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Volume I

FEBRUARY, 1938

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When, in the first issue of *Crime Busters*, we gave our readers the opportunity to judge the stories in their own light, and to give us the verdict of their opinions, we started something which most magazines have been afraid to do. But we have obtained for this magazine the services of the best writers in the profession, and we explained our plan to them. Their reaction was instantaneous—they were more than willing to do their best, and let the readers judge! Each one made it a point of personal pride to turn in his best work, so the readers would judge him the best.

We have been more than pleased with the results. Our readers gave their opinions by the hundreds. We are sure to continue this same system, and thus let our readers judge each and every story as it is printed, and give us any other suggestions or opinions that they might have. We, in turn, will guide ourselves by these opinions, and will give our readers exactly what they ask for.

That is an amazing way of running a magazine, but we know that it is a good way. We are only doing in a direct way what has always been done indirectly. So if you turn to page 127 after having read the great stories which appear in this issue, fill out the coupon and let us know just what you think. We give you a free magazine for your efforts, and appreciate every comment we receive.

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FROM A MEDICAL JOURNAL: "The researches (of doctors) led them to believe that colds result from an acid condition. To overcome this, they prescribe various alkalis."



By

Lester Dent

THE SCARED

CHAPTER I.

THE GRASSHOPPER.

CLICKELL RUSH was not ordinarily a swearing man.

But he managed to keep the Georgia air fairly blue for three or four minutes, did not repeat himself more than once or twice, and ended up feeling he had done the situation some justice.

Then he put the plug in the electric-light socket. There was a bulb on the end of the electric-light cord, and Rush put the bulb in the toad's mouth.

The toad with a mouthful of electric-light bulb looked ridiculous.

"Damn crazy business!" Rush said.

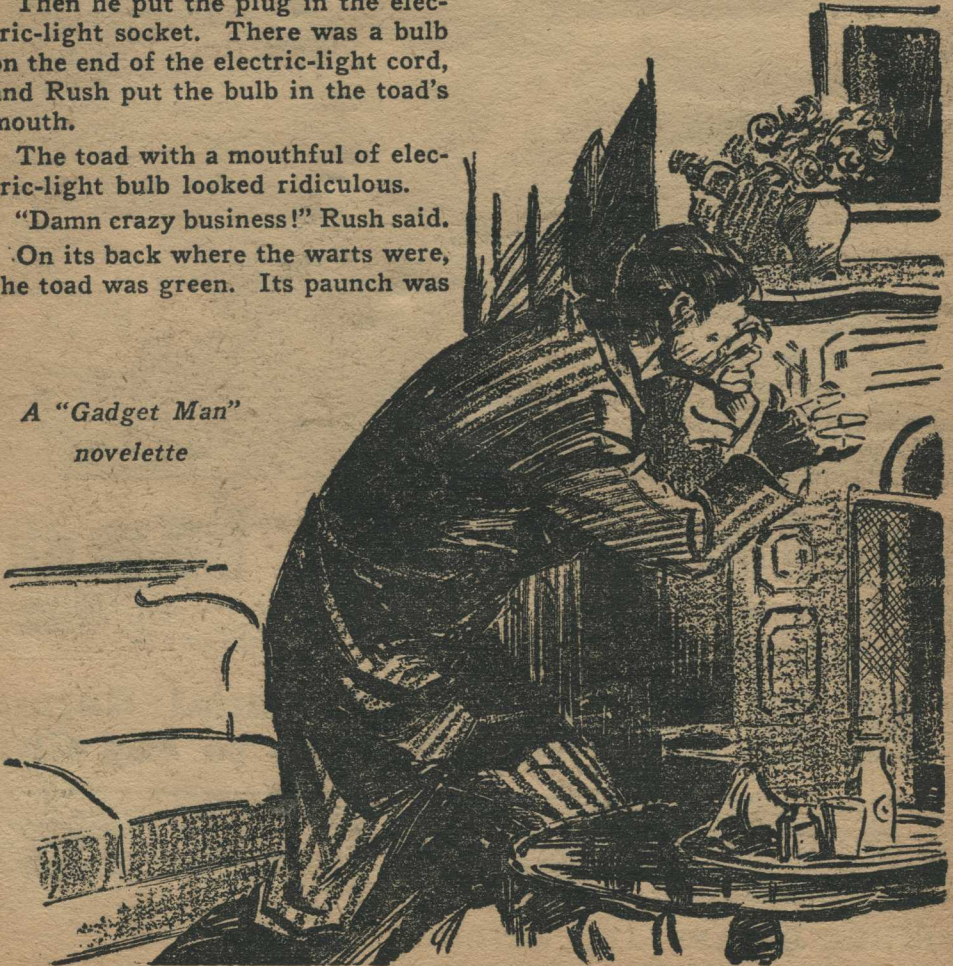
On its back where the warts were, the toad was green. Its paunch was

mud-yellow. It had tomcat eyes. Rush had found from past experience that he could get it in a large traveling bag if he did not put in too much padding.

One of the pieces of paper the toad had been sitting on was green and had one torn edge. It was one half of a ten-thousand-dollar bill.

The other piece of paper was plain

A "Gadget Man"
 novelette



Arrest Him, Officer!

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SWAMP

Bufa has a new assignment for the Gadget Man—and it deals with grasshoppers, bugs and a bughouse!

white with these two type-written words:

TUNE IN

Rush waited for the electric-light bulb to heat the thermostat hidden in the toad's mouth, close a contact and thus turn on the wired radio "transceiver" hidden in the toad's body. Rush knew all about the toad's entrails. He had taken it apart

often enough looking vainly for fingerprints of the man who'd given it to him.

Big raindrops hit the trailer windows like fat, juicy bugs hitting a windshield. Thunder overhead was giving a great whoop an average of about two times to the minute, and lightning squirted glare somewhat oftener.

The trailer camp was as gaudy as the lightning. The advertising called it "Trailer Haven," and signs as far up as Virginia had started saying it was something to look forward to. They were right. Each



trailer stood on a little numbered lot, on streets that were named. There were telephones, lights, water. There was a grocery, drug store, garage, movie theater, golf course, golf driving range, swimming pool, tennis court, and a *jai-alai* fronton.

It had been a swell set-up for a vacation. *Had been*, was right.

The toad began to pur as a microphone was cut in on another "transceiver" plugged in somewhere on the city light system.

Rush leaned close to the microphone concealed in the toad.

He said, "What kind of a fool business is it this time?"

The voice from the toad was strange. Rush had always been convinced the other disguised his voice by talking with a mouthful of pebbles or with a finger pulling his lips out of shape.

The toad said, "I had hoped the change of scenery would improve your temper."

Rush scowled at the toad. He said, "How'd you know I was here? How'd you trail me?"

The toad said, "The man will be strange-looking. I think he is best described as looking like a grasshopper."

Rush raised his voice. "I've resigned! I don't care what he looks like! I've quit this crazy stuff!"

"You will be interested in the plantation he has for sale," the toad said. "But do not make the mistake of thinking the man is dumb because he looks queer."

"The hell with it!" Rush said.

The toad chuckled. "I am *Bufa*, of the species *Bufo*idæ, feeding on insects and slugs."

The other "transceiver," going dead, made a click.

THERE was a small ax in clips over the trailer galley stove, and Rush stood and moved his gaze from ax to toad for some time. When he got rid of the impulse to use the ax on the toad, he put the toad in its traveling bag and packed excelsior around it.

He watched the clock blankly five minutes more, wondering who the voice of the toad could be. For months now, he had been finding those notes, and halves of ten-thousand-dollar bills, and the voice had been ordering him to solve strange crimes. Always, the assignments were cryptic. They told little; they were like the one just received.

A man who looked like a grasshopper was coming to sell him a plantation. There was a crime in that, somewhere, and Rush was to solve it, after which the other half of the bill would turn up in some unexpected place. Ten thousand dollars: A ridiculous price for a detective job! The crime would be fantastic, too. The others had been.

Rush got around to trying to figure out how the person he had not known, the voice of the toad, had found him.

He got out of the trailer. Rain beat him and he ran.

The man in the drug store said, "The late Savannah papers? Right there."

It was there on the front page, and it said:

THE GADGET MAN VISITS SAVANNAH

Clickell Rush, known as the "Gadget Man" because of his thousands of unusual inventions for catching crooks and solving crimes, arrived at Trailer Haven, Savannah's modernistic trailer park, yesterday.

Rush gained prominence recently in New York when he solved a number of remarkable crimes by use of his inventions.

The story carried over to an inside page, and gave a rehash of stuff the New York papers had printed weeks ago.

"Humph!" Rush said.

He went back to his trailer feeling rather famous.

THE man who had a plantation to sell did look like a grasshopper.

"I've got a plantation to sell," he said. "It's a bargain. A real buy. Something you can't afford to miss."

He said that while he was settling his fat body on a seat like a hen squatting down to set, and gathering in his long spindling legs. Then he took off his greenish hat, puffed out his cheeks and blew rain off the hat.

Rush did not say anything. Here was the first piece of the puzzle, and he hoped the rest wasn't as silly as this piece looked.

The plantation salesman had an undertaker's long face, and thin arms. Everything about him was thin but his body; that was huge. The gold watch chain angling across his vest was thin.

"I am Luther Gorman," he said.

"Mr. Gorman," Rush said, "I don't want to buy a plantation."

"But——"

"I don't want to buy anything," Rush said. "If I did want to buy anything, I doubt if it would be a plantation."

Gorman made a smile which showed yellow teeth that looked a little like they had been thrown at his gums at random.

"You act," he said, "as if I were selling life insurance."

"Do I?"

Gorman thought. His face went through a lot of antics while he thought. He puckered his forehead, and that made his long, yellowish front hair wriggle like a grasshopper's feelers.

"This plantation," he said, "is a buy you can't afford——"

"Who owns it?"

"I—er—— What?"

"Who owns the plantation?"

The man exhibited his scattered yellow teeth. "I—— Well—I am not at liberty to divulge."

"Who restricted your liberty?"

"I—— What?"

"Never mind," Rush said.

He looks so dumb that it's pitiful, Rush thought. But he's the kind of an egg who can fool you.

The man gathered his long legs as if he wanted to jump, and the expression on his long face was that of not knowing which way to jump. He put on a patient look.

"This plantation," he began again, "is a rare bargain, one that——"

"No dice," Rush said.

"But——"

"A life insurance agent," Rush said, "would be a relief."

The man sighed. He took out horn-rimmed spectacles with thick lenses and stuck them against his long face. His eyes looked like marbles in a fish bowl. He batted them at Rush.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I—— Well, I'm sorry, and I guess I must be going."

He got up and took out of the pocket of his greenish coat a revolver.

"We'll go together, though," he said.

FOLIAGE was creeping nearer the road. Rush could tell that, because the limbs were beginning to bang the sides of the trailer. The stuff that sounded like snakes going over the trailer roof was probably Spanish moss hanging from limbs. Wind and rain pounced on the trailer in the open places and shook it and washed it.

Rush lay on his back and waited for the next big bump.

Wheels of the trailer under him kept parting loose gravel with a swishing sound, and flying stones hit the floor with sharp reports.

They hit a bump. The bump wasn't big enough.

The ropes around Rush's ankles hurt. They were tight. The man had wrapped the rope around the ax handle to get grip to yank them extra tight. Rush had reared up and looked at the ankles often enough to be sure the cords were buried in flesh. The ankles had stopped feeling as if they belonged to him. So had his wrists, for that matter.

The next bump was one such as he had been waiting for. He got high enough to root the ax with his head and it came out of the clips, turned over once, and the sharp blade cut the end of his right shoe smack off. It looked as if all toes had been cut off. The foot had no feeling.

Rush peered at the foot. He thought of what the colored boy with the razor told the other colored boy. "So yo' thinks yo' throat ain't cut? Son, just wait till yo' nods dat head."

He took his tongue with his teeth, then wriggled his foot. All five toes appeared, unharmed.

He worked with the ax until he had hands and feet free, then took out the gag. He studied the unscathed foot.

"Nice work, toes," he said.

The trailer stopped then. Stopped suddenly, and Rush went walking backward fast on his heels, trying to keep his balance, and his knees caught the forward bunk and he sat down with force, his head hitting the mirror. The mirror broke in large pieces which somersaulted onto his lap and onto the bunk.

He thought at first that the whack on the head produced the sound.

His next idea was that they had stopped at a plantation where a large group of colored folks were humming a spiritual. It sounded a little like that sort of thing sounded on the radio. No words; just humming. Subdued, not unmusical, rising and falling, with crescendos and diminuendos, but no pauses.

Rush frowned. He had rather taken it for granted that plantation singing was in the same bracket with cowboy songs on the ranches—something the movies always put in, but which rarely occurred in real life.

When the trailer door opened, the sound was more distinct, and all at once he knew he didn't have any idea what it was.

The "grasshopper" man yelled, "Have you got any tobacco?"

He held tight with one hand to the trailer door edge as if afraid it would get away. The fingers of his other hand kept going like a woman's knitting needles.

"Tobacco!" he howled. "Where's your tobacco?"

He sounded as if the one thing in the world he had to have was tobacco.

CHAPTER II.

THE SCARED ONES

HE must be able to see that Rush was loose.

Thunder gave an excited whoop, and lightning turned all the raindrops pale red.

"Tobacco," Rush said, "isn't what you need, if you ask me."

The man wasn't listening. He had turned to half face the night. And, suddenly, he was shaking a fist at the darkness.

"Damned fools!" he shrieked. He

whirled on Rush. "You hear that noise?"

Rush was hearing it. And wondering.

"I don't hear a thing," Rush said.

The man started, looked taken aback. Then he pushed his face at Rush.

"Ah—you think I'm crazy!" Then he popped his eyes at Rush. "Hell!" he said, astonished. "You're loose!"

Rush got the man by the neck before he could get his revolver. They got down on the trailer floor, went over and over and around and around while things broke or flew about. Rush got the gun.

The man got out of the door, and Rush crawled on hands and knees to the door, and pointed the gun at the jumping, plunging noises the man was making to escape.

Rush yelled as loud as he could, "Stop or I'll shoot your head off!"

The man kept going.

Lightning came and stood for moments in a white-hot and shaking streak across the sky, and Rush aimed carefully and tried to shoot the man in the leg.

All the noise the gun made could have been equalled by a match stick breaking. After Rush opened it and saw that it was empty, he scrambled out of the trailer into the rain and threw the gun with all his force at the running man, and missed.

Rush ran after the man. They both made noises with their feet knocking up water. New lightning showed a stone path crowded by shrubbery, and showed the man taking grasshopper leaps ahead of his flying coat tails. And it revealed the house.

The house was a squatting old witch.

Gorman struck the front porch, slammed against the door and got it

open. He went inside off balance, twisting to knock the door shut.

The lightning showed the narrow front of the house with the porch that was like an outthrust jaw, the two oval windows above with little scabby, shingled porches over them like eyebrows, and the rambling rest of the building beyond that made up the rest of the witch.

Rush went back to the trailer.

He listened to the weird humming sound that had terrified Gorman, while he put on a bulletproof vest and distributed gadgets through his clothing. After he was, as he reflected wryly, "loaded for bear," he stood in the door of the trailer with a parabolic microphone of extreme sensitivity and an amplifier of great power. This listening device was connected to a telephonic headset he wore. In the headset, the raindrops bursting on leaves were like bombshells, and the thunder was an earthquake.

The device was a pint-size edition of the contraption perfected by the army for spotting planes by sound.

Having listened to the humming for three or four minutes, Rush knew no more about it than he did before.

He said, "Blast the rain!"

Then he went to the house, walked in the front door and looked in surprise at the girl standing holding the telephone.

THE room was austere and dignified, paneled in mahogany. The wide staircase that swept upward was austere. The furniture was more antique than colonial, and dignified. The fireplace was a white and regal thing with gold-plated, or gilt andirons and screen, and it did not look as if the neat, correct fire burning in it could possibly give out warmth.

The girl was like the room.

"I beg pardon!" she said.

"Eh?"

"This happens to be a private home." She sounded cool and amazed beyond belief that any one should have the temerity to walk in.

Rush looked around the dignified place.

"Private, maybe," he said.

The girl put down the telephone with dignity. "Get out!" she said.

Rush looked at the girl's neck, wondered if it would turn out to be marble if you should try chewing it; then, he walked over and held the telephone receiver to his ear.

Rush was an average-size man with a trifle too many muscles that appeared to be made of piano wire. He had too much mouth. His skin was tanned brown, his hair was brown, his eyes were brown, and he wore, whenever he could, browns. He looked brownly astonished and put down the telephone.

"Dead," he said. "Wires cut or something."

"Get out!" the girl said.

"Where did Gorman go?"

"Who?"

"Gorman. You know—grasshopper?"

"I don't understand."

"He tore in here a few minutes ago," Rush said.

The girl looked utterly dignified.

"You must be crazy!" she said.

RUSH listened to the sound. It was rising and falling, swinging up and down a musical scale, but certainly without a tune or any order at all. It wasn't like darkies humming, it wasn't like dynamos in a powerhouse, and it wasn't like wind around an old house. Not exactly. It was fainter inside here.

Rush dipped in his pockets. He pulled out five cigars in a box and took them out of the box; took out

of his pockets cigarettes, a can of smoking and a plug of chewing. He put all the tobacco on a table with glass balls on the ends of its legs.

"I wonder if you would be interested in tobacco," he said.

The girl's hands went out in front of her. She ran across the room, holding the hands out. She was close to a table with little lion heads on the ends of its legs, when Rush saw that her hands were ready to grab at two dueling pistols that were inlaid with silver and lay in a purple, plush-lined case.

Rush galloped over and gathered the girl's hands and the two guns together with his own hands. They did a kind of a dance while the girl kicked at his shins. After she bit him, he took one hand out of the fight to get a small hypodermic needle out of a sheath and prick the girl's wrists with it. The pricks did not hurt her, but enough local anæsthetic was injected so that, after about two minutes, the girl's hands became useless.

She got back, looked at her hands, and began screaming.

She screamed steadily for all of a long minute.

Then the old man with the beard, the rimless spectacles and the cane came in. He had the cane hooked over his left forearm. With both hands, he carried a dignified silver tray on which was a neat linen napkin, a bottle of milk, a bottle of pills and a glass.

He said, "Time for your milk, my dear."

CHAPTER III.

SPHINXES AND LIARS.

RUSH put a dueling pistol in each hip pocket.

"Milk, eh?" he said.

The old man peered at Rush. The milk and glass and pill bottle began

to make clinking noises as his hands shook them around on the tray. He placed the tray on the table alongside the dueling pistol case. Then, as if he couldn't see very well, he came closer to peer at Rush.

"I—why—gracious!" he said. "You're a stranger!"

"Good evening," Rush said.

"I— Well—good evening." The old fellow straightened his beard with one hand, then held to his cane with both hands. "Testell is my name. Doctor Ephraim Testell. I— Well—I preside here."

"You what?"

"Preside. That is, I am the resident physician."

"Oh."

There was close to a minute's silence. Then the old man turned half around, still holding to his cane, and looked at the girl. He made the pity sound with the front of his mouth that is also used to call hogs.

"Poor girl," he said. "She needs her milk."

Rush said, "She needs something."

The old man turned his head toward Rush. "You arrived recently?"

"Quite recently."

"I—ah—see. Did you— Well, did you want something?"

Rush shook his head.

He said, "I didn't want any of it."

"Any of what?"

"I'm wondering."

"Wondering?"

"I think so."

"Ah—I see." The old man smiled.

"What is your trouble?"

Rush said, "I don't know. It's kind of like being stood on your head, then whirled around and around."

"I see."

Rush, exasperated, said, "Damned if I do!"

The old man made his hog-calling



noise. "The man who brought you should have come in with you."

"Oh, he did," Rush said. "I sort of herded him in ahead of me."

"You—ah—I see." The old man's smile grew benevolent. "A violent case. Hm-m-m!"

Rush yelled, "Violent case? What the blazes is this, anyway?"

The old man came very close and peered intently at Rush's eyes. He looked puzzled.

"Show me your tongue," he said.

Rush stuck out his tongue.

"Goodness, I'm sorry!" the old man exclaimed. "I've made a mistake. I thought you were a new patient whom some one had brought."

"Patient?" Rush said loudly.

"Why"—the old man chuckled—"I don't believe you know what kind of an institution this is."

Rush nodded. "I believe that's one of the several things I don't know."

"It is an institution for mental cases."

"Bughouse?"

"Well, yes. Bughouse."

THE dignified girl dashed forward suddenly, and while Rush stared at her in astonishment, she gathered up the cigars, cigarettes, smoking tobacco and chewing plug, held them tightly in her arms and

raced out of the front door into the rain. She was gone long enough to get well soaked. She had looked as tense as a fiddle-string all over when she went out. She seemed more relaxed when she came back.

She said, "I threw them in the cistern."

The old man said, "Maybe they won't sink."

"I put them in a syrup can. I put enough rocks in to sink the can, and put the lid on."

"That's good! Goodness, yes!"

Rush said, "Everybody sure looks relieved."

The old man came over and took Rush by the elbow. Rush got his elbow loose in a polite way and stepped back. The old man smiled.

"Oh, I know you're not one of our patients," he said.

"That's nice," Rush admitted.

The old man cocked his head to the left side. "You—ah—haven't told me what I can do for you."

"The tobacco," Rush said, "puzzles me."

"Oh, tobacco." The old gentleman changed the cock of his head to the right side. "Isn't it too pitiful for words!" He moved his cane slightly toward the girl. "She has a mania concerning tobacco. She goes into hysterics at sight of it."

"Then she hides it, eh?"

"Yes. She always hides it. Always. Quite unusual, don't you think?"

Rush said, "Then you give her milk?"

"Well—milk, with a quieting medicine in it." The old fellow changed his head to the other side like a bird and blinked his eyes rapidly.

Rush pointed at the pill bottle. "Those pills are the medicine?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"Does Gorman," Rush asked, "get the pills, too?"

"Gorman?"

"The grasshopper."

"Oh, I—heh, heh—see!" the old man cackled. "So you met Gorman? He has the same fixation as this young woman. As a matter of fact, all my patients here have a tobacco fixation of some kind. We treat only such cases. This is tobacco-raising country, you know. People who go crazy here are likely to do so over tobacco."

"Very interesting."

"Yes, doubtless."

Rush pointed at the pills. "And you treat them with the pills?"

"Yes. I told you that."

"I believe," Rush said, "that you are giving them *formicoidea* in the *pantaleones*."

"Well—ah—a similar compound, yes."

"Something similar to *formicoidea* in the *pantaleones*, eh?"

"Yes." The old man nodded. "Exactly."

"*Formicoidea*," Rush said, "is a big word for ants."

"But—"

"And *pantaleones*—"

"But—"

"Is pants," Rush said. He walked over, picked up the pill bottle and spilled the contents on the table. "Furthermore," he said, "these pills are common beans."

"I—"

"Beans!" Rush repeated.

HE waited for some kind of a reaction—an attempt at flight, a fight, an explanation or more lies. But they just stood there, the old man and the austere girl, with their heads cocked to one side; and it was more than a minute before he realized they were listening, and that they

had been listening all the time they talked to him. Straining themselves until it hurt to listen.

To what? To that strange droning noise outside in the thunder and lightning and the night. He could see that now.

Their fascination with the sound mesmerized him into straining his own ears at listening. He had studied the noise scientifically through his listener-amplifier device, and learned nothing, and listening to it now, he could tell nothing more about it, except that the thing had a species of weird fascination aside from the mystery which was clouding up around it.

After he stood there bewildered for some time, he discovered that his eyes had grown interested in the five toes of his right foot which stuck out of the end of the shoe that the ax had cut off in the trailer. He put his weight on that foot and water shot out from between the toes. He felt very wet.

He took a handkerchief out of his rubber-lined inside coat pocket, which was sealed almost airtight with a zipper, and held the handkerchief to his nose.

When he was sure he was inhaling and exhaling entirely through the gas-mask type of chemical pad which the handkerchief contained, he took a glass-walled bulb the size of a bantam egg out of another pocket.

The old man straightened up suddenly and looked very glad.

"Going away!" he said.

Rush presumed he meant the sound. It did seem to be going away.

Rush took the chemical pad away from his mouth and nose, and said, "I'd like a full explanation."

The old man stared at him.

"Young man," he said, "the kindest

thing you can do to all of us is go away from here as quickly as you can."

"But——"

"Ask no questions, and go!"

The old man sounded firm.

Rush looked at the girl, and she appeared just as firm.

Rush put the pad to his mouth and nose again, made sure his breathing was right, and pegged the glass egg at the floor. It broke, splashed, and the splash evaporated in faintly colored vapor. It took a short time for the girl and the old man to drop down unconscious from the gas. They did not quite make it to the door.

Rush followed the muddy footsteps of Gorman. The tracks were extremely plain and easy to follow. They led back to a big and ancient kitchen, ended where the "grasshopper" had wiped his feet on a mop.

CHAPTER IV.

TRAIL.

HIS search of the strange old witch of a house told him a number of things that were interesting, but not important until he came across the newspaper clippings. The house must be two hundred years old, and it was presided over by a girl who was neat; had money and a yen for fine old, austere things.

The name of the girl who owned the place was Regina Wintersett, according to the papers in her office. Regina Wintersett was the dignified girl lying unconscious from gas downstairs, judging from the picture in her boudoir. She'd probably given the picture to a boy friend, then spat with him and got it back. It was inscribed, "To Cedric, from Regina," in a fine feminine hand.

But the newspaper clippings were the most interesting. The first one read:

FIELD OF TOBACCO VANISHES

The mysterious disappearance of a small field of tobacco has spread consternation among the employees of New Dawn plantation. It is reported that the tobacco patch was there one night, and gone the next morning. Hardly a leaf of the tobacco remained.

Complete mystery surrounds the disappearance of the tobacco field. It is said, moreover, that superstitious employees of New Dawn plantation are leaving.

Miss Regina Winterset, owner of New Dawn plantation, curtly refused comment to an employee of this newspaper.

The rest of the clips did not add anything to that.

"Tobacco," Rush said. "Hm-m-m!"

He went outdoors with a flashlight and slopped around in the rain, finding cabins and tobacco barns. Both cabins and barns were empty. Both appeared to have been in use recently. It looked as if the plantation employees had left, and all tobacco had been whisked off the place.

Later, Rush stood in the house and frowned at the girl and the old man. There was not much chance of them coming out from under effects of the gas for another half hour. It would not harm them, except that they might have headaches.

He sat down on the floor and occupied his hands with smearing the soles of their shoes with a dark, gummy-looking mixture which he took from a tin container that might have been a salve box.

By the time he had their shoe soles well smeared, he thought of a way of smearing the salve on the floor around them in a manner that would not look suspicious. He spread the salve on the floor. Then he got an oil lamp, sprinkled the oil

on the rug, and broke the bowl of the lamp in the mess; after which it appeared that the rug was only wet with kerosene, even where the salve was smeared.

The way he figured it, the mysterious voice of Bufo, the toad, must have read about the disappearing tobacco patch in the newspapers. But what had caused the "grasshopper," Gorman, to come after him? Wanting to sell a plantation was probably a stall. He'd wanted Rush. When the plantation stall fell through, he'd used the gun to bring Rush. But why?

Rush went back to the girl's office to look for the reason. His first inspection had given him the impression she was the kind of a girl who kept everything that came through the mail or over wires. He'd noticed advertising circulars with dates five years old. She also noted down her telephone conversations on a pad in shorthand.

RUSH had studied shorthand, but he knew this was no guarantee that he could read the girl's notes, the beauty of shorthand being that the more expert you become, the more word signs, pothooks and curlicues you make up that mean words and phrases to you and nothing at all to anybody else. He had seen shorthand of speed champions that meant just as much to him as ancient Chaldean hieroglyphics. He did not know whether the ancient Chaldeans had hieroglyphics. Fortunately, the girl was not an expert.

He finally translated the pad leaf that interested him. He read:

Clickell Rush—trailer—Trailer Haven camp. Have to get him here by trick or force— After he is here, he will get interested and help.

Rush looked at the shorthand he had translated and felt proud. He

had, from the first, had an intense desire to learn the identity of the voice that spoke to him through the fantastic toad. Each time the voice had assigned him to one of the strange mysteries that it managed, somehow, to unearth, he had attacked the problem with as much desire to catch the owner of the voice as to solve the case. Each morsel of progress toward that goal elated him.

After a while, he decided the translation of the shorthand was no help at all in identifying the voice. It just told him that the voice had telephoned the girl—if that were what the notes meant. He returned to his frown.

The wait for the girl and the old man to revive was getting tiresome. He'd expected a search to yield more.

It still was not beginning to make sense.

The thunder and lightning and rain had ceased, and the queer sing-song sound had gone away entirely. Suddenly curious about whether he could pick it up or not, Rush got the listener-amplifier, switched it on, and turned the controls up to full volume.

He thought he heard the sound to the eastward. Either the sound, or his imagination was good.

He was more certain about the man walking in the house. The fellow was in the basement—his careful steps were making the small gritty noises that shoes make on concrete. At intervals, there was a scrape, as if the man were dragging something.

Rush went downstairs carefully.

There was a man with a flashlight in the basement. The basement was modern and contained the farm lighting plant and a laundry. The man was inching a big wicker laun-

dry basket carefully across the floor toward the door.

Rush crouched down and aimed with a little metal tube which was, mechanically, an air pistol without the adorning trigger and grips to make it look like an ordinary pistol. After the pistol made its spitting noise, the basket-dragger howled.

Rush listened to the words and noises of the man. The fellow said, "What the hell?" two or three times, then found the dart, turned the flashlight on it, after which he said, "What—what——" and dropped dart and flashlight. Glass clicked on the floor as the flashlight extinguished and broke. A moment later, there was a soft bump as the man came down on the floor.

Rush walked down the basement steps and turned his own flashlight on the man. The man lay with his eyes almost closed. Rush nudged him with a toe.

"Gorman!" Rush said.

The "grasshopper" man stirred slightly.

"You can talk," Rush said. "That local anæsthetic only paralyzed your lower body."

GORMAN opened his eyes wider. Hate showed all his scattered, tobacco-colored teeth.

"What's going on in this place?" Rush asked.

"Devil with you!" Gorman said.

The two men, one wire-muscled and tanned and alert, all in browns; the other big-bodied and gangling grotesque, scowled at each other and clashed wills.

"Devil with me, eh?" Rush said finally.

He went over and opened the basket Gorman had been trying to take away silently.

He said, "Ugh!" and closed the basket.

After he had stood back and looked blankly at different things in the basement until his insides got back to feeling the way they normally did, he got a stick, lifted the basket lid again, and stuck the flashlight beam into the basket from various angles.

He said, "Man or woman?"

Gorman did not say anything.

Rush said, "This happened sometime to-day, didn't it?"

Gorman was silent.

Rush asked, "What did it?"

Gorman still said nothing, but it was terror now that made his yellow teeth show.

Rush flung upon him suddenly and with pantherish violence, tightened fingers on the man's throat and bumped his head on the floor. "What killed that person?" Rush gritted.

The more he thought about the body in the basket, the more his rage fanned. Horror at the condition of the body boiled up in wrath until he had a fanatic desire to maul this man who would not talk—

When calmness returned, he took his hands and his knees off the man. The fellow lay still, shaking a little, his hands clawing around over his clothing.

Rush glowered at the man's helplessness.

He said, "Too bad I drugged you."

The man said, "You didn't!" and lashed out at Rush's wrist with his right hand.

Rush felt the sting of the hypodermic airgun dart over a wrist vein before he knew that the man's hand held it, and after that they wrestled around on the floor for what seemed a long time before Rush's muscles stopped responding when his will ordered. He lay back, helpless, and wondered how the man would kill him.

Gorman said, "You've got another

guess coming if you think it wasn't some job faking the effects of that dart when I didn't know what was in the thing." He did not sound particularly elated. He turned up the points of his vest briefly to show a wide, thick leather belt. "It hit that," he explained.

CHAPTER V.

FEAR IN THE SWAMP.

RUSH spent an hour dragging himself to the basement stairs, up the stairs and through the lower rooms in the house, then up more steps and through the upstairs rooms. By that time he knew the girl, the old man, Gorman and the mutilated body were no longer in the house. By that time, he could also walk.

He tried out his walking ability toward the trailer. The trailer was gone. He went back to the house and tinkered with his little pocket ultra-violet-light projector, not much larger than a cigar case. The thing was mostly spring generator, for it took a lot of current. The lens, nearly black in color, had been cracked out of its mounting during the fight. He tried vainly to wedge it back in place, but finally had to hold it against the mount with his fingers.

He began in the big front room where he had met the girl, and where he had put the gummy salve on the carpet. When he turned ultra-violet light on the stuff, it turned to a pool of pale-greenish fire. The material was fluorescing under the ultra-violet light, glowing as do many chemicals.

Rush and three other people had walked through the stuff and thereafter left footprints. Rush followed the tracks. They were more blotchy outdoors, but could be traced.

They went into the swamp east-

ward. He covered half a mile, and remembered that the strange sound had gone away into the east.

He got wet again, went all of two miles farther, much of the time on a path that must have been hard to build in such a swamp as was around about, and came to a fence. The fence surprised him.

Height of it was all of fifteen feet; the posts were steel, with insulators on which two different types of wire was fastened, one wire that was heavy enough that it could only be cut with very stout nippers or a hack saw, the other wire of a mesh fine enough at the base to stop a mouse, and not much more coarse at the top. A sign on the fence said:

**DANGER
ELECTRIFIED FENCE**

The luminous tracks went through a gate which was padlocked on the other side.

Having learned that much by sparing use of his flashlight, Rush went to work on the lock. The lock was cleverly wired, evidently with a burglar alarm. Having studied it out, he wired around it with copper strands that he got by dissembling part of the amplifying listening device. The lock was not hard to pick. He stepped through.

He was trying to make the gate look as if it were locked without it actually being so, when the girl rushed out of the darkness and tried to hit him with a club. He knew it was the girl as soon as he dodged the club and got hold of her.

"Psst!" Rush said. "You've got the wrong guy."

The girl stopped fighting.

"Oh!" she said. "I—I'm glad you got here!"

She did not sound dignified. Just plain glad.



A MOMENT later, she was jerking at his arm and urging, "Come! Maybe you can help Doctor Testell!"

Rush followed her far enough to get away from the gate, then stopped.

He said, "Explain things!"

"Oh, Gorman said if we came here, everything would be all right. He said you were scared and had fled from the plantation——"

"Gorman said I'd left?" Rush interrupted.

"Yes. He said that you had gone, and that if we came here and brought—brought Lane's body, everything would be all right after the body was disposed of. Gorman said I—I wouldn't have to pay the five thousand dollars."

"You wouldn't have to pay the five thousand, eh?"

"Yes."

"What five thousand?"

"Why, that's the money the man—it may be Gorman, and I think it is—wanted for not destroying my tobacco with Doctor Testell's bugs."

Rush took a deep breath. He said, "Er—bugs?"

"Don't you know anything about this?" the girl demanded.

"I've done some guessing," Rush admitted. "The guessing kind of runs like this: Somebody has some bugs, and they said they'd turn them

loose and ruin your tobacco unless you paid off." He scowled abruptly. "That's plenty crazy!"

"That's what I thought at first," the girl gasped. "But I can't talk! Doctor Testell is——"

Rush said, "We've got to talk. Is this it: The bugs were turned loose on one of your fields to show what they could do. It scared your farm hands into leaving. The newspapers got the story. The voice of that toad read it and called——"

"Toad? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Never mind. Just a voice. It called you and told you to get hold of me to help out. The voice told me you'd have to fenagle me into coming. You sent Gorman."

