cut face, topped by light brown hair with a natural wave in it. He laughed.

"What kind of a game is this?" he jeered. "Certainly I don't look like those punks."

Silk was busy at a filing cabinet from which he extracted four folders. From these he took some pictures and laid them on Quinn's desk. Quinn went over behind the desk, sat down, and his sensitive fingertips dusted the top of the desk until

he located the pictures.

"Come over here, Walter," he said. "Take a look at these pictures of those four men you saw, pictures which were taken when they were arrested the first time. They aren't bad-looking fellows. You'd never think they'd degenerate into what you saw behind those bars, would you? Be honest now—don't you agree?"

"Okay," Walter said, "so they weren't bad-looking guys." He suddenly looked at Quinn, startled. "Hey—I thought you were blind! How do you know what those pictures or these men are like?"

Quinn smiled. "I wasn't always blind," he said, a little sadly. "I used to be the elected District Attorney until some men, much like those I showed you, threw acid at some evidence I was presenting in court. I tried to prevent them from doing that, and some of the acid hit me in the face."

Walter sat down slowly, without comment, but staring at Quinn reflectively.

"The memory of a blind man for recalling what beautiful things looked like is very good," Quinn went on. "The same goes for evil, ugly things. In my mind's eye I've watched these men go down and down, and from descriptions I have gathered a good picture of what they look like at present. Now each one is broken, at the end of his rope. One will go back to prison and probably die there. Another is so far gone from drink that even hospitalization won't benefit him. The other two are headed for the electric chair at Sing-Sing. From the beginning no one doubted much, from the course they were pursuing, how they would end up. Do you want to finish life that way, too?"

Walter gave a sneering laugh. "Don't worry about me," he said, with insulting boastfulness. "I'm smart. Sure, I want good things and I'll get them—and fast. A smart guy can get them and get away with it."

Silk stepped forward. "That's the first honest thing you've said," he said tightly. "You are smart. Too smart for your own good. Mr. Quinn, I think we ought to lock this smart guy up."

"See what it will get you!" Walter defied them.

"Well, I tried," Quinn said. "I wanted you to realize, Walter, what's in store for young hoodlums. It didn't work. So I

won't ask you any questions. I won't insult that so-called intelligence of yours by trying to make you a squealer, as you would call it. You may go home."

Walter was on his feet, smiling broadly. "See what I mean?" he said exultantly. "A smart guy clams up. He keeps his nose clean and nobody can do anything to him. Cops and D. A.s ain't so clever. All they got back of them is power, but a guy like me—he's got nothing, but he can keep out of trouble if he plays his cards right."

Quinn's phone buzzed. He fumbled for the instrument, raised it and did a lot of listening. Walter shrugged and started to turn toward the door, but Quinn heard his step and signaled him to wait.

"Thanks, Mac," Quinn said into the phone. "Yes, I have the boy here. I'll tell him."

He hung up, raised his head and those apparently sightless eyes were directed about two feet to the left of where Walter Taylor was standing.

Quinn's voice was low as he said, "Your mother isn't at home, Walter. It seems that among those young fellows who watched us take you out were some who believed you might turn stool pigeon. So they paid your mother a visit. They smashed up the apartment. There isn't a stick of furniture left that's worth any more than kindling wood. They beat your mother up and told her if you talked, they'd smash you like they had smashed your home. Silk, drive Walter to St. Luke's Hospital. His mother was taken there."

WALTER bit his lip.

"That's all a lie!" he burst out angrily. "A gag to soften me up. I'm no fool! I know how cops and D. A.s work. I'm not falling for it, you hear?"

"I don't want a thing from you, Walter," Quinn said. "Making you talk would only place your mother in more jeopardy, and she's already suffered enough. Go see her—and then go back to those friends of yours and assure them you didn't talk. But see your mother first. She's worried about you."

"Why she should be," Silk offered acidly, "is more than I can figure out. But you never can tell about a woman—a mother. . . . Come on, I'll take you to the hospital."

"No—wait!" Walter sat down again. "I believe you. How bad is Mom hurt?"

"She'll be in the hospital a few days."

"What about Georgie?" Walter asked hesitantly. "What happens to him? We haven't any money. Is it Potter's Field for him?"

"No, Walter," Quinn said. "I'll arrange for him to have a decent burial. Don't worry about the money. I can well afford that."

"Thanks," Walter gulped. "Thanks a lot."

"I'm not asking for your thanks," Quinn said soberly. "I'm doing this as a measure of precaution. If you decided for yourself that Georgie should have a regular funeral, you would get the money some way and there is only one way for a young man like you to get it. At the point of a gun. Then you'll be brought here again, in handcuffs, and only make more work for me and a hundred other people. Why don't you go with Silk?"

"It hasn't been Mom's fault," Walter said earnestly, all the bravado dropping from him. "I guess I know what I've really been like now, and what I led Georgie into. If he's dead, I'm to blame for that. I showed him all the tricks. I introduced him to Joey Belding, who planned that apartment house robbery. I used to be Joey's right-hand man, but now I suddenly see what he is. I don't want any part of him or the likes of him."

"Ah, so you're beginning to wake up," Quinn said hopefully. "You've been like me—blind. Only it's material things I can't see. With you it was the truth. Go ahead—talk."

"Busting up my mother's tenement isn't any new trick for those boys. I—even helped do it to somebody else's place. Now they've hit me, and I finally can see them for what they are. For what I've been. I know who was with Georgie tonight. I'll name them all. I'll tell you about every job they've done."

Quinn leaned back in his chair. "I'm not interested in the jobs, Walter," he said seriously. "I want to know who put you boys up to it all. Boys your age can't plan, execute, and profit from the sort of crimes you have committed. Who is behind it?"

"Why—nobody." Walter looked—and sounded—astounded. "That's the truth,

"Okay, lady," said Chet, "it will be lights out for you!" (CHAP. XVI)



Mr. Quinn. There are just gangs doing all the damage. Our gang—we called ourselves the Scorpions. Every once in a while we have a battle with other gangs who try to invade our territories. The toughest guy becomes leader and stays there until somebody tougher knocks him down. But we don't split the take with any outsider."

"You're sure of that, Walter?" urged Quinn.

"Positive, sir. There just isn't anybody behind the gangs."

"A gun was used tonight," Quinn observed. "Where did it come from?"

Walter had a film of fine perspiration on his forehead. "They'll probably kill me for this," he said wryly, "but down on Front Street there's a candy store run by a man named Mike Paget. He sells or rents us guns. But he gets none of the loot. All he wants is cash on the line for his guns."

"Who plans the jobs? Like the robbery of that apartment tonight?"

"We do. People are foolish enough to want the society columns to print stories about their going away. When we read about an apartment going to be vacant we case it for a couple of days and then break in."

"I understand." Quinn was thoughtful. "The planning, the execution of the job and the spending of all the profits are accomplished by the various gangs without help from any outsider. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, sir," Walter said earnestly.

"Very well," Quinn said. "Silk, take him to the hospital and after that put him in some good hotel. Give him spending money. Walter, I want you to stay away from those companions of yours. See what you can do about finding a job and, above all, tell your mother what has happened. To you."

"Yes, sir," Walter said eagerly. "Boy, what a sap I've been! The way Mom slaved for us and how we treated her. What saps—Georgie and me. What rotten saps!"

"Silk," Quinn said, "I think I heard the outer door open a moment ago. Captain McGrath should be here with Joey Belding. See if they have arrived. Tell Captain McGrath to wait a minute before coming in, and then take Walter out the

side door. It's best he and Joey don't meet."

SILK and Walter had just disappeared when Captain McGrath entered Quinn's office, unlocked the handcuff circling his left wrist and buckled it around the wooden arm of a sturdy chair into which he pushed Joey Belding. Joey was decorated with bandages and adhesive tape covering the souvenirs of his attempted getaway.

Quinn realized at once that here was no Walter Taylor, no young man who still might be saved. Joey was already too steeped in crime and without the mental caliber of Walter. His was a warped mind, a vicious, sly little mind.

"I'll lay it on the line, Joey," Quinn said. "A gun was found in your pocket. Ballistics prove it fired the two shots that put Patrolman Thatcher in the hospital. He may die. You are nineteen years of age. Old enough so the law can send you to the electric chair. Consider that earnestly. Now do you want to make a statement?"

"Sure."

Joey half arose, but the handcuff prevented him from reaching his feet. He leaned across the desk and spat in Quinn's face. Then he laughed raucously.

Quinn's features didn't change.

"Odd, isn't it," he said, "how cornered punks like to spit. Some animals do that, too—the cowardly kind."

"Who is afraid of a blind bat like you?"

Joey snarled. "Who's afraid of anybody? Try and make me sing. Go ahead!"

McGrath moved up behind Joey. "Shall I take him apart a little, Mr. Quinn?"

Quinn shook his head. "No, Mac, we'll do that in front of a jury. How is Patrolman Thatcher?"

"Coming along," McGrath admitted. "Two of the boys gave him transfusions. The doctors say he'll be okay. They're going to operate tonight. This young punk has got himself a mouthpiece already. How, I don't know. We kept him away from telephones. But a lawyer named Rowan is getting a habeas. He claims that since Thatcher isn't going to die, we can't hold Joey here on any unavailable rap."

"They work fast," Quinn remarked. "Well, we won't protest Joey's release on

substantial bail. Under the circumstances we can't."

Joey laughed. "I guess maybe I outsmarted you guys, huh?"

"Oh, you're very clever, Joey," Quinn replied. "But you won't get out tonight. Take him back, Captain. If you run across Attorney Rowan, tell him to come here. I'll be in the office for another hour or two."

"I'll tell him. He's probably haunting Headquarters now." McGrath put the handcuff back on his own wrist. He pushed Joey toward the door. There he paused and looked around. "At that, this rat nearly hit it right, Tony, when he called you a blind bat. You know what I mean."

CHAPTER V

The Man in Black



SOON as the door closed, Tony Quinn permitted a slight smile to cross his face and those blank staring eyes of his changed radically. When he reached for his pipe, he no longer fumbled. Because Tony Quinn was not blind. His pose of blindness was simply an act, per-

mitting him to keep two identities. He was Tony Quinn, Special District Attorney, through which office he fought crime and criminals with the relentlessness of the full majesty of the law—which can groan and creak at times.

But Quinn was also another individual, a man who dressed himself all in black and covered his face with a tight fitting hood. This was a man who prowled the night as noiselessly as a wraith, and whose name brought respect and fear from the most hardened criminal, and a man to whom many of the police who admired him—but not all—were grateful.

There were few in the underworld who had not heard of the Black Bat and did not know how courageously he fought them with their own methods. Ruthless, with a disregard for the law, he made his own rules as he went along. Here was a man who could fight with fists, or

with guns or knives and outdo the best their own kind could offer.

An awed and fearful underworld recognized him as a figure who had the ability to come out of nowhere in the darkness and vanish in the same manner. The underworld had a substantial price on his head, and the police had a warrant for his arrest, because the Black Bat's methods so frequently conflicted with the laws on statute books.

Captain McGrath, for one, who deplored the Black Bat's methods of ruthlessly slashing red tape when it suited his convenience, had sworn to put the nemesis of crime behind bars, and more than once almost made good this threat. McGrath was sure that Tony Quinn was not only possessed of good eyesight, but that it was his face which was concealed by the Black Bat's hood. Though he had never been able to prove his suspicions, that was what McGrath had meant when he had said Joey Belding almost hit the mark in calling Quinn a blind bat.

It had all come about after Quinn had been actually blinded, and after world-famous optologists had given him no hope of ever seeing again. But he did recover his sight, and in a most surprising fashion. That had been when a small-town police sergeant in the mid-west who was dying as the result of a bandit's bullet, in the pursuance of his duties, arranged for Quinn to have the essential parts of his healthy eyes. These arrangements were made through the police sergeant's daughter, Carol Baldwin, and the operation, which had been performed by an obscure surgeon in the mid-western town, had been a complete success.

To show his gratitude Quinn, who had never given up his fight against crime, had rededicated himself to that life work. He now kept his returned sight a secret so that he might operate without endangering himself, and also so that he could employ whatever means he chose to track down important criminals.

He found it necessary to wear a black hood on his excursions because there were acid-edged pits around his eyes which would have stamped his identity. Being a wealthy man, and well able to purchase his own equipment, he had created a hidden laboratory in his home, where he had installed all the most

modern devices needed in exploiting clues and gathering information.

Three people, and three alone, knew of his dual identity, and helped him. One was, of course, Silk Kirby, who had once been a confidence man of exceptional ability. Once he had known a bad stretch of luck, and because of it he had for the time being turned burglar, and had come to rob Tony Quinn. It was due to Quinn's persuasiveness at that time that Silk had reformed, and had become his would-be victim's loyal friend. Silk, however, could still con his way along when necessary. Presumably, now, he worked for Tony Quinn as butler, cook, chauffeur and valet, but he was far more than a servant. He was a friend, and a valued ally.

Carol Baldwin had joined the Black Bat's ranks soon after her father's death, dedicating herself to the work of crime eradication in respect to his memory. She had quickly proved her worth, and despite her winsome beauty, demureness, and petite size she had proved that she could shoot and fight like an Amazon, and had become invaluable to the Black Bat because of her courage.

THE one other person in this small band was enormous "Butch" O'Leary. At one time Quinn had done him a favor and he was so grateful that he had given up everything else to serve Tony Quinn to whom he was fanatically loyal. Built like a combination skyscraper and Sherman tank, Butch went into battle with joyous whoops. While he couldn't think quite as fast as Silk, for instance, he made up for that by his brawn and dogged faithfulness which made him of equal value to the Black Bat as the other two aides.

The Black Bat was no ordinary crime fighter. He had many unusual assets to bring to his career as an unfailing nemesis of evil-doers. For one thing, when he had been blind Quinn had learned how to develop and use his other senses. Upon the return of his sight, he had retained an extraordinary sense of touch and smell. His ears were still those of a blind man, for he was able to hear and identify sounds which ordinary ears were unable to pick up. And something amazing had happened when his sight returned. He had discovered that he could see as well

in darkness as in broad daylight. And this was an advantage which he employed to its full capacity.

While preparing to launch himself on the world as the Black Bat he made a careful and exhaustive study of crime and criminals, and now he went into action only after he felt that he was thoroughly equipped to compete with the best brains in the underworld. Once the Black Bat appeared on the criminal scene, his work soon became known. With the help of those three aides, he accomplished things which the police, with their restrictions, could never have brought about, because he went after criminals in his own unorthodox way—and landed them.

Now, sitting in his office, with his eyes half closed, with pipe smoke curling up around his face, Tony Quinn wondered if it would become necessary for the Black Bat to step in to put an end to this amazing wave of juvenile crime.

So far the situation appeared to be unorganized. From what Walter Taylor had said it was something which simply had grown after the success of one band of juvenile delinquents had inspired other bands. The present situation which had developed, however, threatened to overshadow the depredations of more adult and professional crooks.

None of the crimes had escaped the scrutiny of Tony Quinn. While he had taken no action, he still had studied developments up to tonight, when a boy had died and a policeman had been seriously wounded. It was time to break up these bands of youthful criminals and divert them to healthier and more civilized ways of making a living and finding amusement.

Quinn cherished no idea that this was not a big job. He deemed it perhaps the biggest of his career, but so far there had seemed to be no reason to employ the talents of the Black Bat. There was no evidence that any one person behind the scenes was exploiting these gangs of boys. But if it did, the Black Bat would move in quickly.

The phone rang and it was Captain McGrath, at Police Headquarters, reporting that Attorney Rowan was there, insisting that if Tony Quinn wanted to see him, Tony Quinn could do the traveling.

"He's a wise young squirt," McGrath

observed. "Reminds me somewhat of the young punks who've been pulling all these jobs. I'll hold him here if you want to come down."

"I'll be there as soon as Silk returns to drive me," Quinn said. "And, Mac, pick up a confectionery dealer named Mike Paget. His store on Front Street is a blind. Paget makes his money by selling and renting guns to potential thieves and killers. Better take him before word of Walter Taylor's reformation gets around."

"I'll bring him in myself and if I find any guns in his place, I'll put axes to the joint," McGrath promised. "Thanks for the tip."

Half an hour later, Quinn was in Headquarters, interviewing Joey Belding's "mouthpiece."

Attorney Tom Rowan was about thirty, fairly fresh from passing his bar exams, tall, slim, and agile of tongue. He would be a formidable antagonist in any court and Tony Quinn realized that after sizing the man up.

"This boy Joey Belding may have shot a policeman," Rowan said, "but the cop is getting better and you can't hold Joey on a charge of murder or probable murder. You'll either agree to bail or I'll get him out with a writ."

"I've no objection, Mr. Rowan, provided the bail is high enough," said Quinn. "I'm going to suggest fifty thousand."

STRANGELY enough, Rowan made no protest.

"Anything you like," he said quickly. "There are professional bondsmen who will take a chance. I'm not going to let you railroad him, Quinn. After all, a cop killed a boy during the course of the same crime. Shot down a kid in cold blood. You can bet on it, if Joey used a gun, he had good reason. Patrolman Thatcher was probably going to mow the lot of them down. Cops must be made to understand that guns are to be used only in an emergency."

"How did you get into this case?" Quinn asked bluntly.

"Joey has friends. As for the fee—which you're ready to ask about—I don't care if I don't get any. The prestige from seeing that Joey gets justice will be fee enough."

"We'll argue it out in court," Quinn

said. "Find a judge and we'll arrange bail. I'll be around for you to contact me."

As Rowan walked off triumphantly, Silk Kirby made a derisive sound.

"All nerve and no brains," he commented acidly. "I'll enjoy your cutting him down to size."

"Later we can discuss that," Quinn said. "Lead me to the property clerk's office where we can run through Joey Belding's possessions."

Silk took Quinn's arm. "What are you hunting, sir?"

"I don't know. Somehow I'm not satisfied that this sudden outbreak of juvenile crime just sprouted of its own accord. I want to be certain of it."

The property clerk dumped the contents of a brown envelope on his desk.

"There's Joey's stuff, Mr. Quinn. He carries quite a roll for a kid his age. Three hundred and twenty-nine bucks there. And a fourteen-carat wrist watch."

Quinn's apparently sightless eyes studied the possessions while Silk made a list. Quinn's right hand idly rested on the edge of the desk.

Joey had a key-ring with three old keys on it, but there was a fourth key, loose and familiar-looking. It had a number stamped on it and Quinn guessed this was the key to a check-room locker. In a fraction of a second Quinn had palmed and transferred it to his pocket. A locker key might prove interesting.

There was nothing else much—a pen-knife, handkerchief, cigarettes, and an empty wallet. Apparently Joey liked to flash his bankroll.

Quinn signaled Silk and they quietly departed from Police Headquarters.

CHAPTER VI

The Clan Meets



NEXT stop for Tony Quinn was St. Luke's Hospital. He made the visit mainly to see and try to comfort Mrs. Taylor, but also to check on her son, Walter.

"If he doublecrossed us, I wouldn't be surprised," Silk opined before they drew up be-

fore the hospital. "Let a boy like that progress too far on the wrong side and he doesn't come back easily."

"Want to bet on it, Silk?" asked Tony Quinn confidently.

Silk chuckled and shook his head as he pulled up to the curb. "Not me. You're a good judge of honest people. I'm better at picking those who have larceny in their hearts. In fact, that's how I made my living for quite some time, as perhaps you may recall."

Walter had been to the hospital. Although neither Silk nor Tony Quinn had been so informed, neither of them questioned that when they stepped up to Mrs. Taylor's bedside. She had learned how to smile again. Wanly, perhaps, for in her heart was the realization that her youngest son was dead—but there was a smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Quinn," she said softly. "Thank you very much. Walter told me how kind you were to him."

"I wasn't," Quinn said briskly, as he sat down in the chair to which Silk guided him. "I happened to be rather rough about it, but, since my methods worked, we won't question them. You're feeling all right?"

"Yes. And I suppose you'd like to know what happened to me? Well, there were five boys who burst into the flat. One of them struck me—rather hard. He directed the others. He laughed at me and told them to mark me up so Walter would see what they had done and be warned against talking. But the others—well, I guess they weren't quite as tough. Just boys. Off on the wrong foot in life maybe, but still just boys."

"The one who appeared to lead them—the one who struck you," Quinn asked, "did they call him by name?"

"Yes," she said. "I think they called him Chet. He was—somehow—different."

"From his actions he must have been," Quinn said wryly. "Well, we'll be going now, Mrs. Taylor—we just stopped by for a moment. Don't worry about Walter, even if he shouldn't show up tomorrow. We're keeping him hidden."

"I know—and I'm very grateful," she sighed. "Odd, isn't it, how a few kind words can make someone feel so much better? I can even face what happened to Georgie with much more strength. Thanks to you, to this gentleman with

you, and Mr. Alvin."

"Alvin?" Quinn queried swiftly. Here was a new name injected.

"He left just before you arrived," she told Quinn. "He owns the house where I live. Someone told him what happened and he went down to see how much damage had been done. He's going to move Walter and me into a better apartment, in a better neighborhood."

"Philip J. Alvin, the real estate dealer?" Quinn asked again.

"Yes, that's the man."

Quinn arose and Silk promptly pulled the chair out of his way.

"Good night, Mrs. Taylor," Quinn said. "I'll try to look in on you tomorrow, and remember, Walter will be quite safe."

Neither Quinn nor Silk spoke as they walked slowly along the wide hospital corridor. They had reached the reception room and were passing through it when Quinn's name was called. He came to a quick stop.

A man who had been sitting on a davenport, reading a magazine, approached them. He was about fifty, had iron-gray hair, an almost too handsome face, and a firm, warm handshake.

"My name is Alvin," he said. "Philip J. Alvin. You passed me in the hall, Mr. Quinn. I was certain it was you and I thought you might be going to see Mrs. Taylor. So I took the liberty of waiting around to speak to you."

"I'm glad you did," Quinn said heartily. "This is my friend, Mr. Kirby. Why did you want to see me, Mr. Alvin?"

"Sit down, please," Alvin urged. "It's quiet and private here. No prospective fathers pacing the floor tonight. Or do they have a special room for them? I want to talk to you about conditions on Oak Avenue. I own some property there and in other places in the neighborhood. Of course, not being blind. . . Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Quinn."

THE supposed blind man smiled.

"Sorry for what?" he murmured. "You were speaking in a figurative sense anyway. Go on, Mr. Alvin."

"Well," said Alvin, "to make it brief, if conditions down there are as bad as they seem to be, I'm pulling out. I own the place where the Taylors lived, and two blocks farther north I own a twenty-

eight apartment building. Maybe tenement would be the better word."

"Tenement is the correct word," Quinn told him soberly.

"I suppose so," Alvin said ruefully. "What do you think, Mr. Quinn?"

"About selling your property? I'm not in the real estate business, Mr. Alvin. You might lose money. And if your only motive is because of conditions there which you alone cannot improve upon, disregard it. Whoever bought the places might not feel as you do."

"Yes, I suppose so," Alvin repeated wearily. "But that Taylor boy—shot to death. His mother beaten up and the flat wrecked. You should see the place! My heavens, there isn't a dime's worth of furniture left."

"I understand from Mrs. Taylor that you intend to set her up in another place," said Quinn. "That's generous and extremely kind of you, Mr. Alvin. If I can help in any way, I wish you'd let me know."

"It's little enough I've done," said the real estate man. "She lived in my house when her husband was alive. The rent was always paid on time, and they were good tenants. I don't forget, Mr. Quinn. I insist that whatever I do for Mrs. Taylor I do alone."

"You'll go broke if you treat all your tenants that way," Quinn remarked, smiling, "and won't have to pull out."

Alvin grinned wryly. "Fact is, Mr. Quinn, I'm considered something of a Scrooge. I have to be tough or I'd never get my money out of some of those people. Mrs. Taylor is different. For one of the few times in my life I actually want to help someone."

The three men walked outside a few moments later. Alvin had a large car and a uniformed chauffeur waiting. He shook hands with Quinn again, nodded to Silk, and was driven off.

Soon after that Tony Quinn was in the library of his own spacious home and on the telephone to call Carol Baldwin and Butch O'Leary. He arranged for them to come to the secret laboratory at once. When Silk arrived, after garaging the car, he made coffee—enough of it to supply all of the Black Bat's little band.

Quinn signaled Silk when he came into the library, and Silk promptly drew all the window shades in the room. Quinn thrust his cane beneath his arm, dropped the role of a blind man and walked directly to what appeared to be only shelves of books which took up one whole side of the room. He touched a hidden control and a narrow door opened into the hidden lab. Carol was waiting for him.

The lovely blonde girl went straight into Quinn's arms and he held her tightly for a moment. They were deeply in love, these two, and had been for a long time, but both realized that marriage was out of the question so long as Quinn lived two lives, one of them constantly filled with danger.

Carol's blue eyes sparkled as she looked up at Quinn.

"There's something on the fire, Tony," she insisted. "I could tell by your voice on the phone."

He led her to a leather davenport and they sat down facing the white-tiled tables and cabinets filled with chemicals and apparatus. It was a large and thoroughly complete laboratory, but with

[Turn page]

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one unique item not usually to be found in other labs. Set in the floor was a trap-door which led to a ladder down into a tunnel. This, in turn, took anyone who used it to the garden house behind Quinn's home. There, it was only a short distance to the dead-end street which ran beside Quinn's house and which was never used by anyone but himself and his band.

Carol and Butch could come and go as they pleased, but even more important Quinn could also use the tunnel as exit and entrance when he went out as the Black Bat. More than once this secret entrance had saved him when Captain McGrath had been watching the house to learn whether or not Tony Quinn had been abroad while the Black Bat fought some gang of crooks.

Quinn poured coffee out of the thermos, added cream and sugar, and handed the cup to Carol. He prepared another while he spoke.

"I'm not certain if we are in something, Carol. You recall how I've commented on the sudden and unexplained rise in juvenile crime lately. Well, tonight it really broke. A gang commanded by an ugly young punk named Joey Belding was burglarizing an apartment when a patrolman spotted them. They shot him. Fortunately, he did not die. However, in making their escape this Joey fired at another cop and this time the shots were answered. A fifteen-year-old boy was killed."

"How awful, Tony!" Carol shuddered. "Do you think someone has organized these boys?"

"I did think so until I received fairly reliable information that the gangs are organized only into small units, led by themselves, and that they have no contact with one another. In fact, the gangs are plenty jealous and always scrapping."

"I know," Carol said. "Don't you remember that two or three months ago a boy was killed in one of those gang wars?"

BEFORE they could discuss the matter any further, Butch O'Leary arrived. His massive bulk filled the trap-door entrance and when he stood up in the lab, the place seemed to shrink by comparison. He was well over six feet of muscle and brawn. His shoulders were

enormous, his head rested on a squat neck that was almost no neck at all. He had long arms with thick wrists and huge hands capable of an astonishing amount of crushing power.

But for all his size and menace he had a bland, gentle smile and his good nature could be riled only in battle. He accepted a cup of coffee, carried it in a hand that all but concealed the cup and sat down on a straight-backed chair. He covered it so completely that he seemed to be sitting on air.

Quinn briefed him quickly about what had happened.

"This Joey Belding showed no trace of fear, even though the man he shot was in danger of dying," he said then. "I reason that Joey knew help was coming. It came promptly in the form of an attorney named Rowan who talked fifty-thousand-dollar bail bonds as if that was peanuts. I shouldn't be surprised if he already has Joey out of jail."

"I filched a key from Joey's possessions. It fits a check-room locker, I'm certain, either in Grand Central or Penn Station. I want both of you to locate that locker, open it, and take out whatever is checked. If it is a package, try to make up a reasonable facsimile, as they say about box tops on the radio, and put this dummy package back. Then one of you, Carol perhaps, wait and see if that package is called for."

"Suppose," Butch asked hopefully, "a guy comes while we're opening it. Do I get to bust him one?"

"Use your own judgment," Quinn smiled. "Joey could stand a busting. The main thing is to reach that locker before Joey or some pal does. I want to see what he kept so handy."

NEXT ISSUE

DEEP WATERS

An Exciting Complete Mystery
Novelet of a Baffling
Murder Frame

By **EDWARD RONNS**

PACKED WITH SUSPENSE

CHAPTER VII

Getaway Money

CAROL and Butch went off into the early morning hours, and Quinn returned to his library. Again he was the blind man, heavily dependent upon his cane. He sat down in a worn and comfortable chair before the cold fireplace, filled a pipe, and smoked it slowly while

he relaxed and considered the odd developments in this case which was becoming more intriguing the more he considered it.

Half an hour later the phone rang. Silk answered it, carried the instrument over to where Quinn sat and plugged it into a wall extension.

"Captain McGrath, sir," he murmured, "and he sounds excited—angry, I should say, also."

Quinn spoke into the phone. "Hello, Mac. What's up?"

"I am, for one thing," McGrath grunted. "People think a cop never has to sleep. And confidentially I'm telling you that this is one night I don't want to. . . Well, here's the dope. Joey Belding got out on bail about two hours ago. His wise-guy lawyer found a judge who likes to get his name in the papers. An Assistant D. A. was sent over and he asked for fifty grand in bail as you instructed. The judge cut him to twenty, and it was furnished without a word of—"

"I fully expected that," Quinn interrupted to say.

"You've only heard half of it," growled McGrath. "Patrolman Thatcher died half an hour ago. It was unexpected, but that doesn't change the death from being listed as murder."

"Pick up Joey at once," Quinn ordered.

"Don't you think I tried?" barked the Homicide Captain. "He went to the rooming house where he lived as soon as he got out and bragged all over the neighborhood what a tough monkey he was. Then he just vanished. Last anybody saw he came out of his room like he'd been shot out and no rooming house bed-

sheets ever got as white as his face was, somebody who saw him said. From there on the ground might as well have swallowed him up."

"So it's more serious than ever, Mac," Quinn said soberly. "We'll have to go after the matter hammer and tongs now."

But to himself he was saying that here was a clarion call to the Black Bat. That mystery man was in it now—but good. . .

As soon as Carol and Butch got away from Tony Quinn's house, they flipped a coin to see which railroad terminal they should go to first, and Grand Central won. The coin must have known things, for when they located the locker which matched the number on the key, it opened easily.

Butch removed a suit box, a small grip, and a box of some sort, wrapped in ordinary paper. They carried their loot to a deserted corner of the waiting room and Butch opened the packages.

"A new suit," he told Carol, grinning. "Pretty nice too. I go for these dull red stripes on a blue background. Let's see what's in the bag."

It was locked. Butch removed a knife from his pocket, slit the leather side of the bag and opened a gaping hole. He peered inside, thrust in a hand and took a gun out.

"Loaded for bear," he grunted. "The rest of the stuff in the bag is nothing but clothing. Shirts, underwear, socks and stuff. The lad was going traveling."

Carol's alert mind was already fashioning a plan.

"Open the package, Butch," she said. "Maybe we'll find a million dollars."

Butch broke the cord, removed the wrapper and revealed an ordinary cigar box. Opening this, he whistled sharply. The box was filled with currency of large denomination.

"There ain't a million here, Carol," he said, "but I'll bet there's ten or fifteen grand. In twenties and fifties. The kid was certainly going places."

"Butch," Carol said, "give me the suit box. Empty the cigar box and give me that too. I don't live far away from here. I'm going to rig these two boxes as a trap. If anyone comes to the locker, they'll expect to find something, and we can't disappoint them."

"And this stuff?" Butch included the

three articles with the sweep of his hand.

"Take it all to Tony," she said. "But not right away. Wait here until I come back. You can watch that locker from here. Use your own judgment if anyone comes for the things, as Tony told you to do. I'll be back within half an hour."

BUTCH'S hopes that someone would come dwindled rapidly and he was waiting at the same spot when Carol returned. The suit box was tied shut again, the cigar box wrapped just as it had been.

While Butch stood guard, Carol placed these things in the locker, removed the key, and led Butch back to the bench from which the bank of lockers could be easily observed.

"I'll stay here," she said. "You take the stuff to Tony as fast as you can. If the contents of the locker are called for, I'll trail whoever comes. If you don't hear from me by noon, come back and relieve me. Okay, Butch?"

"I'm on my way," he said, and gathered up the articles.

He reached Tony Quinn's laboratory half an hour later. Quinn quickly dumped the contents of the grip onto a table and separated the articles it contained.

"He was going on a trip all right," Quinn grunted. "The only thing that puzzles me is why, if he had heard that Patrolman Thatcher had died, he didn't call for these things before and breeze out of town before the police got on his tail."

"Carol and I had the key," Butch reminded.

"To the locker?" Quinn laughed. "A man of Joey's criminal prowess could have opened that locker with a screw driver. . . Look at this, Butch. A railroad ticket to Manor Beach in Connecticut. That's a rather fashionable place. And here is a house key. I wonder if he had all these things, including a railway ticket, prepared for a fast getaway if things went wrong. His loot, or what he's saved out of it, is there. Fresh clothing, several changes of linen. He was prepared, so why didn't he take the things and run for it?"

"He could be looking out from behind bars," Butch offered.

"No." Quinn shook his head. "If he had been caught Captain McGrath would have phoned me. Every policeman in town

is searching for him. A cop killer can't do any fooling around. And he had plenty of time to reach the railroad station, and there are trains at all hours. Butch, is the coupé ready to roll?"

"It always is," Butch answered. "You want me along?"

Quinn nodded. "I think it might be wise. Be with you in a moment."

Quinn went over to a steel locker, opened it, and took out the somber regalia of the Black Bat. He quickly removed his own clothing, donned crepe-soled shoes, a black suit and a jet-black shirt. He put on tight-fitting black gloves and, last of all, pulled on the hood which fitted over his head snugly.

Satisfied that it was all right, he removed it and in its place put on a wide-brimmed hat. It was large enough to be pulled down and hide the scars around his eyes. The hood could hardly be worn in public, and the hat served to keep his features fairly well-hidden, especially in a car.

He put a small flat kit of fine burglar tools in a hip pocket, strapped on a shoulder holster and slid a .38 automatic into it. Surveying himself for a second, he called Silk and told him to work with Carol if she called and needed help.

The Black Bat and Butch descended into the tunnel. Butch left the garden house first and made his way to the side street where an old but surprisingly fast and sturdy coupé was parked, as it always was, ready for emergencies.

When the Black Bat stepped from the garden house, in the darkness he was quite invisible. He peered around to be certain no lurking forms had been posted to watch his home. He certainly would have been able to see them for in this inky darkness, his eyes saw things as clearly as if they were illuminated by spotlights. Even the pale yellow color of the late blooming marigolds became perfectly visible to his strange eyes.

Butch drove the coupé and maintained a discreet silence while the Black Bat weighed the wisdom or rashness of this trip. It would have been much simpler to tell Captain McGrath about the railway ticket and the house key, but McGrath undoubtedly would have wanted to know how Quinn had come into possession of them.



SILK

He wondered how he would determine which house on that beach the house key fitted. He was acting purely on a hunch, but they had panned out before, so he was not worried. All he wanted to do was to bring Joey Belding back to face a charge of murder. If he did, Captain McGrath would find the belligerent young killer tied up and gagged on his front porch. And there would be a black sticker cut in the form of a bat in full flight pasted on Joey's forehead. The Black Bat branded his work this way, so that no one else would be suspected.

IT WAS an hour and a half's journey to the Connecticut beach off the Sound. By daylight in the summer it was a glittering place of smart private homes and large estates. Now, in the autumn and not far from dawn, it seemed bleak and dismal. A chilly wind swept in from the Sound.

The small shopping center was dark and deserted. Narrow lanes, many barred by gates and marked "Private," led off the main road. If Joey Belding had come here, it would be difficult to find him.

Then, as the car slid slowly past, the Black Bat's uncanny sight spotted a small

sign on the door of a cottage. It read "Caretaker." He told Butch to pull over in a dark spot.

"Stay here," he instructed Butch. "I've got a hunch. Be ready to travel fast, if necessary, because I'm going to try out the gentle art of burglary."

Like some black shadow, he slipped through the darkness. His crepe-soled shoes made no sound as he walked onto the porch. Many of these beaches, like Manor Beach, maintained a permanent caretaker who would open and tidy the houses if their owners decided on a visit. If this were the custom here, the Black Bat thought he might determine which home Joey Belding's key fitted.

He examined the lock briefly, checked over certain thin tools in his kit and selected one. He thrust it into the lock, found the key on the other side and deftly turned it. He twisted the knob and the door opened silently.

The Black Bat stepped inside, closed the door behind him and stood there listening. He could hear light snoring from a rear room, but nothing else. He required no flashlight for his eyes penetrated the gloom easily. He soon found what he was looking for—a large board

on the wall, from which dangled a number of house keys.

Working fast now, he took Joey's key from his pocket and deftly held it against all those others until he found the one which matched perfectly. A tag on that key indicated that it opened Number 23, on Oceanic Lane. The Black Bat exited silently, relocking the door from outside. Then he hurried back to where Butch waited in the parked coupé.

Now the Black Bat drove at a moderate clip, studying the various street signs pointing down the different lanes leading to the beach and the houses upon it.

CHAPTER VIII

Dead Killer



BEFORE long the name of Oceanic Lane, seen dimly on a lamp post, appeared out of the gloom. The Black Bat stopped the car just beyond the side gate of Number 23. He and Butch got out and approached the place carefully. The gate, which was slightly ajar, opened outwardly. There were fresh tire marks on the dirt lane at one side of the house.

"Get ready for trouble," the Black Bat whispered to Butch. "Could be that Joey didn't come alone. You cover the front of the house while I try to get in through the rear. If anyone comes out—no matter who—stop him."

Butch closed his hands into mighty fists. "Yeah," he said happily. His tone indicated that he hoped someone would come out.

The two men parted when they were close to the house and, for all his bulk, Butch moved silently toward the front of the place. The Black Bat, slipping around to the rear, saw a car parked beneath the trees. The door beside the driver's seat was open. He went over and put a hand on the radiator. It was hot, as from a quite recent and speedy trip. Nodding, he went back to the house.

He was within fifty feet of it when a muffled shot came from within the house.

In this dark and lonely spot, however, the sound was clear, and unmistakably a shot. It was followed by a scream of terror. A door at the front was flung open, and slammed shut. The Black Bat realized that Butch couldn't have reached there yet to block off any exit of a gunman. He started running around the house.

When he reached the front, Butch was just pounding up onto the porch. Then the Black Bat heard a car door slam and a car motor roar into action. He and Butch raced for the back of the house again. But the car already was on the dirt driveway and moving fast for the open gate.

"Go back," the Black Bat told Butch hurriedly. "Find out what happened in there. I'll go after this car. Watch yourself!"

The Black Bat broke into a swift run. He was in time to see the car hit the partially opened gate, to send it crashing wide open, and roar through. The tail-light was disappearing down the road by the time the Black Bat sped back to his own coupé and leaped in.

He pulled away in the high-powered job, and opened her up when he was through the gate and into the main road. His light car picked up speed at a surprising rate. In three or four minutes he saw the tail-light of the fleeing car. The Black Bat reached under his coat and drew out his automatic. He rolled down the window beside him, laid the gun on the seat and whipped off his wide brimmed hat. With one hand he settled the black hood over his head, picked up the gun again and kept on driving with one hand.

The speedometer gradually mounted to show sixty-two, a dizzy speed along this rather narrow road. He was gaining every second. Soon he was close enough to make out a form hunched over the wheel of the car ahead. The Black Bat thrust his left hand out of the window, leveled the gun, and fired one warning shot.

The fleeing car swerved wildly, but kept on going. The Black Bat aimed at the rear window and put a bullet through it. Still the car kept on going. With the superior speed of his own car, the Black Bat could have tried forcing the car off

the road, but that would be dangerous to his own life and limb. The Black Bat always took innumerable chances, but he was never foolishly reckless. Instead, he waited until he was rolling close behind the car, then transferred his foot to the brake, fired three quick shots, and saw the rear left tire of the car ahead go flat.

The sedan weaved crazily, went off the road and crashed through some underbrush. The Black Bat had stopped his coupé by then and in an instant was out of it and running toward the sedan.

He saw a man leap from the sedan and start running toward the brush. The Black Bat fired at him, placing the bullet dangerously close. The running fellow skidded to a stop, and from his lips came a plaintive wail for mercy. Two arms shot straight upward and the figure turned.

