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By G. WAYMAN
JONES

A THRILLING
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WINTER, 1952



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DAVID X. MANNERS
Editor

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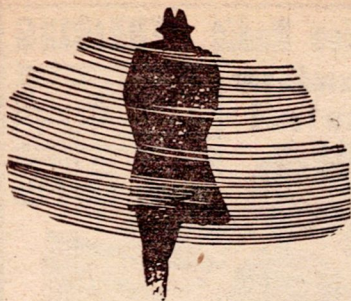
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CRIME CONFIDENTIAL

How To Be Famous—In One Easy Lesson

HE WAS tall for his age—which was seventeen—and good looking in a dark-eyed, brooding sort of way. The brooding part was that though he smiled a lot to show his nice, even, white teeth he almost never smiled with his eyes because he was studying you to see if you thought his smile was as dazzling as, say, Vic Mature's.

That was how you could tell he was stage-struck—or maybe it's TV-struck, these days. He wanted to be an actor, the worst way. That was the way he made it, finally.

I will call him *Ciro* because that was the name he liked to be known by, though he was originally tabbed with just plain John. It's the least I can do for him now, the way things worked out. I had a small and thoroughly unintentional part in getting him famous after a fashion, so naturally I want to give him the billing he deserves.

This began a few years back when I was mixed up in—possibly embroiled in is a more accurate description—radio and also in television in its growing pains stage. One night, after a half hour of what our sponsor called *Thud-and-Blunder*, I came out of the control room to congratulate Miss Carol Bruce who had just done a swell job on the show. I had to stand in line to do it because *Ciro* was in there ahead of me, giving out with his handsome smile and watching with those brooding eyes to see what impression he was making on her.

A Request

Just as I came close enough to hear him tell Miss Bruce he was planning to be an actor himself, she caught sight of me. In nothing flat she'd turned him over to me and had slid away. *Ciro* tried the smile on me and asked if I could help him get started in radio.

"Any experience?" I asked.

"I can tap dance," he said.

"Acting, I mean."

"I can read off a script as well as anybody

else." His tone said he didn't think it would be much of a trick for a man of such obvious distinction. He handed me a card with *Ciro S*—— printed on it. At the bottom, in one corner, was his phone number and in the other it said: *Dancer—Juvenile Lead*.

All I could do was tell him how to get an audition from the casting directors and pass along the standard advice to go to a good school of acting and learn something about the trade.

He thanked me and said he would certainly do that, and I would be hearing from him.

I didn't, though. If he came around to the studios or the agencies for an audition, he must have been pretty bad. Or maybe they didn't need any tap dancers just then. I forgot all about *Ciro* and his toothy smile. I probably never would have thought about him again, except that one day recently the sponsor of that *Thud-and-Blunder* program wanted me to do him a small favor.

He wanted to see a special show, put on by the Police Department at their theatre down on Centre Street in New York. I made the arrangements, met him at the Coffee Pot on Broome Street at eight-thirty ayem. The lineup begins at nine sharp.

Unwilling Actors

It's quite a show, even though the stage is bare of scenery and the auditorium itself is just a high-ceilinged room with rows of arm-chairs, like the high school gym in your home town when parents are invited to watch some amateur student production. But there the resemblance ends; the performers at Centre Street are more reluctant than any amateurs who ever got panicked by stage fright.

Maybe it's because these actors have to come out on the bare stage all alone and stand against the glaring white wall under the bright spotlights that shine straight in their eyes and do their stuff at the mike, knowing in advance the audience won't be giving them any applause whatever.

(>page 8)



THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

*You Can Influence Others
With Your Thinking!*

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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Name.....

Address..... State.....

CRIME CONFIDENTIAL

(→from page 6)

There is a sort of prompter, a master of ceremonies, in a blue uniform; this particular morning he was an assistant chief inspector.

The audience began to file in. They were all solid-looking citizens with dead-pan, expressionless faces and watchful eyes. Though they came in groups of three or four, there was none of the chitchat and buzz-buzz you hear in a regular theatre before the lights go down and the curtain goes up. These men were quiet.

There was no curtain to go up, anyway. The A.C.I. read off a name from the list on the stand before his microphone. A door in the far wall opened, and a cop pushed out a short, pudgy shmo who shambled over to the four steps at the side of the stage and halted.

"Come on. Snap it up, Francis. We haven't got all night," rasped the loudspeaker.

Francis went up the steps, shuffled across the stage. It was only about twenty-five feet wide, but he made it look as if the twelve feet to the mike was the last lap in a potato sack race.

That one was a repeater; he knew the ropes. He answered questions haltingly, blinked at the strong light, denied nothing of the charge the inspector read to him. He was a sex offender and was due to take a long vacation at the state's expense. But whatever he had to go through when he got up to the Stone School, I had the feeling he was sure it couldn't be as bad as this ordeal of having three hundred detectives give him the cold and scornful up-and-down.

The Hider

There were six of these solo-performers before the door opened to send out a John Somebody-or-other who had been picked up on charges of being a hider. My companion asked what kind of a crook *that* was, but I was too astonished to answer. The hider was *Ciro*.

He didn't tap dance his way across that barren stage but he didn't stumble or shuffle along, either. He took the steps two at a time, strode briskly to the microphone, and showed his lovely teeth in that smile which put in play only the lower half of his face.

The assistant chief inspector read the charge: "John ———, charged with concealing himself on business premises not owned by him and remaining there after closing for purposes of committing grand larceny. How about that, John? Did you do that?"

"I certainly did not." The words came clear and firm without hesitation or mumbling. "The accusation is utterly false."

The hollow voice of the loudspeaker asked, "Weren't you picked up carrying a case of

brandy out of that bar and grill on Van Nostrand at three-thirty this morning?"

"I was," answered my tap-happy acquaintance. "But I had no intention of stealing it. I am well known in that cafe—" he straightened his bow tie carefully—"and I have every intention of paying for the liquor I took out of there."

The blandness of the guy threw even the inspector a little. "Well—uh—how'd you happen to be in that bar at three-thirty in the morning?"

"I walked in some time during last evening," *Ciro* answered, making an airy, offhand gesture. "Around one, I should think it was. I sat in one of the booths with a couple of my friends. We had a few brandy highballs, and I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I remember I woke up under the booth table, all the lights were out, and everyone had gone!"

It got a laugh, the first one of the day, from the assembled dicks.

"First time such a heavy sleep ever overtook you in somebody's place of business, John?"

"No." *Ciro* hung his head. He bit his lower lip. He scowled. His voice became subdued. "It happened once before, up on City Island."

A Good Bad Actor

"Yeah," agreed the hollow tones of the loudspeaker. "That time you were drinking Scotch and you had sixteen quarts of Scotch in that Navy duffel bag you just happened to have with you when the officer on the beat accosted you."

"I guess I'm—" *Ciro's* voice broke; it was as well done as any part I'd ever heard played on a soap-opera—"I'm apt to go off the deep end when I've had a few too many, that's all. I needed money to help me finish my training. That's why I did it."

"What kind of training are you taking, John?"

Ciro raised his chin proudly. His eyes flashed. "I'm attending the De Coursey College of the Stage," he said in the perfect, pear-shaped tones of the cultured juvenile lead.

"Well, well," said the inspector unfeelingly. "Perhaps the judge will arrange it so you can complete your studies upstate. Last time all you got was a suspended sentence. This time it might be different. Next prisoner."

As *Ciro* marched, not so briskly then, off the stage, my companion commented:

"There's a guy who looks like a real bad actor!"

"Oh, I don't know," I answered. "Kind of corny, of course. But every hamateur has to get a start somewhere."

It's a tough way to break in, though.

—Stewart Sterling



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The Killer



"She's my woman," Mace said, and Emerson grabbed him by the shoulder . . . setting in motion a murder plot that spelled death for Mace, oblivion for himself, and disaster for—yes, YOU!

Who Wasn't

CHAPTER I

Prelude to Murder

HE WAS a solidly built, well-dressed man with iron-gray hair and gray eyes that were now somewhat dull in a boredom which hadn't come about yet, but which he knew would develop.

He extended his hand to help a handsome middle-aged woman alight from the taxi. The doorman sauntered in their direction, took a second look at the man, and quickly picked up speed.

"Good evening, Mr. Emerson," he said in the voice he reserved for customers who tipped the best. "Haven't seen you around in a long time."

Emerson nodded and smiled slightly. He handed the man a folded bill, took his wife's arm, and they walked toward the door which the doorman opened with an especially low bow.

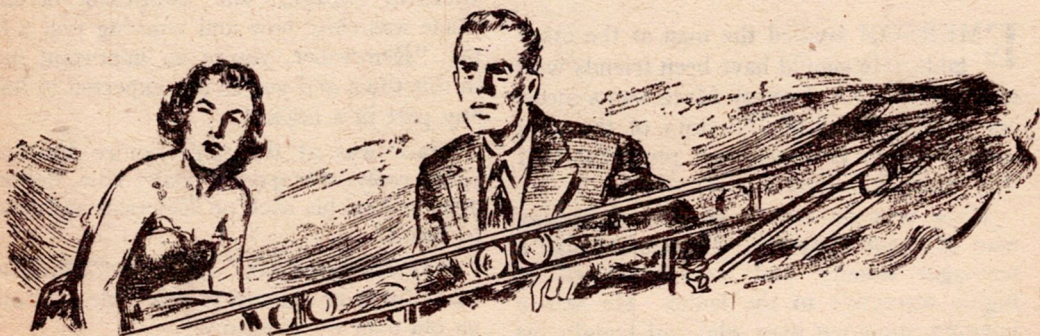
The woman said, "George, I'm honestly

thrilled. It's been so long since we went anywhere together—and a night club restaurant! I thought you'd outgrown them when they elected you Chairman of the Board of the Vulcan Steel Mills."

George Emerson grinned. "Oh, I suppose a man ought to take his wife out as often as possible, but things are pretty rough these days, what with Government orders, shortages, and all the harassing matters that make things just short of what conditions were during the last war. I get tired by the end of day."

"Well, thank heaven," Mrs. Emerson said, "that Marcel Remy insisted on your coming tonight, otherwise you'd never have budged. Darling, you need more relaxation."

"Maybe," Emerson said, "but the Government needs more steel, too. However, I



A Novel by G. Wayman Jones

promise to enjoy myself. You're right—this ought to do me good. Remy thinks so. I wonder where he is."

They were led to a favored table by a headwaiter who knew what the tip would be. The place was crowded already and an excellent orchestra was playing dance music. Emerson sat down, ordered drinks and leaned back to look over the customers.

"Soon as I get my second wind," he said genially, "we'll dance. I hope I remember how. But whether I do or not, I can be sure of one thing. I'll have one of the most beautiful women in this room in my arms."

Edith Emerson glowed. "If you still believe that after being married to me for thirty years, George Emerson, I'm flattered. Let's forget business and worry tonight, and—" She stopped suddenly and the corners of her mouth were pulled down. Emerson knew something was wrong. She glanced his way. "George, that man Mace is over to my left. I want you to promise to ignore him."

"Garney Mace here?" Emerson looked boldly at the further table. "Um—how to ruin a pleasant evening before it begins. I almost forgot myself this afternoon, Edith, and hauled off to sock him one. The man's impossible."

"I know he is," she said. "I've told you how he's pestered me. Actually hinting that you left me alone too much, and that he should be permitted to take me out. George, I rarely let myself go to the extent of hating someone, but I'm afraid I hate him."

EMERSON studied the man at the other table. He should have been friends with him, trusted him. Garney Mace was a member of the Board of Directors of the steel mill of which Emerson was president, and they were in contact a great deal.

Mace was an overly stout, soft-looking man of about forty-five. He dressed like a teen-ager usually, and fancied himself as highly attractive to the ladies. He was a fawning, mooning man who had bought his way into the steel mill.

Emerson noted that Mace was slightly tight. He waved his highball glass with one hand, a long expensive cigar with the other, and his voice was louder than even its usual

commanding bellow. Mace liked attention. "Edith," Emerson said, "I think we ought to leave."

"Oh, control yourself," she said. "Mace won't bother you if you ignore him."

George Emerson waited until the cocktails were served. He silently toasted his wife before taking a sip. Then he put the glass down.

"I wish I knew why Mace insists on needling me the way he does. There must be some reason for it. He invariably votes contrary to my suggestions. He hamstringing the Board for days on end sometimes, and I think he does it only to annoy me. Lately he's been almost insulting. I even offered to buy him out, but he won't sell."

Edith took another sip of her cocktail. "George, be reasonable now. Mace has seen us and I think he's coming over here."

Emerson's face twisted into a scowl. "He's been asking for trouble, Edith. I only hope it won't happen here, in public, when you're with me. I hope—in fact, I'm praying Mace will behave. Because if he doesn't—"

Edith arose quickly. "We'd better leave, George. I'm a little frightened. Somehow Mace makes me think he's capable of almost anything."

"He's as yellow as they come," Emerson grunted. "Sit down, Edith. If we leave and he yells anything at us I'll slug him for sure. Try to relax and I'll do my best to get rid of him without a scene."

She resumed her chair. "Try to control yourself, George," she whispered, because Mace was close now and weaving just a little. "Remember, you're an important man in this town and you're not expected to have any part in a brawl."

Mace was at the table before Emerson could reply. He gave a shaky bow, deliberately turned his back on Emerson and spoke to Edith.

"You're beautiful," he said. "Much too beautiful to be chained to this table with only an old man for company."

"Please, Mr. Mace," Edith begged.

Mace went right on. He put a little something extra in his voice and the more or less innocent words he spoke took on a different meaning.

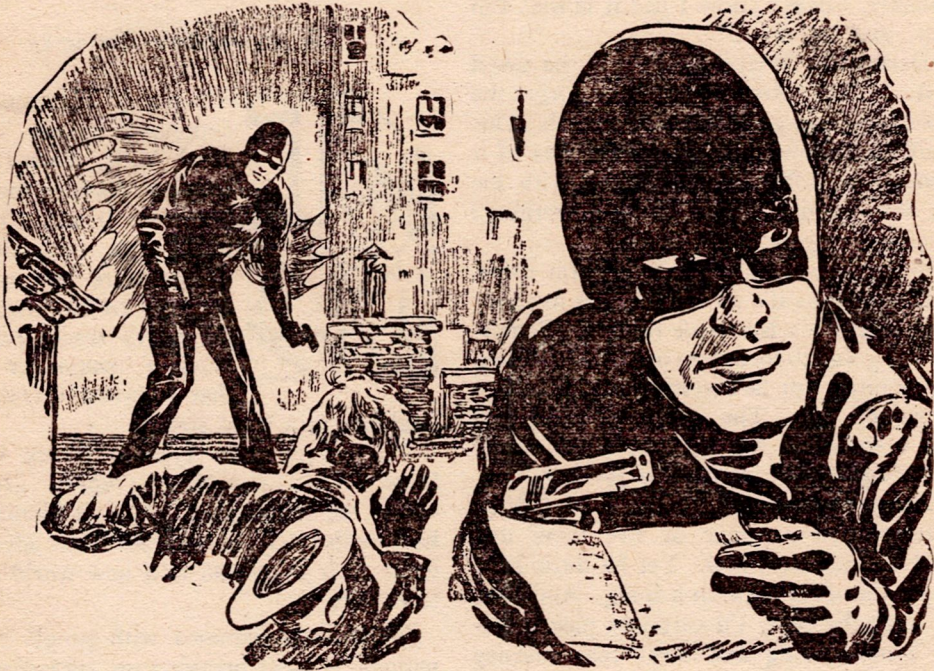
"With a face and figure like yours, you should be showing them off, darling. Come on, let's go on the floor and show these yokels something they can gawk at. You and me—we're a pair."

"Mace," Emerson said in a deliberately quiet voice. A dangerous voice.

Mace twisted his head and laughed at Emerson. "Relax, Pop," he said. "Remem-

grow soft. His punch was well-aimed, carried a lot of weight, and all the force his anger could muster.

Mace seemed to be lifted from the floor by the blow. His wild challenge was cut short. He hurtled back, fell over an empty table and brought it down with him as he crashed to the floor. He lay there, staring eyes looking up at the gaudily decorated ceil-



THE BLACK BAT

ber your age and realize a woman like your wife is meant for others to dance with. Come on, Edith. You're my woman right now. Let's show 'em."

Emerson arose slowly. "Mace," he said again, crisply this time..

Mace paid no attention to him. He grasped Edith's arm and was pulling her out of the chair when Emerson suddenly reached out, grabbed his shoulder and spun the man around.

Mace uttered a sharp oath, pulled back his fist. That was as far as he got. Once, years ago, George Emerson had worked in the mill, worked with the giant crucibles as a metal tender and stoker. The muscles under his sleek tuxedo had never been allowed to

ing. He was as cold as he would ever be this side of death.

SOMEONE tapped Emerson's shoulder and he half spun around. The man behind him was narrow-faced, white-haired and wore a tuxedo. He said, "Well done, George. He asked for it."

Emerson forced a smile. "I'm sorry about the whole thing, Remy. You know my wife, of course. This is Marcel Remy, Edith. He invited us here tonight, but we don't seem to have added any luster. I'm sorry, Remy. Now we're leaving. Thanks, anyway."

Others patted him on the back or indicated their gratification by nods and smiles, but Emerson was somber-faced as he got his

hat and topcoat. When he and his wife reached the street, he stopped.

"Edith, I am sorry. I don't blame you for being ashamed of me."

"I'm mortified, George," she said. "A cheap, common brawl like that. But George—what a wallop! What a wallop!"

She held his arm tightly and looked up at him. She would feel his muscles relax.

"I have got some steam left," he chuckled. "Frankly, I didn't know I had it in me. I'm sorry, just the same."

"Darling, as Marcel Remy said, he asked for it. Nobody blames you. Let's forget the whole thing and go to some other club. This is still an evening out, though the rest of it is bound to suffer by comparison with the first few minutes. You know something? I'm proud of you."

He laughed then. "You're a great sport, Edith. Perhaps it's all for the best anyhow. Mace pulled his last trick tonight. Tomorrow I'm going to force him out. I don't know how—quite. But he's getting out. I wish I understood this. The man's no good, but even a scoundrel has to have some reason for getting himself punched on the jaw."

"He's a fool," Edith Emerson said. "Why, he telephoned me four or five times and asked me out with him. Yet he must have known I'd never do such a thing. And even if I were the type, I'd certainly pick someone better-looking and nicer than Garney Mace."

Emerson helped his wife into a taxi. He settled back, put his black homburg on his lap and still looked puzzled. "He's up to something, Edith. I know very well that he is. But I can't for the life of me figure out what he hopes to gain by making my life miserable. It's been going on for months, and getting worse."

Edith leaned her head on his shoulder. "You're to forget him tonight, George. If you let him spoil our evening, he wins a point."

"You're right," Emerson said. "Perfectly right."

Edith Emerson gave a small sigh. "What a sock! You know, George, you'd have been pretty good in the ring. Right on the button, and did he go down! Table and all. But

you should have aimed for his nose. He thinks he's handsome, and flattening his nose might have done his morale some good. Or ours."

Emerson chuckled again. "Frankly, I aimed at his nose—and missed. So you see, I'm not so hot, after all. Okay—it's over. We've got an evening ahead of us."

CHAPTER II

The Astounding Frame-up



THE city of Haverton was dominated by the Vulcan Steel Mills, though there were a dozen other big factories. It was a typical mill town, though the streets were laid out for carriage traffic instead of the heavy trucks and the bustling passenger cars that crowded every thoroughfare in a solid stream.

The people were typical. There was a large foreign population, rapidly growing out of the environment the first immigrants had deliberately chosen for themselves, to make their transition to a new world easier to endure.

Settlements, jammed with people of one nationality were breaking up, spreading out, until the city was turning into one homogeneous unit. Everyone was busy; unemployment hadn't been known for years, and new houses and spanking bright cars testified to this.

Now the factory wheels were beginning to turn at night as well, so that Haverton would do its share in thrusting back the menace facing most of the world. The Vulcan Mills were operating beyond capacity, thanks to George Emerson's far-seeing plans and his intelligent handling of the business.

Emerson walked briskly through the office the morning after his one-punch fight with Garney Mace. He looked slightly more cheerful and brighter than he felt. He and his wife had done the town and, being unused to it, he had a trace of a hangover.

In his large private office, four men were



He saw Carol at the moment the tire iron began to descend

waiting. Three of them arose as he entered. Garney Mace, slumped in his chair, didn't move. His jaw looked definitely lopsided.

Emerson had phoned ahead to have these men waiting for him. One of them, Jed Medford, a vice president, was an efficient man even though he didn't look it. He was inclined toward foppishness, wore a thin black mustache, and had a slim figure and dull brown eyes.

Another, Ed Julian, general manager of the plant, was more the type who belonged in a steel mill. Red-faced, red-haired, he was a barrel of a man. He was direct and sure of himself. His handshake made even George Emerson wince slightly.

The third man, Bert Harris, a member of the Board of Directors, Emerson had never liked much. His appearance alone was enough to discourage confidence in the man. His face was cream-white and he had small, shifty eyes. Usually he was evasive, adhering to a lot of double talk as if to please everyone and offend no one.

George Emerson sat down behind his big desk. "I know you're busy and we won't

waste any time," he said. "I called you here to talk about Garney Mace. I want your honest opinions because I'm going before the whole Board of Directors with this problem and base my actions upon whatever we all believe."

Over Ed Julian's beefy face spread a grin. "Mace said you slugged him last night, George. By the looks of his jaw it wasn't just a playful poke."

Emerson nodded. "Yes, I hit him. He had it coming, and next time I may beat the life out of him. That's why he's got to go."

"Try and get ride of me," Mace said from the depths of the chair he occupied. "I put my money into this place and I'm staying."

Emerson paid no attention to him. "I've tried to buy Mace out. I've tried reasoning with him. At first he worked against me

only in a business way, but lately it's become more personal. I, as an individual, can't force him out, but a vote by the entire Board can do this."

Bert Harris bit his lower lip. "George, I don't like it. Mace has a right to protect his investment. He's the last man to become a member of the Board and we took him in willingly enough."

"We didn't know him then," Emerson reminded them. "I've come to know him too well. For some unaccountable reason he's been needling me. Making my business and personal life as miserable as he possibly can. It's so obvious that there must be some reason for it."

"How about that, Mace?" Julian asked harshly.

Mace looked up. "Emerson's nuts," he said. "Just because I happen to go for his wife—"

Emerson's fists clenched. "Leave my wife out of this, Mace. She wants nothing to do with you, any more than I do. If you insist on getting personal, I'll beat the life out of you, and I mean that."

BERT HARRIS started to say something and suddenly winced in pain. He dabbed at his left eye with his fingers.

"Blasted coke," he muttered. "I'm forever getting my eyes full of the stuff. George, loan me your pocket handkerchief, will you?"

"Of course." Emerson whipped out the kerchief and handed it to Harris who immediately went over to a mirror and began working on his eye.

Jed Medford, the vice president, walked slowly over to where Mace sat. Medford had one hand in his coat pocket.

"Why don't you cut it out, Mace?" he asked.

"This is none of your business," Mace muttered.

Medford slowly moved his head so that he looked all around the room. Then he turned his eyes back on Mace. "You know, there's a way to make you behave, Mace. It's an effective way, too."

Mace glared at him and growled something under his breath. Medford's hand

came out of his pocket and he held a pair of gloves. Calmly he thrust his fingers into them.

"You know Emerson will probably kill you if you keep on with this," he said slowly. He pulled the gloves tight. "Emerson is a nice fellow and we should do everything possible to prevent his getting into any trouble."

Mace was sitting erect now, looking puzzled. "What are you talking about, Medford? What's this all about?"

Medford said, "This!"

His right hand came from beneath his coat and the gloved fingers held a revolver. Mace let out a yell and started to rise. Medford took aim without much effort. He fired one shot. It hit Mace squarely between the eyes, knocking him back in the chair. He was dead before his body settled down against the leather cushions.

"Medford, you idiot!" Emerson shouted. "What in the world—"

Medford threw the gun on the floor and peeled off the gloves. He walked calmly to a long table and placed the gloves on it. Bert Harris came forward until he stood beside that same table.

Medford said, "Mace was born to die like that, George. Harris, will you go outside and call the police?"

Harris nodded with short jerks of his head and moved rapidly toward the door. Emerson sat down behind his desk. "Medford, what got into you? I don't understand this. I've been feeling as if some kind of an ugly force was working behind my back and now—you murdered Mace in cold blood! Why? Why?"

"Hang on, George," Medford said. "It'll all come out in the wash. Don't tell me you're sorry Mace is dead."

"Of course I am. Maybe he was second cousin to a louse, but he was still a human being, and you don't have to kill a man to cure him. Medford, of all people, I'd never expected this of *you*! Why, you're probably the one man I'd positively say couldn't commit murder even if the evidence was all against you."

"It was rather cold-blooded, wasn't it?" Medford asked conversationally. He laughed. "But did you see the look in Mace's eyes

when he saw the gun? At least admit he didn't suffer."

"You're mad!" Emerson cried. "Completely mad, Medford! What could have got into you? Since when did you take to carrying a gun?"

Medford turned his back and walked calmly toward the wash room. He closed the door behind him. Emerson looked at Ed Julian, whose red face was composed. He showed no excitement or surprise.

"Julian," Emerson said, "can you explain this?"

Julian shrugged. "What's there to explain? Mace is dead and good riddance. But you know, I never saw a man die so fast. Well, the police ought to get here pretty soon."

"And what a commotion this is going to make!" Emerson said. "I wish I knew why Medford did it. There has to be some compelling reason. He's an intelligent man. He's had no trouble with Mace. In fact, he's about the only one of us who hasn't. Yet he shot Mace with a deliberation I think shows he'd actually been planning it. Of course he planned it. Otherwise why would he have been carrying that gun?"

Medford came out of the wash room looking composed. He glanced at the slumped corpse in the chair, shrugged and sat down across the room from it. Then Bert Harris returned, and almost on his heels came the police.

AT FIRST there were only a pair of radio patrolmen who simply ordered everyone to remain as they were. In ten minutes Lieutenant Sebastian of the Detective Bureau walked in. Sebastian was a heavy-set man, keen-eyed and thin-lipped.

He gave the dead man a cursory examination, took a piece of string from his pocket and used this to pick up the gun. He placed the weapon on a table and fenced it in with several books for protection. Then he turned to face the four men who watched him silently.

"Who killed him?" he asked.

Julian spoke first, his voice firm and direct. "Emerson shot him. They had an argument."

Emerson jumped to his feet. "What? Julian! Are you crazy?"

"Sit down, Mr. Emerson," Sebastian said. "Mr. Julian, you say Emerson killed this man?"

"I do," Julian answered quietly.

"How about you, Mr. Medford?"

Medford nodded. "I'm sorry, but I must tell the truth. They had an argument last night and carried it over to this morning. Mace was a rat, but—Emerson shot him."

Emerson's eyes flicked from one man to another, as if sudden realization was just dawning on him. His gaze centered on Bert Harris, stayed there, as Harris answered the Lieutenant's unspoken question.

"Yes, Lieutenant, Mace had been riding Emerson for months. If anybody asked me, I'd have said it would end this way eventually. Emerson accused Mace of trying to—to make his wife. They argued and Emerson just pulled a gun out of his pocket and shot him."

"That's a lie," Emerson said. "All of you are lying. Medford shot him, Lieutenant."

"Why?" Sebastian asked.

"I—don't know. I haven't any idea, but he shot him."

Sebastian said, "Okay. We'll all stay here until certain tests and examinations are made. We have ways of finding out who is telling the truth."

"What I said is the truth," Emerson insisted.

Sebastian shrugged. "I hope so, Mr. Emerson. I'd hate to pinch the man who gave my father his first job when he came to this country, and boosted him to the position of a super. But it looks bad, sir. It looks bad."

Medford walked over to face Emerson from the other side of the desk. "I'm sorry, George. I wish we could have done something. I've never been sorrier for anyone in my life."

Bert Harris said, "Mace wasn't worth it."

Lieutenant Sebastian sat down and fished out a dog-eared notebook. "We've got to wait for the scientific boys to arrive, gentlemen, but we might as well start taking statements. You want to be first, Mr. Emerson?"

"What difference does it make?" Emerson said. "This is some sort of a plot. Some-

thing that's been building for months. I'm enmeshed in its web. But I'll shake myself loose. Wait and see! I'm not paying for a crime I didn't commit. Julian, Medford and Harris can lie themselves blue in the face, but I'm not guilty of this and somehow I'll prove it!"

Sebastian wagged his head. "I hope so, Mr. Emerson. I sure hope so, but like I said, it looks bad. It looks bad."

CHAPTER III

The Eyes of Tony Quinn



INSPECTOR McGrath, of the New York Police, puffed violently on his cigar and studied the checkerboard intently. He started to make a move, hesitated, and looked up at the man seated across from him.

McGrath was a sturdily built, hard-as-nails type of cop. There was an uncompromising glint in his eyes and a pugnacious cut to his jawline. He sported a thick mustache, wore his clothes as if their only purpose was to cover him. He hated criminals with an intensity that had helped him go far, and would probably advance him higher and higher until the day of his retirement.

McGrath's companion, physically, was startlingly different. A rather handsome man, he was six feet tall, and with a fine pair of shoulders. His casual tweeds looked as if they were an actual part of him. He had a mobile mouth, now smiling, a well-formed head and hair with a slight tendency toward a wave.

There were several deeply etched scars around his eyes which detracted somewhat from his otherwise pleasing appearance. They looked like the result of serious burns.

And his eyes were—dead!

Stark, staring, blind eyes which somehow one could become used to quickly, and all but forgot. And Inspector McGrath had temporarily forgotten them as he found himself in a tight trap. He gestured in disgust.

"Some checker player," he grunted. "I can't even beat a blind man. Tony, how do you do it,"

Tony Quinn laughed. "I have to memorize where every checker is on the board, Mac. While you're making your moves, I'm planning my next ones. It keeps me ahead of you. Another game?"

"For what?" McGrath grumbled. "A man likes to win once in a while. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you could see."

Quinn said, "You often swear I can, Mac."

"I know. I know, Tony. Sometimes, the way things work out, I not only believe that, but am positive you're the Black Bat. Then I'm just as sure you're not. It's the same with that and your blindness. Back there, when it first happened, every doctor said you'd never see again. You were blind then—sure. But that was a long time ago and since then they've done some wonderful things in making people see again."

"Mac," Quinn said gently, "if I were faking this blindness, do you think I'd have won all these games? I'd have let you win them, blundered all over the place, and made certain you were sure I couldn't see. But I won! Every game."

"You're telling me!" McGrath chuckled. "And because I'm feeling expansive tonight, I don't think it would matter a whit if you were faking. It wouldn't even matter if you *were* the Black Bat."

"Watch out," Quinn warned good-humoredly. "You might not like yourself in the morning, Mac."

McGrath chuckled again. "Okay. I suppose if I ever laid my hands on the Black Bat and had him good, I'd arrest him. After all, I'm a cop and there is a warrant out for his arrest. I hope I never catch up with him, Tony."

"You're mellowing," Quinn said. "Once upon a time you were dead set on ripping the hood off the Black Bat and throwing him to the wolves."

McGrath wagged his head. "If only that guy would operate like a cop. Instead of that he just sails in and doesn't give a hoot for laws. Sure, it gets results, but you can't break the law any time you want to. That

turns you into a criminal, too."

There was a clink of glasses behind McGrath and he turned. The man who carried the tray into Tony Quinn's library, was of medium height, slim, bald-headed and impassive. He put the tray on a table, mixed drinks, and guided Quinn's hand around one glass. Then he stepped back and stayed there, ready to move quickly if blind Tony Quinn needed anything.

Silk Kirby was no less a perfect servant than he was a friend. McGrath glanced at him.

"He shellacked me, Silk. Six games—and he won every single one."

"I can't beat him, either," Silk said with a smile. "He plays checkers like he handles a case in court. Every move has a reason."

McGrath took a sip of his drink. "Things have been quiet lately," he said. "I've come to hope they stay that way. Getting old, I suppose, but that's the way it is."



McGRATH

THE telephone buzzed and Silk went to answer it. Tony Quinn's blind eyes were staring into space, his hands sought the crook of his white cane and grasped it firmly. He leaned forward, supporting his chin against his knuckles around the cane.

"Things never stay quiet for long, Mac. Not in our business. Now take that phone call. It might be word of a murder. Some stupid killer eliminated competition by the blast of a gun or the drive of a knife. Then you go into action and pretty soon I do my part in court. It's always been that way. Always will be, I suppose."

Silk was returning. He said, "It's an out-of-town call, sir. From Mrs. George Emerson. She says it's vitally important and, if I may say so, she sounds as if it is."

"Edith Emerson." Quinn got to his feet quickly. "I haven't heard from the Emersons in years."

"Friends of yours, Tony?" McGrath asked.

"Oh yes, Mac. George Emerson and I used to be pals, even though he is considerably older than I. He's a great guy. So is his wife. I wonder if she's as attractive as ever. I imagine so. Well, excuse me. Be right back."

But Tony Quinn didn't come right back. He was at the phone for a long time and when he finally returned, it was starkly obvious that he'd heard bad news. He sat down slowly, feeling his way into the chair.

"What is it, Tony?" McGrath asked.

Quinn's lips tightened for an instant. "A few minutes ago I said some stupid killer would be taking a life. Mac, Edith Emerson just told me that her husband is locked up and accused of cold blooded murder."

"George Emerson?" Silk Kirby gasped. "But that's impossible, sir! I know him well enough to be sure he couldn't kill anyone."

"Three people said he did, Silk. They were eye-witnesses. George is going to be tried for murder. He wants me to defend him."

"Go to it, Tony," McGrath said quickly. "You can get a leave of absence and if there is anything I can do— Or wait! Holy smokes, it didn't happen here? Where you're a Special District Attorney!"

No, Mac. It's in a city called Haverton, about a hundred miles north of here. But in the same state. I can practice law there."

"You're going to defend him, even in the face of three eye-witnesses?" McGrath asked.

"I'd defend him if he were accused of killing ten people before an audience of a

thousand. Because, Mac, if that happened, I'd feel all thousand witnesses were mistaken or lying."

McGrath shook his head. "You're biting off a big mouthful, Tony. Unless the witnesses are punks trying to frame the guy."

"They happen to be business associates of George," Quinn said. "Silk, pack a couple of bags. We'll drive up, and we'll leave as soon as we possibly can."

"Yes, sir." Silk hustled out of the room.

McGrath leaned forward. "Tony, if you get in any jams and you need help, I'll be here. You know that."

"Thanks, Mac. I know I can count on you. And maybe I will need help. This is the most fantastic thing I've ever heard of. George Emerson simply hasn't it in him to kill anyone."

"Look," McGrath said. "As a specialist in the study of murder, let me give you some advice. Murders can be committed under the weirdest circumstances ever conceived. A man can be driven to kill, even though his very nature is against it. You haven't seen those people in a long time. People change, just as circumstances do."

"But I know George Emerson," Quinn said firmly. "Nothing else is needed to make me sure he is not guilty. I'm sorry we have to break this up, Mac."

"So what?" Mac arose. "I'd be on the losing end all night anyway. Remember, if there's anything I can do. Well, you're going to be busy, so I'll run along. Only don't be too disappointed if things don't turn out quite as you expect them to, Tony."

McGrath went out to where his car was parked and drove away. Quinn dropped back in his chair. After a few moments Silk entered the room.

"I'm packing, sir," he said. "What about the usual equipment? Or don't you think the Black Bat will take a hand?"

"I'm not sure, but he will if we run into anything that has even the faintest aroma of a frameup, Silk. Yes—pack everything. Including guns and ammunition."

SILK'S usually passive features actually glowed for a moment. He turned and quickly drew all the window shades in the

library. After he had gone to resume packing, Quinn arose. This time he didn't walk with the slow steps of a blind man. Instead he tucked the white cane under his arm and strode across the room toward what seemed to be a wall of solid bookshelves.

An almost silent door whirled open at the touch of a switch, and Tony Quinn entered a large, white-tiled laboratory equipped with every modern appliance for crime detection; also rows of chemicals in bottles and a complete library on crime. In rows of filing cabinets were identification cards of the more notorious criminals, past and present.

Quinn walked to a steel locker, opened it, and took out a brace of guns, fitted snugly into shoulder holsters. He set these on a table, and took out a suit of thin, jet-black material. To go with this was a black shirt, and shoes which enabled him to move without a sound. There was also a black hood which fitted his entire head closely, masking the scars around his eyes.

Tony Quinn was the Black Bat, a fact which only three other people in the world knew but which a few others, like Inspector McGrath, suspected. Quinn once had been a noted district attorney, and well on his way to higher positions when he had been stricken blind by acid thrown by criminals who were trying to destroy evidence in court.

At that time, Quinn had spent a small fortune trying to find a doctor who might restore his sight, and since the search had been unavailing, few believed now that it ever had been restored. Too many famous surgeons had stated frankly that there was no hope for it to be believed otherwise.

And Quinn had accepted his fate, had methodically learned to live as a blind man, and had abandoned his career. Fortunately, he was well-off financially, and had no worries about making a living. He learned Braille, and discovered that the blind do develop their other senses to make up for the loss of sight. Sounds became important to him, his sense of direction and sense of touch became acute. But the radical change from an active life to that of a blind man often brought him to the depths of despair.

Silk Kirby, an ex-confidence man with an amazing record for hoodwinking that larcenous portion of the populace looking for easy money, had broken into Quinn's home one night, to burglarize it. Instead of that, due to the persuasive arguments of the former New York District Attorney, Silk had remained to become Quinn's friend—and his eyes. A complete reformation.

Then a girl named Carol Baldwin had come into Tony Quinn's life. Her father, a police sergeant in a small town in the Midwest, knew of a little known surgeon who believed there was a chance of removing living tissue from healthy eyes and, by transplantation, enable a blind man to see again. Carol's father had a special interest in helping Tony Quinn, for he had closely followed the D.A.'s career in fighting crooks, and his admiration for Quinn's work was unlimited.

Carol's father had been dying from a bullet wound in the back which he had received from a cowardly killer he had tried to arrest. It was Sergeant Baldwin's desire that his eyes should become Quinn's.

Without much hope of success, and due principally to Carol's pleas, Quinn had gone secretly to that small city in the Midwest and submitted to the operation. Soon afterward, Carol's father had died. Quinn returned home, his eyes bandaged. He had permitted no one but Silk to know what had happened.

Finally the bandages had been removed, and Quinn had discovered he could see once more! And, as if a relenting fate wanted to repay him for his suffering, a weird power was included with the return of his sight. Quinn had discovered that he could see in darkness as well as in daylight—even the faintest colors.

AS SOON as he realized that he could fight criminals again, he had made up his mind to do it without submitting to the red tape of the law. He planned to fight them with their own brand of terror and ruthlessness. He meant even to break laws which stood in his way, revert to violence when it became necessary.

So he had adopted the identity of the Black

Bat, and uniformed himself in jet-black clothing, with the hood to cover the telltale scars. Keeping this identity a secret was absolutely necessary. If the underworld discovered who was behind that hood, Tony Quinn well knew he would become a target for gangster guns.

To carry on the necessary deception, Tony Quinn continued to be a blind man, tapping his way along with the aid of a white cane, and helped by Silk Kirby. But by night he was the hooded terror the underworld soon came to know and dread.

Silk Kirby worked with him, and so did Carol Baldwin who asked for the privilege of helping to carry on the Black Bat's work as a tribute to her dead father. But when she came East after the operation, and Quinn saw her for the first time, he promptly fell in love with her. She returned his affection in full, but both realized the impossibility of marriage under the circumstances, so they agreed to wait for a more opportune time when Quinn's life would not be in such constant danger.

In the meantime Carol, like Quinn, devoted herself to the problem of bringing criminals to justice. And she turned out to be a daring and clever operator—a decided asset to the Black Bat.

Then a man named Butch O'Leary, for whom Quinn once had done a favor that would never be forgotten, joined the little band. Butch was a giant of a man, perhaps a trifle slow mentally, but in a physical predicament he was as valuable as a General Sherman tank—and about as effective.

These three people closest to the Black Bat made up his crew. Together they studied crime and criminals, laboratory technique, and became proficient in shadowing, following clues, and recognizing them. The four earnest students learned how to build up a case until there was no doubt about who was responsible for some outburst of crime. Then they pounced—and when it was over, there were astonished criminals ready for legal punishment. Or dead ones!

Quinn had a short tunnel dug from his hidden laboratory to a garden house at the rear of the grounds surrounding his home, which was in a quiet section of the city among other

private homes. By means of this tunnel he could come and go secretly, and Carol and Butch could enter the lab and the house without attracting any attention.

Of the few who suspected that Tony Quinn not only could see, but actually was the elusive Black Bat, Inspector McGrath was the most persistent. For a long time he had been determined to track down this hooded man and turn him over to the law for punishment. But gradually even McGrath had come to realize that there was little difference in the work accomplished by the Black Bat, and the organized forces of law enforcement.

As this became borne in on him, his determination to expose the Black Bat slowly receded, until he now dreaded the moment when he would come face to face with the hooded man and have him at his mercy. Often, now, the Inspector stayed awake at night wondering just what he would do in such a situation.

Tony Quinn, restless because of a life of enforced inactivity, had asked for and received an appointment as a Special District Attorney, to handle difficult cases, and in this capacity he could also operate inside the law. It made a perfect set-up in the town with which he was so familiar.

BUT now, to answer the distress call of old friends, he would be leaving his jurisdiction, as well as turning from prosecutor to defense attorney. He wondered how this was going to work out.

From what little Mrs. Emerson had been able to tell him over the phone, her husband was beyond any help, unless Quinn could convince a jury that his act was not the premeditated and deliberate deed which constitutes first degree murder. And Tony Quinn, during the fast auto ride he took to the little city of Haverton, made up his mind that he wouldn't seek a plea, to save Emerson from the electric chair. Not unless Emerson himself admitted the killing.

It was going to be strange, fighting on the other side, but Quinn was glad that Emerson had remembered him and wanted him to act. He *would* act, too, to the limit of his abilities. If circumstances called for the Black Bat, he would don the hood and

swing into action in that capacity, also. In that case Carol and Butch would come on to help him, and he had an idea he was going to need all the help he could muster.

CHAPTER IV

Airtight Case



EMERSON presented a dejected appearance and years had been added to his age when Quinn met him in the visitors' room at Haverton Police Headquarters for the first time. They shook hands and sat down beside a small table in the barren room.

Quinn said, "I'm going to ask you one question, George. I know you will give me an honest answer, and everything I do may depend upon what you say."

"I know what you're about to ask, Tony," Emerson said. "The answer is, I did not kill Garney Mace."

"Good." Quinn nodded in approval. "Do you trust a blind man to help you?"

"You know I do, Tony. There isn't a better lawyer anywhere. But I'm warning you, it's just about hopeless."

"I've been told just what happened in your office. That is, from the side of the law. Three men, every one of them substantial citizens, have sworn they saw you shoot Mace."

"That is what bothers me the most," Emerson said, with a sigh. "I've known those men for years, trusted them, been their friend. They've worked with me, helped to expand the factory. I'd have trusted them with anything, but now though Jed Medford deliberately donned gloves, took a gun out of his pocket and shot down Mace as he sat in a chair, Medford swears I did it, and Harris and Julian back him up."

"There must be a reason for this," Quinn said. "Have you given it any thought?"

"I've thought about nothing else, Tony. Nothing! But I can't see a thing which would make them turn against me. It's fantastic."

Quinn clasped his hands over the crook of the white cane and his apparently sightless eyes seemed to be riveted on the further wall, somewhat to the left of where Emerson sat.

He said, "I talked to a detective-lieutenant named Sebastian. He seems to like you very much and is about as surprised as I to find you charged with murder. He talked willingly. Something policemen rarely do to a defense attorney. As a matter of fact, he hopes I can get you off."

Emerson nodded. "Sebastian is a good man. You can trust him. He's one hundred per cent cop, but he tries to be fair."

"He told me that you and Mace had been having trouble for months, and that Mace had been annoying your wife. There was even a fist fight in a night club the night before the murder."

"It was a one-punch fight." Emerson wryly allowed himself the luxury of a chuckle. "I knocked him cold."

"Why was he doing this, George?"

"I don't know, Tony. I swear there was no reason at all. But he did his level best to make my life miserable. He went out of his way to do it. Why, last night Edith and I were asked out by a friend of ours—Marcel Remy, who owns a night club and restaurant. I decided at the last minute to go and called Remy for a table. Mace made it a point to be there, because I know he had an appointment elsewhere, which he broke."

"The murder gun was traced to a hockshop and the owner swears he sold it to you. What about that?"

"I never purchased a gun in my life," Emerson said flatly.

"That pawnshop owner could be the weak link in this plot against you. Now there's something else. When you accused Medford of the shooting Lieutenant Sebastian made a powder residue test of Medford's hands and found no trace of powder."

"He wore gloves, Tony, as I told you. I saw him put them on."