"I didn't dream then that Gorman was in on the extortion——"

"What happened," Rush interrupted, "while Gorman was coming after me?"

"Lane! They killed him with the bugs! Put tobacco on him. The things—ugh——"

She sounded so much like she was going to scream that Rush shook her.

He asked, "Who was Lane?"

"The plantation hand who stuck with us," the girl choked.

"That scared you and Doctor Testell into pulling that stuff about a bughouse to get me away from the place, eh?"

"Yes." The girl sounded frantic. "I tell you, they're going to kill Doctor Testell if we don't hurry!"

Rush let her drag him along.

"Why?" he asked.

"Doctor Testell developed the bugs."

"Developed them? Developed insects to destroy tobacco?"

The girl stumbled, almost fell, and Rush helped her up again. She dragged him on.

"He didn't develop them to de-

stroy tobacco," she said. "He just found out that he had developed an insect that craved tobacco. He thought he had an insect that would feed on boll weevils and nothing else."

"Then Doctor Testell is an entomologist?"

"Yes. He's worked for years for something to destroy boll weevils. There's millions in it."

Rush said, "Won't they hear us talking?"

"They're in the basement."

Rush went flat in the mud, and got up feeling his temper. He said, "I know—in the basement killing Doctor Testell. Why?"

"Because he knows about the insects. They were stolen from him by—by whoever is trying to get the money. I don't know who. I haven't seen him."

A house stood in the blackness before them.

RUSH peered at the house, but listened to a sound that was coming from the rear somewhere. It came only at intervals, and was something like the noise swarming bees make when a stick is thrust into their midst. It was, he decided, fragments of such a noise as he had heard earlier in the night.

"That the bugs?" he asked.

The girl's "Yes" was low. Her "Hurry up!" was louder.

Rush was interested in the insects. "How do they control 'em?" he asked. "If you turn 'em loose, I'd think they'd be gone."

"They're like bees!"

"Bees?"

"They have," the girl explained, "a queen which produces all the eggs. They always come back to the queen, exactly like bees. As long as you can keep the queen, you can keep the swarm." She jerked at

him. "Come on! They left me tied upstairs. They may find out I got away!"

Rush let her lead him to a door, where he took off his shoes. The girl did the same. Then she led him inside and they listened.

"Basement," Rush said.

"I think so, too." The girl went ahead to the stairs. "They don't squeak," she whispered, and went down into an awful odor.

The basement was divided into a large room and a small one, and the larger, into which they descended, was electrically lighted and fitted out with four long tables and half a dozen tall cases with glass doors. On the tables stood small cages of fine mesh wire, glass-walled boxes resembling aquariums without water, and other stuff which was probably whatever an entomologist used. The cases held more of the same.

The door into the other basement room was at the opposite end of the laboratory, and was open; and they could see through it and make out two figures, but could not distinguish details about the figures because of a lack of light.

One of the forms lay on the floor with his shoes off. There was a pillow over his face. The other figure was standing on the ends of the pillow with both feet, holding it

over the prone man's face. The standing man's hands held a wagon rod, the end of which was red-hot.

Each time the hot wagon rod came against the prone man's bare feet, there was a sizzling and the awful odor got worse.

The standing man put the rod down, got off the pillow, and the phone man's agonized moaning was audible.

"How much did you tell this Rush?" snarled the man with the poker.

His voice was so strained with the excitement of what he was doing that it was hardly understandable.

The man on the floor said he had told Rush nothing. He said it several times in different agonized ways that only a man being tortured could think of.

"I want the truth!" The other man reached for the poker.

Rush lost his caution and started a headlong rush across the basement. The man doing the torturing looked up. Then he snatched a gun out of his clothing. Rush got behind one of the tall cases as the gun banged.

The gun banged again, and all the lights went out.

RUSH yelled, "Get back, girl! This guy's a sharpshooter!" Then

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he lay very still. He heard the girl jump suddenly, and get behind something. Wondering why she had not fled the basement, he turned his head and saw that the basement entrance was limned in light from the upstairs room, so that any one going through it would make a target.

The man with the gun snarled, "I had a hunch you weren't the kind who would get scared and leave!"

He fired his gun. He must have hoped the flash would show a target. It didn't.

There was intense silence until an object fell off a table, and Rush knew the man was advancing, prowling, hunting.

Rush went through his clothing as quietly as he could, hunting a gadget for the situation. It should be on him somewhere. He had pocketed it at the same time as the tin of fluorescing salve and the ultra-violet projector. It was a bottle— He found it in a side coat pocket.

The bottle had a narrow neck, and he got down with it close to the floor, removed the cork and switched it from side to side so as to throw the contents as far as he could, and as close to the floor as possible. Then he waited.

Two hot, red spots on the floor were first sign of the chemical working. Suddenly, the red spots began to go up and clap back on the floor. And the man with the shoes started screaming.

Rush was waiting for that, knowing the surprise would not last long. He rushed, closed with the other, searching with his hands for the gun. When he found it, he fought for that alone. The man kicked him, and Rush's legs began hurting from burns where the shoe soles landed. After the other's hold broke, Rush got the gun.

He hit with the weapon and the

other dropped. After that, he felt out the location of the other's head carefully and hit again to be sure.

He said, "Girl!"

"Yes," she said.

"You might hold my flashlight."

THE county sheriff was a practical man. He wore large, square-toed shoes and a black hat, and smoked dark cigars.

"Ordinarily," he said, "I wouldn't believe a word of a thing like this." He took his cigar out of his mouth, frowned at it and suddenly ground it into the mud with a heel. "Ugh!" he said.

Rush said, "We poured gasoline over the bugs and set it afire. They're gone."

The sheriff shook his head. "Like I say, ordinarily, I wouldn't believe there were any bugs."

"Miss Winterset can testify that there were," Rush said. "And so will Gorman."

"That's why I believe it. That is—I'll take their word. I don't know about believing it." He got out another cigar. "Let's put it this way: The part of me that is the law will believe it. That's enough, ain't it?"

"Enough for me," Rush admitted.

"Miss Winterset," the sheriff said, "was always a truthful girl."

"And Gorman, too, eh?"

"Well, he saved your life, didn't he?"

"Probably," Rush admitted. "If he had told Doctor Testell I was in the New Dawn plantation basement, paralyzed from the effects of my own anæsthetic, the good doctor might have done something unpleasant."

"In which case," the sheriff grinned, "the doctor wouldn't have a fractured skull."

"Did I fracture it?"

"Afraid so."

Rush grinned back at the sheriff. "Of course," he said, "Miss Wintersett and Gorman were really convinced some one had stolen Doctor Testell's bugs. I guess the doctor had given up his boll weevil ideas and decided to go in for extortion. He must have been a convincing old devil to put over his act as long as he did."

"I always liked him." The sheriff sighed. "Hell, and I'll have to hang 'im, too!"

The sheriff started fumbling in

his pockets for matches. He brought out an envelope and peered at it.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "I nearly forgot all about this!"

He handed the envelope to Rush.

"For me?" Rush said, astonished.

"Sure. Found it on my desk today. Addressed to you."

Rush opened the envelope and looked at the other half of a ten-thousand-dollar bill which it contained.

Later, the sheriff peered at him curiously. "What's the matter?"

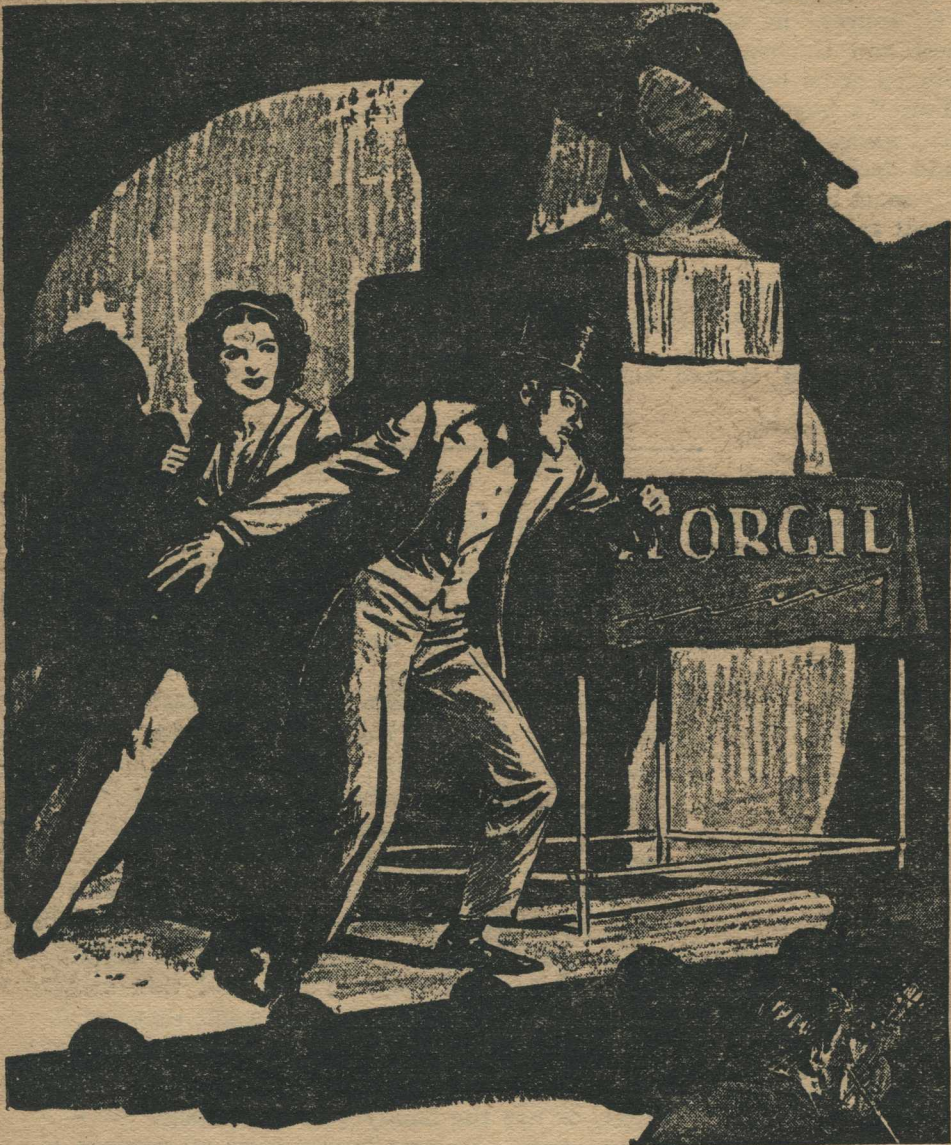
"Nothing," Rush said, "that I have been able to do anything about."

The Ones You Ask For—

Crime Busters is very much your own magazine; we not only say we give you what you want, we actually *do* give you what you want, for we give you the means of choosing. The ballots which our readers send in through the coupons in each issue have shown that "Click" Rush is a favorite without a doubt; so is "Norgil," the magician; and Carrie Cashin. These three selection are almost unanimous, so you'll have them every issue. And they'll be longer, too, to please you more.

Then there will be additional stories; some that many liked, though not as much as those mentioned above; others that are new, and that we expect you will like a great deal. You'll find this magazine packed with stories that are unusual; that are thrilling and exciting to the last line! And always, we want you to tell us just what you think. Write a letter, or use the handy coupon on page 127 of this issue. *Crime Busters* is smashing all records for a new magazine, because it is a new and different type of magazine, and because our readers are helping us select only the best. You can't go wrong with *Crime Busters!*

Murderer's Throne



CHAPTER I.

CROOKS HEAR NEWS.

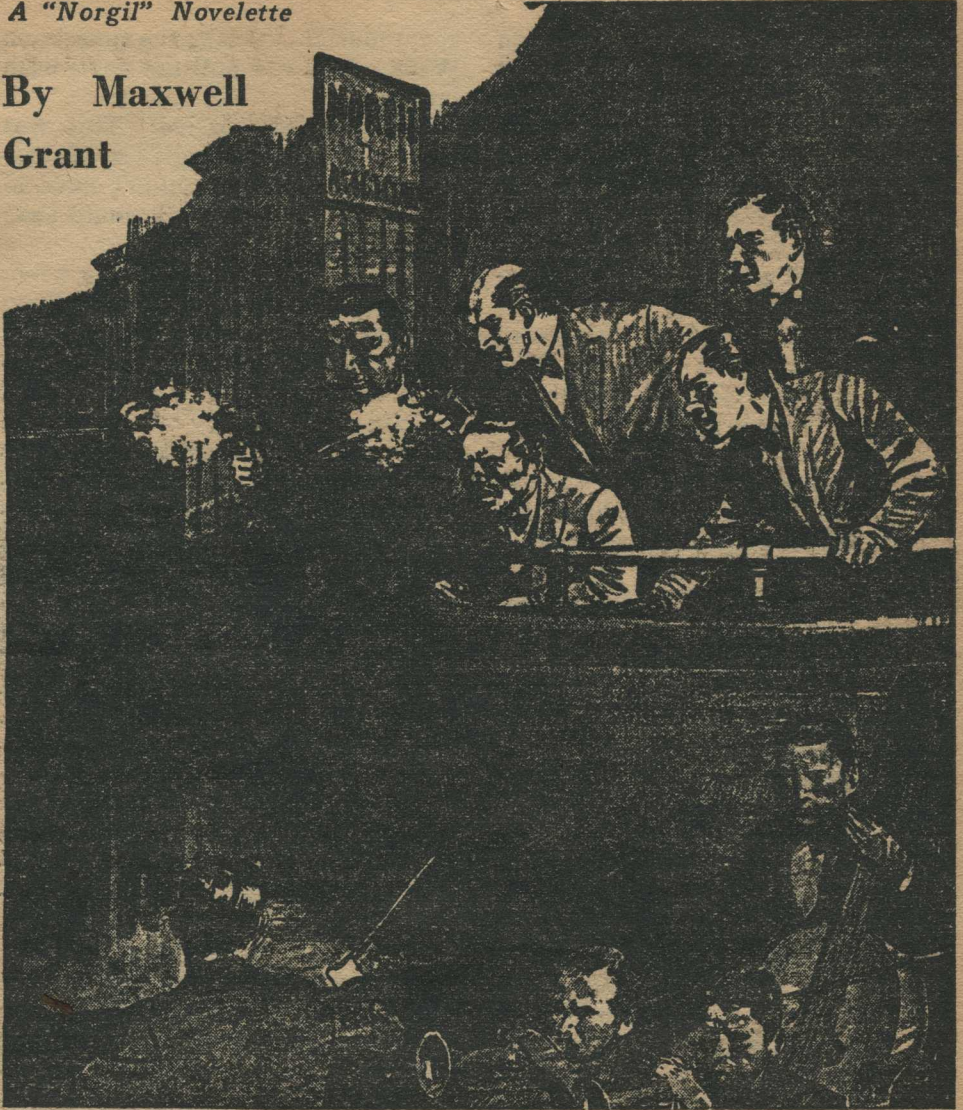
DEFT hands were moving smoothly in the spotlight, timed to the orchestra's soft waltz music. The hushed audience was like a huge, thousand-eyed creature, held spell-

bound. There was something almost hypnotic in the dexterity of those hands—the hands of Norgil, the magician.

Fingers plucked a cigarette from nowhere. Norgil placed that cigarette between his suavely smiling lips. He puffed it slowly; as the

A "Norgil" Novelette

By Maxwell
Grant



***Norgil, magician, puts a "king"
killer where he really belongs!***

smoke curled lazily past his pointed mustache, he tossed the cigarette into the big ash bowl that Fritz held on a tray.

Smoothly, Norgil plucked another cigarette from the atmosphere.

To the audience, the cigarette act was a baffling performance; to Nor-

gil, it was a matter of routine. Sometimes, he watched the faces of spectators near the side aisles, to observe their reactions to his sleight-of-hand, but to-night, his gaze had a different purpose.

Norgil's practiced hands were literally working on their own, while

his eyes studied a group of five men seated in the lower box at the left of the stage.

The central person of that group was hard-eyed, heavy-jowled. Thick, brutish lips added to his poker-faced expression. With folded arms, shoulders shoved back square, he had the air of a king—that his thug-gish companions tried to imitate.

Norgil had seen that ugly-faced fellow before; but for the first time, he understood why the man had been given his nickname: "King" Blauden.

A cigarette skimmed into the ash bowl; blandly, Norgil produced another. While he puffed it, he speculated upon the notorious reputation of King Blauden. The fellow was the local big shot; he controlled every racket in this town.

Actual crimes, however, had never been pinned on King Blauden. If Norgil's guess were right, King was responsible for the bank robbery of two nights ago, when ninety thousand dollars had been taken from the town's First National Bank.

All evidence pointed to an inside job. The crime had been pinned on Louis Lanning, a teller who had disappeared the same night. It was odd how Lanning, a drab, timid type of fellow, had managed to completely cover his tracks.

To Norgil, that smacked of King Blauden—though the law hadn't figured it that way.

THE music livened. Norgil's fingers were catching cigarettes in rapid progression; with both hands busy, he wasn't bothering to puff the cigarettes. Instead, he was talking to Fritz, in an undertone that only the assistant heard.

"We're closing with the Radio Vanish," spoke Norgil, "instead of the Protean Cabinet. Don't worry

about music. I'll fake the tune-in on WKX. You can pull the news flash imitation."

Fritz looked worried. This was short notice; but Norgil's eyes reassured him. Fritz wouldn't have to ad lib his lines. Norgil would have them for him.

The final cigarette hit the bowl. The spotlight spread to a flood; Fritz was hurrying off stage, Norgil kept taking bows, following slowly toward the wing.

Fritz had already removed the Protean Cabinet from the full-stage set; and Irene, cute in her scanty costume, was stepping from it, wondering why the final illusion had been switched. Assistants wheeled a skeleton stand on stage; atop it was the radio cabinet that Norgil used for his new vanish act.

That radio cabinet was real enough; but it wasn't hooked up. Norgil had found it more satisfactory to pipe in his own imitations of current programs. Usually, Fritz made a fake station announcement and supplied music from a phonograph. To-night, Fritz had a bigger job.

Norgil was still giving Fritz his lines when the curtains opened. He took a dozen seconds more, then strode on stage. He reached the cabinet, thumbed its dials. Suddenly, a voice broke from the loud-speaker.

"*Express-Item News Flash service*"—Fritz's brisk, nasal speech was a perfect imitation of the local commentator—"giving you the late news early—Flash—"

Norgil's right hand was reaching from the dial, to take a cloth that Irene passed him. He was ready to cover the radio cabinet; but all the while, his eyes were keeping side-long glance on the box where King Blauden sat.

"Police have a new lead in the First National robbery"—Fritz was snapping it, briskly—"and if the tip is right, their theory exonerates Louis Lanning, the missing teller. Police see a link between the crime and local racketeering activities, which places suspicion directly upon one——"

FRITZ didn't add the name of King Blauden. Things were happening with a speed that only Norgil could outmatch. The flimsy cloth was covering the radio cabinet; Norgil let it stay there, to make a grab for Irene.

He flung the girl ahead of him as he dived from beside the covered cabinet. Two of Blauden's trigger men were piling over the box rail, before the big shot could stop them. The radio vanish was cued to come with revolver shots, that Norgil normally supplied. This time, others gave the cue—and their guns didn't carry blanks.

The driving thugs were shooting for the covered radio cabinet, hoping to cut off the news flash. They succeeded; but they didn't demolish the cabinet as they expected. Instead, they shot away an empty cloth, that Norgil should have whisked from the table.

The radio cabinet had vanished from the skeleton-built stand!

The theater was in a turmoil. Amid that chaos, King Blauden made off through the curtains of the box, dragging along his other two henchmen. The big shot wasn't risking his own hide to help the two thugs who had gone berserk. Once they recovered from their stupefaction, they'd go after Norgil; and King knew it. He didn't want to be on the scene of murder, committed before sixteen hundred witnesses.

That murder didn't arrive. Nor-

gil was on the move while the trigger men still gaped at the vacant table. Fritz and other assistants were springing in from the wing; they bowled the thugs to the floor. Orchestra members came over the footlights, to help suppress the struggling crooks.

Ushers were shouting in the aisles, to halt the panic. Spectators saw that the crooks were overpowered; they began to applaud that dramatic finish of the act.

There were calls of acclaim for Norgil; but the magician didn't hear them. With the battle won, he had made a rapid exit from the scene.

Out through the stage door, Norgil was on his way to take up the trail of King Blauden.

CHAPTER II.

UNDERGROUND EVIDENCE.

KING BLAUDEN and his pals must have eased out easily from a side exit of the theater, for they weren't worrying about trailers. Norgil could tell that, as he followed them in a taxi that he had boarded on the front street.

King's car was a big sedan, and it wasn't traveling in a hurry. Every time it stopped at a traffic light, Norgil saw the big shot lean out and give gruff but friendly greeting to the cop on duty. Maybe King intended to alibi himself later.

When the sedan swung from the main street, Norgil told the cabby to make the same turn. Norgil noted that the sedan was slowing near the entrance of an alley. He told the cabby to keep going ahead. A block farther on, the magician picked out a house address and had the cab stop there. The driver pulled away.

Returning on foot, Norgil reached the alley and entered it. He came to a small parking lot, spaced be-

tween two darkened buildings. He made out the shape of the sedan, hulked close to a building wall.

King and his pals were somewhere close, and it didn't take Norgil long to guess their location. Near the inner end of the blind alley, he picked out a house that was quite as conspicuous as any sore thumb. That house had a doorway, two steps down from the sidewalk, and the entrance was fronted by a rusted iron gate.

The gate groaned warningly as Norgil swung it. Unheeding that sound, the magician opened the door. His flashlight showed an entry, then a large room. After that, an inner room.

There was a door in the far corner; Norgil opened it. His flashlight was off, but he could sense the cramped space of a closet. He took a cautious inward step; then grabbed for the doorknob. Trained to quick strides and turnabouts that went with his stage act, Norgil was out of that snare before his leg had gone more than knee-deep.

THE closet was floorless!

Norgil saw why, when he used the flashlight. There was a floor, but it served as an elevator. King and his pals had used it to reach a subcellar.

It wasn't more than eight feet to the shaft bottom. Norgil made the drop, found a narrow passage below. Past a corner he came upon a lighted stretch. There was an open doorway at the left; the room was darkened. Ahead was a closed door, fitted for a padlock. King was probably beyond it, for the padlock was gone, and the hasp was swung clear of the staple.

It flashed to Norgil that here was a chance to turn a trap on King Blauden. Norgil didn't need a padlock;

all he had to do was close the hasp and shove his fountain-pen flashlight into the staple. First, though, he wanted to see what King was about.

The door wasn't quite tight. Looking through, Norgil saw King and his two trigger men; another man, with wizened face and little, darting eyes. King was stooping above an open suitcase that teemed with bundles of currency, the swag from the First National.

Picking one bundle of bills, King pocketed it.

"I'll get rid of these," he said raspyly, "before I forget it. You'll stay here, Bogo"—this was to the dart-eyed tough—"until midnight. That's when we lam."

"Ain't you gettin' rid of that?"

Bogo nudged toward a big box, in a corner, near the door. King stepped over, raised the lid. Norgil could see the light strike a dead, upturned face, that still bore resemblance to the photographs of Lanning, the missing bank teller.

"We'll get rid of the stiff," promised King. "But not until after midnight."

Before Norgil could budge, King turned abruptly toward the door. His hand was almost on it, when Norgil whipped away. No time to press the door tight and jam the flashlight pen into place. Norgil's only bet was a quick slide along the passage, into the darkened side room.

NORGIL was in the room by the time King and his crew came through the passage. As luck had it, they stopped by the door. Norgil slid into a little alcove, just as Bogo entered. The fellow pressed a switch; lights came on from two battered floor lamps. One was near the door; but the other was in Norgil's alcove.

Flattened against the wall, Norgil

could see a high-set window, covered by a drawn shade. He could hear King giving final instructions to Bogo.

"I'm leaving it to you, Bogo," informed the big shot. "If any boob shoves in here, give him the shiv. Croak any guy if you have to; if you don't have to, you've got plenty of rope here to tie him up. Then we can make him talk."

King and his cronies left. On lone duty, Bogo remembered King's admonition. He paced the center of the room, muttering to himself. His arm and hand came into view; Norgil could see the fellow fidget with a knife. Norgil tightened, expecting the shiv specialist to turn in his direction.

Bogo's attention was suddenly trapped by a chance flutter of the window shade.

It was just a passing breeze; but Bogo wasn't convinced. He shifted to the center of the room; Norgil could sense that he was still watching the window. The shade flapped again, lightly. Bogo grunted, resumed his pacing.

Norgil was already working with a prompt idea.

Unquestionably, Bogo was deadly when he had his knife. Without it, the fellow wouldn't be tough to handle. What Bogo needed was preliminary treatment to despoil him of his fang. His suspicion of the window shade provided the method.

REACHING to a pocket, Norgil drew out a lighted cigarette; a reminder of his recent sleight-of-hand performance. He tucked the cigarette between two fingers of his left hand, then cupped his right fingers above. The cigarette projected, as Norgil extended both hands to block the light from the alcove lamp.

Those hands cast a grotesque silhouette against the window shade. Deftly, Norgil found the range, to turn the shape into a life-size profile. Big forehead; flattish nose; pudgy, oversize lips—between the latter, the projecting cigarette.

Norgil squidged his hands. The cigarette puffed. Shadowy smoke flickered on the window shade. Another puff—a third; with it came the hoped-for flutter of the shade. Norgil could hear Bogo swing about. The magician's hands went downward.

Bogo didn't stop to reason that an outsider's profile would not show against darkness. The shape on the shade looked like a ducking head beyond the open window. It came up again, cautiously, shoulders below it.

Those shoulders were cast by Norgil's forearms, stretched to horizontal position. They were enough for Bogo. He had his target, there at the window. The tricked killer took one quick step; whipped his knife for the heart of an imaginary enemy.

The blade slashed through the window shade. The roller released; the shade lashed upward. There was Bogo, in Norgil's full view; the fellow's wizened face was as blank as the space beyond the window, where the knife had clattered.

Dropping the cigarette, Norgil made a long, hard dive. Bogo heard it, but was still too stupefied to even guess the direction from which the drive came. Norgil bowled the scrawny crook clear across the room; settled him with a hard thump against the wall.

Twenty seconds later, Norgil had reclaimed his cigarette and was puffing it complacently while he eyed the limp form of Bogo, senseless on the floor of this hide-away.

CHAPTER III.

THE WRONG FINALE.

IT wasn't long before Norgil was on his way back to the theater. He had left Bogo, bound and gagged, in the room that held the swag and Lanning's corpse.

Norgil was due back at the theater to do his ten-forty show. The act would be off at half past eleven; and that time, as Norgil reasoned it, was when the police should be informed of what lay in King Blauden's underground lair.

At present, King was probably probing the local grapevine, to learn if the police were actually after him. Premature moves by the law would merely be a tip-off to the big shot. The right idea was to lull King into thinking that all was well, then have a surprise for him, when he came back to his hidden headquarters at midnight.

Things were as Norgil wanted them when he reached the theater. The management had called in the police, to make sure that no new riot occurred. There were cops at the entrance; another officer at the stage door. When Norgil peered from the wing, he could see more bluecoats in the box where King had originally been.

The feature picture had twenty more minutes to run. Picking his way by the flickery back-stage glow, Norgil reached his dressing room. A burly, long-faced man was awaiting him. Norgil recognized Detective Caston, of the local force.

Though Norgil had met Caston a few times before, the detective didn't appear very friendly. He put the reason bluntly. He had been here, asking questions about the battle on the stage; and nobody had the answers.

Norgil shrugged when Caston had finished.

"What about the chaps that started it?" asked Norgil. "Haven't you quizzed them?"

"They won't talk," admitted Caston. "It's clear enough, though, that you baited them with a fake radio announcement."

Norgil was seated in front of his mirror, restoring his make-up for the coming show. He watched Caston in the glass; their eyes met. Caston demanded:

"What about it?"

"The radio announcement?" Norgil's question was a purred one. "Just a bit of showmanship. Perhaps we overdid it. But on the contrary——"

Norgil interrupted himself, to call to Fritz, who was passing the dressing-room door.

"Leave the radio trick out, this show," ordered the magician. "Tell Irene we'll work the Protean Cabinet, as usual."

Rising, Norgil thwacked Caston on the shoulder.

"You see?" Norgil put it smoothly. "That settles matters; there won't be any trouble this show. But stay around"—his tone was confidential—"and I may have a surprise for you."

THERE was a long-drawn call: "F-i-i-ive minutes!"

Hearing it, Norgil gave an apologetic smile. It was almost time for the act to begin; Caston would have to wait and resume the talk afterward. The detective accepted that situation, but it didn't satisfy him.

Standing by the wing, arranging the fish bowls for the opening, Norgil watched Caston snoop about. Caston was looking at the electric chair, an item that didn't even belong in the act. It was a piece of

old side-show equipment that Norgil had bought from a retired carnival man. Norgil had an idea that it could be rigged into a stage illusion, and had assigned Fritz to make some mechanical changes in the device. The job was finished; but it wasn't all that Norgil wanted. The electric chair was to be shipped to storage to-morrow.

The girls were hurrying down from the upstairs dressing rooms that lined a metal balcony. There was the final call: a blast of music from the orchestra. With impressive stride, Norgil the magician went on stage, to face another audience.

All through the fifty minutes of that rapid show, Norgil was thinking of the sequel that would follow it. He had chosen the words that he intended to speak to Caston; in fact, Norgil was repeating them to himself, while he performed the cigarette act.

He could tell Caston that a hunch had inspired the hoax with the radio trick; that he had seen King Blauden leave the theater, and had followed to see where the big shot went. That, and a little more would be sufficient. Caston wasn't a difficult fellow to persuade, if given proper encouragement.

Norgil was right in that surmise. He was to learn how quickly Detective Caston could analyze a situation, when he had a chance to visualize it. Only the situation wasn't the one that Norgil planned.

Within the next five minutes, the suave magician was due for the biggest surprise of his stage career.

"IS Irene ready?"

Norgil asked the question when he had bowed himself off stage. Fritz nodded; the assistant pointed to the corner near the stage door, where two stage hands were wheel-

ing the big Protean Cabinet from its place. Norgil beckoned for them to hurry. The cabinet reached stage center.

Norgil was out from the wing, as the curtains slid apart. He reached the tall six-foot cabinet, opened the door to show its empty interior. While Norgil stood aside, Fritz and another neatly uniformed attendant wheeled the opened cabinet in a circle, to show all sides.

Caston was gawking from the wing. Norgil twitched his mustache, to hide a momentary smile. It was Caston's job to solve riddles; but even from his vantage point back stage, the smart dick wouldn't guess the secret of the Protean Cabinet.

Too bad, Norgil thought, that he wouldn't be able to watch Caston's expression, when the dick saw Irene appear from the cabinet. But that moment called for Norgil to be facing directly toward the audience.

Norgil closed the cabinet door. He drew his revolver, fired two quick blanks. With a sweep of his arm, he grasped the door handle, whipped open the front of the cabinet as he turned toward the audience. He reached for the girl's hand.

A huge, indefinable gasp came from the audience. It carried horror, mingled from many throats. Above that strange choke, Norgil heard a clatter beside him, a thud as something struck the stage.

He turned. Irene wasn't there. Instead, a figure had rolled headlong from the cabinet, to stretch at the magician's feet.

It was the figure of a man, stiffened and grotesque, in his blood-stained clothes. That form from the cabinet finished its inert roll, with a sideways tilt that brought it face upward. A white, contorted face was staring with the sightless eyes of death.

Norgil's eyes were as fixed as those of the corpse. He was rooted motionless; he didn't even hear Fritz's frantic shout to "Close in!" that brought the curtains sweeping together, cutting off the audience's view.

For Norgil had recognized that death-stilled countenance. The thing from the cabinet was the body of the murdered bank teller, Louis Lanning!

CHAPTER IV. NORGIL'S VANISH.

BIG hands were on Norgil's shoulders. Detective Caston was shaking the magician from his stupor. Slowly, the dick's growled comments were drilling through Norgil's brain.

Caston wanted explanations, and he wanted them fast. It was plain enough that he regarded Norgil as responsible for Lanning's death; but to Caston, the ways of a magician were beyond normal understanding.

There was just a chance, as Caston saw it, that Norgil could furnish facts to clear himself of murder. That dawned on Norgil, as he listened; but with it, he saw the hopelessness of the situation.

The taxi driver must have met up with King Blauden, and blabbed things to the big shot. King had returned to the hide-out, to hear Bogo's story. The rest had been nervy work, putting Lanning's body where Irene should have been; but it hadn't been overdifficult.

With Norgil occupied on the stage, Caston and the cops watching the show, the crooks had found a chance to prepare their own climax. They had switched the burden of crime to Norgil, through planted evidence.

As for that other evidence—the swag from the robbery—it would be

gone, by this time, from King's headquarters. There wasn't a doubt that King would do exactly what he had planned; clear town, taking his funds along. The big shot would be far away by the time Norgil could manage to clear himself from blame.

Norgil's wits were back. He saw one course: to locate King and have a show-down. There might still be time, for King certainly wouldn't have to hurry his get-away, under present circumstances. There was a way open for Norgil, a risky one, for it meant that he would jeopardize what status he still held with the law.

Nevertheless, the risk was necessary; not only to go after King, but to aid a person whose plight was far worse than Norgil's own.

NORGIL was thinking of Irene. What had become of her? Had she met harm from King's sluggers—or had the big shot carried her away? Whichever the case, Irene needed help.

"Come on, Norgil." Caston's growl was irritable. "What about Lanning's body? How did it come here?"

"You can solve that later," snapped Norgil. "What about Irene, the girl who should have come from the cabinet? She is the person who can probably tell us."

That struck Caston as logical. He didn't know how the cabinet trick worked; but since Lanning's body had appeared in Irene's place, the girl might furnish evidence. He asked Norgil where they ought to look. The magician suggested that they try Irene's dressing room.

Together, they ascended the metal stairs. Norgil stopped at the third door on the little balcony; he pounded there. No response came. Norgil gave Caston a worried look.

The detective nodded to enter.

Norgil thrust the door inward; stopped short. Horror registered on the magician's face, as his eyes gazed toward the floor. Evidently, the magician was shaken by some gruesome sight.

Viewing such scenes was part of Caston's business. The detective shoved the magician aside and shouldered into the room. He stared at the floor, puzzled. The place was vacant.

"Say!" rapped Caston. "There's nobody in here——"

The slam of the door interrupted. A key clicked from the outside. Caston was wrong about the room being empty. He was in it, to stay a while.

Norgil was hurrying down the steps. Cops heard his clatter; started to intercept him. Norgil pointed to a screen that stood near a wing.

"Detective Caston wants it," he explained. "It's the screen the girls use when they change their costumes. It's evidence."

That sounded sensible. The officers volunteered to help Norgil carry the screen. By that time, Fritz had joined them. Norgil gave Fritz a nudge, that the assistant understood. Fritz slid away, past the stage wing.

Norgil was at the screen, folding it from the other side. The four big panels were loosely hinged; he was having trouble with the screen. The policemen heard his voice:

"Here, you fellows, help me with this——"

THERE was a smash of glass from the balcony. The cops turned, stared upward. Caston's face shoved through the transom of Irene's dressing room.

"Grab Norgil!" bawled the detec-

tive. "Hold him, until I bust out of here!"

