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MARCH 1933

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by E. Hoffmann Price

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Vol. XXXV
Number 4

MARCH
1936

CLUES DETECTIVE STORIES

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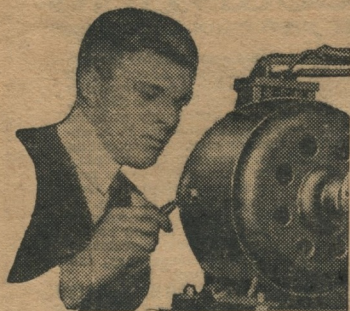
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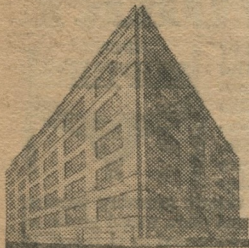
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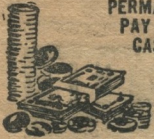
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A Mystery Novelette

H O N E S T Y in E V E R Y T H I N G



AL WAS an armchair sheriff. He had always taken the stand that if the law just let the crooks alone the crooks would let the law alone. It had worked tolerably well. But, as he sat breathing the air redolent of new calcimine and old cigars, Al's heart was heavy—so heavy that he couldn't get to sleep. It was already three o'clock in the afternoon and he hadn't slept a wink since lunch. He was thinking of a letter he had just received:

Sheriff Al Thrasher
Cumsaw County,
Cumsaw, Oklahoma

Dear Sir: As you know, the governor is to formally open the new Cumsaw County Courthouse, and, in view of the fact that he is vitally interested in criminology, it is advisable that you have your prisoners installed in their new quarters on or before the day of his visit.

Yours truly,
Hastings Amory,
Secretary to the governor.

His mind carried him to the basement. With a sigh, a frown and a loquacious flood inaccurately and half-heartedly shot at an unoffending cuspidor—three hundred of them in the building, each one of which had netted him ten cents—he tried to dismiss the unwelcome vision.

Didn't his honor know how busy Al had been attending to the innumerable details in the construction of the new building? It had taken all his time and interest and watchfulness to see that everything was done as per specification.

Why, dammit all, there weren't any prisoners to install. He couldn't do a hundred things at once. Besides, prisoners come and go every

by John F. Goodrich

day, but counties build courthouses only once in a lifetime.

The warm afternoon sun drenched the courthouse square. The new leaves on the graceful elms and shaggy catalpas were grateful, the young grass was thankful, the birds in their new homes were eloquently appreciative. The young man who lolled, sprawled out on one of the new benches, took the kindly warmth for granted. His too-pointed shoes were a menace to passers-by, but he was too indolent to care what anybody thought. Besides, there didn't happen to be any passers-by.

His cap was pulled low to protect his eyes from the sun's glare. But not low enough to hide a decidedly good-looking face. He painstakingly manicured his nails with his imitation gold knife.

He was mildly perturbed about the immediate future as he torpidly absorbed copious quantities of sunshine. The journey to Chicago, whence he was heading, by means of truss rods, blind baggages and tops, seemed at the moment particularly nauseating. Joe admittedly preferred the inside to the outside of Pullmans.

He got up slowly and stretched—a long, languorous, luxurious stretch that made his joints crack. His sigh sounded like a summer breeze in the sycamores. He ambled leisurely toward the courthouse steps.

THE five-gallon Stetson was tilted back and the hand that held it also scratched the graying thatch that covered Al's remarkably bone-armored brain. Joe's was an unfamiliar figure—didn't belong any-

*Which
concerns
a
sheriff
and
his
problem*



*"Some buzzards,
there—for a bird
of my delicate
plumage to be
roosting with!"*

where in Oklahoma. Al knew that by his general appearance and it bothered him exceedingly. He turned and left his office.

They met in the rotunda of the courthouse. One glance at Al and Joe had him clocked: a .22 caliber on a .45 frame. Joe wondered if Al had had savvy enough to clean up on this building job.

Al also did some professional clocking. City slicker, all right, but danged if I know him. Wonder what he's looking for? Drummer, mebbe. I dunno.

"Any objections to looking over your place?" Joe asked in his pleasing way. "Fine-looking building, all right. You the sheriff?"

"Yes, Sheriff Al Thrasher," Al replied, beaming at the compliment. It meant something to be spotted instantly as the sheriff. "Help yourself, stranger——"

"Dawson, Joe Dawson's the name."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Dawson," Al replied heartily. "I'll be right proud to show you over the place myself. They ain't a courthouse like it west of the Mississippi."

They went down the steps into the prisoner's quarters.

"An elegant hotel you've got here, sheriff. It would be almost a pleasure to be a guest." Joe laughed.