The Black Bat saw then that the fugitive was not a man, but a boy of no more than sixteen, pale and shaking. The Black Bat moved up to him, gun still level. He was taking no chances for he was well aware of what some of these delinquent boys were capable. He seized the shaking lad by the shoulder, spun him around and deftly searched him. The boy was unarmed.

THE Black Bat turned him around again until they were face to face.

"Did-did you k-kill Joey?" the boy asked. "Gosh! You're the Black Bat. I didn't think you killed people that way, without no chance!"

"Is Joey dead?" the Black Bat asked quickly.

"Y-yes, sir," the boy quavered. "I-I think so. He just dropped down on the floor when the shot came. I ran out. You never gave him a break! Never a chance!"

"I didn't shoot Joey," the Black Bat said. "You little idiot, you made me believe you were his killer and were escaping. That's why I chased you. Now the real killer has probably got away."

"But-but I didn't know," the boy whimpered. "Honest! It all happened so fast!"

"Tell it—and make it short," the Black Bat commanded.

"Joey," the boy blurted, "he told me to steal a car. I picked up this one. Joey said I was to drive him here and I did. For twenty bucks. But I had to promise I'd never tell anybody. We came to that

house back there. He said he had a key, but didn't have it with him, so we would have to bust the lock with a stone. I drove through the gate to the back of the house, then we got out and went to the house."

"So Joey didn't have a key to the door?" asked the Black Bat.

"No! No, sir—I told you. He thought maybe he'd break a window instead of bustin' the lock, but then he found the door unlocked, so we went in. Everything was quiet. Joey said the electricity would be cut off, but he knew where there was a lantern. He told me not to move and he went off somewhere. He had just lit a match, started to go through a door to the kitchen when that shot came. Joey—fell down!"

"Did you see anyone?" asked the Black Bat.

"No. That's why I thought maybe you shot him, and were going to gun me down."

"Put the spare on that car," the Black Bat ordered. "Drive it to the nearest town and turn yourself in as a car thief. Do you understand that? If you don't, I'll come visiting you, and I know your name and address. It was on some letters I found in your pocket."

"Y-yes, sir." The boy spoke earnestly. "I'll do just as you say. I'm scared! I don't want no more of this business."

"What did Joey say on his way here?" prodded the Black Bat.

"That he was on the lam. He was proud about it, saying every cop in the country would be looking for him, but he wasn't worried. He had friends."

"Joey didn't say he had to stop at Grand Central Station?"

"Gosh, no! We didn't go near Grand Central. Joey was in an awful rush."

"Get busy with that car," the Black Bat told him. "Joey was a wanted murderer, and your helping him escape could send you to prison. Instead, you can take the rap for the car theft if you give yourself up tonight. Otherwise you'll face both raps. Get that?"

The Black Bat didn't wait to hear anything more the boy said. Butch might be in trouble, though the Black Bat doubted it. Still, there was a killer around that house, if he hadn't escaped. The Black Bat turned the coupé around and raced back.

He found Butch sitting on a bench in the yard, where he could watch three sides of the house. Butch jumped up, ready to fight, when the Black Bat materialized out of the gloom. Then Butch sat down again.

"There's a dead man in the house," he said. "Drilled smack between the eyes. Did you get the guy who powdered out of here?"

"I did, but he didn't do the shooting," the Black Bat said grimly. "There was someone else. But he could have eased out the back door and slipped off in the darkness while we were chasing the boy who brought Joey here."

"Joey is the kid dead in there?" Butch asked.

"I'm sure of it, but we'll go and see."

They entered the house and Butch snapped on a flashlight. Joey Belding lay exactly where the boy who had driven him here said he had fallen. A burned match was still between his fingers. When he had struck that match and made a target of himself, a murderer had fired at point-blank range.

A search of the rest of the house revealed nothing. The back door was open, so the killer could have escaped while Butch was at the front and the Black Bat was following the boy driver.

IN JOEY'S pockets were only the articles which the Black Bat—Tony Quinn—had examined at Police Headquarters. The fairly large roll of bills was practically intact.

"If that boy I caught up with had killed Joey, he'd have waited long enough to frisk him," the Black Bat said.

"Who did kill him then?" Butch asked.

"I don't know," the Black Bat answered slowly. "But it seems that so long as Patrolman Thatcher was alive and seemed to be surviving the bullet wounds, Joey was a fair-haired boy for whom an attorney was furnished, along with a substantial amount of bail. But when Thatcher died, Joey, slated for the electric chair, might have talked."

"I thought you said there wasn't an organizer for all this kid stuff," Butch protested. "If Joey was bumped to keep his mouth shut, then someone would have been in trouble if he sang."

"I know. Butch. Young Walter Taylor

insists the juvenile gangs are not organized, but the murder of Joey alters the situation. Now I do believe someone is behind this. Someone whose efforts have resulted in this sudden wave of violence among juveniles."

Butch shrugged his mighty shoulders. "Okay. But any guy who bosses these kids must get something out of it, and they haven't pulled any real big stuff. A lot of small jobs add up, of course, but there are so many of those kids to share in the loot, how can there be much left for a big shot?"

The Black Bat laughed softly. "You're beginning to think like a detective, Butch. The best thing that ever happened to you was when we set you up as a private detective. How is business, by the way?"

"Not too bad." Butch grinned. "I could get all the divorce stuff I want, but I don't go for it. And then, when you start on a trail, my business stops cold."

The Black Bat nodded. "Ours is a big job, Butch. . . Well, we can't do anything more here. It will be dawn shortly so we'd better go back to the city. Tomorrow we'll find out who owns this house and how it happened that Joey had access to it. Maybe Carol will have something for us. She's had an eye on that Grand Central check-room all night. Joey was either in too much of a rush to go after his loot in the locker there, or someone was going to get it for him. All lockers have to be cleaned out in twenty-four hours or the contents are impounded. So perhaps a messenger did come for it and Carol has tracked him down."

"If she has, we're not stuck," Butch said. "At least, we'll have somebody to work over."

NEXT ISSUE

**Thubway
Tham's
Better
Thelf**

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER IX

Young and Tough

ONLY, but now greatly distressed, Carol did have news, though for a time she wondered if she would be alive long enough to make use of it.

Two hours after Butch had left her to watch the check-room locker, she had seen a young man loitering around that corner of the vast railroad terminal where the lockers were located. She had kept her eyes on him.

He seemed to be about eighteen, a gangling youth who apparently was fast outgrowing his clothes. He wore a pair of checked and rather loud trousers, a fancy sweater, and a sport coat. His hat had a green ribbon and red feather for decorations, his shoes were the sharp-toed kind, and highly polished. His trousers were too short, and gaudy socks showed above his shoe tops.

He was furtive enough to arouse Carol's interest. Besides, she thought, at this hour a youth his age should be home and in bed. He glanced at her several times but Carol, demurely reading a newspaper, appeared to pay no attention to him.

Finally when he had seemed to assure himself that no one was noticing him, he walked over to the row of lockers and examined the one in which Joey Belding's loot had been checked. He tried the handle, then reached into a pocket and brought out a short instrument of some kind. This had a thin edge which he slipped beneath the door. Then he gave one hard pry. The door budged a little, but held. He gave an annoyed shrug.

Carol saw him look in her direction again and decided that he might be afraid to go through with this locker breaking if she was there so close that she could be a witness. So she arose and ambled casually away. She did not go too far, though, and from another vantage point, where she could not be seen, she watched him finish the job of forcing the locker door. The big terminal was fairly well

deserted now, and there was little danger of the boy's being observed.

He reached into the locker and brought out the suit box and the paper-wrapped cigar box. Thrusting these beneath his arm, he hurried for the nearest exit, with Carol heading straight after him.

On the street he hailed a cab. There were plenty of them at this hour and Carol had no difficulty in getting another. She handed the driver a five-dollar bill.

"Keep the change," she said, "if you don't lose sight of that taxi which just pulled away. There's a boy in it who ran away from home. I'm a reporter. Finding that boy will be a pretty good story. How about it?"

"Sure, lady." The driver gave her a grin. "I'll follow anybody for five bucks, provided there ain't any gun play. Here we go!"

The chase was long and complicated by unexpected twists and turnings. Finally even Carol's driver began using a great deal of caution. "Lady," he said, "keep your eyes on that crate. I'd almost bet the kid you're after is afraid of being trailed. He sure is taking us all around Robin Hood's barn, as they say."

"Don't worry," Carol said. "I've never taken my eyes off that taxi."

At last the youth's cab came to an abrupt stop practically in the middle of the street. He got out, carrying his packages, and looked keenly around. Carol's driver kept on going and she shrank back so she couldn't be seen. But her taxi moved slowly, and she could watch the boy out of the rear window.

He paid his driver, hurried across the deserted street and entered one of the biggest, smartest, and most expensive hotels. Carol leaned forward and spoke to her driver.

"There is a side door to this hotel," she said, "and I'll bet he comes out of it. Turn the corner."

It was a good hunch. Carol's taxi was just turning the corner when the youth emerged, hailed another cab that was passing, and the chase began again. Now the boy seemed certain he was not being followed, so the rest of the run was simple.

When he left his cab again, it was in front of a cheap hotel. He stopped once on his way in and tied his shoe lace. Carol

knew that wrinkle. Anyone suspicious of being shadowed usually resorted to it, and she didn't like the gesture.

The boy entered the hotel and Carol gave him a full five minutes. Then she went in and headed straight for the elevator. The operator was an old man, and he seemed rather to like the looks of the two dollars in her hand.

"I want to find the young man you took up a few minutes ago," she explained. "It's terribly important. I know his family and how worried they are because he ran away from home some weeks ago. I just happened to see him."

THE old man took the money with a smirk.

"You mean Chet Conklin?" he said. "You must mean him, lady, on account of he's the only guy I've taken up in an hour." His expression became serious. "Look—he's no good. You better stay away from him. He's too mean to even have a family."

"I've got to find him," Carol insisted. "I can take care of myself."

The old man closed the elevator door. "Fact is, lady," he mumbled, "I think you can at that. Chet's in Seven-o-nine, but don't tell him I said so. If he wants to know how you found out, say the desk clerk told you. I don't like that desk guy and if Chet smacks him one, it'll make me feel real good."

Carol stepped out of the elevator and walked down the narrow corridor. She followed the numbers until she came to Room 709 and there she stopped, wondering just how to handle this situation. If this Chet Conklin was a wise, fresh kid as the elevator man seemed to think he was, he would be capable of almost anything. She knew his type—too young to have well-developed brains, and immature to a point where his conscience or common sense had not yet reached the stage where he might be warned not to go too far.

She decided it was best to get help and not try to handle this alone. She wished that Butch were here. She had started to turn away when she sensed someone behind her. She turned quickly, and gave a startled cry. Chet must have been hidden somewhere down the corridor, and he had slipped up on her. He seized her wrist and gave it a hard twist.

"Don't yell—and talk in a whisper," he warned, "or I'll break your arm! Easy now, while I unlock my door." Then he got a good look at her. "Say, you ain't so bad looking. Pretty neat job, I'll say. What's the idea of following me?"

"I'll tell you—" Carol tried to jerk her hand away, but his grip was too strong.

"Quiet—until we get inside my room," he ordered. "If we wake up any people, I'll tell 'em that when I got home I caught you going through my stuff."

He got the door open and shoved her roughly inside. He snapped on the lights, revealing a poorly furnished hotel room, oddly decorated with such unexpected articles as a sterling silver dressing table set, an expensive radio, and several bottles of imported liquor.

"Now," Chet chortled, "we can talk. You better have a good reason for shadowing me. I like my women at my side, not dogging my steps."

He had dropped his grip on Carol's wrist and she was rubbing it, and wondering if she ought to casually take the little .25 automatic from her purse. She decided against that, determined to play the game out as the cards had fallen.

"You talk about turning me in for searching your room," she derided. "I'll tell you why I followed you! It's because you're a thief."

He laughed and lit a cigarette. "So I'm a thief," he drawled. "Maybe you'll tell me what I swiped."

"I most certainly will!" she said heatedly. "I was stranded in Grand Central. I had a suit box and a smaller package which I placed in one of the lockers. I saw you break into that locker and steal my things!"

Chet's cigarette sagged limply between his lips. He pointed at the bed on which lay the suit box and the package.

"You mean those are yours?" he demanded.

"I do!" she declared spiritedly. "And unless you give them to me right this minute, I'll call a policeman! I should have done that in the first place instead of following you all the way down here, but I couldn't find a cop."

"Lady, you're off the beam," Chet said, and went over to the bed. "These things belong to a pal of mine. He lost his key and didn't want to go to all the fuss of

putting in a claim. What's the gag?"

"Inside that suit box," Carol said, "is a blue and white tailored suit which would look peculiar on your pal—unless she happens to be a girl. In the smaller box are cigars I was bringing home to my husband. Open them if you don't believe me."

Chet whistled and his eyes narrowed. "I'm going to do that very thing," he said. "You're lying, but we'll soon find out."

HE TOOK a knife from his pocket and slit the cord around the suit box. He raised the cover and muttered savagely when he saw the blue and white suit wrapped in tissue paper. He tore the paper off the other box, glanced at the unbroken customs seals on the cigar box and cut through these. The box was full of cigars.

"Now are you quite satisfied?" Carol demanded indignantly.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, but I don't get it. My pal told me the number of the locker and I didn't make any mistake."

"Wait!" Carol said brightly. "Perhaps this is just one of those errors no one is responsible for. Just before I checked my things in that locker a young man came through opening all of them with a master key. He took a number of things out of some of them."

Chet nodded slowly. "Yeah, that must have been it. Your dime only gets you twenty-four hours of use from those lockers and then they empty 'em. Okay, lady, I'm sorry. Maybe you'll have a drink with me, huh?"

"I don't drink," Carol said stiffly. "Hand me my property and consider yourself fortunate that I did not see a policeman while I was following you here."

He rewrapped the packages clumsily and put them in her arms.

"I said I was sorry," he mumbled. "You don't have to get huffy about it."

He came close to her and Carol stepped back hastily. Suddenly he put his arms about her, but only for a moment, and she had the impression that his fingers were busy at the catch of her purse. But to show her suspicions of this might make him think she was more than just someone who was irate over having her possessions taken.

"Keep away from me!" she said fierce-

ly. "Or I'll wake up this whole hotel!"

CHAPTER X

Gun Merchant



YOUNG Chet Conklin's face was impassive, his lips tight as he opened the door and gave Carol Baldwin an ironic bow. She walked quickly to the elevator and rang for it. Chet was leaning against the wall beside his door, smoke from a cigarette curling up around his head. He

seemed so lackadaisical that Carol could have no idea that the instant she stepped into the elevator, he would step on the cigarette, close his door behind him and race for the first stairway. He made almost as good time going down as the elevator.

Carol did not even give a thought to being followed, though she did suspect that perhaps Chet's inquisitive fingers had felt the outline of the gun she carried in her purse. It was still there. She made certain of that, for she still might need it at any moment.

She took a taxi straight back to her own apartment and went in. It was already dawn and even though it was light now she didn't notice Chet Conklin step from another cab far down the street and carefully approach her apartment house. He checked the number and made a note of it before he sauntered away.

Carol remained in her apartment only long enough to dispose of the packages, then she made her way to the home of Tony Quinn which was not many blocks distant. This time, though, she took every precaution against being shadowed. That had become second nature with the Black Bat's band when they approached Tony Quinn's home.

Only Silk was at home when Carol arrived, but he had coffee and sandwiches waiting. He hadn't heard from Quinn, but did expect him back before long. Carol ate her early breakfast then, and talked to Silk about the odd affair of organized crime among juveniles. Both were deeply interested.

When the Black Bat and Butch returned, Carol listened to what they had gone through while the Black Bat stepped behind a screen and removed his somber regalia. He emerged in the clothes of Tony Quinn, and carrying the white cane under his arm.

"I set a little trap at that locker," Carol said, "and a young man named Chet Conklin fell into it."

"Chet?" Quinn asked quickly. "Are you sure about that name?"

"Quite sure, Tony," Carol assured. "Why?"

"A young man named Chet headed the band of kids that smashed up Mrs. Taylor's tenement and put her in the hospital," he told her. "Go ahead, Carol."

"There isn't much to tell." She shrugged. "Just that I trailed him and didn't do so well at it because he knew I was following him. Perhaps that was for the best because when he surprised me, I put on an act of an outraged housewife who wouldn't be expected to be the world's best shadower."

"He didn't harm you, Carol?" Quinn asked anxiously.

"No—except for twisting my wrist a little," Carol said. "But about this Chet, Tony. He may be about eighteen or twenty, but he stopped being a juvenile at the age of two. He's mean and vicious. I discovered his identity and where he lives and let it go at that. But I'm half afraid he bested me."

"Just how?"

"He—made a pass at me," Carol said, with a wry little smile, "and I think it was done only to dig a hand into my purse. If he felt the gun, he knows darned well I'm more than the plain housewife I pretended to be."

Quinn pursed his lips. "This Chet must be an amazing young man. We'll look into him later. If your hunch is right, though, I'd be very careful, Carol. Make certain he isn't watching your apartment."

"I'll keep my eyes open," Carol promised. "Forget Chet. How is the case going, Tony?"

"It's running away from us," Quinn said. "The first thing to be done is find out if these juveniles are actually organized. Perhaps that's true, but if so, it's been done in such a manner that they

aren't even aware of it."

Silk broke in. "You have only the word of Walter Taylor that they are not, sir. And frankly, I wouldn't take his word that it's daylight. The kid is slick. Maybe he seems to have reformed, but I'll keep my doubts about that until he proves it."

"I admit that," Quinn said. "But even if Walter is still crooked, he can only be a small cog in the wheel. What we want to find is the big shot—the man who profits somehow from these crimes committed by boys. Finding that out can be done in only one way—and not by the police."

BUTCH laughed.

"I'm starting to get the idea Carol and me are in for a lot of routine work."

"We all are, Butch," Quinn said soberly. "Carol, I'll arrange for you to be installed at a Settlement House down in the section of town where Walter Taylor used to live. Mothers and fathers come to the Settlement House for advice and help. They'll talk about their boys. Get a list of the trouble-makers without letting the parents realize what you are doing."

"I'll be on the job as quickly as you make the arrangements, Tony," Carol promised.

"Good." Quinn nodded, and turned to the other two of his aides. "Butch, I want you to hang around that neighborhood and observe things. Talk to bar-keepers and tobacco merchants. Tell them anything you like, but try to get names and addresses and facts also. Stay in contact with Silk—you will of course remain with me, Silk—and be careful. There may be more to this affair than we've uncovered so far. I don't usually follow hunches, but this time I have a feeling that we're fighting something and someone mighty important. . . ."

Without having had any sleep, Quinn reported to his office promptly at nine o'clock. For two hours he handled routine work of which there was always plenty. Then Captain McGrath was announced.

McGrath had another prisoner this time, one he didn't seem alarmed enough about to have handcuffed. He pointed to a chair and the prisoner sat down with a glum expression.

"Morning, Tony," McGrath said. "I raided that candy store last night and I've brought Mike Paget here. We found a nice little arsenal there. Eleven guns and ammo. Most of the guns were war souvenirs, the kind that can't be traced." He heaved a heavy sigh. "Why don't those otherwise sensible G. I.s make certain their death-dealing souvenirs stay out of improper hands?"

Quinn asked, "What does Paget look like, Mac?"

the fat man. "I told the kids the guns were to be used only for target practice. I swear that's what I told them!"

"You forgot to designate whether or not the targets were alive, Paget," Quinn said. "One of your guns killed a policeman. I could ask—and convince any court—that you be sent away for more years than you have left."

Paget's forehead was covered with a fine film of sweat.

"You—wouldn't do that?" he chattered.



CAROL

McGrath turned and surveyed the nervous prisoner. "He's a five by five," he said. "Soft, flabby, the kind who couldn't work up enough ambition to make an honest living. But he will. They have methods up at Sing-Sing and even little fat guys turn out their day's production. Or else!"

Paget squirmed at the mere idea of work. He gulped, raised both hands in an attitude of pleading and spoke to Quinn.

"Please, Mr. Quinn, give me a break! This is only my second offense, and I promise you it will be my last."

"Where do you get that stuff?" McGrath grumbled. "This is your sixth time, and you know it."

"I meant for selling guns," said the lit-

"You'll give me a break, Mr. Quinn, won't you? I'll leave town. I'll get a job. I'll—"

"You'll talk, Paget," Quinn broke in with considerable sarcasm, "and you'll tell the full and absolute truth. Who gave you those guns to sell?"

"Guys who were broke," Paget said. "And I guess maybe some of them were swiped. You know how it is."

"Who set you up in business?" pursued Quinn. "You needed money to start a candy store as a cover-up. Come through, Paget. Name the man who is behind you."

Paget looked decidedly alarmed. "You're wrong, Mr. Quinn. Nobody set me up. I had a little dough, and I was looking for some easy marks—that is, I

figured what with all the things going on around that section of the city I might get rid of some of the guns I had. But only for target practice. I swear I warned them!"

"Mention that again," Quinn snapped, "and I'll get you forty years. Now listen carefully and give me a straight answer. Those kids don't plan all the crimes that are being pulled. Some of the jobs have a professional touch. Once more I'll ask you—and only once—who directs the activities of those boys?"

PAGET swallowed hard and looked as if he needed a drink to settle his nerves. He locked his fingers together, pulled them apart, and repeated the operation.

He kicked at the rug, squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, and then finally looked up.

"John Verne," he said in a voice almost too low to be heard. "But he'll kill me if he knows I talked. John Verne has been talking to those kids—I know that much. I think he tells them what to do and they pay off later with some of the stuff they get on the jobs. I ain't sure, mind you, but that's the way it seems to me. Now do I get a break?"

"Lock him up," Quinn said. "Without bail."

McGrath made a wry face. "That lawyer—Rowan—is trying to find Paget. We could start Paget on a merry-go-round from one precinct to another till he'd be hard to get to."

"No," Quinn said. "Let Rowan know where he is and let him apply for bail. This time I'll fight him myself and we'll see how far he'll go. We let one of Rowan's clients out on bail, and look what happened!"

"Excuse me," McGrath broke in. "I'm pretty much interested in that, too, but I don't think Mr. Paget is, so I'll take him outside and attach him to one of my men who are waiting in your outer room. Then I'll be back."



MCGRATH returned to Quinn's office in three minutes and sat down.

"About Joey Belding," he began. "Rowan got him out on bail and Joey gets himself knocked off. Now you wouldn't know about that, would you, Tony?"

"I was told about it this morning," Quinn said. "What's the matter, Mac?"

"I was worrying about you," said the Homicide Captain. "You look awful tired. Did you sleep well last night, Tony?"

"As a matter-of-fact, I didn't," Quinn replied. "I stayed up until all hours, studying case histories of these various juvenile crimes. Why?"

"You wouldn't have been studying them at—say, a beach up in Connecticut?" McGrath asked cannily.

"Oh-oh!" Quinn fashioned a grin. "I get it. The Black Bat has been prowling again."

"He was around," McGrath admitted. "He must have found Joey's body, because he did catch up with the kid who drove Joey to that beach. Scared the living daylights out of the kid so that he headed for the nearest State Police barracks and gave himself up with his stolen car. He said the Black Bat warned him to do this—or else."

"That's interesting," Quinn said. "I'd like to know the details. But I wasn't there. You can ask Silk who spent most of the night reading case histories to me."

McGrath gave a raucous laugh. "Asking Silk is the same as asking you," he jibed. "He's an echo. Okay, Tony. We both know I can't do a thing about the Black Bat until I have him backed into a corner and rip that hood off his head. Neither of us is going to like it if your face is under that hood."

"You're wrong," Quinn said. "I'd be delighted if I were the Black Bat, because then I wouldn't be a blind man. Forget that. Let's get down to business. What about this man John Verne whom



that gun seller mentioned? Who is he?"

"A common crook," McGrath said. "Once arrested for murder—no conviction. Two years in the pen for burglary, and several visits to jail on minor charges. Want me to pick him up?"

"Not quite yet, Mac." Quinn shook his head thoughtfully. "Give him a little more rope. We want to be certain he is behind this wave of crime before we take action. It bothers me, though—learning that he is interested in those juvenile criminals, because I believed Walter Taylor when he told me there was no organization except in the individual gangs, and no pay-off to an outsider. If Verne directs juvenile delinquent operations, Walter is a liar."

McGrath arose. "I could have told you that long ago," he said positively. "Don't worry about him. I've got a man on his tail day and night. The kid has looked for a job. He goes to see his mother at the hospital every afternoon and evening. But in my opinion he's putting on an act."

"We'll see," Quinn sighed. "Keep a check on those kid gangs. Something big may be brewing if a man like John Verne is behind them. He won't be satisfied with peanuts."

McGrath shrugged. "I've got maybe a hundred detectives available for this work," he said. "There must be two thousand punk kids belonging to those gangs. I hope you don't expect me to keep tabs on them all."

Quinn leaned back in his chair. "As many as that, Mac?" he asked, in surprise. "This is serious, indeed. Every one of those boys is a potential criminal. If one of them gets away with it now, he'll turn to a life of crime."

"Turn to it!" McGrath exploded. "Listen, those punks were born punks and they'll die that way! I've been a cop too long not to know what I'm talking about."

"Oh no," Quinn countered. "You've been a cop too long, period. You've become hardened—and I know something about the big heart you have or did have. Nobody can blame you but, Mac, the late Father Flanagan of Boys' Town said there was no such thing as a bad boy and I believe in that theory. In fact, Father Flanagan proved it. Those boys he took in hand had gone bad by reason of en-

vironment and lack of supervision. Lack of proper amusements, a place to play and grow. They saw nothing but the seamy side of life. Let such lads find and appreciate the brighter side, and you'll see them change quickly enough."

McGrath headed for the door. "Okay, Tony," he said. "You tell me how to take thousands of boys in hand. Sure I'm a tough cop, but I'll give you my word I've lain awake nights trying to figure out what I could do to save some of those boys. You name the procedure and I'll help. I don't even care if you call in the Black Bat to help handle it. I'll be on your side—and his."

"Thanks, Mac," Quinn replied. "We'll all have to help, I guess. It's too big for any one man."

WHEN the door closed on the burly detective, Silk came over and sat down in the chair McGrath had occupied.

"Mac's okay in his blundering way," he said. "Mr. Quinn, I've found out who owns that house where Joey was killed. Happens to be a fellow named Frank Downes, a professional reformer. Runs a lot of clubs for boys in the poorer sections. Clubs dependent upon donations from wealthy people. See what I'm getting at?"

"I think I do," Quinn said musingly. "All this publicity will bring in more and more money to Downes. Yes, he'd profit if his income is derived from those donations—and if he's a crook. If he isn't, then he'll be able to do more good than ever." Quinn looked up thoughtfully. "Silk," he said, "I think Mr. Downes will have a visitor tonight. I'd like to size the man up."

"There's still another one," Silk went on.

"Another reformer?" asked Quinn.

"In a way—yes. Naturally the police went to Downes and asked him how come Joey Belding picked his summer home to hide out in. Downes claims that he gave Joey permission to use it only after an athletic instructor in one of the clubs said that Joey might possibly be rehabilitated if he could be allowed the use of a place on the beach. Seems Joey was crazy about surf swimming and this instructor believed he would forget a life of crime if he had a beach available. How wrong

he was!"

"And this instructor, Silk?"

"Name of Jeff Kempin," informed Silk.

"Does that bring back memories?"

"Jeff Kempin!" Quinn whistled. "The pro football player who sold out and was banished from the game?"

"That's our boy, sir. After he was kicked out, he made a public apology and pledged himself to devote the rest of his life to teaching boys how to play fair. And the world believed him."

"Don't judge the man yet," Quinn warned. "John Verne bothers me more than either Jeff Kempin or Downes. Get hold of Butch and tell him to watch Verne. I'd like a report early this evening."

Quinn's P.B.X. buzzed and he flipped the switch. A secretary announced that Attorney Rowan was in the waiting room. Quinn had him sent in.

Rowan looked angry as he entered, and his voice snapped in rage. He banged his hat down on Quinn's desk.

"I brought a bail bondsman to get Mike Paget out of jail," he barked, "and I find you are opposing any talk of bail. What's the idea, Quinn?"

"Sit down, please," Tony Quinn said calmly. "You got Joey Belding out and he was murdered. Rowan, you can't take refuge in stating that professional ethics won't permit you to reveal the name of a client. I demand to know who sent you to help Joey. Who paid off the bail bondsmen so they would put up twenty thousand dollars in cash?"

Rowan sat down slowly, most of the rage leaving him fast. He rubbed his chin and seemed to be considering the situation.

"What if I refuse to answer?" he asked.

"Then I'll demand that Joey's bail be forfeited," Quinn said flatly. "He did run away from the jurisdiction of the court. He meant to hide and stay hidden. In short, he jumped bail. You'd have a hard time explaining just how you lost that twenty grand, Rowan—explaining it to the man who first retained you for Joey, and who must pay off those bondsmen."

"I stand on my constitutional rights in refusing to answer," Rowan said, but his voice showed his nervousness.

"This isn't a court of law," Quinn re-

minded him. He turned to Silk. "Would you mind leaving us, Silk? Mr. Rowan, I find, has an aversion to witnesses."

SILK left quickly and Rowan slumped low in his chair. Quinn's blind eyes were focused far to the attorney's left. He said nothing, just waited patiently for Rowan to get ready to speak.

Rowan finally looked up, as if Quinn could see him.

"If I tell you," he asked, "will you promise not to ask forfeiture of the bail? And promise to keep me out of this? You have me over a barrel. I'm licked, but if I don't get the protection I want you can go to blazes."

"I will recommend that the case against Joey be dismissed and the bail returned," Quinn said. "I won't mention your name. Now—who pays you?"

"A man named Verne—John Verne," said Rowan. "Oh, I know he's a crook, but you can't blame me for working for him. Even crooks need lawyers. Maybe they need them more than other people do, and we lawyers can't discriminate. You know that, Quinn."

"That's all," Quinn said stiffly. "You may go."

It was a crestfallen legal light who picked up his hat and walked heavily out of the office.

CHAPTER XII

Strange Bedfellows



STANDING among the waiting passengers at a bus station, Butch O'Leary was idly reading a folded newspaper in the light of a street lamp. His eyes were not on the paper however, but were watching the rather congested street for the appearance of the Black

Bat's coupé.

He saw it, after a while, and casually sauntered down to the corner and on to the side street where he found a spot that was dark and deserted. He knew that the Black Bat had seen him, and waited there until the coupé rolled toward him and

slowed. Then Butch reached it in three long steps and swung aboard.

The Black Bat, wearing his wide-brimmed hat, drove away and headed down close to the waterfront where it was quiet and where they would hardly be disturbed. He left the motor running as he talked to Butch.

"What about this man Verne?" he asked, wasting no time.

"I've been following him around all afternoon," Butch complained. "He's the kind of bum I'd like to bend around a telephone pole. I found out that he hangs around in pool halls and juke box joints, picks up kids and gets friendly with them. He hands them dough and tells them they're suckers to fool around with kid stuff when he can put them onto bigger things."

"I understand," the Black Bat said slowly. "Perhaps you'll get the chance to shape him in the form of a pretzel, Butch. Though he seems to be crooked enough already to be mistaken for one. Where does he live?"

"He must be in the bucks," said Butch, "because he leased an apartment over on White Street. Not such a hot one, of course, because it's right in the heart of all this juvenile crime business. But he paid six months in advance. I've cased the place. He lives on the fourth floor and he's certainly got all the necessary conveniences for his business, because there's a fire escape at the rear which leads smack up to his living room."

"Good," said the Black Bat. "You've given me a lead. I'm going there. How long has Verne been acting this way? Did you hear, Butch?"

Butch shook his head. "I'm not sure. The guy is cagey and hard to get a line on. But he hasn't been hitting this racket long, I'd say."

"And how are you doing in connection with getting names of juveniles who are bent on a life of crime?" asked the Black Bat.

"Not too bad," Butch assured. "I've got about fifteen of 'em tabbed pretty well. Shall I keep on with it?"

"Butch," the Black Bat said earnestly, "You may not have guessed it, but this is perhaps one of the most important assignments I've ever given you. True, it may not call for much of the physical

action you like so well, and you won't get the satisfaction of punching crooks into a land of happy dreams, but you may be instrumental in saving a lot of boys who, except for coming under the wrong influence, could be good boys."

"That's enough for me," Butch said and meant it. "I've been pretty close to those kids today. They ain't wrong ones because they were born that way. Most of 'em have parents who don't care—until the kid gets into a jam, and then they whale the daylights out of them. Which only makes the kid go more on the wrong side and become cagier, for no reason except self-protection."

"That's the answer to most of this," the Black Bat agreed. "Now listen, Butch. I'll drive to where Verne lives, then turn the car over to you. Keep circling the block and be ready to pick me up in a hurry if things go wrong."

Ten minutes later Butch drove off while the Black Bat's form made a faint blur in the darkness of an alley beside John Verne's apartment house. He reached the back of it and saw how carefully Butch had studied the situation. There was a light in what the Black Bat was sure must be Verne's apartment.

He crept up the fire-escape, that uncanny sight of his enabling him to avoid such pitfalls as flower pots and milk bottles set out on the landings. He was climbing the last flight to the lighted windows when one of the steel supports of the rusty fire escape almost gave way. It creaked dismally and scraped against brick.

The Black Bat instantly drew a gun and flattened himself against the wall, tilting his head upward to spot Verne in case the man should be aroused by the noise and had determined to greet a surprise visitor with gunfire.

Nothing happened, however. So the Black Bat continued his climb, carefully now for he had not entirely realized before just how shaky this fire-escape was. At last he reached the landing, set his back against the wall once more, and sidestepped toward the lighted window. It was wide open, almost as if in invitation.

TWISTING his head around, the Black Bat took a quick look into the room. A

big man, husky and bull-necked, sat in a chair with his back toward the window. He seemed totally unaware of the possibility of a visitor so close by.

The Black Bat would have liked to extinguish the lights in the room but that was impossible. For the switch was located across the room near the door. So he thrust one foot over the window sill, rested his weight securely on the floor and pulled himself through. Gun level, he slipped up behind the seated man.

"Don't move," he warned in a cold voice. "If you carry a gun, let it stay where it is, Verne."

The man in the chair said nothing. He had a wide face as well as a wide figure, but he seemed so frightened that he had been shocked out of the ability to speak. Almost instantly the Black Bat sensed that something was wrong. The eyes of the man in the chair were wide, but they seemed to grow even wider.

"Is someone behind me?" the Black Bat asked.

"You're doggone right there is, Black Bat," a voice behind him answered. "Boy, and they tell me you're a smart guy! I heard you coming up the fire escape and I told my visitor, Mr. Kempin, here, to stay put so you'd mistake him for me." The voice laughed triumphantly. "Well, well, wait'll the boys hear that I'm the guy who finally rubbed out the Black Bat! I'll be the biggest shot in town. And I could sure use that kind of advertising."

The Black Bat never moved. "Verne," he said in a cold voice, "you can easily shoot me in the back, but there is one thing you can't do. You can't kill me so fast that I'll be unable to turn and cut you to pieces. This gun I hold has a hair trigger, and eleven slugs in it. Big ones. Every slug will plow into your hide. So if I die, you'll be taken to the slab next to one I'll occupy."

Verne didn't answer, beyond exhaling a sharp breath. For a second there was just silence. The Black Bat knew that if he turned, Verne would start shooting. It was a ticklish predicament. If Verne did kill the Black Bat, he not only could proclaim himself as sensational in the underworld, but he could also collect a fat reward. The man might take a chance with all those benefits to be derived from the Black Bat's death.

Jeff Kempin's hands tightened on the arms of his chair. His heels dug into the rug. The Black Bat missed none of this and sensed what it was about. Verne was preparing for one big leap, a swing of his gun to knock the Black Bat into oblivion, and then would come the more leisurely and far safer operation of killing an unconscious man. Kempin was getting set to charge, gun or no gun.

The Black Bat's abnormal hearing enabled him to detect Verne's soft footfall. He was close behind now but still, in turning, the Black Bat might startle the man sufficiently so that his trigger finger would automatically go to work. It was better to let him swing the gun, try to move with it and avoid the full force of the blow, and then let Kempin take over for a second or two.

The silence became eerie. Once Kempin's chair squeaked as he pushed himself hard against it. Verne's breathing, raspy until now, became one long hissing intake of breath as he wound up for the blow. The Black Bat heard the starting swish of the descending gun butt, saw Kempin start to come out of the chair and the Black Bat suddenly let himself go limp and at the same time jerked his head to one side.

It should have worked if the slightest degree of luck had been with the Black Bat. But it wasn't, and when he ducked, he moved into the path of the descending gun barrel. But the Black Bat's knees were caving as the blow fell so that he absorbed only part of the force. It was enough to send him to the floor, stunning him momentarily.

There was a shout. It sounded distant to the Black Bat's ears. Kempin had moved into action. Verne shouted something. There was a thud as two big bodies collided, and then a gun crashed to the floor beside the Black Bat. There was another shout heard but dimly, quick steps, and the opening of a door.

The Black Bat's spinning wits steadied a bit. He supported himself with one hand flat on the floor and gave a heave. That sent him to his feet, and he swung toward the open door. Someone was out there, was coming back. His gun steadied. Kempin entered, saw the gun, and raised his arms slightly.



BUTCH

"It's all right, sir," he said. "I'm not a crook. That man made me sit there to trap you. I'm Jeff Kempin."

"What about Verne?" asked the Black Bat.

"He got away—unfortunately," said Kempin. "I managed to knock the gun out of his hand, but he was as slippery as an eel. When he reached the stairway he went down it in one jump. I tried to follow, but he disappeared on some landing. He knows this house; I don't. And then, too, I was worried about you. So I came back."

DELIBERATELY the Black Bat lowered the gun, walked over, and closed the door. His head was aching badly, but he turned the key and came over to sit opposite Kempin.

"You know who I am, of course," he said. "It happens I know you, also. You're the chap who rose to great glory in college football, became a pro and sold out to a syndicate of gamblers."

Kempin flushed. "I admit it," he said humbly. "I've admitted it publicly. Does that accursed episode have to haunt me for the rest of my life?"

"It does, Mr. Kempin, when you become mixed up with men like Verne," the Black Bat said flatly.

Kempin smiled wanly. "I can explain that," he said, "and I can prove what I say. Verne is a crook bent upon organizing a lot of wild boys in this section into a criminal mob. I work for a man who operates several boys' clubs. We do our best to keep the boys off the streets and have them exhaust that boundless energy they possess through games of sport instead of crime."

"Yes, I know that, but go on," the Black Bat urged.

"Verne has been careful about the type of boys he has approached, but he slipped a couple of times and talked to boys who had given up any ideas of going in for a life of crime. They came to me about it. I decided to pay Mr. Verne a visit and bat off his ears if necessary."

A chuckle came from behind the black hood.

"I came for the same purpose," said the Black Bat. "And motivated by an identical thought of making Verne stop promoting these boys. Perhaps you know more about this man than I do, being so

close to it. Will you answer some questions?"

"I'd be delighted—though talking to a man who wears a hood is a trifle disconcerting."

"Has Verne got himself a gang?"

"Not yet. He hasn't been at it long enough and he'd been simply feeling his way around. Joey Belding, the boy who was killed last night, did join forces with him. And I know Verne has been bringing in men who will act as fences and suppliers of guns. I tell you this thing is much more serious than people believe. Even the police."

"How long has Verne actually been at work doing this, Mr. Kempin?"

"About a week. No more than that, or I'd have heard about it."

Under the mask, the Black Bat frowned.

"But this wave of juvenile crime has been going on for a couple of months," he insisted. "Verne couldn't have started it then. Who did?"

CHAPTER XIII

The Murder of a Crook



KEMPIN crossed his legs and reached for a cigarette. He lit it, blew out a cloud of smoke, and wagged his head solemnly as apparently he finally made up his mind how to answer the Black Bat's questioned demand.

"Who started it?" he repeated. "A thousand

people. A hundred thousand people. It began when those boys were born. They opened their eyes in squalid rooms, saw their parents who were poor, and grew up to find they couldn't have as many lollipops as the kids who lived across the tracks. At eight or nine the comparison was even keener. Our boys didn't have footballs or baseballs or spending money. The others did, and there was natural resentment. At twelve and fourteen the resentment gave way to deeds. Something to change the situation. That meant getting money fast, even if by facing danger."