Two officers leaped for the screen. Norgil had begun to manage it, handily. Flattened shut, the screen lifted from the floor; its bearer swung it to ward off the police. He was zigzagging across the stage, poking away each cop who tried to flank him.

The officer guarding the stage door dashed in to help the others. The three made a charge, flattened the screen, with the man beneath it. They flipped the screen aside, to haul Norgil to his feet. That was when they blinked.

The man beneath the screen was Fritz!

Detective Caston saw that climax, from the balcony, where he had made short work of the dressing-room door. His vantage point gave him a view of the stage door; he saw Norgil, heading through there toward the alley. Caston yelled for pursuit.

From the street, Norgil saw the stage door gush police, with Caston among them. Norgil darted for a corner; there was a cab just past it. Poking in beside the astonished driver, Norgil shoved the man a five-dollar bill with one hand, brandished his stage revolver with the others.

"Get going!" emphasized the magician. "Travel—and don't stop until you have to!"

The rear door slammed as the cabby stepped on the gas; but Norgil wasn't in the taxi. From the curb, the magician ducked for a parking lot, crouched behind a parked coupé.

He heard the surge of passing police cars. Coming from the corner, they had spotted the decoy cab and were after it. Norgil's vanish was complete; he had gained his chance to look for King Blauden.

That wasn't all. Whether by luck or clever calculation, Norgil already had the trail he needed. From this outside corner of the parking lot, he could spot the hulked outline of a big car against the whitewashed corner of a building wall.

Again, Norgil had come across the sedan that was used by King Blauden and his hoodlum crew!

CHAPTER V. THE DEATH CHAIR.

SHIFTING from car to car, Norgil took chances on spaces that lay between, to reach an old truck that was near King's big sedan. Easing up to the back of the truck, he gained a look into the big-shot's car. The sedan was empty.

From a flood of thoughts, Norgil untwisted the answer.

King and his followers had been ready for their get-away, probably with Irene as a prisoner; but they hadn't had time to start, before commotion broke loose from the theater. Things had happened very rapidly there, as Norgil could testify.

When the chase whirled by, it had been policy for King and his crew to stay in their car. They had left it; but they hadn't come out by the street. That meant they could have gone by one route only, through a passage, back to the stage alley!

Norgil took that route himself. As he neared the alley, he learned why King had again indulged in a bold course. Every one had dashed out with the police; stage hands, as well as the members of Norgil's company. Foe and friend alike, were hunting for the vanished magician.

A lookout must have spotted that and passed the news to King. In fact, the lookout was still on hand; but he had ventured down the alley, to make sure that the rear street was

clear. Norgil saw the fellow at the alley's mouth. The man's back was turned. Crossing the alley, Norgil slid in through the stage door.

The stage was dim; from its vaulted depths came hoarse but guarded whispers. Guided by the sounds, Norgil threaded his way among big cabinets and tables, to reach an observation spot. He saw King Blauden, two toughs with him. Between them, the hoodlums held the limp figure of Irene.

"Where'll we put her, boss?" came the query. "In that t'ing where we stuck the stiff?"

King shook his head. He didn't like the idea of using the Protean Cabinet again. He looked about, saw the electric chair resting on a square, carpeted platform. He noted a coiled wire, then looked toward a square box that was fitted to a wall socket.

"I heard about this chair," gruffed King, "from the same guy that wised me up to the cabinet. He saw them testing it, the other day, and it shoots plenty of juice. Plug in that wire, then put the girl in the chair."

WHILE the crooks obeyed, King added other comments for their benefit. He was pulling a small packet of bills from his pocket, the same bunch that Norgil had seen him appropriate at the underground lair.

"The doll gets the juice," announced King. "And this wad of mazuma goes into Norgil's dressing room. This is the dough Lanning squawked about, when we put the heat on him. The only bills they have the numbers for.

"Explaining Lanning's body won't be all Norgil will have to do. Caston will find the doll croaked, and he'll pick up this hot paper. We'll lam with the eighty grand that's out in the car."

From King's figures, Norgil assumed that there was ten thousand dollars in the packet of marked money, that King intended to plant. That, however, was a minor matter. Irene was still alive; but she wouldn't be long, unless Norgil intervened. King was right—that electric chair could take real juice.

King pulled a switch to test it. There was a crackle, as big sparks lashed across the chair. King turned off the current; the thugs carried Irene to the chair. She settled there, limp; she looked tiny and frail in her abbreviated ballet costume.

Norgil had to get to the wall-plug box, fifteen feet away. The first stretch was risky; it was too well lighted. Close by was an upright rack, draped with costumes, topped by a Chinese devil head used in a quick-change act. Lifting the rack, Norgil inched it ahead of him.

The thugs were placing arm clamps around Irene's wrists. They thrust her back in the chair, fastened another clamp about her slender neck. They stepped aside, and King shook his head. There were other clamps they had forgotten.

The big shot himself stepped to the platform, to apply a pair to the girl's ankles. Then, from the front of the chair, he lifted the last pair of fastenings, to thump them upon Irene's thighs.

As King turned to the switch, three feet from the platform, Norgil came from a huddle in back of the costume rack. He stretched full length along the last space of floor, gripped the side of the plug box. Quick pressure of the side, and the box slid open, revealing tiny, hidden switches. Norgil pressed one. His thumb had just finished its motion when King yanked the switch by the electric chair.

There was a crackle as Irene's

body took the current. There was plenty of voltage in that juice, for sparks zipped from the girl's fingers. But Irene's body didn't flounder in the clamps, as King expected.

Instead, her eyes came open. The current was reviving her!

NORGIL had pressed a transformer switch, that cut down the current's amperage. Alone, the voltage carried no destructive power; but it made a swell act. That was why Norgil had bought the electric chair.

King ripped out an oath as he yanked off the switch. Something was wrong; he couldn't guess what. But there was another way to settle it. At King's nod, one thug pulled a blackjack, stepped over to take a swing at the back of Irene's head.

That blackjack never snapped. Norgil pressed the second switch that lay within the plug box. He reached below, to thumb a little dial. There were wild yells from the platform beside the electric chair.

This time, real juice was going through a wire, but not to the chair. The platform had metal beneath its carpet. This was a comedy number that Norgil had planned, to make committees from the audience hop about in surprise.

The little dial increased the current, and Norgil turned it past the usual limit. The thugs were jouncing about like chunks of human pop corn; they couldn't break themselves loose. Only King Blauden remained ready for action.

Norgil was driving for the big shot. The magician was aiming his blank-loaded revolver. King dived away, yanking a gun of his own. Both revolvers barked; Norgil was keeping King on the duck, so he wouldn't get the aim he needed.

Meanwhile, those shots, when heard, would bring back the missing police.

With a sudden dart, Norgil came in under King's aim. He wrestled with the big shot; they reeled toward the platform where howling crooks still jounced about. There, King's hard slug made Norgil duck. The magician tripped, sprawled, with his back against a metal cage that contained a quartet of craning geese.

King pounded forward, slashing his gun downward, to take aim. His drive was unwise. Norgil's feet came up like pistons, met the big shot's stomach. King went backward, floundering, his ankles hitting the platform edge. By the time Norgil was up, King was down. The big shot had become another member of the dancing group upon the wired platform.

The lookout was in from the alley. He didn't see Norgil, beside the cage. He saw King, though; heard the big-shot's shouts, and spied the excited waves of King's hands. Then Norgil had him covered, before the fellow could reach the plug box.

There were foot-beats from the stage door. Caston arrived, with Fritz, followed by a pair of policemen. While Caston and the cops covered the platform, Fritz turned off the juice. The big shot and his pals came shakily from the platform, while Norgil released Irene from the electric chair.

WHILE King Blauden, handcuffed, looked on with ugly glowers, Norgil told his detailed story to Detective Caston. The bills that King had hoped to plant, were in Caston's possession; so was the swag, that police brought from the big shot's car.

The Irene episode brought questions from Caston. A charge of at-

tempted murder was valuable, while the law still had to piece the facts that would prove King responsible for Lanning's death. At Caston's request, Norgil cut off the transformer; then, he pressed the switch beside the platform.

The deluge of crackly sparks that issued from the chair was proof that the unrestrained current could kill. It showed King Blauden for the murderous person that he was, and that revelation drove the big shot desperate.

There was a shout, above the crackles. Norgil swung, to see King breaking from the control of officers who held him. Swinging his handcuffs, King came clear, as his captured pals provided a wild flank attack.

It was Caston who met King, at the platform. They stumbled, rolled in front of the electric chair, as Norgil came springing into aid. Thugs were subdued; the police who held them were witnesses to the struggle's finish.

King and Caston were on their feet again. The big shot's manacled wrists were over the detective's neck; in frenzy, King was hauling Caston backward, toward the spark-ripping chair. Norgil had no time to reach the switch; and Fritz wasn't there to pinch-hit, for he was helping Irene up the stairway to her dressing room.

All that Norgil could provide was a hard punch to King's jaw, that tilted his head back, lifted his wrists a half foot higher. With descending grab, Norgil clamped Caston's shoulders with both hands, to slick the detective downward, out from King's hooking hold.

With Caston, Norgil rolled to the stage, in front of the platform. As they landed they heard a bellow that

sounded like the cry of a wounded jungle beast. Crackles were muffled, when Norgil reached the switch and yanked it—too late.

Relieved of Caston's weight, King Blauden had gone backward. The handcuffs had prevented him from flinging his arms to save himself. He had landed squarely in the electric chair, to take the final punishment that he deserved.

Flayed by the devastating juice, the big shot lay tilted, half from the chair, as dead as the corpse of Louis Lanning which rested in an obscure corner of the stage.

Norgil, the first to reach the body, was the man who gave the solemn nod that declared the big shot's well-deserved fate.

King Blauden had found a murderer's throne.

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It takes a thief to catch a thief—and Carrie Cashin to trap a double-crosser!

CHAPTER I.

KIDNAPED DANCER.

ALECK'S muscular body was cramped into a tight and uncomfortable hiding place. He was squeezed inside a shallow liquor closet, from which the shelves had been removed. The closet door was locked to hide Aleck's presence from a cunning and dangerous black-mailer. The key to the closet was in the pocket of Nat Berman, the

frightened owner of the prosperous Club Fandango. Berman was obeying grim orders that Aleck had whispered to him before "Pump" Casaba had arrived.



Earl
Moran
-37-

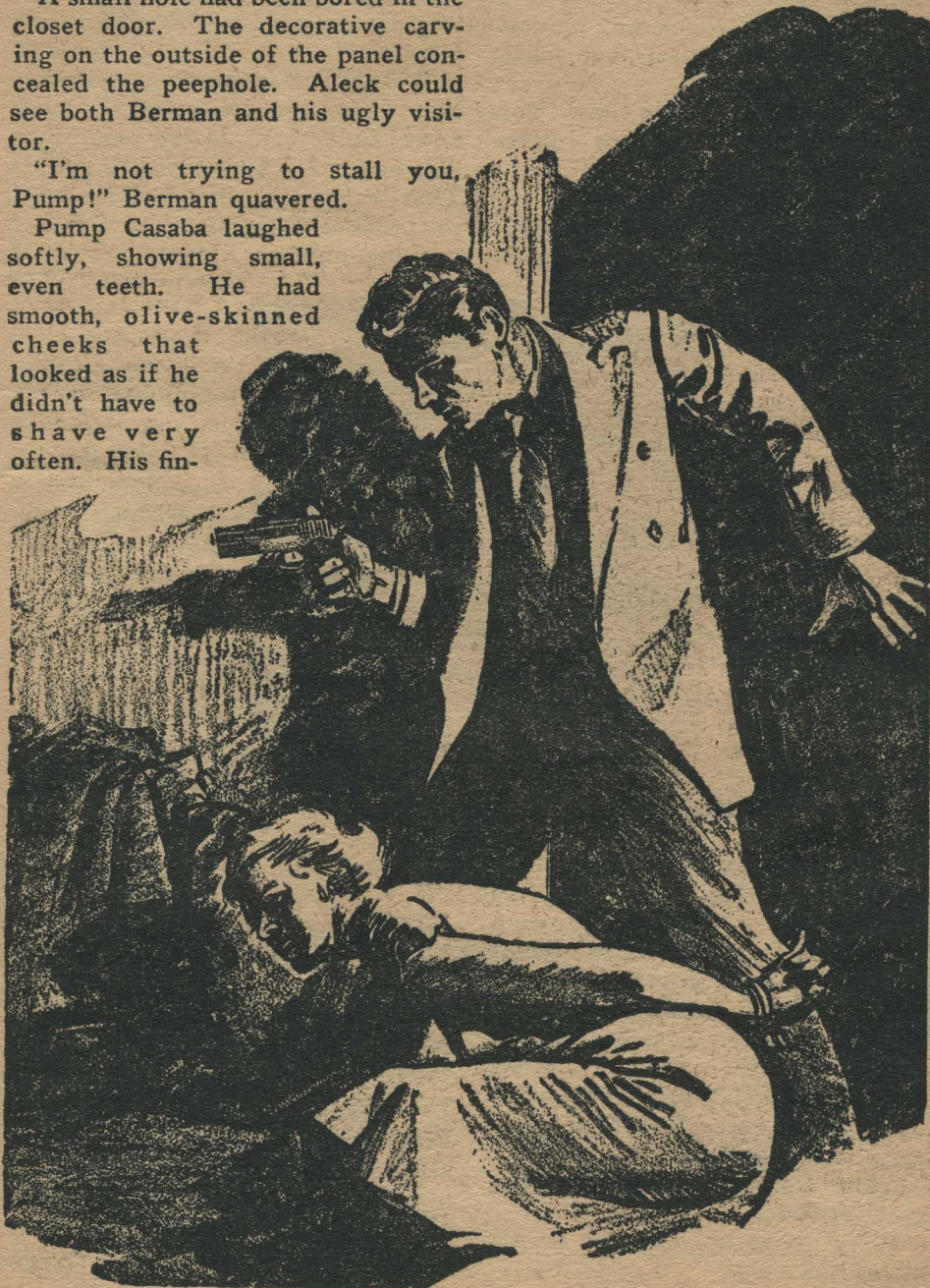
A Carrie Cashin Novelette

By Theodore Tinsley

A small hole had been bored in the closet door. The decorative carving on the outside of the panel concealed the peephole. Aleck could see both Berman and his ugly visitor.

"I'm not trying to stall you, Pump!" Berman quavered.

Pump Casaba laughed softly, showing small, even teeth. He had smooth, olive-skinned cheeks that looked as if he didn't have to shave very often. His fin-



gers were soft and well-manicured. They were wrapped around the butt of a squat, blue gun.

"You promised me you'd have the fifty grand ready! In cash."

Berman tried not to glance toward the closet where Aleck was hidden. "It ain't easy to raise that much cash. Gimme time."

"I've given you plenty time. You want your star dancer back, don'tcha?"

"Good Lord, yes!"

Berman looked suddenly sick. Sweat glistened on his bald head. He knew that, without Lola, his show was nothing—a flop. And the show opened in an hour! He could hear dimly the buzzing clamor of the enormous crowd that jammed every table in his expensive club. They had come to see Lola, the biggest dance sensation in New York's theatrical history. And Lola was missing—kidnaped!

Only Pump Casaba knew where she was, and the knowledge was priced at fifty thousand dollars. Berman had kept the snatch a secret from the police, afraid that the news of Lola's disappearance would sound like a cheap alibi. Broadway would laugh cynically. They'd say he couldn't pay Lola's enormous salary and she had quit. The Club Fandango would go broke in a week!

Again Pump laughed his soft, noiseless chuckle.

"Fifty grand is cheap for an ace dancer like Lola."

"How do I know she's still alive?"

"I don't kill meal tickets, pal. Lola's okay. When I snatched her, I took her maid along. Her maid, Anna, spends most of her time brushing Lola's hair, clipping her toenails and rubbing her down with olive oil."

"I'll pay!" Berman promised huskily. "I'm—I'm collecting the cash now. Come back to my office in a half hour. I'll have the fifty grand! That leaves you another half hour to produce Lola in time for her opening number. How—how do I know you'll play ball?"

Casaba rose to his feet. His voice was as crisp as the reflection of light on his blue gun barrel.

"Fifteen minutes after I get the dough, you'll have your dancer. I'll throw in Anna the maid for good measure. And listen, wise-guy, if you're thinking of pulling the cops in on this—"

"Don't be silly!" Berman gasped. "I haven't been near the police."

ALECK smiled grimly inside his narrow hiding place. Berman's statement was true. He had taken his problem to a private agency that specialized in confidential business. "THE CASH AND CARRY DETECTIVE AGENCY—You Pay, We Deliver!" The fee, paid in advance was already in the agency safe, uptown. The rest was up to Aleck—or rather, Carrie Cashin!

Carrie was Aleck's boss. A de-



mure, brown-eyed girl as smart as a steel trap, with a cute, innocent face and a figure like a Hollywood star's. Nat Berman had never seen her. That was because most clients had a silly prejudice against women detectives. So broad-shouldered Aleck usually posed as the head of the agency and accepted the cases. But it was Carrie who delivered the goods!

She was waiting tensely at this very instant for a certain signal from Aleck. Her slim, modishly dressed body was poised on tiptoe, within fifty feet of this quiet office on the second floor of the Club Fandango.

Pump Casaba glided swiftly toward a closed door. There were two of them in Berman's office. One opened on a corridor that was lined with dressing-room doors. Beyond was a broad staircase that gave access to the stage of the crowded night club. Music and laughter welled through that closed door. But Casaba grinned slyly and chose the second exit.

This doorway led down narrow wooden steps to a short corridor that opened on a rear alley. It was at the alley door of this corridor below that Carrie Cashin was posted. She was waiting grimly to find out exactly how Pump Casaba pulled his smart trick of vanishing into thin air.

The trick had been pulled on Aleck. Two nights earlier, Aleck had tried to trail Casaba when he

emerged after a sly conference with the frightened night-club owner. It had been a complete flop. There had been no car parked at the curb in the rear street—and Casaba had never appeared from the alley. But he *had* gone down those rear stairs! Aleck had Nat Berman's word for that!

From his hiding place in the liquor closet, he saw Pump Casaba depart through the rear door of the office.

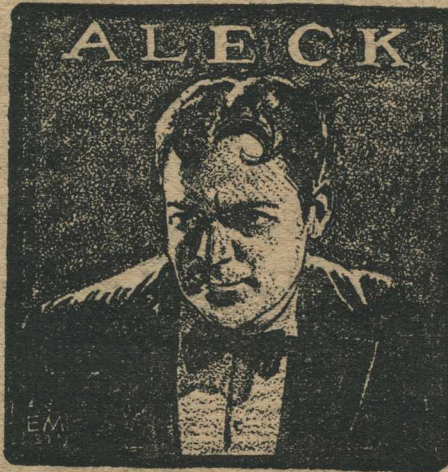
BERMAN was already on his feet. He tiptoed noiselessly to the closet.

The swift turn of his key in a lock freshly oiled made no betraying sound. Aleck stepped from his narrow prison. Both hands jerked from his pockets with a quick motion. But the objects he held were not guns. They were tiny electric-light bulbs.

Turning, he darted to the curtained window of Berman's office. The window was lifted three or four inches at the bottom. Aleck made no effort to peer into the dark alley below, nor could he have seen Carrie Cashin had he done so. His hands thrust outward across the sill and he dropped the two light bulbs, spacing their fall a few seconds apart.

Plop!—Plop!

The bulbs were so tiny that the crash of their exploding vacuums was almost inaudible at the window. But Aleck knew that Carrie's sharp ears would hear and understand the signal. One crash meant that the



slippery Casaba had left Berman's office by the door that led through the night club itself. Two crashes told Carrie instantly that Casaba was leaving by the rear—the same as he had done on his previous blackmail visit.

Berman looked puzzled and startled as Aleck grinned and lit a cigarette.

"Aren't you going to follow him?"

"Keep your shirt on," Aleck murmured. He glanced at the telephone on Berman's desk, and his eyes became grim. "I expect a phone call in a little while. When I get it, I'll go places—don't worry about that! You'll have your million-dollar dancer back in time for the show, and you won't pay any fifty grand ransom for her, either!"

He produced a businesslike .38 gun and laid it calmly on the night-club owner's desk. From a vest pocket, he drew out a tiny derringer with a short barrel. He examined both weapons carefully, his good-humored eyes like flint. He was thinking of the murderous face of Pump Casaba. If Carrie wasn't damned careful—

CARRIE CASHIN closed the alley door carefully. She had heard the tinkling impacts of the two light bulbs. She knew that Casaba had started down the back stairs from Nat Berman's office.

There were three trash barrels standing in the alley corridor. Two of them were filled to the brim with crumpled newspapers. The third was empty. Hoisting her skirt for a swift instant, Carrie stepped into the empty barrel.

As her body lowered out of sight on bent knees, her hand lifted a huge crumpled ball of newspaper from the adjoining barrel. She was completely covered by the time

Casaba appeared. All three barrels looked exactly alike—filled to their tops with trash and paper.

Casaba passed so close to Carrie's hiding place that his sleeve brushed the barrel. But he didn't stop. He walked straight to the alley door. The door opened and closed. Had Carrie been depending on the evidence of her ears alone, she would have thought that the crook had passed outside to the alley. But she knew otherwise.

Through a tiny crack she had split with a pocketknife between two of the staves in her barrel, she saw the motionless figure of the crook. He was listening rigidly to detect any sound from Berman's office upstairs.

The dim corridor was deathly quiet. Satisfied, Casaba began to tiptoe quietly back from the alley door toward the corridor wall just beyond the foot of the stairs. With his eyes glaring watchfully over his shoulder, Pump Casaba lifted both hands to the wall.

Suddenly, Carrie smothered a gasp. She knew now the mystery of Casaba's magic disappearance the night when Aleck had failed to trail him. He was vanishing through the wall!

A square panel came away under the quick tug of his fingers. It left a small, square hole. In a moment the kidnaper had squirmed deftly through. The flick of a tiny torch glowed for an instant like a yellow firefly. Then hands reached out and replaced the loose panel. Casaba was gone.

CARRIE climbed noiselessly from her trash barrel. Pressing her ear against the wall, she could hear the squeak of footsteps on what sounded like loose boards. Then there was a faint thump. It was followed by utter silence.

The loose panel came away in Carrie's cautious grip. She found herself in what was evidently an air passage between the corridor and the foundation wall of the cellar below. Like Casaba, the girl flashed a tiny torch for an instant to make sure of her footing. Loose boards had been laid above the upright edges of beams to afford a safe passageway. Carrie crept forward.

She saw in a moment where the crook had leaped downward, making the faint thump she had heard. Twenty feet along the passage was the grilled metal of an air vent. A section of the pipe that carried stale air from the basement of the night club had been wrenched loose, exposing the grille work in the cellar wall. Peering, Carrie could see a dark figure flitting across the concrete floor below. She ducked as the figure halted. Casaba's grim face peered backward.

But the crook saw nothing to alarm him. He hurried across the cellar to a small window on the opposite side. He was protected from observation from the more brilliantly lighted end of the cellar by the mass of machinery that blocked off this dimmer section of the basement.

He was directly below the stage of the night club. Part of the machinery was used to manipulate the movable stage above. The rest was a complicated pattern of pipes and vats, used to freeze the stage into an ice rink whenever Nat Berman put on one of his famous ice ballets. It screened the fitting figure of Casaba. He went through the side window like an eel, disappearing into the darkness of the open air.

Carrie dropped to the cellar floor and darted recklessly across, afraid she might lose Casaba in a maze of

back yards. But he was still in sight as her head lifted above the sill of the cellar window.

He was in a small stone courtyard between the night-club building and the near-by wall of what looked like a deserted three-story brick dwelling. He was bent eagerly forward, unlocking a closed door on the court level. His key grated impatiently. Then the door swung open and closed behind him. A second grating sound told that Casaba had locked the door on the inside.

CARRIE then squirmed swiftly through the cellar window. She felt a sharp twinge of excitement at the crook's consummate cleverness. No wonder he could promise to produce the kidnaped Lola in fifteen minutes! He was hiding the dancer and her maid directly under the nose of the worried Nat Berman! His whole criminal scheme must have been figured very carefully in advance, after a survey of the night-club cellar and the building opposite.

Carrie stared upward at the three-story brick house. Every window was dark. It was impossible to tell from the outside where Casaba had gone.

It was an unpleasant dilemma. Carrie had promised to telephone Aleck the moment she had trailed Casaba to his hang-out. But to get to a phone now would waste precious minutes while she scaled a couple of fences to reach the street and find a phone booth. The only alternative was to return through the cellar of the night club and race through the wall passage back of Berman's office. She decided grimly that she dared not risk the delay.

She began to glide noiselessly toward the locked door where the

crook had vanished. Suddenly, she halted, her eyes staring at one of the windows on the upper floor. A light had flashed on behind the drawn shade!

The next instant Carrie flung herself flat against the cold stone of the courtyard. The shade of the lighted window had snapped upward! A face was visible for a blinding instant. But it was not Casaba's. It was the face of a terrified woman!

It was Lola, the dancer! A loose gag hung from her mouth; her hands were bound. She lunged against the windowpane with desperately raised wrists, trying to smash the glass with a blow of her fettered hands.

But before she could accomplish her purpose, another face swam swiftly into vision. Casaba's! His brawny arm circled the dancer's throat. Choking, Lola was jerked backward. The shade snapped downward, covering the lighted window. For an instant, a double silhouette was visible, struggling viciously. Then, without warning, the light went out.

CHAPTER II.

SNATCH HIDE-OUT.

IF Carrie had any doubts about what to do, she lost them now. She raced to the locked door of the brick building.

Skeleton keys took a little time, but presently the door swung open. It was as black as a tomb inside. The house was so quiet Carrie could hear the dull throb of blood in her listening ears. Gradually, her eyes became accustomed to the darkness. She discovered she was in a bare hallway that led to a flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs.

She tiptoed up the creaky stairs. Her hand darted under her skirt and drew a flat automatic pistol from a special garter holster she wore on the inside of her leg. It was not a large-calibered gun, but it was plenty accurate at close quarters.

Turning the landing on the second floor, Carrie began to creep up the last wooden flight. She moved slowly on hands and knees. This flight was even more squeaky than the one she had climbed from the ground floor. She had paused and was testing the steps with the pressure of slim finger tips, when she heard a quick, panting breath behind her.

A man had been hidden in a dark angle of the hall. He flung himself at the kneeling girl, crushing her body against the sharp edge of the staircase. Carrie tried to swing her automatic, but her assailant was too quick for her. His hands closed like a steel vise about her ankles. He yanked her backward down the stairs, banging her forehead against the hard wood with a force that dazed her.

Her thrashing arm jammed between the posts of the banisters. She tried to hold on to her gun, but it was a choice between dropping the weapon or having her arm snapped like a pipestem. She let go the gun and twisted her arm loose with a convulsive jerk. Then she crashed on her stomach in the dark hallway with a force that jarred the breath from her lungs.

She could hear the snarling chuckle of the invisible Casaba. He had trapped her for an easy kill. But his chuckle and the twist of his body, as he dived for Carrie's throat, gave the desperate girl a chance to roll over and draw up both knees.

She kicked at the crook's arched

stomach. At the same time, her two hands fastened under the man's armpits, heaving with all her strength. An adept at jujutsu, Carrie combined the kick and the arm heave into a double thrust that sent Casaba flying over her prone body. His head banged against the post of the staircase.

SNARLING, he clutched at Carrie's leg as she tried to sway to her feet. He tumbled her headlong. His hand twisted in her hair and pulled her head fiercely back. Fingers fumbled at her taut throat.

Carrie's teeth broke the hold. But she knew she was no match for her opponent's brute strength. She had to depend on speed and the quick glide of hands, trained for lightning action by the most famous jujutsu instructor in New York.

She tried again—for wrist and shoulder. With her face bleeding from the grim smashes of the crook's fist, she began to apply scientific pressure. Casaba's pinioned arm stiffened, turned, was forced slowly backward. He was no longer battering viciously with his left fist. Groaning, he spread his lean fingers across Carrie's cheek, searching murderously with their blunt tips for the girl's staring eyeballs. She felt the hideous scratch of his nails. Her eyes closed tightly. Breathless, half fainting, she managed to shove the pinioned arm farther back. Farther—

Craaack!

Casaba's arm had snapped between wrist and elbow. He went down on his face, groveling for his fallen gun. Carrie beat him to it. The weapon swung upward in her aching wrist. She struck at the dim head of the killer, dropped him in a limp huddle.



She was pretty limp herself as she caught at the stair rail and dragged herself upright. But a deep breath filled her panting lungs; her weakness slid away. She stood staring down at the dark huddle at her feet. No sound came from the floor above. The noise of the struggle had been considerable, but it had brought no cry from the imprisoned Lola or her maid.

Carrie drew her tiny electric torch from her pocket and sent a yellow oval of light flickering on the face of Casaba. She received a terrific shock of amazement.

It wasn't Pump Casaba!

THE man on the floor was taller, a lot more good-looking than the kidnaper she had trailed from the office of Nat Berman. He had sleek, dark hair and a smooth, handsome face, with a cupid-bow mouth like a woman's. He looked more like a gigolo than a gunman.

Confused, Carrie dropped to her knees and searched the unconscious man. She found an answer to the puzzle in his inner pocket. A small leather folder contained a paste-

board identity card. It was a membership card in the musician's union. The man's name was George Tobin. He was a saxophone player in a dance orchestra. And glancing swiftly at the countersigned name of the orchestra leader, Carrie discovered at once who this George Tobin was and where he played.

He was a member of the dance orchestra in the Club Fandango!

An inside job! Carrie had suspected so from the start. Casaba would never have known about the cellar passage without the help of the cunning Tobin. They had worked the snatch racket together.

But as Carrie pondered this fact, she became aware that the mystery was deeper than ever. If Tobin was Pump Casaba's henchman and had been placed in the dark hallway as a lookout—why hadn't Casaba raced to his assistance? Carrie's struggle with the "sax" player had been a noisy one. Yet no sound had issued from the blackness of the top floor. Casaba hadn't made a move since he had dragged Lola away from a lighted window and plunged the room into darkness.

Carrie crept soundlessly up the last flight of stairs. She had discarded Tobin's gun because it was too heavy. Her own automatic was

gripped tightly in her smooth hand. She had found it under the banister of the staircase where she had dropped it.

She was rising to her feet on the top-floor landing when she heard a faint sound welling tremulously through the darkness. It was a woman's moan. It came from the closed door of a room on the left side of the hall.



CARRIE now halted outside the door. She dropped slowly to one knee and tried to peer through the keyhole. It was impossible to see anything in the blackness within. Was Casaba waiting like a frozen carving of death, his gun ready to spit flame at the opening of that quiet door?

The fingers of Carrie's left hand pressed against the floor to steady her crouched body. Suddenly she felt a wet-

ness under their touch. It was warm and sticky. It was trickling out from beneath the frame of the door. She had a feeling of horror as she guessed what that trickling fluid was. Blood—

The touch brought reckless courage to Carrie's heart. She lost all sense of fear in the grim urge to capture the cowardly killer of a helpless woman. She sent the door flying open and sprang into the dark room.

As Carrie leaped, she pivoted swiftly, so that she swayed alongside the wall. Her gun pointed rigidly into the blackness. Scarcely daring to breathe, she began to move her left palm softly against the wall in ever-widening circles. She was feeling for the light switch.

As her fingers touched it, she stiffened her gun hand. The room blazed with light. Her finger tightened against the automatic's trigger—then relaxed. Casaba was staring directly at her, but there was no menace in his ugly face.

He was lying on the floor, his wide-open eyes glaring. He was stone dead. The blood that had oozed beneath the door had come from him. A knife had been driven into his body up to the hilt.

FOR a second, Carrie forgot about the dancer and her maid. Then she saw Lola lying sprawled on a sofa near the wall. Lola's face was the color of death. Her mouth gaped queerly and one arm trailed limply to the floor. But she had not been murdered.

A quick sniff at the opened lips gave Carrie the true answer. She smelled the strong reek of laudanum. Lola had been drugged. Dangerously drugged, too! The whites of her eyeballs were streaky.

Carrie whirled to where a second woman lay face-downward near the shade-drawn window. This was Anna, the dancer's maid. She was beginning to whimper faintly. Turning the maid on her back, Carrie sniffed at her lips and was relieved to find that none of the laudanum had been forced down Anna's throat. Except for a nasty bruise on the forehead, where she had struck the floor, she was unhurt.

She stood reeling on her feet, supported by the arm of her slim res-

cue? She gasped out terrified words. Anna had managed to free her wrists and slip the gag from her mouth. Then she had removed the gag from her mistress. She had hardly done so when the door had opened and Casaba had rushed into the room. The quick flood of light that Carrie had seen from the courtyard had come from his raging finger on the wall switch.

He had dodged Anna's desperate rush; had seen Lola whirl and snap up the window shade. But Casaba was too quick for both of them. A blow sent Anna flat on her face. A quick bound forward, and Casaba had caught Lola before she could smash the glass of the window. He throttled the dancer with one arm, while he uncorked a bottle and forced its contents down Lola's helplessly gulping throat. The dancer was thrown headlong to the sofa; then, Casaba darted toward Anna. It was at that instant the lights in the room had gone out!

A shadowy figure had sprung at the startled kidnaper. There was a swift, deadly struggle—then Casaba gave a gurgling scream. The thump of his body was followed by the vanishing footsteps of the man who had killed him. Anna heard him cautiously descending the stairs to the floor below; then, for a time, she knew nothing more—

Carrie shook her as her knees buckled.

"You can't faint now! Help me with Lola! She's got to be roused or she'll die!"

"I'm afraid! That—other—man— If he comes back—"

"He won't come back. His left arm is broken, and he's had a rap on the skull that will keep him quiet for a while," Carrie said grimly.

She bent over the drugged dancer. Suddenly, Anna screamed. Too late,

Carrie whirled. A pistol aimed from the doorway of the room made a level line toward her heart.

The man who held the gun leaned against the doorpost for support. His left arm hung useless at his side. There were lines of agony on his sleek gigolo face. But there was cold, unwinking death in his eyes. It was George Tobin, the crooked saxophone player whom Carrie had left crumpled in the hallway below.

"YOU'RE only half right, lady!" he snarled, his face livid with fury as he glared at Carrie. "You busted my arm all right, and you handed me a tough rap on the skull. But I'm a quick guy to recover—when there's fifty grand to go after!"

His grin was like the toothed grimace of a shark.

"Back over to that corner! I don't want to pour a slug into Lola by mistake—when I kill you!"

Carrie began to back slowly. She saw that Anna had slumped to the floor. But this time, the maid's faint was only pretense. She was crawling slowly, inch by inch, toward the dead body of Casaba. Tobin was watching Carrie. Anna was behind him, her eyes fixed on the knife that still projected from the bloody wound in Casaba's back. For an instant of horror, Carrie realized that Anna intended to rip the knife loose and plunge it into Tobin's back. She tried to signal a desperate "No!" to the maid. She had a better plan, a plan to take Tobin alive.

She talked pleadingly to him trying to divert his attention from her feet. Her right foot was sliding free from her loose slipper, leaving only her stockinged toes hooked under the leather of the footgear.

Tobin's trigger finger tightened murderously.

But an instant before the shot roared, Carrie's leg kicked upward. The slipper whizzed from her toe like a projectile. It flew in a straight line toward the startled Tobin and its spiked heel caught him squarely in the mouth. His arm jerked as the pistol muzzle flamed. The deflected bullet burned the chestnut hair of Carrie's ducking head.