Al shot him a troubled look. It changed to a pained look. Al was racked with the birth pangs of an idea.

Joe caught the broken waves of troubled thought on Al's face.

"Your prisoners haven't been moved yet?"

"No," Al replied lamely, "I thought I—well——"

"I know," Joe answered quickly. "You hate to spoil the nice, new place with lousy bums."

Al nodded his head.

"I don't blame you," Joe continued. "Now look at that bridal suite. It would be a pleasure, not a punishment, to be incarcerated in yon love nest."

Al's mouth dropped open. Joe was leading him into rosy fields of wicked temptation. Joe knew he was leading Al somewhere, but hadn't called the station yet. He was studiously unconcerned, but his wits were as alert as a cat in an aviary.

"Know any folks in these parts?" Al asked with the indirect approach he always used when he was sleuthing.

"Not a cockeyed soul," Joe replied. "Why?"

"Nothing. Figure on staying in Cumsaw long?"

"I'm not particular," Joe answered, now feeling he was getting hot. "If something turns up I might."

THEY had finished the tour of the jail. Al seemed reluctant to leave. Those empty cells shouted to him to get busy. They appealed hungrily to him for tenants. He had to do something.

Beads of biscuit shortening popped out on his forehead. "Maybe we might find something," he started lamely. Joe looked interested, hopeful.

It encouraged Al. "I might——" "You don't need a deputy, do you?" Joe asked.

Al shook his head quickly.

"I thought you might want some help getting your prisoners moved." Joe volunteered. "How many you got?"

"Well—you see——" Al evaded. "I—been—course building a big place like this——"

Al had long since ceased playing poker. The boys could read his

hands in his face as a parent reads a lying child. Joe was no slouch in facial Gregg. A light dawned. He looked quickly around to see that no one heard.

"So that's the trouble," he whispered. "You haven't got any?"

Sadly, forlornly and guiltily, Al nodded.

Joe plunged himself into deep thought. "That's sure tough," he said finally. "You ought to do something about it."

"Don't I know it?" wailed Al. "But what can I do?"

"If I were in that hole, what would I do?" Joe mused, more to himself than to Al. "I couldn't go out and round up a herd like you do steers. But if I could only locate a bunch of mavericks——"

He was talking Al's language and a blaze of light brightened Al's downcast face.

"I think maybe," Joe continued carefully, "I'd rope them, brand them and run them into my corral."

"What do you mean?" Al asked with a trembling break in his voice.

"I mean that if I didn't have any prisoners and had to have some, I'd try to beg, borrow or steal, and if that didn't work I'd probably try to rent some."

"By cracky!" Al exclaimed, slapping Joe on the back and then hastily checking himself and looking around furtively. "Let's go up to my office and talk this here thing over."

"O. K., but you better go first—just to be sure no one sees us."

In the office, with the door locked, Al drew his chair close to Joe's and put his hand on Joe's leg. "Well, how about it?" he asked eagerly.

"Got a gallery?" Joe asked.

Al chuckled and pulled out his collection of "wanted" circulars. Together they went over them, Joe

careful to segregate the ones wanted by the Chicago police.

"Some buzzards, these," Joe commented, "for a bird of my delicate plumage to be roosting with."

"Shucks!" Al assured him. "If worst comes to worst it's only a case of mistaken identity and I'm the goat."

"Yeah," Joe replied, his attention riveted on a circular before him. "You'd be the goat. Take a look at this one, sheriff," he said, tossing it over in front of Al. "With three weeks' growth of beard I could pass for this egg?"

"By cracky!" Al muttered. "You ain't him, are you?"

"You don't think I'd be sticking my head in the lion's mouth like this if I were, do you?"

Al allowed as how that sounded reasonable.

"What damage will you pay?" Joe asked.

Al looked surprised. "Why, I thought that a good, clean place to sleep—ain't a bed been occupied—and three square meals a day, kinder ought to be enough."

"It would," Joe considered carefully, "with about ten iron men a day for good will."

"Cracky!" Al exclaimed, appalled. "You ain't got no mean opinion of yourself, have you?"

Al rolled his eyes up at Joe in a heartbroken appeal, but Joe was adamant.

II.

WHEN the last hobo in the jungle had been kicked into full possession of his mental faculties, if any, Joe had completed the cast. Belasco himself couldn't have done better:

One plain drunk, a pint of Al's confiscated hooch had nobly fitted him for the part. Two vagabonds,

*The officious and official
moralizing made the inside
of Joe's stomach crawl.*



both hungry and serving with honors in the Great Unwashed. One held on suspicion and looking the part. And to add the master's touch, one "hop-head," as genuine as the dope that dulled his jumping nerves.