"Not a bad theory," the Black Bat said.

"I like it, and I'm beginning to like you. But back to the questions again. You work for a man named Downes who depends upon public donations to keep his clubs running. Have those donations been enough to keep them going?"

"There's never enough," Kempin said glumly. "It takes thousands and thousands of dollars. Lately, with this crime wave receiving publicity, and in the hope that something could be done to put a stop to it, there has been a little more than usual coming in, but not half enough."

"Do you think Downes may be profiting from this?" the Black Bat asked bluntly.

Kempin looked startled. "Why—why I never thought of that. He's such an ardent man it is difficult to associate him with such an idea."

"Capone and Dillinger were likewise ardent men," the Black Bat reminded him. "You can't judge a man by the zeal with which he accumulates money, even for others. Have you ever had the slightest occasion to think that Downes may be slipping a little into his pocket?"

Kempin bit his lip. "Well, he did buy a pretty nice car a couple of weeks ago," he admitted reluctantly, "and last month he leased a better apartment. I don't know how to answer your question about him. I can't make up my mind because I've never thought of such an angle before."

"Keep thinking about it," the Black Bat urged. "And keep your eyes and ears open. In my opinion this juvenile wave of crime didn't start spontaneously. There have been too many crimes. It was started under the guidance and supervision of someone. Perhaps the boys aren't even aware of that fact—and perhaps I'm wrong, too. But I have to find out."

"I'm with you all the way through, Black Bat," Kempin said. "Sure, I've been crooked. I wanted easy money and I paid for it—I still am paying—but I gained too, because my own ways showed me how easy it is for these boys to go wrong."

"Good night, Mr. Kempin," the Black Bat said. "I'll leave the way I came. Watch yourself in case Verne is hanging around. In fact you'd better stay here for five minutes, and if there is no

shooting or commotion outside by that time you can be fairly certain Verne isn't in the neighborhood. I'll look for him."

The Black Bat went down the fire-escape, gun ready for fast action. At the foot of it he made his way along the alley and stopped at the mouth of it, obscured by shadows and ready to signal Butch as he drove by.

When the coupé appeared, the Black Bat emerged and walked briskly toward the car. He no longer wore the hood, and attracted no attention from the few people who were walking along the street. As Butch pulled away, the Black Bat glanced around and saw Jeff Kempin hurriedly emerge from the building. The man was ashen-faced, and he was eagerly scanning the block as if looking for someone.

"Turn the next corner," the Black Bat ordered. "Then get out and go back to that building. You'll find Jeff Kempin outside there. Something must have gone wrong by the looks of him. Find out what it is, and then join me back here."

Butch was gone about five minutes. Before he returned, the Black Bat heard the first siren. It was followed by others as radio cars and larger police cars converged upon the neighborhood. Butch climbed behind the wheel and drove off in a hurry before he spoke.

"Kempin says that when he left the building and was walking down the steps, he found John Verne on the second floor landing," Butch reported. "He'd been stabbed through the back, and he was dead. I went up there. Kempin wasn't lying."

The Black Bat grunted in surprise and then in his mind tried to weigh the meaning of this murder. It was plain that Verne hadn't started this juvenile crime wave, but he planned to expedite and control it, to profit from the jobs pulled by boys under his command whom he exploited. Now he had been murdered, and the reason for that must be because someone else had the same idea and wanted no competition.

BUT somehow that didn't seem like an altogether satisfactory answer to the Black Bat. So far as he had been able to determine, the boys were not

splitting their spoils with anyone, and there was no controlling factor. They were simply on their own, composed of individual gangs that were jealous of one another and constantly fighting. With someone to direct their efforts such rivalry would not have been tolerated.

There still was something wrong with the overall picture. The Black Bat couldn't put a finger on the solution. He required more facts. Perhaps there was no overseer of crime at all, and no real motive beyond the desire of those boys to make money easily and quickly. They were simply emulating one another.

A gang, say, had made a killing from their thefts. Its members had plenty of money and were cocky in the knowledge they had got away with something. The other gangs soon learned what had happened and began a campaign of crime on their own. A thing like that could snowball into immense proportions.

And yet—there was the murder of Joey Belding. That murder had been committed for only one reason—so that Joey could not talk if he were locked up on a charge of murder without any hope of escaping the chair unless he sang. Such a motive indicated a crime czar taking precautions to protect himself. Now Verne, a professional crook, had been killed. That too indicated an overall leader of these boys. But if he did exist, he stayed so far in the background as to be untouchable and invisible. But what was his motive? Did he mean to let the boys keep their loot for the time being, until he had lined up something big? Perhaps that was the answer. It could be. But still and all, the Black Bat realized that he was a long way from the truth. The only real lead he had considered valuable at all was that of Attorney Rowan having been hired to protect the arrested boys and get them out on bail. Rowan had sworn that Verne paid him to do that. A logical and probably truthful answer, but now Verne was dead. Had Attorney Rowan taken steps to eliminate Verne so that he could take over a highly profitable racket himself?

Or was it this reformer, Frank Downes, who could be profiting from the crime wave indirectly? By using it to get more money for his boys' clubs, a certain

amount of which would slide into his own pockets.

Or was Jeff Kempin a good enough actor to convince the Black Bat that his only interest in these delinquent boys was to try to help them? Kempin had already proved himself a cheat by selling out his team some years ago. Perhaps his reformation was not as complete as he insisted it was, or had never been a reformation at all. Many boys would follow him. He was in a perfect position to select those who had the nerve to handle crimes, and to use the others as a cover-up for himself.

The Black Bat made a quick trip to his home and, once there, when he had become Tony Quinn again, he spent the rest of the evening studying the copious files on the juvenile crime wave. Somewhere, buried in that maze of facts, might be the answer to what he wanted to know.

At ten-thirty Captain McGrath phoned and reported that half a dozen cars had been taken for joy rides by boys in the neighborhood of Oak Avenue where the Taylor family lived. There had been three apartment robberies, obviously the work of boys, and one gang fight which had not been broken up until the arrival of an emergency squad.

"Those crazy kids will start killing each other one of these days," McGrath said glumly. "We took away two pairs of brass knucks from a couple of kids. Another carried a knife big enough to commit murder with. The whole thing is getting out of hand, Tony."

"I know," Quinn said. "Next thing we'll have civic committees waiting on us with wild suggestions as to what we must do. Frankly, I don't know where to begin. It isn't like breaking up a single gang of hoodlums. These boys have formed a score of gangs. Keep me advised if anything big breaks."

He felt glum himself as he hung up, but cheered himself with the thought that tomorrow Carol Baldwin would begin her Settlement House work. Perhaps she could dig something up. She would be in a good position to ferret out facts. . . .

WHEN Carol left her home the following morning, she paid no atten-

tion to three boys who were busily engaged in playing stick ball on the street. She was not at all suspicious of the boy who got into the subway right behind her and stayed close while she clung to a strap and wished she had taken a taxi instead.

Another boy, hands stuck in his pockets, sauntered along behind her soon after she left the subway and he saw her enter the Settlement House where Tony Quinn had managed to get her a job. She reported to the woman in charge and was, by pre-arrangement, placed at the receptionist's desk in the lobby.

There Carol had a splendid opportunity to observe the people who came for help, and she could question them before sending them to the proper people for guidance. Before the day was over, she had made up a good list of names and addresses where families reported boys getting out of hand.

She also discovered the great work these charitable institutions were accomplishing, and with so little with which to do it. This Settlement House was a clearing house for all sorts of troubles. Workers brought estranged couples together, guided broken families toward a firmer road of recovery, arranged for the sick to be cared for.

Carol was marveling over all these things when an undersized boy stepped up to the desk, whipped off an old cap and shuffled his feet shyly.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'd like it if you would come see my mother. She and Pop had a fight and he left. Now Ma is awful sick."

"I'll send someone right away," Carol said.

"Ma says she wants you," the boy insisted. "She was here this morning and she took a liking to you."

Carol eyed the boy sharply, then berated herself for being suspicious of him. How could anyone around here know what her true mission was? She had already learned that these poor people had as many idiosyncrasies as the wealthy. If this boy's mother wanted her and her alone, no one else would do.

"Give me your name and address and I'll be at your home right after five o'clock," Carol said. "Will that be all right?"

"Gosh—that's swell! Ma'll be tickled. I better go tell her. The address is Oak Avenue. Number One-twenty-one. The last tenement on the right hand side of the first floor."

CHAPTER XIV

House of Fun—and Death

HURRYING away after he had given instructions about how to reach his home, the boy left Carol again, entertaining a certain amount of doubt. But how, she asked herself, could anyone know that she was operating against the juvenile gangs? She did bring back to mind that swaggering, insulting young man named Chet Conklin, but she had got away from him without arousing any suspicion.

But had she? Because then she remembered how he had clumsily held her while he prodded her handbag and perhaps discovered she carried a gun.

Carol was taking no chances. She called Silk at Tony Quinn's office, and outlined to him her problems and doubts. Silk suggested what he hoped was a solution.

"It would be helpful if they did take some action against you, Carol," he said. "But don't you head into it alone. If you do find yourself in a spot, say that you work for Butch's private detective agency, and that you were hired to check on conditions in that part of town. I'll

have Butch stand by ready to help, if you need him."

"That's a relief," Carol told him. "I'm really worried, though I don't know why. Perhaps it's because I've had a strange feeling that I'm being watched. Silly, I know, but I haven't been able to shake it off."

"Stick with the private detective yarn," Silk advised. "I'll tell Tony and if there is any change of plan someone will call you up before it's time for you to go to that tenement."

Carol went back to her desk, glanced at the boy who was sitting on one of the waiting room benches, and started to work again. She forgot the boy so completely she never even noticed him leave.

At five-thirty she ate a quick dinner at a nearby restaurant, and then walked the eight or nine blocks to Oak Avenue. It was the same street on which Walter Taylor and his mother had lived, but while Carol's mission took her to the other end of the street, there was the same squalor.

She found the address easily. It was one of those square wooden structures originally meant to house eight families in its four floors. But the larger tenements had been chopped up until now more than twenty-four families lived here.

Carol found the name she was looking for tacked to the wall in the hallway. The tenement was listed as 1D. She walked down the dismal hall, glad that she'd had her dinner before coming here. The assortment of cooking odors would have killed any appetite.

She knocked on the door. From somewhere deep inside the tenement came a

[Turn page]

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THREE WAYS

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voice telling her to enter. She turned the knob, stepped into an empty tenement, and instantly realized her hunch had been correct. This was a trap! Someone turned on a light and she saw Chet Conklin leaning carelessly against the opposite doorway. There was a cheap revolver in his hand.

"Well," he said with obvious relish, "how did your husband like those cigars? The ones you were supposed to have put in the check-room locker and which I got by mistake. Remember? Lady, do I look like a sap?"

"I'd hate to tell you what you look like to me," Carol said shortly, "but a sap would be the kindest description. What do you want?"

"First of all," he drawled, "let go of that handbag and kick it across the floor toward me. I get suspicious of ladies who carry guns and you had one in the bag last night. What'll it be, sister—a bullet through your leg or do I get the handbag?"

Carol dropped the bag and kicked it across the floor. Chet scooped it up, never taking his eyes off her. He opened the clasp, dumped the contents on the floor and appropriated Carol's money and the pearl-handled automatic.

Chet straightened up, and his eyes and voice grew hard.

"Okay," he said. "Now where is the dough you took from the locker before you played your little game on me?"

"I don't know anything about money in that locker," Carol said.

"We'll talk about that later." He shrugged. "For right now suppose you tell me how come you got a job at the Settlement House so easy. And why?"

Carol decided there was no point to stalling. "Very well, if you must know," she said sharply, "I work for a private detective."

"That makes sense," Chet said, too sweetly. "What private eye, and what's he supposed to do for who?"

Carol gestured hopelessly with her hands. "My boss' name is O'Leary," she told him. "My job is to keep my eyes open and do some spot checking on juvenile crime that's been going on in this section. I don't know why nor who pays Mr. O'Leary."

"But he'd know," Chet said. "Walk into the next room. Believe it or not there's a phone there. Most of these tenements don't have such luxuries, but the man who used to live here was a bookie and he had to have a phone. Get on it and tell your boss I want to see him."

"That would be a pleasure," Carol said. "He can handle a dozen runts like you."

CHET flushed a dull red and gestured with the gun he held.

"Nobody asked for wise cracks," he growled, "and I can take care of myself. Go on—do as I say."

The phone was on the floor in the adjoining empty room, but it was still in working order. Carol dialed the number of Butch's office while Chet stood directly behind her, memorizing the number.

"Mr. O'Leary," Carol said into the phone when Butch answered, "I'm in trouble. One of these boys down here drew me into a trap. Now he demands that you come down and see him—or else."

"Put the guy on the phone," Butch said in a roaring voice, purposely loud enough so that Chet could hear.

Chet pushed Carol aside, turned the gun on her again, and took the instrument.

"I got the doll," he said roughly. "What happens to her depends on you. The address is One-twenty-one Oak Avenue, and you be here in an hour and a half. No sooner and no later. If you don't come, this girl will wish you had."

"I'll be there," Butch said gruffly, "but understand this. I'll break you in little pieces if she is hurt in any way, shape, or form!"

Chet did not answer. He hung up, scowled, and put the phone back on the floor. He ordered Carol to turn around. She obeyed because there was nothing else she could do. Chet promptly fastened her wrists with adhesive tape, swung her about and plastered more of it across her lips. He stuffed his gun into a pocket, took her arm, and piloted her through the vacant tenement to the back exit.

A car was waiting at the rear of the place. He pushed her into the front seat, got in himself and drove out to the street.

There he turned left, and settled himself as if for a long ride.

"You been smart so far," he told Carol. "If your boss has any brains at all, maybe we can work this out and you won't get hurt. We'll pass through traffic. Keep your head down so nobody sees the tape on your mouth because if we're stopped, I'll have nothing left to do but kill you. I don't like to kill pretty women."

Carol bent her head in meek submission. She wished that Silk had thought of a better scheme. This one didn't seem as though it could have a happy ending.

Chet didn't seem to mind if she saw where he was taking her. At first she was puzzled by that, and then she realized that they were heading straight for a small amusement park, a miniature Coney Island which had been gradually sinking into oblivion. The season was over, the park closed up, but when they reached it, Chet appeared to know exactly where he wanted to go.

He drove the car down a midway which was still flaunting faded banners that moved lazily in the breeze. At the end of the midway he turned left, passed a Ferris wheel, a roller coaster that looked definitely unsafe, and finally pulled up in front of a weird looking place.

It was all sham, just like the other buildings, but it had towers and minarets fashioned of flimsy wood. The gilt and paint were worn off, but a large sign had been painted above gigantic heads of men and women who were depicted as laughing heartily with wide-open mouths. Above them were huge letters forming the words "FUN HOUSE."

"In there," Chet ordered crisply as he stopped the car and shoved her out. "It's a good spot to keep you, and you won't get out." He glowered at her. "Look, do you move or do I slug you one and drag you inside?"

Carol spoke volumes with her eyes, and Chet grinned. He took her arm and led her to the entrance. It was padlocked, but he had a key. Once inside Carol found herself faced by a maze of mirrors. They reflected her image in a dozen different places.

Just inside the door Chet said, "Stop right where you are. I'm going to blindfold you. Then do exactly as I say, and

nobody gets hurt."

He used his handkerchief to cover her eyes and gave her a slight push. She nudged one of the mirrors with her shoulder and Chet said, "Turn left." She blundered against another mirrored wall and changed direction to the right at Chet's orders.

Her shoulders grew sore from bumping into the walls, but finally Chet placed a hand on her shoulder and she came to a stop. He removed the blindfold and for a moment Carol thought she had gone mad.

SHE was in a large room of some kind, much like a theatre. Chet had lighted a bull's-eye lantern and its beam was turned toward one of the walls. This wall was composed of a clown's head, mouth cavernously open, and huge teeth formed what seemed to be a fence. Beyond those whitewashed teeth was darkness.

Chet laughed. "Cute place, ain't it? Now listen. There are only two ways in and out of this room. One is through that maze of mirrors and I'll block that. You're not strong enough to break the mirrors down, so you needn't waste any breath or strength trying it. The other way is by passing between the clown's teeth. People who take that route get themselves shocked as they try to slip through. The teeth are made of steel and we charge 'em with just enough juice to make the customers jump."

Carol gurgled behind the adhesive gag, as if she was asking him to remove it. He shook his head.

"Nothing doing, babe." He laughed at her. "Your mouth stays shut and your hands stay taped behind you. Now get this. The juice running through those teeth can be stepped up and before I leave, I'm stepping it up to a point where you'll be knocked cold if you touch them. Wait—I'll show you what I mean."

He left Carol standing there and disappeared somewhere in the darkness behind the bull's-eye lantern. When he returned, he was carrying a short piece of metal. He turned Carol until she faced the clown's teeth and then he tossed the bit of metal at them. There was a bluish flash. Chet hadn't been lying

about those teeth.

"Pretty good, huh?" He grinned at her and his voice was taunting. "Now you can try all night to get out of here—and you won't. You can yell your head off if you find a way to get that tape off—which you won't. There's nobody around here for miles. I'm going to see your boss, and if he tells me what I want to know, you go free. If he doesn't, you can rot here, for all I care."

Chet did leave the bull's-eye lantern burning when he left her. Carol waited for five minutes after his departure and then she made her way to the mirror maze. After a dozen steps, she knew that she was lost. In one pocket there seemed absolutely no way out and she decided that Chet had sealed this somehow. Carol kicked at the mirrors and succeeded in cracking a couple of them, but they had been installed in solid wall. There was no breaking them down.

She found her way back to the main room after a while, and after another battle with the mirrors which bruised her shoulders. The room was provided with hard benches where customers could relax and watch the antics of those who chose to escape between the teeth of the enormous clown head. She sat down and went to work on the tape binding her hands.

CHAPTER XV

Butch Lands One



FIRST Butch phoned Silk Kirly and told him about Carol's predicament. Quinn came on the wire.

"Do as you were ordered to do, Butch," he said. "Go see this fellow and find out what he wants. Insist that you can't tell him who your client is, but cagily

admit it is some real estate combine."

"Okay," Butch said. "But what do I do about Carol? He'll be too wise to have her there. Can I bust him enough to make him talk?"

"I'm afraid he might not, no matter

what you did to him," Quinn said. "His ace in the hole is Carol. His hold over you is the fact that he can harm her. If you scare him enough or make him sore enough, that's what he may do. When he goes to Carol, he'll leave a trail. Give him no satisfaction. On second thought, poke him one if you like. Make him go to her. Silk and I will be waiting to follow. It's an awful chance, but it's the only way to make him lead us to her."

"I'll poke him all right," Butch growled. "Just give him a sample of what he'll get if Carol is hurt. I could be at the address he gave me in fifteen minutes, but he said an hour and a half. Shall I go right down?"

"No," said Tony Quinn. "He wants time to hide Carol. Let him have it. Do exactly as he says until he starts questioning you. Pay especial attention to those questions because in asking them he may give us a hint of what this is all about. Good luck, Butch, if you ever had any in your life."

Butch spent the rest of the hour and a half he had been told to wait pacing the floor of his office. He looked at his watch a score of times and the minutes crawled. Finally he jammed on his hat, hurried out of the building, hailed a taxi, and was driven to Oak Street. He entered the tenement house precisely on schedule, located the right rooms and knocked on the door. He was told to come in.

Butch opened the door and stepped inside. It was dark. He sensed a trap the moment his foot was over the threshold, but before he could make a move, a gun was thrust against the small of his back.

"Freeze, Samson," Chet said. "I'm going to frisk you. Then we'll have some light and some talk."

Chet found no gun, but he did take Butch's leather wallet. He turned on the lights then, revealing the empty apartment. Keeping the gun trained on Butch, he opened the wallet and glanced at Butch's private detective license. He snapped the wallet closed and threw it at Butch.

"Okay," he said. "It looks as if the doll was telling the truth."

"I'll tell you some truths too," Butch growled. "If she's been harmed, you'll wish you'd never been born!"

Chet smiled. "Relax, pal. You're an awful big guy. Under most circumstances I'd be scared skinny of you—but this gun I'm holding on you, and the fact that I've got the doll you're so worried about, sort of whittles you down to my size. Answer my questions and I'll tell you where she is. Clam up on me, and you'll never see her again, and that's for sure."

"What do you want to know?" Butch asked angrily.

"Who hired you to prowl around here?" said Chet.

"I can't answer that," Butch said.

"You can answer anything, chum," Chet said easily. "Forget ethics. They don't go now. Suppose we start this way. I looked over the dame's handbag. Besides having a fancy little gat in it she had a paper with the names of a lot of kids on it. And their addresses. Kids who have been in a little trouble."

"Kids like you," Butch told him sneeringly. "Kids who think they're as smart as grownups."

Chet laughed. "Look, Samson, get wise to yourself. An eighteen-year-old boy today knows as much as a fifty-year-old man knew twenty years ago. I'm a kid myself, if you want to think it, but I don't feel like a kid or talk like one and I've got more ambitions than a boy. So I'm asking you—why the list of names and addresses?"

"My client wanted them," Butch said. "He wants to know the boys who belong to these gangs, and where they live."

"Why?" Chet asked quickly.

"I don't know," Butch shrugged. "Why should I? I do as I'm told and what I'm paid to do without asking questions. I was told to get this list and I'm getting it. That's all."

Chet nodded. "Okay. Now who hired you?" he demanded coldly. "And no stalling. Not unless you never want to see the doll again."

"I'll say this much and no more," Butch said with finality. "A real estate outfit that owns property around here is back of me."

"That's a lie!" Chet shouted. "You're lying, and I know it! If you lie about that, you lie about everything. Get back against the wall. I ought to put a couple of slugs into you, chum. Just for luck. Maybe I will."

BUTCH realized that the time for talking was over. He hoped with all his heart that Silk and the Black Bat were already posted, prepared to take up Chet's trail. But Butch only shrugged again.

"All right, wise guy," he said. "You know I don't want anything to happen to that girl. The name of the people who hired me is in my pocket. Here, I'll show you."

Butch reached for his inner pocket and the gun came up promptly to cover him.

"No, you don't!" Chet shouted. "Keep your hands where they are. I'll see what's in that pocket."

He moved up to Butch, thrust the gun against his stomach and yanked open his coat. Butch had already seen that the gun was a cheap revolver of the hammer type, and knew how to deal with it. He brought up his right hand quickly. His fingers closed around the gun, his thumb pressing against the hammer and holding it down when Chet tried to pull the trigger.

Butch's left hand wound around Chet's neck and lifted him clear off the floor. He held him that way until the struggling victim was half choked and let go of the gun, which clattered to the floor. Butch put him down then.

"I hate to smear kids," he said ominously, "but you're no kid. You packed too much bad living into your years ever to have been a kid. And I don't think you have the girl. She's too smart for you. I think you're bluffing, so I'm going to call the cops. Then, if you are telling the truth and the girl dies, you'll take a fast trip to the chair. These things can work both ways. First, though, I'm going to paste you one. That's what should have happened to you a few years ago."

Butch poised one fist while Chet's eyes grew wide in frantic terror. He started to scream, but the fist moved too fast and cut off the cry. Chet's head snapped back, he stumbled when Butch let go of him, then crashed to the floor.

Butch dusted off his hands as if they had been contaminated. He bent over Chet, searched him carefully and found Carol's gun. The little rat wasn't bluffing, though Butch never had seriously believed he was. From here on Carol's welfare depended on Chet's reaction, and the

trailing abilities of Silk and the Black Bat. Butch's part was done.

He left Chet lying where he had fallen and hurried out of the building, looked around the half deserted street, heard a sibilant whisper from the doorway of the next house, and recognized it. Butch promptly joined Silk.

"How did it go?" Silk asked swiftly.

"He's got Carol all right," Butch said seriously. "I conked him one, but he ought to snap out of it in about five minutes."

"Good," Silk said. "The Black Bat is in the coupe down the street. Around the corner you'll find one of the big cars. Go get it and be ready to travel. Chet has a car of his own parked behind this house. When he leaves, the Black Bat and I will follow him. You follow us. We don't know what we're getting into and we might need a battering ram like you."

"If I only didn't have to pull my punches!" Butch groaned. "But I can't slug a kid hard, no matter how tough he is. That guy in there asked me a lot of questions. Maybe they mean something."

"We'll talk about them later—after Carol is safe," said Silk. "Beat it now, and if we get thrown off the trail, you try to pick it up. Remember that Carol's life may depend on how we handle this."

"I'm not likely to forget," Butch said, deadly serious.

It was fifteen minutes before Chet's car nosed out of the driveway and turned into the street. He drove it slowly while he studied the parked cars, but he saw nothing alarming in any of them, and he couldn't afford to investigate thoroughly. Chet didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but it couldn't have been more than a minute or two, the way he reasoned. Otherwise that giant of a private detective would have been back with cops.

Chet's jaw was sore, but his vanity had suffered the most. In that weasel mind of his was the idea of revenge, and the only way he knew to administer it was through the girl. Before he reached the next avenue, he knew exactly what he was going to do.

Chet had no more than headed out when Silk and the Black Bat pulled away

from the curb to take up the chase. It was going to be a ticklish business, with so much dependent upon the outcome that any thought of failure was impossible. While Silk drove, the Black Bat's gloved hands were clasped tight as he fought to control his nerves.

AT TIMES like this he hated himself for letting Carol get into such predicaments, though saner reasoning told him he couldn't keep her out of it, not with her devotion to the cause she had made her life's purpose. And he well knew she was more than willing to assume as many risks as the rest of the Black Bat's little band.

Chet was jumpy, and showed it by taking corners on two wheels, then suddenly pulling over to the curb. He taxed every effort Silk could summon not to give himself away. Once they were almost tripped up when Chet carefully estimated a traffic light, reached the intersection and came to an abrupt stop. He could have made the light easily, but he chose not to so that the two or three cars behind him would either have come abreast of his car or stop directly behind him.

Silk didn't pull alongside, but nosed closer to the curb. When the light changed, he started jackrabbit fashion and got ahead of Chet. Butch, lagging a block behind, realized what had happened and it was then that he became the pursuer.

Silk and the Black Bat rounded one city block, picked up Butch's car and clung to that until they realized that Chet might be getting suspicious again. Then they reversed positions once more.

"He's a wily scoundrel, Silk," the Black Bat said. "He can't be much more than twenty, but he acts like a man who has been doing this sort of thing for twice that many years."

"These kids learn fast," Silk grumbled. "Especially the things they shouldn't learn. You know, I've got an idea this punk is heading for that cheap amusement park a couple of miles farther on. It would be a good spot to hide Carol. The park is practically abandoned after the season closes."

"I know the place," the Black Bat said.

"After each poor season there are always a number of unexplained fires there. They've been brought to the attention of my office."

CHAPTER XVI

Black Bat's Trick



JUST a few moments later Chet had driven onto the midway of the deserted amusement park, and Silk was forced to remain far behind and switch off his lights. If Chet should see any car following him along this abandoned strip, he would know he was be-

ing trailed. He turned off at the end of the midway, and while he hadn't seen any signs of being shadowed for the past five or six miles, he had been fairly certain there was someone after him prior to that.

Chet prided himself on being smart enough to shake anybody off, but he played it cagey anyway. After he turned off the midway, the street slanted downward to its end. Chet put the car into neutral, opened the door and leaped out. While the unoccupied car continued on its way down the slope, Chet dashed toward the House of Fun. He was lurking behind the wooden box office when the car containing Silk and the Black Bat came into view. Behind them a short distance came Butch's car.

"Where is that guy going?" Silk asked the Black Bat. "There's nothing at the end of that street."

"Don't stop!" the Black Bat said sharply. He was leaning forward, his amazing eyesight penetrating the darkness easily. "Chet isn't in that car. It's coasting down of its own accord, and Chet is probably hidden somewhere watching us. Pretend to fall into his little game, but when we pass the children's park, I'm getting out. He won't see me there—it's too dark."

The Black Bat hit the ground without making too much noise. While Silk kept following the abandoned car, the Black Bat hurried back toward the end of the

midway. He came to a stop and listened intently. Somewhere in the distance his acute hearing picked up the crunch of tires on dirt. That would be Butch pulling up and trying to figure out where everyone had gone.

There was no other sound. The Black Bat surveyed the low structures forming part of the amusement area. All of them were in total darkness and blanketed in a weird silence. The Black Bat knew that he could make no move until Chet blundered somehow, for invading all those buildings would only alarm the youthful crook and force him to take swift action. Since Chet had pulled that trick of letting an unpiloted car draw his pursuers, he was either highly suspicious of being followed or knew it for a fact. Which would make Chet Conklin wily indeed. It behooved the Black Bat to be all the more wily himself.

The Black Bat kept turning slowly, so that his strange eyes, which could see so well in the dark, scanned every building and all the spaces between them. Carol was concealed somewhere near here—he was certain of it—but there was nothing to give him the slightest clue as to where.

Then suddenly he saw the dull red glow. It was dull for not more than one full minute, however, before it became crimson and alive as flames ate at the flimsy wood and canvas shell of the Fun House.

The Black Bat started running. Silk was coming up fast and Butch pounded closer from somewhere farther back. There was no longer any need for silence. Chet Conklin had pulled the trick for his revenge. Speed was essential now, for Carol would be somewhere in the middle of that fire!

Carol had heard Chet making his way through the maze of mirrors. She jumped up quickly and moved toward the great open mouth of the clown that formed one wall and the only other exit from this terrible place. She was careful, though, not to touch the shafts which composed the clown's teeth. Chet had demonstrated that they held either a lethal amount of electricity or at least enough to stun a person who touched them into unconsciousness.

She had her back against the wall be-

side the gaping mouth when Chet rushed into the cavernous room. He held that nickel-plated revolver, which he had held on her before. The bull's-eye lantern was turned in such a direction that it illuminated Carol. She'd been unable to remove either the adhesive across her lips or the wide bands of it binding her wrists, and was helpless.

Chet's leer at her was inhuman. He appeared as though he liked what he was going to do.

"Okay, lady," he said. "What happens now ain't my fault or yours. That big gorilla of a boss of yours smacked me and went for the cops. But I got away from him. And the only way to teach a dumb guy like that a good lesson is to do exactly what he was told would happen. That means lights out for you!"

CAROL wanted to scream. Her chest filled, her eyes grew wide in horror, but she couldn't cry out. That adhesive was too perfectly affixed. All she could do was watch Chet blow out the bull's-eye lantern and turn on a flash. He unscrewed the cap from the base of the lantern, swished the remaining kerosene about, then pulled out a knife. He walked over to some canvas decorations, cut off sizeable chunks and wadded them into more or less compact wads.

He poured kerosene upon each one of them, struck a match and touched it to the first ball of fuel-soaked canvas. When it started to burn, he hurled it in Carol's direction. It was unnecessary for him to select good spots for these flaming wads to fall, for the whole place seemed to be flimsy enough to begin burning anywhere at the slightest chance.

Carol, her back against the wall that formed the clown's head, tried to stamp out one of the flaming wads, but only burned her shoes and stockings. Others were falling about her. With horror-filled eyes she saw the flames that licked at the ancient walls and the heavy coats of inflammable paint on them. This place, she knew, as frightful death stared her in the face, would be one solid mass of fire in a matter of minutes! And there was no escape.

Chet laughed idiotically, uproariously, as he hurled the last wad of fire. Then he raced for the twisting corridors of the

mirror maze. Carol stumbled after him. Behind her the fire was beginning to acquire a roaring sound.

She reached the mirrors, now redly illuminated by the flames. She found herself in a pocket, but managed to get out of it, only to enter another. The flames were lapping at the wooden benches now and they might quickly flash across the entire floor. When they did, she would be lost. Already her skin felt seared with the heat, and smoke was filling her lungs, choking her.

She could not guess it, but outside, the Black Bat was speeding toward the Fun House, gun in his fist. He didn't see Chet emerge and duck around the place to make his escape. Even if he had, the Black Bat would have done nothing more about stopping the man than pumping a few bullets his way. He sensed that Carol was inside this burning building, and nothing else mattered.

He blundered into the first turn of the corridor of mirrors and here his abnormal sight and his other extra keen senses were of no benefit. Every time he turned, he struck a mirrored wall. His own image was reflected back at him from a dozen positions and now the mirrors were beginning to reflect something else. The ominous redness of fire!

Silk reached him in a moment or so, and became just as confused. Then Butch arrived and the huge man took in the situation quickly. He elbowed Silk and the Black Bat to one side, drew away as much as possible, and hurled himself at one of the mirrors.

They were all set in wooden frames and backed by wooden slats, but they were never meant to withstand an attack like this. One mirror splintered. Butch tore at the frame with his hands, paying no attention when the glass cut his flesh. He cleared an opening and, five feet ahead, saw the backs of more mirrors.

Without hesitation he charged these and knocked one completely over, only to find that he was in another of those tricky passages. Silk and the Black Bat joined in the next attack and together they sent down another wall.

"Why doesn't she call out?" Silk panted. "Let us know where to find her! Unless she is—"

"Don't say it!" the Black Bat shouted.

"Don't even think it! She's got to be all right!"

Butch was bulldozing his way along and finally the last of the mirrored walls was smashed away. Fire shot through at them and there, silhouetted against the background of flames, was Carol cowering as close as possible to the floor where there still was a minimum of cooler air.

Butch gave a great shout, covered his face with one crooked arm, and plowed through fire and falling debris. He bent, scooped up Carol and tucked her under one arm like a doll. Exiting from the place was an easy matter, for he had already cleared an open way. Glass crunched under his massive feet and the fire was pursuing him along this corridor through which plenty of draft swept and encouraged the flames. But nothing could stop Butch now, neither fire nor flame nor cataclysm of nature. Carol was his only thought.

CHAPTER XVII

Men of Murder?



OUTSIDE of the burning Fun House, Butch kept going until Silk and the Black Bat joined him. Then he set Carol on her feet and the three of them quickly removed the adhesive. Carol sagged in the Black Bat's arms. She couldn't talk. Swollen lips and tongue pre-

vented that. The Black Bat ordered Silk to bring up the car in a hurry. It was imperative to get Carol home and under treatment as swiftly as possible.

They wasted no time hunting Chet. That wily individual would be far away by now, probably smacking his lips as he looked back at the fire which was throwing a red glow against the cloudy sky.

The Black Bat and his aides made a record trip home and, in the Black Bat's laboratory, Carol quickly regained the use of her voice. In a few words, between sips of cold milk which Silk had brought to her, she told the facts of her capture.

The Black Bat frowned darkly, walked the floor for a few moments, and then

stepped behind a screen to change into the clothing of Tony Quinn. He rejoined them and looked inquiringly at Butch for his story.

"I did exactly as Silk told me to do," Butch said. "I let that Chet do most of the talking before I slugged him. He wanted to know who hired me, as a private eye, and what I was supposed to do."

"Good," Quinn said. "What did you tell him?"

"I hedged, to make it look better," Butch explained. "I told him my clients wanted a check on all the kids who belonged to the gangs in that neighborhood, but said I didn't know why, except that it had something to do with juvenile delinquency. Then he demanded the name of my client. Not having any, I couldn't make up actual names, so I said it was some real estate outfit."

"That was excellent thinking," Quinn said. "What did Chet say to that?"

"He told me I was a liar," Butch growled.

"Promptly, as if he knew it to be a fact?" Quinn prodded. "Or did he stall, to gain time to think of something?"

"He called me a liar almost before I was finished," said Butch. "He knew I was lying all right."

"Silk," Quinn said, "first thing in the morning I want a complete file on all the property within a dozen blocks of that Oak Avenue address. I want to know all the owners. You can pick that information up at City Hall. Butch, let me have that list of juveniles you made up. Then get on the trail of a Frank Downes who operates several boys' clubs. Find out what makes him tick."

"And what about me?" Carol asked.

"You've had enough for the time being," Quinn said gently. "Your assignment is to go home and rest. And be careful, Carol. That Chet Conklin evidently picked up your trail from your apartment. Watch especially for boys whom he might send to keep you under observation."

"For once, Tony," Carol sighed, "I agree that I have had enough. But tomorrow I want to get back into this. I'll be all right by then. All day long yesterday I talked with mothers and fathers whose boys have gone wrong. Something leads

them on, Tony—or somebody. You can't tell me all that crime isn't organized, or at least handled by one man. Whether or not he profits makes no difference. I'm positive that such a person actually exists, though what his motives are, I can't determine."

Quinn clasped hands behind his head and leaned back on the davenport.

"We had an excellent prospective villain in John Verne," he observed, "but he got himself killed. The murder of Verne is highly interesting. He meant to organize the boys—no doubt about that—but it was a very recent decision on his part. Verne simply recognized the profits he might make and moved in. So did a certain gun seller. Attorney Rowan accepted Verne for a client, but now that Verne is dead, Rowan must be out of the picture."

"Then whom have we left?" Carol asked. "Are you suspicious of any one at all?"

"Not many," Quinn admitted. "There's the ex-football player, Jeff Kempin, who already has proved he once had crooked tendencies—and what proof is there he hasn't got them now? Though I will admit he has tried to make up for his remissions. If he is to be believed, that is. The boys flock to Kempin and he could be an excellent organizer either for crime or against it."

"Sir," Silk broke in, "I've been thinking about that Taylor boy we helped. He reformed almost too fast. He's not exactly a boy, either. Why couldn't someone like him lead those other boys?"

"He could," Quinn confessed, "except for one thing. I've had one of Captain McGrath's boys watching Walter. For two reasons. If Walter is honest, he may need some protection. If he isn't, then a detective on his trail would soon find it out. Since Captain McGrath's man hasn't reported anything interesting, we must assume that Walter is doing exactly as I told him—laying low. But we didn't run out of suspects with Kempin."

SILK asked a question that brought a nod from Quinn.

"Who, then?" Silk wanted to know.

"Frank Downes, for one," explained Quinn. "His living depends upon how much he derives from charity to support his

clubs. He could make it a point to run them efficiently, chiseling here and there, perhaps, but on the surface little would show that he was reaping a large margin of crooked profit. What we seem to lack is motive. Nobody appears to be getting rich by the activities of these boys. They keep all their loot, from what I discover. But still, though we can't guess it, Downes could have a motive."

"What about that real estate man who offered to replace Mrs. Taylor's wrecked furniture and provide her and Walter with a better home?" Carol asked. "It seems to me that he made his offer a trifle late. As the owner of property right in the heart of all this brand-new juvenile crime, he must have known what was going on."

Quinn sat suddenly erect. "And there, Carol," he said, "you have expressed precisely how I feel about Mr. Philip J. Alvin. His suddenly acquired zeal to help seems forced—just a bit. But what would he gain? There we're up against it again."

"As a matter-of-fact," Silk said, "he has everything to lose. People aren't going to keep on living in a section that breeds crime, money or no money. Not even parents who might otherwise be lax in supervising their children. They'll realize that if the neighborhood makes their kids go wrong, the thing to do is move away from it as quickly as possible."

Quinn's eyes grew narrow, his lips cold and straight. For a moment he said nothing. Then he put into words what was in his mind.

"You've expressed a thought that's been far back in my mind ever since this all began, Silk," he said thoughtfully. "So many things have happened that I've found no time to develop it. But I intend to—in the morning. . . ."

McGrath was Quinn's first visitor at the office in the morning. The Captain dropped into a chair and spoke with some amusement.

"Usually," he said, "you size up people accurately, Tony, but this time you slipped."

"So?" Quinn pursed his lips. "Just how?"

"Remember Walter Taylor, the young fellow you just about sponsored?" asked McGrath. "Well, I think I told you I had one of my men keep tabs on him. Mostly

because you and I both thought some of Taylor's former associates might beat him up, as they did his mother. The detective trailing him reports that young Taylor has been hanging around the Oak Avenue area again, in pool rooms and juke joints. He's been seeing all his old pals and explaining to them how it was all a mistake. He says that the only reason you took him away was because you wanted an identification of his kid brother, and he hasn't spilled a thing."

Quinn grew serious. "Thanks, Mac, for telling me," he murmured. "I'd hoped I was right about Walter, but I suppose I can't be."

McGrath nodded. "Yeah, the kid tells quite a story," he went on. "About your putting him through the hoops and yet he wouldn't talk. About how sore he is because a cop killed his brother that he wants to knock off a couple of cops in revenge. Shall I have him picked up, Tony?"