She was in desperate motion the moment the flying slipper had left her toe. She dived headlong at Tobin and slapped his gun aside. Her other hand clutched for his maimed arm. She knew that a twist of the broken bone would send a stab of unbearable agony through the killer's body.

Tobin, however, pivoted. Again his weapon roared, but the bullet sped harmlessly past Carrie's back-flung throat. The next instant, a heave of Tobin's body sent Carrie crashing to the floor.

Unseen by Tobin, the dancer's maid had snatched the bloody knife loose from the dead back of Pump Casaba. She leaped to her feet and darted forward. Tobin heard the thud of her feet and twisted his head.

Then Anna struck!

CHAPTER III.

DOUBLE CROSS.

THE knife plunged into Tobin's body as if the flesh beneath it was butter. The long blade, slanting diagonally through his ribs, penetrated his heart. He pitched forward across Carrie, soaking her shoulder with the quick spurt of his blood. She pulled herself free and swayed to her feet. But Tobin never moved.

Anna was glaring at the dead saxophone player, the knife still in her

hand. Carrie touched the maid's rigid fingers and took the knife away.

Anna began to babble fiercely. She had recognized Tobin as the saxophone player in the night-club orchestra.

"He's the one who killed Casaba!" Anna cried. "The two must have been in cahoots. Tobin tried to double-cross him!"

She leaned with shaking hand to pick up the gun Tobin had dropped, but Carrie already was grabbing it. She shoved it in the pocket of her coat and caught the struggling Anna in an iron grip.

"We've got to rouse Lola from the effects of that drug," Carrie said harshly, "or she'll die! She's full of laudanum!"

Anna turned dazedly; but her eyes were half closed. Suddenly, she collapsed.

Carrie ran to where Lola lay. She began to slap her face with a hard, stinging palm. She kept at it until Lola groaned and came half awake. Her legs were like rubber, but Carrie made her walk up and down with feebly dragging steps.

"Poison!" she cried in the sleepy ear of the victim. "You've swallowed poison—do you understand? Wake up—or die!"

She saw horror glint in the drugged eyes of the dancer. Lola tried desperately to walk. Then Carrie did a queer thing. She turned away from the tottering dancer and drew out the pistol that Tobin had dropped. She examined it swiftly, her back to Lola. Then, with a tight smile, she tossed it to the sofa where the dancer had lain.

Anna was still in a faint on the floor. Near by were the two dead kidnapers. The room looked like a shambles.

With both hands under the
CB-4

dancer's armpits, Carrie dragged her from the room. At the top of the stairs, Lola collapsed, but the desperate Carrie hauled her down the steep steps, dragging her loose heels after her as if she were a stuffed dummy. Around the landing and down another flight—— Carrie lifted Lola and carried her out to the paved courtyard.

She dropped her brutally against the cold stone. The shock of the fall and the chill of the stone beneath her face roused the dancer. Carrie's voice was like a whiplash in her ear. She helped the victim to tottering feet and ran her forward to the cellar window of the night club.

GETTING Lola back to the office of Nat Berman was something that Carrie could never recall very clearly. She remembered shoving Lola through the cellar window and dragging her across the basement floor to the air vent in the opposite wall. How she raised Lola through that opening and got through herself, was a complete blank to Carrie. But, somehow, she managed to drag the limp dancer along the flat planks laid over dark beam-ends. A smash of her fist knocked out the loose panel at the other end. She saw a dimly lit corridor with an alley door at its far end. Nearer was the dark slant of stairs that led aloft to Berman's second-floor office.

Lola was now completely dead to the world. With a tremendous effort, Carrie threw the slim, sagging body across her shoulder. She forced her legs grimly up the dark stairs, panting with fatigue, salt sweat in her eyes, hardly able to see.

She remembered beating feebly at Nat Berman's office door. Then there was a rush of feet on the other

side of the barrier. The door was unlocked. The tense, good-looking face of Aleck was visible, peering over the barrel of a steady gun.

He took one startled look and gasped.

"Carrie!"

His big hands caught Lola as the dancer slid from Carrie's grip. He laid her gently on the floor and sprang to the aid of the girl with the tired brown eyes. But Carrie had regained something of her strength. The frightened face of Nat Berman reminded her that she had promised to bring back Lola in time for the show to go on. And Lola was dying—unless the numbing effects of the powerful drug could be whipped away from her sleepy brain!

"For God's sake, wake her up!" Berman cried. "She's billed for the opening number! If you don't wake her, I'm ruined."

"If we don't wake her—she'll die!" Carrie said harshly.

ALECK leaned, sniffed at Lola's quiet lips, and his face paled with understanding. He heaved the dancer upward to her feet. He buffeted her brutally till her eyelids fluttered. Carrie swung in on the other side. Together, they walked her wabbling feet up and down the room. Fast—faster—

"Hot coffee!" Aleck growled over his shoulder to Berman. "Black and strong! Get it up here in a hurry!"

Berman grabbed at his phone and yelled an excited order over the wire to the service kitchen of the night club. In a few moments, a waiter hurried in with a silver pot of steaming coffee. He gaped at the sight he saw, but he had no chance to utter a startled word.

"Back to the kitchen," Berman cried, "and keep your mouth shut!

If you spill a word to any one downstairs about this—you're fired!"

Through the balcony door, the throb of orchestra music made a rhythmic blare. It was the overture for Lola's dance. But the worry went out of Berman's tense face as he saw that Lola was no longer a dead weight in the arms of her deliverers. Coffee stained her chin. She had gulped down three cups of the strong, bitter fluid. Sanity was returning to her dark, lovely eyes. She stood erect, listening to Berman's pleading cry.

A born trouper! She could hear the sensuous Oriental wail of the music from the night-club orchestra. It roused her completely. The show must go on! Men and women were eagerly waiting to see her—Lola! She must not disappoint them!

"Get my costume!" she shrieked to Berman.

Her hand began to rip fiercely at the fastenings of her gown. The gown slid from her body and fell in a tangled circle at her feet. She ignored Aleck's embarrassed stare. He turned away with a flush. Berman came rushing back with the flimsy dance costume.

Lola was sobbing with excitement.

"Not those slippers, fool! The others! And where is my silver scarf? Get it—quickly!"

Again Berman's feet raced away. Carrie Cashin's voice was a grim, explanatory murmur in Aleck's ear.

He muttered: "You mean the snatch job was engineered by George Tobin, the sax player in the orchestra? He got Casaba to make the snatch, and then double-crossed him?"

"No," Carrie said. "I don't mean that at all. The clever brain behind the kidnaping was not Tobin. The real criminal has not yet been

caught! I expect one last attempt will be made to get hold of the fifty thousand in ransom money—right here in this office!"

Carrie was smiling strangely. But before she could say any more, the voice of Lola cried out triumphantly behind them.

"Behold! Feenesh! I am ready!"

TURNING, they stared at her. She was standing on tiptoe. Smooth white arms extended gracefully above her head. Her gleaming body was like a sheath of silver beneath the filmy drapery of her spangled scarf. Henna stained her bared toes crimson.

"Are you all right?" Berman whispered.

"It would take one thousand crooks to stop me now!" she cried proudly. "I theenk I——"

A sudden rush of feet along the balcony outside the office cut short the sound of Lola's voice. The door was flung open. A man sprang into the room. It was Charlie Mason, leader of the club orchestra!

At sight of his grim, staring face, Aleck's hand moved like chain lightning. His gun leaped level, menacing the orchestra leader.

"Stand still, or I'll let you have it!"

Mason gasped. But Carrie began

to laugh with a hard, humorless sound.

"Let him alone, Aleck! Mason is innocent. He had nothing to do with the crooks."

"What the hell's going on here?" the orchestra leader spluttered. "Who's this fool with the gun? Why doesn't Lola get downstairs to the stage? We've already played the overture once and——"

"Play it again," Berman growled. "Lola's ready. Start once more and give her the cue!"

"Right!"

Mason darted back along the dressing-room balcony and sped down the stairs to the orchestra pit. Lola stepped to the door, her eyes bright and glittering with excitement. Her slender body was erect, beautiful.

"I dance!" she cried tensely. "Better than I ever danced before!"

"The hell you do!" a shrill voice screamed across the office. "You die—if you try to leave this room!"

A pistol was pointing menacingly from the rear door that led to the alley staircase. It was the same pistol that had fallen from the dead hand of Tobin, the crooked saxophone player. It was held tightly in the hand of a woman. A woman with hard, malicious eyes and lips



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that smiled with hate. Anna! Lola's treacherous dressing-room maid!

CARRIE CASHIN was the only person in the room who failed to raise her hands under the menace of Anna's gun. She seemed neither frightened nor surprised. She began to move slowly forward toward the tense figure of the maid.

"Stop!" Anna cried harshly. "One more step, and I'll fire! Unless I get that fifty grand from Berman—I'll kill every one in this room!"

"I haven't got it," Berman whispered in terror. "I couldn't raise that much cash."

"You lie! You had it ready for Casaba—and I want it! Now!"

Carrie had halted. But it was merely to ask a jeering question:

"Did you think I wasn't wise to you, you she-devil? It wasn't Tobin or Casaba who thought up this kidnap scheme. It was you. You and Tobin interested Casaba in the snatch. But he was only a fall guy. Tobin expected to split the ransom with you. But you killed Tobin and you stabbed Casaba. You were too greedy, Anna! You managed to fool two smart crooks, but you couldn't fool me."

"Yeah?" Anna croaked. "I'll take fifty grand from Berman, or I'll kill every——"

"You'll kill no one," Carrie said coolly. "You're licked right now, baby!"

She sprang straight toward the muzzle of the gun. Anna's finger jerked at the trigger. The hammer fell, but there was no roar of flame. Only a dull click resulted. Before Anna could jerk the trigger again, Carrie was on her like a slim thunderbolt.

The two women swayed in grim combat; but it was over almost before the startled Aleck could reach

his partner's side. Anna's arms were locked behind her back in a grip that held the panting woman tilted forward in agony. Shining steel cuffs from Aleck's pocket slid over the quivering wrists.

"You couldn't really kill any one, Anna, with that gun," Carrie said softly. "You see, when you pulled your fake faint, I emptied Tobin's gun before I tossed it on the sofa. I figured you'd make a last try for that ransom money.

She turned toward the frozen figure of the dancer.

"There's your music cue, Lola! Hurry—and good luck!"

Lola flung the door open. She poised herself for an instant like a silver moonbeam. Then she was gone into a rumble of distant applause that rose like the thunderous break of a wave.

ANNA wilted, her clenched hands dangling helplessly in steel cuffs.

"How did you know she had killed Casaba and drugged Lola herself when she turned out the lights in the room?" Aleck asked.

"She lied to me," Carrie said. "Anna claimed that Casaba had thrown her to the floor and then drugged the dancer. I asked her twice if she had gone to Lola's help. But she insisted each time that she was lying dazed on the floor. And yet, when I smelled her hands, they reeked of laudanum. She had the bottle! She drugged Lola before she killed Casaba. But she was dumb enough to spill the stuff on her own hands!"

Carrie's eyes flashed.

"I knew she was the real killer before she stabbed Tobin. I tried to stop her, but she was too quick for me. Then she tried to grab Tobin's gun to finish me. But I picked it

up first—and the knife, too. Her only chance was to fake a faint and make a last play here in the office. But as you see, she made her play with an empty gun."

Aleck grinned shakily.

"Why the heck didn't you phone me before you followed Casaba into that joint across the courtyard? You promised me you would!"

"I didn't have time. In this detective racket, a gal sometimes has to move fast."

From the stage of the night club, where Lola was doing her million-dollar dance before a packed audience of the town's celebrities, came

a tremendous roar of sustained applause.

Nat Berman stood hunched at the head of the balcony stairs, grinning like a man who had suddenly recovered a gold mine he had lost.

But Aleck was staring at the flushed, lovely face of Carrie Cashin. His grip on her arm made her wince. There was loyalty and affection in Aleck's low voice.

"You're a fast woman, all right! The kind that makes chain lightning sit down to catch its breath! Let's go somewhere nice and quiet and have a slow, tall drink. I need one! After all, I'm just a poor weak man!"

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Intrigue, death and horror draw even "Big Red" Brennan into the net of the mysterious "Mad Russian."

CHAPTER I.

THE MAD RUSSIAN.

YOU'VE heard of Emperor Ti Sum Kee. His name is on the front page of every news sheet in the world, on the average of twice a week. His smiling Oriental face is photographed for news reels and rotogravure. Great books have been written about him, and a dozen theories concerning the extent of his

power in the nation of Manchukin, which he rules, have been advanced. No theory, so far, has been right. But every one knows the history of how Ti Sum Kee came into power.

It was in that time when China's politics became a grab bag, and the strongest and most cunning took what they were able. It was a bloody scramble in which a few millions died, and Ti Sum Kee—who had once been a coolie—came up out

*A new novelette of the Naval Intelligence, and China—
and "Big Red" Brennan.*

By Steve Fisher,
the navy's foremost fiction writer.

of this with a smile and the title of emperor. His empire is a fat chunk of land north of Singapore, stretching between the Yangtze and the border of Tibet; and he is reaching out for more, his ultimate goal being the rule of all China.

But he isn't really emperor. He is a puppet, and his state house, re-

and lied, and fought to gain this land. It is the Mad Russian whose ambition it is to rule all China. He keeps Ti Sum Kee on the throne because he knows a Chinese must rule



splendent though it is, is a mockery to his empty title.

It is the "Mad Russian" who rules most of China. There have been mad Russians since, but he is the first and original, and he rules Manchukin from a cellar in Singapore. It was he, not Ti Sum Kee, who maneuvered, and stole, and killed,

China; and because it fits his purpose to remain in obscurity until China is won.

The name of the Mad Russian is Joseph Steen. He was officially killed in the Russian revolution; his head was officially chopped off once in Hongkong for stirring up a revolt. Officially, he is serving in a

British prison for sabotage; and he has also been officially hung from the yardarm of a French sloop for attempting mutiny.

But he is alive, and intact, and in a cellar in Singapore. He is a rogue and a fighter. He is a combination of Houdini, Napoleon, and Rasputin. His word is worthless.

He would fight you if he had to, but he would sooner stab you in the back, because he doesn't like to take chances. Fools take chances and die. Each time he has been captured and sentenced to death, others have died for him, or he escapes. His methods, tortures and victories would fill limitless volumes, for which there is no space here.

SUFFICIENT then, that he is Joseph Steen, the Mad Russian, empowered with the empire of Manchukin, and anxious to control China. So far, only the Japanese suspected his ambition. Japanese troops, therefore, were everywhere. Ti Sum Kee the emperor would not rule China so long as the Japs remained.

Joseph Steen had faced that situation for three years and knew there was no end to it, except to get the Japs interested elsewhere—to get them into war. Then, while they were busy, it would be a simple matter to step in, unite China under one rule, and place Ti Sum Kee over all.

It was a very potent chessboard of nations which Joseph Steen would play, but getting Japan into a war with another nation was his only solution. He had considered Russia, which once was his own country, but he had little regard for the strength of Russia to keep the Japs busy for long.

He looked toward France and saw that she had trouble enough. Eng-

land was busy and it would be difficult to stir up public feeling for a war with Japan. But America—ah, that was the logical nation! Reams of publicity on a prospective Japanese-United States war had been printed during the last ten years. The American public was keyed for it. A match would set off the powder keg!

Joseph Steen sat in his cellar now, a big, sweating man whom you would not have taken for a ruler. He had a three-day growth of beard, piggish, ebony-black eyes; and he wore only a dirty gray shirt, open at the collar. In front of him on the table were maps written on oil-skin. Sitting across from him was a beautiful Eurasian girl.

"Nita," he said, "I am giving you a job that ten men could not do."

Her eyes did not flicker. "Yes?"

"Although I have never worked directly with you before," he went on, "I have looked up your record and it is excellent. You have been one of my best and most clever agents. As you understand, my agents in the American navy are about to work a masterful stroke of strategy, which we hope will bring about a war between the United States and Japan. Like all great plans, this one is very simple. But there——"

"What is it?" Nita asked.

"I will come to that," said Joseph Steen. "First, I wish to give you your assignment, and to tell you how I want you to carry it out. An American Naval Intelligence agent has interfered considerably with my agents aboard ship. He has arrested several, and he has killed others in gun battle. This man—this American—is a red-haired human hell on wheels. At least, that is the report which has come to me. It will be difficult for me to pro-

ceed with the plan I have until he is out of the way."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, and she lit a cigarette.

"Kill him. I have sent ten men to do that, and none of them came back. A woman can work in different ways."

"Who is this man?"

"Lieutenant Brennan," said Joseph Steen. "He is called Big Red Brennan, and I am told he is dynamite."

The girl Nita nodded, and Steen went on talking.

TWO hours later, Nita walked down the polished cork-floor corridor of the Singapore Palace Hotel and knocked on the door of a room. A big man who wore whites and had a .45 strapped about his waist, opened the door. His hair was bright red, and he had a high-cheek-boned face and a jutting jaw. His skin was bronze, and his teeth flashed white when he smiled. He was "Big Red" Brennan.

"Nita," he said, "come in."

She came in, her eyes narrowed. Brennan turned his back to pour her a Scotch and soda. Nita watched him for a moment, then she sat down. She had begun to sweat, and the brownish grease paint was streaking her face. Also, her eyes hurt, and she reached up and released the invisible threads which had made her eyes slant. She took off the dark, straight-haired wig and shook out her soft blond hair.

Big Red turned, saw her; then, he grinned. "Well, I see you are Betty Thompson again. What's the matter, honey, don't you like being Eurasian?"

"No," said she, accepting the drink he offered. "And you can let Nita out of the closet now. She might not like being tied up. I got through

to Joseph Steen without trouble—smart man that he is supposed to be—and he was utterly convinced that I was his agent Nita."

"Of course he had never seen Nita," said Red. "So many people work for him. That was the way we planned it. Did you get his plans?"

Betty Thompson nodded, her eyes shining. "Yes, I kept questioning him, and because he was a little proud of how simple and terrible his plan is to bring about war with Japan, he told me."

Big Red sat down. "We'll let Nita out later. I want to hear it now."

There was a knock on the door. Brennan and Betty looked at it, then at each other.

CHAPTER II.

DEATH IN THE STREET.

BIG RED BRENNAN got to his feet, nodding with his head that Betty should hide. She put down her drink, and did this hurriedly, stepping behind a curtain. Brennan put his hand on the butt of his automatic and went to the door and opened it. His brown eyes flickered. A Chinese bell boy stood there with a tray containing chipped ice and Tom Collins high balls.

"You order drinks, sir?"

"No."

"This not room nineteen?"

"This is room nine," said Brennan.

"Solly. Me new here. Me chop-chop quick to room nineteen before ice melt."

Big Red closed the door, turned the lock; then, he leaned back against it and surveyed the room. Betty appeared, but he stood here, holding his finger over his lips. When a minute or two had passed

and he felt that an eavesdropper might have given up, he said:

"Your wig was in plain sight. You forgot to get it out of the way when you hid, Betty."

"Do you think he was sent up here to spy?"

"I don't know," said Brennan. "I would guess that he was. Joseph Steen doesn't send out agents without having counteragents watch them, and it would seem queer that you could come—as Nita—openly to my room and be admitted."

She looked worried. "Maybe I'd better get out of here, then."

Big Red glanced at his wrist watch. "You'll have a few minutes yet. When you go, I'll have to go along. Although with your own blond hair, and in your own clothing, they may not know you. I want to know Steen's plan."

Betty sat down again. She explained, "It's this: He has an intensive spy ring on board the American Asiatic flagship in Shanghai. These men are centered in the communications and radio divisions, and their forces, he says, can be strengthened by offering fabulous bribes to other men in these same divisions. But they will have to be bribes so large that he could offer them only once. Anyway, let it suffice that he has a way of carrying out what he plans."

"That I don't doubt. And the plan?"

"To garble fleet orders on a certain day. Merely mix up the technical figures of longitude and latitude. He will substitute longitude and latitude figures that will put the ships in the lane where Japanese vessels—on this certain day—will be engaged in battle practice. The American vessels will be in this Japanese lane, and in range of their guns, although—because of this mix-up in orders that will come as

official from the flagship—the American commanders will be under the impression they are in their own waters, and that the Japs are intruding. The rest is easy. Maybe ten or twelve Jap shots will hit United States vessels. Maybe a couple of American minesweepers—or destroyers—will be sunk as a result of this. With the tension between us and the Japanese being what it is—well——"

BIG RED nodded. He understood, but comprehension had come slowly, for he was stunned. He had heard that Joseph Steen was a genius, and now he had not one bit of doubt that this was true. The plan was incredibly fool-proof. The Japs would never be able to explain the shots. They would say the American ships had gotten in the way before they could stop the firing, which would be true. But the Americans would say they were in their own water, and the shots had been deliberate.

Argument. Parades. Protest. And if war did not come out of it, Steen would plan another equally clever thrust between the actually innocent nations, which would be sure to be the final straw. Big Red Brennan of the Naval Intelligence was getting a look into the mind of an international czar!

"The Mad Russian must die," he said slowly.

Betty Thompson replied pointedly: "Yes—but——"

Red nodded. "It's our turn to move. And if we're to keep Steen from killing us, we'll have to move, have to keep thinking all the time." He became silent, but his mind went on. He was sure that the bell boy had noticed the wig, and would report it to Steen's agents. Steen would know he had been trapped,

although he would not send men to Brennan's room; because he had done that before and Brennan always shot faster.

Brennan was too careful, too much dynamite to be caught and shot down like that. Instead, they would wait for another chance to get him. And they would also be waiting for the girl. When they saw her come out of the hotel—in make-up, as Nita—they would, according to their plan, capture her.

Looking at it like this, Big Red thought he saw a way in which he could get Betty Thompson out of the hotel safely. He wanted her to take a message to the commandant of the Asiatic fleet. He could neither phone nor trust any other messenger with it; and because he was going to be busy himself, he could not take it in person. Yet he wanted the assurance that Betty would be safe.

So—and this is what Steen's agents did not know, and what would trick them—Big Red would release the genuine Nita from the closet and send her out of the room. Tell her she could go. Downstairs, the agents, thinking her still a white girl made up, would surround and capture her. While they were delayed in this manner, Betty could slip out the back way and escape.

It mattered not that the real Nita could tell what had happened to her. Because of what the bell boy saw, it was already in the open. Steen would know, anyway, that he had been tricked by one of Brennan's women agents. And by sending Nita out now, Betty's get-away would be clean.

"I think I have something," Big Red said.

He crossed the room to a table, sat down and quickly wrote a note. He sealed it in an envelope, telling

Betty to give it to the admiral; then, he explained his plan.

"The thing that Steen's men don't know," he said, "is that the actual Nita is here in this room."

He opened the closet door. The slim, dark-haired Eurasian spy half tumbled out. Her eyes were wide and cold; her face was set grimly. When they had taken the gags from her mouth, she said:

"You will pay for this. Both of you will pay for this!"

"We'll see," said Big Red, and opened the room door for her to go out.

THE moment Betty Thompson left Red Brennan she no longer felt so safe, although there was a gun in her purse, and she knew that his plan about Nita would see her through safely. And yet, in moments like these, she realized how close one came to facing death. It was like walking a rope a thousand feet in the air; you only had to slip once. She had taken the elevator a minute after Nita, was on it now.

The car stopped on the main floor. Betty got out and slipped through the lobby to the side entrance. She saw the cobblestone street of Singapore bright with sunshine; she saw the coolies, and merchants, and travelers in white linen; American business men with faded skin, and bleak eyes. She saw British sailors, swinging arm in arm; and Jap soldiers. It was street scene, and she saw that the coast was clear for her escape. Things were placid, natural. No one was watching her.

She waved for a ricksha; and then, suddenly, there were shots that crashed through the singsong sameness of sound. A scream shrilled high, and trailed off. People squealed, and ran toward something

falling limply in the middle of the street. Betty stood up against the hotel, terrified. She did not know what to do. Chinese rushed by her, anxious to see what had happened. The crowd surged; gibbering, talking, pointing.

And then there was a police whistle. Khaki-garbed officers charged down upon the scene. The Chinese threw up their arms and fled. In a few moments the thing that had fallen on the street lay there alone, crushed and bloody; so that Betty, standing there against the wall of the hotel, saw it.

She took breath into her lungs and shuddered with horror. For the corpse was that of a woman. It was that of Nita.

Something told Betty she should run. Big Red had told her to make her get-away no matter what happened. But she was petrified. Nita's body held her gaze. She felt that for a moment, it would be impossible to move. A moment ago Nita had been living and breathing, and now she—

Betty Thompson felt some one close to her. She looked up. A man, a large part Russian, his clothes ragged, was on her right side, apparently unaware of her, for he was looking the other way. A bulky Manchurian was on her left. He seemed to be looking at the corpse. She started to move, and found suddenly that she could not. The two men had pinned her between them. She opened her mouth to scream, but found her throat dry.

Joseph Steen's agents had killed Nita thinking she was not Nita, but a traitor; and now, in the minutes that passed, they had learned of their mistake. And Betty Thompson, instead of getting away, had lingered too long. The bell boy

must have recognized her. She was trapped. They could not shoot her down as they had Nita, because the police were too close by. The police!—she thought, and again she opened her mouth to scream.

A sweaty hand clamped over it. She was jerked around the corner with such violence that her clothing tore. She was lifted—in between the two men—into an automobile. The motor roared. The car was moving down the street. She was held so that she could neither move nor scream; and the wild pounding in her veins told her this would be the last ride she would ever have on earth.

CHAPTER III.

A MESSAGE TO THE ADMIRAL.

WHEN Big Red Brennan put Betty into the elevator, he had no doubt in his mind but that she would make a safe get-away; once she was a good distance from the hotel, no one would know her identity, outside of the fact that she was a pretty, blond young woman. He had intrusted her with an important message to the commander in chief of the American Asiatic fleet; and because her reputation as an undercover woman was great, because Red himself had worked with her once in San Francisco, he felt certain she would deliver it.

It was a message he could not send out to the admiral, who was on his flagship, the U. S. S. *Huston*, because of the information he had already gained that the communications division of the *Huston* was corrupt with spies. A message coming through it would never get to the admiral. Personal delivery was the only way to get through.

And if the message did not get

through, the *Huston* would lead out the American fleet on scheduled maneuvers, and because of deliberately jumbled navigation orders, sail into the line of Japanese gunfire.

Big Red did not take it upon himself to deliver this message, because he had confidence in Betty Thompson; because he felt it more important that he go after, and try and get, the Mad Russian, Joseph Steen, before Steen could counteract any of Brennan's moves and cause more trouble.

So Big Red was tense as the elevator doors closed on Betty, because he knew that of all the assignments he had had in his career, these in China were more important, more vital than any. Being transferred to China was a promotion for Brennan. It meant they thought him capable of gigantic tasks. And he knew now that, unless he was capable of coping with the one facing him at the present moment, war with Japan would result; that millions would die in that war; the United States would be thrown into an upheaval of economic depression, whether the war was won or lost; that billions of taxpayer dollars would have to be spent on armies and navies and gunpowder.

He stood in the hall, looking at the blank elevator doors; he stood here waiting a short interval, and then he started back to his own room to get certain things he would have to take with him in his battle against Joseph Steen. Brennan had been through a lot in his lifetime. He had seen and felt a lot of bullets. He had faced death a dozen times. But he had no illusions about the Mad Russian.

If Big Red had faced death twelve times, Steen had faced it thirty; Steen had twenty years more experi-

ence than Brennan. He was more treacherous, more used to dealing in China, where you could do almost anything for the right price in gold. Steen's mind had been trained along venal lines that were foreign to Big Red Brennan. Yet Brennan knew that regardless of war or not, war lay directly between him and Joseph Steen. It was that personal—Brennan and Steen. The winner got what he wanted; the loser would take death!

Never before had Brennan felt so uncertain as to what the outcome of his mission would be. The Mad Russian had taken years to build what he had, and he was a powerful ruler; he was the real emperor of Manchukin. Big Red Brennan was only a single government employee.

HE came into his room, thinking these things, and it was then that he heard the shots that echoed up from the street. He rushed to the window and looked down. He saw a body huddled on the cobblestones; saw Chinese rushing to surround it from every direction.

Big Red waited no longer. He picked up what he wanted and slammed out of the room.

He got onto the street just in time to hear police whistles. The Chinese scattered, and he saw the corpse was that of Nita. Big Red lit a cigarette, then he retreated back into the lobby of the hotel.

It occurred to him then, suddenly, that this commotion might have delayed Betty Thompson's get-away. He had told her to go through the side entrance. Now he went to it, to see whether or not she was gone, whether or not she was in sight.

And his timing, though he had done everything naturally, was as close as that. A few seconds later,

and it would have been too late. He arrived on the street to see Betty jerked around the corner by a huge Manchurian and an ill-clad Russian.

Big Red rushed around the corner. A man stepped up to him, threw a gun into his back, and said: "Stay away, mister!"

Brennan saw Betty thrown into a car, saw the car start up. Fury surged through him. The man at his back was nothing. Brennan ducked low, suddenly and quickly, threw his arm back and grasped the man's gun wrist. He hurled him over his shoulder, throwing him six feet. Then Big Red Brennan's automatic was in his hand and he was running, yelling after the car. His gun was exploding.

A tire smashed out, but the machine gathered speed, whined around a corner; Big Red saw it crash into a ricksha, saw it run over a coolie and squash the life out of him as blood oozed through the crevices in the cobblestones. A singsong howl went up from the Chinese. Americans and English stood and stared. Police whistles blew.

Big Red saw another car, hopped on the side of it, told the driver: "Follow those killers!"

THE driver was a Belgian, and his car was old; but he, too, had seen the hit-and-run spectacle, and he pushed his machine for all it would do. He could drive without obstruction, because the murder car had already cleared a bloody path. Big Red saw the tail of the sedan again, and, leveling his .45, fired.

Even in motion like this, Red Brennan was an expert shot. He knew now that every bullet must count, so that he was more accurate than ever before in his life. The two bullets went to their marks, one

taking out a tire, the other puncturing squarely into the gasoline tank.

The killer car lurched, and then, because they were racing so fast, the punctured gas tank exploded, rocking the street and the squat buildings on either side of it. The murder car burst into flames that licked up over the top of it like a sheet of red smoke. The machine lurched crazily, spun around, and then went crashing to its side.

Already the Belgian was stopping his car, and Big Red was off, running. He arrived at the burning car to see the Manchurian and the half-Russian crawl out, guns in their hands. The driver, a Chinese, also was out. Betty Thompson was trapped underneath!

Big Red dived to get her out, but as he did this, the Joseph Steen agents recognized him and opened fire. On his stomach in the street, the flames fanning his broad face, burning his red hair, sweat blistering across his cheeks, Big Red turned, snarling, cursing. He pumped the automatic.

The Chinese driver went down, and so did the Russian; but the Manchurian only came closer, turned his gun on Brennan.

A slug stung through Brennan's side, and because his own gun carried a clip of only seven bullets, he knew he had but one more left. He moved weakly, feverishly, knowing that Betty was still under the car. He heard her scream now, a scream that meant she was facing death. He heard this and felt the Manchurian's bullet in his side; felt another crash through his arm. He tried to bring the .45 up, and found that his fingers were nerveless.

He changed the gun to his other hand; but in doing this, the worst possible thing happened. The .45

went off, and Brennan lost the last bullet he had. Betty's scream came to him again, but for a moment he could not move, and he saw that the Manchurian was going to shoot at him again. The Manchurian was aiming at his head!

CHAPTER IV.

"I WILL KILL BRENNAN MYSELF!"

THERE is always something a man can do before he dies, or something that a man can try to do; and now Brennan, in the split second in which he had been paralyzed, thought of this, and of the course of action that was left him. He rolled his body out, crashing against the Manchurian's legs.

Blam! Blam!

The bullets went wild and Brennan was up, rising somehow, then bearing the Manchurian down with him. Bullet wounds were forgotten. He bore down, smashing the Manchurian's head against the burning car. So incensed was Red Brennan that he did not stop even when the Manchurian's tongue was sticking purple from his head, and the man was dead.

But he stopped, finally, because he heard Betty's last, faint scream, and realization came to him about what he must do. He turned from the body of the man who, a moment ago, had been bent on killing him, and jerked open the car door. His hand was burned. His skin became scorched. The pain was all over him now, and he was like a madman walking through hell.

But he got the side door of the turned-over car open. Somehow, though everything was very hazy, and the fever in his brain robbed him of clear thought, he was lifting Betty out of the car. It had not been

burning inside, but she had been hurt in the crash.

He lifted her out and staggered with her to safety. And then police whistles were shrieking everywhere, and a rickety ambulance was coming. A rickety ambulance driven by Chinese, with a sign on the side that said: "Singapore Emergency Hospital."

Big Red half collapsed then; but he opened his eyes in the ambulance to find Betty beside him, and he said:

"You're hurt pretty bad, kid. I'll take the message to the admiral on the *Huston* myself. Joseph Steen, the rotten dog, can wait. We must get that message through before the fleet sails into Jap waters."

"You can't keep going," Betty said. "You're so hurt, so——"

Big Red Brennan's eyes flickered. "It doesn't matter about me," he said. "It *does* about America. I've got to keep going until there is nothing left in me——"

THE huge, unshaven man that was Joseph Steen, paced up and down in his cellar headquarters. He was a calm man, which was the reason for his success; he was calm and knew how to keep his temper, but now he was closer to rage than any one had ever seen him. Sweat stood out on his great forehead. His pig-gish eyes glittered with the light of hell-fire. He poured vodka into a glass and gulped it down. He smashed the glass to the basement floor. He swore. One of his aids came near him and he knocked the man down, kicked his toe into the side of his head.

"Get away from me, you. Dogs—yellow, incompetent dogs; I rule an empire, but cannot kill a man I want killed. I have the power of dictators, and yet a single American stands in the way of the biggest

project of my life. What is the matter with all of you? Has your blood turned to water? Have your hearts gone soft, dripping with the puss of cowardice?"

He poured more vodka, and the rage seethed up through him. He grew red in the face, and his chest came out. His pride was hurt, and his plans—ah, his plans—

"Fools—morons, asses!" he cursed. "Ten men—and none of them come back. And then Brennan tricks me with one of my own woman agents. When my men go to get her, they kill the real Nita instead! Simpletons—blockheads! They kill the real Nita, and capture Brennan's woman, only to have Brennan overtake and kill them; kill all of them, and save his woman again! Am I Joseph Steen, or some petty murderer that can be tricked by a mere Intelligence man? Are these my agents, or rag rolls that cave in at the breath of a red-haired American? Have I no one in my employ, is there no one who accepts my gold who can kill this dog?"

"I can! I can!"—voices.

"You can?" screamed the Mad Russian. "Fifteen of you have said that and died! You are conceited prigs without the ability to think or to fight. You volunteer because you know that if you don't, I will kill you! But none of you shall have the chance at Brennan again!"

His voice softened. With trembling hands, he poured more vodka. "No—I Joseph Steen, who has been bested by no man, shall do the job. I shall do it personally! I will leave my basement for the first time in two years and go after Mr. Brennan. I, personally, will kill him!"

He looked around at the white faces of his men. "But it will take a plan," he went on, more softly, "a

clever, fool-proof plan—a plan that only the genius-inspired mind of me, Joseph Steen, is capable of making or——"

BIG RED BRENNAN had said in the ambulance that he must go on, and he had meant it; but he was more badly burned physically than his spirit, and after saying that, he had lost consciousness. He did not awaken until hours later in a hospital bed swathed with bandages. He rose to a sitting position. His head throbbed. Gradually, everything that had happened paraded through his mind. He looked at his wrist watch, and then he became more pale than he already was. He got out of the bed. A nurse rushed over.