Joe rode herd on the noisome group and successfully guided it into Al's corral without being seen or causing any suspicion.

The supporting cast had nothing but exclamations of joy as they beheld the immaculate quarters. Joe, however, was more temperamental, and demanded extra blankets, criticized the architect for not having added sleeping porches, and insisted on the first day's emolument—ten dollars.

That night Al slipped off into a comatose state, vaguely troubled by tiny goblins wearing "wanted" circulars and throwing ten-dollar bills into huge caldrons supported from nowhere by ropes of pearls.

But it was no nightmare that awakened him later. It was a sunshine girl and as sweet a bit of healthy femininity as ever grew out of Oklahoma's fertile soil.

"Look what the *Clarion* says," Mary cried excitedly. "Why didn't you wake us up and tell us?"

"What does the paper say?" Al mumbled, sitting up.

"It calls you 'our alert, clever and courageous sheriff' and says, 'with steel nerves and experienced caution' and that you've done what the whole Chicago police force couldn't do!"

"Tell your ma to get seven breakfasts ready and I'll take them over."

"Oh, pa, let me take the breakfasts!" Mary asked eagerly.

"No."

"Oh, please," she begged.

"Not this morning, honey. But you'll have to take them lunch this

CLU—2

noon. I'll be busy with the governor."

Mary rushed to help her mother. Eva was singing cheerily. Seven meals, three times a day, two dollars and ten cents.

Later Al wheeled his breakfasts to the jail door and went to Joe's cell.

Joe took one look at it and his fastidious lips curled in scorn.

"Take it away, take it away!"

Al stopped stock still in his tracks.

"No eggs for breakfast? And in a country that fairly teems with poultry?"

"Well, of all the nerve!" Al gasped.

"As long as you are the host of this lugubrious little housewarming you'll have to serve far better breakfasts than this. Three poached eggs on rafts of browned, crisp toast waxed with the golden butter of the land. Also Java, that is at least first cousin to a stove lid," Joe said with mock appeal.

"Well, by cracky!" was all Al could stammer.

"Because if you don't," Joe concluded with deadly finality, "this housewarming will turn into a funeral and you, being the corpse, will be the life of the party. Run along and get the eggs going."

AL couldn't go back to Eva. She would sense negroid characteristics in the highly combustible accumulation instantly. So Al made his way gloomily to the Remember, a café, where he bought a breakfast for Joe, mentally charging the amount paid to election expenses, and plunked the victuals down in the cell sullenly.

When Joe had finished his second egg he looked up, square into Mary's wide expression of curios-

ity. Joe forgot his breakfast, forgot his past, forgot everything except that he was gazing at the most alluring bit of rosy-cheeked fluff that had gladdened his eye in many a day.

"He just can't be so bad and smile so good," Mary said to herself. "It's too bad. He looks kind of nice—that is, he wouldn't look so bad if he wasn't in jail."

Joe wasn't so cramped in his viewpoints. He thought Mary would look like a million dollars in jail or out.

"Why, where did you get those eggs?" she asked in mild surprise.

"The maître d'hôtel brought them, miss," Joe replied in his best manner. "And they seem to be a bit overdone."

"But pa didn't bring you any eggs," Mary said, still at a loss to account for the hen fruit.

"And who might your pa be, miss?" Joe asked solicitously.

"Well, you ought to know," Mary answered with a pretty indignation. "He's the sheriff who caught you."

Joe changed instantly. He was deadly serious. "I've been up against many a hard officer in my day, miss, but that dad of yours is the toughest proposition in the way of a sheriff I've ever tackled."

Mary smiled proudly. This was such a nice prisoner.

"Well, you ought to be glad you're in such a nice clean jail," she said, and then stopped. A shadow of regret coursed over her fresh face. "If you've got to be in a jail—because the old one smelled something awful."

With a sympathetic flash in her eyes for Joe, she turned and left.

JOE went back to his thoroughly congealed egg and began playing jackstraws with the remains of his

breakfast, until he was aroused by the noise of the governor's approach.

Al and the portly governor headed the inspection party. They stopped at Joe's cell.

"A tough-looking hombre, sheriff," the governor announced pompously, inspecting Joe with a condescending eye. "If all our sheriffs were as alert and as courageous as you, the State, our wives, our daughters and our homes would be much less in jeopardy."

Al turned his face away modestly—and caught a glint in Joe's eye that made his knees tremble.

"I shall take a personal interest in this case and see that justice prevails," the governor continued, and his remark didn't steady Al's knees.

"It's a shame, too. Now if this young man had only had the proper environment, received the proper training, he might have been an honest man, who knows? Look at his face. You have a mother, haven't you, prisoner?"