"Not—yet," Quinn said slowly. "I started this and he is my responsibility. If he is picked up, his resentment will only grow worse. Silk can handle him."

McGrath arose. "Whatever you say," he agreed reluctantly. "The responsibility is yours, however, Tony."

"I know that, Mac," said Quinn. "I've already admitted it. I know how risky it is to trust a boy like Walter, and yet I still feel I wasn't wrong."

After McGrath left, Quinn interviewed witnesses in cases that were soon coming to trial. It was hard to keep his mind on them. By noon he was glad of the relief furnished by lunch hour. Silk came in to the private office then, with a well-filled notebook.

"I've been down at City Hall, sir," he informed. "Checking real estate records

as you suggested. I also met Butch and went over the list of kids who seem to be mixed up with the various gangs."

"I've been waiting for this," Quinn told him. "It will either ruin a theory I've been developing or put us on the right track. Go ahead, Silk."

"A lot of funny things have been happening in the six blocks around Oak Avenue," explained Silk. "Several firms have bought the tenements and dwellings. But if they thought they were going to make a killing, they certainly estimated wrong."

"Why? Because people are moving away on account of the crime wave?"

CURIOSITY was in Silk's eyes as he looked up.

"How'd you guess? Some of the tenements are half empty and no matter how hard the brokers try, they can't rent them—despite the housing shortage. Tenants with children are moving away as if the plague struck that section. Some have to accept even more squalid quarters, but they at least get away from the influence of the gang leaders."

"All right, Silk," Quinn nodded with satisfaction. "That confirms my suspicions. Have you a list of the real estate firms and brokers who bought that property?"

Silk placed a long slip of paper on the desk. "There you are, sir. Nine of them. I've listed their officers and stockholders, if they are incorporated."

"Good," said Quinn. "Now about Butch's report."

"That's odd too," Silk said thoughtfully. "All the boys whom he could check on live within those six blocks. It's almost as if the whole juvenile crime wave is concentrated there."

Quinn was studying the list of real estate operators.

"Have you noticed how several of these firms have the same officers?" he asked. "Could it be that this is one syndicate, masquerading as several separate outfits? Perhaps to evade tax laws?"

"I thought of that, sir. I tried to find out, but there wasn't much time."

"Here's a good job for Carol," Quinn said. "You might meet her and explain the circumstances. We're due in court at two this afternoon, so attend to it right away."

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CHAPTER XVIII

The Plague of Crime

IN THE afternoon, the trial where he appeared was a nightmare to Quinn. His thoughts kept reverting to those boys who had so suddenly turned to a life of crime. Several times he missed important questions and answers and had to have them repeated. He got a con-

viction but often wondered, afterwards, how it had happened.

At dinner at his home, later, he was just as preoccupied. On the stroke of seven, Philip J. Alvin arrived and Silk showed him into the library where Quinn sat smoking his after dinner pipe. Blind eyes stared unseeingly as Alvin approached. Silk mentioned him by name and the rather puzzled expression on Quinn's face faded.

"I knew the footsteps were faintly familiar, Mr. Alvin," he said, "but not having known you long, I couldn't be certain. We blind people have to depend upon our ears to recognize visitors."

Alvin sat down, refused the offer of a drink, and went straight to the point that had brought him there.

"As you know, Mr. Quinn," he said, "I own two pieces of property in that so-called tenderloin district which interests you. I've been losing tenants at an alarming rate since this crime wave began. Not that I blame the people who moved. Anyone with a boy of impressionable age ought to get out of there."

"I agree," Quinn said. "But what can I do about it?"

"I came here, Mr. Quinn, as a property owner and a taxpayer. You are attached to the District Attorney's office and in full charge of this matter. At least I was so advised at the District Attorney's office. Therefore, I come to you. If this juvenile delinquency keeps on, my property will lose much of its value. I'll even be lucky if I can sell out. And yet I must try before it's too late."

"I understand," Quinn encouraged.

"Have you any suggestions?"

"What I must know is this," declared Alvin. "Can you—will you—put an end to all that mischief and turn Oak Avenue and its neighboring blocks into a peaceful community again? How are you progressing in breaking up these gangs? What should a property owner there expect?"

Quinn heaved a great sigh. "Probably nothing but trouble, Mr. Alvin," he confessed. "I've given the matter considerable thought. Crushing those gangs isn't as easy as it sounds. There must be a dozen or more of them, all independent of one another. By the time we break one, two more have sprung up. They fight one another, as you know, and their battles would put adult gangs to shame."

"I've heard the same thing," Alvin commented. "I was beginning to believe that someone had organized those boys."

"I had the same suspicion," Quinn told him, "but I assure you that is not true, Mr. Alvin. As for an answer to your problems—I can't give you any. I have ideas. In fact, I've sent for two men who may help, and who should be here soon. If you'd like to stay and hear what I have to tell them, you might find it interesting."

"Anything concerning my property down there will be interesting," Alvin said. "I'll be glad to stay, and I wouldn't mind having that drink your man offered me now."

Silk brought a highball and while Alvin sipped it, he and Quinn talked about the effects of the crime wave. After fifteen minutes of this, Silk announced that Jeff Kempin and Frank Downes had arrived. Quinn had never seen Downes before and he was rather surprised now to note that the man was more like a funeral director than someone interested in reforming boys.

He had a solemn expression, a long face, and a bald head. He was dressed in black and went for the flowing neckwear more suited to an artist than to an altruist. His handclasp was cold and weak.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Quinn invited, as Silk brought them in. "I won't keep you long. This is Mr. Philip J. Alvin, who owns property on Oak Avenue. I've asked him to remain and hear what I have to tell you."

"We have no objection," Downes said in a funereal voice, entirely fitted to his appearance. "I must confess that we are a bit astonished, however, that the District Attorney's office has taken such a lively interest in our boys."

"And why not?" Quinn demanded. "Like policemen, our main task is to prevent crime, not punish it. Those boys are potential criminals unless they are checked quickly. Some of them are already."

JEFF KEMPIN edged his chair closer. "Mr. Quinn," he said, "whatever you are about to suggest I'm for it wholeheartedly. You can depend upon my support."

"Thank you, Mr. Kempin," Quinn said soberly. "I'll need your support—and that of several thousand others. Briefly, this is what I suggest. As an attache of the D. A.'s office I carry some influence. I am willing to back a campaign to start condemnation proceedings against Oak Avenue and all the property close by which comprises the boundaries of our juvenile crime wave."

"Condemn it?" Alvin cried. "But there must be five hundred buildings—thousands of people—"

"I know that," Quinn insisted. "It will require a terrific campaign, but I can do it. Once condemned, we shall raze every building. We'll destroy the crime that flourishes there by destroying those places that hatch it."

"But good heavens, the property is valuable!" Alvin protested heatedly. "Besides there are no homes available anywhere for the people who will have to move!"

"We'll find homes," Quinn calmly assured. "With enough money and public support it can be arranged. In the place of those ancient tenements, we'll erect playgrounds and schools. We'll cleanse the area from the ground up. How about it, gentlemen?"

"I can't agree," Alvin declared positively. "It sounds excellent, of course—uplifting and fine, but as a property owner I can see the other side of it. You'll take my property away by public condemnation. I can afford it, I suppose, but there are others who can't. To right one wrong you'll commit another, Mr. Quinn."

"But the greatest wrong is the one we're after," said Quinn. "How about you, Mr. Kempin?"

"I'm all for it, sir," Kempin said promptly. "Bank on me."

"Good! And you, Mr. Downes?"

"I don't know," Downes said. He was deep in thought. "I really can't make up my mind. The whole idea is too stupendous to grasp at once. I am, of course, prepared to take over such a gigantic enterprise and am capable of handling it. I've dreamed of something like this, but—I must have time to think."

"Go ahead, but don't take too much time," Quinn cautioned. "That commodity is too precious right now. We can't afford to let this affair go on unchecked, and nothing short of a radical idea like mine will do the trick. It will be a scourge, sparing no one. For my own part I'll make radio addresses, talk to parents' associations, teachers and school principals. I'll contact bankers and other influential men. With the right sort of promotion the thing can be done and we shall have a finer city for it when it is done."

"Whew!" Jeff Kempin exclaimed. "You don't do things by halves, do you, Mr. Quinn? I'm beginning to get scared now."

"I'll get in touch with you two men tomorrow," Quinn went on. "That will give you time enough to consider it. And, Mr. Alvin, while you give it thought, do your deciding as a human being and not a property owner. Don't forget those kids. Whatever we do, will be for them."

"I'll—do my best," Alvin promised. "I'm too amazed to talk about it now." He got up quickly. "Good night, Mr. Quinn. I've had a surprising evening if not a peaceful one."

When all three had left, Quinn began to laugh. Silk stared at him wonderingly, but Quinn restrained his amusement only with an effort.

"Man," he said, "I ought to run for the presidency! I actually put that over. I made them believe I was serious."

"But—but weren't you?" Silk's mouth fell open in amazement. "Why, I thought it was a perfect idea."

"You too?" Quinn began laughing again, but suddenly stopped and grew serious. "Silk, have you stopped to consider how much money it would require to put that plan over? Perhaps as many

as thirty city blocks are involved. We could spend millions and not even make the least headway. All that campaign was for was to spur someone on. I wanted to tip an apple cart and make the driver scramble to pick up his apples before they vanish forever."

"Yes, sir." Silk still looked bewildered. He changed the subject. "Miss Carol is in the laboratory, sir. She has signaled that it is most important."

Quinn's smile died away.

"The window shades, Silk," he said. "Quickly!"

WHEN they were drawn, Quinn hurried into the lab. Carol jumped up and handed him an envelope. The seal had been ripped open.

"I found this beneath my door when I returned a little while ago," she said. "I thought it important enough to bring over."

Quinn extracted the letter and placed it on the lab bench. It was brief, and read:

I am one of the boys Chet Conklin forced to shadow you. I know you are honest and will help me. I can give you some important information about Chet. You or anybody you want to send. Even cops. But Chet is watching me and I have to be careful. I'll be back of P.S. 792 at nine o'clock tonight. If you don't come or send someone, I'll know you don't care.

"Unsigned," Quinn murmured. "Thanks for bringing it over, Carol. I think it's a trap, however, something else thought up by our friend, Chet Conklin. He must have seen the Black Bat at that amusement park and has guessed we either work together or that you work for me. Notice how insistent the note is about sending someone? That's meant for me—or rather to draw the Black Bat."

"I thought of that," Carol said. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Why, keep the appointment, of course," Quinn said, in a tone of voice that implied nothing else would have occurred to him. "But I'll be ready for trouble."

"There might be more than you can handle, Tony," Carol protested earnestly. "Remember, there must be a hundred or more boys who are mixed up in this business."

"Yes, I know," Quinn nodded. "But if it is a trap, Chet is bound to be there and I want that young gentleman. Sorry—I made a mistake there in calling him young. Chet has been wanted for assorted crimes for the past ten years. In at least one instance he shot and almost killed a man. That was just nine years ago."

"But, Tony, he can't be more than seventeen or eighteen now!" exclaimed Carol. "Do you mean to tell me he was a would-be killer when he was eight or nine years of age?"

Quinn laughed. "Chet Conklin, my dear, happens to be thirty-seven years old. He is blessed—or cursed—with the build, complexion and resiliency of a nineteen-year-old boy. He is one of those perennial juveniles, but he is almost a middle-aged man."

"How on earth did you find that out?" Carol cried.

"It was simple enough," Quinn told her. "When he took you to the amusement park, I knew he had something to do with the place or he'd not have been so familiar with it. So I checked, and found that the park used a youthful-looking character as a shill for some of their games. That, and Chet's description, simplified matters. The F.B.I. keeps a file on occupations, habits and characteristics of criminals. Even though I could not provide any fingerprints, they were soon able to locate his file, and they'd like to lay hands on him."

"Then there *has* been an organizer," Carol sat down slowly. "We've been all wrong, Tony. Chet got those boys together to put them on the wrong road. They've accepted him as a youth, too—one of their own kind."

"That's true," Quinn said. "But his job was to organize a number of gangs and set them against one another. In brief, what he was hired to do was create this juvenile crime wave. How successful he has been is a matter of record on the police blotters."

"He worked for someone," Carol insisted. "Someone who has stayed behind the scenes and has a motive well concealed. Tony—who is he?"

"I'll know by morning. Right now I've got to prepare for my meeting with the boy who wrote the note."

CHAPTER XIX

Trap for an Enemy

PROMPT as always—he was often ahead of time for good reasons—the Black Bat was at the rendezvous half an hour before the appointed time. He saw a lanky boy walk slowly past the indicated school and covertly eye the rear yard which was used as a playground. In the darkness the boy had the build of a man, but the Black Bat's uncanny sight pierced the darkness to see the youthful face.

The boy paused, flipped a cigarette into the road, and looked around carefully. Then he opened a door in the heavy wire fence and walked rapidly toward the rear of the school.

"Over here," the Black Bat whispered. "Follow my voice."

The boy turned on his heel and walked in the direction of the rear doorway to the school. When he came close to it and saw the weird figure in black, the Black Bat knew by his tone and actions that he had broken into a cold sweat.

"You're the Black Bat," he said with an attempt at bravado. "I wrote my note to a girl."

"I was watching her home and saw you leave the note," the Black Bat explained. "I know all about how she was taken prisoner by one of the gang leaders. In fact, I helped to get her free and I knew she was being watched, so I set up a watch of my own."

"I-I see," the boy said slowly. "Well, I guess it's okay to talk to you. Everybody says you're the same as a cop."

A low chuckle came from behind the black hood. "Don't let a policeman hear you say that. Especially one certain policeman who heads Homicide. But of course you can trust me. Now—what is this all about?"

"I—I belong to a mob headed by a kid named Chet," the boy began. "I don't like him. He makes me sick."

"Strange," murmured the Black Bat, "but he affects me the same way, so you

and I should get along. What's your name, by the way? In strict confidence, of course."

"Paul Wiler. I'm scared of staying with Chet's gang and even more scared of pulling out so I thought, if I could break the gang up, nobody would say I was a quitter, if I walked out."

"You have good sense," the Black Bat complimented. "All right. Now get to the point, Paul."

"Chet is planning to pull some big job," said Paul. "I don't know what it is—honest. I'd tell you if I knew. But it takes a lot of guns to pull it. Chet's been getting them together for a long time and—they're all hidden in this school. I can show you exactly where."

The Black Bat placed a gloved hand on Paul's shoulder. "If you are sincere about this, my boy," he said, "I promise that you won't suffer because you told me. Neither from Chet nor from the police. So lead me to the cache of guns."

"I—I got a key," Paul muttered. "I swiped it—from the janitor. This is a grade school. I never went here, but I sneaked in this afternoon when school was over. To case the joint."

"You're talking like a crook," the Black Bat observed drily. "But go ahead. We can't waste time."

Paul took the key from his pocket, licked his lips and unlocked the door. The boy had a small flashlight which he used sparingly and hiding its ray as much as possible with the fingers of his other hand. They climbed two flights of stairs, passed several classrooms, and then Paul pointed toward a closed door.

"In there," he whispered. "The guns are under the floor. You start at the west wall and count seven floor boards. The eighth one can be pulled up and the guns are there, wrapped in burlap. I guess there must be twenty or thirty of them."

The Black Bat gently took Paul toward the stairs which they had just climbed.

"Sit down here," he invited. "We're in no hurry, now that I know where the guns are. Sit down, Paul."

The boy gulped. "Yes, sir."

They sat down side by side. The Black Bat looked straight down the stairs and not at the boy.

"You're doing a great thing, Paul," he

said. "Don't think for a moment that anybody could classify you as a stool pigeon. Anybody who helps the law—and the Black Bat, which is the same thing—helps a lot of other boys in this particular instance. You're in the thick of this, as you've admitted. But you've been smart enough to realize what it leads to. There is only one eventual landing place for boys who go wrong. It's a place with bars, and sometimes some of the boys find themselves in a room with an ugly wooden and metal chair. I've seen it, Paul. It gives me the jitters."

PAUL was ashen-faced and nervous. His feet kept moving, the muscles at the base of his jaws worked overtime, and there was a film of sweat across his smooth, young forehead.

"Why—why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Because you are entitled to know," the Black Bat told him. "You have a right to know the whole truth about what has been happening, Paul. You and the other boys in with you are being made suckers of. You've been led into a life of crime by someone who intends to profit by your misfortune."

"I don't get it," Paul complained nervously.

"A crime wave," the Black Bat explained, "an intense one like that which now exists, will pay dividends to someone. Chet works for that man. Paul, did you ever notice anything peculiar about Chet?"

"No," Paul shook his head. "No—except that he's plenty smart."

"And why shouldn't he be? The man is thirty-seven years old and the F.B.I. wants him. Chet is slated for a long term in prison. Perhaps most of his life will be wasted there. What does he care if you boys suffer the same fate? Paul, you've been very, very wise. Do you realize that?"

Paul rubbed his nose and didn't look up. "I—I guess so," he muttered.

"After it was all over," said the Black Bat, "Chet would call you a bunch of saps—and not be too wrong either. He showed you all the excitement and glitter of being a crook. He forgot to tell you about the heartache that is included. Did you ever see a criminal on the run,

Paul? He's a pathetic thing. He has no friends, no one to turn to. But usually he does have parents and brothers and sisters, people who once loved him and probably still do no matter what he has done. But they can't help him. Their hearts are breaking more than his. They are the ones who genuinely suffer. They are the ones who feel the greatest shame when the crook is finally captured—as they all are. They feel the judge's sentence far more than the criminal. Do you follow me, Paul?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Good. Then hand it over."

"Wh-what? What do you—mean?"

"How much did Chet pay you to set and bait this trap?" The Black Bat's tone was inexorable. "Hand over what he paid you."

Paul licked his lips again and for a moment looked as if he were going to take a header down the stairway in an attempt to escape. He bit his lip, moved nervously, then reached for his pocket. He took out half of a five-hundred-dollar bill and passed it over.

The Black Bat held it between gloved fingers.

"Chet paid well for this job," he said grimly. "You get the other half after I'm caught or killed. Is that it, Paul?"

"Yes, sir." Paul seemed almost on the point of collapse now. "But gosh, I didn't know what I was doing! He showed me the five-hundred-dollar bill. It was more money than I'd ever seen before in my life. He said you'd never get wise, and that it was safe as churches."

"But you see I was wise," admonished the Black Bat. "I have been all along. You and Chet are rather obvious. Well, what happens now?"

"The—the cops come. Chet says they'll take care of you."

"And there are no guns?"

"N-no, sir."

"I see. What are you going to do now, Paul?"

"Help you get away, sir," Paul said promptly and grimly. "Then I'll tell Chet what I think of him. I'll tell the other kids too—what you told me about him being a grown man, and making saps out of us. I'll tell them—every kid I know."

"Then you believed what I told you?" asked the Black Bat.

"Yes, sir. I guess I was too dumb before to realize what it was all about. Like you said, Chet only showed us one side of it. Easy money, he said. Easy money and no comebacks. But how come the prisons are so full if crooks get away with all the stuff that Chet said we'd get away with?"

"Quite a sage remark, Paul." The Black Bat nodded. "You've too good brains to remain a crook, my lad."

THE boy was growing more nervous by the minute.

"But—but we better get out of here before the cops come!" he insisted. "Chet says they'd give their right arms to capture you."

"Some of them would." The Black Bat smiled a little sadly. "But it's too late, Paul, for me to get away. During the past four or five minutes radio cars and squad cars have been pulling up and men have been stationed to surround the whole building. You can get clear though. All you have to do is rush out and tell them you saw me enter, that you followed to make certain who I was, and were on your way to a telephone. They'll believe you."

"What—what will they do to you?" Paul asked.

"I don't know. I shall try to get away, naturally, but it won't be easy. One of the police who is bound to come—I spoke of him to you a few minutes ago—has sworn to land me and he's going to try—hard. If I were you, I'd run along. There might be some shooting."

"I could kill Chet for this!" Paul said between his teeth. "Maybe I will!"

"You won't see Chet again," assured the Black Bat. "Not even to collect the rest of the five hundred. Which I don't believe he'd give you anyway. Chet was careful to retain that portion of the bill on which the numbers are printed. He can cash it in. Your half is worthless."

"I knew he was a doublecrosser!" cried Paul. "Wait'll the gang hears about this! Look, maybe I can do something to make the cops chase me. That would be all right. I got you into this."

"No, I got myself into it. And if I have to pay a price because I've met you and put you on the right track, it's well worth whatever happens to me. Beat it

now, while you still have a chance."

Paul's mouth was grim. He arose.

"Yes, sir. I'll do whatever you say. Good luck."

CHAPTER XX

The Black Bat at Bay



UNEASY and thoughtful, the Black Bat watched young Paul run down the stairs, and stood there, listening intently. Paul left the staircase at the second floor and he was running fast along the corridor below now. The Black Bat wondered why, and then he had no more

time to wonder.

Suddenly every window of the school was brilliantly illuminated by the powerful searchlights on police emergency trucks. The Black Bat dodged into one of the classrooms and felt like a giant alongside the small desks. He strode to a window and risked a quick look out of it. What he saw was not reassuring. The street was clogged with police cars. Patrolmen with rifles and tear gas guns were in position, awaiting orders to rush the building.

Automatically the Black Bat reached for his gun, then his hand dropped away from it and he shrugged. It was incredible that he should be trapped at this stage of the game, and distressing from any viewpoint. It was bitter irony that he should be cornered and unmasked when he was so close to ending this case. But it would be ended. The police might throw him into a cell, but they would listen to him and act according to his advice. He was only a criminal in that his methods of fighting crime were sometimes out and out illegal. He was no thief or murderer, but once the unholy light of publicity hit Tony Quinn, and there was proof that he was masquerading as a blind man, working under the Black Bat's hood by night, his career would be at an end.

There were worse things that might happen at that. At least, when it was all finished with he could go to Carol as a man and not as a half mythical being who

lived under remorseless and relentless peril.

The Black Bat laughed hollowly. He was giving up without a fight, and that had never been his way. He had been trapped before and it had not meant the end. Perhaps not as securely as this time, but nevertheless trapped. He had escaped before.

He had begun to hunt the stairway to the roof, when he recalled that there were no adjacent buildings.

Every exit was closed to him. The police would search each room, each closet and corner. There was no escape. He came to a halt when he heard a voice booming somewhere on the first floor. It was unmistakably the voice of Captain McGrath though a trifle shaky.

"Black Bat! If you hear me, take some good advice and surrender. Otherwise we'll come shooting!"

Downstairs, as Captain McGrath shouted that warning, he shuddered a little and felt himself in no less a trap than the Black Bat. At McGrath's side was Inspector Maloney, a tough division commander recently transferred to McGrath's unit, and McGrath could show no relenting before that man. Maloney respected nothing but the law and those on the side of it.

"I—guess we'll have to go after him," McGrath said lamely.

Maloney made a raucous sound deep in his throat. "You're acting like a lily, Mac," he jibed. "He's in here. We know he's in here. Our informant said he actually saw the black hood on the man and saw him enter and not leave up to the time we arrived. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing." McGrath set his jaws sternly. "Nothing at all. I've been—hoping for this day. Let's get on with it."

"That's more like it," Maloney commented. "I thought you were going soft. And after all the threats and promises you've made for years about catching the Black Bat. He's nothing more than an ordinary crook, so why worry? You can't tell me he doesn't profit somehow, by turning in those criminals."

"Now wait a minute," McGrath stopped dead. "He's the Black Bat, and there is a warrant out for him and I mean to get him. But he isn't a crook. Understand

that. He doesn't make a dime out of the dangerous work he does."

"Be that as it may," Maloney said, with a shrug. "Are you going after him, or do I handle it?"

"I'm going," McGrath growled. He turned to issue orders. "I want every corridor covered. I want each room searched, one at a time, and when the search is over, two men are to remain in that room while the others are gone through. This man is as elusive as a shadow. Get started!"

The police went through the first floor systematically. The basement was already swarming with men in blue. McGrath led the procession to the second floor. There he issued similar orders and his men began their search. McGrath went on ahead, but he was cursing himself with each step. Of course the Black Bat was in here. The information was too reliable to be phony. This time that black hood was coming off and McGrath knew very well whose face would be revealed, but he still didn't like it.

HE WAS far down the corridor when something creaked inside a nearby room. He mopped his face and looked back. His men would soon reach this room, but McGrath thought he could do the job better than they could, if it had to be done. At least there would be no shooting by some trigger-happy rookie, and he had plenty of those in the detail he had brought with him.

McGrath turned the doorknob softly, threw the door wide, and leveled his gun.

"Come out of there before I start shooting!" he called. "It's all over, Black Bat. Believe me—this is the finish."

A lanky man with a face covered by some black substance slowly moved into the light. His hands were raised as high as he could get them and he was trembling badly.

McGrath gaped for a moment, and then joy almost overcame him. He stepped forward and peered keenly at the man he had covered.

"You're nothing but a kid!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing in here?"

"L-looking for money or anything I can find," a youthful voice chattered. "Please don't shoot me!"

McGrath quickly frisked him. He was

just completing the job when others, headed by Inspector Maloney, came hurrying into the room. McGrath faced them and laughed.

"Here is your Black Bat," he said. "A scared kid who blackened his face so he wouldn't be recognized, if seen. Okay, I admit he looks the part. From a distance of ten feet you'd swear he was wearing a black hood."

The boy gulped. "Wh-who am I supposed t-to be?" he asked.

"The Black Bat," McGrath told him.

"G-g-gosh!" Paul Wiler said.

Maloney seized him by the shoulder. "Tell the truth, kid," he growled in a menacing voice. "Did you come here alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see anyone in here?" barked Maloney.

"N-no, sir. If I had, I'd have run away. I was scared anyhow, in the dark. I didn't steal anything. Honestly!"

Inspector Maloney said something under his breath. "Take the kid home, Captain," he said. "And clear these men out of here before some reporters hear of this. Move fast. We don't want any publicity if we can help it. Tell the people outside we were after a gang of desperadoes who were hiding in here, and that we caught one of them, but don't let them see he's only a kid. Man alive, what a cop has to go through. Snap it up, men. There'll be droves of reporters around here pretty soon."

When the place quieted down, the Black Bat made his way to the second floor and to the room where Paul had been taken prisoner. Inside a glass cabinet he found a display of common chemicals used in the classroom. Half a dozen old fashioned cork stoppers were missing. He discovered these in the wastebasket, their ends burned.

The Black Bat wagged his head solemnly and resolved that Special District Attorney Quinn was going to handle the case of Paul Wiler no matter what strings he had to pull to do it.

When the Black Bat finally reached the security of his hidden lab, a small green electric light bulb was lit, indicating that Tony Quinn had visitors whom Silk was endeavoring to stall.

Moving fast, the Black Bat removed

his somber clothes and changed to those of blind Tony Quinn. He had just completed dressing when the secret panel opened and Silk came in for a look. He sighed deeply in relief.

"That boy Walter Taylor," he explained, "has been here for about half an hour. He's scared stiff about something, but won't talk except to you. I told him you were out for a walk, but if you don't show up pretty soon he's going to burst a blood vessel."

"My life seems to be full of these youthful characters tonight," Quinn commented. "Hold him there, Silk. I'll come by way of the front door."

Quinn dropped down into the tunnel and passed through the garden house to reach the side street beside his home. There his cane came down and tapped the sidewalk. His steps were the slow, deliberate ones of the blind. At the corner he advanced all the way to the curb before his exploring cane told him it was time to turn.

ABOUT halfway to the gate his cane was thrust out to the left until it encountered the iron pickets of the fence. It rattled along these to the gate. He opened it, went on through and tapped his way up the porch steps. Silk had the door open before he reached it. Behind him stood Walter Taylor with a look of incredible fear on his young face.

"Mr. Quinn!" he called out eagerly. "Mr. Quinn!"

"We have a guest, Silk?" Quinn asked.

"Yes, sir. That young man who was mixed up with the gangs. The one whose brother was shot."

"Oh—Walter Taylor," said Quinn. "How are you, Walter? I'm sorry I wasn't in to greet you."

"Never mind that, Mr. Quinn," Walter said hurriedly. "Something is going to break! You've got to listen to me!"

"I am listening, Walter. Come on into the library. Close the door, Silk."

"Mr. Quinn," Walter said anxiously, as they sat down, "I didn't do exactly as you told me. I got thinking that just holing up in a hotel room wasn't helping you any. So I sneaked out and went back to the places where the gang meets. I told them you held me incom—incom—that you wouldn't let me see anybody."

"Incommunicado." Quinn half smiled. "Go on, Walter."

"I let them think I was still okay. Even Chet believed me. He was glad I showed up because he needed me. Mr. Quinn, they're going to stick up the Garden!"

CHAPTER XXI

The Big Job



ASPING at the suddenness and surprise of what Walter had told him, Quinn could hardly believe it.

"Madison Square Garden?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir," Walter said earnestly. "It sounds crazy, but that's the truth. Chet is leading about twenty guys.

They'll filter into that big long lobby and make out they're looking at the pictures around the box office. When they all get there, they'll pull guns all in a bunch and make the guards hand over the cash."

Quinn thought quickly. "There's a lightweight boxing match tonight," he commented. "Not many customers buy tickets in advance. The box office will have a sizable sum, and it's too early . . . or wait! Walter, when does this stick-up come off?"

"At ten-thirty, sir," Walter said. "They figure just as the fight is finished that everybody will start coming out of the Garden and they can mix with the crowd. That way they'll all get away—maybe."

"Maybe is right," Quinn said with grim force. "Don't those idiots of boys know that the Garden has an ample police force of its own to handle anything of that kind? And that they are armed men who'll shoot fast and straight?"

Walter nodded miserably. "They know it all right," he agreed. "They've been watching the box office for days. But just before the gates open, after the fights are over, most of the guards start showing the crowd how to get out through the nearest exit. And by then all the dough is in a suitcase ready to be taken to a night depository. I tell you Chet has it all figured out."

"Yes—I can imagine that," Quinn said

soberly. "He would have it figured so well they might actually get away with it. And if they pull a job like that and do get away with it, there'll be no stopping them. They'll bask in the glory of being big shots. We've got to stop them—somehow. And without getting them mixed up with the police, if possible."

Walter got up, went over and kicked a black valise he had placed on the floor.

"You can head them off, sir," he told Quinn. "I've got all the guns. That's my job—to carry the guns. I'm supposed to be on the corner waiting until time for the blowoff. Chet will come first and I'll slip him a gun. Then the others, one or two at a time. They can't do much without me."

"What a break!" Quinn cried. "When are you supposed to be on the job, Walter?"

"In half an hour, sir. That's why I was so worried you wouldn't come back in time."

"I see. Are you willing to accept a certain amount of risk?"

"I'll do anything you tell me, sir," Walter promised earnestly.

"Good. Wait here . . . Silk, take me upstairs."

In the privacy of his bedroom Quinn said to Silk, "Find Butch. Have him meet us near the Garden. Finger Walter for him when we get there. Butch is to hide inside a doorway. Walter is to be posted right in front of him. Tell Butch I want him to make a spectacle of Chet."

"I'll phone Butch now," Silk replied.

Moments later, Walter helped the apparently blind Tony Quinn into his big sedan. Silk was at the wheel. Walter placed the valise full of guns between his feet and sat rigidly at Quinn's side.

While Walter listened, Quinn gave him precise orders. When they reached the corner where Walter was to set up shop as a gun distributor, he was well briefed on what to do, and the expression on his face said he meant to make no mistakes.

Walter got out of the car three blocks away and walked back to the post Chet had chosen for him. He saw Butch in the darkness of a store doorway, set the bag down, and waited there. By the time Chet Conklin appeared, Walter was

growing nervous. But he took a grip on himself and was whistling as Chet walked up.

"All set?" Chet asked.

"Yes," Walter nodded. "I'm ready. Your gun is on the floor inside the doorway."

Chet stepped past Walter, intending to pick up the gun. An enormous arm shot out before Chet realized there was someone deep in that doorway. He tried to yank free and, when he recognized Butch, he let out a yelp of astonishment and terror. That gave way to sheer desperation and swiftly he reached for a knife. He got it out, the blade snicked into place, and then Butch ripped it out of his hand. Butch pushed the man into a corner and with recent memories of Carol having been subjected to a flaming death by this criminal, Butch did not hold back his blows too much.

WALTER picked up the bag of guns and ran hurriedly down the street. He leaped into Quinn's car and slid far down out of sight. Soon the boys whom Chet had talked into the stickup appeared, by twos and threes. They were plainly disconcerted at not finding Walter waiting with the guns, but on the assumption that something must have happened, and they would be given new instructions, they kept moving toward Madison Square Garden.

Silk and Tony Quinn were already in the Garden lobby. Though Quinn showed no sign of it, his eyes spotted the undue number of uniformed and armed guards around the place, and he felt satisfaction.

"Silk," he said, "take me to the box office. I'm going to buy tickets for tomorrow night's fights. While we're there, casually ask the ticket seller why all the guards."

Silk put his question over well—and casually—but the ticket seller merely shrugged.

"Silk," Quinn said, "what do you mean? About an abnormal number of guards around?"

"I counted more than thirty, sir," Silk said.

Quinn reached into his pocket and took out a leather badge case. Opening it he showed his District Attorney's badge in the direction of the ticket seller.

"If you're expecting trouble, perhaps

I can help," he said.

The ticket seller leaned forward. "I figured you were just a couple of nosy guys," he said quickly. "We got a tip that a gang of tough crooks were going to stick up the box office. So every guard has been alerted and if anything starts, they'll begin shooting. We didn't notify the cops because we're prepared to handle that kind of trouble ourselves."

"The police should be in on it," Quinn said firmly. "This may mean more trouble than you imagine. . . Silk, get me to a phone."

Well away from the box office Quinn turned his head to speak to Silk.

"Do you see it now? The man who planned the robbery also tipped off the Garden police. He wants them to open fire when all those kids try to stage the holdup. Plenty of the boys will be killed, but that doesn't matter. Not to this despicable man who is using them to further his own ends."

"What are we going to do about it?" Silk asked. "There isn't much time."

"Right now those boys are moving up," Quinn said. "But they'll see something on their way that may jolt them considerably, perhaps change their minds. Lead me down the street to the next block south."

There were half a dozen boys around the corner when Quinn and Silk turned it. Handcuffed to a light pole by ankles and wrists was Chet Conklin, mouthing curses, yelling at the boys to go ahead with the plan. With all the forceful language at his command he was calling Walter Taylor a stool-pigeon. And, pasted on the center of Chet's forehead, was a Black Bat sticker.

Quinn moved closer and the boys started away. Quinn told Silk to call them back. Some ran for it, but others obeyed Silk. There were about ten boys gathered around when Quinn spoke to them.

"You've been made fools of, boys," he said. "This man Chet—he is a man—is not one of you. He's a professional crook with a long record. He'd have led many of you to your deaths, and he was well aware of it. The Garden has been tipped off about the holdup. Many of you would have been killed. The more who died, the better for certain plans. If you don't

believe me, all you have to do is go to the Garden and see how many officers are there, well-armed and expecting trouble. Then go home. Is it a deal?"

It apparently was. Some of the boys did approach the Garden, but after taking a single look walked quickly away. They told the others what they had seen. In a few moments any threat of a stickup in the Garden that night had been dissipated.

A POLICE car rolled up and McGrath got out. He eyed Chet and the Black Bat sticker pasted on his forehead. Then he approached Tony Quinn.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"The man cuffed to the pole is wanted by the F.B.I. and by you, probably," Quinn told him. "I can't understand why he hasn't been picked up long ago, except that he was believed to be a boy. He has been leading those gangs of boys into crime and tonight he had a holdup of the Garden planned. But it went beyond that. The Garden had been tipped off, and they were all set to stop the raid."

"But why?" McGrath asked. "Why would a stickup be planned and then tipped by the same person? At least you sound as if you think it was done by the same man."

"It was," Quinn said grimly. "If his plans had gone through tonight a good many boys would be dead right now. A few Garden policemen too, probably, for guns were to be furnished the kids. And the juvenile crime wave would have reached its peak, something which had been planned for and engineered. . . What's it all about? With the help of the Black Bat, I now know. Bring Chet to my office and put him in the next room. Gag him. Leave the door to my office open a bit so he can hear everything that goes on. If I play this right, Chet is going to learn he was due for a doublecross tonight as much as the boys he led."

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VENING was far advanced, for it was after midnight when the company Quinn had called together were all assembled in Tony Quinn's office. McGrath sat near the door, chewing on a cold cigar. Jeff Kempin, obviously nervous, and not knowing just what to expect,

occupied a chair against the wall to the left of Quinn's desk. Philip J. Alvin kept plucking at a loose thread on his shirt cuff and the funereal Frank Downes sat rigid and unblinking. Silk stood directly behind Quinn, his eyes shifting from one man to another, always keeping them under close scrutiny.

Quinn leaned back and began to speak.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it was kind of you to come. But I thought you would be interested to know that we have cleared up this juvenile crime wave, and brought to light what it really was. The whole thing was a well-planned and well-executed scheme. The crime wave was synthetic, not spontaneous as we were led to believe. The boys were talked into their crimes. A man named Chet Conklin, who looks like a boy, and convinced the other boys he was about their age, became the openly active organizer. His job was to create several gangs, and to instill them with hatred for one another, then lead them into burglaries and stickups."

Philip J. Alvin held up his hand.

"May I say something, Mr. Quinn?" he asked suavely. "Thank you. I don't know what this is all about, but it concerns me as a property owner. Not long ago you told us of a plan to raze that entire area, to root out the evil that's bred in it. Well, I developed ideas also, after listening to you. My plan is to accomplish just what you outlined and still make it profitable. I have contacted a number of real estate outfits who own property there and they agree with me."

"I think I know what you are going to suggest," Quinn said. "But go on, for the

benefit of the others."

"To do what you outlined, Mr. Quinn," Alvin continued, "would be slow work, and would involve financial support from the public, always a tricky thing. With my idea we can work fast. We intend to move all families out of the area. Some will protest, and we shall require the law courts to help us there. We shall then raze every building in the section and erect a low-cost, privately owned housing project. The biggest thing this big city has ever seen. How does that sound?"

"Very good," Quinn said. "I approve all features except the fact that you control all the real estate firms which own that property, and that removing the families by the procedure of law will make it unnecessary for you to provide costly shelter for them. Alvin, you want to clear that area for selfish reasons. It couldn't be cleared without expending vast sums of money. You wanted to save this. And so you started a crime wave."

Alvin stared at the supposed blind man. "I'm not quite sure I heard right, Mr. Quinn," he said, in a plaintive voice.

"Yes, you did," Quinn said shortly. "In the first place, these juvenile crimes were committed—except in isolated instances—by boys living within the area of the section you own and control. You wanted that area to become a hot bed of juvenile crime, of delinquency. Families would hastily move out to get their children away from the bad influences predominating there. Every family that moved meant money in your pocket, money you would have had to spend to move them yourself. Then, when half the buildings were empty and no one else dared move in, you could go to the rent control boards and protest that the section not only needed cleansing but that half-empty houses were ruining you. That would be a fact you could prove."

Jeff Kempin half-arose. "I get it!" he exclaimed. "Alvin secretly controlled all the property. He wanted to build a huge project, but he couldn't because the people living there would protest that there was no place for them to go! They could make it stick, too. Alvin would have had to provide them with new quarters, which would have cost him plenty! But if enough families moved away of their own accord because the

section had been turned into a nursery for juvenile crime, public opinion would be on his side."

"Exactly," Quinn said, "You've stated the case in a nutshell, Mr. Kempin. I've been in contact with people who have investigated all phases of the situation—including the Black Bat. Whoever he is, whatever he is, we know his motives are honest and his work thorough. Do you agree, Captain McGrath?"

McGRATH nodded emphatically.

"You know I do," he replied brusquely. "He's a law-breaker, but his motives are honest. I'll say that for him."

"But look here," Alvin protested, "you're all wrong about me. I tell you it's a mistake!"

Quinn silenced him with a wave of his hand. "There has been no error, Alvin," he said coldly. "I can prove you control all that property. I can prove you attempted to start proceedings to get the people out, and that they failed. I can prove you hired a man named Chet Conklin to lead the boys into crime. I can prove he murdered several people at your suggestion or direct orders."

"I never gave any such orders!" Alvin shouted. "This is preposterous!"