"But there were no gloves in that office, and Medford had none on him. What happened to them?"

"I don't know. He stripped them off after the shooting and I think he placed them on

[Turn page]

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a table. That's the last I saw of them. But at my insistence the entire outer office was searched for them. Without any luck at all."

"Did any of those three men leave the office after Medford had placed the gloves on the table?"

"Harris did—to phone the police."

"Why didn't he use the phone in your office, George?"

"I don't know. I never thought to ask about that. I've been too confused. You might as well know there were no fingerprints on the gun, and on the floor near it was my pocket handkerchief. This was tested and oil from the gun was found on it. Also a few powder stains."

QUINN lifted his head at that.

"How come?" he asked.

"Just before the shooting, Harris told me he had something in his eye and asked for my handkerchief. I gave it to him. He must have wiped the gun with it and dropped it behind the chair in which Mace was killed. I didn't see him do it, but what else could have happened?"

"All right," Quinn said. "Now, when a test was made of your hands, they found traces of powder. How did that get on your fingers?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Emerson said. "I told you this looked hopeless."

"Hopeless my foot," Quinn said confidently. "There's a grand conspiracy against you, George. One that's been building up for years. Those behind it planned every inch of the way, but schemes involving too many people and conducted over a long period of time always leave some trace behind them."

"You think there's hope?" Emerson asked.

"I don't question your innocence," Quinn said. "And there's always hope for an innocent man. You've got to trust me, rely on me, and give me every cooperation."

"You know I will. My life is at stake."

"Then I'm going to get to work," Quinn said. "They have to let me see you from time to time. I'll get the first hearing postponed. Stall all I can. We may need time, lots of it. What about the D.A. in charge?"

"His name is Bill Allison and, unfortunately, he's an ambitious man. If he can con-

vict me, it would go a long way toward helping his own future. He knows it, and I predict he'll take advantage of it. Besides, he doesn't like me."

"What a combination!" Quinn groaned. "What's behind his dislike of you?"

"I damaged his pride some years back. He was on our staff of attorneys for the plant and I fired him after he pulled a particularly stupid blunder. He'll get me if he can, Tony."

Quinn said, "You're going to have plenty of opportunity to think this over, George. I want to know every little detail about the three men who swear they saw you kill Mace. I also want to know about Mace. When Edith visits, you might give her as many facts as possible. I don't want to come here too often. Remember, no detail may be too small."

Emerson nodded. "I feel much better, Tony. I have an idea you're going to learn what's behind this astounding scheme. And I'm prepared to pay anything you may ask."

"Very well," Quinn said. "The retainer will be full confidence in me. The final bill will demand your good will forever more. Now that's the last time I want to hear anything about paying me. You're going to need courage, George. We must be fighting a rather grim set-up and it will be hard to break."

"I know, and I'm prepared to worry. Just do your best to give Edith confidence. I worry more about her than I do about myself."

Quinn thrust out his hand blindly as he arose. Emerson shook it warmly, then went to the only door in the room. He knocked and a guard opened it. Emerson passed through the doorway, turned, and raised his hand for a final wave. Then he remembered that the man he meant to salute was blind.

Quinn tapped his cane and felt his way toward the door. Silk should have been waiting outside, but there were no signs of him. Quinn frowned slightly and continued on his way.

He was on the fifth floor of the building which housed the Police Department, the D.A.'s office, the courts and the jail. There was a bank of elevators across the hall and

Quinn headed vaguely in this direction. Still he couldn't find Silk.

The corridor was quiet and his tapping cane echoed through the silence. He reached the wall where the elevator doors were located and began feeling his way along, seeking the elevator call buttons.

SOMEONE was walking briskly toward him from behind, but Quinn didn't turn to look, even though he wanted to. There was something wrong here. Silk wouldn't have gone off without the most vital reason or under persuasion he couldn't cope with. Heavy steps were moving toward Quinn and that could mean almost anything. Quinn suddenly felt as he used to, when he had been really blind.

A hand slipped under his arm. "Mr. Quinn," a heavy voice said, "I'm a cop. Your man is waiting in the D.A.'s office and I was sent to bring you there."

"Oh." Quinn's blind eyes turned toward the man. "I wondered what had happened. Good. I'd like to meet your District Attorney."

"Mind walking down?" the man asked. He was an average type, neither dangerous looking nor saintly. "It's only one floor below this and the elevator service smells."

"Quite all right," Quinn said. "Let's go."

He was led down the corridor to where the fire stairway door was located. The man pushed open this door, brought Quinn to a halt until the door clicked shut, then piloted him to the head of the stairs.

"The stairs are kind of narrow," the man said. "I'll be right behind you."

"I'll be quite all right," Quinn told him.

The stairway should have been brightly illuminated, for it was not equipped with windows. But the lights seemed to have either been turned off or were not operating. The steps were shrouded in gloom. Quinn found the top step with his cane, descended it, then began moving faster. The man behind him was somewhat slower.

After descending about a third of the way, Quinn noticed black smears on the steps. Ordinary eyes might not have seen this at all, but neither darkness nor half light could blur his vision. Those smears were grease—

gobs of it, as if it had been accidentally dropped by some careless workman.

Quinn saw it clearly, recognized how dangerous it might be to the faltering steps of a blind man. He had to go on, but being warned could well mean the difference between life and death. A fall down these steep concrete and steel stairs could very well kill him.

He thrust his cane one step before him, straight into the middle of a spot of grease. He leaned heavily on it, gave the cane a slight twist. It slid out from under him. He started to pitch forward. His outflung arms encountered the railing, as if by sheer accident and he braced himself against them.

But, being off-balance, he almost fell down a couple of the stairs and his feet landed on more of the greasy smears. It appeared that he would have taken a header except for the grip he had on the railing. Even though he was in full control of himself, Quinn almost did topple over.

Behind him he heard his escort rapidly climbing the few steps to the top of the stairs. Then the fire door slammed shut and there was only silence. Quinn, grasping the railing hard, turned around and began pulling himself up the stairs. Near the top, he heard someone approaching the door and he braced himself for an attack.

The door swung wide and Silk stood there. With a shout Silk raced down the steps and took Quinn's arm.

"Are you all right?" he asked sharply.

"Yes. Yes, thanks to luck. What happened to the officer who came to take me to the District Attorney's office?"

"Nobody here," Silk said. "I didn't see anyone in the corridor either."

"Where have you been?" Quinn inquired.

"I don't understand it, sir," Silk said. "Two men came up to me while I was standing in the hall outside the room where you were talking to Mr. Emerson. They told me nobody was permitted to stand around there except policemen, and that I should wait in the anteroom of the D.A.'s office. I told them you were blind and needed me, and they said someone would be waiting to take you to the D.A.'s office."

"Strange," Quinn said. "I wonder what

this is all about?"

"It's stranger than you think, sir," Silk went on a trifle grimly. "They ushered me into a small dusty room and told me to sit there. I did, until I wondered how any D.A.'s office could be so quiet. So I got up and looked around. I was in an office which apparently had been abandoned and the inner door led to a vacant office."

"There must be some mistake," Quinn said. "But perhaps we'd better go see the District Attorney anyway. Find my cane, will you? It fell down the steps. There's something slippery on them, so be careful."

SILK recovered the cane and paused a moment to examine the smears of grease. When he rejoined Quinn, he spoke in a voice which couldn't be heard two feet away.

"Someone meant for you to break your neck, sir."

"I know." Quinn spoke just as softly. "They got you out of the way first, then brought me here. This is going to be a most interesting case, Silk. Most interesting indeed. Somebody wants to get rid of us even before we're started."

"At that," Silk declared, "it was a pretty smart idea. If you had broken your neck, the whole thing would have been blamed on the impatience of a blind man who shouldn't have been trying to go down the stairs alone. And on the carelessness of a workman who spilled the grease."

Tony Quinn repeated, "Most interesting, Silk. Now we know Emerson isn't guilty. All we have to do is prove it."

CHAPTER V

Pawnshop



DISTRICT Attorney Allison was a six-foot-two-inch length of man. Almost a skeleton, for despite his height he weighed no more than a hundred and fifty pounds. As a result, his clothes hung on him loosely and he presented a generally untidy appearance. But there was shrewdness in his eyes, and a determination in his manner

which Quinn didn't like.

Allison said, "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Quinn. Naturally I've heard a great deal about the famous blind district attorney who is piling up a mighty good record for himself despite his handicap. Frankly, in this case, I wish you were on my side of the fence."

"And I wish you were on mine," Quinn replied. "Did you send for me?"

"Why—no. No, I didn't. In fact I'm quite surprised to see you in my office."

"Odd," Quinn said. "Two men told Mr. Kirby, who takes me around, that you wanted to see me, and that he was to wait in your office. They took him to some room on the fourth floor and left him there. He told me it was an unused part of the building."

"Incredible," Allison commented, and there was a trace of suspicion in his voice.

"Then another man met me after I'd finished talking to Emerson, said he was an officer, and that I was to accompany him to your office. Naturally I went along and he led me to the stairway. I slipped on something and almost fell. The man vanished and when Mr. Kirby found me, he examined the stairs and said they were smeared with grease."

Allison picked up a pencil, slowly rolled it between his fingers and looked smug. "Quinn, you wouldn't by any chance be setting up some scheme which is meant to help Emerson by indicating somebody wants to kill you?"

"I didn't say that," Quinn answered.

"Because if that's true, the whole thing may backfire in your face," Allison went on. "We'll forget that. It could have happened, I suppose. I just want you to understand this, Mr. Quinn. There is nothing you or anyone else can do which will make me agree to a plea to second degree murder. Emerson bought the gun with the intent of killing Mace. Perhaps he had good reasons, but there can be no excuse for killing a man. Emerson is going to the chair for his crime."

"But I didn't come here to beg," Quinn said. "I wouldn't allow Emerson to plead to any lesser charge even if you wanted it. Because, you see, I'm going to prove that Emerson is not guilty."

"In the face of testimony which will be submitted by three men, all of almost equal importance to Emerson?" the D.A. blurted. "Three men who haven't any reason not to tell the truth as they know it? Three trustworthy men who have been among our foremost citizens for years? Quinn, I'm surprised at you."

"You'll be even more surprised before I'm through," Quinn grunted. "Thanks for the interview. I'll see you again—in court."

"The pleasure," Allison said, "will be all mine. Good-by, Quinn, and you might as well know that I won't stand for any fancy, big-city tricks. I know my way around."

"I'm sure you do. I like a capable opponent. But I'm afraid before this is over, you'll be on my side, Mr. Allison—I'm ready to leave, Silk."

Outside, in the first floor corridor, Silk spoke softly. "I don't like that man, sir. He's too eager to build himself up. I also don't like the way he brushed off that attempt on your life. In my opinion— Oh, oh, here comes more bad news."

"Lieutenant Sebastian," Quinn murmured. "Things are beginning to pop."

Sebastian nodded to Silk and, after greeting Quinn, said, "I couldn't say this in my office, or any place else where I might be overheard, but I wanted you to know that I don't believe Emerson killed Mace."

"Even though three important people swear they saw him do it?" Quinn asked in surprise.

"Look—I've known Mr. Emerson a long time."

"I see," Quinn murmured. "But have you any ideas?"

"None. I wish I did. I just wanted you to know that I'll help even if it costs me my job. There's something strange about all this. I think it's even bigger than the murder of that louse, Garney Mace."

"I'd like to have a talk with you, Lieutenant. At some place where nobody will see us and comment. I'm going to stay at Emerson's home while I'm here. It's a rather secluded place and should be quite safe. Would you consider coming out there soon?"

"You name the time," Sebastian said. "I feel better already. But a word of advice—

take it easy, Mr. Quinn. I don't like the set-up. See you later."

ON THEIR way out of the city to the Emerson suburban home, Silk drove the car past the pawnshop where Emerson was supposed to have purchased the murder gun. Though Quinn gave no indication of it, he studied the place, and found it as unsavory as the neighborhood where it was located.

For the rest of the twenty-minute trip, Quinn was silent, letting his mind go over all the aspects of his case and trying to sort out the important and unimportant phases. He knew that if he were in Allison's shoes, as local prosecutor, he'd have been certain of Emerson's guilt. Everything pointed to it and therefore this scheme to frame him had vital necessity behind it.

There was some compelling reason why Emerson had to be convicted. The murder of Garney Mace was incidental. A cheap killer could have been hired to take care of that, so the motive concerned the murderer

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more than it did his alleged victim.

Somebody wanted Emerson out of the way. An enemy, who planned this out of sheer revenge? Quinn doubted that. Had anybody hated Emerson that much it would have been known. Certainly to Emerson himself, and yet he had insisted he had no idea who could be back of it. Besides, Emerson declared he had no enemies—not to his knowledge.

Quinn turned his head slightly toward Silk. "When you get a chance," he said, "phone Carol and Butch. Have them come here at once and be ready for action. They are to check into different hotels, under phony names, but they must have some reason for being in town. A reason that can be checked if necessary and will stand up."

"I'd been hoping you'd want them," Silk said. "And you know, living out at Emerson's place, we can operate beautifully. It's isolated, almost as good a base as your home in New York."

Mrs. Emerson was at the door to meet them. In the living room she told what little she knew about the affair. "I want to help, Tony," she said, "but there's not much I can do."

"You can keep George happy and encouraged. And keep him in touch with me, Edith. That means a great deal."

She nodded. "I thought of that. Tony, what are his chances? Be honest with me."

"In the face of the evidence against him—none," Quinn said bluntly. Then he added quickly, "But something has happened. Please don't ask me what. The less you know, the better. However, I believe this is all a plot against George. Therefore, the three men who swear they saw him kill Mace must be in on it."

"I can hardly believe that," Edith Emerson said. "But of course it must be true if George is innocent."

"We've got to fight them without their knowing it," Quinn went on. "If they go on the defensive, our job will be all the harder. They must believe they're getting away with it."

"I'm afraid they will, Tony," she sighed. "It's so strange—people call me and tell me how sorry they are, but not one even hints

that George might be innocent. The whole city has accepted his guilt."

"Then we'll shock the whole city," Quinn assured her. "Now, if you don't mind, will you show Silk where our rooms are located?"

"I meant to talk to you about that," Mrs. Emerson said. "I'd thought about moving to a hotel so I can be nearer George. Now that you've asked me to act as a liaison agent between George and yourself, I think it's even more important that I be in the position to reach him quickly."

"And we're to occupy your house?" Quinn asked.

"Is that too much to do for a man who is trying to save my husband's life? Of course you will stay here."

Quinn smiled. "I'm glad you're taking this with so much courage, Edith."

"I—won't break down. Not until there is no longer—any hope left. I'm going to fight too, Tony, and with any kind of weapon I can find."

Silk helped Mrs. Emerson with her luggage, saw her to the car she would drive to town and watched her head it down the winding driveway. Then Silk rubbed his hands, beamed, and hurried back into the house. It had been dark for some time now and he turned on more lights before he walked briskly into the living room.

"This is a real break, sir," he said, and stopped because the room was empty.

THERE were sounds upstairs and he hurried to the second floor. He opened a bedroom door. Tony Quinn had disappeared. In the center of the room stood a man clad all in black, with a hood covering his face and head. He was strapping a brace of automatics around his shoulders, and on a chair lay a neat kit of burglar tools.

"You're not wasting any time, sir," Silk said.

"A man's life is in our hands, Silk. Minutes might be precious. I'm going to visit that pawnbroker who swears Emerson bought the murder gun at the place. Silk, you've had a little time to look around this place. What's the layout?"

"Just about perfect. There's even a black

coupé in the garage. An old job, but it looks pretty good. I can fix the marker plates in two minutes so they can't be traced."

"What about Butch and Carol?"

"I imagine they'll be here in a couple of hours, sir. Well, as soon as you're ready—"

"I'm traveling alone this time," Quinn, now the Black Bat, said. "You've got to stay here and stall anybody who wants me. We can't tell just what's going to happen yet."

"I suppose so," Silk said glumly. "But don't forget I'm here if you need me."

The Black Bat nodded. He stripped off the hood, folded it and put it in his pocket. Then he put on a wide-brimmed black hat. Wearing this he would attract no attention if he drove about town openly, yet it served to shadow the scars under his eyes and give him some guarantee against being recognized.

Silk hurried out to the garage and when the Black Bat got there, the marker plates had been smeared with enough clay to obscure the figures without actually appearing to do so.

The Black Bat drove rapidly back to town, cruised past the pawnshop and noticed that it was dark and closed up for the night. He parked the coupé, stepped out, and walked down the side street casually.

After a swift look around, he stepped into an alley and the darkness swallowed him up. There he exchanged the soft hat for the black hood, slid his guns in and out of their holsters a few times and walked rapidly across rear courtyards.

In the blackness of night here, which was intensified by the tall building, his uncanny sight was a decided asset. He found the rear door to the pawnshop and studied it carefully

to make sure he wouldn't blunder into any burglar alarm systems. He found no trace of any and went to work on the lock. It amounted to little and proved no obstacle for his skill at breaking and entering. He'd studied this art for years and had become highly proficient at it.

Inside the pawnshop, he found himself in a back room which needed a general cleaning. At the front of the store, a weak bulb partially illuminated the safe, but he stayed away from this. Instead, he went behind the counter, sought out the records of the shop, and went over them rapidly.

In the ledger listing goods sold he found an entry about a gun purchased by George Emerson. The records indicated that the gun had been pawned by someone named Brown who had never redeemed it.

A further search produced the book in which the pawnbroker was required by law to enter all gun sales. It was signed by George Emerson and the handwriting was remarkably like Emerson's.

There was still another record, in a book of report blanks which had to be filed with the police when a weapon was sold. The police had the original copy, but the carbon bore Emerson's signature with an exactness similar to that of the ledger.

The Black Bat knew this had to be a forgery, but it was good enough to deceive anyone, and therefore must have been done by an expert. He stored this fact away in his mind as he replaced all the records. Continuing to prowl, he came upon a dirty card tacked near the front door indicating that in the event of trouble, the owner of the premises, James Kennedy, should be called. There was an address and a phone number listed.

The Black Bat located the telephone and dialed the number. There was an immediate answer. He said, "This is the cop on the beat, Mr. Kennedy. Your front door was unlocked. You'll have to come down here and lock it—pronto. I'll wait until you arrive."

"Okay," Kennedy said. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

The Black Bat hung up, unlocked the front door without showing himself to anyone on the street, and pulled it slightly ajar. He then backed into the shadows and waited.

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CHAPTER VI

Wanted for Murder

KENNEDY, the pawnbroker pushed open the door and walked into the store. A set of keys jingled in his fist. He was a small man with a bald, high-domed head. His features were wrinkled and he was slightly stooped.

The Black Bat called, "Kennedy—come into your back room. The rear door has been jimmied."

"Some punk trying to bust in here," Kennedy grumbled. "Lucky I got a good safe." He pushed through the filthy curtains dividing the store from its back room.

As the curtains dropped behind him, he found himself in almost utter darkness, and a wave of apprehension came over him. Then a hand descended on his shoulder and the cold muzzle of a gun lightly fanned his nose.

"If you yell, I'll blast your head off," said a voice in the dark. "Back up and stand against the wall."

"What is this?" Kennedy wailed.

"What do you think?" the Black Bat asked mildly.

"You cheap, chiseling punk!" Kennedy suddenly recovered his nerve. "If you take so much as a dime, you won't last twenty-four hours. Get this—I got friends! You won't even have a chance to leave town."

"So you have friends," the Black Bat commented. "That's nice. But I'm not your friend and I'll let you have a look at me. Remember, one yell out of you and all your friends will be attending your last rites."

The Black Bat reached up, turned on a shaded overhead light and let Kennedy's eyes get used to the glare. Kennedy's angry face changed rapidly. A look of terror replaced the rage. Without a word he lifted both hands high as the light winked out.

"We're going to have a little talk, you and I," the Black Bat said. "About guns. One gun in particular, and if you lie to me, you'll wish you hadn't."

"Wh-what's this all about?" Kennedy demanded. "You—you're the Black Bat. But I haven't done anything. Honest, I'm just a small-time hockshop owner!"

"Your records show that you sold a gun to George Emerson. You didn't. Who fixed those records and put Emerson's name on them? Answer me."

"He—he bought the gun! He came in here and bought it, I tell you."

The Black Bat used the flat of his automatic to slap Kennedy's face. "Think again," he said.

"I'm telling the truth!" Kennedy groaned. "I swear I am!" He gently rubbed his jaw with his left hand. His right was moving downward, toward the top of his trousers. He kept jabbering away. The right hand slid down behind his belt buckle and started pulling out a gun.

It was half-drawn when a gloved hand encircled his wrist, gave a single twist. Kennedy barely stifled the cry of pain he wanted to let out. The Black Bat's automatic was pushed hard into the pit of his stomach and the gun he carried was taken from him.

"A crotch gun," the Black Bat said slowly. "A handy way to carry a rod and get it quick. A way in which professional gunmen carry their weapons. You're going to talk, Kennedy. You're going to start right now, if you want to continue breathing."

"I tell you—"

"Just one more denial, Kennedy, and I'll begin a type of treatment that will make you glad to talk. I haven't any time to waste. Open up. Who did you give that gun to, and who signed Emerson's name on the records? Who paid for all this? One answer will do. Just give me the name of the man."

"I don't know. That's the truth. The Scribbler said I had to do it—"

"The Scribbler? Is that a fancy name for a forger?"

"Look—in my desk over there. I can show you something."

"Go ahead," the Black Bat said. "No tricks now. I can see every move you make."

Kennedy moistened his lips, walked stiff-legged to a cheap desk, grasped the center drawer, and gave it a mighty yank. The drawer slid out quickly and Kennedy started

whirling with the drawer still in his hand. He made a half-circle and let go of the drawer. It should have hit the Black Bat squarely, and Kennedy was certain it would. That was why he followed it up with a lunge.

BUT the Black Bat had moved as fast as the pawnbroker and Kennedy went hurtling through space. He crashed against a chair, smashed it, but was up again in a flash. He held a part of the broken chair above his head and was swinging it wildly.

The Black Bat danced closer, brought down his gun hard and Kennedy's knees buckled. He fell in a heap and stayed there. The Black Bat worked fast now. The brief fight had created a lot of noise and he didn't want to be trapped in this place.

He searched the man and took everything from his pockets, making a bundle of the stuff. Next he darted over to the desk where there was a bottle of ink. He spilled some of it on the floor, picked up Kennedy's hands and made some quick fingerprints on a piece of white paper. Holding the paper so the inked prints wouldn't smear, he hurried to the back door and let himself out.

In moments he was driving away and heading back to the Emerson home. Things hadn't turned out the way he'd hoped they would, but he had drawn a few facts from the pawnbroker. There was a forger dubbed the Scribbler who would know something, and Kennedy had all but admitted the entries in Emerson's hand were forgeries.

One other thing interested the Black Bat. Until Kennedy had recognized the Black Bat, he'd believed he was the victim of a holdup man, and he had made certain threats that only someone with definite gangland connections would have dared to make.

All in all, the Black Bat decided, his visit had been profitable. He made certain nobody was following him, and shortly turned into the Emerson driveway. Silk was waiting for him at the back door of the big house.

Inside, the Black Bat quickly removed the somber regalia and put on the more comfortable clothing of Tony Quinn. But before he assumed the pose of a blind man again, he dumped Kennedy's possessions on a table. While he examined them, he gave Silk a de-

tailed account of what had happened.

"We're getting below the surface, Silk," he said. "I thought the pawnbroker would be a weak link. He wouldn't say too much, but what he did tell me helps some. Did you, in your days as a confidence man, ever hear of a forger named the Scribbler?"

"Sure I did," Silk replied promptly. "He was just a young punk in those days, but coming along. He showed promise of being an excellent forger."

"He seems to have fulfilled that promise," Quinn said. "He put Emerson's signature on the hockshop receipts for the murder gun, Say, look at this roll of bills. There's—let's see—about nine hundred dollars here. Kennedy's shop and everything in it isn't worth much more."

"This knife," Silk picked up a swivel-bladed knife and the blade snicked open. "It wasn't meant to sharpen pencils with. This is a lethal weapon."

"He carried a gun, too," Quinn said. "Well, that's all we can get from this stuff. Better hide it well. And now we'll have to wait and see what Kennedy does. I wish I could have risked staying there, but it was too dangerous."

"We'll take care of him," Silk promised. "Oh yes, Carol and Butch are both in town. They phoned ten minutes ago and I told them to come out here right away."

"Good idea, Silk. I've got plenty of work for them. Now we'd better arrange things to look as if I'd been here all evening. This is one time we can't afford to take any chances."

Quinn picked up his white cane. The mask of blindness came over his eyes and he tapped his way slowly through a house with which he was unfamiliar. In the living room he sat down, and Silk joined him with the evening newspaper. Anyone peering through the windows would have seen a blind man listening to the news being read to him.

Half an hour went by before they heard a gentle tap on a window. Silk paid no attention to it. He went on reading for a few moments, folded the newspaper and strolled casually to the kitchen. There he unlocked the door and Carol Baldwin slipped inside.

Following her was huge Butch O'Leary, his usual amiable grin stretching across his enormous face. Butch towered above Silk and he had to enter the house sideways. But big as he was there was no surplus fat on his frame. He was solid muscle, two hundred and eighty pounds of concentrated power and force.

CAROL looked diminutive beside him. She bordered on the petite, anyway, had lovely oval features, eyes that were clear and bright, and moved with lithe grace. When Tony Quinn entered the room, she went straight into his arms.

He held her for a moment, then curled an arm about her as he spoke. "I'm glad you're here—both of you. We're going to fight something that so far hasn't even taken shape. But there are a lot of leads to be run down."

"It looks like a nice town," Butch commented. "But brother, do the taxis soak you! And the hotel! I got me a room just big enough to turn around in and it costs fifteen bucks a day."

"I found the same thing," Carol said. "But never mind that. How about briefing us, Tony?"

"Of course, but we'd better go to the second floor. Mrs. Emerson turned the house over to me and Silk. There's a small study upstairs which we can use. Silk—put out the lights and draw the shades. Tony Quinn is retiring early tonight—if anybody wants to prowl and see what I'm doing."

When they were in the upstairs study, no lights were turned on, but they sat around comfortably while Quinn explained everything he knew about the case to date. Carol and Butch listened intently, but at the end of the recital they were as puzzled as Quinn.

"There has to be a reason, Tony," Carol said. "Three prominent men who swear Emerson is a murderer! What's their motive? Why should important people like that turn on Emerson?"

"I wish I knew," Quinn said. "Whatever it is, there must be a great deal of money behind it. And they're after something Emerson has and won't surrender."

"But his only interests are the steel mill," Butch offered. "Maybe they want that."

Quinn pursed his lips for a moment. "I haven't had much time to think this out, but that's not a bad idea, Butch. As Chairman of the Board, Emerson could stand in the way of anybody who wanted that mill. I happen to know he owns the controlling interest in it, too. But still, there must be a thousand stockholders. Even if some crooks did get possession of it, what could they do? The steel mill might be what they're after, but that isn't all."

"Where do we begin, Tony?" Carol asked practically. "Every hour puts Mr. Emerson that much closer to the electric chair."

"You'll have to handle this cautiously," Quinn said. "I want the murdered man, Garney Mace, checked up. Go right back to when he was born. That's your assignment, Carol. Butch, you take on the three men who swear Emerson is a murderer. Find out everything you can about them. How long they've been here, where they come from, what their friends are like. Dig deep and far back."

"Just plain legwork," Butch growled. "Do you suppose we'll find anything else to do—like busting a few heads?"

"I think I can promise you that, Butch," Quinn said. "I had an experience tonight which indicates there are a few garden variety thugs involved."

"We'll get right at it," Carol promised. "You know, with this big house it's almost like operating in the city, Tony, and it makes things easier. Do we report here?"

"Yes. Keep Silk advised whenever you learn anything and if you get into trouble, call here. And, Carol, at what hotel did you check in?"

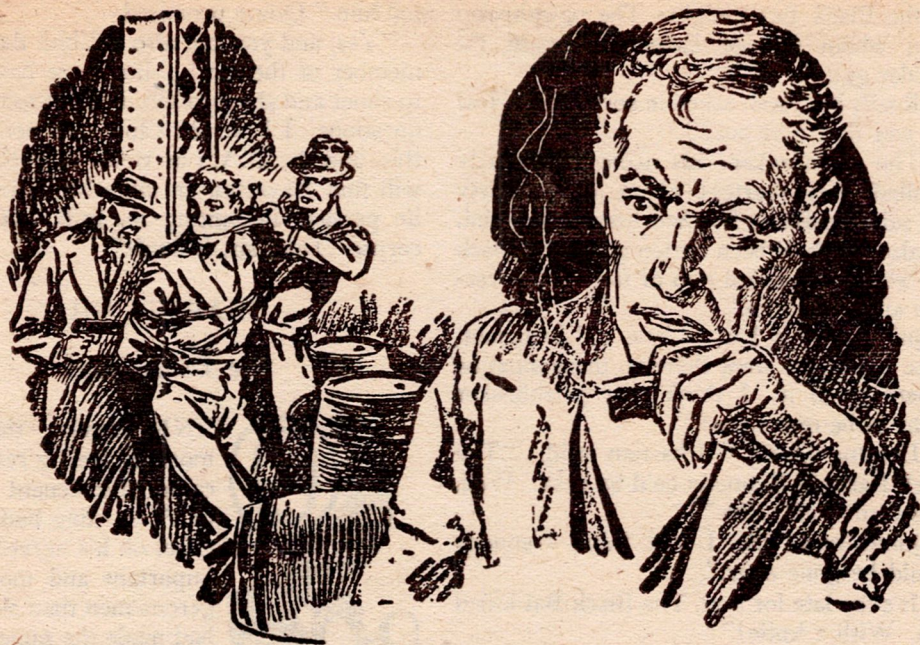
"The Mayfair. Why?"

"Mrs. Emerson is in the same hotel. Suite Nine-o-four, I think she said. I'd like to have you sort of keep an eye on her when you can. There's no telling whether or not she's in danger, too."

"Perhaps she will be," Carol said. "Some of it could likely rub off on her. I'll try to have my room changed and get as close to her suite as possible."

"What about transportation?" Silk asked.

"I rented a car," Butch told them. "It ain't much, but it gets you around okay."



SILK

—If you're ready, Carol, we'd better get started. The sooner this routine stuff is finished, the more of a chance I'll have to mix it with some of the punks back of the scheme."

Silk saw them to the back door and when he returned, Quinn was preparing for bed. Every move he made was that of a blind man for he rarely took chances. Long ago he had discovered the advisability of that, realizing how many prying eyes would welcome the chance to recognize the fact that Tony Quinn was not blind, and broadcast the information.

IT WAS well after midnight when the doorbell clamored. Silk, in pajamas and dressing gown, made his way to the front door. When he opened it, Lieutenant Sebastian stood there, and the look on the detective's face was not cordial or pleasant.

"Where's Quinn?" he asked bluntly.

"In bed," Silk replied. "Where else would he be? What's happened?"

"Plenty. Get him down here fast. I want to settle something once and for all."

"Wait in the living room," Silk said. "I'll fetch him."

Upstairs, Quinn was already climbing into

a dressing gown. Silk closed the door softly.

"I don't know what this is all about, sir, but Lieutenant Sebastian isn't as friendly as he was today."

"Um," Quinn muttered glumly. "I wondered if somebody would try to discredit us. So we'll find out what this is all about."

Sebastian was pacing the floor when Quinn entered on Silk's arm. The detective turned sharply and started talking before Quinn was close enough for normal conversation.

"I want some information," he said. "You can give it to me if you will. Maybe you'll think I'm nuts, but there's something compelling me to ask this."

"Well, go right ahead," Quinn invited.

"Do you work with the Black Bat?"

Quinn's features never moved. "Work with him?" he repeated mildly. "I've been in contact with him on occasion in the past, but he makes all the advances. I can't reach him—if that's what you want to know. Wouldn't know where to look."

"Is he interested in this present case of yours, Quinn? I've got to find out."

"I couldn't tell you, Lieutenant. Would you mind telling me why you ask this?"

"A man here in Haverton was approached

by the Black Bat tonight. The pawnbroker from whom George Emerson bought the murder gun."

"Really?" Quinn asked in surprise. "How did you find that out?"

"The pawnbroker—his name is Kennedy—called Headquarters about eleven-thirty and said the Black Bat had been to see him. He also said he'd been beaten up by the Black Bat who had accused him of forging his records about the gun."

Quinn gave a low whistle. "Lieutenant, if the Black Bat went that far, there must be something to it. I think that pawnbroker ought to be questioned."

"Let me finish," Sebastian said. "The Black Bat told Kennedy he'd be back. Well, he returned all right."

Quinn said, "So I still think Kennedy should be gone over."

"It's too late for that. The Black Bat killed him. With a knife!"

"What?" Quinn half-shouted. "How can you be sure?"

"Kennedy didn't die quickly. He had time to phone us again and he told us the Black Bat returned, threatened him and when he refused to answer questions, he used the knife. When we got there, Kennedy was dead."

"Lieutenant," Quinn said calmly, "before you go off on a crazy hunt for the Black Bat, make sure it was really Kennedy who phoned you that last time. Because that isn't the way the Black Bat operates. It's true he doesn't seem to care a whit for law and legal rules, but he has never been a wanton killer."

"You should have seen Kennedy," Sebastian said bitterly. "I wanted to be sure that you hadn't summoned the Black Bat to Haverton."

"How could I?" Quinn countered. "Nobody can do that. I've never found anyone who knew who he was or where he could be reached."

"All right. I'll take your word for it, Quinn. But, I'm not going to stand by and let the Black Bat operate here. Maybe he can get away with it in your city, and in others, but this is my town and we don't go for the brand of violence the Black Bat uses."

"If he should approach me, I'll certainly

tell him," Quinn promised.

"Yes, and you can also tell him that every member of the local police force has orders to shoot and shoot to kill, without asking any questions. I have the Chief's cooperation in this, and the D.A.'s as well. The Black Bat will find Haverton an unhealthy spot and if he persists in butting in, he'll wind up a corpse. That, sir, is final!"

CHAPTER VII

The Money Angle



QUINN awoke the next morning feeling rested and calm. Lieutenant Sebastian's warning had had no effect on his nerves. More important and more dangerous men than Sebastian had made the same threats more than once in the Black Bat's career.

Silk had an excellent breakfast prepared and while Quinn ate, Silk seemed to be reading the morning newspaper to him. In reality they carried on a conversation.

"It looks like one good lead has gone," Silk commented. "How do you suppose they killed the pawnbroker and pinned the blame on you?"

"I don't believe that was too difficult, Silk. Kennedy must have phoned someone about my visit. Perhaps he blurted out that he had told me a few small things, and thereby doomed himself. A man who'll talk once will talk again. So Kennedy was first ordered to report the Black Bat's visit to the police. Then, at the right time, he was killed. Someone else called the police again, said he was Kennedy, and that the Black Bat had been there again."

"Criminals who murder their own kind are desperate, sir."

"Perhaps more cautious than desperate in this particular instance, Silk. We certainly haven't got them on the run. In fact, we know so little that I doubt they are even alarmed. But it does show there is something mighty important behind the scheme to con-

vict Emerson of murder."

"And how do we start undermining them, making them show their faces?"

"I wish I knew," Quinn sighed. "We don't even know where to begin, except possibly with this forger known as the Scribbler. Could you do anything about that?"

"I might," Silk said slowly. "I still have certain contacts and the Scribbler is well enough known so my former friends would keep track of him. I'll see what I can do."

"Fine, but handle it by phone. I need you with me every moment. We've had experiences with men who've tried to kill blind Tony Quinn before, and sometimes it gets to be really dangerous. I have to appear to fall into their traps or else show them I'm not blind."

"I'll have word soon," Silk promised. "What about this morning? Where do we start?"

"We'll see Mrs. Emerson first. Perhaps she may know some little thing to help us find the right trail. We're working in the dark, Silk, and we won't make any progress that way. Get the car around now. We're not going to waste any time."

At her hotel, Mrs. Emerson greeted Quinn and Silk cordially, but although Quinn spent half an hour questioning her, she could offer no help. Then, as so often was the case where clues were concerned, one that was unintentional came out of the blue.

Mrs. Emerson said, "Tony, I know you have refused any fee for your work, and George and I appreciate that. We're not as well off as we used to be—everyone has reverses—but because we know that there will be many expenses in connection with your investigations, I'll arrange to place a substantial sum of money at your disposal in a day or two."

"It isn't necessary," Quinn said.

"I know, but George won't have it any other way. They let him phone me this morning and he has ordered me to sell his shares in the mill."

"I see," Quinn said thoughtfully. "Are they in demand, or could I take them off your hands?"

"In demand? Why Tony, we've had so many offers for that stock that George has

been tempted to sell out and quit the whole thing many times."

"Who, in particular, wants them?"

"Oh, several people. One of the most persistent is Sam Dudley, a local broker. He must have a customer for them."

"Will you do something for me?" Quinn said. "Don't sell the stock. Not even if you have to borrow from me. Maybe later, it will be all right, but at this time you might be playing right into the hands of someone who is arranging all this."

"What on earth do you mean?" Mrs. Emerson asked.

"I've been hunting a reason for the frame-up against George. Until now there hasn't even been the suggestion of one. But if he owns stock that somebody else wants badly, perhaps that someone will go as far as murder to get it."

"Do you really believe that?" Mrs. Emerson gasped.

QUINN nodded soberly.

"I have to believe it, until there's proof otherwise. Look here—the three men who swear George is a murderer are also members of the firm. Maybe they want to get control of it. Even the murder victim owned stock, and that will be up for sale also."

"I understand, Tony. I won't sell under any circumstances unless you agree that it is wise. George will be most interested in learning about this."

"When you tell him, be sure nobody can hear you," Quinn warned. "And if you are openly approached, let me know."

Back in the car, Silk seemed only mildly interested in this new phase of the investigation. "It doesn't sound right to me, sir. This is much bigger than a simple racket to get possession of stock."

"They want possession of the factory, Silk. That's big. I don't know why they want it, but I happen to know that Emerson's shares are worth nearly half a million dollars."

Silk whistled. "What kind of crooks could raise that amount of cash, sir? They have to buy the stock. They can't steal it."

"Yes, I know. And Silk, if there are con-

firmed criminals behind this, they have plenty of cash. They'll get a hundred dollars for every one they invest—or so they hope. But still, few people have cash in such an amount. Few, excluding big time gangsters. Their earnings run into many millions and they have to invest somewhere."

Silk shrugged. "The F.B.I., the Senate Crime Investigating Committee, and a few thousand cops have been trying to prove that, sir. With all their resources they haven't got far. Do you think you can do what they failed to accomplish?"

"I wonder," Quinn said musingly. "All those you've mentioned have their hands tied by legal red tape. They can call in witnesses, but they can't make them talk, or tell the truth if they do. Our methods are a little more direct. Now we have a plan. It may fall apart, but it's worth checking on. We've got to find out if any known gangsters are operating quietly in this city, or if there are any local strings reaching out to organized crime."

"And how will you go about that?" Silk asked.

"By initiating a small crime wave of our own. For the rest of this day we're going to snoop around. Talk to average citizens, try to get a line on what's going on in the city. Find out if anything has been happening here lately."

"Just where do we begin, sir?"

"With Sam Dudley, the stock broker who wants to buy the mill shares so badly. If he won't talk to us, maybe he will to the Black Bat. We'll see. I'm getting ideas, Silk. This scheme could have been set up for the express purpose of getting control of the steel mill."

"Maybe," Silk admitted. "It's a sure bet they've been operating here for a long time. Years, I imagine, since the three men who are trying to convict Emerson have been here that long. I'll check Dudley's address at the nearest phone booth."

When they arrived at the brokerage office, Sam Dudley saw Quinn at once. He stuck out a well-manicured hand until he realized that Quinn's rebuff wasn't intentional, and that his visitor was blind.

"It's too bad about George Emerson," he

said when Quinn spoke of his mission. "I can't understand it. But if there is anything I can do to help him, just name it."

"You want the shares he holds in the steel mill?" Quinn said.

"Yes, frankly, I do. It's time George retired anyway, and I can get him a handsome price for those shares."

"Who wants to buy them, Mr. Dudley?"

Dudley made an expressive gesture with his hands. "Well, I'm not at liberty to say just now."

"Do you want to help George, or was that a lot of hot air?" Quinn demanded.

"Why, of course I want to help. But telling you who wants the stock—what has that to do with it?"

"Let me be the judge of that, Mr. Dudley. Just tell me."

"I'm afraid not," Dudley said with a note of finality.

TONY QUINN adopted new tactics.

"All right," he said. "But understand this. I've got plenty of money. George is my friend, and so is his wife. If they have to sell that stock, I shall buy it and if I do, you'll whistle a long time before you get in on the deal."

"It's the Landis, Simpson Company in Chicago," Dudley blurted. "But they want it kept secret."

"Have they been buying shares already?"

"Yes. All I could furnish them. Look here, Mr. Quinn, I have violated a confidence, but my commission on the sale of Emerson's stock runs high and I need the money. This Chicago firm has been good to me. I've represented them for a long time now. They're interested only in bettering this city. The proof of it is in the fact that they control the various bus lines here and from the moment they took control, there have been better vehicles, better service."

"What else have they bought?" Quinn asked.

"Oh, various firms. They merged our local wholesale markets into one big combine. They've started grocery chains, set up strings of gasoline stations. Things like that, and in every instance the product has been improved."

"I see. Have they taken over the local hotels, too?" Quinn asked.

"Yes, they have. I handled the deals."

Quinn arose and Silk was instantly at his side. "Thank you, Mr. Dudley. If the Emerson stock is sold, I'll advise George that you should be the agent. I won't buy it unless you get out of line. And by that I mean talking too much about my visit."

"Trust me to keep it quiet," Dudley said. "Look—I'd even be willing to split my commission with—say—anyone who helps me promote this deal."

"I'll think it over," Quinn said. "We might do business at that."

Quinn's steps were springier, his face lighted up with satisfaction as he stepped into the car. Silk drove back toward the Emerson home.

Quinn said, "Silk, do you see the pattern now?"

"I see something that's hard to believe," Silk said. "This city is being taken over, and before these crooks get through with it, they'll sack it to the last buck any citizen owns."

"Well, perhaps not that far. Maybe they have something in mind that's even bigger. Now we can go to work. There's that Chicago firm to study, and we must learn how much Haverton is paying for all these added services when their bus lines, hotels, gas stations and markets are taken over and improved. But more important than that, we have to learn who is behind it all."

"What about the three men who pinned this murder rap on Emerson?"

"They're part of the scheme, certainly,

but the man we want is in the background. Only who is he, and where is he?"

"And can we get enough proof to fix his wagon?" Silk added. "I'm thinking of something else, too. If we work on this new angle, what happens to Emerson?"

"The scheme operating against him is a part of the racket," Quinn assured positively. "If we crush the head of it, we'll find the means of proving Emerson's innocence. This has to be it, Silk. There's nothing else."

CHAPTER VIII

Intruder in Black



ED MEDFORD, vice president of the steel mill which Emerson controlled, was a confirmed bachelor—like the other two men associated with him to make Emerson a murderer. He lived in a penthouse suite atop the Mayfair Hotel where Mrs. Emerson and Carol Baldwin were also staying.

win were also staying.

It was a large and busy hotel and Medford felt secure there where his rooms were cared for by the hotel employees. He enjoyed being alone in his large and luxuriously furnished suite.

Just past the dinner hour, Medford took an elevator to the top floor, then climbed one flight to the roof and his penthouse. He unlocked the door, stepped inside, and turned

[Turn page]

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on the lights. Tossing his hat on a chair, he took a cigar from his pocket and was stripping off the cellophane when he suddenly realized he had a visitor.

Medford gave a gasp of astonishment, clamped the cigar between his teeth and strode over to the chair in which a hooded man sat quite at ease.

Medford said, "You're the Black Bat. If you think I'm afraid of you, you're wrong. And I have read and know enough about you also to know that you're a cold-blooded murderer."

A chuckle came from beneath the hood. "You should talk, Mr. Medford."

"What do you mean by that?" Medford demanded angrily.

"Look," the Black Bat said, "there's no sense hedging with me. You shot Garney Mace. I can't prove it, perhaps I never shall, but I'm not the police, Medford. I don't need proof before I act."

"What are you going to do? Kill me, like you killed that poor pawnbroker?"

"If I find it necessary," the Black Bat said quietly. "Sit down, Medford. You might as well be comfortable. Oh yes—there's a gun in the drawer of that little table near the fireplace. If you want to go for it, I left the gun fully loaded."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Medford snapped. "Well, I know little about guns, and I realize I couldn't possibly cope with a man like you when it comes to violence."

"You couldn't cope with me where only brains are involved, Medford. Because you're a conniving crook and there never has been a smart crook in the history of mankind. No smart man turns crooked because he can make more money and gain more power by being honest. I said, sit down!"

Medford sank slowly into a chair. "Black Bat, I've told the absolute truth about everything concerned with Emerson. My story is backed up by two reliable people. Why do you say I killed Mace?"