"You must stay there—at least two weeks——"

"My clothes," said Brennan hoarsely. "My clothes! The Asiatic fleet has already left by now. They are already cruising. I must get to them!"

"You can't! You must stay——"

But he had found his clothing and was putting it on.

He faltered as he left the hospital, and almost fell, for he was still weak. He knew he must get to a phone and get a government plane out on the flagship. An amphibian. He knew that, in Singapore, it would be difficult to do this; but everything depended on it.

He found a phone, and called.

He was lucky. There was a commercial mail plane belonging to the government of Ti Sum Kee, and to accommodate an American officer in an emergency, it would take him. Big Red Brennan could not contain his mirth. It was ironic. A plane that belonged to Joseph Steen's empire taking him on a mission which

was to defeat Steen's purpose! Of course Steen could not keep in touch with every detail of the government, and did not know. But still, Big Red thought, it was ironic.

Such were the international jests and pranks of the world when countries struggled one against the other.

Big Red got to the air field in record time. Although it was funny that he was going in a Manchukin plane, he was not fool enough to take a chance that the joke might be turned on him. He was wary, for when you are in China a while, you get that way. Your life depends on it. He said to the pilot:

"I'll fly it—alone."

"But——"

"I'll fly it," Brennan repeated, smiling, and a newly loaded .45 was in his hand.

He flew the seaplane.

He knew the American ships would have their charts and positions jumbled because of Steen, and he radioed—from the plane—the Japanese flagship for its position. He said he was lost. The position signal came back, and Brennan set the course and flew toward it. The propeller hummed; the wings lifted and fell, and wind screamed through them.

He had radioed the Japanese ship because he knew that, according to Steen's plan, the American fleet would be somewhere near by, blandly and innocently steaming into the Jap line of fire.

But he had not dreamed how close they would be!

He roared over the Japanese ships, saw their huge guns belching in gunfire. And less than ten minutes later, he was flying over American ships that were sailing a course toward the firing practice. The Japs were out of sight to the Americans,

CB—5

because in ten minutes in the air you can fly a long way. But for Red Brennan, the ships were too close for comfort.

IN another few minutes he had landed, and had been hauled up onto the deck of the *Huston*. Officers in white crowded around him.

"I must see the admiral," said Brennan.

"Of course, sir."

A marine messenger took Big Red down to the admiral's cabin and announced him. For the first time since this had begun, Brennan was beginning to feel good about it. At least he had regained consciousness in time to get out here and avoid disaster.

The door to the admiral's cabin opened. A flag lieutenant met him in the foyer of the suite.

"Your business, sir?"

"It is with the admiral," said Big Red. "Personal business."

In that moment, the gray-haired admiral appeared in the curtained doorway of his office. He nodded gravely that Big Red should come in. Brennan went in and sat down. He lit a cigarette, and waited for the admiral to seat himself. But he suddenly looked up to see the flag lieutenant in front of him again, a gun in his hand. Another man appeared from out of a closet, and he also held a gun.

Big Red Brennan stared toward the admiral, saw him taking off a gray wig, taking off make-up. He sat and stared, sweat on his face. The real admiral must have been killed, and this man had put himself in his place! It was incredible; only a genius could get away with such a thing! It was incredible, and horrible, and——

He saw that the man in the admiral's uniform was Joseph Steen, the Mad Russian.

CHAPTER V. THE MASTER STROKE.

JOSEPH STEEN said: "So you are Big Red Brennan? You are the man they cannot kill? I am Steen. I am the Mad Russian. Only I am not mad, except for power. This, Mr. Brennan, is—as you may admit—my master stroke. I didn't think I would have to do anything so daring, take any chance so great as to impersonate the American admiral. But you—you and your intrusions, killing my agents, spoiling my plans, forced it on me.

"We Russians, Mr. Brennan, when cornered, can fight, though we prefer—at least I do—a knife in the back. But your back was too tough to knife. So I came out of my corner and faced you. That means you die. There is nothing you can do now. The Japanese will be firing on these American ships in another few minutes—and you'll be dead!"

Big Red Brennan looked up with burning eyes, and he could not help admiring Steen's skill. "It is indeed," he whispered, "a master stroke. This cabin is the last place in the world I would have expected to find you, Steen. So, at the moment, you are in command of the United States Asiatic fleet. A salute to your cunning—but——"

The Mad Russian's eyebrows raised slightly. "Yes, but——"

Big Red Brennan looked at him, and at the two men standing near him with guns in their hands. He felt the movement of the ship, drawing closer and closer to Japanese gunfire. Drawing closer and closer to a war. He felt, too, his heart

pounding hard against his side; and he knew, or thought he knew, that this was the end, that Red Brennan would die here and now.

"But"—he went on, and Big Red's voice was just a little above a whisper now—"a man does not die when his country is plunging into war without first giving everything; without first——"

And then, suddenly, he moved. He knew that he had to move fast; he knew that the moment his body jerked, guns would go off. And yet he did move. The guns did go off, exploding in his ears; but the shots missed him. He backed, a perfect target for more of their fire, and jerked out his .45.

THE man who had come out of the closet went down with a bullet between his eyes. Now the Mad Russian was bending to pick up his gun. The flag lieutenant was firing point-blank at Brennan.

Bullets jerked through Red's side, but because his back was to the wall, he remained standing; he remained standing and now he threw his body outward, catapulted across at the man who was firing at him. Red's bleeding, aching body swung like a pendulum across the room. He threw himself onto the lieutenant, crashing down, bashing a gun on his head——

And then Big Red was rising again, although all his old wounds had broken open; although he was a bleeding mass of flesh; although there was nothing but a haze of horrible red in his mind. He was rising, gun in hand, and facing Joseph Steen, who stood unhurt, also with a gun in hand.

It was a moment that was history for the world.

It was a moment in which nations

stood still, and war wavered on a sword's point. The Mad Russian was half smiling. Big Red Brennan, bleeding, bruised, had no expression on his face, nor purpose in his mind except to kill Steen.

Their guns crashed simultaneously.

Big Red took both of the slugs in the stomach, and yet, for a fraction of a second he stood there as though nothing at all had happened; he stood and saw the great Mad Russian go down, jerking, bleeding. He saw this—saw in a moment Steen would be up again. But Big Red, too weak to do any more, dropped his gun and fell in the direction of the bulkhead where was the ship's phone—the phone from the admiral's cabin.

"Reverse the course—the whole fleet," he whispered. "This is the admiral speaking."

And even as he said this, he heard the faint boom of Japanese guns, and he saw Joseph Steen, the Mad Russian, getting up. Big Red's eyes were closing. He knew he was going to sag into an unconscious heap. He clung onto the phone for a moment longer.

"Come down here—arrest Joseph Steen, an impostor— Arrest him—I'll—explain—later—"

THE operations were a success, and Big Red Brennan of the Naval Intelligence regained consciousness a few days later; he was able to sit up and read a newspaper. Betty Thompson acted as his special nurse and was at his side constantly. Big

Red read something on the front pages of an old paper that gave him a smile:

EMPEROR TI SUM KEE AFRAID
HIS MANCHUKIN GOVERN-
MENT IS FALLING

POPULACE DEMANDS ELECTION

TI SUM KEE SHOWS GREAT
CONCERN OVER ARREST OF
AN OBSCURE SINGAPORE RUS-
SIAN NAMED JOSEPH STEEN

Manchukin, Dec. 10th.—Emperor Ti Sum Kee, in the name of the Manchukin government, to-day demanded the release of a prisoner known as the "Mad Russian," who is one Joseph Steen, known to have lived in a Singapore cellar. Critics cannot imagine why the emperor is so concerned over an obscure Russian refugee. But Ti Sum Kee's demand has been turned down by the international court, and Joseph Steen has been sentenced to be shot for a plot which is understood to have involved the American navy.

Lieutenant Commander Brennan of the American Intelligence made the arrest aboard the U. S. S. *Huston* and is expected to appear in a further hearing against the Mad Russian when he gets out of the hospital. Brennan suffered several gunshot wounds.

"Poor Ti Sum Kee," said Big Red Brennan, "the puppet emperor. Without Joseph Steen, he is a dummy." He looked up at Betty Thompson. "There will be more work to do when I get out. China has needed a cleaning up for a long time."

"Yes," said she, "and you are a one-man force who will do it—who will do what armies could not do before."

**NOTICE—All stories in Street & Smith's
magazines are new. No reprints are ever used.**



CRIME BUSTERS
OF AMERICA

J. EDGAR HOOVER
Director Federal Bureau of Investigation

J. EDGAR HOOVER

The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; Foremost Enemy of the Criminal Element; Pride of America, and Hero of Modern Youth

Nothing can rear its head—especially when it is an ugly head—without there springing up, very soon, some other thing or individual which will have power enough to cut off that ugly head.

It might be a mechanical development which promises to outstrip all production needs, when, before you know it, the demand for that item becomes too heavy even for the machine to supply it—the mechanical improvement lowered the cost, the cost increased consumption, consumption stretched the modern device to the limit, and things were stalemate again!

Without going into too many other incidents, we come to the particular one in question:

Crime reared its ugly head in this country in a most alarming way from the time prohibition made it possible for crooks to reap huge benefits from the illicit trade. Little by little they extended their operations to other fields, until some of the most powerful gangster leaders had enough strength in their organization to challenge organized society. The many-headed monster of crime was beginning to crawl out of the

slimy dens of the underworld and esconce itself in exclusive pent-houses—until the times brought forth a modern St. George who struck with a mighty sword and cut off those heads, one after another, until now there are no more left; till there are only a few twisting, swirling, headless bodies of this huge crime organization.

That modern St. George is none other than J. Edgar Hoover, a man who deserves more credit than any one can give him, for he, veritably single-handed, turned the tide of crime just at the time it threatened to engulf all that was decent and honest in our social organism of today. J. Edgar Hoover, riding on a horse of courage and personal bravery, using as his sword the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its

staff of efficient, courageous, and tamper-proof heroes, rode straight for the dragon's den, and practically wiped him out!

True, crime is not wiped out. Possibly crime will never be altogether wiped out. But J. Edgar Hoover has done just about as much as can be done to wipe out crime; he has definitely put an end to the bravado of crimi-

Who is your favorite

CRIME BUSTER?

Give us the name of the police officer, chief, county or State officer whose record is one to be proud of. We hope to give you more famous Crime Busters of America with each issue.

nals; he has definitely put crime back in the gutter, where it belongs. And he has accomplished this mostly because he set out to do this, despite all odds; and because he had the ability and good sense to bring into his organization men of high caliber, men who were one with him in their condemnation of crime, and were willing to go as far as he was in stamping it out.

Big-time gangsters are no more, thanks to the work of this leader and the F. B. I. He has been able to do this because he insisted and fought for legislation which took his department out of the inactive class, where many another man would have been satisfied to let it rest, and made it the most aggressive unit on earth; because he made our government erase State lines, wipe out political influence, obliterate graft, and give him the powers necessary to deal with big-time crooks with their own fire!

Many will say that it was fortunate that laws were passed which made it possible for the F. B. I. to assume powers that State or city police did not have; that it meant a great deal to forget that there were such things as city jurisdictions and State lines. Perhaps—but these laws, these rules, did not come until after a long and tedious personal task of influencing the government to bring about these reforms. And even after they were made, what was promising about the task of policing all the forty-eight States with a staff of men numbering less than five hundred? What good was the lack of limitation when it gave to these men territory which no other organization on earth never had to equal, no matter what the size of its staff? And it was not a barren, lifeless territory, either; it was a teeming nation, the richest on earth,

and one that gave more possibility for crime than any other nation ever gave.

That was the situation that faced J. Edgar Hoover when he started his active and forceful campaign to rid this country of the super-criminal. The fact that this situation has been entirely wiped out; that Hoover and his men have been able to turn in a record of victory brighter than has ever been turned in before by any one—that fact stamps this wonderman of to-day without a doubt as one of the greatest Crime Busters of history, and every American citizen should be glad to point to him as an example of what American fight, American initiative, and American courage can do. As one of the foremost Crime Busters of all time, J. Edgar Hoover deserves praise from all.

How Hoover changed this country from a paradise for gangsters to one in which big-time crooks ran to cover as fast as they could is too long a story to tell here. It is a story that has been told in the pages of our newspapers as one after another of our "big shot" racketeers went behind bars, or fell before the blazing guns of the F. B. I. men. It was not a one-sided battle, and one name after another was added to the bronze tablet which carries the list of the brave comrades who died under fire. But these men expected to receive death if they had to, in order that the war against crime could go on. And though such names were added, there were always more names of crooks that went down on police records, or went into ignominious graves.

Although the public is acquainted only with the flashing, brilliant captures amid blazing guns and smartly-set traps that caught fleeing gangsters. Behind these spec-

tacular scenes, however, is the patient training which Hoover made essential to his men; training which takes every man in his department over a certain, well-planned course to make the man fit to meet almost any condition which might arise in the battle against crime, and many which may never rise. The idea is to have the man fit for every occasion, and in order to do this his original training is supplanted by periodic "brushing up" throughout his career. No man in Hoover's department is ever finished training; no man can ever stop learning. It is probably because of this feeling, this attitude among Hoover's staff, that they are always on their toes, and always several jumps ahead of the criminal in every way.

Hoover's personal part in the rise of his department is synonymous with the department's progress. No man has worked so hard to bring about its success as he has. He has battled every obstacle to get the best

men possible, and he has fought every inch of the way to give them the power and equipment they need. It seems almost impossible that politics could be kept out of a department such as his, but he braved the wrath of the mightiest of political powers in order to keep his department free of unnecessary influence, and he won! With such a man for a leader; with such ideals—no wonder the F. B. I. is the world's most famous crime-fighting organization.

Hoover has made his mark in this world. Society owes a great deal to him, and to his loyal band of workers. More men will follow in the path he started; more and more men will make crime fighting their career. Some day, perhaps, the title of "Crime Buster" will be as honored as that of any profession to-day—and it will deserve to be, for protecting citizens against the ravages of crime is just as important as protecting him against disease, against falsehood, against any evil!

NEXT ISSUE—

"WINDJAM"

The Gadget Man gets down to Miami, and somebody steals not only his pants, but his whole suit! It's the best of Lester Dent's Gadget yarns.

"DEATH'S GREEN NECKLACE"

Carrie Cashin almost wears it about her throat—squeezed tight—in a great yarn by Theodore Tinsley.

"NORGIL"

The magician does more gun-magic to catch crooks. Another treat by Maxwell Grant.

**NORVELL PAGE—STEVE FISHER—ALAN HATHWAY—
AND MANY OTHERS**

in the next issue of

CRIME BUSTERS

THE DIAMOND MONSTER

CHAPTER I. JEWEL OF DISCORD.

WHEN the brawl started in the reception room, Dick Barrett was asleep, feet propped up on the desk in his private office. The raucous voices snapped him awake and he slammed to his feet and went with brisk, hurrying strides to the door. Through it came the angry roar of a man, pierced by the shriller voice of his secretary, Miss Fay.

Barrett whipped open the door and stood there, broad shoulders filling the frame, craggy chin thrust out; then, a slight smile twitched his wide lips. Barrett was thick-chested, solid and strong as a private detective had to be, but he was a dwarf compared to the angry, red-headed giant whom Miss Fay was defying.

The man towered over her, a head more than six feet and seeming almost that broad; but Miss Fay stood right up to him and was even shouting him down. Her head, with its tight, spinsterish hair, was tipped back and she shook both knobby fists under the red-headed giant's nose.

"Mr. Barrett's in conference!" she shrilled. "And I won't disturb him for you or for the President of the United States. Furthermore, I don't care for your manners, Mr. Terence O'Shawn!"

Her voice ran on and on, and Barrett's smile widened in spite of

himself. Then the red-headed giant reached out and clapped a broad palm across Miss Fay's mouth.

Barrett's jaw clicked shut. He took two chopping strides forward and the stiffened edge of his hand cut down across the forearm of the man called O'Shawn. Nerves paralyzed, the giant's arm dropped, freed Miss Fay. He let out a roar, but Barrett gripped his shoulder and, despite the man's bulk, wheeled him about.

"Get out!" Barrett ordered savagely.

"All right, all right," big O'Shawn said. "I'm sorry, but the woman tempted me. She did, begorra. I'd like to——"



Miss Fay



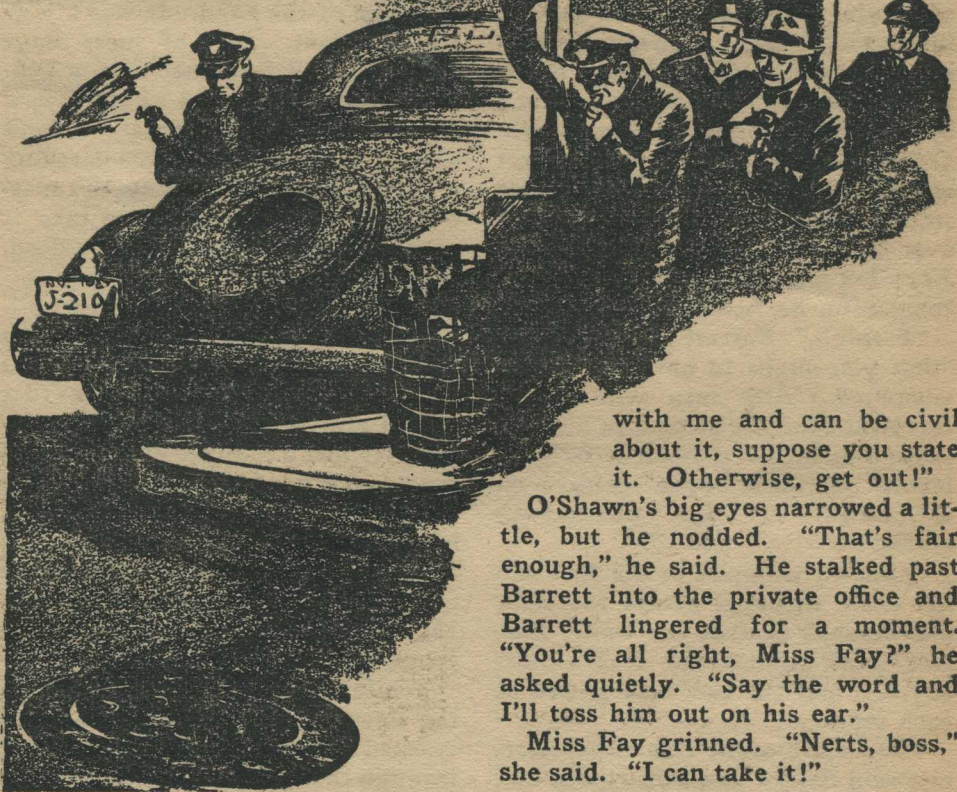
**Dick Barrett had to kill
The Ghost to put an
end to its bloody trail!**

By Norvell W. Page

"You big punk!" Miss Fay cried shrilly, lapsing as she sometimes did into the argot of the detective thrillers she loved to read.

O'Shawn grinned at her. "I admire you—and that's the truth. I've apologized."

The set of Barrett's jaw was uncompromising. He said: "If you have business



with me and can be civil about it, suppose you state it. Otherwise, get out!"

O'Shawn's big eyes narrowed a little, but he nodded. "That's fair enough," he said. He stalked past Barrett into the private office and Barrett lingered for a moment. "You're all right, Miss Fay?" he asked quietly. "Say the word and I'll toss him out on his ear."

Miss Fay grinned. "Nerts, boss," she said. "I can take it!"

Dick Barrett and Miss Fay, in a novelette of gripping action.

O'SHAWN was sitting gingerly on the edge of a heavy chair. Barrett flung into the swivel behind his

desk, bit the end off a cigar. O'Shawn poked a big finger in his direction.

"Are you the lad who said Terence O'Shawn needed a bodyguard?" he demanded.

Barrett rolled the cigar between his lips. He understood now. In the course of his work for a number of jewel insurance companies, he had picked up a tip that a man named O'Shawn would be robbed of a famous jewel, and O'Shawn was here as a result of a warning issued by the company.

Barrett's hand dropped carelessly to the edge of his desk and he ran a finger over a series of small buttons. They directed invisible rays of varying wave-length at O'Shawn; rays which had the property of making precious stones throw off a fluorescent glow, each when struck by the proper wave-length. O'Shawn's right-hand vest pocket showed a faint glow, and Barrett smiled thinly. He was still angry over the man's treatment of Miss Fay; but because of the insurance companies, he had to see this man.

"I think," Barrett said harshly, "that you ought to have your head examined. Any man who would carry the Monster around in his vest pocket is either a lunatic, or"—he leaned forward, eyes coldly on O'Shawn's—"or an out-and-out crook!"

O'Shawn whipped to his feet and his chair rocketed across the floor and crashed against the wall. Barrett went around the desk almost eagerly, and the two men glared at each other.

"One more stunt like that," Barrett said flatly, "and you go out and the policy on the Monster is canceled, understand? You've either got to put the jewel in a bank vault, or accept a bodyguard. I'm telling

you that any man who will carry two hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds on his person"—Barrett tapped the pocket from which the gleam had come—"is either crazy or he's made a deal with crooks and wants to be robbed."

O'SHAWN was sucking in deep breaths that distended his nostrils, struggling to hold his temper.

"Never in my life," he said with difficulty, "have I taken words like that from any man. But no one's going to make O'Shawn take a bodyguard. This thing—"

He dipped two thick fingers into his vest pocket and all the light in the room seemed to concentrate in the palm of the hand. It was a jeweled pendant, made of three huge diamonds and fashioned into a Chinese dragon. Gleams of light flew from its facets like sparks. "I don't know how you knew I was carrying it in that pocket, but it doesn't matter. No crook is going to take it off me while I'm alive. If I'm dead, it don't matter—"

A bell whirred faintly beneath Barrett's desk and he ripped out a startled oath. His hand flipped across his chest to the gun that nested always beneath his left armpit. He had a glimpse of O'Shawn's eyes jerking wide open, but there was no time to speak to him, to tell him that the buzzer meant violence in the reception room. It was a hidden bell, operated by a floor plate. Miss Fay would use it only in extreme emergency!

While the buzzer still sounded, the door of Barrett's private office crashed inward. Three men plunged through the opening. All three wore black masks and there were guns in their hands. And Barrett was laughing; short, hard, angry sounds. His gun was already in his hand. A

wrench of his arm and its muzzle would be centered on those three men before they fairly knew what was happening, and—

A blow struck Barrett on the shoulder. He realized with a sense of absolute amazement that O'Shawn had struck him. He fought for balance, but the force of the punch whirled him, off-balance, against the desk. It jarred his hand loose from the gun. Barrett heard it thud on the floor; then, O'Shawn was towering over him, eyes blazing.

"Pull a gun on me, will you!" O'Shawn roared. "You damned cheap—"

Barrett wrenched free. His elbow jammed into O'Shawn's larynx and sent him reeling backward. Barrett whirled toward his gun, and—

It was too late. Three guns were centered on him and on O'Shawn.

"Kindly elevate your hands, Mr. Barrett," one of the armed men said smoothly. "Just take hold of your ears. Mr. O'Shawn, will you likewise oblige? Very considerate of you to misunderstand Mr. Barrett's draw. Otherwise, I should have been compelled to kill him. What I came for, you understand, is not murder, but—the *Monster!*"

CHAPTER II.

INCHES FROM DEATH.

BARRETT could hear the whistle of O'Shawn's angry breathing. His own lips were pressed grimly shut. If he were behind the desk, he could press a floor switch which would summon the police and at the same time shoot a paralyzing electric current through those three crooks just inside the door. But, because of O'Shawn, he was in front of the desk. *Because of O'Shawn—*

Barrett's glittering eyes swung to

the big Irishman. It was damned strange that O'Shawn had blocked his draw at the crucial moment. He turned to the three crooks.

"Only one man would dare pull a thing like this," he said crisply. "And you sound a great deal like him, punk."

The spokesman of the crooks smiled faintly beneath his black mask. "You flatter me, Mr. Barrett. Mr. O'Shawn, you have the *Monster* in your fist, I think. Toss it over!"

O'Shawn said thickly, "I'll see you in hell first!"

The crook's gun leveled very steadily. "It's yourself that will go there first," he said curtly, "if you don't hand over the *Monster*. Come, I'm tired of waiting!"

O'Shawn's big fists were knotting. He twisted his head toward Barrett. "You know who this crook is?"

Barrett nodded, keeping his eyes on the three gunmen. He knew all right. No other man had that same impudent way of handling a gun, or that cocky tilt to the head. A man was a fool to think he could disguise himself by wearing a mask—

"Yes, I know him," he said coolly. "It's a thief they call the *Ghost*, because of his little disappearing tricks. This time, you won't disappear, *Ghost*. When I'm through with you, you'll be a genuine phantom, and—"

O'Shawn went into action. Without a sound, without even a tensing of muscles that Barrett could detect, he went across the room in long, lunging strides. Barrett heard the "*Ghost*" yelp out an order, heard the sound of blows, but didn't delay to investigate. At the instant he saw O'Shawn's body sway forward, Barrett dropped to the floor, stabbed at his gun and threw himself backward into the knee-space beneath his desk.

His head struck with vicious force against the seat of his swivel chair and he swore thickly. Blind with the pain of the blow, Barrett groped with his left hand for the emergency switch in the floor. He thrust his automatic out at arm's length, turned the muzzle upward and fired twice blindly at the ceiling.

GUNS hammered, but he heard them only dully. His own ears rang with the concussion of his shots under the desk. His pain-squeezed eyes were beginning to see blearily again. He located the electric plate and slammed his left palm down on it hard, heard a man gasp a scream and knew he had caught at least one of them with the paralyzing current.

He moved his throbbing head gingerly out of the opening and a bullet clipped the desk within an inch of his face, gouged his temple with a splinter.

Barrett ducked back, but he had seen enough. O'Shawn and one crook were on the floor. The other two men were in the doorway, running while they threw lead back at him. Barrett shoved his gun above the level of the desk and pumped out bullets. He got his feet under him and staggered toward the door. He stumbled over O'Shawn's feet, swore dully, and made the outer office. Empty, too, except for Miss Fay, sprawled on the floor.

The window—

Barrett drove his stubborn legs to a run. There was a car with the motor running parked at the curb. Two men popped out of the doorway and, with a short, hard laugh, Barrett threw down on them, squeezed the trigger. His gun clicked. Empty!

Barrett cursed raggedly, tried to fork the sill, and two guns ham-

mered at him from below. A third man leaned out of the parked car and began to pump lead at him. Barrett hurled himself backward to the floor, hit his head and darkness buzzed in his head like a hive of bees.

BARRETT wasn't out, but he couldn't see or think clearly about anything but pursuit. He got somehow to his feet and stumbled down the steps to the street. When he reached the sidewalk, the Ghost and the car had disappeared.

Barrett leaned against the wall and sucked in deep breaths until his head began to clear; then, he went slowly back up the steps. Even after the beating he had taken, he moved lightly, almost silently. That was how he happened to overhear O'Shawn and Miss Fay. He stood stupidly, hand on the knob, and listened.

"Okay," she said. "But if I tip you off to what the boss is doing, it's going to cost you—five hundred smackers on the nail!"

Barrett's eyes flared wide. What the hell was this? Miss Fay—*bribed*? He squatted and peered through the letter slot. O'Shawn was counting money out loud, fingering a sheaf of green bills.

"If you cross me up," O'Shawn said thickly, "I'll personally wring your neck!"

Miss Fay laughed harshly. "Do I look like a sap? Go play dead again."

O'Shawn and Miss Fay resumed their positions on the floor, and Barrett straightened slowly. Red anger swam before his eyes. Damn Miss Fay! Wait until he got his hands on her! His chin pulled down, his fists knotted and clenched hard on the doorknob. Just wait—

CHAPTER III.
CROSSED TRAILS.

JUST as Barrett's hand hardened on the knob, police sirens began to sound faintly. He took his hand away, closed his eyes and sucked in a series of deep breaths. Afterward, he went inside, moved directly to the water cooler and began to pour glasses of icy water over his aching head. He was still doing that when police under Sergeant Helvig arrived, and an interne set to work to revive Miss Fay.

Barrett stood to one side and watched, gloweringly. Miss Fay was doing a good job of faking unconsciousness. O'Shawn did not wait to be revived, but began to push dizzily up on hands and knees. For the first time, watching him, Barrett realized that the thief whom the electric trap had knocked out, was dead. There was a bullet hole in the back of his skull.

Barrett smiled thinly. That was like the Ghost, to kill a man rather than risk the possibility that he might talk. Sergeant Helvig identified the dead man at once as Lanning, a small-time safe-cracker; but that offered no clue to the Ghost.

When finally Sergeant Helvig took the dead crook away, Barrett detained O'Shawn on a pretext of checking his insurance policy on the Monster. He dropped once more into his swivel chair.

"O'Shawn," he began crisply, "when the Ghost was crashing into my office, you knocked my gun out of my hand. It was an accident, I am sure, but there are certain other things that need explaining. You attacked the Ghost and he only knocked you down, yet he murdered one of his own men rather than risk his talking. You're a fool to trust the Ghost!"

O'Shawn stared at him blankly. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Barrett leaned forward sharply. "I'll tell you. You made a deal with the Ghost to steal the Monster in my office. You figured that with me as witness to the robbery, the insurance company would pay off at once, and you'd have the jewel *and* the insurance. You probably agreed to split the money with the Ghost."

O'Shawn said thickly, "You're a dirty liar, but go on. Go on! When you get through, I'm going to pulverize you!" He lifted his thick hands and clenched them with slow power.

BARRETT laughed in his face. "I said you were a fool. You figured that the Monster was such a conspicuous jewel that the Ghost would be afraid to skip out with it. You lost sight of the fact that the Ghost sells principally to collectors, who don't give a damn whether jewels are stolen or not. So you've lost the Monster for good. And I'll see you in hell before you get a cent of insurance. Now, get out! If you come back, I'll crack your skull for you!"

O'Shawn stared down at Barrett and his anger was plain. But he was puzzled, too. "You're trying to get me to fight," he said. "Maybe you could cancel my policy if you did. I'll wait. I'm good at waiting. When this is over, I'll come back and whip hell out of you!" He swung on his heel and strode heavily from the office.

Barrett threw back his head and laughed harshly. He had played his cards right, made O'Shawn suspicious of the Ghost. O'Shawn was in a hurry to check up on the crook. And when he did, Barrett would be right on his tail!

Barrett grabbed fresh ammunition for his gun, snatched his hat and went striding toward the steps in O'Shawn's wake. He heard Miss Fay jump up and run after him.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Barrett!" she called. "I've got something to tell you, and——"

Barrett slammed the door in her face and went striding down the steps. His head ached damnably and anger made his throat dry. Damn it, he had come to trust Miss Fay, and here she was accepting a bribe from a crook like O'Shawn.

He reached his coupé when the taxi O'Shawn had entered was a block away and, sullenly, took the trail. Unless he had lost all his cunning in judging men, O'Shawn would go straight to the Ghost. Barrett grinned thinly and slid his hand to the gun under his arm.

O'SHAWN led him eastward to the river, and then north. Barrett dodged on and off the direct trail, but when O'Shawn stopped finally before a bedraggled tenement house, Barrett was only a block behind. He parked the car, checked his gun once more, and scuttled along the darkening street.

He was still a half block from the entrance when O'Shawn came plunging through the door and dived into an areaway. A storm of shots rang out and Barrett rocked back on his heels, staring in amazement.

Only for a moment did he hesitate; then, he lunged forward at a dead run. There was a tight grin on his mouth. O'Shawn had made the mistake of telling the Ghost there would be no insurance money, so there was no longer any reason for O'Shawn being kept alive. The Ghost was prompt in action all right!

Barrett ducked into a tenement doorway, next to that from which

the shots had poured, and sprinted through the sour-smelling hallway for the back court. He had lost no more than thirty seconds, but the court was deserted. He crept into the building where the Ghost plainly had been lurking, but a swift search revealed no trace of the vanishing killer.

Bitterly angry, Barrett raced down the stairs. By damn, he'd choke the truth out of O'Shawn's thick throat! Maybe the fool would be willing to talk now. Maybe——

Some one rushed out of the entrance and a voice called out sharply, "Drop that gun, Barrett!"

Barrett whirled, finger compressing the trigger. But he managed to check the shot just in time. The men who surrounded him were policemen!

"What the hell is this?" he demanded harshly; then, he spotted O'Shawn's big hulk in the background, heard his thick voice shout angrily.

"It's murder, that's what it is, you dirty crook!" O'Shawn cried. "You sent me here to see a stoolie of yours, and then tried to shoot me to keep my mouth shut about your crookedness. Sergeant, I want him charged with attempted murder!"

CHAPTER IV. THE OTHER MONSTER.

BARRETT let the gun sag at his side and glared at O'Shawn. Was it possible that the entire shooting incident had been faked? Had Miss Fay warned O'Shawn by phone at some hide-out here that he was being followed?

Bitter anger dried Barrett's throat, but he fought for calmness. If O'Shawn swore out a warrant, the police would take him in. He might get out on bail, but meantime

O'Shawn would make his contact with the Ghost and he would be sunk.

Barrett straightened out of his defensive crouch. "You got here mighty quick, Sergeant Helvig," he said softly.

Helvig moved out from behind the police car, flat-footed, waddling. "Why wouldn't we?" he said stolidly. "Mr. O'Shawn tipped us off you was in with the crooks, and got him down to your office so they could rob him. We followed you. Drop your gun!"

Barrett's lips drew back from his teeth. So that was the frame-up that the Ghost and O'Shawn were planning! His alert eyes swept the street, spotted the other two policemen coming out of the areaways in which they had hidden. Their guns were carelessly held; Helvig had holstered his in favor of handcuffs.

"I don't mind handing over the gun," Barrett said angrily, "but dropping it might ruin it. Here it—"

He thrust the weapon out butt first. Helvig took it under his arm and then held out the handcuffs awkwardly for Barrett's wrists. It was a mistake for any foe to do anything awkwardly near Barrett. His hands closed abruptly on the sergeant's forearms, his shoulders heaved, and at the same instant he pivoted on a heel.

Helvig uttered a bull roar and went reeling, head-first, across the pavement and into the arms of his two men. Barrett snatched his automatic, which Helvig had dropped, and in two bounds was behind the police car and sprinting across the darkened street. He ran bent far forward, with the tricky, zigzag change of pace of a veteran football player.

He was a hundred yards away be-

fore the first gun spoke behind him. A bullet clanged off a light post as he sped past, then he hand-pivoted a corner and the shadows swallowed him.

He ducked into a tenement doorway, panted through the back court and over a high fence; doubled through an alley and back toward the river. He tried to spot O'Shawn, but the man had disappeared. Barrett had taken a desperate chance in vain! Not only was he a fugitive from the police, but he had missed his trail. There was nothing left except to go into hiding. Even bail would be denied him now, because of his break to escape.

A THIN, drizzling rain began to fall as Barrett started on a long hike across town—you couldn't be traced on foot in the city, and it would be the last thing the cops would expect—and he was soaking wet by the time he reached the small apartment he kept always against such an emergency as this. It was here, too, that he did his laboratory work when he wished to keep out of reach of clients. He enjoyed a sizzling hot shower and fresh clothing; went at once to his laboratory and picked up a dial phone.