This officious and official moralizing made the inside of Joe's liver crawl. He remained sullenly silent.

"Oh, the memory of his mother touches a bitter chord. I wish I could stop longer," his honor said with a smug self-complacency. "By my experienced methods I'm sure I could get a complete confession from him."

Al's knees knocked together at the mere thought of such a catastrophe.

"Perhaps you'd like to confess to me now, prisoner," the governor condescendingly inquired.

Joe let a silent sneer of contempt cross his features.

"Come, come, lad, speak up," the governor said sharply, piqued at Joe's forbidding silence. And to

make it infinitely worse he snapped his pudgy fingers in Joe's face.

"Nuts!" Joe muttered, and turned away.

Al's knees were wilting.

"A surly brute, that," the governor said. "Nothing but the harshest treatment will have any effect upon him—and I shall take a personal satisfaction in seeing that he gets it."

The party moved out of the jail on its dignified tour of inspection, to the bunting-wrapped band stand where his honor delivered pigeon-hole number-three speech to the assembled citizens. He concluded by acclaiming Al. Al's rheumatism always told him when wet weather was coming. His entire insides griped an intuition to him that made him close his eyes to shut out the awful possibilities.

EVA, over her big stove, was perspiring, too. But hers were beads of moist happiness. Everything was just grand—so grand that she forgot herself entirely and dished out a meal for the prisoners that was fit to dress her own bounteous table.

The dewy drops on Mary's temples didn't come from carrying the plates down the jail corridor—two by two, to the hungry actors. One, however, was different from the rest.

From the succulent chorus re-sounding through the jail, it was obvious that the prisoners were bucking tucker that made their stomachs think their necks were about to be noosed.

Joe expected a good meal, but he didn't expect that generous slab of white meat from Eva's last night's chicken. And he didn't expect that large-sized square of creamy chocolate that Mary had fudged with her own little hands. And he didn't expect that little hand to flutter a sec-

ond or two in his when he caught it and smiled his likable smile.

But it did and it brought a crimson flush to Mary's cheek. She was falling, and right beside her, as she fell, gyrated Joe.

Coaled up on Eva's gastronomical joys, the bums in Al's swell jail were, under the leadership of fiery and garrulous "Red," about to hang home-sweet-home signs on the virgin walls.

"And why should we be turned out into a cruel world where only work awaits us?" he shouted, and his words were answered with a lusty cheer.

The echoes of their hosannas brought a dark frown on Al's face as he slumped down the stairs and strode angrily to the first cell door.

"Get the hell out!" he growled, as he flung the door wide open.

"Nothing doing," a vagabond answered, without arising from his reclining position.

The same cry came from the other cells and Al staggered back, gasping.

"Where do you get that stuff, you bums?" he demanded with a loud voice and a weak heart.

"The constitution must be upheld," cried Red, quelling the riot.

Al stared at him with protruding eyes.

"We were arrested in the act of what, in this fair State, constitutes a crime," Red went on, grandiloquently. "And, being honest citizens of this grand and glorious republic, we are willing, nay, more than that, we insist that we be punished as the law proscribes—ten days I believe it is," he finished with a direct challenge to the flabbergasted sheriff.

"Why—you—you——" Al exploded, a bit lamely, but Red cut in on him.

"But we will be generous," Red continued magnanimously. "And to hold the costs as low as possible, I will take upon myself the responsibility of speaking for my comrades, and assure you we will all plead guilty."

Al sat down hard—pathetically hard. The horrible intuition of the morning was the reality of the afternoon. The governor was sure to start things with Joe—and now these hobos would stick him for two bucks a day each. He got up weakly and slumped his disconsolate way toward the door.

"Ten beans, please," Joe said cheerily.

"Aw, have a heart," Al pleaded miserably.

"And get me some paper and pencil. I want to write a bread-and-butter note to the governor," Joe said smilingly.

"By cracky," Al said, finding a little of his vanished spirit, "I reckon you'll be wanting me to pay you for doing that for you?"

Joe remitted the fine but the pencil and paper were delivered, and when Mary brought the suppers that night the hand clasp was a little longer, a little tighter and the paper with Joe's feelings penciled on it found itself tucked in a warm, fluttering breast, to be eagerly retrieved, read and reread late into the night.

III.

AL'S literary background had had a wide scope geographically, but culturally, aside from "Frankie and Johnnie," "Barnacle Bill the Sailor," "The Cowboy's Lament," "Down by the Rio Grande," and a few others, Al had not gone in too frantically for a poetical education. Now fragments of an old classic synchronized with his dragging steps and for-

lornly stooped shoulders. Dirgelike it hounded and pounded. "Somewhere the sun is shining—somewhere children shout. But there is no joy in Mudville—Mighty Casey has struck out."