"I wouldn't even bother to answer that one. How long have you lived in town and been connected with the steel mill?"

Medford laughed. "I'm not answering any questions for a man who hides behind a hood. Do you think I'm a fool?"

"I've already confirmed it, Medford," the Black Bat said quietly. "I've searched your apartment rather completely without disturbing much, of course. You have expensive tastes, but your apartment lacks something."

"Really?" Medford allowed himself a cold smile. "I thought I was quite comfortable."

"No, you lack a homey touch," the Black Bat commented. "Like a high school diploma, one from a college if you went to one, which I doubt. Pictures of relatives, keepsakes from your youth. There's nothing of that kind here. Why, Mr. Medford? Is it because you don't want anyone to know where you came from, and who or what you really are?"

"I shall say nothing," Medford declared firmly. "I don't have to talk to you. As you said, you are not the police. You hold no powers of authority over anyone. Perhaps I can't kick you out, but I won't answer a single question or talk about anything that concerns me or Emerson."

"I didn't think you would," the Black Bat said. "I waited around only because I wanted to see what you were really like. The actual purpose of my visit was to confirm the fact that your past reaches back exactly to the day you showed up in Haverton. But do you think you can get away with it, Medford?"

"Get away with what?"

"Keeping your past hidden. When you arrived here, you came with plenty of money. You bought into the steel mill and, to give the devil his just due, you worked hard and faithfully. Now you're vice president, and if Emerson goes to the chair, you'll probably move into his position. What do you want with a steel mill, Medford?"

MEDFORD clamped his lips tightly shut and shook his head from side to side violently.

The Black Bat got to his feet. "Perhaps at some later day you'll be glad to talk to me, Medford. But, as I just told you, a man can't appear out of nowhere with a small fortune in cash. I'll find out where you came from and who supplied that money."

"You'll find out nothing," Medford challenged.

"Next time we meet," the Black Bat said, "I'll tell you about yourself, in detail. Stay exactly where you are. I'm leaving, and I don't like any interference. I'm putting out the lights and if I were you, I wouldn't move from that chair for at least ten minutes. Good night, Medford. Expect me again."

The lights winked out. Medford sat rigid. He heard the door open, then close. For half a minute there was no sound at all. Then Medford jumped to his feet and raced for the telephone.

"Desk!" he shouted. "Get me the desk! And call the police. Quickly! Hello, desk? This is Medford. The Black Bat just left my apartment. He can't reach the street for another five minutes. Guard the elevators and block every exit. The operator is getting the police. Tell them to send a strong party of men and surround the entire building. Yes, yes, I'll be down shortly. And if this killer gets away, you'll share the blame."

Medford banged the phone down on its cradle, made his way through the darkness and turned on a table lamp. He gave a startled gasp of terror. The Black Bat was standing close by him and there was an automatic in the hooded man's fist.

The Black Bat said, "You let me down, Medford. I hoped you might call someone other than the police. That's why I didn't leave the apartment, as you thought."

"Some day I'll kill you." The mask of Medford's polish dropped away for a moment. "So help me, I'll kill you and make it as slow a death as—"

"Thanks for those words," the Black Bat said. "You make my work just that much easier. Good night, Medford."

THE automatic came up quickly and descended even faster. Medford took the blow on the top of his head. He fell heavily without uttering another sound.

The Black Bat moved quickly to the door, looked out, then raced for the stairway. He was down it and two stories below the top floor by the time the elevators were as high up as they could go. The Black Bat kept up his speedy retreat until he reached the

ninth floor. He opened the fire door, peered into the corridor, then sprinted along it to where a room door was wide open. He darted inside, closed the door, and extended both hands toward Carol Baldwin.

"Thanks, darling," he said. "This might have been a little close."

"I have the shades drawn," Carol told him. "If they make a room to room search, I've a place to hide you. A nice big trunk which I sent down. Now what happened?"

"Not much." The Black Bat removed his hood and sat down. "Medford reacted about as I expected he would. However, I did confirm what you and Butch learned today—that Medford is a man without a past. Ed Julian and Bert Harris probably have the same non-existent history."

"So had Garney Mace," Carol told him. "Tony, those four came to Haverton five years ago from out of nowhere. All of them had money and it didn't take them long to get connected with the steel mill. At the time the mill wanted to expand, and needed cash. They seemed to know this."

"What about Mace's quarrel with Emerson?"

"That's recent, and I can't find anyone who knows how or why it all began. They used to be good friends and Mace became obnoxious only five months ago."

The Black Bat said thoughtfully, "Mace was building up to something. Certainly not his own murder, but he was needling Emerson badly. I'm wondering if he wasn't trying to force Emerson out of the steel mill."

"Those four men all worked together," Carol said. "Why then, did they murder Mace?"

"Because the original scheme wasn't working," the Black Bat said. "Emerson, instead of getting out of the mill, was going to force Mace out. So the other three reversed their plans, sacrificed Mace by killing him, and are trying to make Emerson take the blame."

"Why?" Carol asked. "What would a gang of crooks want with a steel mill?"

The Black Bat chuckled. "I have ideas about that, Carol. But at this moment they're just a bit too fantastic to talk about. And my main purpose is to clear Emerson first."

CAROL wasn't enthusiastic about the idea. "Tony, those three men will stick together because they must. Since they all tell the same story, each is as guilty as the one who fired the shot into Mace's head. You can't break down one of them. You can't pick and choose the weakest, because he'd be talking himself into the electric chair."

"I know. That's why we've first to prove they are more than business friends. We must show they were sent here with some purpose in mind. In short, we may have to prove what's behind the framing of Emerson before we can prove his innocence."

"And just how do you go about that?"

"Certain events, like the murder of the pawnbroker, the introduction of a forger known as the Scribbler—such things point toward some kind of a crime organization. Which means there must be strong-arm men. If we can uncover these men, trace them back and discover they all work for the same big-shot crook, then we have a start."

"Is that what you're trying to do now?" Carol asked. "Your visit to Medford couldn't have been to intimidate him because, as a murderer, he can't afford to weaken."

"That's about the idea, Carol. I paid Medford a visit. He's already flashed the word about. Not quite as I'd hoped he would, because he called the police instead of any strong-arm gang which might be in town. However, the other two will now be fairly certain I'll visit them. Harris and Julian are going to take precautions."

"And you're going to see them anyway? Tony, it's too much of a risk." Carol grasped his arm tightly. "We're working in a strange town. Your authority as a district attorney in another city isn't worth anything, and everyone is against us."

"It can't be done any other way," the Black Bat explained. "If Harris or Julian call on their own kind for help and we can separate one of the thugs for a little quiet questioning, we may go a long way. It's worth the risk and I've more or less set up a plan to make it work."

"I know it has to be done," Carol finally acquiesced. "I still don't like it, but I also

want to do my share. But must I just guard Mrs. Emerson?"

"For the moment, yes," the Black Bat said. "Because those men want Emerson's steel mill stock. That much I'm certain of, but I don't know how far they'll go to take it over. It's possible that the frame-up of Emerson was done to get him into such a jam that he'd have to sell the stock to get enough cash to try and clear himself. Now they know that Tony Quinn is going to finance the affair himself and they may change tactics."

Carol nodded. "I understand. The simplest method of getting the stock would be through Mrs. Emerson. Of forcing Emerson to sell it to whomever they designated. I'll stay on the job, Tony."

He patted her hand, got up, and went to the door. The excitement seemed to have died away. The Black Bat risked a look into the corridor and found it empty. He returned to Carol.

"I'm going to see Harris now, but don't worry. Butch is helping me with that one, and Silk is standing by. We'll make out."

The Black Bat was careful in leaving the hotel, but he found a badly worried Butch waiting in his rented car. Quickly then they were proceeding toward the suburbs where Bert Harris lived in solitary splendor in a big old house.

CHAPTER IX

Close Call



BERT HARRIS was understandably nervous. He had heard from Medford that the Black Bat who, though New York was supposed to be his habitat, left no city or town untouched when crime appeared, was not only on the prowl, but had somehow guessed much of the truth about the murder of Garney Mace.

Seconds after Medford's warning call, Harris went through the house locking all windows and doors. Now he sat in his li-

brary, the back of his chair against a corner of the room so that he could survey every approach. There was an automatic in his lap with the safety off, and he was prepared to shoot fast.

The one thing in his favor lay in the fact that he could kill the Black Bat with complete impunity. The hooded man had long been marked as a killer and highly dangerous. Cutting him down on sight would never be construed as anything but self-defense.

had passed, that the Black Bat had been captured or killed at the Julian home. Harris was praying for that.

The voice on the phone, however, was unfamiliar. It was a heavy voice, and it said, "This is Captain Blane at Headquarters. Just checking up, Mr. Harris. Are you all right?"

"Yes," Harris said. "Yes, I'm fine. I have my own men on guard. Nobody will get through."



CAROL

Harris told himself that a dozen times, but he grew less sure of himself with every passing moment. As he waited uneasily, he realized that it had been two hours since the Black Bat visited Medford. If he meant to visit Ed Julian first, he should have been there by now and another alarm would have been given. But across the room, the telephone stood silent.

Another fifteen minutes went by and the house was as quiet as a graveyard at midnight. Then the shrill clamor of the telephone brought Harris to his feet with a suppressed yowl of terror.

Composing himself with considerable effort, he hurried across the room. Maybe this would be Ed Julian, telling him the danger

"Good, Mr. Harris. I'm sure the Black Bat won't take any more chances tonight. But we'll be standing by if you need us."

Harris mumbled something and hung up. He stood there for a moment, his hand still resting on the telephone. Then those fingers grew tighter, until they gleamed whitely at the knuckles. His backbone became rigid, beads of sweat sprang out across his forehead.

For, silhouetted on the wall facing him, was a grim shadow. He knew who made it without turning around. He groaned, because his gun was back in the corner chair he had occupied and he was hopelessly at the mercy of the hooded man who created this shadow.

Harris turned slowly, his hands rising until the fingertips were level with his shoulders. He tried to talk but, though his lips moved, no sound came from them.

The Black Bat said, "I'm sure I couldn't have startled you, Mr. Harris, because you certainly expected me. Oh yes, when you lock yourself into a place like this, always pay particular attention to the cellar windows. They're the easiest of all to open."

"I—I can't tell you anything," Harris finally blurted. "I don't know a thing about this—business. That's the truth. I swear it."

"Perhaps you've forgotten, and I can refresh your memory," the Black Bat said. "Sit down, Harris. I'm not going to ask you any questions. All I want is an explanation."

"Oh—what?" Harris asked cautiously.

"You have a nice home here. I especially enjoyed looking around that private sanctum on the second floor. The room with the fireplace."

Harris sat tight. "You weren't upstairs. If the lights were on in any of the rooms, they'd have shone down into the front hall which I could see from here."

The Black Bat uncured his left hand and in the middle of the black-cloth-covered palm lay two small blackened bits of metal. "These are snaps, from a pair of men's gloves, Harris. The gloves themselves were reduced to ashes, but you were careless. Metal doesn't burn."

FOR one ghastly moment Harris almost blabbered out a plea for mercy. Then he steadied himself. This man in the black hood seemed to have an uncanny way of finding clues, but those brass glove snaps didn't mean a thing. They couldn't be traced, they comprised no evidence.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said tartly. "Furthermore, I can't see why I have to explain anything to a man who hides behind a hood."

"Maybe you'll be glad to," the man in black said. "Medford shot Mace to death, but you and Julian will pay for that crime just as surely as if you had also pulled the trigger. Do you know why, Harris? Because Medford will never admit that he did it. If you accuse him and he denies it, you'll

be in the same spot that Emerson is in now. Your only chance is to prove that it was Medford who had the gun—and perhaps I can prove that it was."

"You can't prove a thing," Harris said in a weaker voice. "Not a thing."

"Are you certain of that, Harris? Medford fired the shot. He wore gloves which he placed on a table. Then your part began. You picked up the gloves, left the office to phone the police, but outside you had an envelope prepared. It was addressed to you and all you did was stuff the gloves into it, then place the sealed envelope in the outgoing mail basket. That's why they were not found."

"What nonsense!" Harris declared.

The Black Bat reached under his coat and Harris braced himself for gun play, but all the Black Bat took out was a folded brown envelope.

"You dropped this into the waste basket, Harris. Probably with the idea it meant nothing anyway. But it does. This envelope was canceled in your office machine and bears the number of your meter. It is addressed to you here at your home. It contained the gloves which Medford wore and which became covered with exploded gunpowder."

"Prove it," Harris said, and tried to put conviction in those two words. He didn't succeed too well.

"It will be simple," the Black Bat said. As he put the envelope back in his pocket, he noted the time on his wrist-watch. He had to start moving soon now. "A test for exploded gunpowder is sensitive and needs only a minute amount. The inside of this envelope must have brushed some of the powder from the gloves. Therefore a test will show—"

"I don't know anything!" Harris repeated, but with less conviction than ever. "Emerson shot Mace! We saw him do it and that's that. You can't make it anything else."

The Black Bat walked to the door. "I know I can, Harris, and when I do, the police will come calling for you. But you have one out. I want the truth about whom you work for, where you got your money, and what this Haverton frame-up is leading up to. I'll phone you from time to time, but the closer

I get to the truth myself, the less apt I'll be to call you. Good night!"

He closed the door, bent down and jammed a wedge beneath it. Then he raced toward the back of the house. From here on, the going would be rough, because the Black Bat knew all about the six or eight gunmen planted around the grounds. Getting past them on his way in had been easy enough, but Harris was going to give an alarm any second now, and that would set things off.

It was, however, all part of his plan. The Black Bat could have silenced Harris, but elected to let him screech out the news of the Black Bat's presence. Sooner or later people here, as in many places in New York, were going to suspect that Tony Quinn and the Black Bat were the same person, and that idea had to be squelched even before it began. If the plan he had in mind turned out well, that would be accomplished.

The Black Bat, out of the house, was moving rapidly toward a small garden behind the big dwelling. He knew two thugs were crouched down back of it, waiting to stop any approach or exit from that direction.

Then the Black Bat heard a window smashed and Harris started shouting. The two thugs came out of the darkness, running fast, and moving to cover as much of the ground as possible. The Black Bat let them go. He merely stood stock-still in the gloom and they passed him about a dozen yards on either side.

He slipped around behind the garden house then and got set to spring toward the section of steel fence he had scaled upon entering the property. So far things had worked out well. Almost too well, and there was likely to be an aftermath. There was.

SOMEONE snapped on a powerful portable searchlight. Its ray had a wide beam and before the Black Bat could duck, the light brought him into bold relief. Almost instantly a gun cut loose and a bullet whailed dangerously close by the Black Bat.

The hooded man flung himself to one side, but the spotlight followed him. He dodged around the side of the garden house, reaching for his guns as he moved. From the big house, men were running in his direction.

He was just about hemmed in. If any more of them carried these bright spotlights, his chances were slim indeed.

As if in answer to his worries, another spotlight sprang to life from behind him. He started a running sprint which carried him from the garden house to some brush. As the guns cracked, he dived headlong into it and kept going on his hands and knees.

Someone was in command of these men and whoever it was, was calling orders to encircle the whole area and shoot anything that moved. The Black Bat was hearing that as he reached a thick lilac bush, burrowed beneath its heavy branches, and sat there on his haunches for a moment.

There were more than six men here. He guessed there must be a dozen. Perhaps their numbers had increased while he was inside the house, or he had missed some of them on his first reconnoiter of the premises. At any rate this could very well be a tough spot.

It would be suicide to stay where he was. They would beat every bush on the grounds sooner or later. He had to be the aggressor, throw them off-balance somehow. And he knew that at about this time help should be arriving in the bulky form of Butch O'Leary.

A horrible thought assailed the Black Bat. Maybe Butch had blundered into more of the mob than he could handle and they had settled him quickly and noiselessly. If so, the Black Bat's chances were slimmer than ever, and it would be impossible to depend upon Butch to arrive. Any delay might mean his life.

The Black Bat crawled free of the bush and his weird eyesight parted the darkness to spot one man moving warily in his direction. This man wasn't equipped with a spotlight, but he held a long-barreled pistol ready for quick action.

The Black Bat crouched, waiting. Then, when the man was only a dozen feet away, the Black Bat sprang. His extended hand gripped the barrel of the gun, gave it an expert twist, and he moved so fast that the gunman didn't even have time to pull the trigger. Once the gun was twisted, the pain that shot through the thug's wrist numbed the fingers so they didn't have the strength to fire.

An arm wound itself around the man's head, and a knee was driven into the small of his back. The Black Bat held him like this for three long minutes, until the struggle ceased and the strangling effect of the arm had done its work. The thug sank to the ground, unconscious.

Throwing his gun under a bush, the Black Bat moved rapidly to the left. The thug wouldn't stay unconscious long and when he awoke and yelled for help, it might come in such proportions that the way would be cleared for the Black Bat's escape.

After a few moments he heard the gunman moving. There was a hoarse cry from a throat that must have been pretty sore. Then the cry became a shout and footsteps announced the speed with which the alarm was being answered. They were coming from several directions and spotlights were sweeping the darkness.

One man was heading straight toward the Black Bat. As he came by, a gun slashed out from the dark and clipped him across the side of the head. He went down with a yell for help blubbering from his lips.

The direction of the oncoming thugs changed. By the crashing sounds they made and the occasional glimpses the Black Bat had of them, they were effectively surrounding him. He was, if possible, in a worse spot than before.

The spotlights were relentlessly combing every inch of the grounds and not from any great distance away. The Black Bat leveled his gun at one light, held it there for a second, and gauged the distance he would have to swing to get a bead on the second light.

He fired. The light winked out and the Black Bat pivoted neatly. As his gun swung around, it was firing. But the man with the second searchlight simply dropped it as he sprang for cover, and the Black Bat's bullet missed.

NOW they knew exactly where he was. The flash of his guns had indicated that. Quickly and from all sides they started closing in. There were no further orders given. Each man knew what he had to do and moved ahead methodically, always primed for trouble and quick shooting. No matter which

way the Black Bat turned, he was faced with at least one gunman.

Somewhere in the distance he heard the wail of sirens—many of them—and they were getting closer fast. These gunmen must have heard the sirens, too, and by all rights should have faded out of the picture. Instead, they moved on more relentlessly than ever. The Black Bat wondered if there was any sort of tie-up between the police department and this gang.

He realized, however, that once the grounds swarmed with cops, his chances would grow that much less, and they were slim enough now. Only one thing was in his favor—he could see the killers flit from tree trunk to bush, or drop low and start crawling toward the spot where the gun had flamed.

Behind the Black Bat and to his right and left the men were quite close together, giving him no chance of getting through their lines. But ahead were only two men, about twenty feet apart.

The Black Bat raised both his guns. He would have to shoot his way through now. There was no help for it, no other recourse open to him. Yet he knew that if he did follow this course of action, the local cops would hunt him down with more vigor than ever.

Then, quite mysteriously, one of the two men ahead of him seemed to sprout wings. At any rate his feet left the ground and flew upward for a considerable distance until feet and all vanished behind a bush. The Black Bat heard the dull thump of a skull against the ground, and he knew then what was happening.

When an enormous form stood erect, the Black Bat's guns didn't open fire. It was Butch O'Leary, but only the Black Bat could have known it, for Butch also wore black clothing and a hood identical with that of the Black Bat.

The Black Bat ran lightly toward him. "There's another to your left!" he warned.

Butch whirled, barged through the brush and one upraised fist landed on top of the other gunman's skull before the man could swing and open fire. The fellow went down heavily.

The Black Bat was already in motion.

Butch knew what he had to do. The Black Bat raced toward the fence. Nearing it, he fired two shots into the ground. The thugs who were hemming in Butch, broke ranks and raced toward the Black Bat.

All but two of them. One lay unconscious on the ground. The other, in a similar state of blissfulness, was slung over Butch's shoulder while the big man lumbered toward another section of the fence.

Two minutes later the Black Bat was free of the grounds and running toward a side road where Mrs. Emerson's coupé was parked and waiting. He scrambled into it, drove off without turning on the lights, and hoped that Butch would also get clear.

A mile down the road, Silk was waiting in Tony Quinn's big car.

CHAPTER X

Black Bat's Alibi



WHILE Silk made a round-about trip to Police Headquarters, the Black Bat quickly squirmed out of his somber regalia and got into the clothing of Tony Quinn. By the time the car reached the city limits, Tony Quinn was seated beside Silk, white cane between his knees and blind eyes staring unseeingly straight ahead.

"The place was swarming with cops," Silk commented wryly. "But I didn't see any of those thugs running for it."

"I know," said Quinn. "They seemed to have information the police would be there to help them."

"Has this city been taken over altogether then?" Silk asked. "Cops and all?"

"I don't think so, Silk. When that happens, the signs are too plain. Maybe we'll know more shortly. I don't know what it's all about but the last I saw of Butch, he had one of those gunmen over his shoulder and was making time toward the fence."

Silk pulled up to the curb before Police Headquarters. "I phoned as you instructed and told the desk captain you wanted to see

Emerson for an important reason. I had him call me back, at the Emerson house, so he knows where the call came from and he thinks you were at my side. It's a fairly good alibi for the time when the Black Bat was in action at Harris' place."

"Good work," Quinn said. "We've made a little progress, too. Harris is scared. I think he might break under the right kind of pressure."

"If they don't kill him first," Silk commented.

He shut off the motor, got out, and ran around to help Quinn alight. On Silk's arm, Quinn walked into Police Headquarters and was warmly greeted. No police officer was putting any opposition in his way. They seemed, in fact, glad to help him.

"Thanks for calling me first, Mr. Quinn," the captain said. "Your visit is unusual at this hour, so I had to call the Chief first."

"Yes, I know," Quinn smiled. "And thanks very much."

"You'll have to see Emerson in his cell. The doorman will let you in— Okay, Jim, take Mr. Quinn to the cell room."

Quinn's cane tapped noisily along the long corridor to the big barred main door of the cell room. The doorman unlocked this, locked it again after they were through, then took Quinn's arm and piloted him to one of the further cells. They were giving Emerson as much privacy as possible without extending him any favors. Quinn was admitted to the cell and Emerson guided him to the edge of the bunk.

"I was surprised to learn you were coming to see me at this hour, Tony," he said. "I hope you have news."

"Some," Quinn admitted. "But mostly I want information. And do I smell coffee?"

Emerson said, "Mighty good coffee, too. My meals are sent in by Marcel Remy, and he runs just about the best restaurant in town, the food is good. Have a cup?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," Quinn said.

"I only have a tin cup, Tony. I'll rinse it." He stepped to the wash basin and returned to pour a brimming cup of excellent coffee from a large thermos.

"It's great," Quinn commented. "I'll have to pay Remy's restaurant a visit. Now to

business. I've learned that your controlling interest in the steel mill is in great demand. Is that true?"

"Why, I suppose it is," Emerson said. "The mill is doing well."

"A broker named Dudley seems to have been the most persistent would-be buyer. I had a talk with him and he told me he represented a Chicago firm, the Landis, Simpson Company. Who makes up the personnel of this firm? Do you know?"

"I don't, and that's an amazing statement for me to make, Tony. Because they've taken over a lot of enterprises here in Haverton. Done a good job, too."

"Why shouldn't they?" Quinn asked bluntly. "Everything they took over now costs more than it did originally."

"What doesn't?" Emerson shrugged.

"Yes, that's true, George, but hasn't this firm been charging prices somewhat above the average rise of everything else?"

EMERSON looked blank. "To tell you the truth, I haven't paid any attention. Maybe they are. But what's that got to do with me, and this ghastly position I'm in?"

"It may have plenty," Quinn said. "From what I've learned so far, you're an incidental victim of a gigantic plot. I'm not quite sure what these men are after, but you and your steel mill holdings stand in their way. They apparently hoped that all this trouble would force you to sell out to get enough money to finance your defense."

"So that's it," Emerson muttered. "Perhaps you're right. I couldn't be the victim of someone's vengeance, because I've never wronged anyone. So they're after something, and all I've got is the stock. But what in the world do they want control of the mill for? They could start another one about as cheaply."

"I intend to find out," Quinn said. "In the meantime, don't sell that stock, no matter what happens."

"As you wish, Tony. My wife told me you'd suggested the same thing to her. I'll keep it, every share of it."

"That will stop them in their tracks if it's the stock they're after. If it isn't, we'll soon find out by a process of elimination."

"But what about me?" Emerson asked without much hope in his voice. "Where do I stand, as of right now?"

"Can we be overheard?" Quinn asked in a whisper.

Emerson walked to the barred door and peered out. "I don't think so," he replied in a low voice.

"Don't ask me how I've discovered this, George," Quinn said then, "but I already have some evidence that the gloves Medford wore when he killed Mace, were picked up by Harris, who mailed them to himself from your outer office. That's why they weren't found when the police searched everyone."

Emerson relaxed for the first time in days. "Thanks, Tony. I realize that's not much, but it convinces me of one thing of which I've lived in dread. I've been beginning to fear that I killed Mace and couldn't remember doing it. A lapse of sanity or something."

"Believe me," Quinn said, "what you said you saw happen, actually did. Make some noise, will you? I want to get out of here."

Emerson found a laugh in his system.

"You know, I'm really getting a rest. And now that you've taken some of my worry away, I may almost enjoy this."

In the big front office of Police Headquarters, Quinn and Silk found a great deal of excitement. The desk captain explained it for their benefit.

"The famous—or infamous—Black Bat's in town, Mr. Quinn. He's been raising the devil. Killed a man already and nearly killed two others tonight. We had him pretty well hemmed in, but he got away."

"Yes, I knew he was here," Quinn said. "Lieutenant Sebastian told me about it. I'm not going to say I'm sorry, because he has often helped me. And also, I may add, the police of my city."

"Yeah, so I've heard, but the orders are out he is to be shot on sight," the captain grumbled. "And Sebastian is pretty sore about him. He swears he'll either drive him out of town or put him in the morgue or a cell."

Silk was chuckling slightly when they left, and he helped Quinn into the car. "If anybody even remotely suspects you, sir, that

desk captain will laugh in his face. You've got an alibi all right."

"It may come in handy, Silk. Head home now. I'm worried about Butch and how he made out."

Half an hour after they reached the house, Butch entered through the rear door which had been left open for him. He was slightly disheveled, but grinning happily as Silk led him to the upstairs study where Quinn waited.

SILK closed the door and Butch sat down. Quinn's staring eyes suddenly became alive, and he leaned forward eagerly.

"Well, Butch, what happened? A great deal depends upon what you got out of that hoodlum I saw you carrying away."

"I had a little trouble with the guy," Butch declared. "I had to throw him over the fence and it was pretty high and he dropped quite a ways. That knocked him out. When he finally came to, I had him in a wooded section about five miles from Harris' place."

"Did he talk?" Silk asked.

"Well, he was kinda reluctant at first. The dope figured he could take me so I let him try. When he got up again, he'd changed his mind. I waved my fist a couple of times and he yapped."

"Who was he and who does he work for?" Quinn asked.

Butch's grin faded. "It didn't come out as good as I hoped. The guy's name is Luke Staley—says he works at the steel mill as a guard. And he proved it by a badge and an identity card."

"Steel mill guards!" Quinn exclaimed. "Yes, that could be. Gunmen working at the mill as armed guards. They'd have the right to carry weapons, and Harris would be expected to ask them to guard him."

"So that's why they didn't hot foot it when all them cops showed," Butch commented. "I figured the cops were in with the gang."

"Wait a minute," Silk objected quickly. "There's one thing wrong with that picture. Armed guards have to be fingerprinted and their records checked before they can be

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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hired. Especially in a steel mill which produces stuff for the government. They can't be gangsters, with records, and I never heard of a dozen crooks in one group who didn't have them."

Quinn tapped his fingertips together and frowned darkly. "You're right, Silk. But I still think those men were hoodlums. They acted that way.— He told you nothing else, Butch?"

"Only that he'd worked at the plant for three years, and that the next time he saw me he was going to shoot me in the back. Of course he figured he was talking to the Black Bat, because I kept that hood over my face."

"I see," Quinn grunted. "One good thing comes of it. About the time you and that guard were—well, arguing—I was at Police Headquarters. When he goes to the police with his story, Silk and I will be doubly alibied. That's a good thing because I'm afraid there are already suspicions about my connection with the Black Bat."

"I'm sorry I couldn't get more," Butch apologized.

"Never mind, Butch," Quinn said. "You did what was required of you. And thanks for standing by for my phone call from Harris' house. I used one of his second-floor phones. When you called him back to pretend you were a police captain, he had to leave the corner where he'd holed in, and I could get at him without facing his gun. He was nervous enough to shoot at shadows. I saw that as soon as I slipped into his house."

"Well," Silk sighed, "we didn't get far. Emerson is in just as bad a spot as before. The three men who swear they saw him kill Mace haven't changed their tune. All we seem to have learned is that regular factory guards are being used to fight off the Black Bat, and that the cops are right on our necks."

"Yeah," Butch grunted. "It don't look so good."

Quinn still had a smile and a lot of confidence in his system. "One thing we've done, though, and it's important. Those men are after Emerson's control of the steel mill and we've stopped that cold. I offered to buy the stock, if necessary, and neither Mrs.

Emerson nor George Emerson will sell to anyone else but me."

Silk shook his head from side to side. "If you ask me, sir, that puts you in a bad position. Those men have committed more than one murder to get their hands on that steel mill and if you stand in their way, they may do something to ease you to one side. Something like—murder."

QUINN shrugged, in agreement.

"Perhaps," he said. "It would have to be done cleverly, though. If Emerson's attorney disappears, people are going to think that maybe Emerson isn't guilty after all. Well, tomorrow is going to be a busy day. We've got a few loose ends to clean up."

"They're bringing Emerson before the police court judge tomorrow, aren't they?" Silk asked.

"Yes. It's only a preliminary hearing, where Emerson's guilt or innocence isn't at stake. All the D.A. has to do is to show probable cause that Emerson should be held for trial by Superior Court, and the way matters stand as of now, a jury would find him guilty. But I'm going to try for a delay."

"I don't blame you," Silk said. "If he is held for the higher court, they'll transfer him to the county jail, and that's fifty miles away. Also there'll be stricter regulations there and you won't be able to visit him in his cell or see him anytime you wish."

"We can't help that," Quinn said. "Anyway, Emerson hasn't any more of an idea what this is all about than someone uninterested in the case."

"What are these loose ends?" Butch asked.

Quinn said, "Nothing you can handle, Butch. But Silk is checking the fingerprints I took off that murdered pawnbroker, and also the whereabouts of a forger known as the Scribbler. How about those items, Silk?"

"I'll have them tomorrow, sir. They're in the works."

"I intend to check on that Chicago firm which has been investing so much money in town. What I'm looking for, more than anything else, is the man directing all this. And I'm confused."

"Just how, sir?" Silk queried.

"Sometimes these men we're fighting move

exactly like gangsters—as if they are gangster-led. And the next minute their plans seem cleverer, better thought out. Like the murder of Mace. That was a masterpiece, but the murder of the pawnbroker is as raw as anything any gang ever pulled— Right now I think we'd all better get some sleep."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea." Butch nodded. "Tomorrow I'll circulate around and see what I can dig up. See you here tomorrow night, huh?"

"Be careful about leaving and entering the house," Quinn cautioned him. "It might be watched. And pass the word to Carol that her vigilance can't be dropped for a moment."

CHAPTER XI

Grim Warning



NEXT morning, in a crowded courtroom, Tony Quinn did his best to stall the first hearing of George Emerson's case. He knew all the legal tricks, but they didn't work this time. District Attorney Allison battled him with a ferocity that seemed to show he had more than just a routine interest in convicting Emerson.

Usually in a hearing like this one, some minor attorney on the D.A.'s staff, or even the local prosecuting attorney, took charge. But Allison superseded them and fought all the way down the line.

By mid-afternoon, it was over. Probable cause was found by the judge, and Emerson was bound over to the next term of Superior Court without bail, and remanded to the custody of the county sheriff.

Quinn was allowed to talk to him before he was handcuffed and taken away. Emerson was dejected, drawn, and badly worried.

"Tony, they've actually got me believing I did kill Mace. So help me, I'm going back to that theory of a memory lapse."

"Nonsense," Quinn said. "This is a cut and dried frame-up, and they're after one thing. The control of the steel mill. Keep

that in mind, George. I'll see you at the county jail as often as I can, but I shall be busy here."

Emerson nodded grimly. "I'll try not to lose hope, Tony. And I've heard whispers of the Black Bat having moved in. But I can't for the life of me find out if he's for me or against me."

Quinn chuckled. "He won't be against you, George. Well, your wife is waiting so I won't take any more time. This is going to work out. It has to."

Emerson nodded. "If anyone can do it, you're the man, Tony. And say, will you do me a little favor? Go see Marcel Remy and tell him thanks for all the food and kind words he sent me. You won't go wrong eating in his restaurant, either. It's the fanciest place in town, with a cuisine you'll rarely find anywhere else."

"I'll have lunch there," Quinn said. "Right away."

He and Silk departed under the scowling gaze of the D.A., and suddenly even Detective Lieutenant Sebastian seemed to avoid them. Silk didn't like it, and said so as they drove the few blocks to Marcel Remy's smart restaurant.

"The way things are happening," he said, "makes me begin to think we've come across a crooked police department and an even crooked D.A."

"I hope you're wrong, Silk," Quinn commented slowly.

"But how can I be? Take Kennedy, that pawnbroker. I got the dope on him from the metropolitan police. They called me this morning while you were busy in court. That guy's name wasn't Kennedy. It was Sandler, and he's been a gangland gunsmith for years. He used to belong to the Angie Griff outfit."

Quinn whistled softly. "Angie Griff, eh? Angie was a young hoodlum during the days when running booze was a profitable racket. He made a fortune. I wonder if he's tied up with this? If we had one more line on him—"

"We have," Silk said grimly. "A good line. Some of my old friends found out about the Scribbler for me. Last they knew he was working for Angie Griff."

"Do your friends know where the Scrib-

bler is?" Quinn asked quickly. "A man like that, under the right approach, will soften and talk."

"They know where he is, all right. The Scribbler was run down by a hit-and-run car day before yesterday and his body is in a morgue right now."

Quinn gave a long sigh. "They're running true to form, Silk. They recognized the fact that the Scribbler also was a weak point in their armor. That pawnbroker must have told them he mentioned the Scribbler to me. You can see how ruthless they are, Silk."

"I know it means the stakes must be mighty high here, sir. And I still think the cops are mixed up in it. I wouldn't trust any of them, and that D.A. really gripes me. All that stuff about being sorry for Emerson, but having to do his duty is a lot of hooley."

"Yes, I know," Quinn murmured. "But Allison happens to be politically ambitious, and convicting Emerson won't hurt his career any."

"Maybe," Silk said. "But getting back to crooked cops—how come they let a pawnbroker with a criminal record operate openly in this town? And then there's that gang of hoods who work at the steel mill as guards. As you said, they must have been fingerprinted, so why didn't the cops check the prints and find out what sort of men they're handing gun permits to."

"There's a possibility you're right," Quinn admitted with reluctance. "We've had crooked police before and always will, I suppose, but such instances are more or less isolated. However, I'm interested mainly now in this Angie Griff. I'd like a full record on him."

"You'll have it," Silk said. "In asking about the pawnbroker's prints, I made use of your name as Special D.A., of course. And I asked the records division of our own New York Police Department to shoot me a file on Griff. Pictures and everything. It's coming by plane—it should be here late this afternoon."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Silk," Quinn said. "But I know how to repay the favor. We're having the thickest steak Remy can give us."

It was between the lunch and dinner hour

when they arrived and the restaurant was almost empty. A waiter escorted them to a table and Quinn gave the order. Then he asked for Marcel Remy.

WITHIN a few moments a white-haired man, wearing a dark business suit so cut that it could double for a tuxedo, came toward them. He had a narrow face, fine lines in his forehead and chin, but walked with a youthful bounce. The moment he spotted Quinn and the white cane which hung from the back of an empty chair, he began smiling.

He stopped beside Quinn. "Of course this is Tony Quinn," he said cordially. "And Mr. Kirby. George Emerson has told me a great deal about both of you. I am honored and happy that you have visited my place."

"You must be Marcel Remy," Quinn stuck out his hand blindly. "He sent me to thank you for all you have done for him."

"It was nothing," Remy declared with a typical Gallic flourish of his arms. "I am only too happy to be of service."

"Please sit down," Quinn said. "Will you have a drink or something?"

"Please—no." Remy sat down. "In my place you cannot buy anything, Mr. Quinn. Tell me, how did it go today in court?"

"About as expected. He was bound over."

"Ah—yes. There is no one who could have prevented that. But I insist that George Emerson killed no one. I will never believe it."

"That's how Silk and I feel too," Quinn said. "Be sure to visit him at the county jail whenever you can. He needs encouragement."

"Yes, I know." Remy inclined his head slightly. "Is there anything else I can do to help? Anything?"

"I wish there was," Quinn said. "I'm going to be frank with you, Mr. Remy. Emerson was framed, and it's all part of some great conspiracy. I have learned several things. Among them are two important facts. This city seems to be in the process of being taken over by men who are going to exploit it."

"Exploit?" Remy frowned. "I am afraid I do not comprehend."

"Firms like bus companies, dairies, mar-



BUTCH

kets, stores and even hotels have been bought. The new owners are out-of-town people, represented apparently by some Chicago firm. Since they have taken over, prices have been rising."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Remy exclaimed excitedly. "You are right! But I did not think of this. I am a complete fool. Yes—yes, food prices are insane. True, they are high everywhere, but here they are even higher. I know. I have to buy enough."

"Then you can see what's happening," Quinn said.

"But of course. However, what has that to do with George Emerson? He could not stop them from getting an even greater grip on our city."

"You're wrong there," Quinn told him. "Emerson owns the controlling interest in the biggest mill in town and somebody wants him to sell out."

"So that is it." Remy waved his arms again. "I shall not permit it to happen. I shall furnish George with what money he needs—"

"I'm taking care of that," Quinn said. "Emerson won't sell his stock. If they must

have it, they'll have to come more into the open than they are now, and that's what I'm after. If they show themselves, if we can find out who is behind the conspiracy, we'll have gone a long way."

"You will do your best," Remy begged earnestly. "I have been here but five years. Before that I had a small place on the West Coast and before that I ran a restaurant in Paris. When I came here, I was a stranger, building up a business like this is difficult."

"I imagine it is," Quinn said. "Silk has told me how beautiful the place is."

"Mr. Emerson came here when I first opened," Remy went on. "Then he sent his friends and helped pass the word around that it is a good place to eat. For that I shall never forget Mr. Emerson—no. He is in trouble now, and I want to help him."

"Then keep your ears and eyes open, Mr. Remy. In a restaurant like this you may stumble onto something."

"I shall do it," Remy promised. "Ah—your dinner is arriving. If I had only known you had ordered, it would have been special. However, I believe you will find it satisfactory."

REMY himself helped serve them, and Quinn went to work on his steak with only a fair amount of clumsiness which might be expected from a man who had been blind for years. Remy went off to attend to some other business. Silk finally looked up from his plate.

"That," he said, "was good food. And I like Remy."

"He's certainly eager to help," Quinn agreed. "We may need him, too, before this is over. Now we'd better get back to the house. I'm expecting a phone call from Chicago and it may be important."

"About the firm which has bought up half the town?" Silk asked.

"That's right. It may provide the start we need to dig beneath the wall that's been built up against us."

Quinn's phone call came two hours after they were back in the Emerson house. When he hung up, Silk saw no signs of happiness on his features.

He said, "We drew a blank. The firm of Landis, Simpson Company has been in business for six years, its officers are respectable men, and they've been in no trouble."

"If they're a front," Silk said, "they'd have to build up good records. Don't let that fool you, sir. I've known con men who spent five years setting up a racket, and during those years there wasn't a more law-abiding group in the world. Until they were ready to strike."

"Just the same we're stuck again."

Another phone call interrupted, and Silk went to answer it. He returned to say it was Carol, who had nothing to report. Mrs. Emerson hadn't been approached by anyone and mostly stayed in her suite.

"That's the trouble," Quinn groaned. "These crooks don't have to move fast. They've progressed so far already that they can wait it out and make us move first."

"What about those three men who testified against Emerson?" Silk asked. "You didn't see Julian yet—as the Black Bat."

"I'm going to call on him tonight," Quinn said. "He'll be well-guarded, but it can be done. And I telephoned Harris twice today, telling him I was the Black Bat and warning him that his time might be running out."

"How did he react, sir?"

"I think a steady campaign might break him down. Maybe not enough to make him talk, but sufficient to make him try to run out or do some other foolish thing. It's too slow a game for me, but we have to take advantage of anything that offers itself."

Silk said, "If there's nothing urgent right now, sir, I still have a little unpacking to do. It looks as if we're here for a long stay."

"Go ahead." Quinn nodded. "I want to try and think this out anyway. Butch will arrive soon, too. And around midnight I'm going to prowl."

Silk left Quinn in the living room, went to the second floor and began removing clothing from one of the suitcases they'd brought along. He spent about half an hour at this. Then he paused and listened. Someone was moving around downstairs. Butch must have arrived. Silk went to the upstairs study and drew the shades, turned on some soft lights and returned to the bedroom.

After a few minutes he hesitated. It was too quiet in the house. If Butch had arrived, it wasn't like him to remain so silent. Usually his voice could be heard booming throughout any place. Silk started downstairs.

At the head of the steps he thought he heard a car pulling away from in front of the house. He began moving fast. He sped into the living room.

There were no signs of Tony Quinn. Silk felt a wave of apprehension. He went through the entire first floor without finding Quinn, and there was no answer to his shouts.

He hurried out the front door, wondering if Quinn had gone on one of his solitary walks, but he wasn't in sight. The telephone was clamoring and he raced back to answer it. A rough voice began talking without any preliminary greeting.

"Kirby, listen good, and don't make no mistakes. We got Quinn and we're going to keep him for a while."

"Why, you—" Silk exploded.

"Shut up and listen, or you won't hear anything else," the voice warned. "We ain't hurting Quinn. We got nothing against him. But try and find him and see what happens."

"What's the idea?" Silk yelled. "What do you want?"

"From you—not much. Stay in the house and don't tell anybody Quinn has been snatched. Got that? Make up some excuse. Say he had to go back to town—anything. But when the Black Bat shows up, you be sure to tell him we got Quinn. And tell him this, too—that the next move he makes will mean the finish of Quinn. Behave yourself, make the Black Bat pull out, and Quinn will be okay. Otherwise—use your own imagination."

The phone clicked sharply in Silk's ear.

CHAPTER XII

Blind Hostage



EATED in the living room, Tony Quinn heard the front door being unlocked. Someone turned a key in the lock, then at least two visitors were approaching him. He gave no sign that he knew anything was wrong until a hand was suddenly clapped across his mouth.

The man behind him spoke in a whisper. "We're taking you on a little trip, Quinn. Maybe you'll learn something you want to know, but we're going along. If you squawk, you'll get knocked stiff. Have it any way you like."

Quinn made noises behind the hand and it was removed slightly. He said, "I can't argue with you. Where's my cane. I must have it."

The cane was thrust into his hand. "You're being smart, Quinn," one of the men said. "Keep on that way. There's a car out front. Nobody's going to hurt you."

"But why—" Quinn started to say.

"Just let's say you're insurance against something," the crook said, with a smirk.

Quinn could see them now, though they had no idea those staring eyes had the ability to see anything. These men were typical of the strong-arm boys used by organized gangs. They were burly, tough-looking, and

they were following orders. That made it dangerous to resist them.

Also, Quinn didn't want Silk to stumble into this because Silk was unpredictable, and Quinn had an idea these men would shoot if necessary. Therefore he was almost in as much of a hurry to leave as were his escorts.

They helped him into the back seat of a black sedan which started pulling away as noiselessly as possible even before he had settled back. Quinn said nothing, and simply stared straight ahead. But his eyes missed no turn in the road and he stored away the details of the route in his mind.

They headed back to Haverton, went straight through the little city, then the driver began a series of intricate turns and double backs meant to confuse a blind man. All the while the man on either side of Quinn said nothing and the driver was equally silent.

Finally the car rolled down one of the most exclusive sections of the city and turned into a short driveway. It stopped at a side entrance to a large and imposing house.

The man on Quinn's right got out and reached in to grasp the blind man's arm. He said, "The trip's over, Quinn. So far you've been pretty good about this. Keep it up and you'll be glad you did."

"You told me I might learn something of interest." Quinn put just the proper whine in his voice. It was the tone of a helpless blind man who was both frightened and puzzled.

"You'll learn plenty," he was told. "We're coming to a few steps now. Hey, Mac—grab his other arm. We don't want him to trip and hurt himself."

They led Quinn into the house and when the door closed behind him, he heard a lock turn and a bolt slide into place. His blank eyes saw everything. The interior of the house was as elaborate as the outside. The furniture was imposing, there were expensive paintings on the walls, and tall vases filled with flowers in every available spot. Except for a few minor details, it was the home of a discriminating man of wealth.