His brain had not been idle during that wet hike and he had already begun to lay plans. He called a chemist friend, then the office of the *Daily Press*, got hold of a reporter named Bryant.

"I've got a news story for you," Barrett told him rapidly. "Play ball with me, and in the next twenty-four hours I'll give you the scoop of a lifetime! Okay? Now, get this! In the story about the Ghost robbing a man named O'Shawn in my office to-day, insert something like this:

"Police say that in addition to

being a clever jewel thief, the Ghost has learned to manufacture diamonds that are almost impossible to distinguish from the genuine stones. Only one known test has been devised. Cosmo Oland, chemist, has a compound which will definitely reveal the fake.' . . . Yes, call Oland. I'll phone you to-morrow."

Barrett slammed up the receiver. A call on a dial instrument could not be traced except while the connection was held. He had talked swiftly. Eyes narrow and hard, he strode to his laboratory bench. From a safe beneath it, he took a double handful of stones that shimmered like diamonds. With these, he set to work—

The dirty gray dawn had paled his brilliant work-lamp before Barrett lifted a haggard face, but his task was done. On the bench before him lay an exact duplicate of the famous diamond, *Monster!* He smiled thinly, thrust it into the safe and stumbled wearily to the bed—

BARRETT could not guess how much later it was that he leaped from the bed, his automatic heavy in his hand. For moments he did not know what had awakened him. His bleared eyes quested swiftly about him, took in the hot slanting sunlight on the floor. He stood taut, listening, and the sound reached him again—a faint tapping on the door.

Muscles tightened along Barrett's jaw. Not even Miss Fay knew this hide-out. Who, then, could be knocking at the door?

Barrett moved toward it, soft-footed, the automatic ready in his fist. Beside the door, he gazed into what seemed to be a mirror light-switch panel. But at the touch of his finger to the button, it revealed a periscopic view of the hall. His breath sucked in harshly. Before

the door stood a woman in somber black, and it was Miss Fay!

Barrett's lips drew back bitterly from his teeth. He moved with the swift speed of a snake. The door whipped open and he yanked Miss Fay into the foyer, clapped the door shut and locked it, all in one swift movement.

Miss Fay spun across the foyer and brought up, flat-backed, against the wall. The stiff brim of her hat struck and tipped rakishly over one ear. She caught her breath with a gasp.

"Cheez, boss," she gulped. "I t'ought youse was the cops!"

Barrett had his shoulders against the door. His eyes bored hostilely into her face. "How the hell did you find me?" he asked curtly.

Miss Fay's hands were setting her hat straight, tucking in a stray wisp of hair.

"It was really very simple," she said. "You disappeared, and I remembered you'd popped off like this before, so I figured you had a regular hide-out. Naturally, you'd have to pay rent. I looked over your check stubs."

She looked proud of herself, and Barrett held his rising anger in check. There was something a little puzzling about this. If she had brought the police or O'Shawn, why hadn't they made a play when he opened the door?

Miss Fay rushed on. "I tried to tell you last night at the office," she said, "but you didn't give me a chance. I took a bribe from that fool, O'Shawn, figuring I might be able to plant some phony information for you—"

Barrett laughed shortly. "That's a good cover-up, Miss Fay, now that you've guessed I saw you take the money. Get in the living room there!"

MISS FAY'S mouth gaped. She stiffened away from the wall, glared at him. "Really," she said flatly, "really, if you're going to behave that way, I'll tender my resignation!"

Barrett gestured with his gun and Miss Fay went into the living room. He had taken the wrong tactics. Better to learn her plans—

"All right," he said dryly. "So it was a trick to gain O'Shawn's confidence. What did you find out?"

Miss Fay's face was flushed and her gray eyes were brilliant. She was almost handsome in her anger. "I don't care to discuss it with you," she said shortly. "I will protect your secrets, but I am resigning—"

Barrett abruptly grinned. "Okay, I apologize," he said. "I'm really sorry, Miss Fay, but I did see you take the money and you didn't mention it. No, I won't accept your resignation. You're much too smart a secretary to let go. And a damned pretty one just now. Now tell me what you learned about O'Shawn."

Miss Fay's voice was low and confused. "I followed him after you ran from the police," she said. "He went to see three men who have famous collections of jewels. Here are their names and addresses." She handed over a slip of paper. "After that, he went back to the Cumberland Hotel. He seemed very angry."

"And to-day?" Barrett's eyes studied her keenly. Dammit, she seemed to be telling the truth!

Miss Fay shook her head. "To-day, he hasn't left the hotel. I hired a man from Dougherty's agency to shadow him. I've also got a man on each of the collectors."

Barrett said softly, "The devil you have? Nice work, Miss Fay! I—"

"Also," Miss Fay cut in, "the office was searched last night, the safe

opened, everything tossed around. So far, I haven't found anything missing. My guess is it was the police, and—"

Her voice broke off and Barrett whirled toward the front door. He thought he had detected a faint footfall there. In an instant, he had reached the spy-glass plate in the wall and he barely choked down a violent oath. Three policemen were grouped outside the door!

EVEN as he stared, the leader beat thunderously on the door.

"Open up there, Barrett!" came the heavy voice of Sergeant Helvig. "We've got you surrounded!"

Miss Fay had crept to Barrett's side. "They couldn't have followed me!" she whispered vehemently. "I changed taxis five times."

Was she telling the truth, or had she betrayed him? No time to find out now. Barrett cursed savagely, reached his laboratory with long bounds and knelt before the safe. He snatched out the imitation Monster he had made. Miss Fay was just behind him.

"I've got just one chance in a hundred of getting out of here without being caught," he said shortly. "With luck—"

He broke off, his voice drowned by the crash of the first ax blow against the door.

CHAPTER V.

THE GHOST AGAIN.

BARRETT thrust the Monster into his pocket and whirled back to the laboratory bench. He threw instructions over his shoulder to Miss Fay.

"Get some adhesive tape out of the bathroom," he called softly. "I'll

have to tie you up. You can tell the police I got mad when you tried to persuade me to surrender; that I got you here without your knowing who I was. Said I was a client. Anything."

As he spoke, he was snatching up vials from the bench, slipping them into his vest pockets.

"Geez, boss," Miss Fay whispered, returning with the adhesive, "I ain't had so much fun in a coon's age!"

Barrett sniffed and began to tape her wrists. She sat down submissively and he taped her ankles. The pounding on the door went on and there was a splintering sound as a panel gave way. Barrett carefully closed the laboratory door, heard Miss Fay call softly, "Good luck, boss!"

Barrett didn't answer, but his frown was puzzled as he worked two glass balls into his coat pockets. No time to think about her now. He held a handkerchief soaked with chemical near his face, lay prone on the floor and waited.

With a final ax blow, the door caved in and Sergeant Helvig's voice rang out thickly, "Come out, Barrett, with your hands up—or we're coming after you!"

Barrett smiled thinly. He lobbed a glass ball with careful aim. It burst fairly on the threshold and oily, gray tear gas rolled thickly upward. He tossed the second through into the outer hall, then got cautiously to his feet, the chemical-saturated handkerchief over his face. He could see faintly through the damp cloth and it counteracted the fumes. He moved soundlessly to the door.

Bedlam reigned in the outer hall. Helvig was cursing in a strangled voice, shouting orders which were incoherent through his coughing.

But he was game. He staggered in through the doorway, stood with gun in hand and tried to peer around. Barrett reached out and his fist clicked to the jaw. The other two cops had fled downward and Barrett took the stairs to the roof with long, silent bounds.

The apartment building in which he had his rooms was six stories tall, one of a row of buildings. There would be roof guards all right, but if he could spot them before he himself was seen——

He did, and repeated the trick of the tear gas. Five minutes later, his eyes bleared and burning slightly from the gas in spite of the protection he had prepared, Barrett strode swiftly off across the city. Not until then did he think to look at his watch. It was a quarter past two.

AS soon as he had put a safe distance between himself and the police, Barrett called the chemist, Cosmo Oland. Only newspapermen, the chemist reported, had inquired about the test for fake jewels.

"Good!" Barrett said. "That was what I expected. Now, listen, I'm going to send a reporter named Bryant from the *Daily Press* there to see you. He'll ask for some of this test fluid." Barrett told Oland what chemical to give Bryant and rang off, only to call Bryant a few moments later. He gave the reporter the story of his escape from the police.

"To-night," he rushed on, "I'll break the big story, the capture of the Ghost! But I'll have to have your help. Go to Oland, the chemist, and get this diamond test fluid I told you about, then call on these three collectors of jewels."

He read the names from the list Miss Fay had given him. "William

Briscoe; Sanford Gates; Lawrence Kirkpatrick. Get them to test some of their famous diamonds as an experiment. Here's the way the test is done: Dip a diamond in the fluid and hold it in your fingers. If there is a burning sensation, the diamond is genuine. Be sure that each of those men makes the test himself. Understand?

"Here's a story you can print now: The Ghost didn't really get the Monster. I palmed the real stone because I had been warned of a robbery and had prepared a replica. Don't print the rest of this, but you can tell those three collectors I'm going to give the original to O'Shawn to-night."

Bryant cursed faintly, saying the whole thing was foolish; but if there was a real story in the offing—

Barrett hung up on his argument and phoned O'Shawn at his hotel.

"I've got the Monster," he said shortly. "I'll be at your rooms around ten to-night to return it—if the cops don't catch me first."

Barrett slammed up the receiver, but a slow smile stirred his wide mouth and he stood looking at the phone afterward. He whistled softly to himself as he strode along the street. Afterward, in the Albion Theater, he slept through several performances of a motion picture in which a fat detective solved crimes by sitting in an armchair. He ate dinner and, when he had finished, it was twenty minutes of ten. He phoned Bryant, to meet him at the Cumberland Hotel where O'Shawn had rooms. Then he got in touch with the Dougherty agency which Miss Fay had employed.

THE Dougherty agency reported that O'Shawn was back in his rooms after eating dinner out; that of the

jewel collectors, Kirkpatrick was home. The other two, Gates and Briscoe, had gone out and both had given the slip to their shadows! Barrett's eyes had an eager light as he strode up to Bryant in the hotel lobby. The newspaperman's cynical gaze swept him from head to foot.

"Did you hand me an assignment!" he said bitterly. "Those three collectors were the toughest nuts I ever had to crack."

"But you cracked them?"

Bryant nodded, sniffed suspiciously at the cigar Barrett offered him. "The story better be good, after all that."

Barrett led him to a dark corner and took out the replica of the Monster. It caught the light in fantastic flashes and Bryant whistled with puckered lips, popped out eager questions. Barrett ignored him while he poured the contents of a small vial over the jewel.

"I'm gambling," he said briefly, "that the Ghost will come to-night, both to get the real jewel and to revenge himself on me for blackening his character with his customers, the collectors you went to see to-day. Now, this is something I can't prove, but I'm sure that those three buy from the Ghost the jewels that are too hot for fences to handle. O'Shawn planned a fake robbery with the Ghost, and he made contact through one of those three men. I don't think he himself knows which one."

Barrett dropped the empty vial into an ash stand and stalked toward the elevators. He identified the Dougherty man set to watch O'Shawn, and took him along. Near O'Shawn's door, he stopped the two.

"After I go in, you come to the door of Room 1615," he instructed. "When you hear me say, 'All right,

Ghost, take it! open the door and come in. I'll fix the lock. Both of you look at the Ghost's hands. Understand?"

Without waiting for an answer, Barrett strode up to the door of O'Shawn's suite and knocked on the panel. Instantly, the door swung open and O'Shawn faced him. The man's usually florid countenance was pale with anger; but he said nothing, only stepped back slowly and gestured Barrett in.

As he entered, Barrett lurched against the door jamb and slapped a piece of adhesive over the slot into which the bolt of the lock fitted. It would prevent the spring lock from catching. He stepped clear and the door clapped shut hard under the push of O'Shawn's shoulder.

Barrett spun about and two men in police uniforms stepped away from positions against the wall where they had crouched. They had guns in their hands, cocked, and the muzzles bore steadily on Barrett.

Barrett didn't know either of the men. One said: "Hand over the Monster."

Barrett backed up slowly. A chair caught the back of his knees and he sat down.

"I haven't got the jewel with me," Barrett said rapidly. "I was afraid of some trap, and——"

The cop on his right laughed nastily, and suddenly there was something familiar about the tone of the man's voice. Barrett touched his tongue to his lips.

"All right," he said, fingering the Monster out of his vest pocket, "*All right, Ghost, take it!*"

The gun blasted, and Barrett felt a blow in the body that drove all the strength out of him. The Monster was snatched from his numbed hand

and the cop who had fired whipped about to face O'Shawn. The gun bellowed again!

CHAPTER VI. TWO-WAY TRAP.

WHILE weakness swept over him in a hot wave, Barrett tried to lift his right hand to his gun. His hand would not move at all. He saw O'Shawn pitch forward after the second shot rang out, and in the same instant the door flung inward. The detective from Dougherty's was reeling backward across the hall and there was a sick, white glister to his face. His shoulders hit the opposite wall and he began to squat down very slowly.

For a moment, Bryant was standing alone in the doorway; but instantly he was whirling, jerking himself back to the protection of the wall with a long arm. His drooping, long face disappeared and Barrett heard his footsteps beat erratically as he ran along the hallway.

The man in uniform who had shot Barrett stepped swiftly to the door. Screams began to ring out and he did not shoot again.

"It's all right now," the Ghost called down the hall. "We had a little shooting scrape with some crooks, but it's all right now. Nobody is going to get hurt." He turned around and there was a hard, thin set to his mouth.

Barrett had let his head sag. His whole body was limp as death and he held his breath, watching through lowered lashes the face of the Ghost. For an instant, the gun jutted toward his heart again, but the other man in police blue ran to the Ghost's side and gripped his arm.

"He's dead," the man whispered hoarsely. "People might think it

was funny if there was another shot."

The Ghost nodded slowly while his eyes still bored into Barrett's face; then, he whipped toward the door and ran out.

"Come on, Bill," he said loudly. "We got to chase that other fellow."

The door clapped shut behind the Ghost and Barrett let out his pent-up breath in a loud, wheezing sigh. The first numbing shock of the bullet was beginning to wear off and pain was crawling across his chest. But there was no blood in his throat. It hadn't got a lung.

Barrett tried again to move his right arm and agony stabbed through the upper part of his body. He grimaced and, with his left hand, tucked his right into his belt. He fumbled out the automatic left-handed, lurched to his feet. He saw that O'Shawn had lifted his head and was looking at him from the floor.

"Get up!" Barrett ordered coldly. "Get up, damn you, and help me! You're supposed to be dead, killed by the Ghost. I wouldn't mind finishing the job!"

O'Shawn lurched to his feet and Barrett saw a crimson tear across the side of his throat. He knew now that the opening of the door, hitting O'Shawn and driving him to the floor, had saved his life—and doomed the detective in the hall.

"Hurry, damn you!" Barrett yelled. "We've got to catch the Ghost!"

THE automatic wobbled in his left hand and O'Shawn's face paled. He came slowly forward, put one of his beamlike arms around Barrett's waist. Barrett cursed him as the pain knifed through him again, but he stumbled toward the door.

"Fast!" he rasped. "We've got to be fast."

O'Shawn opened the door and Barrett heard his breath suck in as he saw the dead man on the floor. Bryant came toward them at a run.

"I saw it, Barrett!" he cried. "That cop's right hand was red as blood. Good God, you're hit!"

Barrett's head wanted to sag, but he forced his chin up. "Get me to a taxi, Bryant," he said hoarsely. The hall began to tilt and turn around slowly, and he couldn't tell much about the elevator trip or the walk across the lobby and into the taxi. Barrett knew that he didn't have his gun any more. In the night air, his head began to clear. He found that Bryant was holding the gun on O'Shawn and that pads were being fastened over the wound in his chest.

"The bullet got your collar bone, Barrett," Bryant was saying shortly. "We're heading north. Is that all right?"

"Go to Kirkpatrick's house," Barrett ordered. The pain in his chest was enormous now.

"Listen, Bryant," he continued thickly. "You know the Ghost's reputation. Nothing he ever stole has come to light again. You never hear of him as a person, except when a robbery is staged. Answer is—he lives under another identity, probably his real one. The Ghost is a masquerade, a fake.

"Police think the Ghost sells to collectors who are glad to get the jewels and keep them secretly. Men without scruples. O'Shawn went to three men to get in touch with the Ghost—*Shut up, O'Shawn, you know you framed that robbery in my office!*—but when your newspaper carried a story about the Ghost making fake jewels, nobody inquired."

Bryant said angrily, "What the hell does that prove?"

"It proves that none of those three men was afraid of having been tricked by the Ghost," Barrett said. "It means they hadn't bought any diamonds from the Ghost."

"I still don't follow that," Bryant said stubbornly.

BARRETT swore impatiently. "Can't this taxi go any faster? We've got to get there first! Listen, Bryant; O'Shawn reached the Ghost through one of those three men, but none of the men had diamonds bought from the Ghost."

O'Shawn swore softly. "You're a smarter man than I am, Barrett," he said, his voice deep. "You mean one of those three men is the Ghost! But you can't prove it."

Barrett leaned back in a corner of the seat, gathering his strength. It wasn't far now to Kirkpatrick's house. "That's it," he said. "Bryant, when you went the rounds with the test to-day, you got each collector to wet his hands with a fluid that would stay on. When the Ghost took the Monster to-night, he got some more fluid on his hands which, combined with the first chemical, would form mercuric oxide. In other words, his fingers turned bright red. That proves the Ghost was one of the three."

"But why Kirkpatrick?" Bryant said swiftly. "From what you said, your own detective gave him an alibi. He's the only one who didn't leave his house to-night."

"That's it," Barrett said. "He's the only one who troubled to give himself an alibi. He left the house all right, but he wasn't seen. We've got to get into that house before he gets back. O'Shawn, you're equally interested in this. I know you're not worried about the Monster, but the Ghost can prove you plotted that

fake theft. And insurance companies don't like things like that. Remember——"

The taxi slewed to a halt. "This here is the address, boss," the driver said.

Barrett braced himself, lurched to the pavement when the door was open. He began a shambling run toward the big, square house. There were lights in it as if it were occupied. A strong arm girded Barrett's waist, half carried him forward.

"I don't give a damn about your insurance companies," O'Shawn growled. "But you're a brave man and a smart one."

They went up on the porch three abreast, Bryant, Barrett, and O'Shawn. "Break a window," Barrett ordered. "Get inside and search the house. Prove it's empty."

O'Shawn kicked in a window glass and Barrett managed to get through. He slumped into a chair in a den whose walls were stacked with books, and Bryant and O'Shawn began a swift search of the house. Minutes dragged past and there was no shout of discovery. Barrett's taut frown relaxed. He was right, then. He——

He leaned forward so sharply his wound sent a stab of pain through him. Damn it, *those bookshelves were moving!*

He tried to shout, but there wasn't the strength in him. As he watched, a man slid out from behind the bookshelves into the den, plainly coming from some secret passageway. He was staring down at his right hand, and that hand was red!

"The Ghost," Barrett just whispered the word. "*The Ghost!*"

That red hand instantly darted beneath the man's coat, flashed out with a gun. A snarl wrinkled the

lips of the Ghost and he took a long stride toward Barrett.

"Damn you, Barrett," he snarled. "You're too smart. I thought I'd killed you once, but this time I'll make sure!" He pointed the gun point-blank at Barrett's face.

CHAPTER VII. ENTER, MISS FAY.

HIS finger was tightening on the trigger and Barrett knew that he could not move, could not shout. He pushed out words in a whisper.

"It won't do you any good to kill me, Ghost, or Kirkpatrick, or whatever you call yourself," he said. "Two other men know the whole story and have the proof."

The Ghost smiled slightly and the hammer of the revolver continued to edge back. Another fraction of an inch, and it would snap forward, discharge the cartridge—

Heavy footfalls sounded overhead. The Ghost's eyes flicked upward and Barrett tried to get out of the chair. He saw the evil glint of the Ghost's eyes and the Ghost smashed the gun down on Barrett's skull. Barrett did not even feel himself fall.

Barrett swam back to consciousness, shuddering under the impact of icy water. The first thing his eyes saw was the Ghost, standing before him; the next was Bryant and O'Shawn, stretched out as helpless as logs, bound hand and foot upon the floor. His senses still reeled, but he was painfully conscious now. And he knew they were doomed. The Ghost was showing his teeth in a snarl.

"I wanted you to know when I killed you, Barrett," said the Ghost softly. "It was fun fighting you, but you know too much. So do these other two gentlemen. Fortunately, I have an electric furnace in my

basement. It will char you gentlemen into ashes which the garbage collector will carry away for me."

The whole of Bryant's lank body shuddered under the impact of those words. The Ghost laughed. "I won't torture you, I promise. I'll kill you before putting you into my furnace. Bryant, I think I'll strangle you first." He bent over the lanky reporter.

"Wait," Barrett cried. He was remembering the vials he had thrust into his pocket. One of them contained acid. He had brought it along in case he should be forced to force a lock. Powerful acid, poured into the lock, would weaken any metal so that it could be forced. If he could get at that— An awful weapon, but the Ghost was a murderer. He intended to kill them—

"Wait," Barrett repeated rapidly. "You haven't got the real Monster, you know!"

The Ghost whipped about toward him. "You're lying!" he snarled. He dipped fingers into his vest pocket and brought out the replica Barrett had made. He hastened to a light and put a jeweler's *loupe* in his eye to examine it. But he was on the other side of the desk. Impossible for Barrett to reach him, even with the vial of acid. The Ghost jerked up his head.

"Damn you, you've tricked me again!" he cried. He sprang forward, with the gun ready. "You'll tell me where the real diamonds are, or—or I'll put you into that furnace *alive!*"

BARRETT hesitated. Should he say the Monster was in his pocket, snatch the acid? No, it wouldn't work. Before he could do a thing with it, he'd be dead. He'd have to stall for time, for a chance to use it.

"I haven't got the diamond, Ghost," Barrett said slowly. "O'Shawn has it. He never brought the genuine diamonds to my office. My fluorescent machine never lies, but it did fool me. It recorded white sapphires, and I thought they were diamonds. You gave me the tip-off when you burglarized my office. What you have there is a replica I made myself, and——"

"I don't give a damn about that!" the Ghost raged. "O'Shawn, you'll talk, or by damn——"

Barrett's left hand was gripping the chair arm hard. If only he could get a few seconds to get to that vial in his vest pocket, but the Ghost would not look away. Suddenly, Barrett caught his breath. Was he breeding sounds out of desperate hope, or had he actually heard the soft scrape of a window being raised? He began to talk, swiftly, loudly.

"O'Shawn won't talk," he said violently, "unless you promise to spare all our lives; and he can't tell you, where the diamonds are. He'd have to take you there himself. Isn't that true, O'Shawn?"

O'Shawn had lifted his big head from the floor and was staring at him. "That's right, yes," he rumbled. "And be damned to you, Ghost!"

Barrett dared not pause in his talking to listen, to verify that half-heard sound. The Ghost lifted his voice.

"Shut up, damn you!" he cried. His crouch behind the gun was murderous. "I love diamonds all right, but not enough to spare you fools. You know too much. I've wasted time already. Bryant, I promised you could die first, but strangling's too slow. The gun won't make much noise if I put the muzzle right against your chest." He stooped and

gouged the gun into Bryant's flesh above the heart. His face tightened, and——

"Put up your hands, Ghost!" a woman's voice cried shrilly.

Barrett's head jerked up and he saw a woman's thin white face thrust between heavy curtains which had obscured a window. The window was high and small, set above the bookcases. A woman——

It was Miss Fay! She was holding a small gun in her right hand, and the hand was trembling violently. The muzzle wavered over the entire room.

"Ghost, put up your hands!" she cried. "Or I'll blow you open, damn you!"

BARRETT laughed crazily. He had misjudged Miss Fay completely if she could come through like this for him. She hated guns, was deathly afraid of them. She couldn't hit the Ghost, not in a thousand years. And the Ghost—— Barrett's eyes flicked toward the man. The Ghost had not dropped his gun and its muzzle was tilting slowly toward Miss Fay.

"Drop that gun!" Miss Fay repeated almost hysterically. "Even if you shot me, you couldn't escape. I followed you here from the Cumberland Hotel, and I've sent the detective I had watching outside for the cops. The damned fool didn't have the guts to come in here. Ghost, you don't stand a chance, even if you shoot me!"

Her voice rose shrilly, almost hysterically. The Ghost's gun was pointing at the wainscoting. If he lifted the muzzle another three inches, Miss Fay would die! All of them would die! But now, at last, the Ghost's eyes were off Barrett. He had his chance, and he could not

hesitate with brave Miss Fay's life in danger. The acid— His left hand moved with the speed of light.

"Duck, Miss Fay!" he shouted. "Duck back, I—"

Miss Fay's eyes swung toward him and he caught the quick jerk of the Ghost's gun hand. Barrett whipped the fragile vial from his pocket and hurled it in the same movement. Instantly, he was on his feet, driving himself forward with the last strength in his racked body. The vial—

It missed the Ghost! It flashed past him, struck the corner of the desk just behind him and broke. Specks of acid, glistening in the brilliant light of the lamp, flew high. O'Shawn cried out wildly. The Ghost leaped as if bullets had drilled through him. His gun barked, and high up on the wall near the window, a picture shattered in its frame.

THE Ghost's bullet had missed Miss Fay. Barrett gasped a sob of relief as he drove forward. The Ghost was screaming now. O'Shawn writhed on the floor, burned, too, by the acid. His lashing feet caught the Ghost's ankles at the same in-

stant that Barrett's staggering weight struck his chest.

The Ghost pitched heavily backward. His head struck the edge of the desk with a sickening crunch. Barrett, gasping for breath, went down on his knees. The room was whirling, but he scrambled toward O'Shawn.

"Hold still," he ordered raspingly. He was thumbing the cork from another vial; he dribbled liquid on the burning red marks the acid had made on O'Shawn's face. As he worked, O'Shawn stilled his own struggles, though the breath still came harshly through his open lips.

"Just acid," Barrett mumbled. "This is the antidote. I hated to use it, but it was the only chance. The only chance—"

O'Shawn gave a deep sigh. "To hell with the acid," he said. "You've made an honest man of me, you and that woman up there. And I thought I'd got her on my side! You saved my life, all our lives—"

"I'm cheering, too," Bryant's sharp voice cut in, "but dammit, get these ropes off me so I can phone the paper. Barrett, you'll be able to make the insurance companies pay double

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after this. Wait until I get through dictating this story. You've caught the Ghost!"

Barrett was fumbling for a pocket knife. "I've killed the Ghost," he said thickly. "No man could live after a fall like that. Don't forget Miss Fay, Bryant. I'll tell you about her part. She's the one who

really spotted Kirkpatrick.' He lifted his voice. "Miss Fay, I owe you an apology, and your pay is hereby doubled as a reward. *Miss Fay!*"

He jerked up his head anxiously. Miss Fay was lying limply across the window sill. For once in her life, Miss Fay had fainted.

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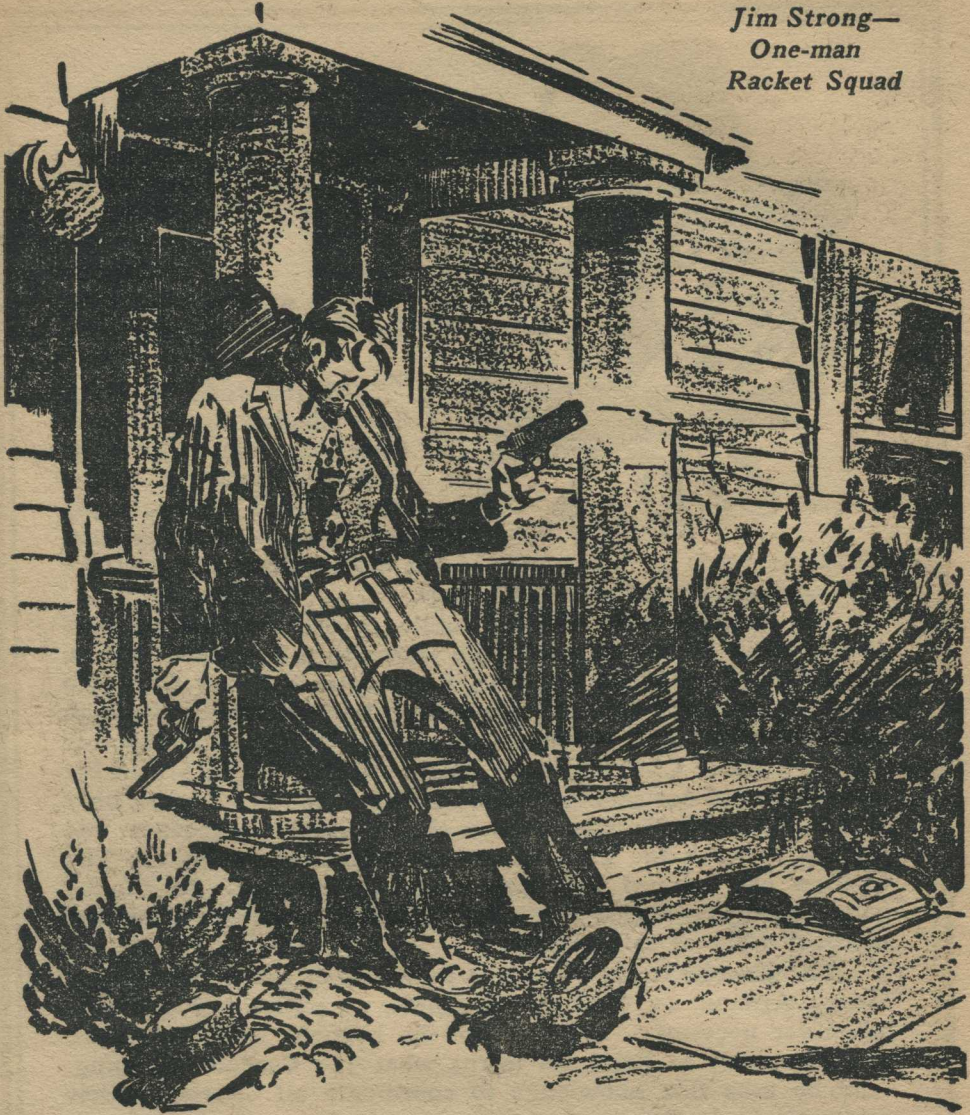
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RACKET TOLL

THE traffic lights turned to red, but the funeral procession exercised its right of custom and continued to roll past the intersection. Jim Strong kept his foot on the accelerator and let his motor pur idly.

Behind him, a horn honked vigorously. Strong muttered under his breath at the callousness of some people. He was utterly unprepared, however, for the action of the impatient driver behind him. As

By Frank Gruber

Strong relaxed behind the wheel of his coupé, a motor in low gear whined beside him. Strong turned to look to the left and saw the huge truck whiz past.

He gasped. The truck couldn't possibly force its way through the

then a terrific crash as the truck hit the hearse!

Involuntarily, Strong released his foot from the clutch of his car and the machine, in gear, leaped forward. Frenziedly, Strong stamped on the brake. He brought the car to an abrupt stop and for safety, turned off the ignition switch. Then he



procession of funeral cars. It would have to make a sharp turn into the side street.

It didn't, though. Even as Strong watched, the huge five-ton truck picked up speed. Strong heard the screams of several persons, the screech as brakes were applied, and

looked again at the scene of the crash and a horrified gasp escaped his lips.

The hearse had been knocked over on its side. The force of the impact had knocked open the loosely fastened rear door and—the coffin was half in the hearse and half on the street!

Strong tore open the door of his

coupe and piled out to the street. Horns were blowing everywhere; people were yelling and brakes were screeching on all sides.

Strong started grimly for the truck that had deliberately crashed into the hearse. The truck driver leaned out of his cab and yelled at Strong, "Get your buggy out of the way or I'll back over it!"

"You will like hell!" snarled Strong. "Climb out of that truck. You're under arrest."

"A cop!" yelled the truck driver. "Okay, I'll stop."

The motor of the truck roared deafeningly and the back end suddenly swerved toward Strong. Strong leaped back wildly. The truck missed him by inches.

The truck driver was switching into forward gear again. Strong rushed to the side of the cab as the truck leaped away, turning into the side street. He caught hold of the handrail and leaped to the running board. "Stop this truck, damn you!" he thundered.

The truck driver grinned wickedly and lashed out sideways at Strong's face with his fist. The blow knocked Strong off the running board. He hit the paved street, tried to hold his balance and couldn't. He landed on the street on one hand and knee, bruising both.

He ignored the pain and sprang to his feet. The tail end of the truck was just sweeping past him. Strong lunged for it, missed, then wheeled and ran back to his coupe. He piled into it, ground down on the starter and in an instant was in pursuit of the truck.

IT had a hundred feet or more start on him, but that didn't matter. In a block or two, Strong would catch up to it. He shifted into second, then high, and plunging his

foot down on the accelerator, reached for the Police Positive at his hip.

He shifted the gun to his left hand, then, holding the wheel with his right, shoved his gun hand out the side of the car. He aimed as well as he could and sent a bullet crashing into the rear of the truck. This ought to be signal enough to the truck driver that he meant business.

Clenching his teeth, Jim Strong swerved out to pull up beside the driver. And as he did, a contorted face suddenly raised up from behind the tailboard of the truck. A black automatic appeared beside it—and belched fire.

Strong was caught completely unawares. During the crash back by the funeral procession, and all throughout the altercation between the truck driver and Strong, no one had appeared from the rear of the truck. And now—there was a sharp explosion in the vicinity of the front tire of Strong's coupe and suddenly he had to fight the wheel.

The tire had gone out as he was swerving to the left. His speed was considerable and with only one hand on the wheel, Strong had all he could do for the next second or two to keep the car under control.

He finally wound up against the curb, on the wrong side of the street. By then the truck was more than a block away.

Strong was memorizing the license number of the truck. He climbed out of his car, whipped out a notebook and pencil and wrote down the number.

Then, deserting his coupe with the flat tire, Strong jogged back to the intersection where the hearse had been overturned. An enormous crowd had already collected, and Strong had difficulty in forcing his

way through to the center of things. His face was taut and gray when he saw the black-veiled women, heard their wailing. A funeral is a tragic thing in itself. To have the hearse containing the remains of a loved one violently overturned and defiled—that was incredibly cruel.

Then, Strong saw something else—a limp, huddled body lying on the street. The driver of the hearse.

Strong turned away and picked out a man in striped trousers and black-tail coat—the undertaker. He pulled him to one side.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Strong, of the district attorney's office," he said in a low tone. "I saw that truck deliberately ram the hearse. What is it—union trouble?"

THE undertaker's eyes were wide in bewilderment. "No, positively no! My drivers are all union men. He"—he pointed at the dead driver—"had been with me for six years. Anyway, would strikers do a thing like *this*?"

Strong shook his head. No, men would have to be pretty callous to show such disrespect for the dead. He half turned away. "Who is it—any one of importance?"

The undertaker shrugged. "His name was George Fosdick, a bookkeeper for a manufacturing concern. His widow told me that there was twenty-five hundred insurance. I—I checked up on that. She was right."

Strong's forehead creased. Just an ordinary person of whom there were hundreds of thousands in the city. Bookkeepers do not have gang affiliations, not as a rule. The undertaker claimed *he* was having no trouble. Why, then, should a pair of ruthless strong-arm men ram a hearse?

The thing wasn't an accident, of

that Strong was sure. No one would become so angry at being kept waiting by a funeral procession as to do such a thing. There was some other reason behind the thing.