Judge Murray saw Al and waited. "A beautiful morning, Al," he beamed.

"Howdy, judge," was Al's colorless answer.

"Great day for you yesterday."

"Yeah."

"And we'll make it another one today, Al." The judge laughed as he slapped Al on the back. "You just run the prisoners up to my court and we'll show the governor that we're just as interested in upholding the law as he is. I'll kangaroo them through in short order and plaster a limit on every man."

A look of poignant pain suffused the gloom of Al's face.

"Listen, judge, you know we don't need any work done and these hobos just cost the county money to feed."

"Don't be a fool, Al," the surprised judge replied. "You know limit sentences help your record—and don't hurt mine any."

Promptly at ten, Al herded his tailor-made but ill-fitting bevy of tie-larks into court, where Judge Murray, surrounded by dignity and exuding tobacco aroma and pancake smoke—at home the judge had to eat in the kitchen—held forth.

Almost before Al knew what was happening the judge had dispensed justice with a hard and unflinching hand. As each culprit was found guilty and given the extreme limit a beatific smile would lighten his unshaven face. But each sentence was a rusty spike roughly driven into Al's grieving heart.

He marched the five back to their cells. Ten days—twenty bucks—ten days. twenty bucks—five men—a

hundred smackers—five men—a hundred smackers, kept surging through his aching brain.

Even the husky thanks the prisoners muttered as they eagerly sought their cells for ten days more of Eva's cooking, failed to help—in fact it almost swamped the doughty sheriff of Cumsaw County.

But, by closing his eyes as he passed Joe, he managed to get to his office and sink hopelessly into his chair. It seemed to Al that one man just couldn't stand that much grief.

He opened his misery-laden eyes and let them wander aimlessly over his desk. A yellow envelope arrested them. A jaundiced, bilious envelope. Al shut his eyes and groped blindly for it. Fumbling he tore the flap loose and painfully extracted the telegram inside, which instructed him to deliver Joe to the Chicago police and to leave that night.

MARY'S FACE had an I-know-I-shouldn't-be-but-I'm-awfully-sorry-he's-going expression that brought a porcupine into Joe's throat.

"I'm going away to-night," he said awkwardly.

"I know it," she answered fluently.

"I'm not guilty."

"I know it."

"I'd rather be in jail here where I can see you once in a while than free in the heart of New York."

"I know it," Mary answered with a break in her voice, and fled.

If Eva could have seen the way Mary's bosom rose and fell, if she could have heard the galloping beat of the girl's heart, if she could have felt the fiery fever on that smooth temple—it would have been sassafras tea and hot blankets for little Mary. But Eva was too busy, too excited and too happy about Al's trip to Chicago to notice.

The smoking compartment of the Pullman was empty.

"Take these damn things off," Joe said.

"Do you think we'd better?" Al queried.

"I'm ordering—not asking," Joe snapped.

"O. K.," Al acquiesced reluctantly, and the handcuffs were removed.

With Cumsaw in the distance Al's feelings began to pick up a little.

"What about a game of cribbage?" he asked.

"We better get down to business," Joe answered.

"What business?" Al asked blankly.

"The business of my get-away," Joe replied.

"What do you mean, get-away?" Al said sharply. "We're going to Chicago, ain't we?"

"I'm not being measured for any suit of lounging pants—the stripes run the wrong way."

"How you going to do it?" Al asked.

"First," Joe said, "by collecting a twenty-dollar note from you."

Al's eyes popped wide open. "By cracky, where do I come in on this?" he growled. "'Pears to me as if all I am in this company is the cashier."

"Got any kick coming?"

"No, not exactly," Al moaned. "But this here thing is costing me an awful lot of money."

"You should worry," Joe said cheerfully. "It's brought you a re-election at deeply cut prices."

"Mebbe you're right at that," Al replied, feeling better—and besides he was traveling on county funds. He pulled out his wallet and painfully extracted a twenty. Then a dawning light broke over his lugubrious face.

"Say," he exclaimed, happy as a

pup with a shoe, "what about doing me a favor?"

"Spill it first," Joe said.

"Well, I thought it would look better for me and everything if you would hold up this train. There doesn't seem to be anybody around. Just ring for the porter and stick him up. I'll lend you my gun."

"Not on your life," Joe said emphatically. "The Pullman company runs these cars for other people to sleep in—not themselves—and a fat

Joe started to wrap up a towel.

"What's that?" Al cried.

"A gag," Joe answered, and approached Al.

"How can I holler with that in my mouth?"

"What you want to holler for?"

"For help."