But such things as a cigar butt lying in a corner, or a crumpled newspaper flung into a chair, broke the illusion. Quinn felt that the

man who lived here enjoyed luxury, but didn't know how to handle it.

They piloted him to a long, curved staircase and finally they were on the third floor of the house where servants' rooms are usually located. He was brought into a small room equipped with an iron bed, a cheap bureau, a rocking chair, and a single floor lamp with a ragged cord stretching to a wall socket. Quinn was helped into the rocker and when he leaned back and almost went over, the men howled in glee.

Quinn recovered his balance. "Tell me," he begged, "what this is all about. Who are you and what do you want with me? Where have you brought me?"

"All in good time," one of the pair said. "We're going to lock you in here, Quinn, on account of we don't want you roaming around and maybe fall down the steps. So just relax. Nobody's going to hurt you—unless you ask for it."

QUINN began rocking slowly as the men went out. The door closed and he heard a key being turned on the other side. For ten long minutes he just kept on rocking. The chair squeaked a little and the sound grew monotonous, but Quinn was hardly aware of it. He was trying to figure out why they had taken such a long step as kidnapping.

There was only one answer, as he saw it. While he was being held a prisoner, something would be engineered so that Emerson would be compelled to sell his steel mill holdings.

Quinn mentally berated the fate which forced him to keep pretending blindness. He had to get out of here, somehow. He had to get word to Silk, Butch or Carol. These men would work fast now that he was their prisoner. Minutes became precious and as each one went by, his danger would increase.

Perhaps they meant to kill him eventually, anyhow. At any rate it was impossible to simply sit here and wait. Quinn got to his feet, extended his heavy white cane and started seeing the room as a blind man sees. His cane poked inquisitively at the furniture, measured the distance between walls.

He located a small window, but when he tried to open it, he discovered it was nailed shut and the glass was the rough type studded with wire mesh.

He never dropped his pose as a blind man for a single instant. They might have him under observation somehow but still, blind or not, he had to make some attempt to get free. He noted the floor lamp wire and managed to jiggle the plug a bit. The room could be darkened almost instantly by pulling the plug free of the wall socket.

Quinn passed his hands over the cot and sat down on the edge of it. The tip of his white cane rested on the floor, an inch beyond the lamp wire. He had a scheme that might work, and still not reveal the fact that he could see. Now all he could do was wait.

A full hour went by and he began really to worry. Perhaps they would just leave him here until they had accomplished whatever they were after. Then he heard footsteps in the hallway outside and the key rasped noisily in the lock. When the door opened, the same two men walked in.

One of them said, "Quinn, we got a visitor for you. He's a nice guy, so answer his questions."

"Who is it?" Quinn asked nervously.

The man laughed. "I guess you'd like to know, but you won't. Okay—here he is."

Quinn's eyes were centered on the further wall, well to the left of the doorway, but he saw this chunky, leather-faced, and totally bald man saunter in. He was in tailor-made clothes, but nothing in the world could have changed him from what he really was. A dangerous, ruthless gangster who had ordered a dozen or more murders during his career as a racketeer. Angie Griff!

Griff sat down in the rocker. He took a puff of the thick perfecto between his lips and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. Then he studied Quinn for a moment.

"You poor, stupid jerk," he said without rancor.

"What?" Quinn asked testily. "What did you say?"

"Never mind," Griff growled. "You're here for one reason, Quinn. We're not afraid of you. Who'd be afraid of a blind man? But we don't like a pal of yours. I mean the

fellow in black—the Black Bat.”

“Look here,” Quinn said, “if you want me to identify him, I can’t. I couldn’t even tell you how to reach him.”

“We know all that,” Griff said. “We also know he gets in touch with you every once in a while. The next time he does, that punk who works for you will tell him you’re in our hands.”

“What good will that do?” Quinn demanded.

“Plenty, if the Black Bat gets the full message. If he moves against us again, no matter how little, we’re going to take it out on you. Understand? If he behaves, nothing happens. If he pulls out and I’m convinced of it, you’ll go free. We’re not afraid of what you can tell. You’re blind. You don’t know me or any of my boys. You don’t even know where you are—and you never will.”

“The Black Bat won’t stop because of me,” Quinn protested. “You should know that.”

“We think he will,” Griff said confidently. “Anyway, we’re gambling your life on it. That’s about all.”

GRIFF arose and Quinn’s grip on his white cane became firmer. He felt the lamp wire tighten and gave the cane a quick pull. The lights winked out and the room was plunged into darkness. There were no hall lights to brighten the intense gloom.

Quinn was on his feet quickly then, and moving toward the door. He raised his heavy cane. In the blackness he saw Griff jump to his feet and try to look around. The gang leader’s two men were temporarily blinded by the darkness, and one of them reached out with both hands and tried feeling his way to the door.

Quinn’s outthrust cane acted like a rapier. Its metal tip drove into the pit of the thug’s stomach and doubled him up in surprise and pain. As the man leaned forward, Quinn whacked him with the cane. It was an effective blow, well-placed, because despite the darkness, Quinn could see his target plainly. The thug crashed to the floor.

The second hoodlum sensed what had happened, but he was still unable to orient himself. Quinn stepped forward lightly. He saw

that Griff had drawn a gun, but it was useless because the gangster was unable to see a target.

Quinn lunged with his cane again, at the second thug. Two good blows sent that one to the floor. Then Quinn tensed a little and spoke.

“The room is dark,” he said. “I know it is. So you’re as blind as I—whoever you are.”

Griff fired at the direction of the voice, but Quinn was ready for that. When he saw the gun swing around he moved, and the bullet only plowed into the wall. Quinn waited quietly. He couldn’t afford to move about too much or Griff would be bound to get ideas. It was better to let the racketeer do the moving.

Griff blundered into the rocking chair and gave a yelp of alarm. He circled the chair, feeling his way, and then he was within five feet of the spot where Quinn was waiting.

Quinn’s cane was raised slowly, came down like the flip of a whip, and the gun Griff held was knocked out of his hand. He howled in pain and bent to retrieve the gun. Quinn struck him across the back of the neck with the cane. Griff pulled himself back, but he was unable to see where his opponent stood.

While he tried to figure this out, Quinn slashed him full across the face with the cane. He followed this up with a barrage of blows, many of them purposely missing, because he didn’t want Griff to think he was too accurate.

Griff fell to his knees and kept groping for this blind man who could use darkness as his ally and fight like a fiend. Quinn reversed the cane, brought down the crook of it on Griff’s head, and the fight ended.

Quinn stumbled toward the door, moving exactly as a blind man might do. If there was no one else in the house, he might make his escape and the chance was certainly worth taking.

He found the door, apparently by sense of touch, opened it, and went reeling along the corridor with one hand touching the wall. When he came to the staircase he started down it, his cane tapping each step ahead of him.

On the second floor he took a chance and went in the right direction immediately, instead of trying to find the way as a blind man would do. He was fairly sure that nobody was observing him.

On the second floor landing he looked down the curved staircase. At the bottom stood a man, looking up. All the hope which had mounted in Quinn receded fast. His position looked hopeless now. Yet he had to go through with it. Maybe there'd be a lucky break. If he could only reach the front porch and shout for help, he might get clear.

Apparently the man at the foot of the stairs had been attracted by the shot, but he seemed astounded to see the blind prisoner begin descending the steps. The thug quietly stepped back and drew a gun.

Quinn kept on going. He was sorely tempted to fling his cane suddenly, leap down at the man and make a break for the door, but that was impossible if he wanted to maintain his pose of a blind man. There were times when Quinn hated this act he had to live, and this was one of them.

HIS cane touched the floor, he threw his shoulders back, raised the cane and started fanning the air with it so he wouldn't blunder into any furniture. The thug still made no move, just stood there with a gun slackly held and his mouth agape. The front door was no more than a dozen feet away now.

Then Quinn heard someone shout. The voice came from upstairs and was followed by the clatter of unsteady feet descending the stairs. It was Griff, and when he reached the second-floor landing and saw the blind man almost at the door, he yelled an order.

The amazed thug moved fast then. He slipped up behind Quinn, the gun upraised. Quinn knew the blow was coming, knew it would knock him out, but he had to take it. There was no other way. He braced himself slightly, let his knees buckle a bit to soften the blow. But when it came, there was enough force behind it so that no amount of precautionary measures would have helped.

Quinn toppled sideward, already swimming in a sea of real blackness now where even his abnormal sight was no longer an

asset. He clawed at the arm of a chair, then seemed to give up the battle. He was lying face down, and didn't even groan when Griff stepped close to him and kicked him savagely in the ribs.

CHAPTER XIII

Dead Man's Brother



SHORT time after Quinn had been kidnaped, Butch arrived at the Emerson house. A hurry call to Carol brought her there quickly and in the upstairs study, Silk told them what had happened.

"We've got to work carefully," he said. "Nothing we do must resemble the actions of the Black Bat, but we must find Tony."

"Silk," Carol asked in a low, steady voice, "do you think they'll kill him?"

"Not as long as they need him to keep the Black Bat quiet," Silk said confidently. "From what I was told over the phone, that's all they want. But I was warned that if the Black Bat took any further action—well, you can use your own imagination."

"Yeah," Butch agreed. "Which means everything stops until we get him away from those mugs. If I knew where they had him, I'd bust the joint wide open."

Carol was trying not to think too much about Quinn's predicament, and she took a certain amount of temporary courage from Silk's belief that Quinn would be safe for a while.

She said, "Silk, perhaps one of those three men who accused Emerson became frightened enough to take a chance on kidnaping Tony. Everyone thinks he's blind, so it wouldn't make much difference where they took him. He could even be in the home of one of those men."

Silk nodded. "We can't take a chance on finding out. I honestly don't know what to do. They just let themselves in—"

"With a key?" Carol asked. "To this house?"

"They didn't force any locks or windows, and they didn't pick the front door lock," Silk said. "I checked that. So they must have had a key. At any rate, they didn't leave a clue behind them. I'm afraid that about all we can do is wait, and hope that Tony can get word to us somehow."

"No!" Carol cried. "I couldn't just sit here and do nothing but hope and pray. We've got to think of something!"

"Take it easy, Carol," Silk said. "Why should they risk killing him if it's unnecessary? They can even let him go, and think it's no risk. Tony is a blind man, remember? How can he tell where he was taken or who kidnaped him? So long as we do nothing, he's safe. They'll call me and ask whether or not I delivered their ultimatum to the Black Bat. If I say I did, and the Black Bat makes no further moves, they'll be certain they've won."

"Look," Butch put in. "Me, I ain't got too many brains, but I never heard of a snatch like this where they let the victim go, blind or not. I think like Carol does. We've got to do something."

"What?" Silk asked bleakly.

Carol began pacing the floor in short, nervous steps. "Silk is right, Butch. We're stumped. There's nowhere to turn and we don't even know who is behind this business or what it's really all about."

Silk added something more. "Besides, Tony would want us to carry on. His last orders were for you, Carol, to protect Mrs. Emerson. That's important, Butch, you were to try and get a line on the underworld characters in town and that's vital, too. You may even stumble on some sort of a clue as to where Tony is."

"But it's all so—so hopeless!" Carol wailed. "If there was just one loop-hole, one little clue!"

Silk shook his head. "Tony mentioned several times that we weren't dealing with an ordinary bunch of crooks. They cover their tracks well. We'll think of some way. There has to be one, but meantime we can't simply drop everything else."

Carol picked up her gloves and handbag. "I'd better get back to the hotel and keep an eye on Mrs. Emerson. Silk, let me know if

there is any change, no matter how small."

Silk nodded and escorted her to the back door. When he returned to the upstairs study, Butch was slumped in one of the big chairs. He didn't even look up.

Silk sat down opposite him. "Butch, it looks bad. I didn't want Carol to know just how bad I think things are, but we're stopped in our tracks. They hold every card and they don't even have to deal any. I've never been so discouraged in my life."

"Look," Butch said, "I'll go along with you and just wait. But not forever. If there's nothing else we can do, I'll get those three guys—Medford, Harris and Julian—one by one and put them on ice. Maybe we can use them to pry Tony loose. You know the old game—if Tony gets hurt, so do the monkeys we're holding."

"But the instant you grab any of those men, the others will decide it's the Black Bat at work, and where will Tony be then?"

BUTCH exhaled slowly, slapped the arms of his chair and got up.

"They've got us nailed down, Silk. But I'm warning you—I can't take it long."

Silk nodded. "I'm afraid I can't either, but we'll have to for a short time at least. Now get going, will you? Prowl around. Use your own judgment if you find a clue, but never forget that Tony is in danger."

When Silk was alone again in the big house, he sat down near a telephone. Something had to break, and he was determined to be ready when it did.

Carol returned to her hotel, went to her room across the hall from Mrs. Emerson's suite, and left the door open a crack. She also settled down to await developments, but while this inaction had bored her before, it now became sheer torture.

It was almost ten-thirty when she heard the elevator door open on her floor, and footsteps padded along the carpeted corridor. Carol quickly pushed the door closed, but held the knob so it didn't latch shut. She fully expected the steps to go on by, but they didn't. Her heart began pumping wildly. There was a sharp rap on the panels of Mrs. Emerson's door.

Carol risked a quick look. A tall, well-

dressed man was impatiently waiting for an answer to his knock. When Mrs. Emerson opened the door, the man bowed slightly.

"I hate to disturb you at this time of night, Mrs. Emerson, but it's important. My name is Mace."

Mrs. Emerson opened the door wider. "Mace? Are you related to Garney Mace?"

"I was," the visitor said gently. "I came here to arrange for the shipment of his body to my home town. And to talk to you about his murder."

"But I don't know—" Mrs. Emerson began.

Mace said, "I hate to do this, Mrs. Emerson. I realize how much you are suffering now, but the facts are plain that your husband killed my brother. I have no desire to see your husband executed for the crime, but I do think my family is entitled to some consideration."

"Come in," Mrs. Emerson said. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you're driving at, but we can't talk here."

The visitor entered, the door closed, and Carol bit her lip in vexation. It was almost half an hour before the visitor emerged and he wasn't smiling. Mrs. Emerson's red-rimmed eyes showed that she had been weeping. The visitor walked toward the elevators, but when he heard Mrs. Emerson close her door, he quickly changed his course to the fire stairway.

Carol saw this and, without pausing to take hat or handbag, she went after the man. She pushed open the fire door cautiously, heard rapidly moving feet descend the stairs and hurried after the man. He left the stairway on the fifth floor and Carol was in time to see him enter Room 504. She listened outside it for a moment, but heard no sounds indicating that anyone was with the man who called himself Mace.

Carol estimated that it was more important that she continue to guard Mrs. Emerson, so she hurried back to her floor. Again she waited in her room, with the door ajar. She didn't have to wait long. Another stranger knocked, but this time Mrs. Emerson knew her caller.

"Why, it's Mr. Dudley!" she said. "I'm so glad to see you. I need your advice badly."

The name struck a familiar note, then Carol recalled that Quinn had mentioned this man to her in talking about the case. She forced herself to remain calm and sorted out the suspects and the incidental people involved.

Dudley! Of course. He was the stock broker who was so anxious to buy the Emerson shares. It checked, too, because Mrs. Emerson knew him well. She would be glad to see him, because she needed advice. The tall man who said he was Garney Mace's brother must have worried Mrs. Emerson about finances. That was it! The whole pattern became suddenly clear.

Tony Quinn hadn't been kidnapped just to keep the Black Bat quiet. That would be a side issue, welcome perhaps, but still not the main reason. Somebody wanted Quinn out of the way while they applied pressure to Mrs. Emerson.

WHEN Dudley left, Carol saw him enter the elevator. She didn't dare ride with him, and frantically pushed the signal button for another car. Then she saw Dudley's car stop at the fifth floor. It could be taking on another passenger, but it was just as likely that Dudley was getting off—and Mace had a room on the fifth floor.

Carl took to the fire stairway again and never had she descended four flights so fast in all her lifetime. If she had been a fraction of a second later, she wouldn't have seen Dudley entering Room 504.

For a moment she was tempted to find a telephone, call Silk, and ask his advice, but she didn't dare leave. She felt that Dudley was too openly a suspect to do much, but Mace was virtually unknown. Carol decided to wait and, if Mace took any action, she would follow him.

Dudley emerged after only four or five minutes and no sooner had he disappeared into one of the elevators than Mace came out. He was dressed for the street. Carol raced to the lobby, passed through it after a quick glance to be sure Mace wasn't anywhere around.

The car Butch had rented was parked half a block up the street and she hurried toward it as fast as she dared, without call-

ing any attention, to herself. When Mace came out and signaled for a cab, Carol had the motor going. She pulled away, stayed a block behind the cab, and followed it to one of the best sections of the city.

When he started moving toward the curb, Carol turned a corner, parked, and rushed back to watch Mace pay the driver, then walk briskly toward a big house. He was instantly admitted.

Carol returned to the car, drove straight to the Emerson home, and brought Silk on the run to the rear door. She told him quickly what had happened. Silk jammed on his hat, picked up an automatic and slid it into his pocket. He had Carol drive him to the house where the man who said he was Garney Mace's brother had gone.

"There's a connection," she told Silk. "Mace's so-called brother came to see Mrs. Emerson, and right on his heels came Dudley, the broker who has wanted the steel mill stock for so long. The two didn't meet there, but Dudley went straight to Mace's room after he left Mrs. Emerson, and Mace came directly here. Both acted as if they were in a big hurry."

"It might mean nothing," Silk warned. "Don't get your hopes up too high. Now, our next move is to find out whether or not Tony is in this house. I think I know a way and, if it works, with a little luck we'll also know where they've got him locked up. There are lights only on the first floor. The second and third are dark."

"Yes, I see that," Carol said. "But what has it to do with finding Tony?"

"I'm going to learn who lives here. I'll put through a phone call and imply that I'm the Black Bat and know exactly where Tony is. They'll do one thing the moment I hang up—they'll go see if Tony is still in the house. Watch the windows, remember which of them light up."

"I'll hide behind the house," Carol said. "It's a good idea. At least we'll find out if Tony is here. But hurry, Silk."

Silk waited until Carol had slipped through a hedge surrounding the house and vanished in the darkness. Then he invaded the premises to reach the side of the porch. He swarmed over the railing, moved like a cat

toward the door and looked at the name plate. It read "Henry Clark."

Silk approached a wide picture window which looked into the living room. He took one quick look inside and beat a hasty but quiet retreat. He had seen enough to know that he and Carol were on the right track. For the man who appeared to dominate the others in that room was Angie Griff, the ex-bootlegger and present-day racketeer.

Silk located a telephone four blocks away. He checked through the phone book, found the number and dialed it. A man's voice answered.

Silk said, "Put Henry Clark on."

"I'm sorry," the voice told him. "Mr. Clark is not at home this evening."

"He's in the living room at this moment," Silk growled. "If you still don't want to call him to the phone, I'll be glad to talk to Angie."

There was a significant pause. Then the voice said, "Hold on a moment."

SILK was wondering if this move really were a wise one. Putting Angie Griff on his guard might have poor results. But if necessary Silk had made up his mind to take a chance and call in the police to free Quinn. It was a dangerous gamble if the police should be working hand in glove with Angie Griff, but at least they'd have to make some move.

"This is Henry Clark," came over the wire. "What do you want?"

"Hello, Angie," Silk said. "I called to deliver a warning. Do I have to say more?"

"What's this all about?" Griff tried bluffing. "Who are you?"

"You'll meet me, in person, if Tony Quinn is harmed in any way. And Angie—if we do meet, I'll be the last person you'll ever see. Is that clear?"

"You're nuts!" Griff shouted. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do," Silk said. "And I meant what I just told you."

"I don't know any Tony Quinn and I haven't seen him," Griff retorted.

Silk gave a low chuckle. "You'd better make sure you still have him, Angie."

Silk hung up and for the first time since

Quinn had vanished, he permitted himself a smile. There was going to be considerable activity at Griff's place about now.

CHAPTER XIV

The Soft Touch



MINUTES later, Silk picked up Carol. She piled into the car beside him and talked as he drove away.

"Tony's there, Silk. I know he is. All of a sudden the light in a room on the third floor was turned on. I saw men moving about. The shade was drawn, but I could distinguish the shadows."

"Good," Silk said. "We'll pick up Butch, return, and get Tony out of there if we have to shoot our way in and out."

"I'm afraid not, Silk," Carol said. "A few seconds after those men went into that third-floor room, I counted seven men coming out of the house. They were all armed, and they took up posts all around the place."

Silk's burst of happiness faded. "Like that, eh? It's bad, because if we do reach Tony, they might kill him rather than let him get free. Carol, I'm going back and drop you off. Find a place to hide and keep on watching the house. Make sure they don't take Tony to some new hiding place. I'll think of a scheme that will work."

Silk headed downtown after he let Carol off. Butch had outlined the places where he most likely would be found, and Silk discovered him in a cheap bar. Butch caught Silk's signal, left the place, and they were soon driving toward the Emerson home.

"So you found him," Butch said. "That's swell! I been getting no place except to find this town is full of mugs who have plenty of dough, but never make any trouble. So I ask myself, how can mugs have dough and not pull jobs? It don't make sense."

"We'll find out about that after Tony is free," Silk said. "We'll need guns and a plan of action. I don't know what, but we'll think of something."

Silk turned into the driveway leading to the Emerson house. Suddenly he tramped on the brake. He had left the porch light on and, dimly outlined below it, he could see a man sitting on the steps. Silk hardly needed more than a glance before he emitted a long groan.

"Inspector McGrath," he said. "Butch, this does it. He'll help us get Tony, but he'll be surer than ever that he's the Black Bat."

"So what?" Butch said. "So long as Tony is freed."

Silk slowed the car. "Drop off here, Butch. I've got an idea. After McGrath and I drive off, go to the garage behind the house. You'll find an old car there. Tail us. And have your Black Bat outfit with you."

Butch nodded, opened the car door and leaped out. Silk pulled the door closed and rolled up to the front of the house. McGrath didn't move. Silk walked toward him.

"Well, what do you know!" McGrath's greeting was openly sarcastic. "I come all the way up here to visit my pal, Tony Quinn, and I find nobody home. Now you show up. Where's Quinn? Taking a ten-mile walk all by himself?"

Silk sat down beside McGrath. "I'm glad to see you, Inspector. It's probably the first time, but I need help desperately. Quinn has been kidnapped."

McGrath jumped to his feet. "What? Who pulled that?"

"I know," Silk said. "I even know where he is and who is back of the snatch. You're going to ask me how I know, so I might as well tell you. The Black Bat found him."

"He did, huh?" McGrath grumbled. "That's just like a man finding himself. Come clean, Silk. The Black Bat got into a jam and so did Quinn, because they're the same person."

"I'm not going to argue that again, Inspector. There isn't time. I want to know one thing, though. What brings you here?"

"I was sent for," McGrath said grimly. "By Detective-lieutenant Sebastian of the local cops. He told me the Black Bat murdered a man here, and he wants my help."

"All right. The fact remains that Quinn is a prisoner and may be killed if anybody moves in. Anybody except a flock of cons."

"If this is a line, Silk, I won't forget it," McGrath said. "Give me some more dope."

"Remember Angie Griff?" Silk asked, and McGrath's eyebrows shot upward in surprise. "I see you do. Angie disappeared some time ago. He's here, living under the name of Henry Clark, and he had Quinn snatched."

"Why?" McGrath demanded.

"To hold the Black Bat in check. Angie has warned that unless the Black Bat stops operations, Quinn will be killed. That's why the Black Bat is afraid to handle this."

"I'll handle it," McGrath said. "Landing Angie Griff wouldn't be so bad, and if I can help Tony, it's ten times better. Lieutenant Sebastian will help."

"Just be careful," Silk cautioned.

"Once we have Angie facing our guns, nothing will happen to Tony," McGrath promised. "Even a fool like Angie won't want to walk straight to the chair. And I'm going to get a lot of satisfaction out of this. I'll do something the Black Bat is afraid to try. Or can't—because he's Quinn."

"I'll remain here," Silk said. "Work this as fast as you can. They've had Quinn for hours, and men like Angie aren't noted for being gentle."

McGRATH noted down the address of Henry Clark's home, snapped his notebook shut, and headed for his car. He drove off in a hurry and Silk walked out into the driveway to stop Butch from following him. Butch brought his borrowed car to a stop. Silk opened the door.

"I think this will work," he said. "McGrath is on his way to get help. Then he's going to go after Angie."

"But maybe they'll knock Tony off," Butch protested.

"I thought of that, too. We're going to see that Angie hears about this raid. He'll make a run for it, but he won't dare leave Tony in the house for McGrath to find. I predict that he'll take Tony with him."

"Yeah." Butch's face lit up in expectation. "It has to work that way and when it does— Look, I'm in on the finish. You can't gyp me out of that."

"You," Silk said, "will be the finish. Now

we'll look up some of those mugs downtown. You pass the word that McGrath is in town on a tip that he can find Angie here. Things will pop after that."

Silk knew it would take McGrath at least half an hour after he reached Police Headquarters to set up the raid. But he and Butch moved as fast as they dared. The reaction to Butch's casual mention of McGrath and his purpose in coming to town was definite.

By the time Silk and Butch reached the vicinity of Angie's place, the house was in total darkness. But a big car was parked at the side door. Silk looked vainly for Carol, but she had disappeared, and some more of his worries came back.

There was no time to look for her. The big car pulled away after several people had hurriedly entered it. Silk was backed into a private driveway with his lights out and when the car passed, he wasn't seen. Silk gave it a one block leeway, pulled out, and told Butch to get ready.

The big sedan didn't move too fast and it was heading out of town. Butch struggled into the black clothing of the Black Bat and pulled the hood down over his head. Then he nudged Silk hard.

"We're being tailed," he said. "There's been a car back of us for the last mile and slowing up when we do. Taking the same corners, too."

"They must have ordered more men to follow," Silk groaned. "Butch, why don't I think of these things? It may turn rugged, but we can't stop now."

"Yeah, and if we keep tailin' Angie much longer, he'll get wise too. We're in the outskirts. Let's take a chance, Silk."

Silk nodded. "Hang on. I'm going to cut them off, crash their car if I have to. But I can't be seen. So if we do stop them, the rest is up to you."

"Okay," Butch agreed. "Just get it over."

"Wait a minute," Silk cried. "Look—they're pulling over. There isn't a house around here. Something must have happened."

"That's a break," Butch said. "I don't think they spotted us, either. Pull over and let me out."

Silk obeyed the suggestion quickly. He had been driving without lights ever since they left the city limits and he felt fairly certain that Angie hadn't stopped because he had spotted a tail and was setting a trap.

Butch plunged into the brush beside the road. Silk drew a gun, pushed the safety to off and got ready. He glanced in the rear-view mirror for any sign of the car which had been following them, but it seemed to have disappeared.

Butch rapidly made his way toward Angie's car. The driver and one other man had stepped out and were around toward the back of the sedan. Apparently the car had run into some kind of trouble. Butch made sure his hood was pulled down. He drew closer until only a thin film of brush separated him from the car.

One of the men behind the sedan walked forward and opened the rear door. Butch came up fast, then. The second man, who was bending over the gas tank intake, never knew what hit him. An enormous black-gloved fist landed on the back of his neck and he went down to stay. But as he fell, his arms and shoulders hit the car. A ring he wore made a loud scratching sound.

BUTCH knew the others would be alarmed and he went barging around the side of the car. The man who had gone forward whirled to meet the attack.

"The Black Bat!" he screamed—and then Butch had him by the throat.

Butch lifted the man high, flung him against the paved shoulder of the road, and reached for the car door handle.

It was Angie who called the warning: "Move back or Quinn gets it! He's sitting between me and one of my boys and we've got guns against his ribs."

Butch stepped back a little. He was holding a gun now and it was level with the car window. He couldn't see who was inside the vehicle.

"Let Quinn out of there," he warned, "or I'll start blasting."

"All right," Angie called back. "We'll give you Quinn if you promise to give us a break."

"Put Quinn out of that car," Butch

warned again. "Then we'll have a little talk."

The car door opened. Butch saw the white cane, followed by Quinn's legs. Suddenly Quinn was propelled the rest of the way out of the car by a powerful shove. He hurtled in Butch's direction and the big man automatically made a grab for Quinn. They were both off-balance for an instant.

By that time Griff and his companion were out of the car with guns aimed. Quinn, who had dropped his cane, kept floundering around. Butch slowly raised his hands, but he held on to the automatic. It was up to Silk now.

Griff said, "Well, well, this is the best luck I've had in years. Black Bat, grab that blind man and move around in front of this car where we can see you in the headlights. And drop that gun!"

Butch flung the gun away. He took Quinn's arm gently and led him to the pavement alongside the car, then in front of it. Griff and his companion followed them closely and were ready to shoot at the first sign of a trick.

"Okay," Griff said. "Stop right where you are. Now turn around. I want you to see this coming, Black Bat."

Butch said nothing, but he wondered where Silk was. Then, over Griff's shoulder, Butch saw a car coming up fast. Oddly enough it had been in second gear as if it just pulled out of the shadows beside the road, but the driver shifted now and really stepped on it.

Griff heard the car too, cautioned his companion to keep his gun trained on the Black Bat. Then Griff turned. He gave a sigh of relief.

"It's some of the boys," he said. "That's my other car. So now it comes, Black Bat, and Quinn gets it, too— Okay, Mickey, you drill the blind D.A. and I'll finish off the hooded guy. Then we'll get out of here before that New York cop catches up with me."

Both guns leveled and steadied. Tony Quinn was tense, ready to display the fact that he wasn't blind. It hardly mattered now because, unless he did something, he would be dead in a matter of seconds.

CHAPTER XV

Almost Murder

CAROL, assigned to watch Griff's house, hurried completely around the block, crossed through a large yard and came out at the rear of the property. She crouched behind a low fence, wishing she had the uncanny eyesight of the Black Bat. From time to time she could

hear men moving about and heard their voices, but not what they were saying.

There was a four-car garage well to her left and the rear wall of it bordered this same fence. It offered a better hiding place and an opportunity to be closer if they tried to whisk Quinn away in one of the cars. Carol moved in that direction.

Apparently one man had been assigned to stay close by the garage. He smoked cigarettes chain fashion and kept pacing up and down. Suddenly lights flashed on in all the rooms in the big house. Men were hurrying about the place.

Soon Carol heard one of them running fast toward the garage. The guard there stepped out to intercept him and the running man was out of breath enough so that the words he spoke were partly shouted. Carol heard every one of them.

"New York cops are moving in on Angie!" the man puffed. "We're getting out fast, and we're taking Quinn with us. Roll the sedan to the side door and don't waste any time."

"Okay," the guard said. "Only I got some stuff in the house I ain't leavin' behind."

"Step on it then," the other thug commanded.

Both hurried off, and Carol quickly climbed the fence. In a moment she was inside the garage. Moving quickly, she approached a tool bench and picked up a sharp-pointed instrument that looked like an awl.

She went behind the big sedan, knelt, and located the gas tank. It took several jabs of

the instrument before she penetrated the thin metal and got the first whiff of the high test fuel. Carol worried the awl deeper, then moved it to fashion a larger hole.

The gasoline was leaking out. If she removed the awl, there'd be a considerable flow and it might be noticed, so she worked the awl only partly out and hoped the vibration of the moving car would loosen it and let it fall free.

This done she went to a lighter sedan, opened the door and reached under the dash. She wasn't quite sure what she was doing, but she pulled every wire free that would break loose. There was a coupé also, and she was heading toward this when one of the men came running into the garage.

Carol dodged inside the coupé and curled up on the seat. The thug was in too much of a hurry to notice anything. He simply piled into the heavy sedan, started the motor and drove out.

Carol stepped from the car and moved to the garage door. She saw the sedan stop at the side door, and then saw Quinn led out between the men. He was forced into the back seat, and Griff came out. He got into the sedan and it rolled away.

Carol headed back for the coupé, glad that she hadn't sabotaged it. She could follow them if she was lucky enough to escape the bullets which were bound to fly when she drove off.

She was reaching for the coupé door when she heard the footsteps on the driveway gravel. Carol, on tiptoe, again moved toward the garage doors and on her way picked up a tire tool from the work bench.

There was enough moonlight to throw shadows and she saw that of the man who approached. He was moving slowly and had a gun in his fist. Apparently he had heard something from the garage which had aroused his suspicions.

With her back against the wall, Carol waited. As the man stepped warily inside, she raised the tire tool. The thug took another step forward. Already highly suspicious, he suddenly turned just after he had entered the garage.

He saw Carol at about the same moment the tire iron started to descend. He tried to

fling himself aside and get his gun centered, but the tire iron clipped him on the forehead, sent him reeling back. He felt blood running down his face and pain stunned him, but he saw Carol clearly enough and lunged forward again.

THIS time she threw the tire iron and at that distance it would have been hard for her to miss. The man shouted an alarm and his outflung hand almost clawed her face as he went down.

Carol skirted him where he lay on the garage floor, leaped into the coupé and slid behind the wheel. The starter whirled and the motor turned over quickly. She stepped hard on the gas pedal.

Two men, running toward the garage, had to throw themselves to one side to avoid being hit. She snapped on the headlights, felt the automatic shift go into high, and was going too fast to be stopped when she flashed by the side of the house.

There was a bad bump where the driveway ended and she was jolted by it, but never lost control of the car. Turning the wheel hard, she straightened out and took the direction the sedan had taken.

Then she saw something that gave her considerable hope. In the middle of the road, just ahead, lay the awl-like tool she had left wedged into the gas tank of the sedan. That bump had jolted it loose and by now gasoline ought to be pouring out of the tank.

But a block further on she developed a fresh worry. Another car had joined in the chase and was keeping a respectable distance behind the sedan. Carol didn't recognize it as the car driven by Silk, so she dropped well back.

When she saw Angie's sedan slow up and head for a shoulder of the road a few miles out of town, she knew they had run out of gas. The car between her and Angie's sedan also abruptly pulled off the road and Carol quickly did the same thing.

She left the motor running and watched the sedan intently. She saw everything that happened. The sudden appearance of an enormous man in the Black Bat's regalia she knew to be Butch. That meant Silk was also somewhere about. Butch and Silk must have

been in the car immediately following Angie's sedan.

Carol saw the tables turned on Butch, watched Quinn and Butch being lined up on the road where the headlights glared on them. She knew Silk must be moving up, but Silk couldn't shoot fast enough to stop what was about to happen. At his first shot, either Angie or the man with him would cut down the man in black and try to kill Tony Quinn also.

Carol sent the coupé rolling fast toward the scene. She saw Angie look around and guessed he had recognized the car, but believed his men were in it. Carol pushed the gas pedal harder. She was heading straight toward the gunmen who were ready to execute their two victims.

Angie heard the car coming up too fast. He whirled around, his gun flamed, and the bullet smashed the windshield to Carol's right. Then Angie tried to get out of the way. A fender struck him, hurled him off to the side of the road. The other gunman was hit squarely, even before he really knew what happened.

Carol stepped out of the coupé on wobbly legs while Silk came out of the brush and ran toward her. Quinn was leaning against the crippled sedan while Butch, in the Black Bat's outfit, was busy securing the two men he had knocked out.

Silk said, "I don't know where you popped from, Carol, but you certainly showed up at the right time. You'd better abandon this coupé in the outskirts, take a bus and meet us at Emerson's place."

Carol found her voice at last. "Is he all right? Are you sure they didn't harm him?"

"He looks fine to me," Silk said. "Now beat it. I'll bring him home."

"What about the two men I hit with the car?"

"One of them was Angie Griff. I saw him moving a little, so he can't be too bad. The other one was cursing a blue streak, so don't worry about either one of them."

It was half an hour later before Inspector McGrath, Lieutenant Sebastian, and a dozen detectives arrived on the scene. They found Tony Quinn in the back seat of the sedan. Angie Griff was securely tied up, one of his

men had a broken leg and couldn't move. Two more thugs were trussed up and helpless.

McGRATH identified himself to Quinn and pumped his hand hard.

"Before I ask for an explanation," he said, "I want to apologize. This time I'm convinced. Angie Griff and his three punks are plenty confused about what happened here, but they agree on one thing—that the Black Bat engineered it."

"They had us lined up side by side," Quinn said. "I thought we were going to be killed and then—something happened. I'm not sure what. But the Black Bat soon helped me into this car and then made prisoners of these men. He stayed here until we heard the sirens of your cars, then drove off."

"You're not hurt?" McGrath asked.

"I've been kicked around and slugged some," Quinn said. "Otherwise I'm okay. I'd like to be taken home, if you don't mind. —Mac, what in the world are you doing in town?"

McGrath chuckled. "I'll be truthful. Lieutenant Sebastian wanted help to nail the Black Bat, so he sent for me. Right now I don't think he wants the Black Bat quite as badly, but the laugh's on me. I thought this time I had you cold. I'm glad. Maybe if you were the Black Bat and I'd cornered you without anybody around, I might have turned my back. But Sebastian was out for blood. I'll take you home, Tony, and then I want to hear the whole story of what's going on in this town."

CHAPTER XVI

Slick Trick



FOR a time, McGrath listened intently to the entire story Quinn told, over innumerable cups of coffee which Silk prepared. Finally McGrath pushed away his empty cup and leaned back.

"Well, Tony," he said expansively, "whatever Angie Griff has been up to, it's over now. We've had a warrant out

for him for more than four years. He came to New York with the express purpose of bumping off an old enemy of his. He didn't, because he was a lousy shot, but he put that guy in the hospital for months. Griff vanished after that."

"He came here," Quinn said, "because he intended to, anyway. Everything was set for him to hide here and direct operations, so he must simply have taken advantage of the circumstances and shot this enemy of his. But it isn't over, Mac. Not in Haverton."

"But why not, Tony? Griff is finished."

Quinn said, "Mac, this town has been systematically taken over. Not by force or violence, but by uncannily shrewd double dealing. It's even within the law."

"Okay, so Griff changed his methods, that's all."

"Griff?" Quinn shook his head. "Not by a long shot, Mac. I know Griff's record. He doesn't think in terms of anything but violence. He was useful here for two reasons. One was to direct the operations of his men, who apparently came here with him. The other reason was that he'd be a good man to take the blame if anything went wrong."

McGrath whistled softly. "So that's it. Somebody had Griff working for him and I'll bet Griff never even realized he wasn't top man. Maybe we can get Griff to do a little singing."

"I doubt it, Mac. Griff has never sung up to now, and all he'd do would be get himself in deeper. However, it's worth a chance."

"You got any ideas about who is behind Griff?" McGrath queried.

"The three men who accused Emerson of killing Mace might be, but I have my doubts. There's a broker named Dudley who badly wants to land the controlling stock of Emerson's steel mill. He's also handled many of the other deals which turned various public service businesses here over to a Chicago firm which looks all right on investigation, but might be only a financial front for the mobs."

"Keep talking, Tony," McGrath urged. "It's starting to make a little sense."

"It could be one of the most dangerous schemes ever pulled by organized crime," Quinn explained. "Those crooks have made

millions in all their rackets. It's money that can't be allowed to stand still. They're dangerous millions because their owners want to use them to make more."

"Take over a whole city and bleed it dry!" McGrath exhaled sharply. "Tony, that's no idea hatched by any ordinary crook. If the thing worked here, they'd carry it out in other cities."

"I'm beginning to think that Haverton is being used as a test tube," Quinn said. "Here they try out their schemes, find the bugs in them, and they won't make the same mistake again. This campaign was set up years ago, handled slowly and carefully. Many of those dangerous millions have been invested."

McGrath looked glum for a moment. "Tony, there's a theory that things like this couldn't happen without the help of cops. Do you think—"

"No," Quinn said promptly. "There's no real indication that the police are mixed up in it. I've got an opinion about that. Perhaps these crooks are working without protection for the purpose of proving that a payoff isn't necessary. Sure, we've had crooked police, and they come high. Gangsters have to give them a large portion of their take and if that could be eliminated, the crooks would profit handsomely."

"If you're right," McGrath said, "there's a genius behind these ideas."

"All along I've been of the opinion there was—and it isn't Angie Griff. Mac, I need your help. I've been handicapped badly, trying to work alone. See if you can make Angie talk. Question those men of his you helped to arrest. Look into the facts I've given you. That brokerage firm in Chicago, for instance, and the local broker, Sam Dudley. Check the three men who have accused Emerson. We've got to track this whole affair down."

"I'll get right to work on it," McGrath promised. "The local police will be glad to have me cooperate with them."

"And don't forget there may be something more than taking over a town, Mac. Something bigger—and it concerns steel. Don't ask me any questions now because I'm not sure, but I have an idea that I will be soon. Thanks again."

AFTER McGrath left, Quinn went upstairs to the study where Carol and Butch were waiting for him. He kissed Carol soundly, shook Butch's hand, and told them of his appreciation. Then, while they listened intently, he explained all that had happened. He told them of the dangerous millions which he believed were being used to take over the town.

"Further than that," he went on, "I know they're after Emerson's steel mill. That's why they framed him. A dozen times he refused to sell. Mace was ordered to make things disagreeable so maybe Emerson would be glad to get out, but that didn't work. So they had Emerson arrested for murder and hoped he'd be forced to sell out to raise enough money to finance his defense. I stopped that, but I've a feeling they aren't finished, even with Angie Griff out of it."

"But what do they want with the steel mill?" Butch asked.

"That's the easiest question I've had to answer so far. Remember the last war? The shortages in such essentials as steel? Suppose black market operators are looking forward a bit. To the time when steel will be just as short and consumers scrambling for it. During the war black market operators had to buy the stuff and pay fancy prices for it. But if they owned a steel mill, rigged their books to satisfy Government inspections, and shipped out plenty of steel to be used in black market dealings, the profits would be tremendous. There'd be no middle man."

"You've hit it!" Silk said. "They must have figured on just taking the town over and making the people here pay through the nose with increased bus fares, high dairy prices, and anything else where they could control the price. Then our country started rearming, and steel became short. So they planned to take over the mill."

Carol said, "Tony, I haven't had a chance to tell you what happened at the hotel early tonight. But in view of what Silk just said and what you have offered, I'm beginning to realize how important Mr. Emerson's stock is to the success of this crooked deal."

"What did happen?" Quinn asked.

"Garney Mace's brother came to see Mrs. Emerson. I don't know what they talked

about but soon after he left, that broker Dudley showed up and Mrs. Emerson seemed to be expecting him. When Dudley left, he went four floors down and into the room occupied by Mace. I had followed Mace. I let Dudley leave and when Mace also left, I trailed him. That's how we found Griff's house."

Quinn looked at his watch. "It's far past midnight, but I've got to see Mrs. Emerson right away. What you did, Carol, may have

night, Tony," she said as she closed the door. "There wasn't any answer."

"Certain people saw that there wouldn't be," Quinn said grimly. "I was kidnaped and I think the only reason behind it was to keep me away from you."

Edith Emerson looked thoughtful.

"I wonder," she said. "Early tonight Garney Mace's brother came to see me."

"Did he have any proof he was Mace's brother?" Quinn asked.

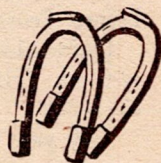
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opened this case wide. And I don't mean the part you played in saving Butch and me."

Carol turned a faint pink and snuggled closer to Quinn. "Oh, Tony," she scoffed, "if I hadn't run those men down, Silk would have taken care of them."

"You're wrong," Silk said quickly. "I was within range of them and I had a gun trained on Griff's back, but I was afraid to pull the trigger. The chances were that my bullet wouldn't have killed Griff instantly and he'd have started shooting. Also, that pal of his would have got in his slugs before I could knock him over. Believe me, Carol, I didn't know what to do until I saw you flash past me behind the wheel of that coupé."

"You were all great," Quinn said. "But the compliments will have to wait. Silk, bring the car around. Carol, you and Butch stay here. We may need you again in a hurry."

Carol said, "Tony, one more thing. This man who says he is Mace's brother was one of those in the car with Griff. He's locked up right now."

Quinn nodded. "He's important in this."

Silk phoned Mrs. Emerson before he and Quinn left the house and when they reached her hotel suite, she was eagerly awaiting them.

"I tried to get you half a dozen times to-

"I didn't ask him, and he didn't offer any. He told me he intended to sue George unless we agreed to sign papers giving him a quarter of a million dollars in the event George was convicted."

"He evidently put Mace's worth considerably higher than anybody else would have," Quinn said. "What did you tell him?"

"That I'd have to talk to George. He said he'd wait until morning, but no longer, and that he would tie up everything we had, including the mill holdings."

"I see. Did you do anything about it?"

"I called the county jail, but they refused to let me talk to George or to arrange an extra-visiting day. I didn't know what to do, so I telephoned Mr. Dudley, who has been trying to buy the stock for months."

"And what advice did he give you?"

"He told me I'd better sell him the stock then and there. Get rid of it before it was attached."

"Dudley is either a fool or thinks you must be," Quinn said. "Any court would make him turn the stock back to you."