"But you do admit this crime wave would have helped you," Quinn said calmly.

"Suppose I do?" snapped Alvin. "Suppose I even say I am glad it happened. Does that make me a criminal?" Those stupid people wouldn't move, wouldn't get out of my way when I wanted to improve the section. I wanted to erect apartment houses for people who could afford to pay well for comfort—that I do admit. I even confess that I know Chet Conklin, but I never sent him to create a crime wave."

"That's odd," Quinn said. "He claims you did."

"Just who are you going to believe?" snapped Alvin. "An established business man like me or a crook like Conklin?"

"Oh, you, by all means," Quinn said soothingly. "For the immediate present, at least. So we'll say that Chet Conklin's intention was to manufacture this crime wave, to keep it unorganized, even have the boys fighting among themselves. The more trouble they created, the better. The

ultimate idea was to force families to move away when such things were going on.

"But a crook named John Verne realized he might profit from this so he moved in—and he was moved right out again to the tune of a fatal knife wound. Chet couldn't have anyone sew those kids up in a tight organization that police could break up. With several gangs running wild the authorities were stumped. Chet's right-hand man was a boy named Joey Belding. He was one of those few who would have turned to crime anyway. Joey killed a policeman, was arrested, and was promptly bailed out. By John Verne, who wanted to use him. The policeman was not dead, but when he did die and Joey was faced with murder, he became dangerous to Chet, and to the man Chet represented."

"Don't accuse me!" Alvin shouted. "I didn't direct Chet to do anything."

"Joey was told to hide out," Quinn went on placidly. "In a house you own, Mr. Downes. That proved a good angle for Chet and his backer. You were in an excellent position to direct these boys and—well, I rather think a careful investigation would show that you're not completely honest. You had a motive and, in all probability, any investigator would concentrate on you. All Chet and his backer wanted was time. Even Jeff Kempin, with his old record, became involved as another angle to waste time on."

"A private detective agency worked on the case. They sensed what was going on and began checking the addresses of the boys who were involved in juvenile crimes until they realized the boys all came from the same section. But Chet found this out, and tried to murder one of the private agents. Most fortunately he failed in sending the agent to a flaming death. When I learned about the list and the fact that Chet had been tricked into admitting to that agent that he knew the whole section was controlled by one man, I knew we were on the right track."

Alvin jumped to his feet. "Quinn," he shouted angrily, "this man Chet is a hoodlum! If murder has been committed, or even attempted, he did it. In fact he told me he killed John Verne. He went much too far, but I couldn't stop him. He

became obsessed with the idea of profiting from leading these boys into crime, and nothing could stop him!"

"And he also murdered Joey Belding so he wouldn't talk?" Quinn asked smoothly.

"Yes! He told me he had to kill him. Joey was a born gangster and Chet had taken him into his confidence. Yes—he killed him. I'll swear to it. I started this thing, but it got out of my hands. I'm guilty, but there is no blood on my conscience. I really meant to do the right thing. I wanted to erect my huge apartment house project, but I couldn't make those people move, to get out of my way. But murder—no. No!"

"I can imagine that Chet did get out of hand," Quinn said. "Tonight he planned to stick up Madison Square Garden, using about twenty of those boys who followed his banner. But I'll bet Chet never knew the Garden authorities had been tipped off, and that there would have been a gun battle. Perhaps Chet would have been killed. Did you think of that when you tipped the Garden, Alvin?"

"I did no such thing!" Alvin screamed.

"But who else did? Chet—when he would be risking his life? Men like Chet play only sure things. Who else knew about the raid except the man for whom Chet worked? And you swear Chet told you he killed Joey. Captain McGrath, will you see if Chet agrees to that?"

CAPTAIN McGRATH went into the next room and came back with Chet. The undersized killer's eyes were blazing in fury. He pointed a finger at Alvin.

"Sure he did it!" he screamed in a high, youthful voice. "He planned the whole thing. He had to have that area cleaned out because there were millions in it for him. Sure I knocked off Verne, but I didn't kill nobody else. Alvin himself killed Joey!"

"Prove it," Alvin challenged, and turned his back on the raging Chet.

Quinn smiled. "I think we can. When Joey was murdered, Chet happened to be in New York under the close scrutiny of a private detective agency operative. If you accuse him and swear he told you he was the murderer, we can establish that you are lying, Mr. Alvin. And your

knowledge of the crime shows you did the actual murder. Your admission of involvement in this affair—which was made because you knew it could be proved—places you in the same class with Chet. We'll find the evidence to convict you of murder."

Frank Downes got to his feet. "I—don't feel too well," he complained. "I'm getting out of here."

"You might as well get out of those boys' clubs you've been operating for your own cash benefit," Quinn said. "Jeff Kempin is going to take them over. You, Mr. Downes, will be taken care of later on. We have all we need to finish Mr. Alvin. Chet has already made a statement. Captain—take them out of here."

"Right way." McGrath approached Alvin with handcuffs.

"Exploiting boys to make money is the lowest form of crime on the records," Quinn said. "Causing heartbreak among parents, turning boys into crooks. A man like that contaminates the atmosphere he breathes. I feel like taking a bath to get the blight of Mr. Alvin off me."

Alvin and Chet were screaming ac-

cusations at one another when they were dragged away. Jeff Kempin came forward and Quinn stuck out his hand when Silk told him Kempin was offering his own.

"I'll put those boys back on the right track, Mr. Quinn," Kempin said. "I know you suspected me—and with reason. But I made up my mind long ago to repay for what I did. You've helped."

Quinn nodded. "What I told you and Alvin and Downes about starting a campaign to help those boys wasn't all hot air. I knew no such colossal plans as those I outlined were possible, and I did that only to make Alvin show his hand. I had to force him to admit he was in a position to raze the section, and that he controlled it through a lot of dummy firms.

"But I did mean we must campaign for money to help the motives of men like you. I'm going through with it. Walter Taylor—and another boy who must be unnamed—have proved they can be rehabilitated. Others, skirting a life of crime, can be easily diverted. It's a job for all of us. A big job, but it can be done. It will be done."



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CHAPTER I

Forced Interview

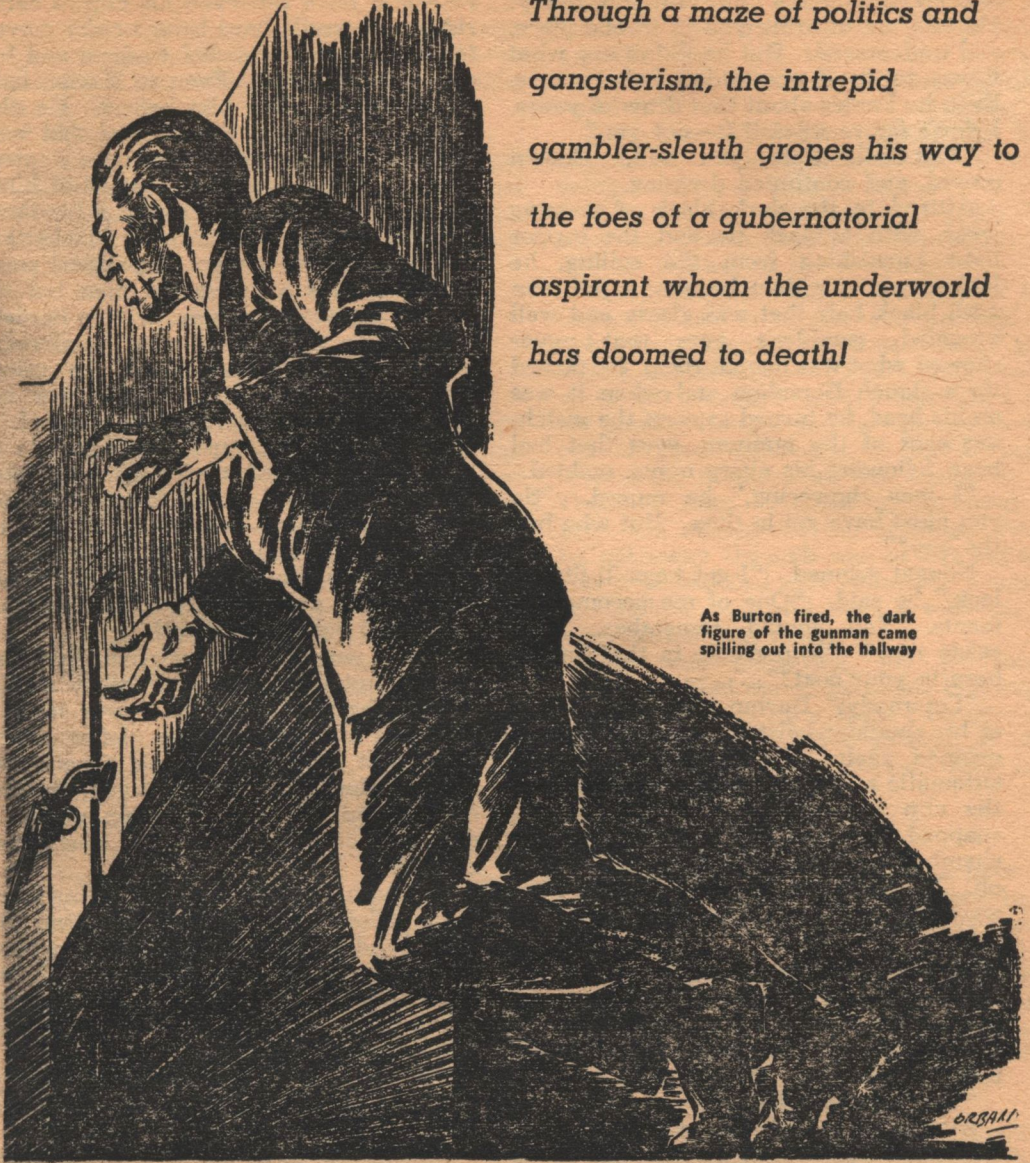
BLACK BURTON, in dressing gown and morocco slippers, had just found the fresh shirt he needed in the bureau drawer—his black tie and wing collar were laid out—when he felt a draft behind him. He had been alone, and it needed only a glance to show him that his gun and holster were too

far off to do him any good just then. So he sighed, straightening, said as he turned:

"Yes, of course. Pete Nougat! Didn't anybody ever tell you about a Sullivan Law? And you less than five months out of the Big House!"

From under heavy black eyebrows,

*Through a maze of politics and
gangsterism, the intrepid
gambler-sleuth gropes his way to
the foes of a gubernatorial
aspirant whom the underworld
has doomed to death!*



As Burton fired, the dark figure of the gunman came spilling out into the hallway

bushing under a short brow, Pete Nougat's slanting slate eyes tightened and below there the gun in his hairy fist jerked. In the eyes was a fanatic light. A killer's eyes, with a puff of heroin to make them brighter. Pete Nougat's nostrils flared.

"Been watchin' all day, Burton. Job

I like. You helped to send me up, last time. You and your pal, Dalton. Timed it when that valet of yours went out; had him tailed. He's safe." The smoky killer eyes flicked to the gun and holster once more; the lips smiled. "Keep on gettin' dressed. I'd like to wear clothes like that. I'm here for an escort. Merle-

han wants to make talk with you. Sorry! He told me to bring you in in one piece, and undamaged. But he didn't say what I was to do if you didn't behave nice. Even he knows about that draw of yours. I don't figure to risk it—not yet."

"You will, Pete, you will," Burton mused, and continued dressing.

Attired in the dark black of evening wear, with a black tie and the copper light burnishing from the ceiling, he looked younger than he was, a tall man with black hair that was glossy and well groomed, gambler's eyes that never showed what was behind them. He picked up a slouch Borsalino and when it was on his head, he turned to meet the watching eyes of the gunman, eyes that had been following his every move, nodded.

"I was showering," he mused. "So you must have got in then. But who had the key?"

Nougat grinned. "I got keys 'll fit any lock," he said. "One of me accomplishments. You should remember. You ready now? No perfume in that hankie here in your coat?"

"I'm ready," Burton said. He looked at his shoulder-holster and gun. Nougat grinned again. He crossed to the .38 automatic so snugly encased, snapped out the clip and shoved it in his pocket, snapped back the top to make sure the chamber was empty, then said, "Put it on. I'll hand you the clip, though, after we part; after we've seen the boss."

WITHOUT comment Burton adjusted his harness. A gambler, he knew when to accept the breaks. When to wait for them. "You work for Merlehan now?" he mused. "Still?"

"That's right. Ready?"

Burton regarded the gunny, with a look that was like measuring him for a shroud. Under the regard the man squirmed a little. He had a gun tight in his fist and Burton was disarmed—but after all it was Burton. Pete Nougat had reason to know all about him. Most criminals in New York City did—and some other cities too. A professional gambler who worked with the police, whose best friend was a dreaded lieutenant of Homicide, Dalton: target of the underworld and yet with friends there too.

Burton might have made a move and

he might have retrieved his clip of cartridges. It would have been a risky move, for Nougat was addicted to dope and he was hair-triggered. Even so Burton had outwitted men like him before. He did not make the move though, and that was because of one consideration: he wanted to know what Merlehan wanted of him. He had no fear of Merlehan, a big-time gambler owning two places in Manhattan and with greedy fingers in political pies. Merlehan was a dangerous man but as yet not an avowed enemy. Burton needed to know, in the light of what he already knew, why Merlehan should be using this method with him. There was no quarrel between them that he knew of.

He saw Nougat push the gun into a little bag he carried, then nodded as Nougat motioned him to the door. He proceeded the gunman out. Nougat's .45 was nudging his side as they went down the stairs and to the curb where a big sleek black sedan purred, with a stoney-faced individual behind its wheel.

There was no conversation as they purred uptown some distance to swing toward the East Side, the newer section that was a conglomeration of fine smart apartment buildings and old tenements. One of Merlehan's many houses, Burton conjectured, as they drew up under a dark port-cochere without the least noise of brakes.

Nougat backed out warily, holding Burton's spiked .38 under his left arm, his right hand bulging his side pocket where his own gun was. He gestured with his chin. Burton, stepping onto the cement curve below the door and regarding the imposing entrance, said:

"Your boss is doing himself nicely. Only dabbles in politics, too. Becoming a public spirited citizen, I hear."

Nougat cursed as the door swung open inward. Light spilled out as Black Burton turned easily toward him. But Burton's face was a mask; his lips scarcely moving as he said:

"I don't know where this leads, Nougat. I want to find out some things and that's why I let you bring me along. In case you were surprised! But don't forget, there's a time coming when you won't be behind me. That'll be payoff time!"

He went striding past a tall butler with mutton-chop whiskers, a man out of a

Wodehouse gallery, and the man said tonelessly:

"Mr. Merlehan is waiting for you, sir. This way, please." Exactly as though there had been no gun behind the guest. Nougat edged at Burton's heels, close, and they were shown into a room the like of which Burton had seen only a few times before. It lay behind a richly carved ornate door of oak.

Merlehan arose quietly from behind a wide heavy desk. The rich room contrasted his appearance, a bulldog jaw and a thatch of grizzled hair never straight, a man in his early fifties with aggressiveness marking every line of his strong features. His steel-blue eyes were hooded and calculating. After a moment of silence while Merlehan stood measuring him, Burton smiled a tight smile. His host broke the silence with:

"What would that be for, Burton?"

Burton replied: "You remind me a lot of Haviland. Did anyone ever mention that before?"

Merlehan thrust a cigar into his big mouth and said: "What's Haviland payin' you, Burton? What's your cut there?"

Burton said, "First I want to know why I'm here. You're not paying me, are you?"

"It's an idea, Burton," Merlehan said. "Sit down."

BURTON dropped into a chair. Merlehan went to a cabinet and brought forth Scotch wrapped in gold foil, a pail of ice, glasses and soda, which he set on the desk edge. Then as he squirted soda into two glasses he said casually,

"I got the idea you're not too fond of Pete Nougat." And he pushed the glass toward his guest.

Burton touched the glass, nodded over it. "Nougat's a killer. I helped to send him up once and you got him out. He's breaking the Sullivan Law right now. They say you can get a liking for strychnine; maybe I could like Nougat if I tried hard." He drank. "Do you realize that my presence here can be turned into a kidnap rap?"

Merlehan shook his head from side to side in a fatherly way. "That's not the idea, Burton. I wanted to see you and knew you'd be shy of me. So I took this way. You're not kidnaped. Your gun's

emptied, that's all. This is only a conference."

Burton drank. He still wanted to know the reason for all this. Politics had little to do with it, of course. Yet the wealthy Grover Merlehan, who sat opposite him now, was not a politician.

Burton could figure backward, and he did. Harvey U. Haviland was running for the Governorship. He was Merlehan's open enemy. He had got where he was by the most ruthless means, and by the use of his wife's great fortune: he was her second husband. But he walked in fear of his life. Still, he could purchase loyalty. Burton knew why Haviland had cultivated him; Haviland knew the gambler was straight, knew he could shoot—and knew Burton's presence would keep the underworld from him to some extent.

"What's your tieup with Haviland?" the big gambler inquired, after a moment of silence.

Burton said, "I don't have to tell you but I will. First, I'm curious. That's one of the reasons why I'm here right now; Nougat could never have brought me in if I hadn't been curious."

"I know that," Merlehan said, and waited.

"The second is—I'm a gambler. Harvey U. Haviland is paying me for lessons, professional payments, in bridge and contract—with some poker."

"That all?"

"That's all you're going to know. I know he's out on his ticket to do away with gambling houses; it's on his program."

Merlehan breathed deeply through his nose. It was a sigh. He moved something on the desk, kept his eyes lowered, said:

"Haviland is going to be murdered. He's announced himself as a candidate for murder. He wants you because he knows your guns. I want that murder to go through, even though I'm not arranging it. You got to take my word for that: I'm not. Even if I do want him dead."

"How do you know he's going to be killed if you aren't in on it?" Burton asked.

"I know. And I wouldn't lift a finger to stop it. He's got an appointment for it. I'm out of it. I just wanted to see

if I could get you out of the way—for a price. It means a big price to me."

Burton stood up. "Not enough," he said. "I'm no hired gunny but I took a job and if the job means trouble I'm in. You haven't got the price, Merlehan. Is that all you wanted?"

"That's all," Merlehan sighed. He pressed a button under the desk and the door opened. "Sorry, Burton. You might be unlucky, too."

Burton said, "I might. You think you've got Nougat at your heel?"

"I bought him out."

"And he'll sell you out," Burton said. "I don't know why I'm handing you information, but he's highest bidder stuff. Tell him to return my gun—and then to keep out of my way!"

He got his gun while Merlehan never moved and Nougat said nothing. He went out, and on the next corner managed to flag a cab. He gave the address of Haviland's super deluxe hotel apartments and in the taxi strapped on his .38 again.

CHAPTER II

Hovering Death



IT HAD not needed Grover Merlehan's assurance to convince Burton that Harvey U. Haviland walked in hourly danger. It had not even needed that to tell him that was the reason why Haviland was paying for his services. The trick of paying a high bonus for

bridge and poker lessons was a transparent pretense. Burton knew that Haviland had angered the gambling element in the state and that his election, if he backed his promises, would ruin it. He might back his promises too. He was beyond bribery because of the wealth into which he'd married. Therefore, fanatic or whatever anyone wished to call him, he was a menace to certain dishonest elements and those elements had stood for grave danger in other eras.

There was a big party on, running all through the two expensive floors of the luxurious hotel, when Burton entered.

Haviland's step-son and step-daughter were going on with their usual affairs, laughing at their step-father's ambitions and ignoring the danger that menaced him.

Those step-children! Ronald and Gayda Haviland! Ronald was always in debt, and Gayda barely succeeded in concealing her contempt for her mother who, by means of wealth, had tried to buy her way into wealth and society.

Burton went on to Haviland's private suite.

A private detective on guard at the door offered:

"Ulysses has been raising cain wondering why you didn't show up, Burton. We told him we had everything covered but that wasn't enough. Boy, is that guy scared!"

Burton answered, "He doesn't want to give them a chance to assassinate him. He knows he's made himself a candidate for more than the Governorship—for murder."

The guard tapped a cigarette and lit it. "Yeah. And that Gay kid, she's been all over the hotel lookin' for you personal. What a party they're throwin'!"

"They call it tea," Burton said, smiling, and turned away.

Gayda was the biggest problem to the gambler. She was beautiful, young, and vivacious. She wanted new experiences. When Burton had first appeared, she had liked his looks. He'd told her he was married and the fact that he was not living with his wife had made him all the more interesting. Burton had represented a marked change from the crowd she knew, the hectic, always-moving nightclub gang that found bed at dawn only to arise for cocktails at noon. Gay had unmistakable allure.

He encountered her almost as he stepped into the first room of the magnificent suite. Haviland maintained two top floors of the hotel for his own apartments and entourage. Supposedly the suite was shared with his wife. The floor below was occupied by the brother and sister and the friends they might choose to accommodate from time to time. Mrs. Haviland had her own retiring quarters—and it was known that it was there she spent her time—in rooms of the lower suite.

The room Burton had entered was crowded with people. He halted. Gay saw him and caught his arm.

About Haviland's stepdaughter there lingered always the heavy odor as of new-cut gardenias: she seemed perennially fresh, always alive. That her manicurist, her couturier, her French maid adept at Swedish massage, lotions, creams and astringents—that all these contributed Burton was full aware, had been since he first knew her. But even the knowledge could not serve to deny her young thrilling attractiveness; she was dangerous! Her painted lips were arched provocatively and her bronzed hair shone as she shook it back, catching the gambler's silk lapel.

"We've missed you, Noir, we've missed you!" she exclaimed, using the name she had chosen for him. "Where have you been?"

He smiled down at her and evaded: "I'd like to see your father right away. I've been—busy."

She half released him. "Of course! But you've met Captain Lamonte, haven't you?" And she nodded casually to the tall slim man who had come ranging alongside her.

Lamonte only gave a cold bow. Burton said, "Yes, we've met. Good evening, Ronald," to the girl's brother, before bustling away.

LAMONTE! Well, at least Ronnie had not brought back a foreign wife on his last trip abroad. No. Instead, this Lamonte gentleman. Lean and bronzed and with a distinctly Continental air, Lamonte had been over a period of weeks an intimate in the lavish Haviland household. One newspaperman had labeled him as Gayda's fiance, had spoken of manorial estates in Kent.

But the stepfather did the dictating for them all and he was a hard man. His wife had known it for some time. His stepchildren, spoiled though they were, faced it with resentment and bitterness. And his death, which Merlehan had spoken of, would release a huge fortune and freedom for three persons.

Crossing the rooms where the party was in progress, Burton nodded to two or three acquaintances, noting that Haviland's bodyguards were quietly present.

They knew him. He knocked at an oak door, received a short command bidding him enter, and stepped into the magnificent library of the suite that Harry U. Haviland retained for his own. No one violated the great man's privacy here; here scarcely a breath could penetrate from the world without. The walls were lined with expensive and unread books; the carpets were so thick as to deaden all sound; a Napoleonic desk dominated a room made for a dictator or a Czar.

Haviland was in his middle fifties. He had a mane of shaggy gray hair that he would push back from time to time in one of those leonine gestures of which he was so fond. His blue eyes were hard and icily commanding, and his jaw was scarped blue granite. There was distinction in him, unquestionably. And yet behind his eyes lay continual fear. He rapped out, before Burton had a chance to speak:

"I've been trying to get hold of you for an hour. Where have you been?"

Burton smiled. "Delayed. I've been with Grover Merlehan."

"What?"

"With Merlehan. He wanted to see me."

Haviland started from his chair. "You're telling me you went to see Merlehan? Because he wanted to see you? Am I crazy or you? It's been less than three days since Merlehan was quoted as saying that humanity would be better off if I were dead. Only he didn't mention me by name. What—what does this mean?"

Burton said, "Merlehan sent one of his gunmen after me, and the gun was an invitation to come across town and see him. I went. Even though I don't like to have a gun pulled on me. Merlehan made me an offer, gave me an opportunity to get away from you. He—" Burton paused—"he wanted to give me the same chance he'd give any rat to get off a sinking ship."

Burton had spoken quietly. But the words made the big man who so feared death sink back into the great imperial chair.

There was silence in the big room for a long moment. The clock ticked loudly. Then at last Haviland drew himself together. In the voice that the outside world knew, lacking its harshness and its tremor, he rasped:

"Then why did you come back, Burton? I imagine he had a price? You expect me to jack it up?"

Burton said, while his eyes gleamed, "I came back because I had an appointment here. I don't think, from what Merlehan said, that there's any intention of trying to get at you—with his men. He hates you but I'll bet on that. He warned me, though. You're in danger, but I think we've both known that for a long time. I didn't imagine I was being paid to teach you bridge!" Abruptly: "That party tonight?"

"It's on. You saw that. Shall I—"

"We've been warned, so we can consider ourselves ready. Stearns Warren is coming, I hear, to your party. He's supporting you politically but he's not to be trusted. If you want to trust him that's your business. He controls the state but he's got a lot of irons in the fire, and one of them is the fact that he doesn't like your anti-gambling measure, the one in your platform."

"I'll handle Stearns Warren!" Haviland snapped. He was regaining his courage. In Burton's calm there was a cooling draught. But Burton said thoughtfully:

"Sometime tonight Warren is going to name you outright for the Governorship, isn't he? Tell your men to see that he has the opportunity. There'll be trouble and I don't know where it will come from."

"You'll be here, Burton?" Haviland was suddenly limp, fearful.

"I'll be somewhere in the suite," Burton said. There was a click as the door opened and he let himself out.

IN THE outer rooms they were still at cocktails. Burton paid his respects to Haviland's wife, pitied her fading washed-out prettiness. But if she had used her large fortune to augment Haviland's rise and to minister to his ambitions she might have been prepared for what she was getting; so he reflected.

Of late, though, he mused as he turned away from her, she had taken on a little color, an added vivaciousness. He wondered idly if the presence of Captain Lamonte had anything to do with that.

The foreign captain who was the house guest and Ronald's familiar moved to bend over the back of his hostess' wing

chair, if Mrs. Haviland was actually the hostess, and not her children!

There was a gay chatter all about the rich, smoke-congested rooms and, as Lamonte straightened at Burton's presence, a flush was staining Mrs. Haviland's doll-like cheeks. Lamonte looked disturbed, annoyed. Burton looked and thought of the rumors.

What a fortune and what emotions stood waiting to be released if the death of Harvey U. Haviland came to pass! This pretty pale woman, his wife, would be free again, with millions to toss away. The wastrel son and daughter would come into their shares—and quickly dissipate them, without doubt. But the crude facts were there to be estimated.

It was getting late. Soon the biggest moment would be due—the mention of Haviland's name for the Governorship, from the lips of Stearns Warren. The party was accelerating. Rare jewels shone. An ambassador came in, two Congressmen, the bigger men of the Press.

Gay caught Burton as he was going through the foyer. By now the cocktails she had been drinking had flushed her lightly tanned cheeks and added a new, avid brilliance to the wide hazel of her eager, hungry eyes. Her curving red lips were moist, still thirsty, more scarlet and more provocative.

She stopped him with, "Noir! No drink?"

"Later, Gay," he told her. "Evening's young. Why don't you drop that glass and get into a shower for a few minutes before things begin?"

She laid a hand on his arm as she had done before, said, "They told me you had a wife. She's not around, is she? If I take a shower, will you help me?"

"No," he said. "Take it anyway."

"Are you that way always?" Quickly, impulsively, as was her way, she came to her decision. "All right! But when you're not too busy—maybe when this alleged party is over—I'd like to show you things. You know where my suite is. I'll be alone."

Burton quirked an eyebrow. "Not Captain Lamonte?"

"Alone," she repeated. "In my own place. No one comes there unless I tell them to. I'm inviting you." Her hand went out and he felt a ridge of metal come

into his palm: her door key. Before he could say anything she had turned away.

Over her shoulder she said:

"As to Lamonte—it might look as if it's I and the papers who might talk—but Mamma's the one!"

Burton watched her go and then turned, eyes opaque, to where Lamonte and Mrs. Haviland still remained together. Lamonte was looking more than devoted. Even as he watched Gayda's voice was back, in his ear, breathless:

"In case you didn't understand, it might be me, would be—if the money was mine. I'm in a class with Ronald, who'd like to see something happen—and soon. Mother still has some of hers. Plenty! But Captain Lamonte can't live on caviar and champagne alone, you know. Neither can my brother. He's got to have polo ponies!" Then, with a "Be seein' you!" Gay was really on her way out, the bitterness in her voice trailing her.

Burton felt the key still in his palm. Somehow, he thought, whatever the answers, he didn't want to see Gay hurt, even though she was the way she was. He didn't care about the rest.

CHAPTER III

Dead Man in the Doorway



THE murder occurred at ten minutes past midnight. The big ballroom had been floodlighted and the orchestra swung into what was termed the "Yacht Club Number." When the lights faded from their various distances in the walls, other lights—as of portholes on a ship—

took their place. Overhead there was only a segment of a papier-mache moon coasting against the ceiling's high arch.

Burton had stopped to talk with one of the many guards in plain clothes and he was far from the shooting.

But the echoes of the shots were there to tell him; instinct made him smooth down a palm over his coat lapel. A scream came and immediately all the lights were on. But the lights came too late to save

the life of Harvey U. Haviland.

The millionaire and gubernatorial aspirant was lying half in and half out of one of the combined lavatory and lounge rooms for gentlemen guests. Out past him was a high terrace. Stunted artificial firs grew in green tubs out there. But Haviland was noticing them, nor his domain, no longer.

The chief of his bodyguards, Jack Humphrey, was standing in an attitude of complete bewilderment above the fallen body. Blood was coming in slow-ing spurts from Haviland's mouth. His eyes had already begun to glaze. He had been shot twice and at close range. Once in the chest and once—evidently he had been falling forward when he met the second charge—in the throat.

Other men were crowding in. Two women screamed in unison. Burton turned to meet Humphrey's eyes.

"Get Lieutenant Dalton of Homicide on the phone right away," Burton said. "See that nobody gets out of the place without a check."

"Sure! But a doctor—"

"There are three doctors in that crowd outside but none of them can do Haviland any good. Pass the word for them to come in. Get moving!"

Humphrey said, "Sure, sure!" and moved.

Burton found himself nearly alone with the dead man. Tragedy had come as promised and the man who had been host was clay. Stearns Warren came in and stood hovering, ineffectual as always, wiping at his thin mouth. When he began to mumble Burton turned to him with expressionless face and said:

"You'll have no stooge for a candidate now, Warren. What does your crowd know about this?"

Warren put away his handkerchief, achieved a certain momentary dignity, and retorted:

"I wasn't here to look after him, Burton. He had men—and you. He trusted you, I know. Somebody might have offered bigger pay as the way to get to him. He's really dead?"

Burton took another look, without answering stepped inside the French windows and returned with two big Turkish towels, which he eased under the bleed-

ing head.

"Quite," he said. He reflected that he had been offered a big price to be elsewhere tonight, so that, as Warren had suggested, somebody could get to the gubernatorial aspirant. Somebody had.

Suddenly, as he was turning back to the lighted indoors, he caught the glimpse of a shadow. At first he did nothing to indicate that he had observed it. Somehow, in spite of every precaution, a killer had got inside here. Now the quick alarm had held up the killer's chances for a getaway. That might be his shadow beyond there!

He snapped, "Wait!"—and slipping his gun free, he went outside.

They remained where they were. There was something of unhurried competence in the gambler's movements, as though he never could be hurried and as though there never would be need. They knew him, knew of him.

A spiteful jet of flame came licking at him. Something whined off the edge of the French windows opening inward, ricocheted. Inside a woman screamed again.

Burton's eyes were blank and black as he moved after his assailant, a shadow. A new shot cracked at him but it went wild. Even so he could hear it whine past him.

The door at the farther end of the terrace—the big fire door—slammed open, then shut, and he wrenched at its metal handle, got it open.

A DIM figure past there was vanishing ahead of him on the cement stairs, the same elusive shadow. He threw himself toward it, flattening himself against the wall as a new shot came. This time the charge and the sound of it went banging and clamoring back and forth in that enclosed space.

The shadow was making for the floor below. That would be the extensive suite occupied by the Haviland menage; Haviland himself had slept mostly in the suite on the terrace floor.

Another heavy steel fire-door slammed. Burton wrenched at a new iron knob and fell back as he threw the door open, waiting for a shot from past it.

The shot came, flaming at him. This hallway, before the turn it made beyond,

was quite dim and he could not even locate the source of the shot. He heard feet padding, went on.

He was trying to keep as close as he could to his man. But the fugitive had gained. He had vanished. In some inexplicable way he had become lost behind one of that line of blank-looking doors facing the corridor.

But the end of the corridor was in sight. Shadows fastened there too. Burton flattened himself against the wall and crouched as a head and shoulders appeared before his narrowed eyes, a dim light-edged a gun barrel.

Burton knew that his man might not be the one he had originally set out after. He was aware that the other man had somehow disappeared behind one of those close-shut doors. But he knew, too, that he was on the track of one of them, and that the one he was following now meant to kill.

Shots blasted, the echoes of them crashing against the eardrums back and forth in that narrow way. Burton felt lead pluck at his shoulder, heard it go singing its angry song down the corridor.

But then he saw ahead of him the result of his own shooting. The dark figure came spilling out from its shelter, the shelter that the corridor angle made, crumpling as it flopped down.

A gun dropped first, a .45 revolver. Burton sped to the side of the body. Yet even as he bent above his victim he was turning warily to search out the way he had come.

He frowned. He had made his kill and it meant nothing to him. "Chips" Fogarty was a gunman he knew as for hire anywhere. But in death he could never be made to tell who had made him an accomplice in this night's revelry.

In Burton's ears, as he got himself erect, were battling sounds. The police would be arriving by now, of course.

His eyes narrowed. Gun in hand he made his way down the corridor. There had been another man and before the police took over—he wanted him!

He had a pass-key. But after a futile three minutes he abandoned the job he had set himself. Two men! Yes, but one of them had been wise enough to get out of his way, and had slipped out behind

him while Fogarty had been left to carry on the battle he had been paid for.

That other man was still loose. It might be any one of those among the guests on the second floor!

With reluctant tread he made his way back to the fire steps and back up to the apartment that had so recently been the scene of gaiety and triumph. Humphrey met him, face white and strained. Burton said tight-lipped:

"You'd better get down below stairs and tell your boys to watch fire-escapes and inside stairs. I suppose the police will have the elevators by now. No news?"

"No! But that means nothing! You realize that mug could of got up here as a waiter, by the service stairs, anyway at all? There was an extra staff on here tonight."

"You'd better check," Burton said. "Do that with the house detective. See who the new ones were. A gunny might even have bribed one of the extra staff lads and come in. Go down and check thoroughly."

THE Haviland apartment was hushed now. No music. People were still there but they talked in whispers. The police had arrived, and Lieutenant Dalton, of Homicide, a friend of Burton's for many years, roused himself from taking a last look at the body before the morgue men took it away. Dalton was heavy, hard-packed, a man who had come up to his present job via the pavement-pounding route. His eyes were cold. He said to Burton:

"You got anything to contribute?"

Burton shrugged. His eyes brooded.

"No, Ned. Nothing much to contribute right at the moment. But there's a dead man who missed while he was gunning for me, on the next floor. Your boys can find him. With all this sound-proofing you didn't hear the shooting, I suppose. There were two. One I got."

"Who was he?" Dalton was narrowed-eyed.

"You know him: Chips Fogarty. But we don't know yet who he was being hired to gun for. Nor who sent him."

"If it's Chips Fogarty, he could be bought for a couple of century notes," Dalton said. "But you'd know. Two?"

"Yes. One got down the fire stairs and somehow lost himself in the apartments below. I took care of Fogarty. But by the time that detail had been attended to, the other gungel had the chance to get away in any direction, except straight in front of me. It was somebody who know his way around well."

Dalton's eyes were frosty. His lips were tight. They opened for him to say: "Well, the place is sewed up tighter than a drum right now. And if Fogarty's dead it's no loss. But what I'm thinkin' of is what I been hearing about you."

"Serious?"

"Maybe. You paid a call on Merlehan today, didn't you?"

"Merlehan would appreciate that way of putting it! He sent one of his hoods up—you'll know him: Pete Nougat—with a gun to carry his invitation for a conference. Merlehan wanted to talk."

"What about?"

"About," Burton breathed, "throwing over a man who was paying me for instructions in gambling, and coming over to his side of the fence. Merlehan mentioned Haviland was due for the works but he didn't mention where it was coming from. He was a candidate for murder. I gathered that Merlehan had wires out and that he knew someone had been hired to do the job. But I'm pretty sure he didn't know who it was."

"I suppose, then, he made you an offer and you weren't buying?" Dalton said.

"That's about it. But our killer is still in the building somewhere, if you've got the place sewed up. Aren't we wasting time?"

"Where would he be, as a guess?"

"I'm not guessing, and it's a big place. I do know he was *let* in, though. He had to be. But right now I'm busy—unless you want me for something more."

"No." Dalton shook his head. "But I don't like it any way it's played, Burton."

Burton said, "Neither do I. But I'm playing it out." When he turned away Dalton caught his arm.

"Does that mean," the big Homicide man said, "that you're on the prod after Merlehan and his bunch?"

Burton shook his head. "No. I think if it was Merlehan's job, he'd have worked it differently. Even if he did want Hav-

iland out of the picture—and bad.”

He freed his arm gently from Dalton's grip and moved away. Dalton caught the eyes of one of his men on him from across the room, and he gave a barely perceptible nod. But that signal would have been no news to Burton. He knew he was going to be trailed from then on. He didn't mind. He knew Dalton, who was his friend—a baffled, befuddled friend at the moment.

HE FOUND the family in the small study. Mrs. Haviland was in one corner, sitting stiff and erect. There had been tears in her faded eyes but they were dried now. Her face was like marble. The incongruous rouge stood out on her lips flauntingly.

Gay was at the buffet and her brother and Forsyte Lamonte were beside her. Lamonte had just said something but at Burton's appearance he went quickly away and stood beside the newly-made widow's chair. Bending down solicitously over her, he made a gallant Byronesque figure in this moment of tragedy.

Gay turned with a champagne glass in her hand. Ronald was swishing whisky and soda around in a tall glass and he looked as though it might have been his fifteenth. His eyes were bloodshot but there was a gleam in them, a new gleam. Complacency.

From the shadows Stearns Warren was speaking, in a rich platform voice properly subdued:

“We must bear it, *madame*. Even in this dark hour we must recall that the Police of this metropolis seldom let a terrible crime like this go unpunished. There will be a clamor from the newspapers, from the giant public. And Merlehan—”

Burton did not listen to any more. Gay's hand was on his sleeve, in the intimate, proprietary gesture she had come to have. Her beautiful eyes were dry.

At his level disapproving look, she brushed cigarette ash from the tube in her hand, sipped, said:

“I know, *Noir*! You want me to look sad. You think we should pretend to show a grief I—none of us—feel! You know what he was. Can't you see that now—we're free?”

“You mean your money will be re-

leased now. Your mother's, yours—your brother's?”

“Mostly that. Ronnie and I hadn't a thing to do with it, *Noir*, but I'll admit that sometimes we—yes, we even talked of it. But neither of us are more than perfunctorily sorry. You—did you have trouble—awhile ago?”

“I wasn't hurt. I must say good night to your mother. I'm going—for a time.”

“Will the police let you?” Then, as he smiled a little, “Don't forget you've got a key, *Noir*. I shan't sleep. And when you get outside try and remember: he wasn't our father, Ron's or mine. Just—just a big man who used our mother's fortune to make—a czar of himself.”

He nodded. The key burned in his pocket. Gayda looked quite gay just then, flushed and ardent, with eyes that swam in promise. She started to say something more when Lamonte came in, to announce:

“Her brother and I thought we might take Gay out for a bit later on. It's too thoroughly depressin' here.”

“Yes, it is,” Burton said, and went off.

Mrs. Haviland was dry-eyed. A glass of champagne was at her elbow and on the other side of her Stearns Warren was still mouthing platitudes in the same flat voice. She smiled as Burton came up, said eagerly, wistfully:

“You're going, I know. We shall miss you, even if it is only for a little. You found nothing?”

In spite of the tragedy, she looked younger. “You want to find the murderer, don't you, Mrs. Haviland?”

Again that wan smile. “But naturally! Only we're leaving that to the Police, and you. I know you'll do what he would have expected of you.”