"Never mind. Some one is bound to come by before long."

"There ain't been any one by for more'n two hours."

"That ain't long."

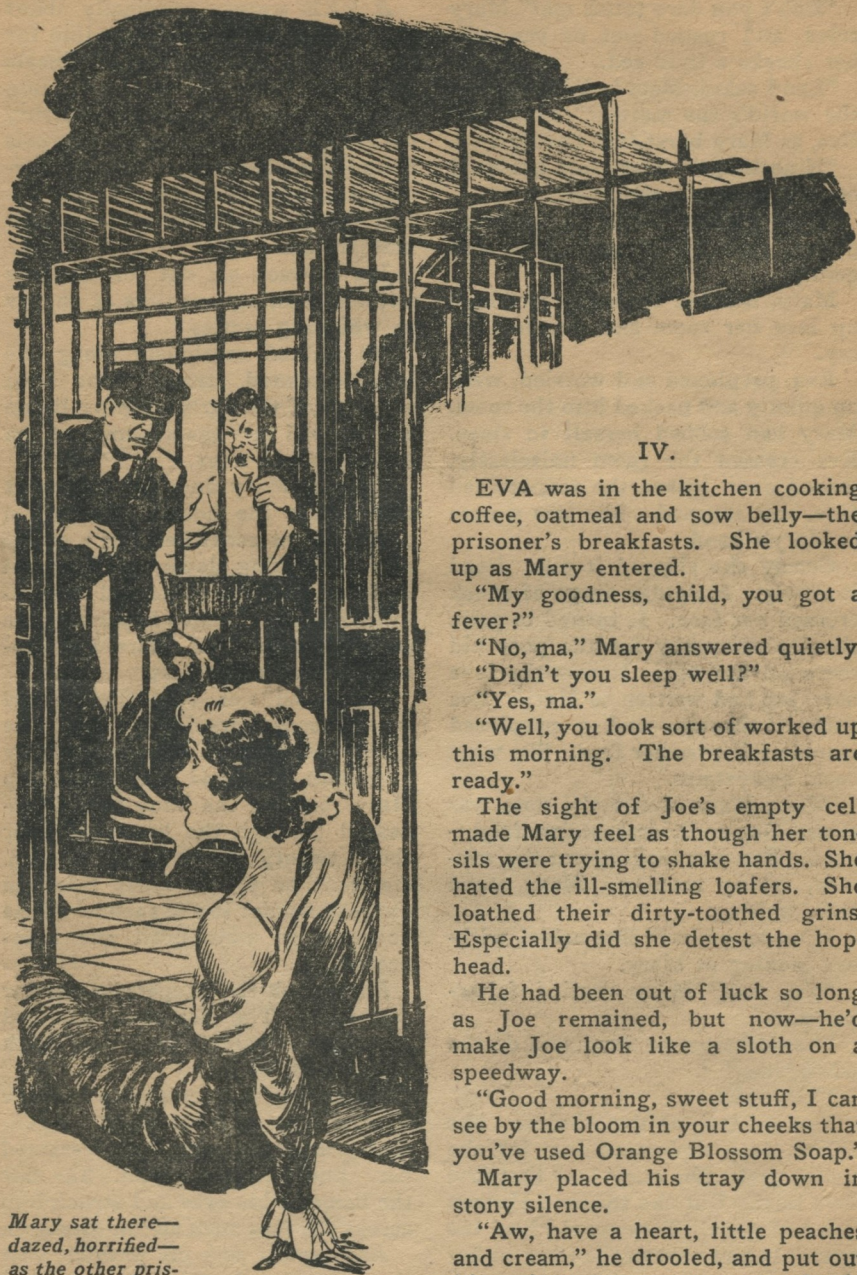
*Joe knew but one thing:
Never would he slacken the
grip he had on the madman's
throat—*



chance I'd have with them on my trail."

"Well, I just thought I'd mention it," Al said lamely and disappointedly. "And if you ain't going to do it you better be tying me up."

"Ain't long with all this here rigging in your mouth?" Al cried, but a few deft twists put a muffled end to his objections. When the train stopped at the next water tank it pulled out with one less passenger.



*Mary sat there—
dazed, horrified—
as the other pris-
oners screamed
encouragement.*

IV.

EVA was in the kitchen cooking coffee, oatmeal and sow belly—the prisoner's breakfasts. She looked up as Mary entered.

"My goodness, child, you got a fever?"

"No, ma," Mary answered quietly.

"Didn't you sleep well?"

"Yes, ma."

"Well, you look sort of worked up this morning. The breakfasts are ready."