"I thought that, but Dudley said he could get backing enough to fight anything of that nature. I told him I'd let him know in the morning. Then I tried to call you again, and finally I asked Marcel Remy to come over."

"Why Remy?" Quinn asked thoughtfully.

"Because he is one of George's best friends. And he has done so much since—

since this all began. Remy was very kind and he gave me much better advice than Mr. Dudley did. I'm sure we worked out something which will enable us to retain the stock without any more trouble."

"Just how?" Quinn asked.

"Remy took it over. He gave me a check for the full amount, and I endorsed it. We made out a bill of sale. I endorsed the stock over to him and he has connections by which he can have everything recorded so it will seem as though this transaction took place before George was arrested."

Quinn closed his eyes as if he was suddenly tired. "Have you a legal right to sign over the stock?"

"Oh yes." She nodded. "George gave me a power of attorney months ago when he went off on a business trip. Of course, I'd rather have had your advice or George's before I did this, but it seemed to be the best thing to do."

Quinn signaled Silk to help him up. "Perhaps it was," he said. "I wouldn't know without talking to Remy, which I intend to do. George told me he'd known Remy about five years. Did he trust him completely?"

"Yes," Mrs. Emerson said, "I'm sure he did. Remy came here right from France. He'd been in this country before and could speak perfect English, but he returned to Paris and stayed there for some time. When he arrived here, he asked George's help to get started."

"But can Remy be trusted?" Quinn insisted.

"I'm positive of it. Tony, George liked Remy from the start and even offered to put some money into that big, fancy restaurant which Remy opened. But Remy said he wouldn't permit George to risk a dime. Of course the restaurant went over big, but not at first. George might have lost a lot of money in it."

Quinn nodded slowly. "Any man who refused money is automatically construed as an honest individual. We shall see, but our main purpose is in proving George's innocence. That won't be quite as easy, though I feel we are making progress. Good night, and try not to worry too much. Things are really looking brighter."

Con Game



ALF in a daze, Sam Dudley blinked sleepily at Quinn and Silk, who stood in the hallway outside of his apartment.

"What do you want?" he asked angrily. "Why, it must be almost dawn."

"I want some information," Quinn said. "You can cooperate with me and save yourself a lot of trouble, or you can wait until the police haul you in."

"Arrest me? Why, I haven't broken any laws." Dudley was wide awake now.

"You visited Mrs. Emerson tonight, didn't you?" Quinn asked.

"So what if I did? She wanted to see me."

"And she told you how Garney Mace's brother was in town and threatening to tie up all her husband's holdings by attachment. You advised her to get rid of the stock before it could be attached."

"Wasn't that good advice?" Dudley demanded.

"We won't go into that," Quinn said. "What did you do after leaving Mrs. Emerson's suite?"

"I came home. Where else would I have gone?"

"Then of course you don't know this man who says he is Garney Mace's brother."

Dudley hesitated. "Well—why should I know him?"

"He's under arrest, you know," Quinn said. "He was caught red-handed trying to help kidnap me and he happens to be involved with a mobster called Angie Griff. Suppose I bring you face-to-face with Mace's brother."

"What good would that do?" Dudley asked nervously.

"Perhaps he knows you," Quinn said. "Perhaps he has already talked enough so that I know you're lying. You did know him. In fact you went to his room right after you left Mrs. Emerson's suite."

Dudley leaned weakly against the wall.

"Come on in, Quinn. I guess I've been pretty much of a fool."

Silk conducted Quinn into the apartment. At the same time Silk kept one hand in his coat pocket where his forefinger was curled around the trigger of a gun. From this point on, Silk wasn't taking any more chances.

Dudley said, "This man isn't Garney Mace's brother. Mace never had any relatives so far as I know. The fellow just showed up here—the who who claims he is the brother—and told me he had been sent by Landis, Simpson Company, the firm in Chicago which commissioned me to buy the stock."

"Go on," Quinn urged.

"He outlined an idea to scare Mrs. Emerson into selling the stock. I told him it wouldn't work because you had advised her not to sell, but he told me you wouldn't be around, and that she couldn't get in touch with her husband."

"But she didn't sell the stock to you," Quinn prompted.

"No. I told Mace's so-called brother that it was in the bag, but I didn't know about Remy. He bought the stock, from what I could gather when I called Mrs. Emerson later on."

"But you knowingly followed the advice of a man you knew was an impostor. You lied, and were willing to cheat, to get your hands on the stock. All because of the commission."

"Yes." Dudley looked at the floor. "I needed the money."

"Was there no other reason?" Quinn demanded.

Dudley looked up quickly. "What other reason could there be, except money? I'm—glad it's finished. I can forget the whole thing and go back to work."

"All right, Silk," Quinn said. "We'll leave now. Dudley, I wouldn't advise you to go too far away from Haverton. It wouldn't look nice if the police had to bring you back."

Dudley was slumped in a chair when they left and Quinn had never seen a more dejected-looking man.

Silk wasn't so sure about Dudley. "He talks a good story and it seems to stand up with what we know, but Dudley is no fool.

He has enough brains to back Angie Griff and plan this set-up."

"Dudley?" Quinn shook his head. "It's someone much smarter than he. A man with a liberal education, especially in the operations of a black market. I'll give you odds we'll find he had that kind of experience both here and in Europe."

"Remy!" Silk said curtly.

"Yes, Remy," Quinn said.

HE WAITED until he was in the car with Silk driving it away before he went on talking.

"I've suspected him just about from the beginning," he said then.

"I've had my eye on him, too," Silk admitted. "He's as smooth as a con man. And like a con man, he first makes friends with the man he intends to gyp. I thought he was just a bit too friendly with Emerson."

"I never looked at it from that angle," Quinn said. "But he made one little slip. Emerson and his wife went to Remy's restaurant and club that night when he got into a fight with Garney Mace, but nobody knew he was going there except Remy."

"What's that got to do with it?" Silk asked.

"A great deal. Because Garney Mace wasn't going there that night at all, but he changed his mind and canceled a previous date. Why? Because he'd been ordered to insult Emerson in public and the restaurant was the right place for it."

"I see." Silk took a corner carefully. "Remy was the only man who could have set up that meeting."

"Yes, Silk. I've known that for some time, but Remy is exceptionally clever. Outside of that one action, there's been nothing else to tie him up with this until he made that phony deal with Mrs. Emerson. He knew she would ask his help and advice when that fake brother of Mace put her on a spot. He also knew I wouldn't be around to interfere. So he got his hands on the steel mill stock."

Silk slid to the curb and braked the car. "It's clear now, of course. The fake brother wouldn't make any trouble after Remy got the stock. Mrs. Emerson would be content,

Remy could bide his time until George Emerson went to the chair. After that Mrs. Emerson wouldn't care much what happened to the holdings."

"I thought you'd recognize it as a typical con game once you knew the facts," Quinn said.

"Okay," Silk grumbled, "but let's see you prove all this. We've got nothing on Remy. Angie Griff won't talk, and his men won't know anything about Remy. The three men who were involved in the murder of Garney Mace can't open their mouths, because if they do they'll wind up in the electric chair. So we're stuck."

"Perhaps," Quinn said. "I expect a thorough investigation will show that Remy came to this country years ago and not five years ago as he has maintained. That can be easily checked. I'm sure he owns that brokerage house in Chicago. It will take time to prove these things, though, and even if we do, it won't be strong enough, so we have to fall back on one thing."

"I don't see it," Silk said.

"Fear makes men think in crooked lines or circles," Quinn said. "It throws them off-balance, slows up their ability to weigh matters before acting upon them."

"If you're talking about Bert Harris," Silk said, "you might be on the right track. Every now and then, even while you were being held by Griff, I telephoned Harris, told him I was the Black Bat and let him stew. I'd say it wouldn't take much to make Harris crack."

"If we have to use him, we shall," Quinn said. "But I'd like to see Remy break down. He's been plenty careful that no part of all this has touched him, and while I'm sure he is head man, he hasn't had a single worry."

"If you notice," Silk said, "I'm parked in front of Remy's restaurant and night club. It's about dawn, the place is deserted, but if you'd like a nice quiet talk with him, this might be a good time for it."

Quinn said, "Talking to a man like Remy won't help. He'll have every answer and the whole town will believe him. However, it might be well to give him a little something to think about. Drive down a couple of blocks where it's dark and deserted."

When Silk drew up, Tony Quinn, in the back seat of his big car, had taken the somber clothing of the Black Bat from a concealed compartment and was drawing on the hood.

"Stay here, unless there's trouble," he said to Silk. "If there is, drive away as fast as you can. Remember, this is Quinn's car, and the Black Bat shouldn't be associated with it."

Silk nodded. "I wish you luck, sir."

REACHING the rear of Remy's night club, the Black Bat worked back the night latch with a thin, flexible bit of steel. He passed through the dark kitchen as easily as if it were broad daylight. The dining room smelled of stale tobacco smoke and liquor and in the silent, deserted room, the trappings looked cheap and tawdry.

The Black Bat hunted for the office and found it quickly. He entered the room and spent about ten minutes looking for the reservation lists of the past week.

When he discovered the one for the night when Emerson had slugged Mace, the Black Bat noticed that Emerson's reservation had first placed him on a far side of the room, but this had been changed to a more central location.

The table which Garney Mace had occupied had first been held for another dinner party which had been moved, the names erased, and Mace's entered. Mace apparently hadn't reserved any table before the changes were made.

There were also plenty of samples of Remy's handwriting, and from a comparison of these with the writing which changed all these reservations, the Black Bat saw that Remy had personally made them all. He confiscated these records, put them in his pocket, then made a quick search of the office.

He was not disappointed at finding no helpful evidence. All along, Remy had been exceptionally careful. There was a calendar pad on the desk and the Black Bat smiled thinly behind his hood as he took out a small container from his pocket. From this he took a small black paper sticker cut in the shape of a bat in full flight. He affixed this to the calendar pad and quietly stole out of the place.

Maybe Remy hadn't done much worrying before, but when he saw the insignia of the Black Bat, he wouldn't exactly cheer. It was all part of the Black Bat's final campaign. He had plans for Marcel Remy.

CHAPTER XVIII

Drink Your Own Poison

EARLY in the morning—before ten o'clock—Tony Quinn returned to Marcel Remy's club, this time as a blind man. Silk accompanied him and they had to knock hard and long on the club door before Remy let them in.

"Oh, good morning," he said. "We haven't opened the place yet, and I'm alone here. Anything new, Mr. Quinn?"

"Well, the morning papers probably informed you that Angie Griff was arrested last night and is in the hospital at this moment. Griff is a racketeer, and I think he knows the truth about the murder of Garney Mace."

"Then George Emerson will go free," Remy replied. "This is wonderful news, Mr. Quinn."

"Hold the cheers," Quinn said. "We haven't proved it yet, but we're on the way. The police are helping me now."

"Do you mean the police also believe George may be innocent?"

"They're leaning that way," Quinn said. "Everyone involved in this affair is being questioned again and taken to see Angie Griff. We think he's been the brains back of the crime and if his underlings see him under arrest, we figure one of them might break down."

"This Angie Griff," Remy asked. "I do not seem to know the name."

"He's been living in town for four or five years, Remy, but under another name. I wonder if you'd recognize him. Certainly he must have come to your restaurant. Would you like to see the man?"

"But of course, if it will help," Remy said.

"It could," Quinn told him. "You might have seen Griff with certain people connected with the crime. How about coming along to the hospital now to see Griff?"

"Yes," Remy said. "Please make yourself comfortable. I must first telephone an order or two for supplies, check today's menu. Ten minutes, no more."

"We'll wait," Quinn said. "Lead me to a chair, Silk."

On the way to the hospital Remy didn't talk much, but Quinn kept up a fine of cheerful chatter. Soon they walked down the hospital corridor toward an isolated room where prisoners were kept. There was a row of chairs lined up against the wall in the corridor, and five of these were occupied.

Jed Medford, Ed Julian and Bert Harris were there, and all three tried not to look nervous. The man who claimed to be Garney Mace's brother was there too, handcuffed to the arm of the heavy chair he occupied. He was morose-looking. Sam Dudley, the local broker, seemed to have aged a dozen years overnight.

Remy said, "Mr. Quinn, there seems to be quite a delegation waiting here."

"Oh?" Quinn frowned. "Silk, who—"

"The three who say they saw Emerson kill Mace. Sam Dudley and a fifth man. I think he was one of those arrested as a member of Griff's gang."

"Don't be concerned about them, Remy," Quinn said. "They are probably waiting to be taken back to Police Headquarters. Silk, we'll go right in."

Silk opened the door and allowed Remy to enter first. Only Angie Griff was in the room, propped up against pillows on the hospital bed. He stared blankly at Remy.

Quinn said, "Who is here, Silk?"

"Only Griff, sir."

"Good. Well, Remy, have you taken a good look at this man?"

"Yes," Remy said. "I think he has been in my restaurant, but we've never met."

"Please be sure about that," Quinn urged. "If we can associate Griff with other people involved in this case, it will go a long way. Even if you're not positive, it won't make a great deal of difference, because Griff is going to prison for a long stretch anyway."

"That's what you think," Griff growled.

Quinn said, "Griff, you don't stand a chance. Even if we can't connect you with taking over this city, ordering murder committed, there is still that rap in New York. You'll get fifteen to twenty for that, Griff."

"You want to make any bets on that?" Griff shouted.

"Why should I?" Quinn said. "You forget that I'm on the D.A.'s staff in New York, and it will be my job to prosecute you. I happen to know all the facts, and you haven't a chance, Griff."

REMY had moved closer to the bed and stood with folded hands, looking down at the racketeer.

Quinn said, "You can't expect any mercy, Griff. You've never done anything in your whole rotten life to help the law. That's why it won't make a particle of difference if your stabbing victim five years ago was just another punk."

Silk, who had been standing on the side of the bed opposite Remy, moved to Quinn's side and nudged his arm slightly. Remy turned his back on Griff and moved toward the door.

"Well, Remy," Quinn said, "are you quite certain you can't help us?"

"I wish I could," Remy said. "But I don't know the gentleman."

"Why did you poison his glass of water then?" Quinn asked quietly.

"Poison?" Remy froze in his tracks.

"You dropped something into Griff's glass of water. You know he's bound to drink it sooner or later. I'm blind, Remy, but a blind man hears things that escape ordinary ears. Besides, Silk saw you do it."

"That's nonsense!" Remy cried. "Why should I do such a thing?"

"You can easily prove I'm wrong," Quinn said.

"You are wrong. It is a mistake. A blind man's error."

"All you have to do is drink that glass of water yourself," Quinn said.

Remy moved fast then. He pivoted on one heel, yanked the door open, and catapulted into the corridor. He raced down in front of the five suspects who sat riveted to their

chairs as Remy went running by.

Remy spotted a stairway and raced toward it. When he was a dozen yards from the stairway door, it opened and Lieutenant Sebastian stepped out with a gun in his hand. Behind the lieutenant were uniformed police and detectives.

Remy ran like a scared rabbit toward the elevators, only to find Inspector McGrath blocking his way. Men came out of the various rooms off the corridor until Remy was completely surrounded. He slowly raised his hands.

Back in the room where Quinn and Silk had remained, Griff was outlining everything he knew about Remy. In the corridor just outside the door, Bert Harris jumped up and began screaming for a policeman to whom he could tell his story.

Remy's secret empire had collapsed. The work of five years had disappeared in as many minutes.

Tony Quinn and Silk went to tell Mrs. Emerson the news and sent her by police car to the county jail to break the news to her husband. When Quinn and Silk reached the Emerson house McGrath, who had preceded them, was sitting on the porch.

"Well, it worked," he said. "You gave Remy the opportunity to poison Griff so that any of the other suspects would be blamed. They'd all been in the room minutes before. You forced Remy to act in a hurry too, by intimating that Griff might swing a deal on the stabbing charge if he talked."

"We couldn't have convicted Remy any other way." Quinn sat down beside McGrath. "His tracks were too well-covered and his men had too much to lose by singing. Until they realized that Remy pulled a doublecross in trying to get rid of Griff."

"Tell me something, Tony," McGrath urged. "How did you know that Remy would use poison?"

"Because it was the only silent way to do it. Remy even hoped to be far away when Griff drank the water and died. A gun or a knife would have been too messy and not clever enough. Remy always worked cleverly. Like in the frameup of Emerson."

"That was a perfect frame," McGrath conceded. "Remy didn't forget a thing."

"He put in a little too much," Quinn smiled. "First, Emerson was needled by Garney Mace until there was a quarrel. Remy even arranged that. Then, when things were all set, Emerson entered his office that morning. Three men were there, with Garney Mace. One of them shook hands with Emerson and smeared enough exploded gunpowder on his hand to be detected in a test. Then another borrowed Emerson's handkerchief and used it to wipe the gun free of prints. Mace was shot, the gun dropped, a pair of gloves vanished. Three men swore Emerson was guilty. Even the murder gun was traced, and a pawnbroker swore Emerson had bought it from him. And the hockshop records, forged of course, backed up this statement. Emerson was as neatly sewed up as any man I ever knew."

McGRATH shook his head slowly. "I can't see how even you thought Emerson was innocent," he said.

"I knew Emerson too well, but I admit there were times when I wondered if I might be mistaken. Especially when Emerson doubted his own innocence. Then they murdered the pawnshop owner because he said a little too much to the Black Bat. From there on, the finish was inevitable. I had to find the man who directed all these operations. He had to be close to Emerson so he could set things up and be ready to take over the steel mill."

McGrath said, "According to Griff and all the others, the mill has been putting out steel on a black market already. Fixing their records to show all of it went on Government orders, but shooting out plenty on the side."

"Yes," Quinn said. "Until recently this was all in the nature of an experiment. A first lesson in how to take over an entire city by the use of money obtained from gambling, drug selling, and every other form of racketeering."

"You said they were dangerous millions," Silk put in. "And we have the proof of how right you were."

"They set all this up with the utmost care," Quinn went on. "The three men who

would accuse Emerson were actually his business associates and respected citizens. They are crooks, of course, but without any records, and not known in this part of the country. Mace, too, was a crook. Griff ran the whole affair, importing his strong-arm men to get jobs as factory guards. Of course the fingerprints of these guards were taken at the factory—but by another crook who saw to it the real prints weren't filed. So the gang was here in force and Remy stayed in the background, in personal touch with only Griff."

"What about this broker, Dudley?" McGrath asked.

"They were using him, Mac. Dudley was greedy. They threw him a few good-sized crumbs and let him try to handle the steel mill deal. He didn't know who he was working for. The Chicago firm was backed by Remy and Griff, from what Griff told us."

"And one more thing came out of all this," McGrath grumbled. "We've had proof that you can't be the Black Bat. In fact, Lieutenant Sebastian looks pretty silly, and so do I."

"I wish it had been the other way around," Quinn said.

"What do you mean, Tony?"

"I wish you'd discovered I *was* the Black Bat, because that would mean I wasn't blind. Good night, Mac. I'll see you back in town. Right now, I need rest."

McGrath arose. "I shouldn't wonder. See you back at your office. And get plenty of rest here because things have been too quiet in our city lately and I've got a feeling they'll pop."

Quinn had the same feeling. There would never be any rest for him, either as a Special District Attorney or the Black Bat. There were too many vicious gangsters, too many fools for him to let up.

But for the moment Quinn knew he could forget such things which concerned only the future. In the house, Carol Baldwin waited. It was going to be a pleasure explaining to her and Butch what had happened.

Silk opened the door and Carol came forward swiftly. Quinn held her tight and wondered if the day would ever come when he wouldn't have to let her go. • • •

A PAWN for the CHAIR

"We want a hundred bucks
for the stuff," Arnie said.
"It's all solid metal"



by JOE ARCHIBALD

Behind the three brass balls lived a man who hated cops, and whose son was in the death house—for killing one!

IT WAS late when Patrolman Tom McBride passed Innis Bold's pawnshop on the avenue two blocks from the river. McBride paused when he heard the dull muffled sound that came from within the establishment. He opened the door quickly and stepped inside. The store was deserted, and McBride went to the counter and leaned on it, raising his hefty body on the heels of his hands.

A door hinge creaked, and McBride swung his head quickly. A little man with

stooped shoulders peered at him through thick-lensed glasses. Innis Bold was not more than ten years older than McBride, but his face was etched with deep lines and his hair was gray. In a year's time, Bold's hair had turned that way.

"What do you want?" Bold snapped. "I asked you policemen to stay out of here—stay away from me."

McBride had left the door open. A man stood just outside, studying the conglomeration of goods in the window.

"I heard a noise," McBride said. "I didn't like the way it sounded."

"I was fixing a clock, Mr. Cop," Bold said, more resentment in his voice. "You get out of here."

"Sure," McBride said. "Now I've found out you are all right, Innis. It's my job. You've got to stop hating cops."

"I never will, McBride."

"I've been hearing things, Innis," McBride said. "I hear there's a place on this avenue where small-time crooks can get rid of stolen stuff. If you think you should go against the law, because your son—"

"Get out!" Bold shouted. "You got no proof I'm breaking the law. No proof, except that you think my Eddie killed the policeman."

"Okay," McBride said and he turned and walked out.

The man outside grinned. "He sure hates cops," he said.

"Yeah."

McBride kept on along his beat.

For almost a year now, the people who lived in the neighborhood had talked of Innis Bold's hatred for the law. Before Eddie Bold had gone to Sing Sing for killing the policeman, Innis had been a retiring, almost timid man. Everybody loved Innis Bold, for he had watched over the people on the avenue as if they had been part of his own family. He always saw to it that the needy had food and a roof over their heads. That was before Eddie Bold had gone to the death house.

When McBride's footsteps had died out up the street, Innis Bold locked his pawnshop and turned out the lights. He went into the back room and took off his glasses so that he could wipe the moisture out of his eyes. He sat there in the dark, thinking of Eddie.

EDDIE BOLD had been a nice kid, but he had got mixed up with the wrong crowd. Innis knew that Eddie was not altogether to blame, for in doing for others, Innis had neglected to watch his own flesh and blood as he should have. Eddie had been getting in late at night, long after Innis had gone to bed. Eddie used to tell his father

that he had been to the movies or at other boys' houses, and Innis had believed his son for he was sure that a son of his would not lie to him.

Then came the dreadful night when Innis Bold was informed that his son had been shot in the leg while helping in the holdup of an all-night restaurant. They had taken Eddie to the hospital under police guard; and later Eddie was put on trial in the great building near the bridge and found guilty of murder in the first degree.

Innis Bold had gone to see Eddie and had talked with him alone. Eddie Bold swore that he had not fired the shot.

Somebody did, son," Innis had said, feeling that his heart was being squeezed right out of him. "You admitted you were in the gang that tried to rob that place."

"I won't tell you who it was," Eddie Bold had said stubbornly; trying to mask his terror. "I ain't a squealer. The guy who shot the cop tossed the gun to me and said to ditch it, while he went out to bring the car around. But the cops come and—"

"You don't want to be a squealer," Innis had told Eddie. "You wish to live by some crazy rules that crooks write down? Think of yourself, Eddie. Tell me who fired the shot."

Eddie Bold had refused to break the criminal code, and Innis had left him. Soon after, his hair had begun to turn white. They were going to electrocute Eddie.

Innis Bold had gone up to Albany to see the governor and had talked to the big man for two hours with the tears streaming down his cheeks. He even got on his knees. The governor had reprieved Eddie Bold. Twice he had reprieved him, but that was all over. All hope was gone. Eddie Bold was going to die. In just seven weeks now, on a certain night, Innis Bold was going to have to sit in the dark and count the seconds.

A few days after Eddie had been convicted, five of his friends had come to see Innis Bold. Bold remembered having seen three of them at different times, passing by with Eddie, stopping in with Eddie to look over the goods in the shop. Their names were Frankie Paul, Chick Dewin and Howie Alkon.

Frankie told Innis how sorry they were.

None of them had been in the holdup, and they said they had no idea that Eddie had been mixed up with crooks. Innis remembered that the two who had gone into the restaurant had worn handkerchiefs over the lower parts of their faces. The three friends of Eddie's wanted to know if there was anything they could do.

"Yes," Innis had said angrily. "You can keep away from me, you and the cops!"

Sitting there, Bold went through all the tortures again. After the cop had been killed, another one had whipped a long shot at Eddie and had got him in the leg. The other four had made their escape, and Eddie was going to take their names into eternity with him, just to get even with the law.

Innis Bold's torment was uncertainty. *Maybe* Eddie had lied to him, *maybe* he had killed the policeman. But he rejected that *maybe*. Eddie would not kill. Eddie would not harm anyone. He was innocent, and they were going to snuff his life out. He kept hearing Eddie's voice.

"I didn't know any of us had a gun," Eddie had said, "not a loaded one. The one we showed the guy in the restaurant was an old piece of junk we found in a dump near the river. But I *won't* squeal. It wouldn't help me, anyway, because I had the gun in my hand when they got me. We swore an oath."

An oath. To whom? The Devil, Innis Bold thought. The only chance to save Eddie was for himself to hire out to Lucifer and discover what the cops could never find out. Innis had prayed and prayed, but he guessed he would have to try some other way to save Eddie. Perhaps he was being punished for not having watched his son close enough. The boy had lost his mother when he was still in swaddling clothes.

Innis Bold watched Frankie and Chick and Howie during the weeks that followed Eddie's incarceration in the death house. Frankie passed by the shop one evening, and Innis said to him:

"I do not see you around much lately, Frankie."

"No, Mr. Bold," Frankie had said. "I'm going to a trade school at night. I got a job in a tailor shop during the day."

Innis thought Frankie had acted a little

afraid, like a person who holds a terrible secret.

Howie Alkon and Chick Dewin, Bold found out, had also become industrious and were keeping respectable hours. Their parents told Mr. Bold that they were in every night before ten-thirty.

WORD got around to the most remote corners of the neighborhood that Innis Bold's hatred for the law had become an obsession, and several citizens of ill repute made mental note of the fact and weighed the possibility of profiting therefrom. Indigent residents of the neighborhood no longer appealed to Innis Bold for help, for he had become a bitter, brooding man. The old adage that has to do with giving a dog a bad name was applied to Innis, and the story was circulated that Bold's pawnshop might have been the dumping ground for the spoils taken by Eddie Bold and his gang.

It was Tom McBride who had hinted that Innis had cleaned out his shop the day after his son was captured.

A bad dog," McBride had said openly, "generally has the characteristics of the canine that was responsible for its conception.

Eddie Bold had spent over a year in the death house when Arnie Pietro came into Innis Bold's pawnshop by the back way one night after one o'clock. Arnie dumped four gold watches, some solid silverware and three bracelets on the table near Innis.

"We want a hundred bucks for the stuff," Arnie said. "It's all solid metal. You know what old gold brings. We need the hundred."

"It isn't worth fifty," Innis Bold said. "It is what you should call hot, Arnie."

"We get a hundred," Arnie said.

He was about twenty-five. He had wicked eyes, and the way he kept moving his hands put fear into the heart of Innis Bold. A muscle in Arnie's face kept twitching.

"It is a holdup," Innis Bold said.

"Call it anything you like, see?" Arnie said. "We're going after bigger stuff, anyway. This penny-ante stuff don't get us nowhere. Maybe we won't need you no more." Bold."

"All right," Bold said. "I'll give you a hundred."

Pietro went out into the darkened shop while Innis Bold got the money, and Arnie's cat's eyes were accustomed to the lack of light. There was a grin on his face when he came back to get the money.

"You should not do that," Innis Bold said. "If a policeman happened to go by—"

"Nuts!" Arnie said. "I was looking at some goods. Maybe we need you, after all. Say, they're going to burn Eddie pretty soon, ain't they?"

Innis Bold clenched his fists and fought to keep himself from screaming at Arnie and tearing the man's face with his fingernails.

"Yes," Innis said under his breath. "Soon it shall happen. Now you go out of here."

He sat in the dark again and thought and thought. Kids like Eddie and Frankie and the others had not been old enough to think things out for themselves. There must have been an older man who had told them about the "easy way" and the importance of the incredibly devilish criminal code.

That man would not dare to be seen with Eddie's friends any more, not after the cop was killed. He would be a man who would kill kids like Frankie and Chick and Howie if they dared talk to a cop. A vicious criminal like that, Innis Bold knew, would keep climbing in his profession, would keep going after bigger stakes until he became known as a big shot.

You couldn't see the guns that Innis Bold had in the shop unless you knew just where to look. It was becoming almost impossible for crooks to get guns. Every man who openly purchased a firearm had to have a license, and the number of the gun was immediately registered with the police, together with its ballistic characteristics.

McBride came in early the next afternoon. Innis Bold looked at him coldly and sat rigid on the stool back of the counter.

"Let me see your watches, Bold," McBride said. "All of them. They have numbers in the works of watches."

"All of them are here," Bold said, taking down a board from which a dozen watches hung and placing it on the counter. "There are some more in the window, policeman," he said and met McBride's stony glance.

McBride examined the watches. It took

him almost a half hour.

"Guess they're not here, Innis," he said finally. "Not where I can get hold of them."

"You get out of here," Innis said. "You coming here gives me a bad reputation, McBride. Isn't it enough my boy is going to be killed? Do you have to hound his father?"

"I got a job to do, Innis," the cop said. "To keep some more Eddie Bolds out of the chair if I can. Get them quick and you can do a lot with them. Eddie was allowed to go too far, Innis. We're all sorry, very sorry."

When McBride walked out, he had to push his way through a group of people who had been wondering what the elder Bold had been up to. Innis Bold came out and drove them away, a brass banded cane in his hands.

NIGHT CAME again—another terrible night, hours nearer the time when Eddie was going to be led out of his cell and into the death chamber. Innis Bold was about to close his shop when a stranger came in. He was a beefy man with reddish eyebrows and square bluish jaws.

"Got any radios, Mister?" he asked.

"Yes. Lots of them," Bold said. "Portable, maybe?"

"Yeah. Not more'n five bucks."

The man moved away from the counter and ran his eyes over the stuff that filled practically every inch of space. He suddenly said:

"Say, how much are these pistols, Mister? I run a big garage across town and some nights we have plenty of dough there. Been a lot of holdups lately. I'd like to get one for the night man—I mean one of these guns. But you got to know the mayor personal to get a permit for one. So—"

"I don't know," Innis Bold said. "I got to be careful about selling them. Maybe if you leave your name and address, though—"

"Sure," the customer said. "Let me have that one there, Mister. How much?"

"Fifty dollars," Innis Bold said.

"Huh? That's a holdup."

"All right. I would rather not sell them, anyway," Innis Bold said. "Now this portable radio you asked about—"

"Keep it. I can't buy both." The beefy man grinned. "Here's the dough."

"You leave your name and address," Innis Bold said as he wrapped up the pistol. "Don't tell nobody where you bought this, will you?"

"Okay, Mister."

He scribbled a name and address on a piece of paper, handed it to Bold and left.

Next morning the headlines read:

COP KILLER TO DIE!

Innis Bold read the print under the headlines, his blood becoming stagnant in his veins. The paper said that Eddie's lawyer had given up, that the man tried every conceivable legal device to save his client from the chair. Eddie would be the youngest killer ever to get the chair at Sing Sing.

Seventy-four hours before the execution, a fur robbery took place on Third Avenue, and a watchman was shot to death. The policeman on the beat got the license of the light delivery truck that got away with twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of furs from the storage loft. He told his pal, Tom McBride that he pumped three bullets into the truck before it got around the corner. He was sure he had winged a man who had swung aboard the truck.

Every doctor in the city was notified to report the treatment of a bullet wound or a burn that could be the result of a slug grazing the flesh. At ten o'clock the next morning, a doctor on Eighty-ninth Street near Lexington called the nearest precinct station. Police got there in time to arrest the patient.

It was Arnie Pietro. Arnie swore that he had been cleaning a pistol and that it had suddenly gone off. McBride stared at him.

"What were you doing with a pistol, Arnie?" the cop asked.

"Lots of guys own guns," said Arnie.

"Yeah. We've got the bullet out of yours, I think." McBride said. "Took it from the body of the watchman. You've been in the racket a long time, Arnie. You never knew Eddie Bold, did you?"

"Never," Arnie said. "You can't prove nothing on me, copper. You find the gun if you can."

"Okay, Arnie. Now you're bandaged up, let's go down and call on Innis Bold."

Arnie's mouth dropped open.

"Him?" he sneered when he got hold of himself. "So he's been squawking about some stuff I turned over to him, has he? Okay, I've done some small jobs, but you don't hang no murder on me."

INNIS BOLD smiled bleakly at Arnie when the cops brought the wounded crook into his shop.

"You have got the bullet out of the watchman, Tommy?" Bold asked eagerly. "Let me have it."

"Tommy you call the cop? Hah!" Arnie sneered. "You kissed and made up?"

McBride shoved Arnie into the back room. There, Innis Bold took a sheet of oilcloth off a small tub similar to those that butter comes in. It was half filled with some kind of wax and there were holes in the wax. Innis Bold poked at one of the holes with an ice-pick and produced a bullet, then pried two more out of the wax in the tub.

"All of these bullets came out of the three guns you loaned me, Tommy," Innis Bold smiled. "The guns that were once used by killers and had the numbers filed off. You check the three bullets and see if one of them don't match up with the one you took out of the watchman, Tommy. And you take this piece of paper I have here in an envelope. It has the name and address of a man on it. They are fakes, Tommy, I am sure, but a man can't fake a fingerprint can he? Not a big man with red eyebrows."

Arnie Pietro's face was white and drawn, but not from the pain of the bullet burn.

"We took a long chance, Innis," Tom McBride said. "But I think we might have the man who killed the cop that time, the one who tossed the gun to Eddie."

"You're nuts!" Arnie gasped.

"We'll make sure in the laboratory at headquarters," McBride said. "Those kids had a leader, a yellow rat like you, Arnie. A guy who saw to it that they would take the rap if things went wrong. When they grabbed Eddie, you figured to stop messing around with small fry and go to bigger stuff. Killing a man gives a guy like you a Capone complex. Who was the guy who gave you the gun for the last holdup, Arnie?"

"You ain't framing me," Arnie yelled.

"A crook generally sticks to one section of the city because he knows it like a book, Arnie," McBride said. "It saves a lot of time casing jobs, huh? You should've changed your fields, Arnie. Let's go."

"I'll be waiting here, Tommy," Innis Bold said. "I'll be praying all the time."

The width, the depth and pitch of the grooves, the ridges in the grooves and other peculiarities due to defective material, wear and tear, individualize the barrel of a gun and make possible the identification of the bullet which has passed through it. The bullet they took out of the body of the watchman in the loft matched one of the bullets that Innis Bold had fired into the wax. The bullet came out of the gun that Eddie Bold had been holding the night the cop was killed.

"We've got almost everything, Arnie," McBride said softly. "The gun was purchased from Innis Bold by Big Al Betz who has already served two terms for armed robbery in Pennsylvania. His fingerprint tripped him. We've got the net out for him, Arnie. Big Al was the leader this time, and you took the orders. You know where he got the gun, don't you? It was Exhibit A during Eddie Bold's trial. Guns have been hard to get, so we furnished Innis with three of them. You see the D.A. had a hunch all along that Eddie Bold was not the type of kid who would kill a man. He had to do his job and prosecute Eddie, because the evidence was piled against him. With Eddie convicted and in the death house, the D.A. agreed to take a long chance with us and gave me the gun, Arnie. It's a nice gun, and Innis Bold was sure that a crook would pick that one instead of the other two which were of smaller caliber."

"You won't burn me!" Arnie shrieked.

"When we get Big Al Betz," McBride said, "we'll get everything. He'll come out of his hole when he hears he is wanted for murder. And when we accuse Betz of killing the watchman last night, Betz is going to start saving his own skin. So it doesn't matter what you did with the gun, Arnie. The bullets and Innis Bold will be enough to convict you. Maybe you handed the gun back to Betz?"

THAT WAS just what Arnie had done, and he suddenly broke down and became a simpering hoodlum. When a cop opened the door and told McBride that Betz was being brought in, Arnie was telling them everything, including how he had tossed the gun to Eddie Bold that night. Arnie knew they had him for the second killing, anyway.

"That's that," McBride said to a sergeant of detectives. "Thanks for letting me work close with you on this. I had a big interest in the case. I want to get down and tell Innis Bold myself. You know, he didn't really hate cops, Arnie. And, Arnie, I knew all the time that you were handing your take to Innis. He's been saving the stuff for me. You were too provincial, just like a lot of big city folks, Arnie. You should have picked out a different stamping ground to take post-graduate work in crime."

Arnie Pietro was too full of fear to answer.

Innis Bold was in the back room of his shop when Tom McBride walked in.

"It's all right, Innis," McBride said. "Arnie Pietro has confessed everything. I imagine they'll let Eddie go in a couple of days. I don't think they'll want to do anything more to him. A year in the death house is all the punishment he'll ever need."

Innis Bold shook Tom McBride's hand and clung to the big cop. Innis cried like a baby for several minutes, and McBride had a big lump in his throat and had to keep swallowing.

"Look," McBride said. "There's a family going to be dispossessed about four blocks down the avenue, Innis. Tomorrow morning. You better get your hat and coat on and go down there and see what you can do for them; they're colored, Innis."

"What does it matter what they are, Tommy? No matter what their color or creed, Tommy," Innis said and wiped his eyes. "I'll go down there with you. Let us have a little wine, Tommy. We will drink to Eddie. He didn't lie to his father you hear? Eddie didn't lie. Sometimes I think lying is worse than murder, Tommy. It was very bad all these last few months, working with the Devil. But we licked him, Tommy."

"Yeah," McBride said and realized that he had never tasted better wine. ● ● ●

If you die a hero, does it matter much how you get

it? In the gas chamber, a dive off a fast train—

A Novelet

By W. LEE HERRINGTON



I triggered again
and Ancil went down

OR UP A DARK ALLEY

CHAPTER I

Execution Witness

THE telephone booth was at the far end of the bar. I tamed down my insides with a couple of fast double bourbons. Then I put in my long distance call.

Sweeney, on rewrite, said, "Al Purviance, in Stateville? Okay, you're on tape. Go ahead."

I squirmed around in the booth so I could watch the three men coming into the bar as I talked.

"Stateville, September five.—Sam 'The Undertaker' Poss walked calmly to his death in the gas chamber here tonight at three minutes after eleven. Poss, who was convicted of the murder last June 7 of Joseph Storey, displayed no emotion as he stepped into the little octagonal room. Poss was quickly strapped in the heavy chair. Those of us who witnessed his last few minutes on earth unconsciously held our breath as we watched.

"Sam Poss held his breath, fighting the invisible, deadly cyanide fumes that came up at him.

"Sam Poss was the first to breathe—"

I looked out at the bar again. Frank Lorrain, the big lad in the dark blue suit, was drunk. He stood between the two other men and killed his drink. The three men walked slowly from the bar and I finished my story

and hung up the receiver.

The midnight train out of Stateville was a souped-up local and it was already in when I emerged from the bar. I walked across the narrow street to the station platform where the white-haired conductor fiddled with his big watch.

Then I stopped. Frank Lorrain pulled away from the two men who held his arms and lurched toward me. He was almost pushing against me when he stopped walking.

He asked huskily: "How did he take it?"

I lighted a fresh cigarette and blew smoke past Lorrain's shoulder. "He took it," I said, "the way he had to take it—sitting down, strapped to the chair with all of us watching him."

"He's dead then?"

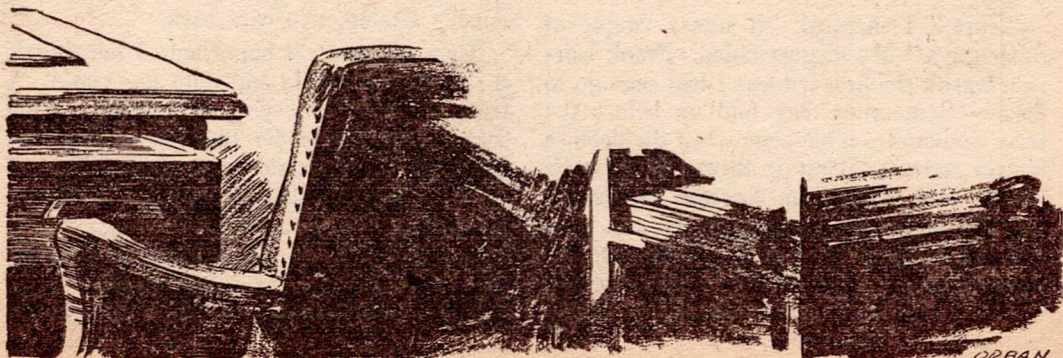
"Like yesterday morning's headlines."

Lorrain pushed his bushy hair back with a meaty hand. His dark eyes were troubled.

"I had to know, Al."

"Sure, sure, I understand. You had to know. Sam Poss is dead. Now get on the train and drink yourself under a seat. Your job is all over."

LORRAIN'S big hand grabbed my lapel. "What's it like, Al?" he demanded nervously. "I've been going nuts waiting for it



to be over. Was it quick or—"

I said harshly: "All right, torture yourself. It isn't every night a bus driver on his night off stumbles up a dark alley and witnesses a cold-blooded killing. Get on the train and get drunk or go to sleep. You did your part."

"I've got to know what it's like, Al." Lorrain's voice was stubborn.

I shrugged. "You were the state's witness. I guess that entitles you to a second-hand look. You identified Sam Poss. They convicted him. Tonight, they set him in the chair at 11:03. At 11:05 they pulled the chain on him. At fifteen minutes after eleven, the doc said he was dead."

I looked past Lorrain's wide shoulder. His two companions were coming our way. Irv Maynard, an assistant in the district attorney's office, and Eddie Ancil, Joe Storey's partner. That is, Ancil had been Storey's partner until the night Sam Poss had shot Joe to death in a dirty little alley behind the Paramount Theater. Ancil walked a little behind Maynard.

Frank Lorrain let his hand drop away from my coat front. His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open a little. Saliva had formed at the side of his mouth. He said, "Al, I've been going nuts. I can't drink enough any more to make me sleep nights. I've got to get it off my conscience."

"Sleep it off. You'll feel okay in the morning."

Lorrain didn't hear me. "I'm going to the District Attorney in the morning and make a statement," he said. "I want you to be there with me. *I'm going to say I am not sure it was Sam Poss who shot Joe Storey to death.*"

"Sure," I snapped, "it was a couple of other guys." My disgust faded. Frank Lorrain wasn't the first witness I had seen go to pieces. Sometimes they fold up before the trial. Sometimes it happens when the defense lawyer starts working on them. Sam Poss's lawyer had worked on Lorrain for hours. Lorrain had taken it, going over and over his story. Each time it had come out the same. The jury believed him. The state had executed Sam Poss. Now the big bus driver had it on his conscience.

The two men came up to us and Irv May-

nard cupped a hand under Lorrain's right elbow. He nodded to me. "Hello, Al." He jerked his head toward the other man. "You know Eddie Ancil."

Eddie Ancil and I shook hands. "I remember you now," he said. "Al Purviance. You by-line a feature now and then for the *Star-Times*. You covering the execution?"

I nodded. "I hoped to get a thousand words out of Sam Poss."

"You interviewed him before the execution?"

"If you can call it that. He didn't confess. He didn't give any reason for shooting your partner to death. Sam Poss was a professional gunslinger. He had no imagination and no conscience; therefore, I got no story. He didn't have anything to say."

Ancil tugged at his thin lip with a long finger. His left hand loosely gripped Lorrain's right arm. "Irv and I managed to snag a compartment for the trip back because Frank here is loaded. We can keep an eye on him better that way. Drop in after a while. There'll be a drink waiting for you."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll look you up."

Down the platform, the white haired conductor put his watch away and bawled, "Bo-o-ar-r-d."

THE local made the stops any local makes.

The night took on a tired feeling. The car vibrated roughly. When it smoothed out in a contented, leveling motion, I knew where the train was—curving onto the new road-bed the streamliners use. Thirty-three miles from home, a drink, a hot bath and a bed.

The train took on speed. I was debating with myself whether to get the drink in Eddie Ancil's section, two cars back.

That was when it happened. I felt myself thrust into the aisle and onto my knees. A fretful child began crying in response to the scraping sounds under the car. The pudgy blonde across the aisle gave out a polite oath as I brought up sharply against her knees. She helped me to my feet.

A quick look out the window showed me we were still on the rails, upright. Just stopped. A trainman barged through the car, a signal lamp hung over the crook of his arm. Fire danced angrily in his weathered

eyes. To no one in particular he complained in a mutter: "Some monkey pulled the emergency cord."

I followed the brakie toward the rear of the train. He cursed softly when we reached the vestibule of the second car back. The smell of whiskey was rank against the cinder-fouled air.

A broken pint bottle shimmered in a damp puddle on the vestibule floor.

The step cover was up, swinging against the car frame. Darkness yawned up from under the car door. Eddie Ancil was shrugging into his coat. Maynard stood behind Ancil.

"Did Lorrain come forward to your car, Purviance?" Ancil asked.