Uniformed cops were already in command of the situation. They were dispersing the crowds, and the undertaker's drivers were handling the coffin of the deceased. The mourners—Strong didn't feel justified in questioning them now.

He turned and pushed through the crowd. He entered a drug store on the corner and put in a telephone call to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

"Sergeant Strong of the D. A.'s office," he said a moment later. "I want the name and address of the owner of the truck containing the following license number." He repeated the number he had memorized.

There was a pause of a moment or two, then the reply came. "Drot truck, owned by the Volney Candy Co., 1798 North Halsted Street. But the license plates were reported stolen, two days ago."

He made another call to the Emergency Squad of the police department regarding his coupé, then left the drug store and stepped into a taxi parked at the curb. Ten minutes later, Jim Strong entered the district attorney's office.

THE clerk at the desk in the outer office hailed him. "Sergeant Strong, Mr. Murdock was just asking about you. He wants to see you right away."

Strong chewed at his lower lip, then shrugged and went to the D. A.'s office.

"Ah, Strong," the D. A. said when he entered, "I've got a special job for you. Something out of the ordinary. A little while ago a truck

deliberately rammed a hearse in a funeral procession—"

"And some one in the truck sent a bullet into the tire of a car that started in pursuit of it," cut in Strong.

"Eh? How do you know?"

"Because I was in the car. I saw the whole thing."

The D. A. scowled. "Damn! Did any newspapermen get that?"

Strong shrugged. "I couldn't lug the car away. If they're smart, they'll check up on the license. That's what I did about the truck—and learned it had stolen plates."

"Then we're in for some razzing." The D. A. shook his head. "Every time it gets near election and some one in this department makes a bull, I catch hell in the papers."

"I didn't make a bull," said Strong. "The truck rammed the hearse and started to make a get-away. I chased it, and some one in the back of the truck popped up and sent a bullet into my tire. That's all there was to it."

"But why would any one ram a hearse?" protested the D. A. "The thing's so goofy that the papers will play it up."

"I don't care about the papers," said Strong. "But about the other—I'm going to find out about that. I'm beginning to get ideas about this thing, anyway."

"What is it—another of your rackets?"

"My rackets? They're yours," said Strong. "All I do is bust 'em."

He turned abruptly and left the room. He went straight to his own little office, a place scarcely large enough for a desk, a filing cabinet and a couple of chairs. In the room, however, was the door to another room. The door was kept locked. Even the district attorneys who came and went with the various city

administrations had never been past this locked door. It was Strong's own room. The district attorneys, after they got to know Strong, respected his request for privacy.

STRONG unlocked the room now and went in. The room was heaped high with an amazing conglomeration of articles. There were household appliances, patented can openers, fruit juices, coffee percolators; there were office devices, models of machines, including several of perpetual motion. An entire shelf was heaped high with dusty documents, stocks, bonds and shares—all utterly worthless. They had the same thing in common with the mechanical contrivances. They had been used by some one in a fraud or swindle. And so they had come to Jim Strong's private storeroom.

District attorneys leaving office, said to their successors: "Fire twenty men if you feel you must economize in this office—but keep Jim Strong. The man knows more about rackets than the rest of the department put together. He'll make your job easy."

And here in this room were the results of Strong's twelve years work under several district attorneys. An odd smile played on his lips as he rummaged through the stuff.

After several minutes search he found what he sought, a thick book bound in limp leather and stamped with gold, "Holy Bible." He wiped dust from the book.

The book had been used in a swindle eight years ago. If he remembered right, the "Reverend" Joseph Dumbro was even now free again.

AN hour later Strong parked his coupé, which had had the tire changed, before a dingy two-story

frame building on Bissell Street, on the North Side. He picked up the bible from the seat and climbed out of the car.

A moment later he rang the door-bell of the first-floor flat. There was a short wait, then a woman of about thirty-five opened the door. She was dressed in black, and her eyes were red and puffed from weeping.

"Mrs. Fosdick?" Strong asked. "I'd like to see Mr. Fosdick."

The woman winced. "You can't. He's—dead!"

Strong recoiled. "Dead? Mr. Fosdick's dead. Ah—Mrs. Fosdick, I didn't know. I *am* grieved. Had I known I most certainly would not have called—not now, in your hour of great grief."

Mrs. Fosdick dabbed at her eyes. "I've just come from the cemetery. I—what did you want to see him about?"

Strong cleared his throat. "Why, I'm from the International Bible Society. I—I brought the bible that Mr. Fosdick ordered recently."

"What bible? I didn't know George ordered a bible."

Strong held the book out before him. "Why, this; it's our latest edition, with illustrated pages. It wasn't quite ready when Mr. Fosdick made the deposit on it two weeks ago."

Mrs. Fosdick stiffened. "Deposit? You mean—there's money due on it?"

Strong looked down at the bible. "Why—ah—Mr. Fosdick paid two dollars. There's eighteen due on it."

"Eighteen dollars!" cried Mrs. Fosdick. "What is this—another racket? George wouldn't ever have bought a bible, anymore than he would all that whisky."

Strong pounced on the woman's words. "Whisky—another racket? What do you mean?"

A look of consternation spread

across Mrs. Fosdick's face. "I—I'm sorry," she said. "I can't talk any more. Not now."

"But you must," insisted Strong. "The bible was a stall. That's a racket some one pulled years ago. You—some one's tried to pull one on you. I want to know about it. I'm a policeman."

"What?" cried Mrs. Fosdick. "You're a policeman?"

"Yes. I know all about what happened at the funeral. I was there. I used this brutal trick just to get you to talk. Some one's tried to victimize you. I want you to tell me about it."

"No, no!" said Mrs. Fosdick hurriedly. "No one's tried anything. I—I can't say a word. Not—now!" And stepping back, she suddenly slammed the door in Strong's face.

Strong looked at the closed door and sighed. He couldn't force Mrs. Fosdick to talk, not during her bereavement at any rate. Yet he had to get on the trail of the racketeers who had tried to intimidate her, who had killed some one in doing so.

"Just stand right there, copper!" said a harsh voice behind Strong.

Strong groaned aloud. He'd been so intent on getting information from Mrs. Fosdick that he'd neglected entirely to think of his own safety. He should have been more alert, knowing that the men who had rammed the funeral hearse were more than ordinarily bold.

STRONG stood still, facing the closed door. Something hard poked into his spine and a rough hand clawed at his hip pocket where reposed his Police Positive. At the moment the hand pulled at the gun, Strong whirled. He threw himself full force against the man who had the gun in his back, swinging his fist at the same time.

The gun exploded and Strong felt sudden, biting pain along his side. Then his fist connected with flesh and bone and the man with the two guns, including Strong's own, staggered away.

A low growl, starting at the bottom of Strong's throat, died only half born. For there was another man, and even as his partner was reeling away, this man was lunging forward, leather-covered blackjack swishing toward Strong.

Strong tried desperately to dodge the weapon, couldn't quite make it. It smashed along the side of his head, almost ripping his ear loose. It thudded against his shoulder and numbness shot down into his arm.

Strong couldn't stop fighting, though. To do so would have been fatal. He lowered his head and butted the man in the stomach. The man went down and Strong sprawled over him. He rolled off him quickly, shot a look over his left shoulder at the other man, then poised himself to attack.

The man with the two guns was groggy. He was waving them about, trying to aim them at Strong. Strong dived low and hit him just above the knees with his head and shoulders.

He spilled the man to the sidewalk and clawed at his own gun in the thug's right fist. The man, surprisingly, showed strong resistance. He clung to the gun as if his life depended on it—which it did. Strong smashed his right fist into the man's face, but the blow was a weak one because of his partially numbed arm.

He could see the other man getting up from the sidewalk, saw the blackjack descending on him. He threw all he had into snatching the gun from the man, succeeded, and began to whirl.

Then the blackjack exploded on Strong's head. A million tongues of flame shot through Strong's head into his shoulder. He felt himself falling and tried desperately to keep from becoming unconscious. He knew that the gun in his hand thundered, but that was all he knew.

HE was in an ambulance when he awakened. Fingers of pain seemed to search out every nerve in his body with every lurch of the machine.

He opened his eyes and looked up at a grinning, white-coated interne. "Good thing your skull's thick," said the interne cheerfully.

Strong put a hand to it. There was a lump as big as a bantam egg where the blackjack had struck him. As he moved, he felt the pain in his side. "How's the bullet wound?" he asked.

"You mean that skin scratch? I put some adhesive tape on that."

Strong sat up. "Then stop the bus and let me off."

"Nix!" exclaimed the interne. "Better come along to the hospital and sleep for a few hours."

"Can't," said Strong. "I've got work to do." He sat up and shook himself. The effort cost him some pain, but he felt better for it.

The interne spoke to the ambulance driver and at the next corner Strong climbed out.

"When does the *Globe* come out?" he asked a newsboy at a news stand.

"She's out," replied the boy. "Five minutes ago."

Strong bought a copy and, moving to the side of a drug store, opened the paper to the "Funeral Notices." He read with a pencil in hand and checked several of the notices. Three minutes later, he climbed into a taxi.

"No. 1961 Orchard Street," he told the driver.

The cab turned into Wells Street, zoomed north to Amitage Avenue, then west a half mile to Orchard. It pulled up at an ancient, frame building. Strong paid the driver. "If you should happen to be around the corner on Amitage in five or ten minutes, I might have another ride for you," he told the cabby.

"I'll wait here," the man said eagerly.

"No, I'd rather you didn't. Park around the corner."

There was purple undertaker's crêpe fastened to the door of the house. Strong rang the doorbell. A moment later a middle-aged woman opened it.

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you at a time like this," Strong apologized. "But I want to save you some money—and trouble. I'm from the police department. Has any one been around yet with a bill your husband was supposed to have run up? About anything at all—whisky, books, clothes?"

The woman shook her head in bewilderment. "No, my Julius never bought nothin' that I didn't know about. He—he was such a good man." The woman's handkerchief went to her eyes.

"Yes, I'm sure he was," Strong said hastily. "But if any one should come around with a—bill, or want to collect money from you, will you call the district attorney's office at once and ask for Sergeant Strong?"

The bereaved woman promised, and Strong left hastily. He picked up the cab around the corner and drove to an address on Addison Street. Here he spoke to another widow. She was not as composed as the middle-aged woman on Orchard Street, and Strong had a bad few minutes of it. He began to feel like a ghoul as he started out for the third address on the list.

THERE were more than forty funeral notices in the paper. Strong called at the addresses of eight. He passed up all those that told of female death, as well as those which indicated, by the addresses, better-than-moderate circumstances.

The work took more than two hours; then, Strong had his cab driver take him down to headquarters.

"Where you been?" exclaimed the clerk at the desk in the outer office. "There've been four calls for you in the last hour and all of 'em from crying women."

"Give the numbers to me," said Strong quickly.

The clerk handed him four slips of paper. Strong went into his private office, sat down and called the first number on the slip. It was the widow on Orchard Street.

"Oh, Mr. Strong!" the woman cried when Strong identified himself. "You was hardly gone, when he come. He say my husband owe fifty-seven dollars for whisky and if I don't pay it right away, he puts attachment on the insurance money. And then the undertaker won't bury Julius. Ach, what shall I do?"

"When's the funeral?" Strong asked.

"To-morrow at eleven o'clock."

"Then don't do anything. Don't pay him if he comes back. Tell him you can't get the money until to-morrow."

The next call was to a widow on Blackhawk Street. She was of firmer stuff than the first saying, "I know George Baker never bought any fur coat for any blonde, because during the three years we've been married he was never out of my sight long enough to take up with a blonde. It's a swindle!"

"Of course it is, Mrs. Baker," Strong assured her. "These crooks

are hitting at people who've just lost a loved one, knowing that they will either pay an unreasonable bill to keep the dead one's name from being besmirched, or they're poor widows who need the insurance money for the funeral and can't have it tied up. Listen, Mrs. Baker, don't do anything until I see you."

Strong left his taxi on Halsted Street and walked a block and a half down Blackhawk. He was taking no further chance of encountering the two thugs who had attacked him earlier that day. They were too tough to handle unprepared and, anyway—they were merely tools for a master mind who was the one Strong wanted.

THERE were several relatives with Mrs. Baker, but she led Strong to a private room. She was a woman of forty or so, strong-willed and determined.

"Even if George had bought a fur coat for a woman, I wouldn't pay the bill," she declared. "He never bought any fur coat for me."

"I'm sure he didn't buy the fur coat," said Strong. "I've checked with several other widows to-day and they've been approached by the same crooks, although the bills were for different items. In one or two cases, when they learned that the deceased drank occasionally, the bills were reputedly for whisky. In the case of your husband, they found that he didn't drink, so used the fur coat stuff. Now look, we want to get these crooks. And the only way we can is to make them come to us."

"I get the idea," said Mrs. Baker. "The man who was here hinted that I'd be sorry if I didn't pay the bill. He's giving me until seven this evening. He's coming then."

"Umm," said Strong, "that won't do. I don't want the henchman

alone. When he comes, we want him to go away and bring back his boss. Let's see—are you game for something rather strong?"

"Anything," replied Mrs. Baker. "It happens that I'm a woman who can take things. I imagine, though, some of the other poor widows these crooks have fleeced are pretty hurt when they apparently learn their husbands have been holding out on them in some way."

"I've seen some of them," said Strong, grimly. "And getting these crooks will give me more pleasure than anything I've done in years. Here's the plan: I'll send down to headquarters and borrow a cheap fur coat. When the man comes here, you tell him you've gone to see Mrs. X, and that you got the fur coat from her and they can have it. But you'll pay no bill. That, I think, will shake out the head man. It's worth a try, anyway."

Mrs. Baker spoke to some of her relatives and friends, and by seven o'clock that evening there were only two or three remaining in the flat. Strong himself was seated in a bedroom, behind heavy drapes. The room was just off the living room in which reposed the coffin and numerous floral wreaths.

THE crook came promptly at seven. He came in a closed car and the motor was kept running, with the man who had driven the truck earlier that day behind the wheel.

Strong saw that much through a slit in the bedroom shade. He recognized the man who came up the stairs as the other one of the two who had fought with him, the man who had wielded the blackjack. Strong touched the lump on his head and gripped his Police Positive.

Mrs. Baker brought the man into

the living room where Strong could overhear the conversation.

"I've run down that woman," Mrs. Baker told the crook. "And I've got the fur coat. Here it is. Now take your bill and frame it, for all I care."

Strong heard the sharp intake of the crook's breath. "Uh—you can't do that," the man protested. "The coat's been worn. It isn't worth the money now."

"No?" asked Mrs. Baker. "Well, it wasn't worth the money you claim George agreed to pay for it, in the first place. That coat hasn't been worn over three months, and the fifty dollars down payment you say George made ought to cover that."

"Look, lady," said the crook, "I don't want the coat. You keep it. All I want is the two hundred and twenty-five that's still due on it, and unless we get the money tonight, there won't be any funeral tomorrow. On account of we'll put an attachment on the insurance money and your undertaker won't bring around his fancy limousine and the other stuff. I tell you, we mean business."

"So do I," declared Mrs. Baker. "It so happens that I've enough money to pay for the funeral, aside

from the insurance money. So go ahead, put on your attachment. I'll fight the thing in court."

Strong heard the man mutter under his breath. Then his voice came, placatingly: "Let's make a deal, Mrs. Baker. We don't want to crowd you under the circumstances. So suppose you pay us a hundred and fifty dollars and we'll call the thing quits."

"We? You've got a partner? Well, bring him around here with a receipt marked paid in full and I'll give you a hundred and twenty-five. That's all. It's worth that much not to go to court."

"I've the bill right here. I'll receipt it."

"No, I want this thing done right. My lawyer's coming here at eight o'clock. Be here then with the bill, because I want him to see that I get a proper receipt."

There was a moment's silence, then the crook said, "We'll be here with the chief—at eight o'clock."

He departed and Strong came out of the bedroom. "He'll be back inside of a half hour. He doesn't want to meet any lawyers. He figures you're too smart, and I'm afraid if you're here then there'll be rough



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stuff. Could you visit—some neighbors until the thing is settled?”

MRS. BAKER and her relatives left the flat inside of five minutes. Fifteen minutes later Strong sat on a chair beside the coffin in the living room. His gun was in its holster, but he had made sure that it would not stick. He expected to have to use it in a hurry.

He looked at his watch. If he had guessed correctly, they'd be here inside of a few minutes now.

Even as he thought of it, the doorbell rang. Strong rose quickly and stepped to the window. There was no car outside. He frowned. He hoped it wasn't a friend or relative of the deceased. He stepped to the door and opened it.

A heavy-set man of about forty was in the act of removing his hat. He stayed the movement, however, when he saw Strong. "Mrs. Baker—can I see her?" the man asked.

"I'm sorry," said Strong. "Mrs. Baker isn't feeling well at the moment. Could I take care of whatever you want? I'm Mrs. Baker's cousin."

A frown crossed the heavy-set man's face. "Why, I'm Henry Comstock," he said. "It's distressing to have to come at a time like this about such a matter, but perhaps Mrs. Baker has told you. It seems the late Mr. Baker ran up a bill at our store and—ah—gave us the wrong address. We just learned about his demise and naturally we presented the bill. Mrs. Baker asked me to call for the money this evening."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Comstock," said Strong. "Mrs. Baker told me all about you. In fact—I listened in when she talked to your plug-ugly a while ago. And so—"

An automobile horn honked vio-

lently somewhere across the street. And then Mr. Comstock made a sudden movement. Without preamble, he brought up his knee and struck Strong sharply in the stomach. Strong gasped and bent forward.

At the same time, he reached out instinctively and fastened his right hand on Comstock's coat. Comstock swore and struck down at Strong's hand. Strong released his grip and shot the hand about Comstock's leg.

His other hand went to join the right and then Strong tugged, hard. Comstock went over backward, his head hitting the door jamb. He yelped in pain.

Strong reached back with his right hand and clawed at his gun. He looked out over Comstock, saw the truck driver of the morning leave a car parked across the street and come rushing across.

Strong's teeth ground together. He freed the gun from his holster and tried to level it across Comstock's body. Comstock heaved up at the moment and spoiled Strong's aim.

"Down!" gritted Strong.

Comstock howled and heaved up again. Strong started to smash his gun down on the widow-robber's head, but an invisible fist suddenly struck the barrel of his gun and whipped it from his hand. At the same instant, an explosion behind Strong rocked the room.

STRONG gasped and jerked his head around. To his consternation, he saw the third member of the ghoulish gang only a few feet behind him, a gun in his hand. And he was just about to shoot again. The crooks had been suspicious and had approached the house on Blackhawk Street with caution. Comstock had come alone. The truck driver had timed things so he'd ar-

rive a moment later, across the street. And the third man had gone ahead, come in from the alley.

Strong had already been fired on twice that day and had escaped with amazing good luck. He knew the luck wouldn't hold a third time. He suddenly caught hold of Comstock and, using every last bit of his strength, rolled over, bringing Comstock over on top of him.

The gunman held his fire. Strong heard him cursing. He heard, too, feet pounding up the stairs and knew the truck driver would be in it in a moment. And three to one was too much.

Nevertheless, Strong kept Comstock on top of him, even though the man struggled furiously to get loose.

"Hit him with your gun!" Comstock yelled. "Bust his skull open and let's get out of here."

"Get your head out of the way," snarled the man with the gun, "and I'll plug him."

A gun exploded, but no bullet struck Strong. None even thudded into the floor in his vicinity. He heard a cry of anguish, though, and shoving Comstock to one side, saw the gunman reeling back.

A gun roared again and the truck


driver, just charging through the door, missed his step and plunged headlong to the floor, within a few inches from Strong. He did not get up.

"All right, Harry!" cried Strong. "That's all!" He heaved up violently and rolled Comstock off him. He had the crook securely handcuffed before he rose to his feet. Then he turned to the coffin in the living room. A man was sitting up in it—a Police Positive in either hand.

Comstock saw, too, and he cried out in horror. Strong grinned, saying, "Naw, it isn't a ghost. Only Sergeant Devlin, the best pistol shot on the force. You've been robbing the dead for a long time, so you shouldn't mind being stopped by some one in a coffin. Actually—you suggested the thing to me. You and your boys.

"You see, Mrs. Baker had her husband's body at the funeral chapel. So, the coffin seemed like a good place to hide Devlin. You boys made it so tough for me to-day that I didn't feel like tackling you a third time—without some damn good help."

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THE LAND OF THE SIX-GUN LIVES IN ITS PAGES

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Laurence
Donovan



COPS DIE HARD

*But when faced with killers' guns;
when called "yellow" by superior
officers—some don't die at all!*

*A fast-paced
novelette*



**CHAPTER I.
MURDER SPOT.**

THE taxi creaked as Detective Sergeant Brannon squeezed his bulk into it. He dropped into the seat beside Edgar Hubbard, an elderly, worried man.

"It's silly, Brannon," Hubbard protested. "I'm not afraid of these men who write notes and threaten me with death. You wouldn't be guarding me if the commissioner hadn't insisted upon it."

"There's nothing lost except my time," Brannon shrugged.

The cab pulled to the curb in front of Hubbard's apartment. Hubbard drew his gloves from his pocket and a slip of paper fluttered to the floor. Brannon picked it up. Hubbard opened the door of the cab and stepped on the running board.

"Hey—wait!" Brannon cried. "Let me go first. I—"

But Hubbard continued to get out of the cab. He stood on the sidewalk a moment, drawing on his gloves. Brannon cast swift glances up and down the street. He saw shadowy forms lurking in the door-

way of a vacant store next to Hubbard's apartment.

"Hold it!" Brannon yelled. He reached for his gun, planted a foot on the running board of the taxi, and froze in horror. Streaks of flame jabbed from the darkened doorway. Hubbard spun completely around, and his face was a gory mask. Bullets thudded into the taxi.

Brannon fired point-blank at the doorway, grabbed the door of the cab and began to get out. The taxi started with a terrific jerk. Brannon was thrown backward and landed in the tonneau.

He squirmed to his feet and cursed. They were already racing crazily down the street. The taxi driver had a pasty-white face, and his eyes bulged in terror.

"Stop, you fool!" Brannon yelled. "I'm a cop! Stop, I tell you!"

But the taxi driver was peering through a windshield that had been shattered by one of the fusillade of slugs. He cared nothing for cops or anything else, except to put plenty of space between himself and those spitting guns.

Brannon lurched to his knees, reversed his gun and smashed the glass between the driver and the tonneau. He inserted a big arm, grabbed the taxi driver by the back of the neck and squeezed.

"Head for the curb, you lollypop!" he raged. "This is the last hack you'll ever drive!"

THE driver turned sharply, missed a car by an inch, and his front wheels slammed against the curb. Brannon was out before the cab stopped. He streaked down the sidewalk, gun in hand. Pedestrians scampered out of his way. A traffic cop took up the chase, recognized Brannon and kept on running.

Brannon reached the scene of the crime. Hubbard was lying across the sidewalk, and a miniature river of blood ran into the gutter. Two harness bulls were kneeling beside him. Radio cars shrieked up. A uniformed captain alighted from one of them. He listened to a sergeant and two witnesses. Then he motioned Brannon to step up.

"It was that damn taxi driver's fault!" Brannon raged. "He started the cab just as I was getting out and——"

"So you immediately ducked back in and thanked your lucky stars it was moving." Captain Powell's tone was crisp. "You were supposed to be guarding Hubbard, Brannon. I happened to be at headquarters when you left with him."

"You got me all wrong," Brannon protested. "I tell you I fell into the cab. I was getting ready to tackle them killers, guns and all."

"Where is the taxi?" the captain asked with chilly politeness.

Brannon groaned. "I left it up the street. The yellow-bellied driver wouldn't stop until I squeezed his neck a little. But I'll find him, captain."

"What kind of cab was it? What did the driver look like, and what was his license number?" the captain demanded. "His picture and license must have been staring you in the face while you rode here with Hubbard."

Brannon scratched the back of his neck. "Damn if I even glanced at it!" he said. "Fact is, I don't even remember what kind of hack it was. But I'll find him. You've got to believe me, captain. I'm not a coward. I've never been afraid of anything in my life——"

"Until now," the captain put in icily. "Go back to headquarters, sergeant. Report yourself under

suspension to the lieutenant in charge. Relieve yourself of your badge, gun and handcuffs at headquarters. That's all."

Brannon turned away slowly. He stuffed his gun into a side pocket of his coat. Two harness bulls eyed him askance and talked in low voices. Brannon knew what they were saying. He was a coward.

He didn't return to headquarters. Instead, he went to a phone booth and called every taxi agency in town. None of them had heard of a driver who reported with a broken windshield. Brannon knew, then, how utterly hopeless his quest would be.

It had been an independent hack! The driver, certain to hear of Brannon's story, would hardly come forward and declare himself the coward that he was. Brannon wandered into a small park and sat down heavily.

He stayed there for well over an hour. Newsboys aroused him from his stupor. He got up and walked toward a newsstand. Editions, fresh from the presses, were piled high, and centered in the middle of page one was Brannon's own face.

The caption below it wasn't complimentary. Brannon turned away hurriedly when he saw the newsstand owner peering at him with a frown.

He plunged his hand deep in his pockets and kept to the shadows of the buildings. His fingers fumbled with a folded bit of paper. He pulled it out, looked at it under a street lamp and took a long breath.

This was the paper that Hubbard had dropped as he got out of the taxi. It was a duplicate withdrawal slip made out with a shaking hand. The amount was twenty-five thousand dollars.

"That's the stake those killers

asked," Brannon told himself. "And they wanted it in fives and tens, so he couldn't have been carrying a roll like that without my knowing it. I wonder if he paid them off? But then why did they bump him? Why didn't he tell me—or the commissioner—that he paid them off?"

BRANNON felt his self-assurance returning. He knew something that none of the other detectives could possibly have discovered—that Hubbard had probably paid off the demand and been killed anyway.

Brannon hailed a cab and fifteen minutes later he alighted a block from the apartment house where Hubbard had lived. He knew Hubbard had a daughter and Brannon was determined to see her and learn for certain whether or not the money had been paid.

He walked up the street, studiously avoided a patrolman who stood on the curb staring at the traffic and hurried through the lobby of the apartment house. A quick look at the mail boxes gave him Hubbard's apartment, and he walked up the five flights of steps.

He walked silently as he neared the door of the murdered man's apartment. If any of the boys from headquarters were questioning Hubbard's daughter, he knew only too well that he must wait. By this time, orders were probably flashed to have him picked up on sight.

But with an ear against the panels he could hear only the sound of some one softly sobbing. Brannon took a long breath and punched the bell.

A girl, easy on the eyes despite her tear-stained face, looked out with a question half formed on her lips. Brannon flashed his badge.

"Hate to bother you," he said,

apologetically, "but something just came up—important."

"Come in," she said and stepped back. Brannon walked into a richly furnished living room and dropped into a chair. The girl sat down on the davenport. She was looking at him with a puzzled expression.

Brannon knew why. On the table at her elbow was an edition of the newspaper with his picture staring out of the front page.

"I've discovered that your father drew twenty-five thousand dollars from the bank to-day," Brannon began. "That's the sum those killers demanded. Did your father say anything about paying them off?"

"Why—he thought about it. Poor dad was worried mostly about me. He was afraid those men might—might try to kidnap me or something. I——"

Suddenly, the girl's face drained of what little color there was left in it. She arose, her eyes blazing. One hand came up and she pointed to the door.

"You are Sergeant Brannon!" she said hotly. "You are the man who was to have guarded my father, and you let him be killed. You ran away when those men began shooting. Oh—the utter, colossal nerve of you—to come here! Get out! Get out before I phone the Police Commissioner."

"Wait a minute, lady," Brannon implored earnestly. "I didn't run away, and I've got a chance to run down those men who killed your father. I tell you——"

"Get out!" she ordered again. "I read that silly story you told about being thrown into the taxi! I don't believe it, nor does any one else! You are responsible for my father's death. You could have saved him!"

She had one hand on the doorknob and the door was slightly ajar.

Brannon heaved a long, despairing sigh. If he stayed, she would phone headquarters. A radio car would pick him up in two minutes. He pulled his hat down over his eyes and took two steps toward the door.

SUDDENLY, the girl was hurtled back into the room. The door opened to admit two men. One of them kicked the door shut. Both held guns and they were thin-lipped, narrow-eyed killers.

The first one saw Brannon and recognized him. A derisive grin spread across his face.

"If it ain't the yellowest cop in the whole world," he sneered. "Get over against the wall, you yellow-bellied louse, before I plaster you against it with lead!"

The second of the two men had his hand over the girl's mouth and the point of his gun against her throat. Her eyes were stark with fear. Brannon said nothing. He moved back a few steps, bumped against the wall and raised his hands shoulder high.

The second crook threw the girl into a chair and stood over her.

"We want somethin'!" he snarled. "Your father's clothes were sent back here from the morgue a couple of minutes ago. Don't lie—we've been trailin' them clothes ever since the bump-off. Where are they?"

"In—in that closet," the girl gasped. Once she turned imploring eyes toward Brannon, but that look died away quickly and was replaced by one of scorn.

The thugs brought out a blood-stained suit of clothes and deftly rifled the pockets. One of them cursed and whirled on the girl.

"You took a piece of paper out of that suit!" he accused. "The cops didn't get it, because we'd know about it if they did."

"But I didn't take anything from that suit," the girl protested. "I—I couldn't even bear to look at it!"

The crook struck her across the mouth, hard. She slipped back in the chair, bewildered and stunned by this unexpected turn of events. The crook doubled his fist this time and drew it back.

"Hold that," Brannon said, quietly. "What you guys want is in my pocket. That girl doesn't know anything about it."

"Keep quiet," the second thug snarled, "or I'll fan you with my roscoe! What kind of saps do you think we are? If the other cops don't know what we're lookin' for, how could you?"

Brannon tensed the muscles in his arms. "It's a bank withdrawal slip, isn't it?" he asked. "I wouldn't know unless I didn't have it."

The crook who stood over the girl came toward Brannon with his gun extended. He shoved the muzzle of the weapon into the detective's stomach.

"You're right, copper. But it's going to be tough on you. Where's that slip?"

"In my pocket," Brannon said. "The right-hand one."

He took a long, slow breath. His arms, shoulder high, dropped like plummets to fall on the shoulders of the crook who was searching him. Like a flash, Brannon had whirled the man around.

THE crook fired, but Brannon avoided the dangerous end of the gun. He fastened one hand around the crook's throat, drew his head forward and banged it with all the strength he could muster against the wall. The crook passed out and slid down along the wall until he was in a limp, sitting position.

Brannon didn't wait to see this.

He had put away one of the thugs within ten seconds. The second man, stunned in amazement, suddenly found himself busy with the girl. She kicked him soundly in both shins. He backed away with a growl of rage, and his gun began to come down.

Brannon leaped straight across a small table and bowled the thug over just as he pressed the trigger. The slug buried itself in the arm of the overstuffed davenport. Brannon lashed out a husky left. The crook dodged it and suddenly found that his gun hand was clamped between fingers as strong as steel.

Brannon gave the wrist a twist and the gun flew across the room. With a yelp of terror, the crook headed for the door. Brannon took two hasty steps after him, slammed the man hard across the back of the neck, then picked him up bodily.

He hurled him into a corner, yanked his own service gun free and began to straighten his clothing. The gun remained in a direct line with the body of the second crook.

"That was wonderful!" The girl moved to Brannon's side. "I'm sorry about what I said before——"

"Forget it!" Brannon massaged his right fist. "If you want to help, find me some white paper and an ink pad."

CHAPTER II. SWING CLUB.

TWENTY minutes later, Brannon and the girl were alone. The detective picked up two pieces of paper with fingerprints impressed on them.

He smiled. "Looks silly to let those mugs go, doesn't it? Maybe it is, but if you read that newspaper article about me, you'll understand. I'm suspended, which is the same as fired. I couldn't make a pinch, be-

cause the minute I showed my face in a precinct station, I'd probably be thrown in a cell along with my prisoners."

"Oh," Helen Hubbard said, and sat down limply. "But I thought—when you came here—it was in an official capacity."

"It was," Brannon told her. "I've still got my badge, even though I'm not supposed to carry it. But let's get on with this. I fingerprinted those two hoodlums. They yelped bloody murder when I did, which shows they have records and can be traced.

"They'll dust right back to the man who hired them, and he'll make a line for the higher-up who furnished the money for this deal. He's the man I want to see."

"But how will that bring him to you?" she asked, bewildered.

"I know too much. They'll be after me, and to do that they'll have to expose themselves. That's when I'll be one up on 'em. I'll be expecting it."

"But I've got to go out," Helen Hubbard said. "My father, as you know, operated a chain of cabarets and liquor stores. I—I've got to take care of things, now that he's gone."

"Then we'll get busy," Brannon said. He plunged his hand into the side pocket of his coat and gravely handed her a gun—one of those he had taken from the two thugs.

"Stow this roscoe in your handbag and don't be afraid to use it if necessary. We're up against something bigger than just intimidation. Your father—I'm betting on this—was afraid for you, so he paid off those crooks. They killed him anyway, which proves it wasn't his money they wanted."

"I'm going to the Swing Club

first," the girl announced. "Kean, my father's manager, is waiting for me there."

THE Swing Club was exclusive and expensive. It formed the nucleus of Hubbard's extensive holdings in this field. The city and surrounding towns were dotted with his liquor stores and his cabarets.

Until death swooped down, Hubbard had been well on his way to a tidy fortune from this business. Not the slightest stigma had ever been cast against him or his places. He ran them on the level, served the best in liquor and food and charged moderate prices.

Brannon got out of the taxi, reconnoitered for a few moments with one hand deep in his pocket clutching a gun. There was no trace of fear in whatever he did, even though he knew that at any moment guns might blast his life away. He returned to the cab and escorted Helen into the club.

Kean, a suave, graying man in perfectly fitted evening dress, showed them into his office. He was quiet, restrained and genuinely sorry for the girl whose father had been murdered.

"Condolences won't help," he told her. "He'd want you to carry on for him. You're going to do that, aren't you?"

She nodded. "It will keep me busy and take my mind off—things. You stay as you are, Mr. Kean. I'm making you my manager—of all the places. You know the business—I don't. Whatever you say goes. Dad trusted you, and so shall I."

Kean compressed his lips. "Rely on me," he said. "And I'll do whatever I can to help run those killers to earth. If it hadn't been for that cowardly detective—"

Brannon gulped and turned a dull

pink. Helen Hubbard lifted her eyes from the papers on the desk. "Sergeant Brannon is not a coward," she said firmly. "That has been proven to me. He happens to be the man who escorted me here, Mr. Kean, and not thirty minutes ago, he probably saved my life at the risk of his own."

Kean turned around slowly and ran a finger around his collar. He managed a sickly smile and extended his hand.

"I'm sorry, sergeant," he said. "I'm only going by what the newspapers say. If Miss Hubbard vouches for your bravery, then I accept that."

He turned back to Helen Hubbard and began explaining the various papers. Brannon sat down with his back against a wall without doors or windows and facing the one door leading into the office.

There was a radio going somewhere just outside the office and when a news flash interrupted the regular program, they could hear every word of the announcer.

"There have been new developments in the Hubbard murder case. The intimidating letter mailed to the murdered man was sent by special messenger to the Bureau of Investigation in Washington after a single latent fingerprint had been discovered on the letter. The print was found to be that of one Michael Nolan, well known in police circles."

"Nolan!" Kean blinked in amazement. "Why, he was in here not an hour ago, trying to sell us inferior liquor. He's been pestering us for weeks. Good heavens—he must have been back of this scheme!"