Pompously Warren broke in with, “Look around Merlehan's dives. Though what evidence there is I can't imagine. An out-of-town killer could have been hired for a thousand dollars and a get-away, by a man who knew his way around.”

Burton nodded. “To be sure. But there were at least two on this job. Two that I saw. Maybe more. Someone was here on the inside to see that your stranger had his opportunity, to cover him. The private operatives covered everything—”

"But not quite everything, Burton, eh?"

"Apparently not. Everything—except the inside, we'll say. That leaves us with quite a few suspects! From the *inside*, Mr. Warren!"

Then he bowed and turned away.

There was a pleading, longing look from Gay as he passed her, a frozen nod from Lamonte, a jerk of the head from Ronald. He found an elevator and went downstairs.

CHAPTER IV

Burton Pays Off



YET in spite of the hour Merlehan was still up. The same stony-faced man-servant, still impeccably attired, answered the doorbell. Burton gave him a curt nod and pushed past him with no more than that; he stepped quickly into the study that he had left only a few

hours before.

Merlehan was not alone. As Burton came in he caught sight of a new face across the room, half in shadow: a bleak hatchet face with cruel eyes set close together behind a high beak of nose. There was a cigar in Merlehan's hand and he slowly lowered it to the tray in front of him, his hard eyes narrowing coldly.

"Just a little social call, Burton?" he said in his easy voice. "Or did you come to collect what was due to the man who burned Haviland down? Of course we've heard." He flicked a hand, a big diamond winking, toward the tall thin figure in the shadow. "By the way, this is Sims. Arty Sims. Newark."

He seemed suave, in control of the situation. But after all Merlehan was a gambler on a big scale. Burton merely slid his eyes off Sims, disregarding him while aware of the other man's keen regard. The radio behind Merlehan, turned down low, gave evidence of how he had learned the news—if it had needed that!

Burton spoke in a low controlled voice. He said, "Merlehan, I don't think even now that you did that job. But I am

sure that one of your hired rats did it. Or had a hand in it. Where is Pete Nougat and when you tell me that I want to know his alibi for the time of the murder."

Mild-eyed Merlehan turned to his henchman. "Where did Pete say he was going—maybe an hour or so back?"

"Late movie," Sims returned glibly. "I seen the picture and told him about it and he wanted to see it himself."

"Yes," Burton said. "As long as he knows all about it and can produce a ticket stub that's all that's necessary." He swung on Merlehan. "I didn't think you'd go to this extreme, but it's been done as we know. Nougat and this terrier here, out of your sight—they'd double-cross their own mothers at the rustle of a Treasury note. Nougat is the man I saw—and missed—in the hallway. And he got away through one of the suites. But if he hasn't had a chance to change his clothes, he'll still have a souvenir I made in his coat sleeve."

Sims was glowering, his shoulders hunched. "Let me—" he began hoarsely.

Merlehan held up a hand. "Be quiet!" Then, "This man, Black Burton, is not crazy; get that! Want to wait here for Pete Nougat, Burton?"

"I only want him."

"What for? Just what?"

"Maybe to take him down to have a talk with Lieutenant Dalton. These days there are such things as ballistics experts, Merlehan."

Merlehan considered. "Yes." Then thoughtfully, "Well, I'm afraid you've given yourself a trip for nothing, Burton. Only thing is they'll try and tie me up with this, and—"

"They're already doing that!"

"And I haven't had a thing to do with it," the big gambler continued carefully, disregarding the interruption. "I'm not sorry, of course, even if I do send flowers. Don't pretend I am. He'd have wrecked my kind of gambling in this state. But there it is." And the hand with the cigar spread out to match its mate.

There followed ticking seconds of silence. Sims stirred at length. He was closer to Burton now. Hand ready for the draw due in any succeeding second. Merlehan's voice came in a sudden rasp:

"Show him out—safe, Arty!"

Then his big body settled itself deeper into the chair. Sims chuckled, deep in his throat. Burton paused, nodded, went to the door. Sims kept a pace behind him.

At the outer door, while fog swirled in from the river, to cloud the entrance way, Burton turned a little.

"Your pal was in that tonight, Sims; we both know it. He was one of two men in the upper hallway. He picked that hood Fogarty and used him for a cover-getaway. But what I want to know is, who paid Pete?"

"I thought you asked Merlehan!" His was an animal snarl. The door slammed hard as Burton left and the fog took him in its clammy embrace.

FARTHER down the lights of a drug-store beckoned through mist and Burton made for them. It was an all-night place and there was no curiosity directed toward him, even with his evening clothes, when he went to a booth and made his call. Gay's voice answered him, over her private wire:

"So you didn't go out with the boys," he said. "Are you alone?"

Her voice came back with a lilt in it. "I told you I'd be here. I'm waiting."

"Is Lamonte due before daylight? In the suite, I mean?"

"Maybe in his own place. But not here." The voice took on acid notes. "You see Mother has all the purse strings now!"

"You mean they might get married?"

"Leave it like that. Anyway it's a few millions to whomever makes the grade!"

Burton said carefully, "I'll be up. I want to talk to you."

"Is that all—Noir?"

"Probably—for tonight." He hung up. Outside the pharmacy he hailed a new cab.

Gay stood waiting in purple negligee when he came. By way of deserted rooms and suites he knew, he got to her apartment and let himself in quietly. She seemed more excited, more than ordinarily seductive. About the deep, luxurious apartment there lingered the trace of some heavy, languid perfume. The lights were very low.

The murdered man's step-daughter moved across the room with that slim, lissom grace that had always been hers,

said softly:

"I'm glad you decided to come, Noir. There's whisky and soda. You look like you might need it."

He squirted himself a drink, back to her, without answering, drank a long sip, then said, "I did. Where's the boy friend?"

"Out. Maybe with mamma. I don't know."

"Not coming back?"

"No. Take your coat off. There's hours till morning. And if you really intend to remember you have a wife we can spend the time talking."

He ignored that, crossed to her and bending over, grated, "Did you let anyone know you expected me here? About now?"

In her scarcely perceptible hesitation he read the answer he had expected. She hastened to say: "No! But no! Do you think I'm a fool?"

"Perhaps—a little." He smiled more easily. "I might even have business in here, mightn't I?"

"I hope you have and wish you'd stop—"

"Where would Lamonte be right now?"

"I don't know." She broke off, "He's—"

His hands caught her shoulders. "Stay here!" he commanded. His voice was metallic.

He did not hesitate then. He went to the door and let himself out of Gayda's room. Then he was standing in the palatial drawing room of the suite. He crossed the thick rugs there with a light step.

The guards were all in the outer corridor, he observed. Here he was undisturbed. Beyond the drawing room lay Mrs. Haviland's suite. He hesitated only an instant, hand brushing the slight bulge his gun made under his jacket, then threw open the door in front of him.

He saw what he had come expecting to see. In the back of his eyes was a dull sense of understanding. Forsyte Lamonte was at the edge of the low divan that took up one angle of the room. Mrs. Haviland was in bed, faded and pretty in her doll-fashion way, sitting up in her cloudy negligee. The room had a lot of smoke in it and there was a whisky bottle and a siphon with an ice bucket on a tray. It was an intimate scene.

LAMONTE'S white tie was undone, his hair was ruffled. That was all, except for his eyes, and the wild look in them. He sprang to his feet with a thick curse.

Burton stopped short. He said quietly, "Sorry, I thought someone came through here, and there's still a murder to be answered for." There was a single inarticulate cry from the frail woman among the mass of pillows, then it was stifled. Mrs. Haviland arose, threw back her hair. Burton said, "You wanted the killers, didn't you? Maybe I've trailed to the wrong room. Maybe not. But Lieutenant Dalton will still want to know, tomorrow."

He ignored Lamonte. Mrs. Haviland's hands were making fluttering motions. The light caught at the jewels on her transparent fingers and flashed mockingly.

"But—" she started to say.

He interrupted. "This man here let them in, by the outer way. There may be one or two of them left in the suite right now. Didn't you know that?"

The pupils in her eyes distended. She looked at Lamonte. All of Lamonte's polish and suavity was gone. His eyes had begun to fill with an insane rage.

"Forsyte! It isn't true! You didn't—"

Lamonte had backed to the door. Then something snapped and he cried hoarsely to a shadow behind Burton:

"Now! The beggar! Now!"

Burton whirled in time. He was not entirely surprised when he saw the crouching figure of Nougat in the corner. There had come the echo of a cry from the girl's room only an instant before and he had noted it. Nougat and a sec-

ond man had obtained entrance by Burton's route.

There followed in the next instant the roar and flashes of continuous volleys. Guns licked and spat across the half-dark room.

Burton felt a shock, knew himself knocked into a corner, saw the face of Pete Nougat close by, monstrous, apelike and nightmarish, livid with vengeful cruelty. He saw Lamonte's gun and the other man's.

"So you never went back to Merlehan's, Pete!" he said. "You even double-crossed him!"

He fired at Lamonte, swiveled. A new shot came crashing out just as Nougat was perfecting his aim for a second charge. Nougat's companion went down. Nougat reeled, brought up his gun once more.

Burton moved into a crouch; he knew the value of careful shots. Shooting didn't help, unless the shots told. He fired twice. The thunder of the echoing reports was stunning to the eardrums, but there were fewer ears to hear them afterward.

Nougat folded, clutching at his middle.

In the doorway Ronald stood, pale and white, a smoking revolver in his hand, eyes wide and pupils distended. He stood staring at the man he had dropped in the doorway. He was in a brocaded dressing gown and his black tie hung loosely about the collar of a stiff shirt wilted from spilled wine.

He gasped, "Did I do that?"

"Not all of it but enough to help," Burton said, then swung about as a cry came

[Turn page]

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from the other end of the chamber. The place still seemed to be rocking with the detonations, yet that last pitiful wail from a woman who had been cheated out of her youth and had tried to regain it, who had come face to face with failure and tragedy in her try, who knew she could not meet the shame of the world when the world came to know—that cry made them all start, froze them all.

The French windows were open. Before either man had a chance to reach her Mrs. Haviland had stepped out.

Ronald, a man in a daze, passed a hand across his bloodshot eyes. He didn't go to the window. It was too high up. There was no need to look. Even the girl suddenly swaying there in the doorway knew without being told. The girl became white-faced and pitifully small of a sudden, the rouge on her lips and her cheeks making her look like some fantastically painted Chinese doll. She was sobbing, but the sobs were inside her. . . .

LATER Dalton was grim about it all. But he played his role.

"So Mrs. Haviland, due to shock and the grief over her husband's murder, committed suicide," he said in a flat voice. "Will that suit you, Burton? It ought to. For a while you were in a tough spot yourself."

"It's fair enough, Ned," Burton replied. He was wiping absently at a blood-smear. "You need the rest of the answers?"

Dalton had arrived only minutes after the last tragedy and a squad car had brought him there as if by magic. "I think they're pretty plain, aren't they?" he said. "Mrs. Haviland and the kids had nothing to do with it, but this Lamonte guy was busy playin' hole-cards with both mother and daughter. He paid off to get Haviland killed, hiring Nougat and figuring the blame would go to Merlehan and the gambling crowd. He arranged to get his hoods inside easy enough. He was a guest! He knew the politics angle would cover him—he hoped!"

"He wasn't so stupid there either," Burton contributed. "He managed to locate Nougat on his own and only we know that actually Pete must have two-timed his own employer for the sake of what Lamonte was due to pay him when he

married the Haviland millions. Of course he could have got his workers in here at any time and concealed them in his suite. But from Nougat's angle it would have built into a rich blackmail income for the rest of his life, no matter what he was paid for this job."

"What about the kids, Burton?"

"I was afraid Gay would get hurt in what I knew had to come, after I'd figured it out. I knew they'd want her next. I didn't want Gay hurt. She's not a bad child."

Dalton grunted. "So it's that way then. Lamonte figured to marry the mother after the others were taken care of. That would have been a cinch, I guess—getting them, the way they carry on. Only Mrs. Haviland didn't savvy. The rest?"

"I think you have it by now, Ned. The murderer simply had to come from *inside*—inside here. After Lamonte let him—or them—in, he hid 'em in his place. No one from outside could have got by the private detectives stationed around. But a man introduced up here by a guest was already *in*! There was nothing then to prevent him, with an accomplice, from getting out through this suite and up along the fire stairs outside. We knew that much when I ran down that first torpedo. What I didn't know then was—who smuggled him in and where he had been hidden."

"Well, I guess we know now," Dalton said. "This'll be a tough newspaper break for the kids, though, even with all the dough they'll come into."

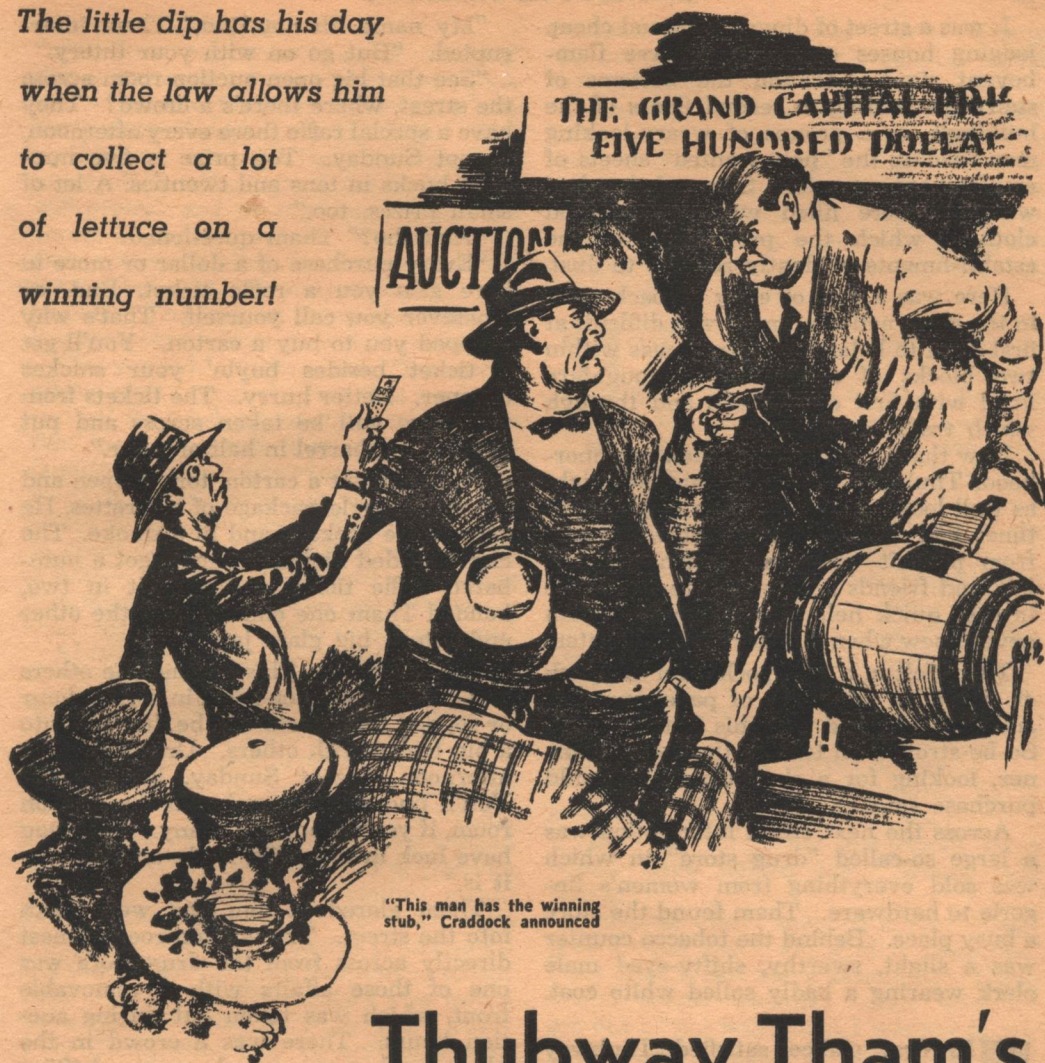
"It doesn't have to be," Burton said carefully. "That's up to you. There's a small fortune in jewels in this suite. Thieves could have seized the chance of this particular night for a haul. Lamonte could have been killed leaving Ronald's rooms—maybe defending the valuables, we'll say. Mrs. Haviland—suicide it was and it will have to stay that way, but with grief for the reason. That won't be too far wrong at that."

Dalton sighed. "All right, we'll play it that way. I'm glad you were here though."

Burton nodded. As he turned away, he said, "I wonder if I'm glad. Take care of Gay."

And he went out.

The little dip has his day
when the law allows him
to collect a lot
of lettuce on a
winning number!



"This man has the winning stub," Craddock announced

Thubway Tham's Raffle Ticket

by JOHNSTON McCULLY

IN COMMON with most dwellers in the country's metropolis, Thubway Tham, the little lisping pickpocket, generally used the same streets and even the same sides of them, and the same shops and eating places. Get him a couple of blocks off his beaten track, and he was like a wanderer in a strange land.

On this particular afternoon, Tham had dodged down a side street to avoid meet-

ing a certain officer of the law who knew him well. He had gone with speed through an arcade in a huge building, and finally had emerged furtively into a street to which he was a total stranger.

It was a street of dingy shops and cheap lodging houses over which were flamboyant signs. Around the bottoms of stairways leading to second floors of the buildings were groups of weary-looking men reading the "help wanted" sheets of employment agencies. Some of the shop windows were filled with second-hand clothing which the proprietors of the establishments evidently refused to dust.

Here was a sort of eddy or backwater in the city's activity, and it was difficult at first sight to believe the street was within two blocks of a bustling thoroughfare lined with first class shops and through which traffic roared.

Now that he was in this alien neighborhood, Thubway Tham thought he might as well look around. A man of his ilk at times had to have a safe getaway route from pursuit which might land him in jail, and friends scattered here and there in case quick help was needed. A man never knew when disaster would threaten.

Tham felt in a coat pocket for his pack of cigarettes and book of paper matches and found he had used his last cigarette. So he strolled on toward the nearest corner, looking for a shop where he could purchase smokes.

Across the next street intersection was a large so-called "drug store" in which was sold everything from women's lingerie to hardware. Tham found the store a busy place. Behind the tobacco counter was a slight, swarthy, shifty-eyed male clerk wearing a badly soiled white coat.

HIS first glance satisfied Thubway Tham that he did not like this unknown and would not have trusted him as far as he could hurl a feather against the force of a gale. But he made his wants known as he fumbled in a pocket for a coin.

"Be wise, Bud," the clerk told him, his manner confidential. "One package of cigs won't last you long. We've got a special on your brand today—one-twenty a carton. And it gives you a crack at the prizes and big money, too."

"What ith all thith thtuff about big money and pritheth?" Tham demanded, a little belligerently. He hated to have salespersons tell him what he wanted.

"Stranger, huh? Listen, Bud—"

"My name ith not Bud," Tham interrupted. "But go on with your thtory."

"See that big open auction room across the street, where there's a crowd? They have a special raffle there every afternoon, except Sunday. Top prize is five hundred bucks in tens and twenties. A lot of small prizes, too."

"And tho?" Tham questioned.

"Every purchase of a dollar or more in here gets you a raffle ticket, Bud—or whatever you call yourself. That's why I tipped you to buy a carton. You'll get a ticket besides buyin' your smokes cheaper. Better hurry. The tickets from this store will be taken across and put into the big barrel in half an hour."

Tham bought a carton, tore it open and got out a single package of cigarettes. He opened the package and lit a smoke. The clerk handed him his change, got a numbered raffle ticket and tore it in two, handed Tham one end and put the other end into a big glass jar.

"There she is! This jar and the others will go to the auction room in half an hour or so, and the tickets will be dumped into a big barrel with others. Drawing every afternoon, except Sunday, like I said. You'll find some bargains in the auction room, if you're lookin' for any. Hope you have luck in the raffle, Bud—or whatever it is."

Tham glared at him and went forth into the street. The auction room almost directly across from the drug store was one of those affairs with a removable front, which was taken out during auction hours. There was a crowd in the place, and more people were drifting along the street toward it.

Tham went back to the corner, watched the crowd for a moment, and then crossed the street when the traffic light changed. He could hear the raucous voice of the auctioneer.

"Look at it, people! A set of dishes that would ornament any table. Take the word of Amos Smith that here is a great bargain. My ears are open—what am I bid for a starter?"

"Thilly atheth to fall for that thtuff," Tham muttered. "A man could buy any of that junk cheaper at a regular thtore. Thuckerth!"

Puffing his cigarette, Tham stopped at

the edge of the crowd on the walk. Just for the heck of it, he would watch the auction for a few minutes and see the result of the raffle. Not that he hoped to win anything.

He felt in his coat pocket and made sure the raffle ticket was there. A group of persons surged forward and jostled Tham, a thing that always made him angry.

"Take it eathy," Tham said.

One of the men glared at him. "One side, chum! Don't block the walk," he advised Tham.

Tham didn't like this man at sight either. He was tall and slender, well dressed, and exuded the combined tonorial parlor aromas of bay rum, talc and hair oil. His manner revealed that he thought well of himself, excessively so.

"Bumpin' into people," Tham grumbled.

"You want to make something out of it?" the other demanded. "Behave, or I'll slap you down!"

He laughed and went on with a companion. Tham seethed with rage. Being a very small man, he always seethed when he knew he came up against mere physical size and strength.

Tham backed to the curb out of everybody's way and listened to the voice of Amos Smith, the auctioneer. But the words were blurred to Tham's ears, for he was doing some thinking along strictly professional lines.

As usual, Tham was in need of funds. He had made three subway trips since morning, and they had netted him nothing. On two trips, he had not seen a likely victim for his nimble fingers. On the third journey, he had spotted a man who looked prosperous, but the might-have-been victim got off an express at Penn Station at the last split second, as if he had forgotten something, and had left Tham to ride on.

Then, he had been obliged to dodge around a couple of blocks to avoid meeting the Headquarters man who knew him and might decide to trail him. And here he was on a strange street. His only hope now was to wait for the evening rush hour, get into the subway and try to make the day return some profit.

His cigarette finished, Tham removed the butt from his lips and turned to toss it into the littered gutter. As he did so he saw at his feet a raffle ticket somebody

had dropped. Tham picked it up and read the number: A-609. He dropped the ticket into his coat pocket to join the one he had been given by the clerk.

Tham needed at least fifty dollars. His rent was due at the lodging house conducted by "Nosey" Moore, the retired burglar. He had seen a couple of shirts he wanted to buy, and he needed socks and eating money.

"Alwayth thomethin'," he muttered.

NOW he turned toward the edge of the crowd in time to hear Amos Smith, the auctioneer, say, "In a few minutes, ladies and gentlemen, we'll have the regular afternoon prize drawings. We have some rare prizes for you today, including, of course, the grand capital prize of five hundred dollars in ten and twenty-dollar bills. Folding money, my friends! Lettuce—and no salad dressing needed! Amos Smith likes to take care of his friends. But, first, look at this floor lamp—"

Tham growled to himself, "Amoth Thmth ith an ath!"

He decided, since he had time to kill before the subway rush hour, that he would hang around. He might win a prize of some sort, though the percentage against him was terrific. And Tham reminded himself mentally that he never had much luck with raffles.

He felt a light touch on his shoulder, and turned slowly to find Detective Craddock standing beside him smiling.

It flashed through Tham's mind that Craddock must have been trailing him, though there was a slight possibility that this meeting was accidental. The detective, who had sworn to catch Tham "with the goods" and send him "to the Big House for a long stretch," irked Tham by his presence. Yet he would rather see him here than in the subway. Tham had no intention of lifting a leather in this crowd. And if he knew where Craddock was, the chances for dodging him before rush hour were better.

"Off your beat, aren't you, Tham?" Craddock questioned in low tones. "What's happened to the subway, that you're plying your nefarious trade in this vicinity?"

"I wath jutht thtrollin' around and thaw thith crowd," Tham explained.

"So? Interesting!"

"Tho it ith interethin'? Ath I thaid, I wath jutht thtrollin' around, and bought thith carton of thigareth at that thtore acroth the thtreet, and thaw thith crowd—"

"Why explain, Tham? The streets are open to the public, as long as said public behaves itself. It's only, Tham, that I am surprised to find you here. By the way, my eyes are open also."

"New York ith an open town," Tham commented.

"You are going to watch them raffle the prizes, I take it?"

"It might therve to path an idle moment," Tham replied.

"I see. All your moments will be idle until evening subway rush hour, I suppose. And watching the raffle—why, Tham, what a chance for you! You'll be able to squirm into the thick of an excited crowd, and— But you know the rest."

"Thir?" Tham said with indignation.

"Now, Tham, don't try to pretend you're only slumming when you appear hereabouts."

"If it cometh to that, what are you doin' hereabout, Craddock?"

"Just strolling around, Tham, like you," the detective informed him, smiling.

From inside the store room came the raucous voice of the auctioneer:

"Now we have come to the great moment, ladies and gentlemen! Into this revolving barrel on the platform have been put the stubs of the tickets you are holding. I'll revolve the barrel and have some lady from our audience come to the platform and draw the winning numbers—"

Tham moved nearer as the crowd surged forward, and Craddock kept beside him.

"When I look around, Tham, I do not wonder at your professional activities," Craddock muttered. "Look at these suckers! With the world so full of suckers, why should a man indulge in honest toil?"

"What ith wrong, Craddock?"

"Little innocent! Don't you know this layout? To get raffle tickets, people must buy from one of perhaps a dozen stores in the neighborhood. When it comes to the raffle, they really give away a few

prizes, mostly cheap junk that costs little—"

"Yeth, but the clerk in the thtore where I bought my thigareth thaid the big prithe wath five hundred dollarth."

"Oh, so it is, Tham! But who gets the five hundred? Some capper all set to claim it. He holds one end of the winning ticket."

"But the winnin' ticket mutht be taken from the barrel by thome women from the audienth," Tham protested.

"Ha! The auctioneer has the winning ticket palmed, Tham. He switches tickets when the woman draws for the big prize. He calls the number, and the capper comes up and gets the wad of dough, tells who he is and where he lives and what he does—like blazes!—and walks away with the wad. Then he hands it back after the afternoon auction is over."

"Why, the low thcoundrelth!" Tham muttered.

"See, Tham? You're not the only crook in our fair city. You have plenty of competition. This fake auction game is a big racket, Tham."

"Ith thith not a lottery, Craddock? And ith it not tho that a lottery ith againtht the law?"

"Supposedly so, Tham. Once in a while we haul 'em in and they get a little fine. But the company that runs these places has an expensive mouthpiece who knows how to dodge the law."

The crowd surged forward again. Some foolish-looking woman was upon the platform, grinning at the crowd. Amos Smith whirled the barrel containing the ticket stubs, opened a slot in it, and the woman extracted a ticket and handed it to him. Amos read the number, and presented a gushing woman with a fancy china teapot.

SO IT started. Tham gradually worked his way into the auction room as newcomers behind pushed him forward. Some friend of Craddock's slapped him on the back and greeted him, and Craddock turned aside for conversation. Tham edged nearer the platform.

He watched as Amos Smith, working his crowd well and between prize drawings calling attention to auction bargains that would be put up for sale after the raffle, disposed of half a dozen more cheap

prizes. Then the auctioneer put up a carved occasional chair worth perhaps fifty dollars retail, the second best prize, and there was more excitement as he raffled the chair.

But there the auctioneer's honesty ended. He held his hands high and gave his audience a benevolent smile.

"Now we come to the big moment, ladies and gentlemen!" he announced. "Five hundred dollars cash! Any of us can use money like that these days, eh? Five hundred cash! Look at your tickets carefully when the winning number is announced. If the grand prize is not claimed by somebody here present within two minutes, another number will be drawn."

Tham had his tickets in his hand—the one he had received with the purchase of his carton of cigarettes and the one he had picked up on the walk. He glanced at the numbers and thrust the hand holding the tickets back into his coat pocket.

All around him, excited people were handling their tickets, their eyes shiny with hope. Tham felt himself jostled again, and turned quickly and angrily to see standing beside him the man with whom he had spat on the walk outside—the tall, sleek-looking dressy man redolent with barber shop odors.

Tham glared at the man as the latter's elbow thrust him aside as if he had been less than nothing. But he choked back his rage. This wasn't the moment for a quarrel. Amos Smith was whirling the barrel containing the ticket stubs.

The barrel was stopped, the slot opened, and a woman drew forth a ticket stub and held it high. Amos Smith lifted his hand and took the stub and held it so all could see. No tricks, his act indicated.

Tham watched closely. He saw the auctioneer's fist close for only an instant, and then the ticket stub was in the open again for everybody to see. But Tham knew that Mr. Amos Smith had had a stub palmed and deftly had exchanged it for the one drawn, and that it was the palmed stub he now held high.

"The winning number!" the auctioneer cried. "If the winner does not claim the prize within two minutes after the number is announced, a second number will be drawn. One moment!"

He still held the stub high while a

grinning assistant put on the corner of the auctioneer's desk a sheaf of currency folded once and fastened with a paper clip.

"There it is, ladies and gentlemen! Five hundred cash, in tens and twenties. And now for the winning number. I want two ladies from the audience to come up here and look at the stub and make sure I read the number correctly."

He still held up the stub while two giggling women got upon the platform beside him. They both looked at the number on the stub, and then Amos Smith read it:

"The winning number—A-609!"

On every side of Tham, people were checking the numbers on their tickets, giving groans of disappointment, hoping nobody would claim the prize so another number would have to be drawn. Tham took out his own two tickets, looked at them—and gasped as his eyes bulged. He had A-609! Whether it was the one the clerk had given him or the one he had picked up on the walk outside, he was not sure.

"I've got it!" he yelled.

Excited, he began thrusting his way forward, jostling men and women as he often had been jostled himself. Those around him began chattering:

"This man has it! . . . Oh, you lucky thing! . . . Easy way to get five hundred bucks! . . . Wish I had his luck!"

Tham elbowed on and finally stood at the edge of the platform. "I've got it!" he repeated, holding the stub aloft.

Amos Smith seemed bewildered. He glared at Tham and then glanced around at the audience.

"Hold it a second! I've got it!" some other man called.

Tham, gripping his ticket stub, turned and saw the sleek-looking man with whom he had collided out on the walk. He was striding forward and grinning as he felt in the several pockets of his garments.

"Got it right here somewhere," he said. "Remember the number well—it's the number of my room at my hotel. Got it in some pocket—"

"I've got it right here!" Tham yelled.

"Let's see it, my man," Amos Smith said, putting down a hand.

"No, you don't!" Tham cried. "Not un-

til I thow thith thtub to thome of the folkth around me. I want them to thee that thith ith the right ticket. A-609."

THAM exhibited the stub to several around him and suddenly found a puzzled Craddock at his side. Craddock checked the number.

"That's right—A-609. This man has the winning stub," Craddock announced.

"Hold it!" the sleek-looking man cried, still fumbling in his pockets. "I know I had that ticket!"

"But here it is," Craddock informed him.

"Then it was stolen from me."

"Wait!" Craddock shouted. He exhibited his badge. "I'm a police officer. I'll handle this." He turned to the sleek-looking man. "When did you see your ticket last?"

"Just before I came into the auction room. I glanced at it again because 609 is the number of my hotel room, and I had a hunch the ticket might be lucky."

"Who are you, and where do you live?"

"My name's Oscar Wilson, and I live at the Friendly Neighbor Hotel uptown. I put the stub into my pocket after looking at it, and now it's gone. It was stolen. Who's this little runt who has it now?"

"I happen to know him," Craddock said. "I was only a few feet from him at any time after he came in here, standing to one side talking to a friend. He didn't take any ticket out of any of your pockets. And why should he? How could he know what ticket would be the winner?"

Everybody around them muttered at that.

"Thith ith a thwindle!" Tham proclaimed. "It ith a thkin game! Thith Amoth Thmith mutht have had a thtub palmed and he changed it for the one drawn—"

"Why, how dare you!" Amos bellowed.

"And thith other man, who callth him-thelf Othcar Wilthn—he mutht be a capper for thith thkin game."

"How's that, runt? I'll bust you for that one!" Oscar Wilson cried.

He hurled himself forward angrily. Tham understood that game, too. A commotion would be caused, a fight started. Women would scream and crowd to get away from the brawl, and men

would mill around like so many frenzied cattle. Then they would try to get Tham aside and slip him a ten spot and boot him out the back door.

Craddock went into action against Oscar Wilson while the bulky auctioneer bent over the edge of the low platform and began yelling. People elbowed and jostled and shrieked. The table on the platform tilted and almost fell over and papers on it splattered to the floor.

Tham was knocked down and his carton of cigarettes fell to the floor and came open. Beneath the feet of the others. Tham picked up the carton, fussed around with it, closed it, then crawled to safety.

He stood up at the end of the platform and waited. The crowd had jammed out on the walk. Craddock had snapped handcuffs on Oscar Wilson's wrists and was now talking to the auctioneer.

"I'll have to report this brawl," Craddock said. "You may lose your license over it. This little man had the winning stub and is entitled to the money. If your capper got careless and lost the ticket and it was found, that's none of my business."

"I tell you it was stolen from me," Oscar Wilson declared again.

"Yah!" Craddock replied inelegantly. "I know this game. Somebody got their signals crossed, that's all. You can't even prove you had that ticket, Wilson, so you can't put in a claim for lost and recovered property."

"This little runt has ruined my business," Amos Smith put in.

"Give him the money he won!" Craddock ordered. "He still has the winning ticket."

The auctioneer let out a yell: "The money's gone!"

"The runt swiped that, too," Oscar Wilson roared.

"Shut up!" Craddock was getting angry. "Wilson, another yap out of you and I'll have you investigated. I'll find how you make your living and maybe check back and see if you have a record."

Wilson's face paled.

"Smith," Craddock went on, to the auctioneer, "let's clear this up. You probably pocketed that five hundred during the fuss. Dig it up!"

"I didn't! Search me! The table al-

most tipped over once. The money may have fallen to the floor. Somebody picked it up."

"Search the runt," Wilson suggested.

"Step down here, Smith," Craddock ordered. "And you stand against the platform with your hands up," he told Tham, without naming him. "I'll search you both."

AMOS SMITH'S pockets did not give up the five hundred in currency folded and held with a paper clip. Craddock searched Tham methodically and well as the other two men watched. Tham was clean. Craddock even opened the lid of the carton of cigarettes and gave a quick glance inside.

"Looks like somebody picked the money up off the floor during the fuss," Craddock judged. "That's your hard luck, Smith. This man has the winning ticket, and I want you to pay him his money."

"I'll have to take this up with others," Smith protested.

"Maybe I'd better take everybody to the precinct station and go into this thing," Craddock hinted.

Tham did not desire to be involved in any proceeding like that. "Oh, under the thircumthanceth, give me a hundred and I'll call it thquare," he offered generously. "All thith ekthitement geth on my nerveth. Therveth me right for comin' into thutch a plathe."

Amos Smith argued a moment longer. But when Craddock got a grim look on his face again, the auctioneer counted out a hundred cash and extended it to Craddock. The detective took Tham's ticket stub and handed it to Smith, then took the handcuffs off Oscar Wilson.

"That settles it," Craddock said. "I know the game you've been working here. I'll report on it. Wilson, better keep away from here, or I'll check on you. And, Mr. Smith, you'd better give a more modest prize—and really give it! Come along, you!" This last was to Tham.

"What are you arrehthtin' me for?" Tham wailed.

"I'm not arresting you. And I don't intend to leave you here alone to be beaten up and that hundred taken from you. I want peace here! I'll just escort you over to the avenue."

Tham walked beside him, demure and silent. They were not followed.

"Tham, you certainly do get into mix-ups," Craddock complained. "But I'm really glad this happened. It exposed that racket to the people of the neighborhood. I know you didn't pick the pocket of Oscar Wilson to get that ticket. You prefer wallets."

"Thir?" Tham raged.

"Anyhow, you got a hundred out of it, so behave yourself while you're spending that. If you'd stuck along, I'd have made those crooks give you the five hundred, but they might have caused a long delay."

"Yeth, and a hundred in the hand ith worth five hundred in the buthh," Tham commented.

"On your way, Tham, then!"

Craddock went up the avenue. Clutching his carton of cigarettes, Tham went to the subway station and caught a downtown express.

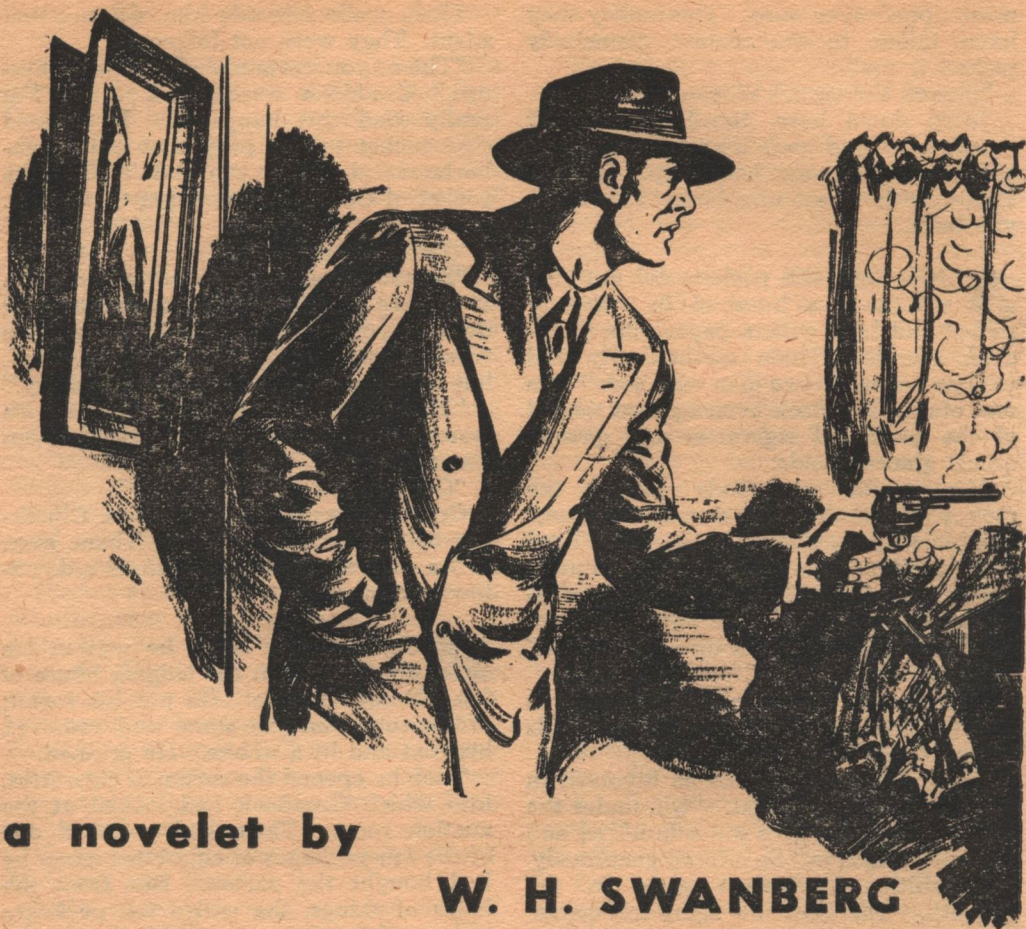
HALF an hour later, he was in his dingy room in the lodging house of Mr. "Nosey" Moore. He put his carton of cigarettes on the stand and removed his coat and lit a smoke. He grinned.

Then he opened the carton of cigarettes, into which Craddock had looked at the auction room. Tham had removed one of the ten packages of cigarettes when he had bought the carton. But from the looks of things, the entire ten packages were still in the carton. There was no depression in the top layer of packages to show where one had been removed.

Tham grinned again and extracted the middle package. And there, in the place beneath it, was five hundred dollars in folding money. It was folded now and fastened with a paper clip, just as it had been when it had fallen from the table on the platform in the auction room during the riot. And it made a tiny bundle just large enough to lift and hold up a package of cigarettes and make the box look full.

"It ith a good thing Craddock wath in a big hurry," Tham muttered. "But the thigarette package in the carton looked natural, and that wath enough for him."

He stuffed the currency into his pocket—and began wondering how to spend it. Tham never thought of the proverbial rainy day.



a novelet by

W. H. SWANBERG

*Rocky Stagg was young Johnny Koval's idol,
but false idols have a habit of betraying
their loyal admirers—when the heat's on!*

CHAPTER I

Dressed to Kill

YOUNG Johnny Koval ran a comb through his black curly hair then stood back from the bathroom mirror and looked at himself.