I shook my head. Irv Maynard said curtly, "That's what happens when you try to ride herd on a drunk. I got tired of listening to him yacking and went to the club car. Eddie was taking a walk somewhere. When I came back, Eddie was looking for Lorrain. He'd disappeared."

Eddie Ancil pointed to the broken glass. "I got up here and found the step cover open and the pint broken on the floor." He wiped a hand over his chin. "That's when I pulled the emergency cord."

Frank Lorrain's body was within walking distance. The spot he had chosen for his out was at a culvert. His body had bounced several times and left dark, damp streaks on the chat ballast where the top crust was skimmed off.

His dark blue coat was pushed up over his back. He lay face down.

I watched the trainman's lantern bob as he went up the tracks to protect the rear end of his train.

The white-haired conductor said, "Would you say he was drunk when you talked to him, just before he got on the train?"

"You saw him," I countered. "He was trying hard enough."

Eddie Ancil put his cadaverous tall body between the conductor and me. "The way it looks to me," he said, "is that he wandered into the vestibule and stopped to hit his bottle. He stepped on the cover release and it suddenly opened. He fell down the steps and—"

"Let me tell you a few things about trains you don't know," the wiry little conductor said truculently. "If you get that step cover up, you've got to want it up. To want it up, you've got to have a reason. Looks like your friend was in one hell of a hurry to get off. That's just the way she goes down in my report."

EDDIE ANCIL said to me, "It'll be a long time before anyone gets me on a jerk-water train like this again. My car's down with a grabby clutch or I'd never have gone down on the train. You happen to have any ideas?"

"About what?"

Ancil frowned and nervously pinched his long chin with thin fingers. "About this." He jerked his thumb toward Lorrain's body. "Lorrain pulled loose from us there by the train and said he had to see a guy. He talked to you. It looked like he was putting the bite on you for something when Irv Maynard and I interrupted."

I said, "We were just chewing over some old bones. No meat on them."

The local got into town an hour late. I turned down an offer from Eddie Ancil to ride home with him. I wanted to walk and develop the germ of a human interest story on Frank Lorrain. I bought a pint in the station drug store. As I slogged out to the street, Eddie Ancil was pulling out of the parking station in a late model De Soto convertible.

I lived seven blocks from the station. Half-way home, I cursed the impulse that had made me ignore the cabs at the station. My feet felt like lead. I was suddenly tired and when filmly shapes came out of the darker shadows along the tree lined street, I recognized them for what they were. Fatigue illusions. My mind kept turning fuzzily back to the station platform in Stateville. Frank Lorrain had guts.

He had identified a killer. He had demanded to know the details of the execution of Sam Poss.

"I'm going to the District Attorney in the morning . . . I'm going to say I am not sure it was Sam Poss who shot Joe Storey to death."

CHAPTER II

"Who Shot You?"

A CAR came slowly up the street. Light flooded over me and sent long shadows hurtling ahead of me. Frank Lorrain's words underlined themselves in my brain. I knew then I had missed the percentage. Frank Lorrain had been talking right out of his heart, not his liquor. Remorse had caught up with him. My hands were wet. I needed a drink. I ripped the wrapper from the flat pint. When the car went by, I stopped by a tree and hit the bourbon, hard.

The hard cold fact hit me with its double-edged meaning. Frank Lorrain had been wrong. Remorseful, he had jumped from the train and had broken his neck. That was half of the fact. The rest—the state had executed an innocent man.

I tipped the bottle again and swallowed. The sting of glass shards bit into my face as the bottle exploded. The smell of warm whiskey flooded my nostrils. I hadn't heard the car or the first shot.

The second shot clipped a twig from the maple tree and whipped it against my neck. I dropped and scrambled sideways. The third shot sent me forward, crawling on my knees. My back felt as if a maddened hornet had lit on it. A car slowed at the curb. A fourth slug ricocheted off the tree trunk and ploughed into the front of a building. Broken glass tinkled.

I lay on my face, hugging the ground. Pain stabbed into my back. The car raced on up the street, gathering speed. Its tires screamed weirdly. A faint, metallic sound carried back to me as the car clinked fenders with another car going through the intersection. When I raised my head, both were gone.

I got to my feet, the warm wetness sticking my shirt against my back. Somewhere behind a building, a chain rattled and a dog bayed. Lights came on behind windows. A door slammed and a flashlight probed along a

broken cement walk. Drunkenly, I scrambled along the street. I had two blocks to go, if I made it at all. If I was supposed to make it, I promised myself, I'd make it.

The side of the streets seemed to pinch in closer together. Joe Storey hadn't made it that night last June. Sam Poss hadn't made it, last night in the gas chamber. Frank Lorrain hadn't made it.

MY HANDS were slick with sweat, and I was dizzy with pain and shock when I got the apartment door open.

The lights were on, full. I stood there a few seconds, feeling dull and stupid, the surprise diluted by the pain.

"Enid." I mumbled the name.

Mrs. Frank Lorrain stood in the middle of the room, her hand to her mouth. Horror widened her gray eyes. She took her hand away from her wide mouth, but she didn't scream as she walked quickly toward me. Her hands made fumbling motions.

I pushed Enid Lorrain away roughly and growled something down deep in my throat. Then long sabers of pain danced in close and cut at me. I fell forward, on my face. . . .

The sound of the bullet dropping into the metal pan made me open my eyes.

A face that had a professional look came close to mine. Then there was a split second of sharp pain, and I knew it was a morphine needle. I tried to raise myself. A cool hand on my forehead held me down. I closed my eyes again as footsteps crossed the room. Softer footsteps followed.

I could hear their voices in the kitchen; Enid Lorrain's voice and that of the doctor.

"Not as bad as it looks," the doc said calmly. "Man like him can take a lot of killing and be all right again. Is he your husband?" There was a quick, prompt denial, then, "All right, I'll send a nurse. No use using up my emergency quota at the hospital. Of course"—the voice firmed—"we have to report this sort of thing to the police."

I tried twisting my body around. Sweat formed on my face and ran down my neck. Dreams flooded over me, and I took off and rode a cloud around the deep bluish sky, and then we nose-dived into a hole in the ground.

Somewhere down in the hole bullets came at me. I laughed at them. The bullets slowed and I reached out and picked them off like flowers.

There were big ones and little ones. Bullets smashed into jagged, ragged plates of copper and lead. Bullets with blood on them. A bullet came by, floating on a pad of gauze. I put out a hand and took it. I turned it slowly over and over between my fingers. It was cold and hard. It weighed a ton and began to heat up in my fingers.

It got bigger and the engraving on the side got clearer. My name. Al Purviance. The engraving turned to blood. I held the slug in my hand and laughed. The dreams showered over me and changed pattern. I was swinging my legs over the side of the bed, and my hand was dipping into the bloody gauze and instruments in the little metal pan.

Then I opened my eyes. I quit laughing. Enid Lorrain looked squarely at me.

"Enid?" I asked huskily.

"Go to sleep, Al."

"He's gone? The doc's gone?"

"Go to sleep, Al."

"Three years," I mumbled. "Hell of a way to see you again. Walk right in and fall on my face at your feet."

"Go to sleep, Al." The words were edged a little with impatience.

"You came here to wait for me and ask me to help Frank Lorrain," I said slowly. Through a mist I could see her nod. "I'm human." It came out harsh, angry. "I've always hoped, from the day you married Frank, you'd have to come to me for help. It's a little late, all around, though."

HER words were dry and bitter. "Maybe I should have married you, Al Purviance. Maybe I didn't because I guessed somehow that sooner or later you'd come home like this—with a bullet in you. That you'd come home and fall into my lap. I didn't want that."

I squeezed my fingers together under the covers. The slug with my name on it was going down to Police Ballistics. Then I tried to sit up. I managed just enough to swing my head around. The metal pan was no

longer sitting on the chair. My bloody shirt was gone. I took my hands from under the covers and looked at them foolishly. They were pale and dry and empty.

I said, "Get a hold on your heart, honey, because I've got to kick you in the face. We can't help Frank now. Frank is dead, baby."

Her weight came down slowly and gently across the bed and I could hear her cry softly with a rhythmic sobbing.

"Whatever Frank Lorrain couldn't live with, he died with. He got the step cover up. He took a header right out into the darkness. It was a fast sure-money bet. It didn't hurt, for long. It broke his neck."

She raised slowly and a soft hand pushed my face back against the pillow. "I know, Al."

"He braced me on the station platform and asked me to help him, last night." I stopped talking and Enid gave me a puzzled look. My eyes swung to the desk calendar on the dresser. The last night I was talking about was Tuesday. The calendar should have said Wednesday. It said *Thursday*. An entire day had dropped out of my life, along with the slug that had dropped into the little metal pan.

The nurse wore a white starched uniform. It rustled when she moved. "You can't get up, Mr. Purviance," she said severely. "We'll both catch hell if you don't lay still."

"How's my temperature and pulse?"

"Normal," she said grudgingly. "But you've been a very sick boy. We must lay still, mustn't we?"

I turned my head and watched the kitchen door open. Irv Maynard, the assistant D.A. was about fifty, wore oversized bifocals and had a tired, worried look on his face.

He carried a coffee pot and two chipped cups.

"Put some brandy in it," I said, "and you won't miss the cream." To the nurse I said, "Go out in the kitchen and fix yourself some breakfast. We'll call you if I start bleeding to death or something."

The young nurse arched her shoulders. Maynard jerked his head at her as he poured coffee into the cups. When the nurse let the kitchen door swing shut, Maynard leaned close to me.

"Who shot you?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Like hell you wouldn't," Maynard sneered politely. "You were just walking along. Someone started shooting."

I shook my head. "I was behind a tree, having a quick drink."

"Will you sign a complaint?"

"Against who? John Doe?"

Maynard walked across the room and raised the window shade. He came back, saying, "We got this much. The attack on you ties up with the suicide of Frank Lorrain. Frank was having a chat with you just before the train pulled out. What did he talk to you about?"

"Go home," I said doggedly. "Let me get some sleep."

"You've slept twenty-four hours. The doc wouldn't let us talk to you yesterday. He says you're well enough now to talk."

"You know as much as I do, Irv."

MAYNARD'S chin came forward truculently. "You know what happens to guys who hold out on my office?"

"I can guess," I admitted. "In the case of an ordinary reporter, you can dig up his pipeline or fill in his well, and he's out of business. With me, it's different."

"Why is it different?"

"I'm a free lance." I tried putting one leg out of bed. It worked. I swung slowly around, got both feet on the floor. "So I can tell you to go to hell or play along with you, depending on how I feel."

"How do you feel?"

"I'll bury my own dead," I said pleasantly. "You've got it backward, Irv. You have to play along with me." I got a cigarette lighted. It made me a little dizzy, but the wave passed. I tried the coffee. "There's half a million people in this town who don't know from up about what goes on behind the scene in a murder trial or an execution."

"Which leads to what?" Maynard's chin came forward the rest of the way. "We haven't got anything to hide down in my office."

"The hell you haven't. Most of the half million people have a childlike faith in justice. They won't like reading that you set a man

in the gas chamber and learned too late he was innocent."

Behind the bifocals, Maynard's eyes bulged. "That hasn't happened yet."

"I'll spell it for you, Irv. S-A-M P-O-S-S."

"What the hell do you want?" Maynard bellowed. "A hundred witnesses? The jury believed Frank Lorrain's testimony."

The young nurse popped a worried face around the door, frowned and let the door swing shut again.

I began, "Frank Lorrain was drunk last night—"

"Night before last," Maynard corrected.

"All right. Night before last, Lorrain talked to me just before the train left Stateville. He was going to change his story. He said he wasn't sure any longer that Sam Poss had shot Joe Storey."

Irv Maynard poured himself some coffee. His hand was unsteady. He looked at me poker-faced for a moment. "You leveling, Purviance?" I nodded. Some of the stiffness went out of his face. "Who else knows about this?"

"You and me and the guy who shot me, I suppose." I tried standing up. It wasn't easy, but I made it. "So we're in the same boat, Irv. I've got a story I can't sell an editor because it's too hot to handle. You see where that puts your office?"

Maynard nodded slowly.

"Any capital case you try, any time you ask for the death penalty, the juries will laugh at you," I said. "All the defense will have to do is point to the Sam Poss case and the jury will bring in a verdict of not guilty. Because if it could happen to Sam Poss, it could happen to them, tomorrow. Or to me, next week."

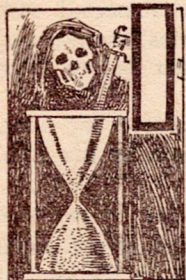
Maynard asked stiffly, "Who shot you?"

"Talk to the doc. He took the slug out of my back. Give it to Ballistics. That might tell you something."

Maynard moved his chair back as I opened a bottom dresser drawer and got out a full bottle of brandy I'd been saving for hard times. Maynard waved the bottle away.

He said in an even voice, "The slug told us plenty. It came from the same gun that killed Joe Storey."

CHAPTER III

Odds or Even Money

I TOOK a lot of argument before the young nurse would let me get up. Finally I chased her out of the room and found my pants and got into them. I had to have help with buttoning the shirt, though.

Fifteen minutes later I was getting out of a cab in front of the Spangler

Building. Ancil Enterprises had offices on the tenth floor. The black-haired stenographer worked the intercom and said for me to go on in.

Eddie Ancil looked up at me and grinned pleasantly. "Maynard told me on the phone you hadn't kicked off yet. You don't look so beat up."

"It doesn't show," I said. "The guy was a lousy shot."

"Been sticking your neck out on some story, I bet. Used to be a newshawk myself, ten years ago. It was a rough hustle in those days."

"Things haven't changed much," I said.

The smile in Ancil's voice went away. "Irv Maynard and I sent flowers. We put your name on the card, too. You owe me five bucks."

"You should have cut me in for ten," I complained as I paid off. "Frank Lorrain was a friend of mine—once."

"Until he married the girl you were nuts about."

"Water over the dam." I waved a hand dismissing the subject. "Maynard spilled the new angle to me, over in my apartment. The gun that pumped a slug into me was the same gun that was used to knock over your partner, Joe Storey."

"You working on that for a feature gimmick?" Ancil drew a long finger along his chiseled chin.

I shook my head. "Frank Lorrain asked me to help him. I missed the percentage because I had pegged him as a drunk and figured it was his bourbon making the speech.

I was wrong."

Eddie Ancil got up and came around the desk and squared a chair around for me. "Give," he said harshly. "Joe Storey was my partner. I'm entitled to openers if you've got something hot."

"Just warmed over. Lorrain was going to change his story. As it stands now, it looks as if he was going to say that Sam Poss didn't shoot Joe Storey. Hearing it the first time, it sounded like a rum-dum shooting off his mouth. When Lorrain dutched it off the train and killed himself, it turned into something else. Something I can't handle because—"

"Yeah, I know." There was a faint touch of derision in Ancil's voice. "You're an idealist. You want to keep faith with the people, assure them an innocent man can't be executed." Ancil lighted a cigarette and handed it to me. "You're soft, Purviance. Ten years ago, I'd have wrung out that story for every word it had in it."

"It's more than a story now, Eddie. When someone took a shot at me, that made it personal."

"Cut me in for any help you need," Ancil said quickly.

"Think back to the night your partner was killed," I suggested. "The night Sam Poss is *supposed* to have shot Joe Storey to death. Frank Lorrain is a bus driver on his night off. He goes to the fights at Convention Hall. He is late. He takes a short cut through an alley and—bingo! He stalls right into a killing."

EDDIE ANCIL went behind his desk and flopped into his big, comfortable chair. When he looked up at me, his face had a tired, set look.

He said, "All right. I heard it said a hundred different ways at the Sam Poss trial. You got something new to add to it?"

"There was a point the defense didn't make. Sam Poss saw Lorrain coming up the alley at a run. He lit out and ran, trying to escape Lorrain. Lorrain caught up with Sam Poss, brought him down and sat on him until the cops came."

"What's your problem?"

The cigarette was making me dizzy, and

I stamped it out before I answered. "If Sam Poss, a professional killer with a lot of experience killed Joe Storey, why would another killing have bothered him? Why didn't he just shoot Lorrain to death and walk away?"

Ancil smiled easily. "That's hardly a point for the defense to have brought out."

"All right. There's the matter of the gun. Irv Maynard's office never turned it up."

"What do you want, Purviance? A hundred witnesses?"

"Irv Maynard asked me that, too. I'd trade ninety-nine of them for the gun." I said stubbornly. "That would have helped the odds that Frank Lorrain was telling the truth."

"I'd still lay a hundred to one that Lorrain was telling the truth, that Sam Poss shot Joe Storey," Eddie Ancil said.

"You'd know all about odds, being in the slot machine racket."

Ancil smiled without humor. "You heard wrong. I'm in the pinball machine and juke box business."

"In case you haven't read the mortality tables," I said, "I'll handicap it for you. That any dead body didn't die of accident, about fifteen to one. That the cause of his death can be determined, the odds go up to seventy-eight to one."

"You talking about Frank Lorrain?"

"I am," I said. "It's eighty-five to one that it wasn't suicide."

"I'll make a note of that." Ancil smiled and ran a thumb across his chin.

"If you want to bet he was murdered," I added, "one will get you a hundred and ninety. The odds on whether I get another slug in the back, I haven't figured yet."

Ancil put a foot on his desk top and laughed. "I'd say that's an even-money bet. If Lorrain slipped you something, or told you something, that makes you dangerous to someone else, why wouldn't they try again?"

I said, "You didn't see anyone on the train who seemed to be trying to contact Lorrain? Anyone who might be tied to Sam Poss?"

"I wasn't what you'd exactly call alert," Ancil admitted. "But then, I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary to happen, like Lorrain doing a dutch."

"The three of you went down together?"

Ancil leaned forward, rubbed his ankle idly. "No. I went down to check on a couple of spots the cops have been bothering. Irv Maynard went on business connected with his office. Frank Lorrain was around, and we all had a drink together before train time."

I stood up and turned toward the door. Eddie Ancil came over, fingering his chin.

HE SAID, "Remember, Joe Storey was my partner. You'll dig around and you'll turn up something because that's the kind of guy you are. Me, I'm the grateful type. Dig up something that says someone beside Sam Poss shot Joe, and you can make yourself a piece of change. I won't leave it to the state to make a mistake. I'll handle it myself and feel I'm doing it for Joe."

"I want the truth," I said. "But I want it in shape to print. I'll be working on the gun angle."

"Irv Maynard is your starting point on that," Ancil said helpfully. "When Mrs. Lorrain brought the bullet to me and asked me what to do with it, I told her to turn it over to Maynard."

"Enid Lorrain—she grabbed off the slug and turned it in?"

"Yeah. I can't figure out why, though, because without the slug, Maynard would never have found out about the gun registration."

I grabbed the doorknob a little too hard on that one. Pain shot up my back and the adhesive tape pinched my belly. "The registration? You mean they know who owns the gun?"

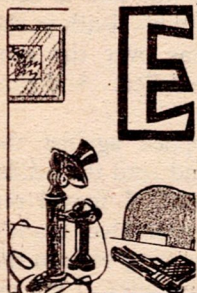
Ancil looked embarrassed. "I supposed Maynard had told you. The gun was registered in Frank Lorrain's name."

I thought it over all the way down in the elevator and across town in a cab. It was okay with me for Eddie Ancil to want first dibs on any new angle in the killing of his partner. It was going to be hard to reopen. Sam Poss was dead. Lorrain, the identifying witness, was dead.

A few inches to the right and I'd have been dead. Over it all the realization was forming in my brain that I knew what had

happened up that dark alley, that night last June.

CHAPTER IV

A Half Page Ad

EVERYWHERE there were the scars that a man leaves on the place he has lived in—the lumpy cushion of the big easy chair; the pipes in the rack on the smoking stand; the radio; the scuffed house slippers under the chair.

Enid Lorrain showed her scars in her eyes. She kept her eyelids lowered as if she were afraid of letting me see inside.

I slapped the day-old newspaper against my leg. The sound of it brought her eyes up to mine.

"We'll try it again," I said wearily. "What was Frank mixed up in? It was more than just remorse or despondency that made him jump off the train."

She chewed the knuckles of her right hand. She moved the hand an inch and said, "I don't know. How many times and how many ways do you want me to say it? I don't know."

"You know how they handle things down at Police Ballistics?"

"Why should I?"

"Last year, a new law was passed. Now, when you own a gun you're supposed to take it down and register it with the cops. They fire a slug, register the serial number of the gun and the owner and file it all together. Then some day, you shoot somebody, and you're in a jam."

When she didn't say anything I said, "So we're back where we started. The gun that was used to blast Joe Storey was the same gun that was used to pump the shots at me."

"But you weren't killed," she said quickly. "Maybe you were just to be frightened off."

"Off what?" I demanded. "That's what makes it all so senseless. Whatever it was Lorrain was to have said to me, or passed to me, didn't come off. On the way home, someone tried to kill me. It almost worked."

I shook my head at her. "But you played it dumb, baby. The word that Frank Lorrain was dead hadn't got around yet. You had all your trouble for nothing. Thanks for holding my head and crooning to me, after you had shot me."

"Al—" She got up slowly. She came over and put her hands against my chest. "You think that? You'd be willing to think I—shot you?"

"You were waiting there at the apartment when I fell in," I said. "You were waiting for me, remember? Not here, waiting for Frank to come back home."

"Al—" Her hands slid down my chest and back up and over my shoulder. Her fingers were cold and they trembled as they brushed my ears. "You can believe I shot you and do nothing about it? You'd let me get this close to you?"

"Maybe I did it because once it was just you and me and there wasn't any Frank Lorrain. Maybe it's because I might do the same for you. Or anyone that meant that much to me."

I COULD hear her heart beating against mine. It would have been easy to rub it all out of my mind—the last three years—and start over. Easy to tell myself I knew she hadn't shot me. I put an arm around her and pulled her close.

Her breath made ripples in the air as it fanned my cheek. She said, "I went to your apartment and persuaded the clerk to let me wait in your apartment. I'm proud, Al, but I meant to get on my knees, if necessary, to ask you to help Frank. He was lost, Al. He would wake up in the night and come into my room and stand over me. His big hands would hold my arms until they were bruised. Over and over he would say, 'I can always stop it at the last minute, can't I?' After a few minutes, he would take his hands away and fix a drink. Yes, he knew I was coming to you for help. He was going to see you in Stateville. That's why he went down there."

Her hands touched my ears again, smoothing them back against my head. I loosened my arm and pushed her roughly away from me. "To hell with that," I sneered. "So he

was going to stop it before it was too late? Like hell he was. He went to Stateville because he had to make sure Sam Poss was dead, that nothing went wrong. Because he wasn't safe until then."

"Safe? From what?"

"Do I have to draw pictures?" I snapped. "The gun. Joe Storey was shot to death with a gun that was registered with the cops, by your precious dope of a husband." I unfolded the newspaper and slapped it against my leg. The pictures of Sam Poss and Frank Lorrain had been run side by side.

"*Killer and Nemesis*," I sneered. "Frank Lorrain died a hero, bearing up bravely to the bitter end. Let it lay. It isn't the truth but it will do. Let it ride that he was a hero. It's a better end. It's all any man could ask. A hell of a lot better than living on after his big hour was over and he had to go back to being an ordinary guy again."

Her face stiffened. "That's enough, Al."

"Not near enough, baby. If Frank Lorrain had lived, he was going to be jammed up tighter than the works in a nine-dollar radio. Irv Maynard can hold the story just so long, then it will have to break. The trick, as I see it, is to get out from under and find the gun before someone makes another try for me."

"You know now that I didn't shoot you?"

"I've almost got to believe it now," I said. "Not that I think you couldn't have, or maybe wouldn't have, to save Frank from whatever it was that was after him, but I can't see the percentage. If you used Frank's gun to shoot me, you were just bringing Frank right out into a mess. It would put him up the alley with Joe Storey that night."

She didn't walk to the door with me. She didn't tell me goodnight as I closed the apartment door behind me.

I poured coffee on top of the half cup of brandy and sipped it while I caught up on yesterday's news. Wednesday. The day that had dropped out of my life.

THE Lorrain story was what you would expect. It was either an accident, which the railroad company denied, or a suicide. Irv Maynard's office seemed to favor the latter idea.

There was no mention of the shots at me. No item about the gun being identified.

A staff artist had sketched a railroad coach, showing the vestibule. It was printed on page five, among the ads. A dotted line indicated the path Lorrain was said to have followed as he plummeted to his death in the dark. A maltese cross was over the spot where he was said to have fallen. And that was the take.

The evening paper plopped against the door, and I brought it in and read the heads. The Lorrain story was dead. I tossed the paper on the bed and fixed another brandy and coffee. My eyes kept coming back to the artist's sketch and the dotted lines. I got up and walked around the table, squinting at the thing. It didn't change, though. One of the ads did. It didn't change, exactly. The change was inside me. My hand shook a little as, this time, I poured a stiff shot of straight brandy.

A little thing—a half-page car ad. It took me out of the little guy class. I could walk right in and name my price. That's when the little guy gets the shakes; when he sees a chance to get out of the cakes and coffee class with a strip of third-class beefsteak on the top days. I had it right in my hands. The hands began sweating. I pulled down the window blinds and sat in the gloom for a few minutes.

My hands were still sweating when I paid off the cab in front of the Spangler Building. Eddie Ancil could advise me how to handle it.

CHAPTER V

The Pay-off



ANCIL swung his chair around and faced me. "How's the bullet wound? You look healthy."

"Remarkable invention, the human body," I said, grinning. "Hard to hold life in, or hard to smash it out. Poison it, stab it, shoot it, and sometimes it comes back for more."

"You sound morbid," Ancil said quietly.

"I was shot at, remember? The human mind does some funny things, too," I said confidently. "It's got a little mechanism that turns off the memory sometimes so that a shock, or a terrible experience, can't be remembered in all its terrible detail."

"You fascinate me," Ancil grunted. "Do go on."

"The shots," I said. "The shock of the bullet in my back took my mind off other things. A whole section dropped right out of my memory. It took an automobile advertisement to bring it back."

It was quiet in the little office. From across the alley, a tinny piano accompaniment to a tap dance came in the open window. Ancil swung his chair around and closed the window.

I said, "It started with your De Soto. You said you went down to Stateville on the train because you had a grabby clutch." I shook my head. "These De Soto's are modern. Fluid drive. They don't have grabby clutches."

Ancil moved a thin hand over his chin. "So that makes it what?"

"It explains a thing that has worried me," I said. "Sam Poss is supposed to have shot your partner—Joe Storey. Why didn't Sam shoot Lorrain, instead of trying to escape?"

"You tell me."

"Because Sam didn't have the gun. There wasn't any time lag, remember? Lorrain barged right in, chased Sam up the alley. That means Sam Poss had to pass the gun to someone else. I think Lorrain saw Sam hand the gun off to that someone. Then Lorrain began to get scared and got drunk every day and finally lost his job. Irv Maynard hasn't been working too hard to turn up Frank Lorrain's gun. That set me to thinking. It could have been Irv that put the finger on Joe Storey."

"When did you give the idea up?" Ancil asked slowly.

"When I realized you had lied about your car. The lie doesn't bother me. It was just that it was such an unnecessary lie. No one cared a damn why you rode a train. Then," I added, "there's the fact that for a guy who never rides trains, you knew too

quick right where to put your hand on the emergency cord."

IT WAS a small office. The tap-dance school across the alley was noisy. But not too noisy. A little guy can get used to anything. Even money.

I said, "Frank Lorrain didn't suicide off the train. He was helped. You waited till Irv Maynard came along, said Frank was missing, put on a good show for Maynard, then pulled the cord. I'm after that piece of change, Eddie."

Ancil got up and paced the floor. I let him take his time. The third time around, he said, "There's not a thing to keep you from moving right in."

"No," I said, "there isn't. Except the fill-in. I've got to have the whole story so I'll know what I'm covering up. Irv Maynard isn't going to worry about Lorrain's gun, but I've got to have the angle on that, too."

Eddie Ancil went to a safe and opened it. He closed it and came back with a sheaf of bills. He said, "Ten years ago, I was a pretty good reporter. I chanced onto a little item that wound up with me owning half of Joe Storey's business. I've had it all for several months now. I don't like to lose it the same way. Take my advice. Play for the money instead of the racket. There's ten thousand. Take all or any part of it."

"Did Lorrain actually see you dispose of the gun for Sam Poss?" I asked.

"I don't know. I was behind Joe's car. Sam passed the gun to me as soon as Joe fell dead. It was my job to get rid of the gun and make it easy for Sam if he was picked up. Anyway, it was my gun."

"If we're going to be partners," I said, "I've got to have the rest of it, so that if it comes back to haunt us, ten, twenty years from now, I'll be ready."

"Lorrain came to me and put the bite on me," Ancil said readily. "I paid for a while, always looking for an angle. I found one. We moved the warehouse. We put on a couple of watchmen. I bought guns for them, got permits, and had them registered. I slipped the gun that had killed Joe in with the others, had the gun registered to Frank Lorrain and the big jerk didn't even tumble

until it was too late. Then I had him where the hair was short."

"Neat," I said. "But you had to keep an eye on Lorrain. You saw him talk to me, maybe overheard a sentence or two and saw the gas chamber staring you right in the face. So you dumped him off the train."

I went over and picked up the money. It felt good between my fingers. It was nine thousand more that I'd ever had before and ten thousand more than I'd ever have again.

Ancil said, "Anything else before we shake hands as partners?"

I laughed. "One thing. The shots at me yesterday morning. I wasn't meant to be killed. You wanted a slug turned in to the Police Ballistics Department that would pull any connection between you and the gun away from you and tie it up to Frank Lorrain. You needed the slug."

"Yes," Ancil admitted readily. "Nothing personal. Sort of a bonus play. There was always the chance Lorrain had told you too much and the chance that you would die."

"I guess that covers everything." I felt the money again. It felt good. Even when the knock sounded on the door, it was still good money.

The door was kicked open. She just stood there, flat-footed, the little .32 Colt held waist high.

E NID LORRAIN didn't say a word. How long she had been standing just outside the door, I wouldn't want to know. She yanked the trigger twice. Glass tinkled off to Ancil's right and the sound of the tinny piano across the alley came in louder once again.

The second one was better. It went into Ancil somewhere high up and I could see him push back a little.

I lunged toward Enid Lorrain. She shook her head at me. "No! Stay back, Al, stay back!"

I went right on in and pushed her back against the door and took the gun away from her. Eddie Ancil's hand was coming out of the drawer. His first shot smacked the wood close to my head. The little Colt bucked pleasantly in my hand.

Ancil took the first slug with a grunt and

triggered the S&W .38 once more. It screamed past my ear. I took aim. A little hole showed just over the bridge of Eddie Ancil's nose.

He went down slow, his fingernails rasping across the desk top. . . .

I talked to Sweeney, on rewrite, and hung up the phone. The sirens were coming across town.

Fists were already knocking on the door I had locked.

Enid Lorrain said, "You can't get away with it, Al, because there's too many holes in it. Why didn't you give Sweeney the truth?"

"I gave him the truth—that Ancil had falsified the gun registration, that he had pushed Lorrain off the train because he feared Lorrain would tie him up with the murder of Joe Storey."

"Then I'll talk to Sweeney myself," she said quickly. The fists pounded on the door again. Enid said, "I came here to kill him. I've known for weeks what Frank had on his mind. Don't you see? Frank was dirty inside. He took money from Ancil to cover up his crime. I knew about it. That makes me bad, too."

"You're a sweet little liar," I said. "You must have followed me here. You heard everything that went on. You got the idea I was going to tie in with Ancil."

"But Frank was a blackmailer."

The fists were louder on the door now. I said, "Look, baby. Maybe he wasn't a hero. But it's down in the books. His story is written. He's dead. His story had a beginning and a middle and an end. Nobody reads the middle when the record says a guy's a hero. Let it lay."

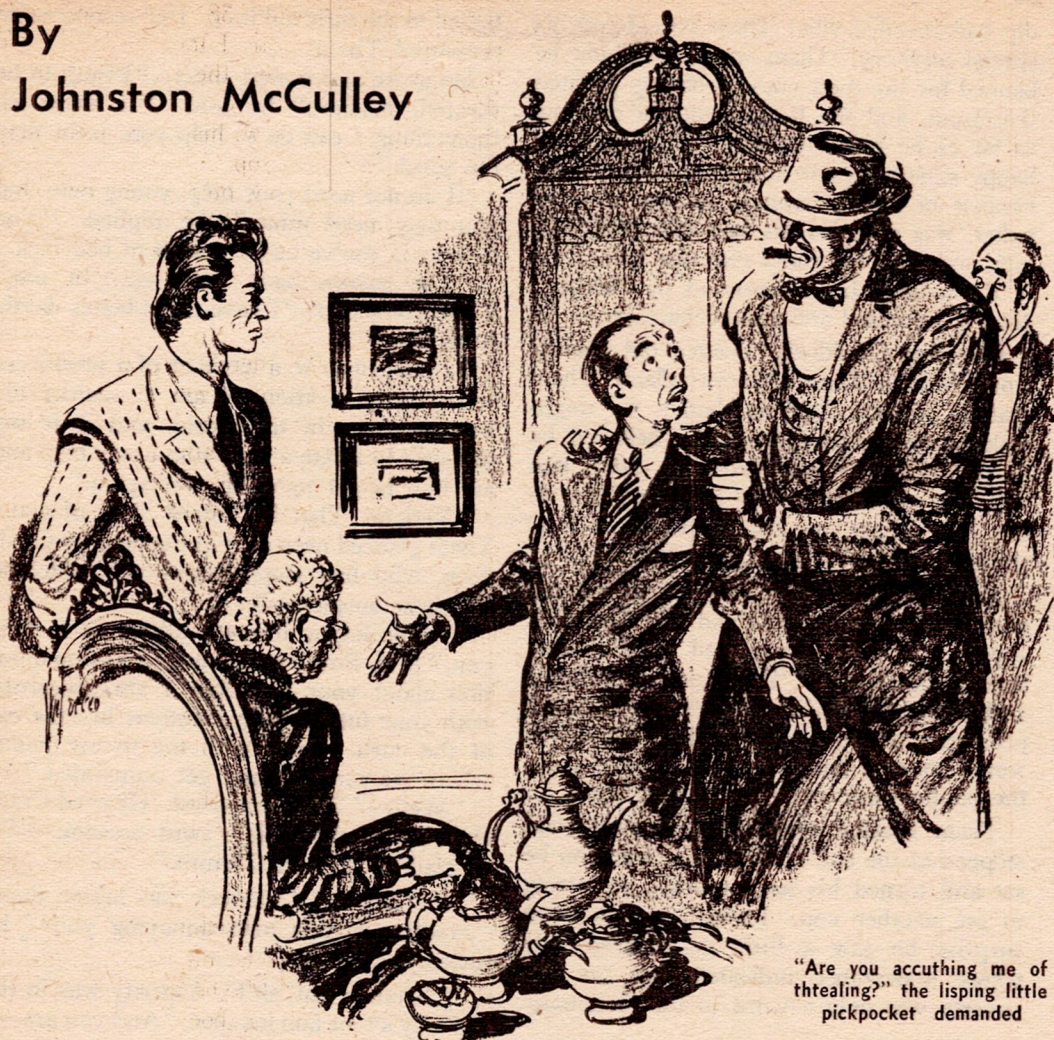
"I think I understand."

I shook my head. "No, you don't, but pretend you do. When you're a hero, what difference does it make where you get it? In the gas chamber, a dive off a fast train, or up a dark alley. I got money in my eyes for a few minutes. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up and started shooting."

"I understand."

Like hell she understood. But I let it lay that way and went over and unlocked the door and let the cops in.

By
Johnston McCulley



THUBWAY THAM'S NITHE OLD LADY

THUBWAY THAM had his worries that morning as he sat on his favorite bench in Madison Square after partaking of a late breakfast. The little pickpocket who lisped and who had earned his nickname by plying his nefarious trade in the subway, was badly disconcerted.

He had learned that a prominent New Yorker had been the victim of a pickpocket while riding in the subway the day before. The haul had been a heavy one, and the victim had complained to the police with considerable vehemence.

Hence, two things worried Tham. Another

● "Stealing from some people is dishonest." ●

—Underworld adage

dip had invaded what Tham considered his special territory. Tham would no doubt be blamed for the theft without having profited therefrom, and the heat would be on now as far as he was concerned. Also, this unhappy situation came at a time when Tham, because of an unfortunate session at draw poker, was down to his last dollar and two bits, and with his room rent due tomorrow in the lodging house operated by "Nosey" Moore, reformed and retired burglar.

Detective Craddock, Tham's old enemy, would be after Tham with eyes aflame. Tham realized bitterly that no denials he might make, however true, would be believed by the flatfoot who had sworn to catch him with the goods some day and send him to the Big House up the river for a long stretch.

As he pondered the situation, he glanced toward Madison Avenue and saw Craddock approaching like an armored tank heading toward the enemy. Tham prepared for a verbal battle in which repartee would be his principal weapon. He hoped Craddock would not take him in for questioning under the painful urgency of kicks and cuffs.

Tham became aware that someone had stopped at the end of the bench whereon he sat and turned his head quickly, expecting to see another cop. Instead, to his great surprise he saw a little gray-haired lady whose appearance indicated that, to her, poverty was only a word in the dictionary.

DIAMONDS gleamed in a brooch at her throat. Her ringed fingers sparkled with gems, and silk rustled when she moved. The delicate scent that was wafted to Tham's nostrils had not been bottled for the five-and-dime trade.

"Pardon me for intruding upon your thoughts, young man," she said, smiling sweetly. "I am Mrs. Sarah Smith. I only wish to talk to you for a few minutes."

Tham was startled. A thing like this had never happened to him before. Always suspicious of everybody, he wondered if the Metropolitan Police now were hiring elderly ladies to do their foul work. All the time Craddock was coming nearer, and argument with Craddock might be postponed if he

talked to the little old lady. Her second smile reassured Tham.

He arose and bowed stiffly. "Pleath to be theated, madam," he said. "If there ith thomething I can do to help you, jutht thay the word."

"I do not need your help, young man, but you may need mine," she replied. "You look as if you've had a season of bad luck."

"The cardth have been againtht me," Tham confessed. "I have theen better dayth, it ith true."

"I happen to be a member of a prominent welfare organization. I am a wealthy old woman alone in the world, and it is my pleasure to locate a man who needs help and aid him to get upon his feet again."

"Yeth'm. That ith indeed nithe of you." Tham glanced nervously at the near-by Craddock, who had stopped and was watching the scene suspiciously.

"I'd be happy if you'd allow me to help you," Mrs. Smith continued. "I ask no question about your past, but I am concerned with your future. My chauffeur has the car at the curb. Come with me to my home, where we can talk and get acquainted."

"Well—" Tham hesitated. He eyed Craddock again and made a swift decision. "I'll be glad to, Mithuth Thmith."

In a moment Craddock was beside them. "Madam, is this man annoying you?" he asked.

"Certainly not, sir!" Asperity was in the old lady's tone and manner. "And you are—"

Craddock showed his badge. "Allow me to inform you, madam, in the line of duty, that this man is a notorious pickpocket and not to be trusted."

Tham moaned. "There it ith! The polithe alwayth hound a man when he ith down and out. It ith true that I wath arrehthted onthe for vagranthy, becauthe I wath found athleep on a park bench. I did not have money enough to go to a flop houthe. Tho, they made me therve thirty dayth, jutht for being poor. Tho I am called a crook, and hounded —" He broke off, and sobbed.

"Why, you—" Craddock began.

Mrs. Smith lifted a restraining hand. "That will do, sir! I have heard of police brutality," she informed Craddock. "I am

Mrs. Sarah Smith, of the Knickerbocker Smiths. The wife of your police commissioner is a fifth cousin of mine. I know what I am doing, sir, and you will do yourself a favor by attending to your own business."

"But this man, known as Thubway Tham—" Craddock persisted.

"If you have a warrant for this man's arrest, serve it," the little old lady interrupted. "Otherwise, you act illegally if you prevent my taking him to my home and ascertaining whether I can help him. Come with me, Mr. Tham."

As she turned away haughtily, Tham and Craddock exchanged a swift glance. Tham's was one of triumph; Craddock's threatened reprisal later.

A LIMOUSINE waited at the curb. A chauffeur held its door open. From it emerged a tall, slender, well dressed man of about thirty, who bowed and smiled at Mrs. Smith, gave Tham a look of disgust, and followed the old lady into the car.

"Get in, Mr. Tham," she ordered.

Tham got into the car and cringed in a seat corner, feeling out of place and uncomfortable. The chauffeur lifted his eyebrows slightly and closed the door. The handsome young man sniffed.

Mrs. Smith introduced them and added: "Mr. Tham, this is Claude Saunders, a protégé of mine. If he is a good boy and studies and works hard, he will be a world famous tenor some day."

"Yeth'm," Tham muttered. His ire was aroused. He did not like Claude, who sniffed at him and whose hair was waved and perfumed and slicked down with some oily substance. Claude looked too smooth to be honest.

Before long the car was stopped before an old-fashioned family mansion reminiscent of New York's era of splendor. Tham followed the others into the house.

During the time immediately following, he was in a daze. A footman led him to a huge bathroom, where Tham was compelled to strip and get into a hot perfumed bath. His shabby clothing was removed by the footman, who also sniffed.

Having performed his ablutions, Tham

was given a robe and sandals and kept waiting until a repast was served him. The strangeness of his surroundings did not impair his appetite. Tham ate well.

Two men arrived, measured him and departed. Later, they returned with clothing. Tham was dressed from the skin outward and supplied with accessories. In a new blue serge suit, Tham felt transformed. He was left alone in the spacious suite, where he paced the floor nervously.

"I feel like thome brat who hath been adopted by rich folkth," he muttered. "Ain't thith thomething! It sure ith a good one on Craddock."

The door opened, and Claude Saunders entered the room and immediately closed the door behind him. With arms akimbo, he inspected Tham, and laughed.

"What a transformation!" he said. "You are scrubbed clean and attired at least half decently. The perceptible odor of musty underwear and clogged pores that clung to you is gone. You look partially human now."

"You are not funny," Tham told him.

"Now, while dear old Aunt Sarah, as all her protégés call her, is having her afternoon nap, we have the time and opportunity for a little conversation."

"Converthation contherning what?" Tham asked.

"Why she picked you up, I do not know—she's liable to be funny about such things. She generally runs to young gentlemen, such as myself, who aspire to be exponents of the cultural arts—you know, singers and poets and such, even painters."

"Mithuth Thmith thaid you were going to be a famouth tenor."

"Such is her quaint belief, my lad," Claude told him. "But that would mean years of hard study, confounded vocal exercises, and all that. Before fame came, my youth would be gone. So I make the most of the circumstances."

"Thuch ath which?" Tham asked.

"Oh, come now, my lad! A good living, fine clothes, pocket money, presents, a chance to meet real people—who am I to toss all that aside? I may even get a chance to impress some wealthy and beautiful young social registerite to the point of matrimony. These

rich old ladies, always wanting to develop genius—you know the sort. Why should we refuse them their fun?"

"Mithuth Thmith ith a nithe old lady," Tham declared, with some indignation.

"She is, indeed. Also a trifle silly."

SAM looked at him curiously. "You mean you are not theriouth about being a great thinger thome day?" he asked.

"I am serious, my lad, about getting what I can while the getting is good. Oh, I have to go to an old nuisance of a vocal coach now and then, but he's fooling her, too, so we understand each other. When I do not wish to vocalize, I merely say I am not in the mood, and she thinks I'm an erratic genius."

"I think you are a thtinker," Tham replied.

"Come, come, now! To business, my lad. Just how are we to get along in this enforced association she has thrust upon us?"

"Talk thenth!"

"Very well. The pickings are good here, lad. You get what you can, and I'll do the same. I know about you. That detective fellow is hanging around the house. He warned me about you, and asked me to warn Aunt Sarah. I play your game, and you play mine. Right?"

"You are a thcoundrel, thir!" Tham declared. "That nithe little old lady—"

"Don't be so noble. I'm not playing a game with you. I mean business. Do we make a deal?"

"We do not!" Tham snapped at him. "I will not thtay in thith houth and dethieve thith nithe little old lady. I will acthept thethe clotheth and a little money if the nithe old lady inthitht, but that ith all. If it giveth her pleathure to help otherth, I am glad. But I will not thwindle her, ath you thay you are doing."

Claude's eyes glittered. "Don't take that line with me, my lad," he warned. "I may be in a position to make things hot for you. Why not play the game with me? A lot of valuable things can be picked up around here and would probably never be missed. I know how to pick them up. You, with your outside connections, know how to market

them. If we're clever, we can gather ample feathers for our nests."

"You talk like a crook," Tham remarked. "And you—a man like you—thniffed at me!"

"So it's no deal? All right! Run and tell Aunt Sarah what I've been saying—"

"I am no thtool pigeon," Tham interrupted. "But I will tell you thith—I like the old lady. And if you pull any funny thtuff here while I am around, I will ecopthe you to her."

"Fine talk from a pickpocket!"