BRANNON said nothing, and Kean walked swiftly to the door. He opened it and called a waiter.

"When Mickey Nolan was in here,

did you hear him give an indication as to where he was going?" he asked.

"I'll find out from the doorman," the waiter said.

He returned in two or three minutes that Kean spent pacing up and down the floor.

"Nolan got in a cab, boss," the waiter reported. "He told the driver to take him to No. 710 Barclay Street."

Brannon arose slowly. "Keep this under your hat, will you?" he asked. "I'm going to look for Nolan myself."

"Yes—yes, why, of course," Kean agreed.

"Let's go," Brannon nodded to Helen Hubbard. "I'll let you off some place where you'll be O. K. Thanks, Kean. I'll return the favor some day."

Kean held the door open for them. Brannon took a quick look around outside the night club and whisked Helen across the sidewalk and into a taxi.

"Hadn't you better get some one to help you?" she asked, as the cab rolled away.

"Who?" Brannon smiled wryly. "If I call headquarters, I'll probably be pinched myself. I'm going to see if Nolan is there. You keep riding around in this taxi. Pass the door every ten minutes, and if I don't show up in half an hour tell the nearest harness bull. But you're not to come in, understand?"

CHAPTER III.

MURDER TRAP.

BRANNON had the taxi stop three blocks from his destination. He got out and walked briskly down the street. He took a firm grip on the gun in his pocket and climbed the half dozen steps of the brown-

stone-front house. The door was slightly ajar.

He kicked it wide, stepped into a darkened hallway and found steep stairs confronting him. He went up these, slowly and quietly, pausing every moment or two to listen.

At the top of the stairs, Brannon drew his service revolver, leaving the smaller gun he had taken from one of the crooks in his side coat pocket. There was a dimly lighted room luring him on. He pressed his body close to the wall and maneuvered his way cautiously. Each time he went by a doorway, he did so with a spurt so that any hail of lead would have a hard time finding him.

Like the front door, the portal before him was closed except for an inch or two. He touched the door with his extended foot and moved it wide. There was a man, his back toward Brannon.

He was leaning over a desk and seemed to be deeply engrossed in his work. He was thickset, with a bull neck and hair that had thinned rapidly on the pate of his head. Mickey Nolan! Brannon would have known him anywhere.

"Reach!" Brannon snapped, as he moved into the room. "Get up and stretch your arms, Nolan!"

But the man at the desk didn't move. Brannon leaped toward him and the set expression on his face didn't change when he saw that he had spoken to a dead man. A pile of books, carefully arranged, was holding the corpse in such a position as to make it appear he was alive and at work.

"O. K., sap!" The words came from the door behind Brannon.

Without turning around, Brannon's gun pointed upward and blazed away once. The single light

winked out and there were no other lights in the house.

Jets of flame came from the man in the doorway, but as he fired, Brannon jumped to one side. Plaster showered down his neck, but the bullets missed him by a foot.

The dick's own gun blazed and he had the advantage, for he knew where the doorway was, and the would-be killer who stood there couldn't see Brannon. A groan and the sound of a man falling told Brannon that his marksmanship had been good.

But he wasn't clear yet. Brannon made a flying dive across the room, so that he was flat against the wall beside the door. Some one turned on the lights in the hall. Brannon saw four men outside. One held a Tommy gun; the others cheap revolvers. The machine-gunner was the most dangerous.

Brannon edged closer to the door, thrust the muzzle of his gun through the crack and fired twice. The man with the Tommy gun fell backward, slid over the top step and rolled down the stairs still clutching his weapon.

THE other three men, momentarily stunned at this unexpected turn of events, weren't ready for the human tornado that tore out of the room and sailed into them. Brannon clubbed his gun and smashed it against the skull of the nearest crook. The other two backed away to open fire, but they weren't fast enough.

Brannon was directly in front of them before they could act. He slugged the one on his left, sent him sprawling and leaped for the fourth man. He brought him down, crashed a powerful blow to the jaw and arose in time to meet the attack of the

crook he had knocked down with a punch to the chin.

This thug was powerfully built and came toward Brannon with his arms outspread, like a wrestler. The moment those arms closed, Brannon knew he had a worthy antagonist. He couldn't squirm free of that clutch, and the thug was bringing a knee up, to lodge it against Brannon's stomach and end the fight with a cowardly thrust.

Brannon stretched one leg out, wound it around the thug's left foot and tripped him, but Brannon was pulled down at the same time. He short jabbed two blows to the stomach and drew a groan of agony. He followed these up with jarring blows to the face. But those gorillalike arms clung with an astonishing tenacity.

His opponent's legs came up to encircle him in a dangerous scissors grip. Once the thug secured that, the fight would be over. And the thug he had hit with the butt of his gun was trying to arise. Brannon could afford to wait no longer.

He beat a savage tattoo on the jaw of the wrestler, and the grip around his middle weakened somewhat. Encouraged, Brannon hammered blow after blow to that granite jaw. The thug's eyes were filming over. He wouldn't last long now.

But the other crook was looking for the gun he had dropped, and had spotted it a dozen feet down the hall. At the same time, Brannon was aware that some one was trying to force the door downstairs.

He smashed a well-directed punch home. His opponent went limp for a second, and Brannon squirmed free. Kneeling over the prostrate figure, the detective rapped a haymaker that didn't miss. He straightened up in time to look into the

muzzle of a gun in the hands of one of the other crooks.

The man was an avid killer and murder shone starkly clear in his narrowed eyes. Brannon looked death squarely in the face and his heart never missed a beat. He tensed for a spring that would take him full at the man in the face of that menacing gun.

He saw the crook's finger tighten on the trigger. Then, over Brannon's shoulder, a heavy revolver boomed. The crook folded up without a sound and hit the floor. Brannon whirled. A uniformed patrolman, smoking gun in hand, was coming toward him.

"Thanks," Brannon said. "You came in time. Call headquarters, will you? I've got Nolan—he's dead."

"Say," the patrolman eyed Brannon, "ain't you Sergeant Brannon? There's an order out to bring you in."

FIFTEEN minutes later, the house was filled with uniformed police and detectives. Captain Powers listened to the story of the patrolman who had reached the scene first.

"I guess I was wrong, sergeant," he admitted. "I'm damned sorry the publicity got out. I didn't mean that to happen. Now, what's this about Nolan?"

"He's in here." Brannon led the way into the room where Nolan sat behind the desk. A quick examination showed that a single bullet through the head had dispatched the crook.

"And that's that," Captain Powers said. "Nolan sent Hubbard that intimidating letter. We found a print on the paper. It was made some time ago, and it looked as though Nolan handled that piece of paper before the letter was written.

You've done well, sergeant. That suspension order is off. What's more, I'll tell those reporters what happened here to-night."

"Thanks," Brannon said, as he edged toward the door.

Helen Hubbard would be outside, wondering what had happened. He beat a hasty retreat for the stairs and ran out to the street. He waited ten minutes for her taxi to appear, but there was no sign of it. Worried now, Brannon walked briskly around the block. Helen wouldn't have abandoned him. He knew her too well for that.

On the street parallel with the one where Nolan died, Brannon saw a taxi at the curb. The driver appeared to be sleeping, hunched over his wheel.

Brannon broke into a run. He leaped on the running board of the cab, looked into the tonneau and saw that it was empty. Then he jerked the driver erect and for the first time in his life, Brannon knew that his heart skipped a beat. Perspiration broke out on his forehead, and his mouth hung limply open in horror.

The taxi driver was dead! A knife had been buried, hilt deep, in his chest. That meant only one thing:

Helen Hubbard had been snatched by this mob of crazy killers!

CHAPTER IV.

HUMAN TARGET.

BRANNON stepped back to the curb, took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face. He was aware that his hands trembled and that his mind was badly jumbled.

A patrolman was walking slowly down the street. Brannon put two

fingers between his lips and blew a shrill blast.

"Take care of this," he ordered the patrolman.

He walked away with paces that covered a full flag with each step. A blue-and-red neon sign down the street indicated that a café was still open for business. It was one of Hubbard's enterprises.

Brannon walked in, strode up to the bar with his hat pulled well down over his eyes and gruffly ordered a drink of whisky straight. A glass, brimming full, slid across the bar and he threw down a bill.

The detective smelled of the liquor, tasted it, set the glass back on the bar and picked up his change. The bartender flashed him a curious glance as he turned away. Brannon watched the man streaking for a telephone.

Brannon went out, stepped into the street and stopped a taxi. He gave terse orders and settled back in the seat. He lighted a cigarette with a match that wavered badly. His nerves were on edge. His collar felt too tight, his hatbrim was soaked with sweat.

"What if they kill her?" he asked himself, with some degree of awe. "Those mugs are capable of anything!"

Brannon rubbed his chin nervously, lighted another cigarette and hurled it out a window after the first puff. The cab stopped in front of the Swing Club.

Brannon leaped out, threw a bill at the driver and sped toward the entrance. A burly doorman intercepted him.

"After hours, sir," he said. "Can't let you in now——"

His sentence was cut off as his teeth clicked together. Brannon hammered one uppercut that sent the doorman into oblivion. He

stepped over the unconscious figure, banged the door open and walked across the now almost deserted dance floor.

A waiter spotted him, slid his tray on the nearest table and made a bee-line for the steps that led to the offices on the balcony. Brannon was after him like a flash. As the waiter reached the top step, Brannon grabbed an ankle.

The waiter tripped and went down. Brannon dispatched him with a vicious promptness. At least action did him some good. It released some of the stored-up fury in him and gave vent to the fear that gnawed at his soul.

The door of the manager's office was closed. Brannon tried the knob gently. It opened and he hurled it wide. Kean, seated behind his desk counting the night's receipts, looked up and his hand darted toward the drawer that was open beside him. It came away clutching a gun.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Have you gone crazy?"

"I've been crazy!" Brannon snapped. "You might as well let that rod drop to the floor, because even if you empty it in my carcass, I'll still have the strength to twist your dirty neck out of shape."

KEAN paled, and the gun he held wavered. Brannon moved across the thickly carpeted floor like vengeance personified. His face was a mask of hate; his fingers were balled into great fists, and the veins in his forehead stood out and throbbed as his heart beat at twice its normal speed.

"Where is Helen Hubbard?" Brannon said, in a cold monotonous voice. "Where is she, or do I have to wring the truth out of you?"

Kean gulped. "How do I know where she is? I'm not her guardian."

"You're trying to be her murderer!" Brannon snapped. "You're back of this rotten business, and don't tell me you're not! You had Hubbard bumped. You tried to have me put away, and now you've got Helen. Put down that rod, Kean! Drop it or I'll ram it down your throat!"

Kean let the gun fall heavily to the top of the desk. Brannon let it lie there. He circled the desk, reached out and grasped Kean by the collar of his stiff shirt. He shook him, as a puppy might a rat.

"Talk, damn you!" he snarled. "Where is she? What have your hoodlums done with her?"

"I tell you this is madness," Kean insisted. "You've gone stark crazy!"

Brannon's fingers closed around Kean's throat and began to squeeze. Kean fell back in the chair. One hand sought his gun when desperation lent a false courage to his brain. Brannon banged a mighty fist down on Kean's outspread fingers and the café manager howled in pain.

Brannon shoved him away from the desk, pulled a straight-backed chair close and straddled it.

"I'm staying right here," he said, "until Helen Hubbard either shows up alive or the cops find her spilled out in some gutter. If that happens, Kean, so help me, I'll kill you!"

Kean massaged his inflamed throat. "I tell you I don't know where she is," he croaked hoarsely, "and I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You had Nolan send Hubbard that phony note. By some good luck, the punk had handled the paper before he put on his gloves and wrote that message. His prints queered him, so you had him bumped off. Then you spilled that lying story about his having been

here and you tipped your waiter off to what was going on.

"He gave that address and before I got there, you had your men rub Nolan out. They were to have killed me and make it look like Nolan had done the job and I had managed to plug him. Don't deny it. The whole thing dovetails."

Kean was recovering his composure. His eyes sought the door eagerly, as though he hoped one of his men might wander in. Brannon saw him and laughed.

Kean's eyes narrowed. He knew that Brannon had a reputation for fast gun play, but if he had no weapon— Kean's eyes roved to the desktop, where his own automatic lay. His fingers tensed as he prepared to reach for it.

He relaxed and forced a smile. "Supposing you are right, Brannon," he said coldly. "Supposing I did have Helen Hubbard kidnaped. What can you do about it? Kill me? That's a laugh! From the minute you stepped into this room, you've been covered. There's a man with a gun trained on the back of your neck right now."

Brannon sent the chair he occupied crashing to the floor. He leaped to his feet and whirled around. Kean's hand streaked for the gun.

"You fell for an old stall like that," he gloated. "You damned fool—if one of my men had been in a position to shoot you, he'd have done it long ago. All right, you big overgrown gorilla, I did have Helen Hubbard snatched! What's more, I'm going to have her bumped, too. She knows too much.

"When you told her about that duplicate deposit slip, you sealed her doom and your own, too. In half a minute you die, Brannon. I'm going to put a bullet through your heart!"

BRANNON leaned forward, balancing on the balls of his feet. This man meant business. He was ripe for murder and there wasn't the slightest chance of jumping that gun. Unlike the scene at the house where Nolan died, no element of surprise could trick Kean. He was backing away slowly, the gun held in a hand made steady by desperation.

Brannon took half a step forward and at the same time threw himself to one side a little. Kean's gun barked. Brannon half staggered, straightened up and blood ran down his shirt front. With a low moan, he crumbled to the floor.

Kean leaped through the door, slammed it and turned the key. He raced down the steps madly. Brannon, apparently dead, lay still a moment. Then he struggled to his feet. There was an ugly wound in his right side, not too high above the heart.

His face was chalky as he grabbed the doorknob. It held. With a curse, Brannon stepped back, raised a foot and in half a dozen kicks, made a hole in the panels of the door. Ten seconds later, he was running down the steps. Waiters and guests stared at him in undisguised horror and amazement. To their eyes a madman, bleeding and pale as death, was staggering toward the exit.

CHAPTER V. PAY-OFF.

BRANNON reached the sidewalk in time to see a taxi dart away. He signaled another cab and squatted in the baggage space beside the driver. A gun gleamed in his hand. "This is the law," he told the driver. "Tail that cab and if you lose it, you're very liable to lose your neck, too."

The driver looked at Brannon's face, at his gun and at the badge held before his eyes. He nodded, tried to talk, but the words froze in his throat. He was after the vanishing taxi in a flash.

Under Brannon's watchful eye he kept well behind it, but not once did it get out of sight.

"Hey, copper," the driver finally managed, "hadn't we better pick up another bull someplace? You're bleedin' like a sieve."

"Do as you're told!" Brannon snapped. "There's one of my week's pay in it for you if things work out right."

"To hell with that. Say, if I can be of some help——"

"Later," Brannon said, tensely. "Later, brother. Right now, concentrate on that cab because if you lose it, the best girl in the world will be killed."

For thirty minutes the race continued. The car left the congested section of the city and headed uptown toward the residential part. It was almost three o'clock in the morning and the streets were deserted. Brannon was afraid of that. Kean might spot the pursuing cab and lead him on a wild goose chase.

Then, when Brannon felt that he was being tricked, Kean's taxi

turned off the avenue and stopped beside the service entrance of a big house. Kean got out and hurried inside with a hasty look around that didn't take in Brannon, who was flattened against the brick wall around the corner.

Brannon's wounded side was aching badly, and once or twice his knees felt as though they would fold up under him. Perspiration stood out in beads on his forehead.

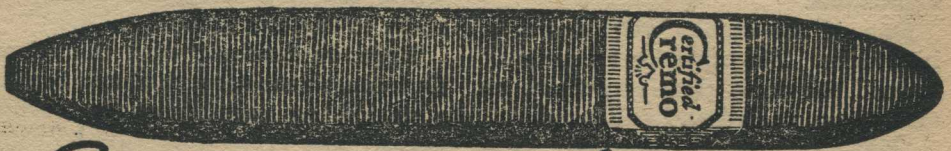
He motioned his taxi driver who had left his cab. "Drive to the nearest phone or pick up the first cop you see. Send word to headquarters that Sergeant Brannon is up here and have 'em send a raiding squad."

"I'm on my way," the driver whispered. "And good luck, sarge."

Brannon moved toward the service entrance of the house. If Kean knew he was being trailed, this would be a trap that would end fatally. But Brannon moved on, reached the door and found it locked. To smash it would only give away the whole business.

He half staggered toward the rear of the house, until he crouched beneath a window. Reaching up, he tested it. The window was locked.

He swore softly and headed for the cellar way. That, too, was



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bolted, but Brannon put a shoulder against the door, shuddered as his wounded side protested and shoved against the panels. They cracked, sagged and finally gave way.

Little noise accompanied this crashing of the house, for Brannon had used muscle instead of weight to break down the slim door. He moved into the cellar, found the steps and went up them quietly.

Once he heard a woman scream, and his heart stood still. He opened the door that led into the hallway on the first floor of the house. Closing this softly, he tiptoed toward a lighted room from which he could hear voices.

Kean was speaking in a strained, scared voice. "I bumped that crazy cop," he said. "We've got to put this girl out of the way once and for all. The whole game is, up boys."

As Brannon braced himself to rush into the room with a flaming gun, a man stepped out. He saw Brannon, gaped and reached for his gun. Brannon shot him through the neck.

TWO other men leaped into the hall, guns spitting. One bullet hit Brannon's already wounded shoulder, but he didn't even flinch. His gun blazed in four miraculously fast explosions.

One of the crooks went down in his tracks. The other began running toward the door. Halfway there he slowed up, reeled and collapsed.

"Kean," Brannon shouted. "I'm coming for you!"

"If you come in here, this girl dies!" Kean shouted, in a quavering voice. "I've got a gun against her temple. I'm not lying, Brannon. Listen, I'll remove the gag and let her tell you."

"He's right!" Helen's voice came

sharply from the room. "He'll kill me."

"I'm coming," Brannon went on, in a steady voice. As he spoke, he bent down and scooped up the gun of the crook who lay almost at his feet. He opened the breech of his own weapon, ejected the cartridges and snapped it shut as silently as he could, talking all the time to hide the sound.

"Be ready to shoot, because you'll get one of these slugs, Kean. Just like this——"

He pulled the trigger of the unloaded weapon. The hammer clicked loudly in the silence that ensued.

"Damn!" Brannon groaned. "It's empty!"

With a shout of elation, Kean rushed into the hallway. Too late, he realized he had been tricked. Brannon had two guns in his fists. One sagged, the other was leveled. Kean covered his face and cowered.

"Don't shoot!" he quavered. "Please don't shoot! I—I wouldn't have killed her. Don't shoot, I tell you! Please!"

Brannon moved forward. He let the empty gun drop to the floor and with his free hand he yanked Kean's protecting arms away. His fist shot back, darted forward and Kean was lifted from the floor by the blow. He lay sprawled out unconscious, while Brannon staggered into the room to Helen's side.

Brannon fumbled with the ropes. Outside, sirens screeched and brakes squealed as cars came to abrupt stops. The front door caved in under a ferocious assault and suddenly the room seemed filled with blue-clad men.

One of them helped Brannon to a chair, while others worked on the ropes that bound Helen. Free of them, she rushed across the room to Brannon's side.

Captain Powers hurried in, saw Brannon and took in the situation at a glance. He snapped terse orders. Handcuffs clicked. Kean was shoved up against the wall.

"Brannon," Powers said fervently, "whatever I said about you before, I retract a thousandfold. I don't know what this is all about, but you cleaned house here. Is that wound bad?"

"NOT so much." Brannon forced a grin and he looked up at Helen, who was perched on an arm of his chair. "Kean was behind it. He sent Hubbard that letter to formulate an excuse for killing him. Hubbard refused to put in cheap, untaxed whisky that Kean and his mob were making. The stuff is on sale already. I tasted some of it an hour ago.

"Kean hoped that, with Hubbard dead, Helen would allow him to manage the whole affair. Then he could put across his poor grade of liquor and if anything went wrong, she would have to take the rap. There was millions in it."

"But how did you suspect Kean?" Powers asked.

"I didn't—not until that news flash came over the air that Nolan was wanted for sending that letter to Hubbard. Kean told me Nolan

had been in the Swing Club an hour earlier. His waiter tumbled to Kean's plan and gave me an address to which Nolan was supposed to have gone.

"There was a trap, but I squeezed out of it. You see, Nolan was secretly indicted two weeks ago for conspiracy to defraud the government of taxes. If he so much as showed his nose, he would have been picked up. Nolan wouldn't have visited the Swing Club."

"And how did you find this hide-out?" Powers went on.

"I tackled Kean alone. He refused to tell me where Helen was hidden, so I let him think he killed me. I knew he'd come directly here to finish the job on Helen.

"You deliberately let him shoot you?" Powers gasped. "Brannon, that took more nerve than I've ever heard of! And I'm betting you didn't even bat an eyelash when he began shooting!"

"Damn right I didn't," Brannon said. "I was so damned scared, I couldn't move. He aimed at my heart, but he was a lousy shot. At that, if the bullet had gone straight, it wouldn't have done any more damage, because my heart was floating around in my mouth. Scared? I was so damned scared, my spine was crawling!"

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IF you had property scattered all over the world, so to speak, and with one large tract several thousand miles long and several thousand miles wide, and you did a tremendous amount of business in that property, and had to see to it that everything in it was done according to law, you would have quite a job on your hands, would you not?

Indeed you would. And if you'd like to know just what kind of job that would be, go ask your old Uncle Whiskers. That's just exactly the situation he faces, and it's no cinch. For Uncle Sam, like it or not, must see to it that everything in this great country of ours is running according to Hoyle; and of all people, he certainly cannot afford to have any one figuratively thumb his nose at constituted authority without just and prompt punishment.

That is why “Old Whiskers”—the name that the underworld and crooks in general give to the United States Government—must always be on his toes; must see to it that every little infraction of the rules is apprehended and punished, regardless of cost. It's not the little deed itself; it's the principle of the thing. Overlooking a slight transgression might weaken the entire structure, so every little spot is carefully marked, and as carefully tracked down.

You might think that Uncle Sam would forget such a small item as a

forty-dollar charge against a man who found himself without funds in a foreign country, went to the American Consul there and, after due investigation, and so on, was given credit to that amount. It took Uncle Sam's agents six years to track that fellow down in order to collect the small sum. They contacted people who scarcely knew the person in question, but one after another, adding this little bit of information to that little bit, they got the trail and found him.

He paid the forty dollars, with interest to the day of payment.

It didn't do Uncle Sam much good—for it cost many times that to conduct such an investigation. But it proved to that man, and to all the others who were contacted in the search, that the government is not to be cheated. It would have been cheaper, in this one instance, to let the small item go—but in the course of a year, there would have been hundreds, thousands, or even more similar items. If they were all to be forgotten, the total would be tremendous. And every forgotten item would breed still another small item which, following the same trend of logic, should be forgotten. That cannot be! That's why Uncle Sam is quite a *Sherlock*—to protect himself.

There isn't much of this that the general public knows about, except

when the individuals themselves are concerned in some particular case. Then you learn about it, quite emphatically! There's no fooling around with a government agent; there's no telling him you know the mayor, or the chief of police, or any one else. Even if you know the president himself, it won't matter, for the department heads of these various divisions are not always responsible to the president.

Most famous of all these various divisions, of course, is the F. B. I.—the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Others that are not so famous, however, include the Coast Guard, the Customs Patrol, the Bureau of Narcotics, the Secret Service, the Post-office Inspectors, the Bureau of Internal Revenue Intelligence Unit, the Immigration Border Patrol of the Labor Department, the Customs Investigative Unit, and the Alcohol Tax Unit Enforcement Division.

The names are descriptive in themselves, but the work in many of the departments covers a much wider range than the title might imply.

THE Secret Service has, up until recent years, been considered the ultimate in the work of bringing the criminal to justice. Public fancy gave it every task imaginable, and was ready to accept anything that might be accredited to this division.

Actually, it is not the largest nor the most active of these various departments. It has less than five hundred men, all told—which does not even begin to compare with some other divisions, such as the Coast Guard, which has more than ten thousand. However, this handful of men in the Secret Service have some very exciting tasks, and their exploits have filled many thrilling volumes. Their greatest job is to guard United States currency—that is,

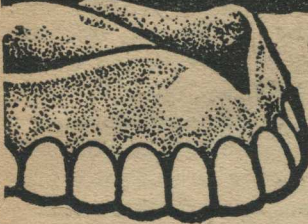
they must keep counterfeiting in check, else the value of our currency will be nothing. Because counterfeiting is one crime in which money is actually "made" while committing the crime, it holds out much for those who will be tempted, and it is very easy to put on a pretense while engaged in the work.

The lush field of counterfeiting, however, never seems to prove such good pasture, and this is mostly because the Secret Service is ever on the job. This division has one of the most complete records of all people engaged in engraving, and with recent years, those in photo-engraving, since much counterfeiting now is done in that manner. The photo-engraving field enlarges this scope to a great extent, but while only the engravers were possible suspects, practically every capable one in the country was kept under enough surveillance so that the service was aware of any false moves he might make.

Next to watching the country's currency, the task of the Secret Service is to watch over the president and his family. Whenever the president makes public appearances, every step of his journey, and every person in the crowd, must be viewed with suspicion. In times of peace and general happiness, this task is not so difficult, unless some particular locality or incident might have served to flare up sentiment against the president. In times of war, this is an extremely difficult job, for the loss of the leader of the nation would be worth more than a major victory on the field. It is not, of course, the best method of fighting a war, but in war, not the best, but the most effective, roads are chosen.

It also means that the Secret Service must watch over the president

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and his family at all times, whether at home or away. Theoretically, the president is never alone; the Secret Service is always with him. Sometimes this becomes boring to both the men on duty and the president, and there have been cases where presidents took great joy in evading their guards, just for the fun of it.

Recent rulings on gold, which make the U. S. government the only agency to have control over this metal, have given the Secret Service another task. Because currency is already under their division of work, they are also given the task of enforcing all the Federal gold statutes that have been passed. They were the agents who were digging up all the "hoarded" gold of a few years back; they are the ones that will get after you if you drop around to your bank to cash a "gold" note which is not supposed to be in circulation, and they are the ones who will have a thing or two to say if you want to send some gold out of this country.

And don't ever attempt to forge a government check. The Secret Service will be on your trail, and like all government agencies, they never quit until they get their man.

ONE department of the government which gets in the news fairly often, but is still a mystery to every one, is the division of Post-office Inspectors. There are about six hundred of them at present, and it is their job to see that the "mail goes through" efficiently, and safely. They must look for trouble from within as well as without. When they find trouble, they do away with it promptly, and if the papers do get some news about it, not a name is mentioned. The agents are forever unknown, and they do all they can to keep this veil of secrecy over their work. Without it, their effectiveness would be decreased.

To prevent mail robberies is their biggest task. This includes more than the "big-time" mail robberies

where trains are stopped, or wrecked, while robbers take the pay roll. It includes these attacks, of course, but nowadays there are very few train robberies. Crooks find that it's almost impossible to pull that nowadays. However, it is a bit easier to rob a mail truck, many of which often contain a great deal of money. It is the job of the postal inspectors to see that the routes taken by these trucks are well protected, if necessary, and changed often enough to keep crooks from being too sure of them.

However, there is another source of theft which must be watched. With the great mass of postal employees, there is bound to be some theft, no matter how carefully the employees are chosen. Conditions at home may be such as to strongly tempt a man who knows that thousands of dollars pass through his hands in the envelopes he handles, and it is only human to fall to temptation occasionally. But Uncle Sam's postal service cannot give in to such human frailty, and the postal inspector must spot the culprit. The various ways of doing this are closely guarded by the postal inspectors. There are many ways mentioned, but it is almost impossible to learn definitely which is right, and which is just a phantasy made up by some imaginative writer. But their effectiveness is without doubt. The loss through postal theft is almost negligible.

Another form of postal theft which is just as much a part of their task is the theft which some clever schemers accomplish through the use of the mails. Many a crooked organization whose legal advice was too sound in all points to be cracked by the police has found its doom at the hands of the postal inspectors. Just let Uncle Sam catch you in one dishonest claim; just let him see one letter that has gone through his channels in which you show a sign of fraud, lottery, or some similar scheme—and you're done for! Uncle

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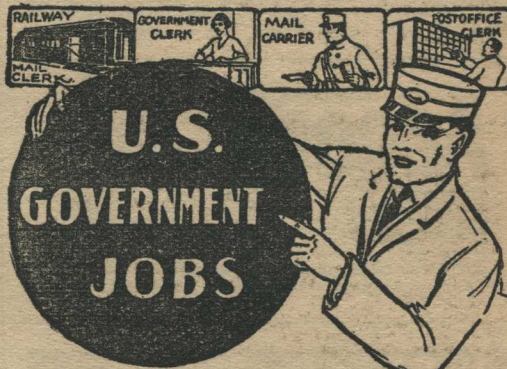
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THE Bureau of Narcotics has the job of checking on narcotic traffic within the United States. Its work does not extend to importations of the drug, as this is handled by the customs units of Uncle Sam's watchdogs. However, the Bureau works hand in hand with any other department which may help it, or to which it can extend help. Most of the work of this department, therefore, is to keep track of sales and exchanges as they are made on the books of firms authorized to handle drugs. The arrests and round-ups made in inland cities and towns are usually made by this group; many of those made in seaport cities are in connection with the illegal admission of drugs, and therefore the other departments also have something to do with them.

A division remindful of the old prohibition days is the Alcohol Tax Unit Enforcement Division. The work of this division is just about the same as that of the enforcers of prohibition, except that instead of worrying about whether they make alcohol or not, the point here is to see that they pay the tax. Of course, wherever alcohol is manufactured in the regular manner, the tax officials are aware of it. It brings this group back again to the job of tracing down illegal stills, checking on outlets that may seek to sell liquor without the proper taxes having been paid on it, and watching those who seek to smuggle liquor through the customs. There are almost two thousand men in this service, and it costs over five million dollars a year to keep them

working, so you can imagine the great sum that must be taken in on alcohol tax in order to require this many watchdogs for those who do not want to pay!

These men continue to have the thrills that went along with prohibition, although not in so great a number. "Bootlegging" to day is done with much more finesse than it was in the old days. The mountaineers and their stills do not give this division its greatest headache; it's the big-time stuff, very often financed by otherwise law-abiding business men who think, in some way or other, that producing alcohol without paying the tax on it is not against the law, that causes the trouble. The bootleggers, if they are still to be called that, have worked out pretty tight systems by now, but not tight enough to get by for any length of time, as the arrests made by this division show.

Several groups of government agencies can be put under the general heading of "customs" services. These are the Customs Investigative Unit, the Customs Patrol, the Immigration Border Patrol, and the Coast Guard. Basically, they are all working toward the same end—to be sure that nothing that is not supposed to get within our borders gets here, and that all charges supposed to be paid on imports are properly paid.

The Border Patrol is under the supervision of the Labor Department, because its greatest task is to see that no aliens enter the country illegally. They not only have to watch seaport towns and other border towns, but have to patrol every foot of our border, just to be sure. Much of this patrolling is done by plane; some by car, and a good bit continues to be done by the original foot-patrol system. Although there have been no great attempts of aliens to get into our borders in masses lately, there are always enough to give the patrol its worries.

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"PIC" is a magazine that brings to all the atmosphere of the world's brightest street, Broadway.

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TEN CENTS AT YOUR NEWS STAND.

ANNOUNCEMENT of New Coffee Agency Openings



EARNINGS UP TO \$60⁰⁰ IN A WEEK

Over 350 more men and women are needed at once to open up fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. If you are looking for a bona fide chance to make as high as \$60.00 in a week, starting at once, this company will send you everything you need, give you all the help you require, and back you up with its proven successful plans. You risk no money. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living. If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you, and if we have, you will receive full information about this Coffee Agency Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan. Don't delay. Send your Application at once.

ALBERT MILLS

4950 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Clip Out and Mail Today!!

COFFEE AGENCY APPLICATION

①

WRITE YOUR FULL NAME AND ADDRESS HERE:

Name
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)

Address

City and State

②

HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE TO COFFEE AGENCY?

Mark with an "X"

FULL TIME; PART TIME

[Full time pays up to \$35 to \$60 in a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to \$22.50 in a week.]

③

STATE WHICH BONUS YOU PREFER—CASH OR FORD AUTOMOBILE

In addition to their cash earnings, we offer our producers a cash bonus of \$500.00 or a brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

\$500.00 CASH BONUS; LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN

④

CAN YOU START AT ONCE?

Mark with an "X"
 YES; NO

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

ALL APPLICATIONS WILL BE HELD STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Send No Money

There is no money fee of any kind required with this Application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. You will be notified by *return mail* whether your home locality is available. Then you can decide if the money-making possibilities look good to you. No obligation on your part. Those who apply first will be given preference, so be sure to mail your Application without delay—NOW! No letter is required, just the Application. Mail at once to

ALBERT MILLS, President

4950 Monmouth Ave.,

Cincinnati, Ohio

DO EXPERT MARKSMEN FIND THAT CAMEL'S COSTLIER TOBACCOS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

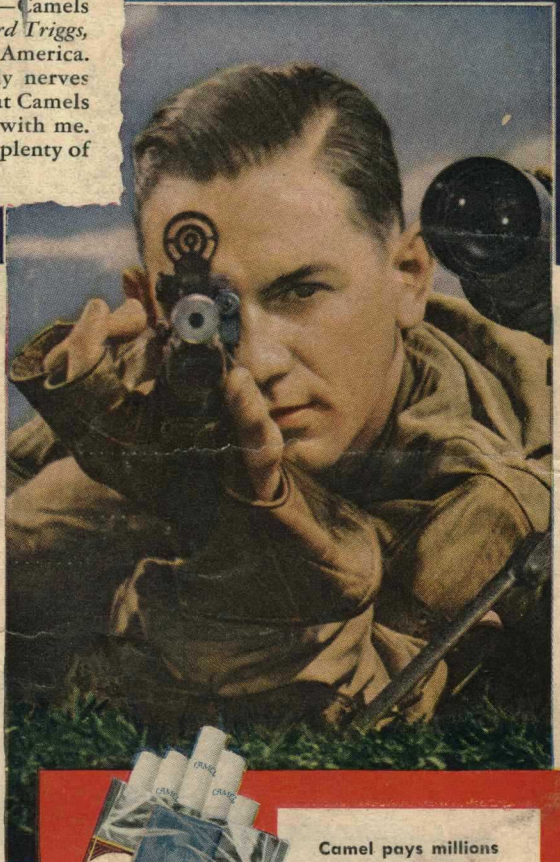
"YES, SIR, in any bunch of expert shots—Camels are the favorite cigarette," says *Ransford Triggs*, one of the foremost marksmen in America. "Marksmen know that it takes steady nerves to make high scores. And the fact that Camels don't frazzle my nerves goes over big with me. That comes from a man who smokes plenty of Camels every day, too."

And millions of other people — the most loyal group of smokers in the world — put their "O.K." on Camels too — making Camels the largest-selling cigarette in America



TAKING X-RAYS is a delicate job and a tiring one too. But as Miss *Myrtle Sawler*, X-ray technician, says: "When I'm tired, a Camel quickly refreshes me. I get a 'lift' with a Camel."

FRANK EAMON, New York ambulance driver, says: "I smoke a good many Camels. They don't jangle my nerves. And without healthy nerves I'd never be able to hold down this job."



Camel pays millions more for **COSTLIER TOBACCOS!** Camels are a matchless blend of finer, **MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS** — Turkish and Domestic.

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