Slick!

He buttoned his blue topcoat and adjusted the white silk scarf. Then, very carefully, he put on the pearl gray Hom-

Say! He was class all right! So what if the hat and scarf had cost him fifteen bucks. It was worth it!

What was it Rocky Stagg had said the other night at Nick's Place? "If you're gonna be somebody you gotta look like somebody." Yeah, Rocky was right, no doubt about that. Rocky was right about everything—he was just a right guy.

my PAL, the KILLER



Johnny bound the struggling landlady with frantic hands

Johnny eyed his reflection again. Rocky would approve all right. He ought to—the hat and scarf were just like his!

Lighting a cigarette, Johnny tilted his head back, and with the fag hanging limply in the corner of his mouth and the smoke curling lazily out of his nostrils, he studied the effect in the mirror through half-closed eyes. It was a way Rocky

had of looking at you. A superior, knowing look. Johnny smiled slowly. The effect was very satisfactory.

Humming a tune, he flipped off the light and went back into his small bedroom. He felt good. The hat made him feel good.

Johnny had no way of knowing that in less than two hours he would be wanted

for murder. Johnny wasn't psychic.

Taking the change from the top of the golden oak chiffonier he counted it quickly. Three-sixty. His face clouded slightly as he shoved it into his pocket. Oh well, the hat and scarf were worth a few skimpy lunches.

Grinding out his fag in the glass ash-tray on the chiffonier, his eyes fell on the portrait. Mary Webb. . .

He gazed at her plain face thoughtfully. She was not exactly good looking—not in the Hollywood sense anyway. Her eyes, set wide apart, were too direct; her full mouth was a little too determined. He picked up the portrait. *To Johnny from Mary..* No "with love." Mary didn't believe in a lot of frills.

What had happened there anyway? They'd gone together all through high school. They had made dreamy, school-kid plans to get married. Then in the last six months, there had been a cooling off.

"She's a funny one," Johnny thought. All women were funny. Just like Rocky had said. "Women only hold a guy back, Johnny. Sure, they're nice to have around but don't get serious. Play the field. Women are afraid to take chances. They want their man to be in a safe, secure rut. And how's a guy going to get anywhere that way?"

Yeah, Rocky was right. Mary was okay but for a guy that was going places, nix. She'd only hold him back. Why, just the last time he'd seen her she'd told him to stick with his job at the Empire Drug when he told her he was thinking of quitting.

"Some day you might own a store of your own, Johnny. Stick with it and learn the business. Slow and steady wins the race."

Yeah, slow and steady! Look at old man Parks! Been with Empire for fifteen years and still a clerk. Not for Johnny! He was going places.

In a hurry!

"If you're going to get anywhere, Johnny, you've got to take chances—you can't get bogged down in a rut."

He set the portrait back on the chiffonier. Still. . . He looked at it with a faint frown of uncertainty. Oh, what the heck! He swept the portrait off the

chiffonier and tossed it into the waste basket. There! That's that!

No woman was going to hold Johnny back. He squared his thin shoulders, feeling proud of himself for thus dismissing Mary from his life. It showed that he was not the type of a guy you'd trifle with. Not Johnny Koval.

He sauntered down the stairs.

"Where you going, Johnny?"

"Out for a stroll, Pop. Just lookin' around."

Pop's tired blue eyes gazed at Johnny thoughtfully. "Where did you get the hat?"

"Bought it this afternoon."

Pop's thin, nervous hands folded the paper. "Seems like pretty fancy duds for a soda jerk, Johnny."

Johnny tried out the look he'd just been practising in the mirror. Somehow it didn't come off so well. "If you're gonna be somebody," he said, "you gotta look like somebody."

Pop smiled wearily. "Allright, son. Have it your way. I guess every kid has to go through this stage at one time or another. Just don't get in any trouble, Johnny."

CLOSING the front door behind him, Johnny opened the sagging front gate and started down the street.

Some neighborhood! Old run-down houses whose uncurtained windows stared into the dirty street like insane eyes, garbage cans sitting in the gutter, dirty sidewalks. Johnny kicked disgustedly at a condensed milk can. Some neighborhood!

Maybe it was okay for some people but not for Johnny. He was going to go places. He was going to have a swell apartment with thick rugs and classy furniture, and a phone in it with an extension cord a block long and a servant to bring it to him when it rang—just like in the movies.

Funny how some people just didn't care if they ever got anywhere in life. Pop was a little different, though. Since the accident, Pop couldn't work much, so he wasn't really living like this because he didn't care. Pop was okay. A little old fashioned, but okay.

Johnny walked along with his head

down, his stubby hands thrust into the pockets of his topcoat. He'd get some gloves next week. Pigskin probably, like Rocky's. His mind returned to the dream that he had gradually built up as a goal. Yeah, he'd have a car. Two of 'em. And a woman. He wouldn't marry her. She'd just be around when he wanted her, and when he got tired of her all he had to do was crook his finger at another one. He'd be well known, Johnny would, and the women would go for him. He smiled happily.

The fact that he made only twenty bucks a week didn't discourage him. He was just holding down the job while he looked around and got set to go places.

He stopped at the Roxy and looked at the pictures in the marquee. Patricia Lynn was playing in "Man Crazy." Wow! What a body! He walked on. Some day he'd have a dozen like her.

Tub Waldron and Ikey Froth were standing in front of Nick's Place.

"Pipe that hat!"

"You'd think he was a banker!"

Johnny's voice was disdainful. "You punks," he snorted. He went inside. The place was dead. Couple of guys playing pool on table four, an old man with a mustache and watery blue eyes huddled up at the bar in front of a beer. No sign of Rocky.

He unbuttoned his coat and shoved his hat back. Then he spun a buck on the bar and waited for Nick.

"What'll it be, Johnny?"

Johnny's hand flattened the buck. "Call it."

"Heads."

Johnny lifted his hand. It was heads. "Beer, Nick. Rocky been around?"

Nick shook his head. "Haven't seen him."

Johnny sipped the cold beer and looked at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Class. Strictly class.

Sixty-three minutes now. Sixty-three minutes till murder.

Johnny was studying a gallery of pin-up girls tacked along the top of the back-bar when the door opened.

"Well, well, well! Look who's here!"

Johnny set down his glass and turned. "Hi, Rocky." He tried to make his voice sound easy. "What's doin'?"

He felt Rocky's cold brown eyes appraise the new hat and scarf, and translated the slow smile as one of approval.

CHAPTER II

Host to Homicide



OCKY leaned against the bar and reaching out a hairy hand, picked up the half dollar of Johnny's change. "Get you payday, Johnny," he said, spinning the coin.

"Sure. That's okay, Rocky."

Rocky ordered a pepsi high. Johnny studied him covertly in the mirror. He looked the goods all right. A brown tweed topcoat tonight, with a tan snap-brim and a flashy red tie. Dressed to kill, Rocky was.

Johnny looked down quickly as Rocky's eyes, cold and impersonal, caught his gaze in the mirror.

"Doing anything tonight, Johnny?"

"Naw, just lookin' around."

"Want to do me a favor?"

Johnny's pulse quickened. He'd do a favor for Rocky any day of the week! "Sure, Rocky."

"I got an appointment tonight way out in the sticks. Should be worth a good piece of change for me." He put a condescending hand on Johnny's shoulder. "How's for you driving me out?"

Johnny grew evasive. Pop never let him have the car. That car was Pop's interest in life. Spent most of his time tinkering with it. "Can't you rent a car, Rocky? Or—take a cab?"

"That's no good, Johnny. Too easy to tr— Uh, well, I just thought you'd like to do a guy a favor."

"I don't know, Rocky. I'd sure like to, but—"

"But what?"

Johnny winced at the demanding tone in Rocky's voice. "Well, Pop wouldn't let me have the car."

Rocky snorted. "Rats, Johnny. Don't let a little thing like that stand in your way. Take it!"

Johnny toyed with his beer doubtfully, making three interlocking circles like in the ale ad.

Rocky straightened. "Okay, okay! It doesn't matter! If you don't want to put yourself out to do a guy a favor!" He started for the door.

"Wait a minute, Rocky!" Johnny walked after him. "Sure, I'll take you out."

Rocky smiled. "I didn't think you were the kind that would let a guy down."

They walked into the street. Tub Waldron and Ikey Froth were still at the curb.

"See you punks later," said Johnny. Their envious stares warmed him. He was a pal of Rocky's, Johnny was. Not a punk kid who stood around on the street corner sizing up the women.

"Who're those guys, Johnny?"

"Couple of punks I went to high school with."

"Punk kids. That's what I like about you, Johnny. For a guy that's only nineteen, you sure act grownup."

Johnny glowed inside, oblivious to Rocky's slow sidelong glance. Sure. Sure, he'd nip the old man's car and take Rocky wherever he wanted to go.

Forty minutes, Johnny.

Reaching his block, they slowed. "It's in the driveway. I figure we can roll it down the hill here to the corner before we kick it over."

"Yeah, he'll never know we took it."

Silently they pushed the blue Chevrolet coach into the street then coasted it down the gentle hill. Minutes later, they were on Lincoln Drive heading out of town.

"How far is it, Rocky?"

"Just outside of town. The Ashland Country Club."

Johnny whistled. Class!

It was a low, rambling, stone building. Johnny drove up the winding drive that led to it.

Rocky got out. "I'll be right back, Johnny. Leave the motor running."

"Yeah, sure, Rocky. Take your time." He lit a cigarette and gazed about at the sleek automobiles in the parking lot, the well-kept flower beds, the wide lawn. He could hear the strains of a dance band, and laughter, and he got a glimpse now

and then through the arched windows of men in evening clothes and women in formal gowns. Strictly class.

SUDDENLY he stiffened.

Was that a shot? There! Another one!

Then he saw Rocky burst through a side entrance and make a lurching run for the car. He was carrying a bulging money sack.

"Ho-ly!" thought Johnny. "A stickup!"

Rocky tore open the door. "Get going, Johnny!" His face was drawn in pain.

Johnny wheeled the Chevy around and headed down the drive. A wave of panic seized him. "Rocky! Whyn't you—"

"Just keep this heap rolling, sonny boy," Rocky snarled. "Never mind the talk!" He tossed the sack on the floor and grasped his arm. "Something went wrong," he moaned. "That bouncer came in just as I was leaving and got me in the arm and I had to plug him."

Johnny glimpsed a man in shirtsleeves running across the parking lot toward a big Cadillac. "Gees, Rocky, what'll we do!"

The Chevy careened down the winding drive and shot out into the highway. The Caddy was a hundred yards behind.

Rocky looked back. "That guy'll catch us sure on the highway. Take the first side street!"

A spotlight began to play over the car. Johnny glanced quickly into the rear view again. The Caddy was searching for the license plate. And creeping up.

They skidded into a sidestreet and began a crazy zigzag up and down alleys. The Caddy stayed with them.

"They got the license number, Rocky!"

"Shut up and drive, punk!"

Then they got a break. They made it across Lincoln Drive just as the light changed, and a stream of cross-bound traffic cut off the Caddy. Johnny breathed easier.

"Turn left here."

"What are we gonna do, Rocky?"

"We're going to hole up. Tina's apartment isn't far from here and she's away on a vacation. It's a perfect setup. Right at the next corner."

Following Rocky's instructions, Johnny pulled up before a decrepit red brick flat.

Rocky climbed out. "It's Apartment 18, Johnny. Ditch the car and walk back. And get some adhesive tape and cotton and iodine for this arm. It's killin' me!" He darted into the building.

Johnny pulled away. Gees! Ditch it where? No good to ditch it too close by. And he couldn't go very far away either—not with every patrol car in town looking for him, probably.

He cruised by a depot. There! Sure! When they found it the cops would think they'd taken the train. He parked it at the curb before the depot and got out.

He paused for a moment, then went inside. Might as well do it up right. Easy now. Don't act scared. Light a fag and study the timetable. Make it look like you're goin' somewhere. Take that Fairfax local. Leaves any minute now.

Johnny looked at the four-faced bronze clock hanging from the domed ceiling. Yeah, in about five minutes. He sidled up to the ticket window.

Cover your face, chump. Don't let the guy get a good look at you. He pulled the new Homburg hat down over his eyes and turned up his collar.

"Gimme two tickets to Fairfax."

"One way?"

"Yeah."

The agent pushed the tickets through the window. "Two-twenty. Train's on track three, leaving in just a few minutes."

Johnny hurried out the rear door to the train platform, then doubled back around the building. Gees! Nothing to it! The guy didn't even bother to look at him. All he'd be able to tell the cops was that a guy came in around eleven and bought two tickets on the Fairfax local. And what did he look like? Johnny could just see the expression on the guy's face when he'd try to remember! What a clunk!

He ran the coins in his pocket through his fingers. Two forty-five. Next thing was to get the medicine for Rocky and then get back. He stood uncertainly on the street corner in front of the depot, biting his lip.

Back? Back to Rocky?

Go on home, Johnny. Get out of this while the getting is good. This is just the beginning. Things are going to get a lot worse, Johnny. A lot worse.

He scanned the street. Drug sign down there in the next block. Another one

there on the side street. He picked the one on the side street. It was on his way.

The clerk was just closing up when Johnny walked in. He put the iodine and tape and cotton in a sack that had an ad for Bolton's Liniment printed on it. "Good for all rheumatic aches, growing pains, arthritis."

"Whatsa matter, cut yourself?"

"Wife did," Johnny lied. He hurried out and started down the street.

"Hey! You fergot yer change!"

"Skip it!" Johnny called back. "Get you next time!"

ELEVEN-TEN. Pop would be locking up now. First the back door, then the front door, then turn out all the lights. Pop would be wondering where Johnny was. He thought of the cheap brass bed in his room with the pine taboret alongside with an ashtray on it. He thought how it would be to crawl into that bed now and have one more fag before going to sleep. It would be great.

He couldn't go home though. He couldn't leave Rocky with that arm. Maybe tomorrow. Tell his Pop he'd stayed over with a friend.

Suddenly he stopped. Fingerprints! Gees, they were all over that steering wheel! He wheeled around and walked back. Why in hell didn't he wear gloves! He polished the steering wheel with his scarf, wiped off the dashboard, the door handles. There!

Apartment 18 was on the second floor. Johnny climbed the stairway. The place smelled of musty wood and stale air. A cheap tin sign nailed on the front door said, "No Solicitors," and another sign beside the homemade honeycomb for mail just inside the door said, "All rent strictly cash. In advance." And in the dim light on the landing there was a third sign printed with a red crayon on the lid of a shoebox and tacked to the oak wainscot: "Positively no noise or loud talk after 10:00 P. M. signed Helena Murkle, landlady."

Ha! Stick around Helena!

The name of the place was the *Elite*. Johnny rapped lightly on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Johnny."

The door opened quickly and Johnny slid through.

"What took you so long? Cripes, this arm is killing me!" Rocky's thin mouth was twisted in pain.

Johnny told Rocky how he'd ducked the car, but Rocky didn't seem to hear. "Get this shirt off."

Johnny dressed the raw, torn flesh as well as he could. Then he climbed into the frilly bed.

Johnny took off his coat. "Where do I sleep?"

Rocky raised up. "On the floor, stupe! Can't you see there's only one bed?"

Johnny curled up on the floor and pulled his coat over him. He lay there, listening to Rocky's breathing.

And thinking. Thinking about his cheap brass bed back home. Thinking about Mary Webb. . . .

CHAPTER III

Homburg Hat



ON THE opaque glass of the office door the lettering read, "Lt. Harold O. Breen, Homicide," but everybody called him Brick.

Maybe because his hair was a rusty red—like some bricks. Or maybe because he was built like a brick—most any brick. He was square all over. His compact, muscular body was fitted out at the moment in a nondescript blue serge suit—complemented by an equally nondescript blue tie a white shirt (slightly frayed on left cuff), and black shoes, negligently shined. Looked at from any angle, he reminded you of, well of a brick. Rough and ready, as they say, and yet with an inner gentleness that shone through in his blue eyes, sometimes twinkling, sometimes somber, always alert.

They were somber now, and very alert, as they looked at the unhappy little man sitting on the other side of his green metal desk. "When did you first miss your car, Mr. Koval?"

"Last night about eleven," was the agitated reply. "When I was locking up

for the night."

Brick drummed lightly on the desk with the rubber end of a pencil. "A blue Chevy coach, 1939 model, license number B-67420?"

Mr. Koval nodded.

"Any idea who could have taken it, one of the family perhaps?"

"No, no, I don't think Johnny—"

"Johnny?"

"My son. He—" Mr. Koval's voice petered out and he looked hopelessly out the window.

"Where is Johnny, Mr. Koval?"

"I—he didn't come home last night." He straightened himself suddenly. "Oh, I'm sure he didn't take it! He'd ask me first! He's just staying with a friend and forgot to tell me. He's a good boy. Young but—a good boy."

Brick smiled. "I think I know what you mean, Mr. Koval. I have two boys myself."

Mr. Koval smiled back. "Foolish stage, I guess. Bought a gray Homburg hat yesterday and a white silk scarf, just like he was a—a banker."

A discreet rap on the door.

"Yes?"

"Can I talk to you a moment, Lieutenant Breen?" The police sergeant's voice was faintly urgent.

"You'll excuse me," said Brick, and went out into the corridor, closing the door behind him.

"They found it, sir. Parked at Tenth Street depot." He consulted a pad of paper in his beefy, roughened hand. "Blue Chevy coach, license number B-67420."

"Good work. Keep a man on it. And send Manning down to dust it for prints."

"Yes, sir."

Brick went back into his office. "We'll locate your car for you, Mr. Koval. And in the meantime, don't worry about it."

Mr. Koval rose and put on his pinched brown hat. He paused at the door and read the lettering. "Homicide," he said. "Why?"

But Brick gently ushered him out. "Don't worry. We'll find it," and closed the door behind him.

Check so far. That fellow at the Ashland Country Club was positive about the license number. Mr. Koval reported the car stolen. The car had been found, ap-

parently abandoned.

And Johnny Koval hadn't gone home last night. A young kid in a Homburg hat.

Brick gave a thoughtful tug to the brim of his gray snapbrim. A young kid in a Homburg hat. Sticking out like a sore thumb wherever he went. Still, maybe he *did* stay with a friend. We'll see.

His freckled hand produced a pack of smokes from his pocket. The pack had a rubber band around it. And the band held a note. Brick didn't have to read it. It said, "Don't forget the cough medicine for Bob." No, he wouldn't forget.

Thank heaven it was only a cold. Suppose it was a deal like this young Johnny Koval was in. Would Bob be harum-scarum like that when he reached that age?

Brick thought about that as he drove to the Tenth Street depot. You never can tell about kids at that age. They get a screw-loose idea and phooey! It looked like phooey for Johnny Koval allright. Murder and armed robbery were plenty phooey. Trying to be a big shot, probably. Yes—Homburg hat—trying to be a big shot. World too slow for their pace. That's the way it usually was—world too slow. And they wanted to go places. Fast. Brick's mouth drooped a little.

H E SLID the car into a vacant spot at the curb before the depot and got out. There was Mickey over there, leaning against a blue Chevy coach, license number B-67420. That was it allright. He forced an official expression into his square, freckled face. That was for the little group of curious onlookers standing on the curb near the car.

"Car been moved, Mickey?"

"Good morning, sir. No, not that I know of."

Brick peered through the closed window. Manning had already come and gone apparently, to judge by the black powder clinging to the dash-board and steering wheel and door handles. Manning find anything?"

"Didn't say, Lieutenant."

Brick opened the door. His contemplative gaze stopped at the reddish stain on the cushion in the front seat. Blood. The bouncer at the Ashland was supposed to

have got in one shot. The blood was on the passenger side of the front seat, too. So there were two in on the deal, probably. Brick slammed the door. "Allright, Mick, have it moved down to the yard."

Brick walked slowly into the depot and examined the train schedule. Let's see. The stickup took place about ten last night. Some train that left after that. Two of them—the Westbound Limited and the Fairfax local. That would be it. The Westbound left at ten-twenty-five. Too early.

He walked over to a ticket window. "Breen," he said, "of Homicide squad." He flipped his identification. "Can you tell me if two men took the Fairfax local last night?"

The clerk's faded brown eyes regarded Breen. "I wasn't on duty last night. Try next window."

He did—and got results. Yes, the ticket agent distinctly recalled selling two tickets for the Fairfax local just before train time.

"What did they look like?"

The agent's smile was apologetic. "To tell the truth I paid no attention." He thought hard a moment. "Seems like there was one," he said at last. "A fellow in a gray Homburg."

Brick's eyes grew somber. A fellow wearing a gray Homburg. Johnny Koval. And the other one was wounded. Wouldn't they try to get it bandaged? Probably.

He went back to the car, radioed in, and told the Desk to notify all towns on the Fairfax line to watch for a young man about nineteen wearing a Homburg hat, along with another man, no description but probably injured.

Then he walked to the corner. Grand Avenue stretched ahead. It didn't look any too grand in the uncompromising light of high noon. A segment of skid row it was. Frowzy hotels, noisy bars, garish second-hand stores with windows crammed with hocked watches, tools, drafting sets—the sorry possessions of people who drifted into oblivion on the row.

A block away, the sign DRUGS stood out in faded black letters. A possibility.

Brick turned his head and looked down Tenth Street. Better. Funny how the

turn of a corner can make such a difference. It boasted a narrow strip of park that ran for a block in front of the depot. The tall elms needed pruning, the grass was getting brown, and some of the park benches had busted slats, but a park nevertheless. A place where old men could sit in the sun and talk. Or just sit. They were there now, sitting on the broken slatted benches, gazing out into space. Brick often wondered what those old men were thinking about, sitting like that for hours at a time. Their past probably. And better days.

Another drugstore a half block down the street. A neon sign on this one. Brick walked toward it. Maybe it had a lunch counter, too. It did. He ordered a burger with the works and a cup of coffee. Finished, he pushed back his plate and reached for his smokes.

The rubber band. Bob's medicine. He swung off the stool and walked over to the prescription counter. "Cough medicine," he said briefly.

"What kind? Gotta cold?"

"Bolton's. No, it's for my boy."

"Gotta watch it this time of year. They're goin' around."

Brick thought that with kids you got to watch it any time of the year. "Medium bottle will do."

The clerk's slim fingers busied themselves with the parcel.

BBRICK produced his identification. "Lt. Breen of Homicide," he said. There was more than a trace of weariness in his voice. "You work here last night?" The clerk nodded, his sharp eyes widening.

"Remember a young kid coming in and buying some bandages, maybe? A kid in a Homburg hat?"

The clerk's index finger pointed like a spear at Brick. "Say! I do! He come in just at closing time and bought some tape and iodine and gauze."

Brick nodded, shoving the cough medicine into his pocket.

The clerk's face was triumphant. "I thought he acted kinda queer. Seemed in an awful hurry. Fergot his change. I hollered after him and he said he'd catch me next time. Said his wife had cut herself."

"Which direction did he go?"

The clerk jerked a thumb down the street.

"And that was what time?"

"Just a few minutes past eleven. Why? What'd he do?"

Brick ignored the question. Outside, he stood on the curb and looked down Tenth Street in the direction the clerk had indicated. A few minutes past eleven—after the Fairfax local had pulled out. . . . Even if the train was late, he walked away from the depot not toward it.

Brick smiled without mirth. Leave it to a kid to pull a bobble like that. A scared kid.

He—or they—could be holed up within a block or two. Or a mile or two. No way of knowing. Try it from the other end. Start with Johnny's home. Might find out who the other one is.

Mr. Koval wasn't home. The front door was unlocked, though, and by cupping his hand against the reflection, Brick saw Mr. Koval's dusty felt hat hanging on the hall-tree. He couldn't be far.

Brick went in. "Mr. Koval!" No answer. Only the patient tick-tock of the shelf clock in the living room, and the faint sounds of some kids playing kick-the-can up in the next block.

Brick walked upstairs. Through a doorway at the end of the hall, he saw an old brass bed, an oak chiffonier with a wad of ties looped around the mirror support. Brick stood in the center of the small room and looked around.

His eyes stopped at the waste-basket. Stooping down, he retrieved a tinted portrait from it. "To Johnny from Mary." His girl probably—or used to be. If she were still his girl what would her picture be doing in the waste basket? Lover's quarrel, maybe. About what? Brick wondered.

He looked at the picture. Not bad. Solid looking. Not the painted doll type at all. Johnny was just lucky and didn't know it, apparently. He placed the picture on the chiffonier and went back downstairs.

Mr. Koval was just coming in the door. "Oh! It's you! You scared me for a minute."

"Hope you don't mind, Mr. Koval, my barging in like this."

"Oh no. Not at all."

Brick noted the faraway note in the man's voice.

"Johnny come home yet?"

Mr. Koval set the sack of groceries on the hall chair. He propped the sack very carefully. "Eggs," he said with a faint smile. "Such prices." He looked past Brick into the living room. "No," he said, "I haven't seen Johnny since—last night."

Brick nodded. "Everything's high. Too high. Eggs, meat. Has Johnny got a girl?"

"Just Mary. Mary Webb, that is. She works at the Empire Drug. Fine girl. I've been hoping—well, you know how it is with kids."

Brick nodded. "I know what you mean."

Outside, Brick climbed into his car thoughtfully. Mr. Koval hadn't asked him if they'd recovered the stolen car. Worried. Worried about Johnny. Well, what father wouldn't be?

CHAPTER IV

Mary Webb



THE Empire Drug was a weird combination of red plastic tile, aluminum, lots of neon tubing and a window full of specials. Brick pushed open the heavy glass door, and paused at the notion counter.

"Can I help you?"

Brick looked at the trim girl standing before him. Calm blue eyes, a firm, full mouth, a neat gray suit. Mary Webb. Yes, Johnny was lucky and didn't know it.

Brick decided to play it straight. "Breen is my name. City Police."

"Oh," Mary glanced at the identification.

"You're acquainted with a Johnny Koval."

The color left Mary's face, but she retained her composure. "What about Johnny, Mr. Breen? Is he in trouble?"

"I'm not sure," Brick replied. "I'm looking for him. He left home last night and

hasn't been back."

Mary searched Brick's face. "I've hardly seen Johnny for a month, Mr. Breen. Ever since he started to pal around with that Rocky Stagg." Her eyes narrowed with distaste.

"Stagg?" The name was faintly familiar to Brick. "Thanks," he said. Through the bank of mirrors surrounding the entrance, he caught a glimpse of Mary looking anxiously after him. Worried, poor kid. In love with the guy, too. Brick jerked open the door of his car. There were times when he cordially hated his job, and this was one of them.

He unlocked the mike from the dashboard. "Car Seven calling the desk. Come in please. Over."

The Desk Sergeant's sleepy voice told him to go ahead.

"Check the files on a young man named Stagg and see if we have anything on him." Brick lit a smoke and waited. That name Stagg was *very* familiar.

The Desk Sergeant radioed back, Brick told him to go ahead: "Bernard Stagg, nickname of Rocky Stagg, age twenty-five, height six feet, build heavy, eyes brown, wanted by MP's of Seattle, Washington in 1943 for Desertion and Impersonating an Officer, no disposition listed on that, booked twice here in 1946 for investigation on car theft, released without charge both times, served thirty days in March '47 for petty larceny, served ninety days beginning in September '47 for carrying a concealed weapon without permit, lives in a rooming house at 2809 Fairfield. Over."

Brick kicked the motor over and headed into the traffic. He glanced at his watch. Three-ten already.

Rocky's rooming house was sandwiched between a red brick tenement and a greasy-looking service station. The attendant was changing a tire on a cattle truck and whistling "Your Love." He was off key. The whole neighborhood was off key.

A fat lady in a sleazy print dress answered the door bell.

"Well?" She looked significantly at the "No Peddlers" sign tacked by the door, then back to Brick.

"A Mr. Stagg live here?"

"He ain't in. Whatcha want to see

him about?" Her black eyes peered out of folds of flesh.

"When will he be home?"

"Don't know. Ain't see him since yestiddy mornin'. Back on his rent, too." She folded her fat arms and glared at Brick.

"Uh-huh," said Brick thoughtfully.

"Well, thanks anyhow."

He went back to his car and drove to Headquarters. Back in his office at fourteen, he propped his feet on the desk and stared unseeingly at his shoes. Then just before five, he put out a general alarm for one Rocky Stagg, believed to be in the company of Johnny Koval already wanted. Both wanted for armed robbery and murder. Armed and dangerous.

MARY was waiting on a lively-eyed woman in her late forties when the call came through.

"Oh!" the woman was saying with an airy toss of her head, "it's so hard to choose a perfume, isn't it! I mean it's so hard because men are so *different!*" She gave herself a dazzling smile in the mirrored column beside the perfume counter. The fluorescent light gleamed on two incisors capped with gold.

Mr. Parks came behind the counter and tapped Mary's arm with a lean pencil. "You're wanted on the phone, Mary. Second booth."

"Oh, is it Mother?"

Parks grinned and shook his head. "It's a man."

The lively-eyed woman popped a diamond-studded hand to her mouth and giggled. "A man! Don't let *me* keep you, dearie! You just run along and I'm *sure* this nice gentleman *here* will wait on me!" She looked at Mr. Parks archly.

Mr. Parks darted a preening glance at himself in the mirror. "Why certainly, madam."

"Oh don't call me a *madam!* Why, you make me sound like a. . ."

The door of the phone booth closed off her twittering, and Mr. Parks' lascivious chuckle.

Johnny's voice, strained and urgent, came over the wire.

"Johnny, where are you!"

"Look, Mary. I haven't got much time to talk now. But I *got* to see you."

"I can hardly hear you, Johnny."

"It's a public phone, Mary, and there's a lot of people around. Look. You know where the Tenth Street depot is." Johnny's voice hurried on. "There's a little cafe just down the street a couple of blocks. The Dutch Treat. Can you meet me there as six? I *got* to see you!"

"But Johnny, what's up?"

"I can't tell you now, Mary. Will you meet me?"

"Why—why, yes. Of course. But—"

Johnny sighed with relief. "Remember," he finished, "Dutch Treat at six." He rang off then.

Mary phoned her mother and told her she wouldn't be home for supper.

Mary took a cross town bus. It didn't strike her as unusual that the perfume woman got on the same bus.

She didn't even think about it. It was a public bus, wasn't it?

It wasn't even odd that she sat down beside her. "Oh, *there* you are!" The gold-capped incisors shot out rays of light. "I just *know* you're hurrying off to meet your man, *aren't* you, dearie!"

Mary crowded over. She wanted to be alone to think. But she had to smile politely. She couldn't hurt the woman's feelings. After all, she was just a harmless busybody.

"Is he good looking, dearie?" This in a confidential tone.

Mary said that he was.

The perfume woman suddenly lost interest and absorbed herself in the *Evening Examiner*. Something about a murder at the Ashland Country Club, Mary noted. She turned away. Such things didn't interest her.

It wasn't until Mary nudged her arm and said, "Excuse me, please," that the woman looked up.

"Oh, are we at the Tenth Street depot already?" She folded her paper and rose, following Mary off the bus. "Do be careful now," she giggled.

Mary hurried down the block toward the red neon sign of a Dutchman in broad pantaloons. The Dutch Treat.

Johnny was in the last booth back. He was wearing that funny kind of hat that bankers wear and it didn't look good on him at all, Mary thought. It looked as though Johnny was trying hard to be somebody he wasn't. It was pushed de-

jectedly back on his head, revealing a mop of black, curly hair. Uncombed hair, Mary noted. And he needed a shave. His red tie with the white polka dots needed straightening, too. But Mary didn't straighten it for him—she wasn't the tie straightening kind.

Instead, she slid into the booth and looked at him, waiting for him to say something besides, "Hi, Mary," in a frightened voice. He just sat there, fiddling with the lid on the sugar bowl.

Finally, after a deep breath, "I'm in a jam, Mary. A bad jam."

"Is it that Rocky fellow?"

Johnny nodded without taking his eyes off the sugar bowl. "Yeah, it's Rocky."

Mary could have said, "I told you so," but she didn't. "Is it bad, Johnny?"

"Really bad."

He straightened. "How was I to know? I met him at Nick's place and he asked me if I'd drive him out to see a guy on the edge of town. I said okay and drove him out to the Ashland Country Club and when he gets there he pulls a stickup and kills a guy. I didn't find out about the killing till this morning when I snuck out and got a paper—I just thought he'd winged him. We beat it out of there—What are looking like that for? I didn't do anything except—except help Rocky get away!"

Mary's eyes were wide. "Johnny, a policeman came to the store this afternoon and asked me if I knew where you were!"

Johnny's head jerked back to stare at Mary in disbelief.

"You've got to get out of this, Johnny! It's none of your doing!"

"What'll I do, Mary?"

"You'll go to the police and tell them all about it."

Johnny's eyes returned despairingly to the sugar bowl. "I can't do that, Mary. I can't squeal on Rocky."

Mary's hands clenched. "Oh, don't be such a fool! Squealing on Rocky! You sound like somebody in a movie!"

"I'd go to the cops if there was some way of leaving Rocky out of it—"

"There isn't any way of leaving Rocky out of it, Johnny. It's him or you." She lowered her voice as a waiter went through the swinging door with two dish-

es of the day's special—wieners and kraut. "Johnny, if Rocky were in your place, what do you think he'd do?"

THE sugar bowl occupied all of Johnny's thoughts. The words "Dutch Treat" were printed in old English lettering around the knob on the lid.

"Johnny?"

"I can't do it, Mary. It wouldn't be right to skin out like that and leave Rocky."

Mary studied the frightened face for a moment. Then with a frown of defeat, she slid away from the table. She stood in the aisle and buttoned her light blue topcoat.

Johnny looked up. "Leaving?"

She didn't answer.

"Mary—will you call Pop and tell him I'm staying—"

The determined shake of her head cut him off. "There's only one way, Johnny. It's up to you. Good-bye." Her high heels clicked smartly on the oak floor.

Good-bye. As Johnny studied the determined set of her shoulders, a look of utter loneliness crept into his eyes. Like a cocker spaniel pup caught in the middle of whizzing streams of traffic and not knowing which way to run.

He straightened up and shoved the hat forward so that it tilted over his forehead. He eyed his reflection in the mirror on the wall over the table. Johnny Koval, a soda jerk at the Empire Drug, wanted for murder. The barrier between respectable citizen and outlaw seemed tissue-paper thin to Johnny just then.

He got up slowly and buttoned his coat. Deliberation was in his movements—something new in Johnny.

"Aren't you going to order?"

"Huh? No, I gotta leave." He tossed a dime on the table, "Thanks anyway."

He stood for a moment on the sidewalk. Back to room eighteen in the Elite. His shoulders sagged a little. He walked slowly to the corner and turned left. Five block walk.

Five short blocks to walk and think.

What's the answer to all this? Just what the blazes is going to happen next?

"Oh young man!"

Johnny threw a quick glance over his shoulder and saw a woman hurrying along behind him. He stopped uncertainly.

The woman approached breathlessly. "Oh, young man, I do hope you'll not think me *forward* but I saw you coming out of that quaint little cafe back there and I thought to myself 'now there's a nice young man and I'm sure he won't mind if—' She broke off breathlessly and flashed an appealing smile at Johnny.

The light of the arc lamp on the next corner glinted dully on two incisors capped with gold.

"I'm afraid of these dark streets at night and I simply *have* to go down that way. Do you mind if I walk along with you? I'd feel so *safe*."

Johnny managed a smile. "Sure," he said. "That's okay."

They walked down the quiet street together. "I'm afraid to walk alone at night. Why, somebody could pop right out of any alley and beat me on the head!"

Johnny wondered what her reaction would be if he told her who *he* was. He found himself secretly enjoying this bit of irony.

They approached the Elite. Johnny slowed. "Well, I'll be leaving you here."

"Well, thank you so much, young man. I can manage the rest of it by myself now."

Johnny went inside. Reaching the landing, he looked out the window but the lady had disappeared.

Johnny frowned, but the faint bell of warning that rang in his subconscious went unheeded.

CHAPTER V

Trapped



HE TAPPED on the door. "It's me. Johnny."

The bolt slid back and the door opened. "Well, where *you* been all this time? Have a date with the girl friend?" Rocky's voice held a sneer that he made no effort to conceal.

Johnny winced at the unwitting accuracy of

his remark.

Rocky shoved the bolt home and turned around. "Well, where's the stuff?"

"Stuff?"

"The papers and the tape and gauze. Where is it?"

"Gees, Rocky! I—"

Rocky's cold brown eyes were cold gimlets. "Where *you* been, Johnny?" He swaggered slowly across the room. "Answer me! Where *you* been?"

A hairy hand shot out and grabbed Johnny by the lapel. "You go out to get papers and gauze and tape and you come back empty-handed and what I want to know is where *you* been?"

He shoved Johnny against the wall.

Johnny watched paralyzed as Rocky drew back. The hard knot of a fist was a bomb that exploded against his nose. He felt his head snap back against the plaster wall, felt the hot blood filling his mouth, and he suddenly found himself wanting to laugh.

Gods, this *was* a joke!

"You little jerk! If you've ratted on me, I'll kill you. One more killing means nothing to me now!"

Johnny slithered along the wall. "Honest, Rocky! I just—"

Rocky lunged after him and slapped him hard across the face. "Tell me," he grated, "where *you*—"

He stopped suddenly.

Someone was rapping on the door!

"Open up, I say!" It was a woman's voice, shrill and strident. "I won't allow any rowdiness in this building! Open up!"

Rocky picked up his hat and jerked it on. Then he dumped the money out of the sack and distributed the packages of bills in his pockets. "I'm gettin' out of here! Fast!"

He opened the door.

Helena Murkle stood in the doorway. Her angular body held stiffly erect, with elbows akimbo, reflected the last stages of a volcanic indignation.

"Well! And who are *you*? And *what* are you doing in this young lady's apartment?"

"I'm her brother," Rocky lied. "I just came by—"

"Hmph! Brother is it! I happen to know that Tina Dartane ain't got a brother!"

She darted a look past Rocky. A bony forefinger impaled Johnny. "And who's that? Her great grandfather, I s'pose!"

She turned toward the wall phone not six feet from the door. "I think I'd just better—"

Rocky grabbed her by the arm and jerked her into the room. "No, you don't." He closed the door and slid the bolt.

Helena glared at him. "Now you look here, young man!"

"You look here, you old battle-ax! Just keep your trap shut and you'll be okay. You start screaming and I'll tear out your windpipe."

He turned to Johnny. "Rip up a sheet and tie her up."

Johnny obeyed mechanically.

Rocky leaned against the door and watched. "What a rat you turned out to be," he grated. "There's only one thing to do with rats like you."

He had the pistol out now.

"Rocky, honest I didn't squeal on you!"

"Cut the chatter, stupe!"

Johnny bound the struggling landlady with frantic hands. She struggled desperately. Rocky walked over and crashed the gun barrel down on her head. She went limp.

"Now hurry up. I'm blowing this place but quick! Dump her in the closet."

Johnny dragged the limp body into the closet.

"Shut the door."

Johnny closed the door slowly and turned around. His face was damp with sweat. "Rocky—"

The pistol came up and leveled at his chest. Johnny stood fascinated.

FUNNY, he'd never thought about being dead. Being killed was something that happened to other people—till just the last few eternal seconds. It came to him in a flash of irrelevancy that he was supposed to be reviewing his whole life in these last few moments, a sort of super movie.

He thought of only two things. He recalled his room at home with the brass bed and the taboret beside it with the ashtray on it. That last fag before rolling over really tasted great.

And he thought about Mary Webb. Her last words to him, almost, were, "if Rocky were in your place what would he do?"

Yeah, she was right about Rocky. And

all those fancy pipe dreams about going places. In a hurry. *This* is where you wound up. In a crummy tenement with a gun pointing at your middle by a cheap hood that had been stringing you along with a lot of big talk.

Anger mounted through the cold fear that gripped him. A new note—a mature note—pervaded his voice as he said. "All right, Rocky, I'm wise now. It don't matter any more, but I didn't go to the cops like you think. I stuck by you and tried to help you because I thought you were a right guy and a friend of mine. I see now what you really are—just a cheap, two-bit hood."