"No dethent dip would rob a nithe old lady," Tham said. "You are worthe than any profethional crook alive. Thuppothe you get out of here and thtop thtinking up the room."

Claude's eyes narrowed to slits and burned with rage. He turned toward the door.

"I'll make you pay plenty for this, you cheap dip," he threatened and went out, slamming the door.

Tham paced around his suite while his anger cooled. He went into the bedchamber and opened the drawers to inspect his new haberdashery. There was more new clothing than he ever had owned at one time before.

But he did not like this setup and wanted to be out and away. The kind little old lady never could put him on his feet, he knew. He was no talented young man whose feet should be directed along the path to fame at a benefactor's expense. He knew he was out of place here. The nice old lady made an error in judgment in his case, and Tham was honest enough to admit it.

He was not the sort to live in ease at the expense of Mrs. Sarah Smith and give nothing but deception in return, as Claude Saunders evidently was doing.

"I may be a crook, but I am an honeth one," he muttered as he returned to the living room of the suite.

A KNOCK on the door preceded the austere gray-haired butler. Tham observed that the man was still sniffing.

"Madam desires your immediate presence in the library. Follow me, please," the butler said.

Tham followed down a long hall to a door where the butler stopped and knocked. The

voice of Mrs. Smith called for him to enter. The butler opened the door and announced, "Mr. Tham, madam," sniffed again, and closed the door behind Tham.

The first thing Tham saw was Mrs. Smith, sitting in a huge chair beside a reading table. The second thing was Craddock.

The detective's face was stern. He glared at Tham, then glanced at Mrs. Smith.

"Young man, you look splendid in that blue suit," she praised Tham. "The outfitters did a splendid job. I sent for you to have tea and a talk with me. But this Detective Craddock insists that he question you concerning something first."

"I want to ask him about a little pick-pocket stunt that occurred in the subway yesterday," Craddock declared. "A certain well known citizen had his wallet lifted. The wallet contained a considerable amount of currency. Since it is well known, Tham, that the subway is your hunting ground—"

"Honesthly, Craddock, I did not have anything to do with it," Tham protested. "I wath at Nothey Moore'th lodging houthe almotht all day."

"Nosey's word wouldn't amount to much as an alibi with the police," Craddock reminded him.

"I had leth than two dollarth on me when Mithuth Thmith found me in Madithon Thquare and brought me here," Tham said.

"You're too wise a crook to flush a roll right after a job. But you could have hidden it for future use."

"I tell you I am innothent!" Tham cried. "Tho I am being hounded again jutht becauth I am poor. If I could afford to hire a rich mouthpiece, you wouldn't dare acuthe me."

"Mr. Craddock, I believe that Mr. Tham is speaking the truth," Mrs. Smith put in. "You will please refrain from annoying him further in my home."

"Very well, Mrs. Smith," Craddock stood up. He was gripping his derby hat with such hot rage that he was bending the brim. "Tham, I've phoned for a relief. This house is going to be watched while you are in it, and you'll be tailed when you leave it."

"Kindly remember, Mr. Craddock, that my fifth cousin's husband is the police com-

missioner," Mrs. Smith reminded him.

"I am only doing my duty. This man is a crook, a dip. We know it. We haven't caught him with the goods yet. But we'll keep after him. We'll make him account for every dollar he spends. As a last resort, we'll take him in for vagrancy. Well—"

"Kinkly leave my house at once!" Mrs. Smith interrupted, angrily. "If you do not, I'll complain personally to my fifth cousin's husband that you were insolent to me."

Craddock glared at Tham, bowed to Mrs. Smith, and left.

"Now, Mr. Tham, we'll have tea, and talk," Mrs. Smith said.

"I never touch the thtuff," Tham told her.

"We'll talk, at least."

She furnished Tham with cigarettes and talked for almost an hour, while she drank tea and ate muffins.

"Talking to you has been most refreshing," she said finally. "I must think on your problem. Perhaps a gift of ready funds would be beneficial. You could move to new surroundings, make new acquaintances, get an honest job. I'd make it my business to see that the police did not annoy you. Please return to your rooms and remain there until I have made some decision."

Tham wandered through the hall and back to the rooms assigned to him. He wanted to get out of this, he told himself. He wished the little old lady would give him ten or twenty dollars and tell him to take his new clothes and go. He would contrive to dodge the vengeful Craddock somehow.

He felt for a handkerchief and found he had neglected to put one into his pocket. So he went into the bedchamber and began opening drawers and looking at his new personal furnishings. He got a handkerchief and continued looking.

Here was enough haberdashery to last him a long time. Underwear, shirts, socks, neckties—the whole works. Simply wearing the new clothes he had on now braced his morale.

HE BEGAN examining the stock. Suddenly his eyes glittered, and his breath came quicker. From beneath a pile of new socks he had unearthed something he knew

had not been there when he had left to go to the library.

A sheaf of currency, folded once neatly and fastened with a silver money clip—that was the first thing. Tham leafed through the currency quickly—two hundred in twenties. The second thing was wrapped loosely in one of his new handkerchieves—a string of pearls.

Tham was no expert on pearls, but it did not take an expert to realize that here was the real article. Worth a small fortune, Tham decided. The pearls—and the money—here in the drawer where some of his new clothes were stored—

If he were found with the money and pearls in his possession, he would be accused of grand larceny. Prison doors would yawn for him. A trap, Tham decided. Claude Saunders' trap! The suave young man with the waved and perfumed hair had threatened to get even.

Tham tried to think, but his brain seemed unable to function. In the distance, he heard the shrill voice of the nithe old lady, the sound of running feet, excited ejaculations—a regular tumult.

Tham hurried into the front room after closing the dresser drawer. His right hand gripped pearls and currency. He looked around wildly, wondering where he could put the stuff so it would not be found while he remained in the house. It was hot stuff. Big stuff. No small time pocket-picking stuff.

A thunderous knock came on the door, and Tham whirled toward it.

"Yeth?" he called.

"Open up!" It was Craddock's voice.

Panic seized Tham as he saw the door-knob turn. All he had time to do was thrust the money and pearls into his right coat pocket.

Craddock opened the door and entered. Behind him were the butler and footman. They rushed toward Tham with such violence that Tham backed up against a table.

"What ith all thith?" he demanded.

"You'll find out," Craddock roared at him. "I thought you'd make a slip one of these days, Tham. Didn't think a cheap, sniveling runt of a dip like you could see wealth scat-

tered around without trying to grab some of it."

"Are you crathy, Craddock?" Tham demanded. "You make a lot of noithe but you don't thay anything."

"Come right along with us," Craddock ordered, grabbing Tham's left arm.

He compelled Tham to walk rapidly along the hall, and the butler and footman came behind them. The library door was standing open, and they entered. Mrs. Sarah Smith, plainly distraught, sat beside the table in her easy chair. Claude Saunders stood beside her, his manner solicitous.

"There, there, Auntie Sarah," Claude Saunders was saying. "We'll soon get at the truth of this. It was fortunate that this detective was in front of the house, waiting to be relieved by another."

"What ith all thith?" Tham asked again.

"Mr. Tham, I hate to think I have been mistaken in the character of a human being," the little old lady said. "It wounds me deeply and almost makes me lose faith." She dabbed at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief.

"This is it, Tham," Craddock grumbled. "All at once, Mrs. Smith finds that the wall safe in her bedchamber has been rifled. A pearl necklace, some diamond rings and other articles are gone. With a man like you here in the house— Is there any reason to go on?"

"Are you accuthing me of thtealing from Mithuth Thmith?" Tham demanded angrily. "When Mithuth Thmith gave me new clotheth and wath kind to me? What thort of thtinker do you think I am?"

"Just the sort who'd do such a thing," Craddock replied. "Going to confess, Tham, or must I go to work on you?"

THAM threw out his hands in a gesture of appeal.

"How could I have done it, Craddock? When could I have done it? Have thome thenthe."

"You had plenty of chance to prow around the house," the detective pointed out.

"I did not. After I had thomething to eat, and drethed in my new thuit and all, Mithuth Thmith thent for me to come here. You know that, Craddock. You wath here when

I came with the butler."

"You had a chance to wander around before you were brought here," Craddock persisted. "Mrs. Smith says she opened the wall safe to get something out of it, but did not turn the knob and lock it afterward. It wouldn't have taken you long to open the safe and take what you wanted. Talk up, you rat!"

"Wait a minute!" Tham cried. "Why pick on me? I am not the only perthion in thith houthe."

He felt sure that Claude Saunders had laid a trap for him. One small bundle of cash and a string of pearls—that was all Tham had found. What of the other money and jewelry Craddock had mentioned as having been taken?

"You're the only person in the house who comes under suspicion," Craddock was saying.

"I wath in here talking to Mithuth Thmith for thome time," Tham pointed out. "While Mithuth Thmith wath having tea and other thtuff. Where wath thith Claude Thaund-erth at the time?"

"Saunders? You rat, he's a sort of adopted son of Mrs. Smith."

"Even tho" Tham said. "He came to my roomth and thaid Mithuth Thmith wath taking her nap. While thee wath doing that, he could have robbed the thafe. Or, he could have done it while Mithuth Thmith wath talking to me tho long in here."

Claude lurched forward. "Officer, manacle the rogue and get him away from here," he thundered at Craddock. "Trying to accuse me of stealing from the dear lady who is doing so much to further my career! I went to his room, yes. To see if he was comfortable. And he tried to ask a hundred questions about Mrs. Smith and the house. He half hinted that he could sell anything I could steal and give him. I was going to tell Mrs. Smith of the conversation after dinner this evening. I did not want to upset dear Aunt Sarah before dinner, a meal she enjoys so much. I thought I'd warn the butler and have the servants watch this fellow until in the morning."

"You are a liar!" Tham screeched and hurled himself forward. Before Craddock or

either of the men servants could interfere, he had grabbed Claude and tried to shove him around. Claude, larger and stronger, hurled Tham back against the wall. Tham grabbed his arms, his lapels, fought to be free. Then Craddock took over.

"I did not thteal anything," Tham sobbed. "Thearch me, Craddock! Thearch Claude, too!"

"I'll search you right here and now," Craddock said, slapping Tham back against the wall again. "But you've hidden the loot in the house, no doubt."

He searched well and found nothing but a handkerchief, an old penknife, and the small change Tham had possessed when Mrs. Smith had accosted him in Madison Square. "Where is it?" Craddock demanded.

"Talk fast!"

"Wait a moment, Officer!" Mrs. Smith called. "Let us be fair. Mr. Tham has cast suspicion upon Mr. Saunders, so please search him, too."

Claude smirked and held his hands high. "Certainly," he said.

"Just for the record," Craddock said, smiling.

He began going through Claude's coat pockets. There was no need to go on from there, for he brought out currency fastened in a silver money clip and a string of pearls.

"My pearls! My money clip!" Mrs. Smith exclaimed. "So you did it, Claude! Oh, how could you? After all I was trying to do for you—" She dabbed with the handkerchief again.

CLAUDE SAUNDERS looked dumfounded. He gulped as he looked at the pearls and currency in Craddock's hand. Tham had reeled back against the wall and was straightening his disarranged clothing.

"You thee?" he gloated to Craddock. "Alwayth ready to blame me for everything, that ith you!"

"I'm not done with you," Craddock said. "I can't understand this. Where's the rest of the swag? I'll search your rooms mighty good, Tham. I know your tricks."

"Thuch ath?" Tham questioned.

Craddock opened his mouth to reply. He knew that a clever dip, wrestling with

another man could easily take something out of that man's pocket—or put something into it.

"Let us end this farce," Mrs. Smith said suddenly.

"Yes, it is a farce," Saunders agreed. "That money and Aunt Sarah's pearls—I don't know how they came to be in my coat. It's a farce to think I stole from Aunt Sarah, though."

"Claude, I know all," Mrs. Smith said. "I may be a silly old woman in some things, but not in everything. I am willing to aid a young man I think might have a brilliant future, but I want to be sure he is honest and loyal."

"But I am true and honest and loyal to you, Aunt Sarah!"

"Oh, tut, tut!" Mrs. Smith said. "My butler and footman have been with me for years and are trustworthy. They have been watching Mr. Tham every minute since he came into this house. They have told me that Mr. Tham did not go prowling around and that no one went into his rooms except you, Claude—until this detective went there when I called him in from the street and explained about the theft."

"I—I don't understand," Claude stammered.

"Also it may interest you to know, Claude, that I have a couple of tape recorders and microphones cleverly hidden. I have missed some valuable articles recently and had my suspicions. Claude, I have a nice tape recording of your recent conversation with Mr. Tham, when you tried to get him to assist you in robbing me and threatened to have revenge when he called you a soundrel. My estimation of Mr. Tham was not wrong, but my estimation of you was, Claude. Tell me where you have hidden the rest of the swag, as the detective calls it, then pack up and get out. Because it would cause me a measure of notoriety, I shall not prosecute this time."

An hour later, Thubway Tham was alone with Mrs. Sarah Smith in the library.

"Perhaps it is best, Mr. Tham," she was saying. "You are not quite the sort I want

for a protégé and you would be uncomfortable here with me. But do try to be honest hereafter. Keep the two hundred dollars in the money clip, and do not forget me. If you ever need help, come to me. If that detective annoys you, let me know, and I'll take up the matter with my fifth cousin's husband."

"Yeth'm," Tham said.

"I have had your new clothes packed in an old trunk, and the butler has called a taxi. Take the clothes home with you."

SO, a few moments later Tham was in front of the place, waiting for the taxi.

"Anyhow, I did the nithe old lady a ther-vithe," he was telling Craddock.

"You certainly did," Craddock agreed.

"Anyone could tell by looking at that Claude Saunders that he was a rat. If I ever get anything on him— But don't grin at me, Tham. That little wrestling match you put on with Claude—Well I know what your nimble fingers did then."

"Potbibly tho," Tham said.

"If you slipped those pearls and that money into Claude's pocket as you wrestled him, where did you first get the stuff?"

"Let uth thay that potbibly thomebody planted them in my room while I wath in the library talkin to the nithe old lady."

"It was that tape recording that saved you," Craddock reminded him. "You were honest with Mrs. Smith, at least. But watch your step, my lad, after that money is gone. Your nimble fingers will start itching again then."

Tham's face was inscrutable. The taxi stopped, the driver got the small steamer trunk containing Tham's new clothes aboard, and Tham got into the cab.

"Pardon me, Craddock," he said. "May I give you a lift thomewhere?"

"On your way, lad, or I'll give you a lift—with the toe of my right shoe," Craddock answered.

"In that cathe, you could get into trouble with the huthband of the fifth couthin of Mithuth Thmith," Thubway Tham reminded him.

by Harold Helfer

GOOD FRIEND



ON the evening of October 20, 1924, in Tazewell, Tennessee, Dr. E. J. McDaniel, the town's dentist, was walking down the street when a Dodge car drove up alongside him and five shots rang out. Dr. McDaniel was killed almost instantly, and the car sped away.

Everything happened so fast that startled witnesses could tell police only one thing: The make of the car.

But, as far as the officers were concerned, that was clue enough. For one of the persons in town who turned out to own a Dodge was Bailey Manning, the garageman. He was a brother-in-law of the slain dentist and gossip had it that he had been unusually friendly with the murdered man's wife. As if to back this up, gossip also had it that Manning and his wife did not get along.

Guilty—as Charged

Manning, protesting his innocence, said he'd been walking down another street in town by himself at the time of the shooting, but it wasn't much of an alibi, and a jury found him guilty. He was sentenced to twenty-years in the penitentiary.

The garageman seemed to take it hard, but one thing appeared to cheer him up more than anything else. It was the way a neigh-

bor, Jim Willis, had stuck by him.

Many acquaintances had turned their backs on the convicted murderer. But Jim Willis stuck by Manning through the thick and thin of it, never seeming to doubt his innocence despite the overwhelming circumstantial evidence against him.

When they were taking the garageman off to prison, Willis called out to him. "Stick it out. Everything will be all right."

This seemed to revive, at least temporarily, the sagging spirits of the convicted slayer.

Vindication

Some four years later the prophecy of the convicted man's friend came true.

A man was grievously wounded in a shooting scrape and, as death inched along, summoned a lawyer, L. D. Smith. The man then confessed that he had had a long-standing grudge against Dr. McDaniel, and that he was the one who had shot the dentist down on that fatal evening.

So Bailey Manning was given a full pardon and the doors of the penitentiary opened for him, with the apologies of the state.

And who was the man who had confessed to the murder for which Manning had taken the rap?

Good friend Jim Willis.

THE TRUE STORY OF AN IRONIC MYSTERY



THE TWISTED TREE

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

The evil silence that hung over the Jarvis house was broken only by the voice of the thorn tree, crying out for blood!

THE THIRD morning after their arrival at Barlow House, Loyde Jarvis found his bride, Ellen, standing on the wrought-iron balcony. She was wearing a flowered-print housecoat, cheerful enough in itself, but which failed entirely to conceal the dejected stoop of Ellen's shoulders.

Her head was turned slightly away from him, looking at the thorn tree that crowded the painted brick wall of the south wing. She didn't hear his footsteps as he came up behind her.

Loyde Jarvis reached out a hand and touched his wife's shoulder. She jerked around as though she had been bitten, shrank back against the iron rail, her breast rising and falling rapidly.

"Loyde!" she gasped. Then she was in his arms, clinging close to him and sobbing.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his voice strained and anxious.

His nerves weren't any too good. The party at the country club the night before had been late and liquid; there was a taste of brass in his mouth.

"You—you frightened me," she sobbed, her voice muffled because her mouth was crowded against the shoulder of his dressing gown. "I was looking at the thorn tree. It's a horrid thing, isn't it?"

"Horrid?"

There was a slight inflection in his voice that made the word a question rather than a complete endorsement of her chosen adjective. The thorn tree *was* horrid—grotesque, misshapen, monstrous, and horrible.

"Yes," she said. "It's horrid."

"It's the largest thorn tree I've ever seen," Loyde said.

He looked across at the gnarled and twisted branches with their cruel barbs scarcely hidden by the waxy green leaves, as artificial-looking as painted canvas.

"What's horrible about it?" he asked, largely from curiosity and perhaps because he felt disagreeable.

"I don't know," she said. "Its shape, I suppose. And then the fact that it's covered with dead grasshoppers impaled on the thorns by the shrikes."

"The butcher-bird has to eat," Loyde said. "The place has been infested with shrikes ever since Perry and I planted the tree. Rapacious little murderer, the shrike."

"It's horrid," Ellen said. "What in the world ever made you and Perry plant such a tree for?"

"Oran Barlow loved trees," Loyde said. "There wasn't a thorn tree on the place. My brother and I wanted to surprise him when he came back from his ocean voyage. But he never came back."

"He was lost at sea?" she asked.

"We don't know," Loyde told her. He was looking through the lovely golden mist the morning sun made of Ellen's hair, toward the twisted tree.

ELLEN released herself from Loyde's arms and backed to the iron railing of the balcony. Her deep blue eyes jerked from one part of her surroundings to another. She



The thorn tree was reaching out for me, its claws raking the window pane

was like a trapped beast, searching for a break in a net.

"It's not just the thorn tree," she said. "It's the whole terrible place. I had no idea it would be like this. I always thought old houses were beautiful. But these gray brick walls, the mansard roof with its rusty iron

trim, and that hideous iron deer over there with the hole rusted in its head." Ellen spread her hands in an appealing movement. "Don't you see, Loyde, that I'm young? Everything here is old and decayed. Take the trees. Nothing but the thorn tree is really alive. The other trees are eaten with

decay, hosts for fungi. It isn't life—it's an awful mockery of life. Then there's the ugly humor of that fence."

Loyde Jarvis looked at the fence that surrounded the Barlow place. It did need painting. Aside from that, what was wrong with it?

Ellen laughed stridently. She looked at her husband's face, lean and hard, except for the puffs under his eyes.

"Don't you see the absurdity of the fence? It's so high. There are spikes at the top. As though anyone would actually *want* to come in!"

"Oran Barlow loved this place," Loyde Jarvis said. "It represented achievement to him, a man whom nature would have destined for obscurity. The fence was the moat around his castle."

"He was a cripple, wasn't he?" Ellen asked, the taut muscles of her face relaxing a little.

"More than that," Loyde replied as he lighted a before-breakfast cigarette. "He came up from nothing in spite of his physical handicap. He was a hunchback with twisted legs and arms—"

"A crooked gnome of a man," Ellen cut in, "with twisted limbs, like that thorn tree."

Loyde looked toward the tree, and Ellen watched him.

"You're afraid of it, too," she said, her voice husky. "Don't say you're not. I saw you shudder. The thorn tree affects you just as it does me."

"Afraid?" he said. "Don't be a silly little goose!"

"You are! Look at it. It writhes. It's like a nest of serpents. And it moves, Loyde."

"That's nonsense."

"Yes, it moves. It grows. Where everything else rots to the roots, the thorn tree thrives and stretches out its twisted arms and spiny hands, clutching at you, clutching at the house—"

Loyde Jarvis reached out long arms. His hands closed on Ellen's shoulders. He shook her.

"Stop that," he said levelly. "I don't want you to talk this way again. Keep still about the tree."

She looked into Loyde's puffy eyes. Her lower lip trembled.

"I didn't mean to quarrel," she said quietly. "But why must we stay here, if I hate the place so? You've all the money in the world. I'm not a gold-digger. A little cottage would be all right. I don't mind living in a small town. Only I want to get clear on the other side of the town, entirely away from this place."

"We can't do that," Loyde said. "We don't know definitely that Oran Barlow is dead."

"He's been missing ten years. He's legally dead. You and Perry exercise full control over the money. You and Perry were the only ones named in the will. You told me that yourself."

"You don't understand," he said. "We owe Oran Barlow too much, dead or alive. He acted as guardian for us when we were left without a relative in the world."

Ellen's fine lips twisted into an ugly little sneer.

"And you owe more to a dead man, a twisted little hunchback, than you do to your wife!"

Loyde Jarvis didn't have any answer. He simply looked at this beautiful woman and shook his head. After a while, he put one arm tenderly about her.

"Come in to breakfast, dear. Everything will seem brighter after you've had your coffee. The party was too much for both of us."

She jerked away from his arm.

"If I eat breakfast, it will be in some other room than the dining room."

Loyde Jarvis looked at the thorn tree and understood. The gnarled trunk, with its lower branches squirming out toward the house, stood close to the dining room window. He shrugged, crossed to the french windows, and entered the house alone.

DOWNSTAIRS in the dining room, Loyde's older brother, Perry, had finished his breakfast, which consisted always of grapefruit and coffee. He was in the act of making his first visit to the whiskey decanter when Loyde entered.

Perry was a small man. Forty years had taken their toll from the black hair on his

head. He had bright, greedy little eyes, a small quirk of a mouth. As Loyde sat down at the table without a word of greeting for his brother, Perry turned, whiskey glass in hand.

"I told you not to bring her here," he said, smiling sardonically.

Loyde looked up, one eyebrow raised. "Eavesdropping?"

"Eavesdropping just enough to hear your Ellen say she didn't care for the thorn tree."

"She wants to move," Loyde said. "It's the tree."

"And you explained to her, did you, that we had to stay here and rot, had to stay and watch old Oran's wealth until he comes back?"

"I did," Loyde said coldly.

Perry Jarvis went over to the dining room window and stood there, his hands thrust into his pockets. The spiny branches of the tree clawed the glass in the fresh morning wind. The thorns made a screeching sound on the panes. Perry Jarvis' attitude was almost one of defiance, as though the thorn tree were a monster that he had once feared but which now was caged.

"She doesn't like the tree, Ellen doesn't," he mused. "Your wife and I are not going to agree, Loyde. Why," he added, a faint note of sarcasm coming into his voice, "I love the old thorn tree. Don't you, Loyde?"

"Love it?"

Startled, Loyde dropped his knife with a clatter on his plate. Then there was that silence with which the old house seemed to be clothed, unbroken except by the screech of thorny claws on the window.

"No," Loyde said, "I don't love it."

Perry chuckled, stopped suddenly as the servant entered.

"It's Dale Witcomb, sir," the man said, addressing Loyde.

"Who?" Loyde frowned.

"Dale Witcomb, Mr. Barlow's old gardener, sir. He was here yesterday about the drainage tiles around the house. Worked all day, fixing them. I think he wants to be paid."

"Bring him in," Loyde said.

He put down his untasted toast, narrowed his puffy eyes on his brother.

"Did you have old Witcomb work on those tiles, Perry?"

"Yes," Perry said with a nod. "The water was seeping into the basement. There were roots in the tiles and he cleaned them out. Roots from the thorn tree."

Dale Witcomb, a stooped, gray-haired man in faded blue overalls, came into the dining room, his felt hat wadded up in his gnarled hands. Mouth open, he looked around the room with all its ancient, faded grandeur. Only when Loyde rapped impatiently on his coffee cup did the gardener bring eyes that were as faded as his overalls to bear upon the younger of the two brothers.

"Cleaned out them tiles yesterday, Mr. Loyde," Witcomb said. "Thorn tree got its roots right in and stopped things up. Shouldn't wonder if that ain't the trouble with the drainage sewer out in the street. Thorn tree roots spread around some, they do."

"How much do you want?" Loyde asked.

"'Bout five dollars, if that's all right with you."

"Pay him," Loyde said to his brother.

"There's some other work ought to be done," Witcomb said as he took the money from Perry Jarvis.

"What?" Loyde asked.

"There's a whole army of little old bugs on the thorn tree. Maybe you ain't noticed. They ain't aphids, but they ain't doing the tree no good, sir. You wouldn't want the thorn tree to die, would you?"

"Die?" Loyde said dully. "No, I guess we wouldn't."

"I thought not," Whitcomb said. "So I figured on spraying the tree for you, if you want me to."

"Go ahead."

"And prune it some?"

"No," Loyde said, looking sharply at his brother. "We don't want you to prune it."

The old gardener smiled. "Well, if it ain't pruned, one of these days you'll find old Mr. Thorn Tree just pushing one of his arms right through the wall, Mr. Loyde."

"We don't want it pruned," Perry cut in. "That's the trouble with most of the trees around here. To much pruning. You see that the thorn tree gets the spray. We can't

have it dying. But don't prune it." He laughed unpleasantly, then added: "The thorn tree just has to live. My brother and I love it. It represents all the finer things of life to us, doesn't it, Loyde?"

Loyde grunted.

Witcomb waited a moment, twisting his hat. Then he bowed to each of the brothers in turn and left the room.

THE following Wednesday night, Loyde was in the library working on the ledger in which he kept careful account of the vast wealth of the missing Oran Barlow, when Ellen came running into the room, her lovely face contorted by fear.

"Loyde!" she sobbed. "Oh, my God!"

Loyde Jarvis got to his feet and gathered his wife into his arms.

"Darling, what's the matter with you?" he asked gently, and held her close while she sobbed. "Dear one, you can't go on this way. These hysterical outbursts—why, the servants will think I married a feeble-minded person."

"The—the thorn tree," she whispered. "Oh, I know you told me not to mention it again. I've tried not to, not because you have any right to tell me what to say and what not, but because I wanted to please you."

His arms tightened about her, hurting her with their pressure. She looked up at him with tear-bright eyes.

"Loyde, the tree—I've got to tell you!"

He looked down at her, and his face was a little pale, his lips drawn into a narrow line.

"What about the tree?" he asked.

"It moved, Loyde. It moved one of its—its arms. I was in the dining room, looking at some of the lovely old china. Outside, there wasn't a breath of air, and it was silent in the house until I heard a faint strangled cry. I looked toward the window. The thorn tree was reaching out for me. Its claws clutched, raked down the window pane."

"The wind," he said. "It was only the wind. Listen." He held up a hand. "Don't you hear the wind, Ellen?"

But there was no wind. Only silence in the house, an ever rising tide of silence that seemed to flow into gaps of sound that living

noises made.

Ellen's frightened eyes toured the large room, looked out beyond the circle of lamp-light that never quite reached the somber walls of books.

"It moved," she whispered. "The tree reached for me with its crippled limbs."

"Ellen!" Loyde's voice was sharp, imperative.

Then the tide of silence filled the hole his voice had made. There was no wind in the night. Loyde knew there was no wind. He hated wind because the gnarled branches of the thorn tree rubbed and made groaning sounds when the wind blew. Loyde's ears were always keenly tuned to the groaning of the tree.

"Loyde," Ellen said finally, "I love you. I think you love me, in your own selfish way. You love to possess me. You're proud that I'm not ugly. I want to stay with you because I love you. I think I could learn to love this house and all the old things in it. It isn't a hideous place from the inside. But the garden and grounds—can't you have the old rotten trees cut down? Can't you cut down the thorn tree, too?"

"Ellen, you're letting your imagination get away with you," he said, his voice gentle. "The thorn tree isn't a lovely thing. But it's the only tree left on that side of the house. There wouldn't be any shade—"

"Loyde," she interrupted, "there's a barrier grown up between us. I can't creep into your heart. I can't because of the thorns. It's the thorn tree, isn't it? The thorn tree between you and me. That's it. I can see it in your eyes. The tree! That twisted, crippled tree!"

Loyde Jarvis clutched Ellen's shoulders, the curve between thumb and forefinger so close to her throat that he could feel the rapid beating of her pulse. Ellen's eyes searched his face frantically. Her jaw sagged. As the grip on her shoulders relaxed, she moved away from him slowly, step by step.

"You wanted to strangle me," she said huskily.

"Ellen, don't be a fool!" Loyde said.

"I'll not be a fool!" she said and laughed tautly. "No, I'll not be a fool, Loyde Jarvis!"

She turned and ran away from him. That

night she slept in one of the guest rooms, her door locked. That night the twisted tree claimed its first victim.

LOYDE came down to breakfast alone the next morning. He hadn't slept, and his red-rimmed eyes showed it. He ordered strong coffee from the servant and drank four cups of it, black. His tired eyes kept drifting toward the window where the thorn tree shut out nearly all the light of a gray, damp day. He was asking for his fifth cup of coffee, when the old-fashioned spring gong on the front door set up a raucous clamor.

"Smithson!" Loyde called to the servant. "Smithson, answer the door and stop that racket, for the love of heaven!"

The servant took his hand from the turn-spout of the coffee urn, put down his master's cup, and hastened to answer the door. A shrill masculine voice demanded to see Loyde Jarvis. Loyde threw down his napkin, pushed back from the table, and went into the hall.

The milkman stood in the open door. His metal basket of bottles jangled in his nervous hands. His face was as white as the overalls he wore.

"It—it—it's Mr. Perry Jarvis, Mr. Loyde," the milkman stammered.

"You want to talk to my brother?" Loyde asked.

"No. Lord, no, Mr. Jarvis. Your—your brother's in the tree. I was bringing the milk around to the back door when I saw him. He's up in the thorn tree! I think—I think he's bad hurt. I called to him, and he didn't move."

Loyde's face became the gray of ashes. Long strides carried him across the hall. He brushed the milkman aside, went out the front door, down the steps to the walk that was overgrown with moss. He rounded the house, looked toward the thorn tree.

He saw the pajama-clad figure of Perry Jarvis sprawled out across twisted branches of the thorn tree, seemingly locked in the deadly embrace of twisted limbs! Perry was face down. Thorns had pierced the flesh of face and hands. Thorns had needled through the flimsy cloth of his pajamas, drawing blood that had stained the ugly green leaves darkly.

Above the thorn tree, the casement and screen of Perry's bedroom window were wide open. It was easy to see what had happened. Perry, drunk as he usually was by bedtime, had staggered to the low window, flung it wide, lost his balance, and tumbled into the tree. Perry had a bad heart; drink had given him that. The shock of the fall had killed him.

It was Perry's fall into the tree that had made the branches claw against the dining room window the night before. Ellen had thought the tree moved, but actually it was Perry, falling into the tree.

Loyde turned, moved woodenly back to the front door of the house. The milkman was standing on the front steps.

"I want to call Dale Witcomb," Loyde said. "I want him to come and bring a pruning hook. I want to get my brother down. He's dead. My brother's dead."

The milkman went on his way. He told the town marshal, but by the time the law had arrived, Dale Witcomb had pulled Perry Jarvis' body down from the tree. He had used a long-handled pruning hook so as not to tear his hands on the thorns. With the hook he had literally torn Perry Jarvis down to the ground. Thorns had riddled the dead man's pajamas. Thorns had raked bloody tracks across the flesh, all but torn one eye from its socket.

All the while, Loyde Jarvis sat in the library, his fingers toying with a paper knife, his eyes staring unblinkingly at the wall. Ellen came to the door of the library and stood there, her golden hair disheveled. The only color in her face was the rouge on her full lips.

FOR a long time she looked at her husband. He did not turn his head away from the wall, did not start when she spoke to him.

"I told you it was a living thing, that tree," she said huskily. "Perhaps now you will believe. The tree stretched out its limbs for Perry, took him into its deathly embrace. That is what happened. It isn't what the police say at all."

"The police?" Loyde said dully. "What do they say?"

"They say that Perry was pushed from the window. They say he was deliberately

pushed. There are fingerprints in Perry's room. There are bluish marks on Perry's throat. Someone took Perry by the back of the neck and pushed him out of the window."

"I don't believe that," Loyde said.

"Neither do I. It was the tree, wasn't it?"

"No," Loyde said. "It was Perry's bad heart. He fell from the window, and the shock killed him."

The town marshal had nothing better to offer than Loyde's explanation—that Perry had fallen from the window. The fingerprints proved to be those of the cleaning woman who came to the Barlow place during the day. She had been in her own home all that night and could prove it. The marks on the back of Perry's neck could have been made when he struck one of the branches in falling. If he had been pushed, there was no way of proving it.

"Now," Ellen said to Loyde that evening after they had returned from the undertaker's where arrangements had been made for the funeral, "now will you cut down the thorn tree?"

Loyde shook his head.

"Shut up about the tree," he said. "It has become an obsession with you."

Ellen sighed and went up to one of the guest rooms. Loyde heard her lock the door. Did she think he had murdered his own brother? Or was she trying to force him to cut down the thorn tree?

That night there was wind. The twisted limbs of the thorn tree rubbed one against the other and gave the tree voice that sometimes groaned and sometimes shrilled like a tortured soul. The voice of the tree kept Loyde awake. He got out of bed, pulled on a bathrobe, went down to the dining room, turned on the light.

He went to the window, stood there with his hands pressed against the panes, and looked out at the tree. In the light from the window, he could see one thorny branch that clawed at the glass. Three dead grasshoppers, impaled on thorns by the shrikes, had been half torn away by the sharp bill of the butcher bird.

"Damn you!" Loyde whispered. "You twisted devil! Damn you!"

Yet he dared not destroy the tree. His span

of life was measured by those writhing branches. . . .

Two days after Perry's funeral, Ben Harper, City Engineer, called at the Barlow house to see Loyde. Harper was a cheerful, heavy-set man with laughing blue eyes. His pleasant countenance was as out of place in the somber hall of the old house as the polished leather boots he planted on the luxuriant carpets.

"City wants to do you a favor, Mr. Jarvis," he said, chewing on the bit of an unlighted pipe. "But we ought to have your permission to do it."

"That's gratifying," Loyde said. Harper's good humor was contagious. "I've often considered burning the south wing just to get fire department service for my city taxes."

"I guess you've noticed," Harper went on, "how the low point of your lawn is pretty often under water. You know how those trees are rotting out down there. Well, that's part of it. There's something wrong with the drainage. Folks below you on this street don't have much trouble. But those above mostly get water in their basements when it rains. Shouldn't be like that, should it?"

Loyde shook his head.

"Had me stumped for some time. We got adequate storm sewers on this street. Went down one of the manholes myself the other day, and what we got is a lot of stoppage from that there thorn tree of yours. The roots have got right into the tile. Guess you had the same trouble with the drainage tile around the house. We could clear out those roots, but we'd only have to do it all over again in a year or so. That thorn tree has roots bigger than the top, I guess. What we want to do is cut down—"

"No," Loyde interrupted.

"No?" There was a puzzled frown on Harper's wide forehead.

"I said no," Loyde repeated. "You'll touch that tree over my dead body. It's the only living tree on the place. It has to stay."

HARPER stood up, put his hat on his head, clenched his pipe hard.

"That's sure a mighty queer attitude to take, after what the tree did to your brother."

"What the tree did?" Loyde was very white. "You're crazy, Harper. You're not serious? You haven't got that idea, too, that the tree is a monster, reaching out to take life? Good Lord, you're worse than my wife. Now get out with your nonsense. Get out in a hurry!"

Harper didn't hurry. He stood a moment in the doorway, looking back at Loyde. Loyde was trembling. His hands were clenching and unclenching.

"All I got to do is take the matter before the City Council and have your thorn tree condemned, Jarvis. You want it the hard way, you'll get it that way."

"I'll kill the first man who touches an ax to that tree," Loyde said.

"Killing is big talk, Mr. Jarvis," Harper said. And he left Loyde alone.

The following afternoon, Harper returned to the house, bringing a gang of laborers with him. He led his men through the iron gate and around to the south wing of the house where the thorn tree stood. It wasn't until he heard the first bite of the ax that Loyde Jarvis knew they were there.

Loyde came out of the house, his lips set in a thin straight line. Harper saw him coming toward the tree and with a wave of his hand, checked the worker who manned the ax. Harper walked to meet Loyde Jarvis.

"Sorry it had to be like this," Harper said, bringing an official document from the pocket of his jacket. "But I got a right to do what I'm doing. It's for the benefit of a lot of people, and you'll just have to give in."

Loyde ignored the city engineer. He stepped in close to one of the overhanging branches of the tree and stood there with his hands in his pockets, his puffy eyes going over the circle of workmen.

"You men get out of here," he said. "I told Harper that I'd kill the first one to touch ax to this tree. There'll be blood shed if you carry out Harper's order."

The workmen backed away, stood there leaning on their tools, looking from Harper to Loyde Jarvis.

"You men go right ahead," Harper said. "Talk's a dime a dozen."

Loyde Jarvis pulled his right hand from his pocket.

"He's got a gun!" the man with the ax said.

Harper's eyes narrowed.

"I don't think he'll use it, boys. I've met men like him before." He advanced slowly toward Loyde. "Put down that gun, Jarvis. You can't use it anyhow!"

Loyde's right hand trembled. He backed a step. Harper continued to advance. Then suddenly he stooped, picked up a crosscut saw, threw it at Loyde Jarvis.

SOME say that Loyde Jarvis backed into the overhanging thorny branch. Others say the branch dipped to meet him, actually took him by the throat in its spiny clutch. Well it might have considering that there was quite a breeze that day. Anyway, a thorn spiked Loyde Jarvis in the back of his neck. He winced with sudden pain, put his hand to the back of his neck. He took three steps forward before his legs suddenly turned rigid.

Before he fell forward to the ground, his mouth widened into a humorless grin that was horrible to see. Under his pale skin was a tinge of bluish color, almost as though the twisted tree had grown hands with which to strangle him.

By the time the shock had worn off and Harper and his men could get to Loyde's side, he was dying. Above him, the thorn tree writhed in the wind, rubbed its twisted branches together as though in satisfaction.

Loyde tried to speak, tried to tell them about the tree. A strange paralysis affected his jaws and tongue. He could not utter a sound. Only the tree talked with its scraping tongues, and there was no interpreter to tell its story.

They carried Loyde into the house. His terrified wife called the doctor. Harper went back to his men.

"We're taking the tree down," he said grimly. "Only we've got to do it without touching a single thorn. Throw a rope into the top. We'll chop nearly through the trunk and pull it to earth. And don't touch a single thorn, understand?"

Loyde Jarvis died as the tree was felled. The doctor who watched helplessly at his bedside said poison—aconite, probably—had

killed him. It was difficult to distinguish its action from heart failure. He stated that further investigation would undoubtedly reveal the same cause of death for Perry Jarvis who had been buried only a few days before.

Out on the lawn, Harper kept his men grimly at their task. When the thorn tree was felled, he ordered that the roots be dug up. At the very center of the root system, close to the tap, they found the skeleton of a human being, a skeleton with a malformed back and twisted arm and leg bones.

In the gathering gloom, workmen and neighbors stood about the hole that had rooted the tree. They watched while Harper, the town marshal, and a doctor carefully removed the rotting skeleton.

"Bullet hole in the skull," the doctor called up from the cavity in the earth. "They murdered old Oran Barlow, all right. The poor old man never went on that ocean voyage at all. They killed him for his money. Loyde and Perry did. It was right after he disappeared that the Jarvis boys planted this tree. Ten years ago. Some of you can remember. I can.

"It was a good-sized tree and there was burlap around the roots when it was delivered from the nursery. A pretty easy thing to hide the body underneath that burlap and plant the tree and the corpse right here in broad daylight."

"I can remember," Harper said. "A lot of us wondered if the tree would live, it was so big to move. But it lived all right. It lived to settle the score."

THE matter should have ended there. Gossip colored the tale with a suggestion that the tree was nurtured from the crooked

corpse of old Oran Barlow and grew as crooked as the malformed thing locked within its roots. Gossip had it that a subtle poison had fermented in the rotting body of the murder victim and had been carried by the sap to every branch and thorn.

Ben Harper, who was an engineer and a realist, thought possibly the whole tree had been sprayed with poison, something that contained aconite. He went to the little cottage where Oran Barlow's old gardener, Dale Witcomb, lived. In Witcomb's garden he found wolfbane, the plant from which the poison had been extracted.

It seemed that his hunch was right. Witcomb had sprayed the tree with the poison, then slipped into the house after dark and pushed Perry Jarvis out of the window and into the thorn tree. Perhaps he had intended to do the same with Loyde Jarvis when the opportunity came.

Entering the cottage, Ben Harper found Dale Witcomb stretched out on his cot, just the shade of a smile on his lips. A glass beside the bed held a slight trace of poison. Dale Witcomb was dead, a suicide.

On a shelf in the cottage, Ben Harper found a piece of paper, held down by a root cutting which obviously old Witcomb had dug out of one of the drain tiles around the Barlow house. The root had grown through a silver belt buckle on which the monogram of Oran Barlow was still clearly distinguishable.

On the paper, Dale Witcomb had penciled with a nervous hand:

"Mister Barlow was sure mighty good to me."

That told the truth eloquently.

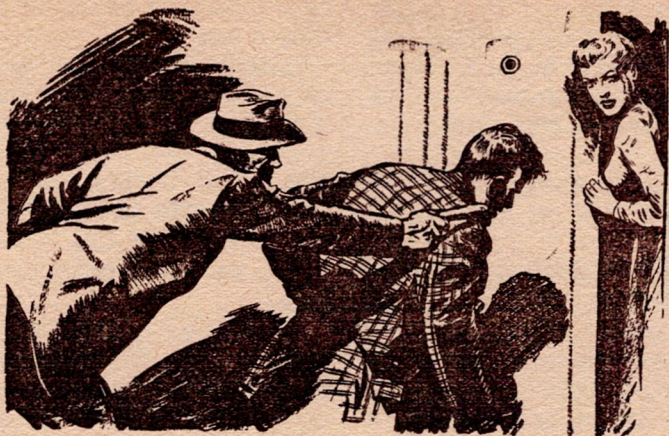
Next Issue's Novel:

THE EYES of MURDER

by G. WAYMAN JONES

PLUS—An all-star array of other crime and mystery stories!





Walling lunged forward
with the sap upraised

The Man on the Corner

By C. K. M. SCANLON

IT WAS a wet, dismal night. Tom Barton plodded along the dark, deserted streets hating everything and everyone. He wore no hat and his hair was damp from the rain that had just stopped. His checkered sport coat felt soggy and uncomfortable against his broad shoulders. The cuffs of his gray slacks flapped against his ankles as he walked. But he didn't care. When you have lost your job and your girl all in one day nothing matters very much anymore.

Ahead a street lamp gleamed down on the glistening black pool that was the wet sidewalk. A man stood there waiting. He wore a trench coat and a soft hat with the brim pulled down so that it hid his face. Barton realized that the man was watching him as he drew closer. He was near enough now to see the eyes staring at him from out of the shadow made by the hat brim.

Barton was suddenly uneasy. Instinctively he knew that he did not like the man waiting there beneath the

light. There was something menacing about that still motionless figure. The man seemed to wait as some great jungle cat might wait to pounce upon its prey.

"Took you long enough to get here," the man said impatiently as Barton reached him and started to walk on by. "You think I've got all night to wait around in weather like this."

Barton tried to walk on, to force himself to ignore the man's words, but he couldn't do it. He could see the thin, long face now and he knew he had never seen it before. Even half shadowed as it was now the face was not one to be forgotten easily. He hesitated and turned.

"Afraid I don't know who you are, or what you are talking about," Barton said. "You must have mistaken me for someone else."

"Sez you." The man's voice was harsh. "Will Cooper doesn't make mistakes, and that's me, chum."

"You've made one now," Barton said.

Tom Barton shows how to handle a deck stacked by death!

His uneasiness gave way to a senseless sort of rage. He didn't like the way Cooper acted so sure of himself. There was a cheap sort of smugness about the man's attitude that Barton found annoying.

"Let's not stand here arguing," Cooper said. "We've got to get moving, the boss is waiting."