The sight of Joe's empty cell made Mary feel as though her tonsils were trying to shake hands. She hated the ill-smelling loafers. She loathed their dirty-toothed grins. Especially did she detest the hop-head.

He had been out of luck so long as Joe remained, but now—he'd make Joe look like a sloth on a speedway.

"Good morning, sweet stuff, I can see by the bloom in your cheeks that you've used Orange Blossom Soap."

Mary placed his tray down in stony silence.

"Aw, have a heart, little peaches and cream," he drooled, and put out his grimy, nervous paw to detain her.

"Don't you dare touch me!" Mary cried, and rushed out of the cell, her cheeks a livid red.

"Land sakes, Mary! Whatever in the world's the matter?" exclaimed Eva, as Mary burst into the kitchen.

"N-nothing!" Mary laid her head on her mother's shoulder.

"There, there, child, you better go up and lay down," Eva said gently.

Mary, blinded by tears, stumbled up into her room and finished her cry.

Eva, perplexed and worried, went up quietly and peeked into the room. Mary had sobbed herself to sleep. Eva crossed the room noiselessly, leaned over, kissed the tear-stained face, and stopped. She saw a note in Mary's hand.

Gently she slipped it out. Read it slowly. A sudden surge of shock crossed her face. It turned to pain, then to sympathy for the poor kid there on the bed. It was the love note Joe had written to Mary. Eva read it through and a perplexed trouble fell over her face. She went back downstairs.

When Mary awoke the note was gone. She went downstairs, frightened. Eva was looking out the window, seeing nothing. Mary stood still, waiting.

"You love him?" Eva asked, without looking at Mary.

"Yes, ma," Mary replied falteringly.

"You'd better go down and do the marketing."

"Yes, ma."

Eva sat long at the window. She felt a deep understanding for the young girl. She knew how that first love hurt. But she thanked Heaven Joe had gone. Time would heal the hurt. It had never failed her in her youth when things seemed so hopeless and tragic.

A BEE weaves erratically about before she hits the straight line for the hive; a homing pigeon wheels round and round in ever-increasing circles before it takes the unerring course to the home cote; young eels flounder haphazardly about the Ar-magossa Sea and suddenly head direct for the fresh-water river their mothers came from.

Joe Dawson set out for Cumsaw without wasting any time or energy in whirligig tactics.

He walked cautiously along the less-frequented streets, kept from the rays of the early evening lights and slipped into the shadows of the buildings and trees.

He saw Mary and her food cart come from the house. He laid a course to intercept her, but a group of men coming down the diagonal walk of the square forced him to luff. He lost valuable headway. He stepped faster, his heart synchronized to his eager feet.

He dared not run—that would surely focus attention on him. He dared not whistle. He couldn't fly a protest flag, and the good ship Mary rounded the buoy and disappeared through the basement door about twenty yards ahead of him. He went on to the finish line and dropped anchor in the shadow of the doorway to wait until she reappeared.

Mary took the suppers to the far cell first. The hop-head watched her as she walked back and forth in front of his cell.

When she came with his food he wanted her more than it. Again that grimy twitching hand detained her. She whirled on him. She saw the flame in his eyes and struck him across the face with all her strength.

As a spark sets off powder, that slap detonated the man's drug-soaked mind. He leaped for her.

His dirty hand found her mouth, but not before she cried out once in terror.

Over Mary's shoulder, as he forced her back, the addict saw Joe coming. They both leaped for the half-open door. Joe was a fraction of a second late. He couldn't catch the door as the madman slammed it shut. He dove for the closing crack and thrust his arm in.

The bone snapped as the heavy door crushed it. Joe got his left foot into the door. The addict was beating at Joe through the bars, madly. Joe worked his knee in. Then with the leverage of his leg he forced the opening wider.

The other prisoners shouted for help and to encourage Joe.

With a gigantic effort, Joe pushed his body through the door and sprang at the man's throat. His eye was true. His one good hand closed on the madman's windpipe.

Joe's other hand dangled helplessly at his side. With insane fury the addict rained terrific blows on Joe's unprotected head and face. Joe knew but one thing and that was never to slacken the grip he had on the madman's throat.

When help came they had to pry Joe's fingers loose from the unconscious maniac's neck.

His face battered beyond all recognition, Joe was carried to the spare room in the Thrasher house.

V.

THE DOCTOR had come and gone. Joe was in deep morphine-induced sleep, his arm set and his face and head a mass of bandages.

Mary, still weak from her horrible experience, stood at Eva's side watching. Eva was silently thanking the Lord, in an inarticulate, humble way. Mary took her moth-

er's hand and Eva put her arm around her daughter's shoulder, drawing the girl to her with a sudden fierce gesture of protection.

"Ma?"