"Sure, Johnny. You had nothing to do with the stickup and that guy getting guzzled. You had no part of it. So why should I cut you in. And why should I leave you around here so you can blab? You're no good to me any more. Whether you went to the cops or didn't it's still the same. Rocky Stagg doesn't take any chances." Rocky cocked the pistol.

"You dirty—"

"So long, chump."

A voice sounded from the hallway, followed by something hard rapping on the door. "Come on out, Koval. Come on out, Stagg."

Rocky wheeled around. "Who is it?"

"Police. Breen of Homicide. Come out quietly with your—"

Rocky sent a shot slamming through the paneled door.

"I make it a habit," Breen said, "not to stand in front of closed doors when there's a killer on the other side."

"You won't take me alive! And I'll get a copper or two first!"

"Okay," Breen said, "if that's the way you want it. Let 'er sing, Casey."

The flat stutter of a tommy gun etched a lethal pattern in the door.

"That's to remind you not to try to force your way out this door," Breen said. "You're trapped. Look out the window now."

Rocky lunged toward the window and jerked aside the frilly curtains. A searchlight winked on and bathed him with its cold brilliance.

He jumped back and crouched in the center of the room.

"Who tipped you off!"

"Nobody tipped us off, chum. We just happen to be a little smarter than you give us credit for. And we work hard on murder cases. Awful hard."

Rocky looked slowly at Johnny. "You didn't—"

Johnny walked toward him.

"You'll help, Johnny! You got to! Look, there's a trap door in the closet that leads to the roof. You stay and hold 'em for a minute while I—"

"Get out of the way," Johnny said. "I'm going out that door."

He raised his voice. "I'm coming out with my hands up! Stagg is staying!"

"You're being smart, Johnny."

"Stop right where you are!"

"I'm going out, Rocky."

"Feet first."

Johnny lunged. His fist crashed into Rocky's face.

Then the gun barked and he felt the hot pain stabbing his shoulder.

He staggered a step, slumped down. Through a haze he saw the hallway door swing open as a burst of the tommy gun tore out the bolt. He saw Rocky turn at the closet door, saw him raise his gun, and then jerk backward as the tommy gun chattered again.

Consciousness ebbed away.

When he came to, he was lying between clean sheets. A blur of a face hovered above him.

"You'll be all right," a voice said. "Everything will be all right." It was Mary.

"I told Mr. Breen the whole story just as you told it to me. And that landlady at that apartment, that Mrs. Murkle, she heard Rocky admit, just before he was going to kill you, that you had nothing to do with it."

Johnny's eyes focused slowly. He looked carefully about the hospital room. His clothes were heaped on a chair in the corner, topped by the gray Homberg hat.

"There's only one thing," Mary went on. "Mr. Breen says you're guilty of being an accessory, but he's going to recommend putting you on probation."

"Probation," Johnny said weakly. "Who with?"

Mary smiled. "With me, Johnny. That is, if—"

Johnny smiled wanly. "That's okay," he said. "That's just plenty okay." He looked at his clothes again. "Another thing."

"Yes, Johnny?"

"Take that hat over there and throw it in the river!"



THE CRIME QUIZ

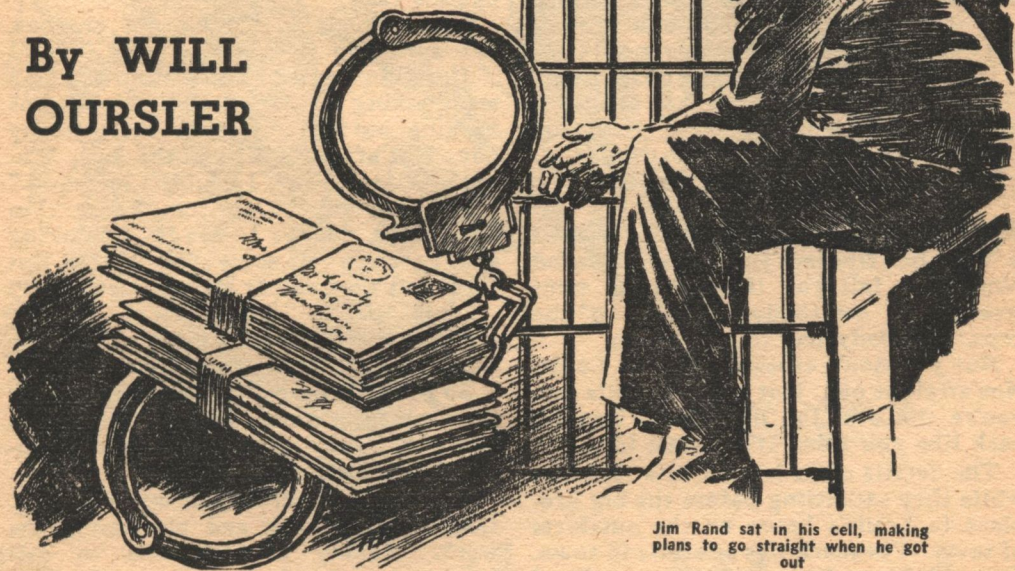
HERE'S your chance to see how much you know about crime! Give yourself 10 points for each question you answer correctly. A score of 60 is good. 80 ranks you as an amateur detective. If you are 100 per cent correct—you're a super-sleuth! The answers are on Page 129—if you must look!

1. What crime is covered by "the Lindbergh Law"?
2. Who is the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation?
3. How many empty shells are left in an automatic pistol after all its chambers have been fired?
4. Is pure arsenic green?
5. Name two crimes that are prohibited in the Ten Commandments.
6. Can a man be convicted of murder if the corpse of his victim is never found?
7. Is it a more serious crime to steal after dark than it is to steal during daylight hours?
8. Do all prison guards carry guns?
9. True or false? Christopher Columbus died in prison.
10. What, to a criminal, is a "can-opener"?

LAST DEAL

What can a released convict do if a man like Louie Hall waits for him at the gates?

By WILL
OURSER



Jim Rand sat in his cell, making plans to go straight when he got out

HE HEARD the gates close behind him, and the guard calling out good luck and he stood there, gulping in his first breath of freedom—and watching Louie come toward him with the glad hand.

Five years of the routine behind bars can make you forget the outside. You get to dreaming in there about the fresh start, the way the skypilot inside has been telling you. About maybe some day meeting some decent dame and getting married and having babies and making yourself a name instead of a number.

You keep telling yourself the past was dead. Inside there, you think that part

is something you can forget forever. All will be new when you come out.

And then you get out and there's Louie waiting. Louie slapping you on the back, telling you nothing has changed. Louie saying he's got the car parked up the road and you can talk things over riding back to town.

Like old times, Jim Rand thought, riding beside Louie. Louie was talking. Going through the spiel about the tough break Jim had that last deal. About all the easy pickups in town. Only this time there wouldn't be any mistakes and nobody would be taking any raps.

"We start in right where we left off,"

Louie said with a grin. "With what I've learned while you were inside cooling off, there's nothing can stop us now—nothing. And partners, just like always. You and me, Jim."

"You and me, Louie." But Jim didn't say much, going in. Just sat there listening. With a sharp-shooter like Louie, it's smart to duck any clashes.

Louie Hall didn't notice, just kept on gabbing. Lucky thing Jim was getting out just now. Louie had a big deal under way. A real big one, worth twenty-five thousand. And Jim was the man to help him. Jim was the one man he needed.

The one he needed, Jim Rand thought. All round professional. An ex-con who can crack a safe or pull a second-story job or serve as front for a blackmail gag. A guy who knows the ropes.

His mind went back to the trial. Louie Hall hadn't cared so much then about his professional talents, hadn't even put up cash for a decent lawyer. Just holed up where nobody would ask questions.

NOW he had a big deal on and needed help. Needed Jim. Sure. Needed him for a fall guy if something went wrong. If somebody blabbed to the cops, somebody had to take a rap.

But you don't cross a guy like Louie. Not straight out. Not when he tells you you're the one Joe he wants. You sit back like you think it's a great idea.

The details come later, Louie told him while they sat sitting before the big fireplace in Louie's house on the outskirts of town. The mark was a female in town. Fat and forty dame, worth a couple of million.

"The dame's husband travels and she gets lonely. Picks up some lunkhead at a bar, falls for him, writes him a stack of letters that high."

Jim made himself laugh. "The old routine. Dames never catch on."

A frown crossed Louie's beefy face. "The lunkhead's scared to make the play himself. But he gabs a lot about those letters. One night I run into him at a joint. We get drinking, him and me. Wind up back at his place. And when I leave there he's out cold and I got the letters in my pocket. See now, Jim, what I want you for?"

That one was easy. It's the old deal.

The dame wants her letters back because they can bust up her home and marriage. But Louie needs a front. A go-between to make the arrangements, with Louie nice and safe, pulling the strings in the background.

Louie grinned. "Our price is twenty-five grand. The dame's husband is out of town. All you got to do is phone her, and make the play. Make a date to meet her and tell her it's got to be in small bills. I'll get the letters out of the safe and give them to you. You'll handle the swap."

Jim puffed on the cigar Louie had given him. The same fifty-cent Coronas Louie always smoked. "And how do we cut the cake?"

Louie laughed. "Don't get anxious. We split—up the middle."

Jim didn't answer for a minute. Louie was looking at him. "Ain't thinking of backing out? No dice on that, Jimmy boy. Not after I spill you the deal. You get me, don't you? I couldn't let you—"

Jim grinned. "Cut that, Louie. I'm flat busted. Maybe I have been thinking about getting into some straight line. But I got to have one big cleanup deal first."

Louie said, "Now you're making sense. One big cleanup deal, Jim. After that, start out fresh, healed with a wad."

So now it was set. And Louie lent him the cash for a hotel room in town and a new suit of clothes so he could rig himself right for a deal like this.

The same old deal, Jim was thinking. Louie sitting back and him doing the work. Making arrangements to call Louie when the deal was over. Shaking hands with Louie. Walking down those same front steps on Louie's house, up the path to the street.

It was that night he made the play.

It wasn't too tough. You waited until the hours when the whole city slept. You knew the lay of the land. You knew how to climb an outside trellis and into a window.

You remembered all the old tricks. You moved like a cat, not making any noise. The details of technique came back into your mind.

Not making any mistakes this time. Too smart to make mistakes. You could blow the safe if you have to but there

(Concluded on page 127)



Stan Dawson took a one-hand snap shot and sent a soft-nosed bullet crashing into Harding's chest

Death in the Woods

*Clint Harding went on that hunting trip
with big game in mind—a human being. . .*

CLINT HARDING paused at the edge of the balsams, peering warily through the branches toward Point of Rocks. There, across the valley, sat Bill Graham, khaki hunting coat blending into the toneless gray

of weathered granite. Bill didn't know it, but in thirty seconds, more or less, he would be dead—murdered by the man he liked and trusted.

Bill Graham was Clint's life-long friend and pal. They had grown up to-

By GEORGE METCALF JOHNSON

gether; those two—and Nancy Lewis. Right there lay the trouble—Nancy. Bill didn't know that either; any more than he knew Clint was going to blast a .303 through him before another minute had ticked away.

Had Nancy married Clint instead of Bill, thus making a vital shift in the roles of best man and bridegroom, the thought of murder would never have occurred to Clint. Bill would have taken it like a good sport. Regretfully, but with no hard feelings. Congratulations, old man—and all that sort of thing. Because Bill was that kind of guy. And he naturally assumed Clint would feel the same way. Which proved how little Bill Graham knew about Clint Harding.

Clint never forgave his friend for marrying Nancy. No one else was openly in the running, and had it not been for Bill she would have married him. Clint was sure of that. And so the peals of Mendelssohn became a prelude to murder.

Wedding plans had been speeded up—due to Pearl Harbor, and Bill's commission in the Army Air Corps. Clint tried for the air force, and lost out. He just didn't have what it took to be a pilot. Clint felt pretty bitter, at Fate in general and at Bill in particular.

All his life he had been trailing Bill, had never been better than a poor second.

In football Bill made the first team, while Clint had sat on the bench, a rarely used sub. Bill could shoot superb golf, play championship tennis, was like a fish in the water. Clint was awkward in the water. On one dreadful occasion he went under and would have stayed there had not Bill saved him.

The same in everything—games, sports, love, war. It was hard to take, without betraying to Bill that the friendship between them was a one-sided affair. But Clint could use Bill, and always managed to keep him beautifully duped.

WHEN it came to the war he had derived savage comfort in the thought that Bill would be quickly eliminated. Fighter plane pilots were highly expendable during those days of the South Pacific campaign.

But Bill's luck held good. He came back, a reasonable facsimile of the fellow who went away. Again he had Nancy. And the seeds of murder, dormant for so long in Clint Harding's brain, began to germinate. He would have to plan carefully, he knew. But there was no great hurry. Better slow than sorry. After all this waiting some further delay could well be endured.

Bill Graham owned a sportsman's camp far up in the north woods. Often Clint had been there with him on hunting and fishing trips. That isolated wilderness he selected as the murder locale—an ideal spot where an accident could be made to happen.

First step had been faking the loss of his rifle the previous year. Clint had been paddling a canoe across Long Lake, and carelessly, as he described it, let a sudden squall turn him over. It had been easy to fool Bill and Stan Dawson, the guide who worked for Bill when he was there and looked after the camp throughout the year. Clint had been the recipient of considerable good-natured kidding, which he managed to survive. He wondered, sourly, how Bill and Stan would react if they knew that the lost .303, well oiled and wrapped as protection against weather, was safely hidden away in a deep crevice under a ledge of rock.

Those distinctively colored square tails in Otter Pond, and the queer ice cave Clint had stumbled on by chance, were other important links in the murder chain he had forged.

Harding, as he lurked in the balsams, let his brain swiftly review all the patient steps which led up to this—the culmination. No weakness anywhere. Not the faintest breath of suspicion pointing his way. He had covered his tracks. The entire plot was perfect—

absolutely without flaw.

To be sure there had been a brief period when it seemed that murder might not be necessary after all. Bill's strep throat had been a very near thing. But his luck held again, just as in the war. Yet the illness left Bill badly run down, and almost at once Clint perceived how the aftermath of it all might be turned to advantage. He was far too adroit to suggest this himself. Let Bill bring up the matter first. He would.

And Bill did. "Know what?" he said abruptly. He, Nancy, and Clint were having cocktails one night before dinner at the Graham home. Often was Harding a guest there. He liked the luxury Bill's abundant wealth provided. He himself was barely able to get by on a very modest scale of living.

Nancy smiled at her husband. "No, Bill. What?"

"Deer season opens next week. I'd like nothing better than to be up at the lodge when it starts. Guess I'll send Stan a wire to have things ready." He turned to Harding. "How about it, Clint? Can you take a week or so off? I don't care much to go alone."

Nancy spoke before Clint could answer. "No! Wait a while, Bill. Until you're stronger. Please!"

Clint, watching her hungrily, had felt hot blood spurt through his whole body. Nancy was so lovely, so desirable. Of course she was crazy about Bill. But that would pass, once Bill was out of the way. Then Clint would have his chance, the chance that rightfully belonged to him, the chance Bill had stolen.

"Relax, honey," Bill said soothingly. "I don't expect to go running wild in the woods. I promise to take it easy."

"I know you, Bill Graham," Nancy sputtered. "You never took it easy yet, and you never will until the day you drop. You make me so darned mad, not taking care of yourself! If you won't listen to me, perhaps you'll listen to Doc. I'm going to call him. Pronto!" And Nancy rushed off.

SHE returned after several minutes. Obviously still mad. "Darn it! Why do you men always stick together?"

"We have to, honey," Bill chuckled. "Self defense. Didn't your mom warn you about that when you were a little girl. It goes with the other facts of life— You know. The birds and the bees. So Doc said it was okay, huh? Good ol' Doc!"

"Good old Doc, my eye!" Nancy stormed. "Couldn't I just pull out those last two hairs of his by the roots! He did make one concession, though. He's going to lay down the law to Stan Dawson. You can do so much each day, and no more." Then her tone changed. "But I wish you wouldn't go, Bill. Please don't. Not for two or three weeks. The deer will still be there."

She didn't appeal to Clint to help her sway Bill. Vaguely he wondered why. Then dismissed it as of no importance whatever.

Bill's voice broke in on his devious thoughts. "What's cooking, Clint? I don't hear loud and lusty cheers. Doesn't the notion of knocking off a buck appeal? Or would you rather fish?"

Clint smiled to himself at the way Bill insisted on leading with his chin. It was too easy.

"That's it," he replied. "I've been wanting a last crack at the trout in Otter Pond before the angling season clamps down. But I don't want to be selfish about it. If you really prefer me to hunt with you—"

"Forget it, Clint!" Bill cried. "Do all the fishing you please. I know you've always been keener for that than shooting. I'll hunt with Stan, while you catch trout for us to eat. Everybody'll be happy. Swell!"

Nancy's sober glance strayed from her husband to her husband's friend, who had murder in his heart, and back again. Bill grinned cheerfully, quite missing the trouble which lurked in her blue eyes.

Everything had gone according to plan. Bill wired Dawson, and in due

course he and Clint arrived at the camp. Clint brought along plenty of fishing tackle, but no gun. That was just a detail, insignificant in itself, perhaps, but added guarantee against any slip. Since the only rifles on hand were those carried by Bill and the guide, Clint could not possibly be responsible for the stray bullet which was destined to end Bill's life.

And now Clint was almost ready to fire the murder shot. He had equipped the rifle with a silencer. This would muffle the sharp crack of nitro to a faint puff of escaping gas. No one save the murderer would hear a sound. Stan Dawson, working down the valley in hope of driving a deer under his employer's gun, would find him dead, killed by a bullet shot by some far-off hunter.

Clint's mind relived details of the previous day. He had taken the long, hard trail to Otter Pond, it was a good day's trip, while Stan and Bill tried in vain for a deer. No trouble at all to fill his creel with plump square tails. The flesh of Otter Pond trout had a peculiar deep red tint, possibly due to mineral content of the water, or some unusual item in their diet. Whatever the cause, the important fact was that nowhere else in that region could such fish be taken. Any guide or native inhabitant could spot Otter Pond trout at a glance; would swear to their place of origin.

About half of his catch Clint had hidden in the natural refrigerator, a couple miles from camp. They would keep absolutely fresh, and when the time came for them to provide an air-tight alibi, who could say they had not been killed that same day?

The ten or dozen trout Clint brought back Stan had cooked for their evening meal, and then they sat around, talking and smoking. Clint described his trip. The fish, he said, had been choosy, not over eager. He'd had to work hard for a comparatively small catch.

"I'll try it again tomorrow," he added. "I'll stick to streamer flies, and may do better."

"Funny about the color of those Otter trout," the guide put in. "An expert from one of the state hatcheries told me once that it was due to feeding on a lot of fresh water shrimp. Might be, at that. I wouldn't know. But they sure eat nice. Taste better'n any other square tails I ever tried."

BILL grinned at the guide and nodded in agreement.

"Sure do," he agreed. "Good thing for us Clint was fishing. Trout out of Otter beat corned beef out of a can. I sort of counted on a venison steak." He stretched, grunting. "Boy, am I bushed!"

Clint had expressed quick concern. "I hope you didn't overdo—this first day, Bill."

"No, but I'll have to admit I'm way below par. Nancy was right." Was there something queer about Bill's voice when he said that? Clint didn't get it. Natural enough for Nancy to worry when Bill insisted on a strenuous hunt so soon after his serious illness.

"That bad throat you had wasn't any joke, Mr. Graham," Stan said. "I mustn't forget I'm working under pretty strict orders from your doc. We'll do it different tomorrow. I'm going to station you at Point of Rocks. I'll go around to the head of the valley, and work down. Nine times out of ten a buck'll be in one of the little meadows along the run. Any deer jumped in there always come down past the point. You can get yourself a nice buck, and not take a beating."

"Rotten way to kill a deer!" Bill complained. "I sit there on my fat fanny and wait until a better man drives one under my nose to be shot! But I guess it's that way this trip or not at all."

Clint made no comment. None seemed called for. And why object if the other two insisted on playing right into his hands? And thus had the final link been forged in Harding's design for murder.

They had started out together next

morning, Bill and the guide with rifles, Clint with nothing more deadly than a fly rod. But after they separated Clint wasted no time in securing his hidden weapon, leaving the rod in its place, and then had hastily cut back through the woods to a position opposite Bill's station.

Having shot Bill, he would again take the Otter Pond trail, but go only as far as the cached trout. The route crossed Swamp Brook, bordered by dangerous quicksands. Here, beneath the black muck, would the murder gun be forever buried. Then a few hours to kill. Eventually, as afternoon shadows grew longer, Clint would return to camp with a catch of trout which absolutely proved that he had been fishing miles distant, shocked beyond measure to learn that his life-time friend had met a tragic, accidental death.

And Nancy—lovely, adorable, desirable Nancy. She would be crushed, heart-broken. That was to be expected. But Clint, Bill's friend and hers, would be there to help, to advise, to comfort. Gladly, gratefully would she lean on him. And as Time, the universal healer, softened the first sharp pangs of sorrow, he would slip into the place Bill had held in her heart.

And along with Nancy, Clint would gain the fortune that, like Nancy, had once been Bill's. Well, perhaps not have it actually in his own possession, for the widow would inherit. But as Nancy's husband it would be his for all practical purposes. Clint was not quite sure which he coveted more—Nancy or the luxuries which would come with her.

A sense of dominant power flooded Clint Harding's breast as he stared across the valley to where Graham waited for the buck he would never kill. So often in the past had he felt inferior to Bill, resentful of the many qualities which Bill possessed and he lacked. But all that feeling, that inferiority, had now vanished, replaced by a strange intoxicating triumph. It was time to

strike, yet he withheld, rolling it on his tongue, as the connoisseur who samples some rare, priceless vintage.

Finally he raised the rifle, lining sights on its human target. The barrel did not waver. It was as motionless as if held in a vice. Clint rejoiced at this evidence of superb selfcontrol. He was no weak sister, whose nerves would twitch and betray him at the crucial second. His bent finger eased gently back. There sounded no sudden explosion, but Clint's shoulder jerked under the vicious recoil of a high velocity load. That silent figure at Point of Rocks slumped the merest trifle as the bullet struck. Clint could have told within an inch of the exact spot where it hit.

AN evil glow of gratified blood-lust smoldered in Harding's eyes as he lowered the rifle. It was over—finished. Bill Graham was dead. Bill—his friend, his pal—the one to whom he owed so many favors; life, even. But Bill had committed the fatal blunder of loving Nancy—of being loved by her. And for that he had to die.

Tardily Clint realized that he should be getting away. The neighborhood was loaded with peril. If some other deer hunter chanced to meet him there when he was supposed to be fishing at Otter Pond, the carefully nurtured alibi would vanish like a puff of cigarette smoke.

He yanked off the silencer, stepped from the thicket which had partially hidden him; then stopped abruptly, paralyzed by shock. Stan Dawson and Bill were watching him from less than a dozen paces off!

After the first moment of stunned surprise Clint reacted instantaneously, almost without thought. Dropping the silencer, he levered a fresh shell into the chamber of his rifle, and swung its muzzle towards them, pressing the trigger as he did so.

But Stan Dawson was even faster. His left arm shoved Bill violently to one side and safety, while the other blazed a

one-hand snap shot that sent a soft-point crashing into Harding's chest.

Clint was conscious of the unmuffled, whip-like crack, conscious of a terrific blow that whirled him half around and drove him sprawling to the ground, conscious, also, that his own hasty, panic-directed shot had missed. From the empty vastness of space a voice reached his ears:

"What a skunk you turned out to be!"

Helpless on his fragrant, spicy bed of balsam needles, Clint stared up dully at the two men who now came towards him. This was fantastic—impossible. Bill couldn't be alive. He lay dead across the narrow valley. Hadn't Clint himself just killed Bill? There couldn't be two Bill Grahams!

Clint's dazed brain grappled agonizingly with the problem. How could Bill be both alive and dead? But the Bill before him wore neither hat nor shooting jacket. The Bill over at Point of Rocks—the one he had killed—wore both. Clint grasped that—slowly, laboriously—and comprehension dawned. The figure he had fired at was merely a dummy. They had tricked him. At the end it was he who was the dummy. But how? How could a perfect murder backfire with such disastrous results?

Life was bubbling out of Harding's lungs through the jagged hole ripped in bone and tissue by the expanding soft-point. Red froth filled his mouth, made him choke and gag.

Coldly Graham eyed the man who had been his life-long friend, the man who had betrayed friendship with treachery. Gone was all Bill's accustomed free-and-easy joviality. His jaws were set in a thin, taut line.

"Nice shooting, Stan!" he grunted. "The whelp almost got me on his second try. I didn't expect that. I thought he'd fold when he saw the chips were down. But I never expected any first shot either."

Dawson muttered unintelligibly, eyes never leaving the prostrate man who lay like a broken snake at their feet. A

snake, even when dying, may still be dangerous. Stan had had quite enough of Clint Harding. He wasn't having any more.

Concentrated hate, repressed through the years, poured from Clint's fast-glazing eyes. He had failed in the big gamble, defeat all the more bitter because success had seemed so sure. How and why that failure had come Clint realized he would not live long enough to learn. Yet he might lessen his bitterness by leaving a hellish heritage to Graham, by planting in Bill's breast the germs of suspicion and distrust, there to spread and fester like an ugly, hidden sore.

"You think you've won," he croaked, and his voice wheezed like a leaky bellows. "But you haven't won. Listen—Nancy's belonged to me for a long, long time. This was her idea—She thought it all up—to get rid of you—so we could be married. You see Nancy made a big mistake. She married the wrong man. Laugh that off, you poor deluded fool! She'll deny it of course. But it's true—true—" Harding gasped, shuddering.

GRAHAM sent a look of contempt at the wounded man.

"Yeah?" he snarled. "If you were able to stand on your feet, I'd knock those lying words down your throat, along with a fistful of teeth for good measure. It was Nancy who spoiled your rotten game. But for her I would have been the loser. Her woman's intuition told her you were up to some deviltry. She tried to keep me home, and was desperate when I refused. She didn't tell me the real reason, knowing I'd never believe. You see, I trusted you.

"She wrote to Stan without my knowing what she was about. He must trail you, always, everywhere. He had to tell me the score when I got up here. I couldn't talk him out of obeying Nancy's orders, so Stan carried on. All day yesterday I took it easy while you

thought I was beating my dogs to death in the woods. Stan was with you, not me. He trailed you to Otter, watched you catch a whale of a mess of trout, followed you back, saw you cache the fish, beat you into camp by only five minutes.

"Yet I was blind to your treachery. For years you took me to the cleaners. But Nancy—God bless her—wasn't blind. She could look right down into your soul and see its foul blackness. Now let's hear you laugh that off. Go on, you human hyena! Laugh!"

But Clint Harding did not laugh. A horrid gurgle came from between his bloody lips. And then for him—oblivion. . . .

There was a half-minute of silence as two men stood beside one whose evil desires had led him to utter ruin.

"I never did like the guy," Stan said with brutal frankness. "And I couldn't see how you managed to stand him, Mr. Graham."

"He was my friend," Bill mused. "What I mean is I thought he was my friend. It's not exactly pleasant to

(Concluded on page 128)



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*Shadowy silence was
the stock-in-trade
of Jake McGuire!*



In the hallway, Jake McGuire stood frozen with horror, listening to Mallon's roistering friends

MORNING CHEER

By Ray Cummings

IT WAS one of those ideal, gloomy nights that Jake McGuire always liked. The time maybe was half past three. The little bungalow, half a mile out from Pleasanton Village, was in a nice lonely spot, sheltered by a grove of trees.

When he got to the thickets at the edge of the nearby patch of woods, Jake

regarded the bungalow approvingly. Bungalows like this one were his meat. In his earlier days he had done quite a bit of second story work. But after just barely making his getaway, with two twisted ankles from falling off a

trellis with all the aroused neighborhood bawling at him, Jake had given up porch climbing. He stayed strictly on the level now.

From where he crouched in the thicket, Jake decided that the best way in would be that second rear window. That would be the pantry adjoining the dining room. Jake was a firm believer in knowing your inside layout ahead of time. He'd had a bit of luck with this one, meeting Annie the other day in town. He knew, for instance, that this was the bungalow of Harry Mallon, a radio announcer in the city. Annie, the maid, was away on vacation. Young Mrs. Mallon would be asleep, alone there now in the house. And Annie had just happened to mention casually that business about Mrs. Mallon's jewels. She'd never remember she said it.

When the moon went under the clouds, Jake McGuire darted to the pantry window. He was a nimble little fellow, mild and inoffensive, genteel looking in his dark clothes and dark cap. Jake never carried a weapon. Hiding was his best defense.

The pantry window was locked, but that was no obstacle. There wasn't a sound as Jake cut the glass and laid the neat rectangle on the ground beside him. He reached in, unlocked the sash, noiselessly raised it.

From within the pantry, at once Mallon's gentle snoring was audible. With his sneakers padding soundlessly, the small figure of Jake moved quietly into the dark hall. Mallon's bedroom door was partly open, Mrs. Mallon's room across the hall. Like a shadow, Jake moved toward it.

MRS. MALLON'S jewel case was in the drawer of her dresser. In a moment Jake had found it, scooped the jewels into his pocket, was on his way out of the house.

Temptation is an insidious thing. As Jake passed Mallon's partly opened door, he caught a glimpse of Mallon's jaunty sport jacket hanging over the back of a chair. Radio people earn plenty. A wallet in that jacket might have a lot of money in it.

[Turn page]

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One of Jake's cardinal principles was never to enter a room if it had any occupant, but maybe Mallon's snores were reassuring. He went in. Mallon was asleep, with his face to the wall. There was a wallet in the inside jacket pocket and it felt fat. There was also a big handsome wrist watch on the little night table beside the bed.

Possessed of this additional and unexpected loot, Jake was soundlessly leaving the bedroom when, from outside the bungalow, came the noise of an arriving car, and a burst of hilarious shouts from its occupants.

"Good morning, Mallon! Wake up an' munch that breakfast crunch! Ha! Ha! So delicious! Eat Crunch for morning cheer! Ha! Ha! Get up you lazy slob an' feed us. We've had a big night."

In the bungalow hallway Jake McGuire stood frozen with horror, as he listened to Mallon's roistering friends arriving outside. It sounded like five or six men. And they hadn't waited for Mallon to get up and let them in! They had jumped out of their car and were pounding on all Harry's doors, front and back.

It was the supreme catastrophe which Jake had always dreaded. He was trapped in here! And the dark little hallway already was untenable, because Mallon was now awake and yelling back at them!

In that sudden crisis Jake darted down the hall and into the dark kitchen. It was about the worst place he could have chosen, because almost at once the guests began pounding at the kitchen door. And now the slap of Mallon's slippers sounded, out in the hallway.

The kitchen had an alcove. In the dimness, Jake could see a door there. He hoped it might lead to the cellar. It didn't. It was a windowless store



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room; it smelt vaguely of paint and furniture polish. Jake jumped for it, snatched out the key, and as the door closed, he locked it on the inside. He was just in time. The slap of Mallon's slippers was audible as he crossed the kitchen to open the back door for his boisterous friends.

Jake's heart quieted down. He decided to rest here quietly until he had a chance to get out.

That chance obviously was not yet. It was unfortunate that the hungry guests should congregate here in the kitchen, almost at Jake's elbow. He hoped that it wouldn't last long. He settled himself on the floor, with his back against the wall and his knees up under his chin. He was safe from discovery—if he didn't make any noise, such as coughing or sneezing.

Time dragged by. Jake could hear that everybody was very pleased with everything, except Mallon, who obviously didn't think that this pre-dawn

[Turn page]

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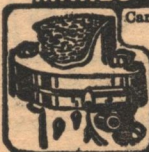


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visit was funny. But the gents only laughed and pounded the kitchen table, demanding beer and pretzels, or coffee and sandwiches. Harry had refused to let them make buckwheat cakes.

At last Mallon said,

"Listen you fellers, too much is enough. It's four o'clock. I'm a working man—on the air at six. Go on, chase yourselves."

Which would have been just fine for Jake. But at that moment, at exactly four A.M. Mallon's awakening alarm bell went off. It started, and it didn't stop.

THE BELL wouldn't have bothered Jake unduly if it had been sounding from Mallon's bedroom. But it wasn't. It was here with Jake, in the kitchen closet; In the kitchen, Mallon himself was seated on a kitchen chair, tilted back against the kitchen door. Mallon heard the alarm at once. It didn't shock him, as it did Jake, but it certainly puzzled him.

It should have been in the bedroom. Instead, Mallon heard its tones right behind him, in the kitchen closet. Harry Mallon, radio announcer, had paid a lot for that handsome wrist watch with its alarm bell and he was proud of it.

What it was doing in the kitchen closet?

"Well!"

Mallon gasped. He got off his chair, tried the closet door, and found that it was locked.

In the darkness of the closet, Jake was frantically jiggling and pushing with all his fingers and thumbs at the wrist watch, but the demon bell wouldn't be shushed. It kept sounding off like a gleeful genie. Mallon and his friends began thumping on the closet door.

Jake realized the jig was up. In a few minutes they would break down the door, so he saved them the trouble. He unlocked the door and came out. Mallon by that time had discovered the loss of his wallet and his wife's jewels.

At six o'clock that morning, Jake McGuire was in the Pleasanton Police Station, with the Desk Sergeant taking down stuff concerning Jake's past. In a corner of the room there was a small radio, playing softly. Now, at six

o'clock precisely, the radio called itself to Jake's attention.

A nice cheery voice said: "Good morning friends! Get up now and munch that Crunch! Um Ah! So delicious! Crispy Crunch, your breakfast cereal that puts you right with the world! This is Harry Mallon — Happy Harry bringing you morning cheer! Isn't it a gorgeous day?"

A gorgeous day? Jake didn't think so.

LAST DEAL

(Concluded from page 114)

isn't any need because you remember the figures, the number of turns.

Louie was right. You hadn't forgotten your way around. You were still the guy who knew all the ropes. Pulling the last big job. The payoff.

Back on the street Jim hastened his pace. Just a Joe walking along, late at night. In a couple of hours, he'd be heading out on a train for anywhere at all, any place where he could start all over again.

Only first he'd have to stop by at a certain house over on the swank side of town.

His fingers fumbled the package in his pocket, the letters he'd stolen from the safe while Louie lay snoring on the bed.

He wondered what that fat and forty lady would think when she found them in the mailbox in the morning.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

TONY QUINN

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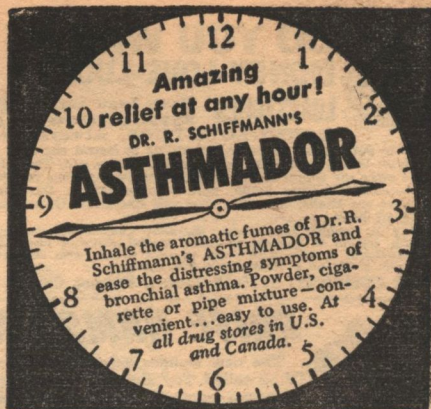
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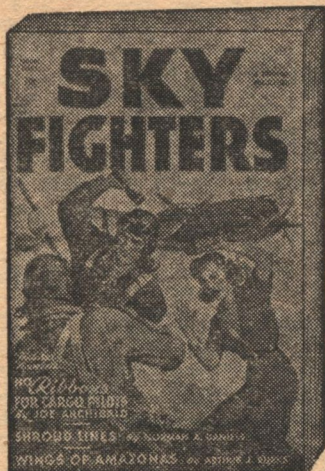
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DEATH IN THE WOODS

(Concluded from page 121)

wake up and find you've been had. Sucker Graham, they called him." He shrugged his shoulders. "Anyway he's gone now. I'm glad I didn't have to kill him, Stan, even in self-defense."

"Yeah! I know how you feel, Mr. Graham, and I'm well satisfied things come out as they did. Shooting that so-and-so is one job won't keep me awake nights. You're in the driver's seat." He stepped forward and replaced the silencer on Clint's rifle. "What now?"

"Only one thing to do. The easy way out would be to pass this off as a hunting accident. That could be done, but we'll play according to Hoyle. Everything here must be left as is until the authorities give permission to move the corpse. Their investigation is bound to be pretty much routine. There's Clint's rifle with the silencer. That'll be the gun we kidded him about losing last year. It provides proof enough of what he tried to do, for no honest hunter ever went in the woods with one of those contraptions on his gun.

"You hit the trail for Peterman's Camps, and phone the nearest sheriff. Tell whoever you talk with to show speed. Meanwhile I'll stay with the body. We don't want any wild animals messing it up."

"Okay," the guide agreed. "I'll be back from Peterman's before dark, and tonight I'll take over guarding the body." He hesitated. "Say, Mr. Graham. Here's something just occurred to me.

"That filthy crack he made about your wife—we don't have to pass it on to the law. Right?"

"No," Bill agreed soberly. "That part is just between us, Stan. His eyes met the guide's understandingly. "Thanks, fella. Now get going."

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Answers to THE CRIME QUIZ

(See Page 112)



1. Kidnaping.
2. J. Edgar Hoover.
3. None. An automatic ejects each shell after it is fired.
4. No. Pure arsenic is colorless and tasteless.
5. Murder, stealing, adultery, perjury.
6. Yes, if there are reliable witnesses who swear they witnessed the murder and there is no question of the victim's death. For example, in a case where the killer shoved his victim into a cauldron of molten metal, it would obviously be impossible to produce the corpse, but there would be no question of the victim's death.
7. Yes. Most crimes are considered more serious when committed after dark.
8. No. It would be too easy for prisoners to overcome a guard and take away his weapon. The only guards who are armed are those on the wall or otherwise out of reach of the prisoners.
9. True. And his prison chains were buried with him.
10. A large, edged tool for cutting open safes.

OFF THE RECORD

(Continued from page 7)

There'll be a punch-packed assortment of other high-grade stories in our next issue—plus outstanding short features. The country's best crime, detective, and mystery story writers appear in our pages regularly, so always remember: You make a date with reading pleasure when you get—**BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE!**

LETTERS FROM READERS

UR first letter is from a reader who has caught us in a rather glaring error—and is our face red!

You may know your murder, but not your Bible! In the January issue of **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE**, Crime Quiz—page 84, question #8 reads, "Who was the world's first murder victim?" Your answer on page 107 was—"Cain, who was killed by Abel."

The Bible differs! Refer to Genesis 4:8. "And

[Turn page]

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Cain talked with Abel his brother. And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him!"

Don't get me wrong, I like your magazine and never miss an issue. However, it would be better to be more accurate, at least on Biblical questions, don't you think?

Lots of success and long life to your magazine and Tony Quinn.—*Beverly Kinkead, Carroll, Ia.*

Thanks, Bev, for the tip. Our thanks also to Nadine Toops, of Waynesville, Mo., who, too, caught our boner. It was just a slip of the pen—or typewriter—but it never should have happened, of course!

In answer to Joe Foned, Brooklyn, N. Y.: Tony Quinn can fool the people and the police, but he couldn't fool a Seeing Eye dog. They won't or can't work with a person who can see. Besides, let's give the dog to some ex-G.I. who could really use it. Tony does O.K. with Silk. That is all I have to get off my chest about that. I have been reading BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE for some time and I think it's swell.—*Eugene Krumm, Dayton, Ohio.*

Do you other readers agree? And what do you think of the ideas expressed in the following letter?

I am a constant reader of the BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE stories. But I think there should be more love between Carol and Tony. After all, they are man and woman. I think they should get married because Tony can't expose Carol to

any more danger than he does now. But I don't think that McGrath should find out who the Black Bat is because it makes the story more interesting when he only thinks he knows.—*L.E.D., Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada.*

And here is a letter from one of our most faithful correspondents:

I follow the Black Bat in every issue and I hope you will keep writing more Black Bat stories. I just can't wait until the next issue comes out. I just keep counting the days. All my friends like to read the Black Bat too.—*Anne Kowalski, Detroit, Mich.*

We'll be back again next issue with many more letters, and we're looking forward to having one from YOU among them. Drop us a letter or postcard today. Address it to The Editor, BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Before signing off, I can't resist telling you about a swell picture I've seen. Called WHISPERING SMITH, and starring Alan Ladd, this Paramount Picture in Technicolor is a yarn of the crimes committed during the railroad era of the West in the 1890s. It's a grand bet for both Western and detective fans.

See you all next issue, and until then—happy reading and thanks to everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.



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*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



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*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

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