"He can keep on waiting," Barton said as he walked on. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Like that, eh?" Cooper snarled. "I hate unreasonable people."

He lunged at Barton and pushed his face into a hard fist that rocked him back on his heels. He cursed and thrust his right hand into the pocket of his coat as though reaching for a gun. Barton hit him again and Cooper went down hard. His head hit the sidewalk and he just sprawled there.

BARTON started on down the street. He walked fast and it was all he could do to keep from breaking into a run. There was something about the way Cooper had fallen, the way he sprawled there so limp and perhaps lifeless, that frightened Barton. Men had been killed by hitting their heads on a hard surface that way. The police could be tough about a thing like that. In their book it was a form of homicide.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he turned the nearest corner. That block behind him was cut off from view now. He couldn't glance back over his shoulder and see that still figure lying there beneath the light. He tried to blot the whole thing out of his mind, but he couldn't do it. Barton kept seeing that thin face, again hearing Cooper's words. He stopped and swung around.

"I've got to go back," he muttered. "Got to see if he is dead or alive."

Somewhere in the distance he heard a muffled report like that of a car back-firing. He paid little attention to the sound. Motors had a way of acting up in this sort of weather. A car swept by the corner as he reached it and rolled on along the other street, the

tires making a slithering sort of sound, then it was gone.

Barton swung back around the corner, hoping there was nothing beneath the street light further along but the glistening sidewalk. He felt suddenly sick. Will Cooper was still sprawled there beneath the light and when you knocked a man out with your fist he didn't usually remain unconscious that long.

He forced himself to walk on. He reached the still figure and stood there staring at it, his eyes fixed on the little pool of blood under Cooper's left arm. That hadn't been there before. Barton was sure of that, and he couldn't understand why it was there now.

A foot scraped on the sidewalk. Barton turned as a big man stepped out of the shadow of an alleyway between two empty stores and came toward him. He waited, standing there beside what he knew was a corpse.

"Who are you?" the big man asked.

"Tom Barton," Barton said. "I was just passing by, and I saw this man lying here and I wondered what's wrong with him."

"I see," said the big man. "I'm Mark Walling, police detective."

Walling walked over and knelt and examined the still figure. Barton stood watching. A dark sedan came from the north end of the town, saw what was going on under the light, then slowed and drew up to the curb. Two men got out. They were big and husky and dressed in ordinary clothes.

"What's wrong?" one of them asked, and then he apparently recognized Walling. "Oh, it's you, Mark."

"That's right," Walling said. "We've got a dead man here. Don't know how it happened."

Barton had a sudden impulse to tell the truth, to get the whole thing off his mind. What was the use of stalling about it? If the police discovered in some way that he had accidentally killed Will Cooper they would only make it harder for him because he had remained silent.

"I'll tell you what happened," Barton said. "I came along this street a little while ago. That man there was standing beneath the light waiting for someone. I had never seen him before in my life, yet he claimed he was waiting to meet me and take me to someone he called the boss."

HE STOPPED, conscious that Walling and the other two men had moved closer to him. They stood so that they hemmed him in, making it impossible for him to get away. He felt like some sort of a trapped animal.

"Go on," Walling said. "Then what?"

"This man said he was Will Cooper," Barton went on. "I told him that I didn't know him and wasn't going anywhere with him. He started to get tough, so I hit him. He seemed to be reaching for a gun in the side pocket of his coat. I hit him again and knocked him down. His head hit the sidewalk hard and the blow must have killed him."

"Nice story," Walling said. "But the last part of it is hard to believe. What did you do with the gun, Barton?"

"Gun?" Barton said in a puzzled tone. "What gun are you talking about?"

"The gun you used to shoot Cooper through the heart," Walling said. "He wasn't killed by striking his head on the sidewalk. He was shot."

"Shot!" said Barton, relief sweeping over him. "Then I didn't kill him. I haven't any gun—never did have one."

"You expect us to believe that?" demanded one of the other men.

"I'll handle this, Clark," Walling said impatiently. "You and Doyle stay here with the body. I'll use the car and take Barton to the police station."

"But I tell you I didn't do it," Barton protested. "I didn't shoot Cooper. I didn't have a gun."

"Don't tell me about it," Walling said. "Tell it to the chief of police. He handles the squeals in this town. Bankford isn't big enough to have a homicide squad and all that stuff."

"Yeah," said Clark. "We all just work together like one big happy family." He looked at Walling. "The ignition key is in the lock, Boss."

"All right," said Walling. "Get in the car, Barton. We're going by-by."

Barton walked over to the sedan with the big man close behind him. Clark and Doyle stood watching as Barton and Walling got into the car.

"Can you drive a car, Barton?" Walling asked.

"Of course," Barton said before he thought.

"Then you drive," Walling said. "I'll tell you where to go."

Resignedly Barton took his place at the wheel and switched on the ignition. He pushed the starter button and the motor started. Walling drew an automatic out of his pocket and rested it on his knee as he sat down beside Barton.

"Straight down the street two blocks and then turn left," he said.

Barton glanced back through the rear view mirror as he drove away. Clark and Doyle had picked up the body and were carrying it back into the alley. Barton discovered that Walling was also looking into the mirror. The big man's smile was not pleasant.

"Go on, say it, Barton," he said. "We're not police."

"I know," Barton said. "I wish you were."

"Maybe you don't," Walling said. "You might find it tough to talk yourself out of a murder rap."

"Who did kill Cooper?" Barton asked.

"I did," Walling said dispassionately. "He was getting big ideas, and that made him dangerous to the rest of us."

"He acted like he was really waiting for me," Barton said.

"He was," Walling said. "Cooper had orders from me to wait for a man there on the corner and bring him to me. He didn't know who the man was. I spotted you a couple of blocks further up the street. You were headed toward the spot where Cooper was waiting. I sent Clark on ahead with the car. He de-

scribed you as the man that Cooper was to bring in."

"Why me?" Barton asked as he turned the corner of the second block and headed along the cross-town street. "I never saw any of you before."

"It didn't matter who we picked," Walling said. "Just any man who happened to be coming along would do. We needed a fall guy."

"And I was the winner," Barton said. "This sure is my lucky day. Where are we going now?"

"To see a dame," Walling said. "Cooper was smarter than I thought. He didn't have the ten grand on him when we frisked the body. I figure this girl friend of his, Lil, might have the dough."

"What was Cooper doing with ten grand?" Barton asked.

"Holding out on me," Walling said. "He was a bookie working for me and he kept holding out part of the day's take for weeks until he got the ten grand." The big man's voice grew hard. "I didn't like that at all."

It dawned on Barton that Walling was talking too freely. A stranger who knew that much about the big man's business probably wasn't expected to live very long. It wasn't a nice thought and Barton tried not to dwell on it.

"Where now?" he asked.

"Six-twenty Fuller Street," Walling said. "We're calling on a Miss Lilian Marshall."

"Oh, I see."

BARTON tried to keep the bleakness out of his voice. Lil Marshall was the name of the girl who had thrown him over, and Walling had just given him her address. She was blonde and pretty, but there was a hardness about her that Barton hadn't realized until earlier tonight. She had told him that they were through, that he never would amount to much, even if he got his job back. She was going to devote all of her time to a man who had plenty of money and she didn't want to see Tom Barton anymore.

"This it?" Barton asked as he stopped the car at the curb in front of the apartment house where Lil Marshall lived. "Six-twenty Fuller Street."

"Yeah, this is it." Walling put his automatic back into his pocket. "Come on, we'll go see the dame." The big man pulled a blackjack out of his pocket and tapped it against the palm of his other hand as he stood on the sidewalk. "She's going to tell me where the dough is or else."

Barton glanced at the blackjack and said nothing. They went into the apartment building lobby. There was no one else around. They took the automatic elevator up to the fourth floor and got out.

"That's it—four E," Walling said. "Ring the bell, Barton."

Barton pushed the bell button. In a few moments Lil opened the door just wide enough to look out. She glared at Barton without even noticing the big man behind him.

"So it's you," she said. "You've got your nerve. I told you we were through and not to try and see me again."

"Like that, eh," Walling said. "If you'd told me you knew the dame I wouldn't have brought you along. You might be in the way."

He lunged forward with the sap upraised. Barton fell with the blow as the blackjack landed on his head. He sprawled limply on the floor of the hall with his eyes closed but he wasn't unconscious.

"You play kind of rough, mister," Lil said dispassionately. "Who are you?"

"Will Cooper sent me," Walling said. "Came up in the elevator with this lug, but I didn't know he was coming to see you, too. Cooper wouldn't like that."

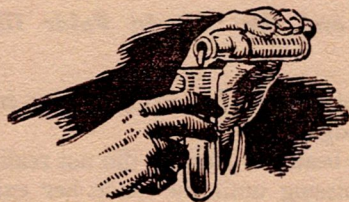
"I know," Lil said. "Barton thought he was in love with me, but I told him to stay away. Looks like you knocked him cold."

"I did," Walling said. "When I hit a man I don't fool about it."

"You better drag him inside," Lil said, opening the door wider. "I wouldn't want the neighbors to talk."

Walling caught Barton by the shoulders and dragged him into the hall of the apartment and left him lying there. Barton remained limp and kept his eyes closed. Lil closed the door.

"You said Will Cooper sent you," Lil said, heading toward the living room. "I thought he would be here by this time. I'm all packed. We're leaving for California tonight, you know."



JUSTICE

By CLARENCE E. FLYNN

Justice's looks changed here lately,
Gone modern, I might say.
She's taken off her blindfold,
And put her scales away.
She has to have her eyesight
Unhindered when she squints
Through microscopic lenses
And studies fingerprints.

When she gives testimony,
Or offers a report
Upon the lie-detector,
There's order in the court.
Her blindfold days are over.
Her balance gets a rest.
She sees what she is doing,
And does her work by test.

"No, I didn't know that," Walling said.

They disappeared into the living room. Barton could only hear the rumble of their voices as he got quickly to his feet. He reached beneath the left lapel of his checked sport coat and drew an automatic out of a shoulder holster. He snapped off the safety catch and moved silently toward the living room just as Lil screamed in sudden fright.

Barton reached the open door of the

living room and stood there watching and listening.

"That's the way it is, baby," Walling was saying as he faced Lil his back toward the door. "Cooper is dead. I bumped him off and I want the ten grand he left with you. You'll live longer if you hand over the dough."

"All right, I'll give it to you," Lil said. "It's right here in my purse. Will told me to keep it for him until he got back." She picked up a bag lying on the table beside the telephone, opened it and drew out a thick roll of bills.

"Thanks." Walling grabbed the money and thrust it into his pocket. His other hand came out holding the blackjack. "I wouldn't want you to do any talking, Baby. When I hit people right with this it keeps them quiet for good."

"I wouldn't try it, Walling," Barton said coldly. "One murder is all we need against you."

The big man whirled and then cursed as he saw Barton standing there covering him with the automatic. "Where did you get that gun?" he snarled.

"I had it all the time. When you and your men pick a fall guy you really should search him."

Barton walked over and picked up the phone, still covering Walling with the gun in his other hand.

"Connect me with the police," he told the operator. "Hello, Chief Dover, please. . . . This is Tom Barton, Chief. . . . I'm at Lil Marshall's apartment at Six-twenty Fuller Street and I'm holding Mark Walling on a charge of murder. . . . Yeah." Barton smiled. "So I'm back on the Force just like that. . . . Sure, suits me fine. When you were ordered to cut down the Force you let me go because I was your least experienced det—" Tom fired as Walling's right hand flashed up holding his automatic; the bullet got the big man in the right arm and he dropped the gun—"But I'm learning, Chief." Barton looked at Lil who had dropped into a chair and was sobbing quietly. "Yeah, I'm learning about a lot of things!"

• • •

BEHIND THE MAGIC WAND

A Department of Tricks You Can Do—and Baffling Illusions You Can Create

—By Bruce Elliott—

1. Featuring the “Disappearing Half Dollar” and the “Hindu Fakir Illusion”

BLACKSTONE, the grand old man of magic, has proved that the only way to stay in show business today is to go forward with the times. Just when everyone thought that the day of the big magic show was as dead as the dodo, Blackstone came up with a night club act out in Las Vegas which netted him rave reviews and left his sophisticated night clubbers with their mouths hanging open.

Here is a stunt Blackstone does all the time. Try it on your friends. Balance a nickel on its edge as shown in the drawing. Next, place a match on top of the nickel and invert a drinking glass over the coin and the match.

The problem you set up is this. Ask anyone to get the match off the nickel without removing the glass, or tapping the table on which you have arranged the set up.

It Looks Impossible

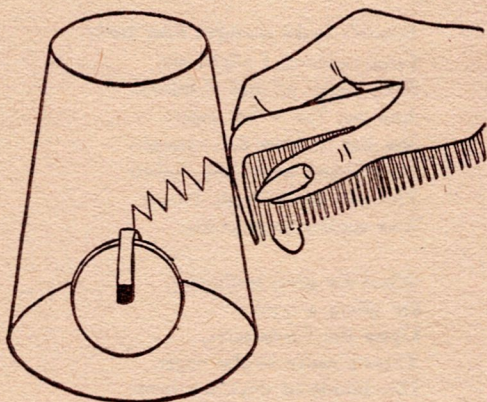
The solution, which never occurs to anyone, employs static electricity. You will find that a hard rubber comb (don't use a plastic one), rubbed briskly through your hair or on your sleeve will generate enough electricity to pull the match off the coin despite the glass walls that segregate the match from the comb.

Magical embarrassing moments make fascinating small talk. There was the time that Jay Marshall was performing in the Broadway musical comedy “Love Life,” and had to saw Nanette Fabray in half at every performance. All went well until the time she

did not squirm far enough away from the keen-edged saw.

The beautiful Nanette did not realize what was missing until she made her exit. The blade had neatly stripped her glamorous gown of its all-important rear!

More tragic than embarrassing, was the night in 1886 in the Far West when an



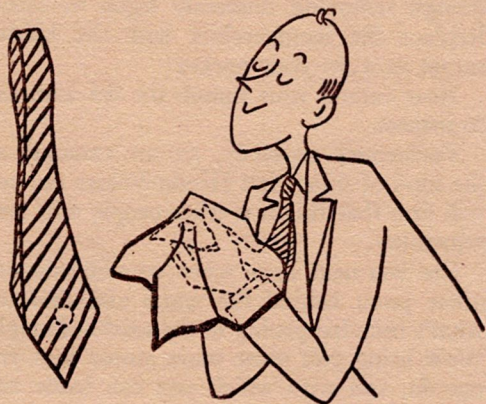
itinerant magician performing the effect that became known as the bullet catching trick, had the bad luck to run into a drunken audience. In the normal course of this baffling stunt, the performer has a gun examined, and a bullet examined and marked for identification.

The bullet is then placed in the gun and the gun is fired at the performer. If all goes well the magician seems to catch the bullet in his teeth and the proof that it is *the* bullet, is the identification mark scratched on the bullet.

On this particular night the magician stood

in front of an audience of drunken cow-punchers and proceeded to catch the marked bullet to the amazement of the audience.

However, one of the cowboys figured out in his alcoholic way, that perhaps the magician's gun had something to do with the way the trick worked. Standing up in the



audience, he whipped out a sixshooter and shouted, "Catch these, you—!"

The magician fell to the stage riddled with bullets.

It was a long time before any prestidigitator dared to perform the bullet catching trick again.

A Trick That's Safe

Certainly less dangerous, but equally mysterious, is a trick which you can perform under any circumstances—but which no one else will be able to duplicate.

Showing your hands to be completely empty, you borrow a half dollar. Next you remove a handkerchief and toss it over the borrowed coin. Ask the spectator who was kind enough—or foolish enough—to lend you the coin to step up and feel the metal through the cloth of the hanky. He does so, and feels a half dollar through the cloth.

Take your hands away so that the coin is held by the spectator and tell him to release his hold at the count of three.

One, two, three, hey presto! The handkerchief flutters to the ground, and the coin has vanished!

A slight bit of preparation will save you any need for sleight-of-hand. Sew a half

dollar in the bottom, wide end of your tie. Under cover of the cloth, pick up the end of your tie and allow the spectator to feel the duplicate, hidden half dollar. Your hands come away from the hanky with the borrowed half dollar hidden in one of them. Place your hands in your pockets as though to show that you have no control over the coin under the handkerchief, really to allow the borrowed half to drop into your pocket.

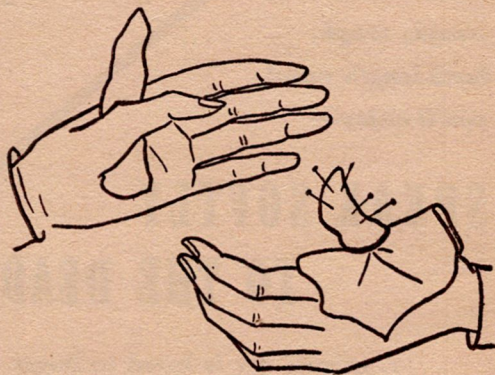
There is no suspicion attached to what you do with your hands because the spectator thinks he is holding the coin himself.

The rest follows naturally. Ask the spectator to drop the hanky at the count of three, and as he does, the handkerchief will fall to the floor, as your tie flops down and hides the evidence of your chicanery.

Requires No Skill

For the non-professional performer, close up magic is the order of the day. One of the best stunts we know, requiring no skill at all, is an effect in which you seem to duplicate the painful feats of the Hindu Fakirs.

Pattering about the way Fakirs eat fire, sleep on a bed of spikes, and in general, conquer pain—you offer a demonstration of Indian magic. You wrap your thumb in a handkerchief and proceed to push a number



of needles right through your digit! At the end of the trick, you show that your magic powers have not only saved you pain, they have restored your flesh, for there are no needle marks in your thumb!

Needed for this little excursion into the mysteries of the East, are a handkerchief, a

rubber band, some needles and of all things, a carrot. Whittle the carrot into a rough semblance of your thumb. Hold the carrot hidden in your right hand. Using your right hand fingers, pull out your breast pocket handkerchief and drape it over your left hand, which you have let the spectators see, is empty. Under cover of the cloth, transfer the carrot to your left hand.

Hidden by the cloth, bring the carrot up into the position your thumb was in. Fold your thumb over the carrot as shown in the sketch, so that the thumb holds the carrot in position, out at right angles to your hand. The rubber band is slipped down over the carrot holding the handkerchief in place.

You can now proceed to push the needles into your "flesh" until the cloth-covered "thumb" looks like a porcupine. You can allow one of the spectators to push one or two needles into the "thumb" for the carrot feels amazingly like flesh.

When your audience is convinced that your thumb must be like a sieve, begin to pull the needles out faster and faster, ending up by snapping the rubber band off the cloth. Grab the carrot through the cloth and ball up the cloth, hiding the carrot. Use the balled up handkerchief to dab at your thumb as though removing unseemly signs of blood. Replace the handkerchief with the hidden carrot in it, in your pocket.

Now extend your thumb for the audience to inspect.

Performed seriously, as an example of the kind of thing that Hindu Fakirs do, you will find that this is a trick people will long remember.

See you next issue when we will take another jaunt behind the wand and find out what's been happening in the world of magic. We'll bring you some more stunts that you can do, and with which you can baffle and bemuse your friends.

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by DALE BOGARD

THE LADY IN THE MORGUE

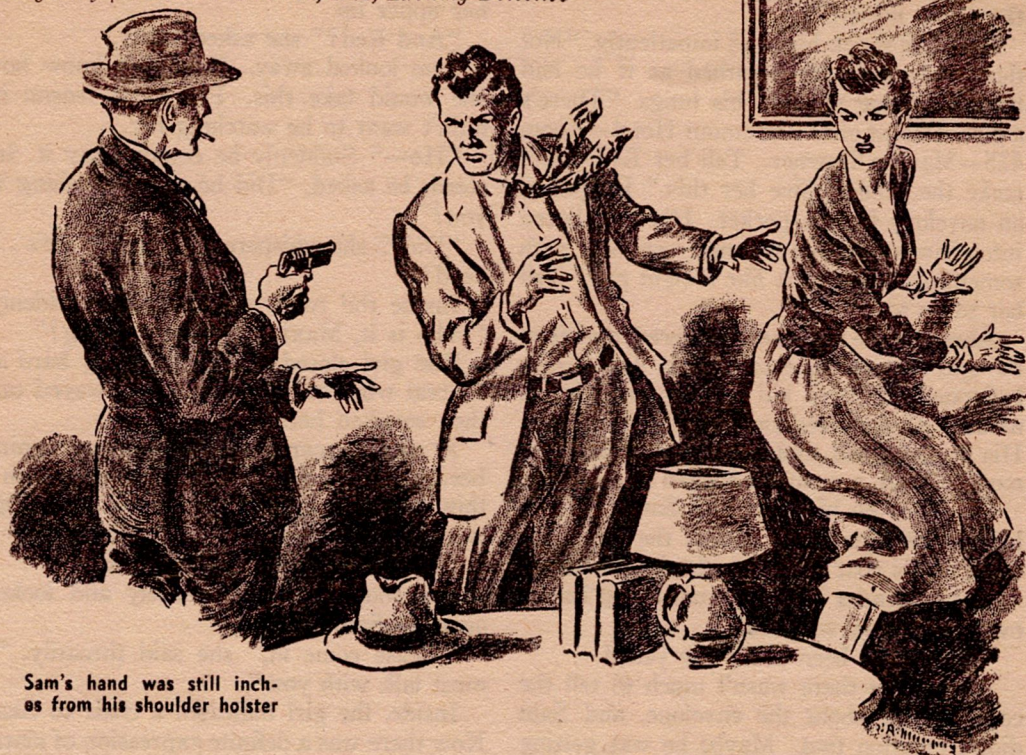
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POPULAR DETECTIVE



Sam's hand was still inches from his shoulder holster

OPTION ON DEATH

Martin didn't tell the police the dying man had given him an envelope to deliver... to the slim brunette in Room 415

SAM MARTIN stood at the bar of the cocktail lounge, his eyes on the man with the red hair. There were only two of them standing there, and the bartender was busy at the back bar.

The tall, young rehead leaned forward so that he pressed the flat of his stomach against the mahogany, and his grip on the whiskey glass threatened to break it. Beads of per-

spiration dampened his forehead. Obviously something was wrong with him. His eyes looked glassy.

Suddenly he turned to Sam and motioned with his head for him to come closer.

Sam hesitated a second and then went over to him. He was a flat, broad man who moved with easy grace.

"Listen, mister," the redhead said. "Would

By **JAMES DONNELLY**

you help a guy?"

Sam smiled wryly. "Sorry, bud. I'm on the rocks myself."

Redhead shook his head impatiently. "Not that," he said. He breathed as if he had trouble getting air into his lungs. "There's a girl. Decent girl. Claremont Hotel—Room 415—Maxine Downer. Tell her Red didn't make the grade. Give her this." He pulled an envelope from a pocket. His eyes bored into Sam's and he seemed satisfied with something. "You look like a right guy. Tell her to go to—"

Abruptly the redhead shuddered, and Sam thought he was going to be sick. His cheeks ballooned out like a kid holding water in his mouth. An agonized look came into his eyes. His lips loosened, and blood gushed from his mouth. With a moan he sagged to the floor.

He rolled on his back, and Sam saw why he had been pressing against the bar. The front of his coat was soaked with blood.

The bartender heard the noise and leaned over. His eyes widened.

"That guy's been shot!" he yelled.

Afterwards there wasn't much to tell the cops, except about the envelope, and Sam didn't mention that. Maybe he was getting himself into a jam, but that redhead was the kind of guy Sam Martin liked. Instinctively he knew that he and the redhead could have been friends.

Outside, when the cops were finished, Sam walked through the early evening traffic. It was a warm, soft California night. Sam shuddered. Too nice a night for a man to die.

WHEN he walked into the lobby of the Claremont Hotel, he debated about inquiring at the desk. He had the room number. It might be better if he didn't ask questions at the desk.

The girl who answered his knock at 415 was slim and brown-haired. Sam liked the way she returned his appraising look.

"I have a message for you," he said simply. He took the envelope from an inside pocket and gave it to her. "Red said to tell you that he didn't make the grade."

He watched her closely, wondering what reaction his words would have.

The girl took the envelope without looking

at it. Her eyes held his and a look of trouble was in them. A fine white line edged across her upper lip.

"And Red?" she asked softly.

Sam looked away. He didn't know how she would take this. For some reason he didn't want to be watching her.

"He—" Suddenly he couldn't say it. Instead, he asked, "Did he mean anything to you?"

"Did?" she whispered. "Then . . . he's . . . dead?"

Inside the room a man spoke suddenly. "Who is it, Maxine? What's wrong?"

The girl closed her eyes, trying hard to conceal whatever she felt. She swayed and then steadied herself.

A man appeared in the doorway behind her. He was a tall, middle-aged man with a thin face and eyes that squinted. His lips were thin and tight.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

She shook her head mutely and looked again at Sam Martin.

"Please come in," she said throatily. "I must talk with you."

Inside, the girl indicated a chair to Sam. Now there was a definite expression of alarm on the other man's face. He stared at the girl as if he already knew the answer to his questions.

"They killed Red," she said abruptly.

She walked wearily to a table and placed the envelope upon it. Her shoulders looked tired, her head bent forward. Her voice was steady, though, when she spoke again.

"Tell us."

Tersely Sam told them. When he finished the girl was quiet for a moment.

"Who are you?" she finally asked.

"Sam Martin."

The dark-faced man watched him with shrewd eyes.

"A name doesn't mean anything," he said. "You're tan from the sun. You've got good, tough hands. You've bossed men. What kind of work?"

Sam contemplated the man.

"You notice things, mister," he said. "I've been running a placer claim. Closed down two weeks ago."

"Working now?" the man asked.

The girl shook her head impatiently. "No, Jed. There's been enough trouble already. It—it isn't worth it."

The man ignored her. With practised fingers he rolled a cigarette with brown paper and sacked tobacco. He lighted it and inhaled thoughtfully.

"I'm Jed Hawkins," he said. "I'm from Montana. Do you want a job?"

Martin leaned back in his chair and smiled. "What kind of work, Hawkins?"

The girl interrupted again. "I won't have it, Jed!" she exclaimed. "First it was Mike Flavin. Now Red. I—I can't let you hire men to go to their deaths!"

Her words were forced, strained. She stared at Hawkins and abruptly tears filled her eyes.

Martin looked at her and suddenly he felt about her as he had felt about Red for that brief moment. He could have been Red's friend. Now, he felt the same urge toward the girl.

"Wait a second, Miss Downer. Maybe I want a job. Let him tell me what it is. Why shouldn't I listen?"

Jed Hawkins nodded in satisfaction.

"Because I don't want anyone else to die!" she cried. "Isn't that enough of a reason? I won't be responsible—"

"You're not clear on that, perhaps," Sam interrupted gently. "A man takes a job at his own risk. I don't have to take it if I don't like it."

"And it's not just you," Jed Hawkins said to her. "How about the others back home? How about the Wilsons, Howards and Clemenses?"

A DEFEATED look came into her eyes, and her shoulders drooped dejectedly. "All right," she murmured. "Tell him."

Hawkins contemplated the end of his cigarette for a few moments as if to collect his thoughts. Without looking up from the glowing tip, he said:

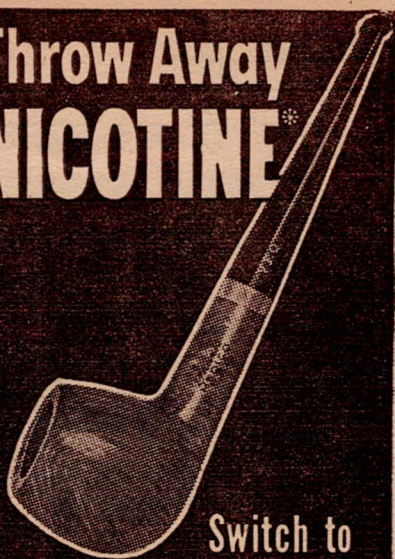
"Ever hear of Tony Skinner?"

Martin shook his head.

"That's all we've done," Hawkins said curtly. "Heard of him. Old Charlie O'Brien knew him. He got the lease and option and

[Turn page]

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paid the full amount on the lease. But Charlie was killed three years ago. Now we've got a name and a post-office box number that Skinner doesn't seem to use any more."

Sam tried to make sense of this and failed. "Start from the beginning," he suggested.

Hawkins nodded. "The Timber Sue is an old mine near Virginia City, Montana—not far from Butte. It hadn't been worked for years until some of the local folks got the idea that there might be something there. With flotation and smelting as it is today, you can handle ore they couldn't refine years ago."

Sam started to see some of the story. He said, "So a few got together, formed a company, and took a lease and option on the Timber Sue. Right?"

"You get it fast," Hawkins commented. "Charlie O'Brien knew who owned the property—this Tony Skinner. He'd met him in Nevada. O'Brien got the group together, including Maxine's dad, who later got hurt when O'Brien was killed. They worked the mine and they were right. There's ore there—plenty—and it assays high." He paused. "The option expires in four days. I bought in after O'Brien was killed. We want to take up the option and buy the mine."

"What's stopping you?"

"We can't find Tony Skinner. We've checked all around here in L.A., but we can't find hide nor hair of him. But Red must have got track of him. Mike Flavin did. He wrote back from Nevada, where we sent him two months ago, that a man by that name had left a forwarding address with an assay company. I came down and got here a couple of hours before Mike was murdered—before I could see him."

"Did you ever hear from Skinner?"

"One letter six months ago. He asked what we intended to do. He had a party interested in the mine."

"He didn't say who?"

"No. But Tom Latham and his crowd in Butte have been watching the property. They're gamblers. Latham is here now."

"Have you gone to the police?"

"We did about Flavin. We will about Red, too. It won't do any good. They looked for Skinner, too, that first time."

Martin accepted the proffered brown papers and tobacco and rolled a cigarette.

"What would my job be?" he asked.

"Find Skinner, and we'll take up the option. The money's in that envelope—twenty thousand dollars. The mine's worth ten times that. But we developed it and we deserve it. We've put in hard work and money. Maxine's dad, who is crippled now, and I have most at stake."

"Who was Red?"

"Our shift boss."

Martin was thoughtful. "Evidently Red got some trace of Skinner," he commented.

"He called this afternoon and said he had," Hawkins said. "I wasn't here." He turned to the girl. "What did he say, Maxine?"

"He said he finally was on the trail," she said. "He was in a hurry and didn't talk long."

"That's all he said?"

"That was all."

"If I find Skinner, what do I get?" Sam asked the old man.

"A thousand dollars."

"I could use a thousand dollars," Sam Martin said. "I'll take the job."

The girl suddenly stepped in front of him.

"Please," she said. "I'd rather you wouldn't."

"Maybe I know my way around better than Red or Flavin," Martin answered. "Besides, I liked that redhead. Maybe I'd like to do something for him—and his friends."

Hawkins smiled and extended his hand to Martin.

"There, Maxine! That's the kind of man we want! Somehow I think you'll do the job, Martin!"

Sam shrugged. "I want a description of Latham."

Hawkins nodded wisely. "Short, stocky guy with a scar over his left eye and hands like a woman's."

Sam nodded. "I'll start in the morning."

HE LOOKED at the girl and shook his head when he saw the fright in her eyes. "It's going to be all right," he told her.

[Turn page]



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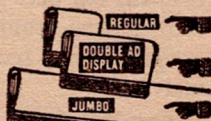
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"Don't worry. And—I'm sorry about Red."

Hawkins stepped into the hallway with Sam and got his address.

"Incidentally," Sam asked, "why did you decide to offer me the job?"

"The folks back home said if we got into trouble to hire a detective or someone to help," Hawkins said. "You're a mining man and know what it's all about. You can get farther with questions than a private detective."

"I'll see what I can do," Sam said.

"You find Skinner, and we'll do the rest. We have the money. He'll have to sell."

They shook hands and Sam left. Hawkins went into the room again. Sam rang for an elevator. A man in a gray suit opened a door down the hall and came leisurely toward him. The elevator door opened and the two passengers went down.

As Sam walked away from the hotel, he told himself that the sensible thing to do was to go back and tell them that he didn't want the job. He wasn't a detective. He wasn't trained in any way for a job like this.

In fact, he wasn't sure what had prompted him to take the job. He needed the money. He had liked Red for that fraction of a moment—one of those intangible friendships at first sight—and there was the girl.

He stopped at a corner drug store and ordered coffee. He thought of the places where he might get a line on Tony Skinner. He knew most of the haunts where mining men hung out when they were in town. If Red had found a trace of the elusive Skinner, surely Sam Martin could.

He finished his coffee and left the store. As he waited for a light to change he glanced around. A few yards away was the man in the gray suit who had come down in the elevator with him. Another man was with him, and they were talking.

Sam felt a warning flash of excitement. The other man was stocky and he had a scar over his left eye. The hand that held a cigarette looked feminine. From Hawkins' description, Sam recognized Latham, the gambler.

Sam wondered if that was the answer. If Latham wanted the mine badly enough, and knew about the option, he could get the mine

if he could keep the option holders away from Skinner. A hundred-thousand-dollar mine was worth murder to a good many men.

Sam boarded the next bus that stopped. Latham and the man in gray followed him. They were still behind him when Sam returned to his hotel. As he went up in the elevator, he saw Latham talking with the room clerk. It wouldn't be hard for Latham to find out about Sam Martin.

In his room, Sam got a heavy automatic from a battered suitcase. He carefully cleaned it and loaded the clip. That done, he called the desk for the latest newspaper.

The story about Red was brief. His name was Ralph Tompkins, and he had died in the cocktail lounge from a bullet wound. Police were trying to solve the mystery. There was no mention of Maxine Downer or Jed Hawkins. Sam suspected that they had not gone to the police yet.

Before he went to sleep he placed the automatic under his pillow.

"I wonder if I'll have to use it," he thought. "I wonder if I'll get the chance."

IT WAS the next afternoon when Sam got his first lead. He had talked with twenty or thirty men in the mining field, assayers, engineers, prospectors in from the desert.

His questions had been discreet and in each place he had asked about a young, redheaded man as well as about Tony Skinner.

In an old assay office, a small, thin man with stained fingers eyed him suspiciously.

"Tony Skinner? You're the second who's asked about him."

"A redhead guy yesterday?" Sam asked.

The assayer nodded.

"Did you tell him?"

The assayer regarded him suspiciously again.

"You a mining man?" he asked.

Sam named some of the places where he had worked.

The assayer nodded. "That's all right, then." He dug an old pipe from a pocket and loaded it. When he had it lit he said:

"The last time Skinner shoved his big face through my doorway was six years ago. He had a sample of ore with him which I

ran. It assayed pretty high."

"Where is he now?" Sam asked anxiously.

The assayer shrugged. "I'm not sure, but Tim Delaney, an old-timer on the Mojave, was in last month and said he thinks Skinner is dead."

"Dead?"

"Delaney says he found a body out on the desert, and a couple of letters addressed to Skinner were in a pocket. I guess the clothes and bones were all that were left. Dead things don't last long out there."

"But surely someone here in town would know."

The assayer nodded. "The redhead asked that, too. All I know is his old address. It's a rooming house. You can try there."

He found the address and gave it to Sam.

In the street, Martin looked at the nearest corner. The man in the gray suit leaned against a building and pretended to read a newspaper.

Sam patted the shoulder holster beneath his coat and walked to the corner. He stopped in front of the man.

"All right, buddy," he said quietly. "Here's where you get off."

The man stared at him.

"Are you crazy?" he snapped.

"Save it," Sam said. "You're working for Latham. Go back and tell him you lost me."

There was an entrance to a vacant store in back of the man. Sam shoved the man into it. He glanced about. There were few pedestrians in sight. Sam's right whipped up and caught the man on the chin. The man slid down with a heavy sigh. He was motionless when Sam walked away.

The boarding house smelled of cooking. A woman, who said she was Mrs. Carthay and manager of the place, barred the doorway with her bulky body.

"Big Tony Skinner ain't been here for a long time," she said.

Sam felt disappointment.

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"You're the second who's come looking for him," Mrs. Carthay said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's a business matter."

[Turn page]

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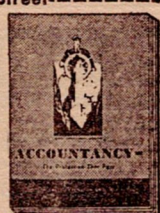
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"Well, I don't know where he is. He sent me an address a long time ago to forward any of his mail, but I ain't seen him."

"May I have the address?"

"You a bill collector?"

Sam grinned. "Mining man," he explained.

"Oh, then I guess it's all right."

She was gone for several moments and returned with a dirty piece of paper. The address she gave him was across town. Sam thanked her and left.

It was late in the afternoon. Remembering his promise to phone Maxine Downer if he got a lead, he found a telephone and called her. Her voice sounded worried.

"Please be careful," she pleaded. "I'm frightened. This is just the way Red called and—"

"Red didn't expect trouble," Sam told her. "Besides—well, maybe I know who's causing it." He remembered the man in the gray suit and smiled grimly.

"But—"

"Don't worry about it," he told her. "I'll call you within an hour."

He found the street and frowned when he saw that the cocktail lounge where Red had died was on the corner where he turned. The number he wanted was in the next block.

THOUGHTFULLY he walked down the quiet side street. Old buildings lined both sides. Metal clanged loudly as he passed a boiler-making plant. The noise filled that part of the street in spite of thick brick walls. An automatic hammer clattered deafeningly as he passed.

The number was over the door of another rooming house. An old man came to the door and peered at Sam over dirty glasses.

"Well?" he snapped.

"I'm looking for Tony Skinner."

The small man froze, and his lips tightened. "Another one, huh? Well, if you're collecting bills, I've got one you can get from the weasel-faced little skunk!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he owes me money. Two years ago he sneaked out."

"You don't know where he is now?"

"If I did, young man, I'd be sixty dollars and fifty cents richer!"

The old man glared at him and went back into the house mumbling to himself.

As Sam walked down the stairs, his disappointment greater than it had been since he had started the search, he heard a scurry of sound somewhere near him.

He glanced around quickly. A vacant dwelling, badly in need of repair, was next to the rooming house. An old porch was heavily covered with vines.

For a second Sam thought he saw someone on the porch.

He walked quickly past the house. The porch was empty, but Sam saw that it was close enough to the entrance to the rooming house so that anyone standing behind the vines could plainly hear what was said at the rooming-house door.

Sam turned back toward the main street. As he passed the boiler-making plant he looked around. There were several places where a man could find concealment—a cluster of heavy power poles afforded protection, a small recess in the building, an entrance once used but boarded up now.

It was easy to figure where Red had been waylaid and shot. The racket of the plant would kill the sound of a shot. Red had walked the few yards to the cocktail lounge. It wasn't unusual, Sam had read somewhere, for men with fatal wounds to walk for surprising distances. The shock would have killed pain for a time. Red might have thought there was a chance to get to a telephone. He would think of a drink first.

If Red had talked to the old man at the rooming house and someone had eavesdropped on the porch, something the old man might have said, some question of Red's that he might have answered, might have resulted in Red's death.

Carefully, Sam recalled his conversation with the old man. He reached the cocktail lounge and went in. Over a highball he got a hunch.

He rushed to a telephone booth and got information. He dialed the rooming house and talked with the old man again. He hung up and found the assay office in the classified

[Turn page]

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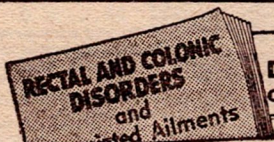
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section. He talked to the assayer for several moments.

Afterward he finished his highball thoughtfully and went out.

Neither Latham nor the man in the gray suit was in sight.

Twenty minutes later, in Maxine Downer's room, he leaned against the door and looked at the girl and Jed Hawkins. Maxine was dressed to go out.

"Tony Skinner is dead," he said quietly.

They stared at him.

"Dead?" Hawkins cried.

"That's right, Jed. He's been dead for two years!"

The girl gasped. "But we had a letter from him six months ago! He wanted to know what we intended to do about the mine!" she objected.

"I'll tell you what I think happened," Sam said quietly. "Tony Skinner was murdered out on the desert, probably by a companion who knew quite a bit about Skinner's business, including the Timber Sue."

The girl watched Sam with unbelieving eyes.

"The murderer returned to Los Angeles," Sam continued, "and wrote a letter to Skinner's old rooming house directing the landlady to forward Skinner's mail to a new address and signed the letter with Skinner's name. Skinner wasn't the sort to write many letters. The landlady wouldn't know his handwriting."

"It worked. The murderer moved into the other address as Tony Skinner. He left there two years ago, beating his bill. That's when he probably had his address changed to a post-office box."

The girl nodded. "We had a short letter about two years ago giving us a new address. But how did you learn this? How do you know it's the truth?"

"Because an assayer described Skinner as a large man with a heavy face. The rooming-house landlord at the last address described him as small and weasel-faced. Red discovered what I did. He knew at once what had happened. But the murderer was listening on the porch next door—he'd probably followed Red all day—and killed Red when he walked past—"

JED HAWKINS moved with amazing speed. Sam's hand was still inches from the shoulder holster when he looked into the muzzle of the gun Hawkins held.

"You've guessed it," Hawkins said bitterly. "After I killed Skinner, I went up and looked the Timber Sue over and saw it was rich. I even bought in on the lease so I could keep an eye on it. O'Brien was the only one who knew Skinner up there and O'Brien was dead. Later I got a letter, forwarded from the L.A. post office, from Latham who made a seventy-thousand-dollar offer for the mine. I figured that, as Skinner, I could sell to him by mail if I could prevent the others from exercising the option or finding out that Skinner was dead."

The man smiled tightly.

"Latham has been trailing us to reach Skinner first and keep him out of the way until the option was up. Maybe he'd have used force to keep us away. He didn't know, naturally, where I stood in it. I'd have sold to him by mail later. I had to kill Flavin and Red. They found out like you did, Martin."

Maxine Downer drew back with wide eyes. "Jed!"

"It's too bad," he said bitterly. "You're a nice kid, Maxine. Too bad about Martin, too. But I had to hire someone. They would expect it back home. I thought he wouldn't get as far as a private detective might. I only had to stall four days."

"What do you intend to do?" Maxine Downer whispered.

"I doubt if anyone will hear the shots," he said. "I'll have plenty of time before they discover you. I have enough money to keep me for quite a while in Mexico."

Sam Martin felt an inner pulse of cold excitement and fear. It wasn't fear for himself, but for the girl. Sam had underestimated Hawkins. Sam had planned it to end with himself holding the gun. This was all wrong. He had to do something.

Jed Hawkins shook his head. "Don't try it, Martin," he said. "I can shoot faster than you can jump."

Sam Martin suddenly wished he had never taken the job. If he had not, Maxine Downer

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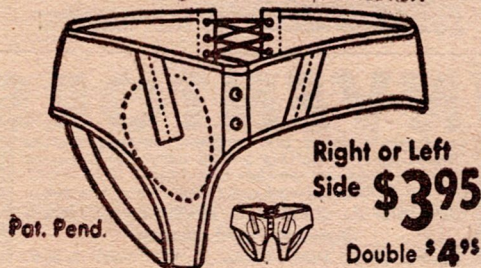


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would not be facing death now. Jed Hawkins would shoot as soon as Sam leaped at him. But Sam was going to leap. He *had* to! Maybe the girl could get out in the excitement. He tensed his leg muscles and—

A heavy fist beat upon the door behind him, and a voice sounded through the panel.

"Open that door, Hawkins. This is Latham. We just saw that guy you hired go in. He knocked one of my men cold. I won't stand for it! We want that guy!"

"Come in!" Maxine Downer cried. "The door is unlocked!"

Sam Martin dived, low and hard. The gun in Hawkins' hand barked and someone in the doorway shouted. It was a shout of anger and not pain.

Hawkins managed to jerk free of Sam's grasp. He swore and leaped backward. He tripped, staggered, and tried to get his balance, the gun waving wildly. Glass crashed. A voice shrieked and died in diminishing shrillness. Far below in the street someone shouted.

"Hawkins went through the window!" the man in the gray suit yelled.

Then somehow Maxine Downer had her face pressed against Sam Martin's coat lapel, and he was clumsily trying to comfort her while he explained crisply to Latham what had happened.

Latham shook his head in surprise. "Who gets the mine now?" he demanded.

Martin shrugged. "We'll let the lawyers and the law decide that," he said.

And one of those odd, irrelevant thoughts that sometimes flash through men's minds in moments of stress flashed through Sam Martin's: "And who gets the girl?"

Maxine Downer wiped away tears.

"I have to go back and tell Alice about Red," she whispered.

"Alice?"

"The girl he was going to marry."

She looked into his eyes and he saw a silent pleading for him to help her. He smiled quietly and saw the relief in her eyes.

Sam Martin and Maxine Downer both knew who was going to get the girl!

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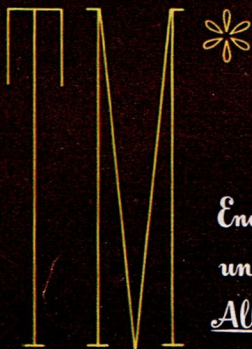
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