"Yes, child?"

"That's him," Mary whispered.

Eva's body tensed. She closed her eyes to the grueling blow as the truth permeated.

Mary buried her head in that wholesome haven a mother carries for a child in trouble, and silently wept. Eva uttered not a word.

Soon she let Mary gently down into a chair and left the room.

All night Eva wrestled with the torturous thought—her little one in love with a jailbird. And yet, if it hadn't been for this very jailbird, what might have happened to that little one?

In the morning, Eva talked with Joe—listened to the boy open his heart to her and she knew he spoke the truth. The clay was all right, the potter a bit careless in the molding.

Eva's life among rough men in a rough country had taught her much. She felt that Mary's love for Joe was not the kind that could be broken off, tearfully and painfully, perhaps, and then laughed away.

Her woman's intuition tore at her mother's hopes. She shuddered at the thought of this union, yet something told her beyond doubt that the union was inevitable.

She knew that often the right kind of love had made many a man. She wondered whether Mary's love would straighten out the crooks and twists in Joe's character. He was still in the formative period. It might.

And with that hope the crest of the hill of doubt had been cleared. Once tasting the romantic flavor she drank deeply of it.

POOR OLD AL had had a rough time. He had wandered aimlessly around Kansas City, trying to muster up sufficient courage to go back and face the music—and Eva.

The Chicago detective had humiliated him; the hectic rush of the city had frightened him; the greasy food had sickened him; and it was a sad, sorrowful, homesick Al who let himself furtively into his own front door.

He heard Eva in the kitchen. He tiptoed through the hall and dining room and to the kitchen door. The familiar odor made his stomach leap. Eva's broad back as she stood at the stove made the tears jet into his eyes. He stood like a sad-eyed mas-tiff.

Eva turned and saw him. She saw that forlorn expression. She ran to him and kissed him.

"Aw, Al," she said soothingly.

"Aw, Eva," he answered humbly.

Often those not blessed with a wide vocabulary make few words mean a great deal.

"Now you just set right down and smoke till I get you some food. I'll jest bet you ain't had a bite of good food since you left," Eva said cheerily.

Al grinned sheepishly and gratefully at her.

"Where is Mary?" he asked.

"Oh—she just went——" Eva wavered.

Eva wavering was something new and alarming to Al. "Eva!" he cried quickly. "There ain't anything happened to Mary, has there?"

"Uh-huh."

"What is it?" Al shouted. Mary was his life.

"Well—you know—aw, Al, listen, she——"

And Al listened, breathlessly, while Eva told him the story.

"But where is this fellow, and who is he? I want to thank him. He can have anything I got," Al exclaimed.

"Be careful, Al, because he may want everything you got," Eva answered.

"What do you mean?" Al asked, again obfuscated by Eva's strange behavior.

"You better go upstairs to the spare room, Al," Eva said, still ill at ease and uncertain about many things.

She stood staring at the door through which Al had gone, on her flushed, friendly face there was an expression which cried, "I wonder if I've done the right thing?"

AL went upstairs quietly, opened the spare-room door and found Mary at the side of the bed reading—and looking—a love story, to a bandaged figure whose one good hand was locked in hers. Al cleared his throat.

Mary turned quickly, startled and confused.

"Why, pa!" she cried joyously and bounded into his arms.

When Al felt that familiar hug, those sweet loving arms around his neck, that precious warm mouth against his cheek, he closed his eyes. All the troubles, humiliation and homesickness slid from his shoulders as snow from a roof. He closed his eyes and his convulsive hug drove the breath from her body.

"Your ma told me all about it," Al said, releasing her.

Mary looked at him with a timid smile, her cheeks flushing a deep red. She turned toward the bed.

"But she didn't say who this man was," Al said, realizing for the first time Eva's intentional omission.

Mary shot Al a quick, frightened

look, but Al missed it as he moved to the side of the bed.

"I want to thank you, young man," he said as he approached the bedside and looked down at the bruised, bandaged face. "I want to thank you from——" he hesitated. A perplexed look came over his face. He bent down for a closer scrutiny. "I want to——"

After what Al had gone through the past few days one face he'd always remember would be Joe's. He bent still lower. "To thank——" There wasn't any doubt about it and Al straightened up. He shook his head as an old bull does after a rap with a club. He looked at Mary, but she seemed miles away. He looked down at Joe again.

"My Lord!" escaped his lips as he sat down, limp and overcome, in Mary's chair.

Mary stood silent and staring. She was sorry for poor old Al, afraid for Joe and worried about her own future happiness.

Al remained, his chin cupped in his hands, eyes on the hooked rug, until Eva ventured in, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I'd rather see my daughter dead than married to a jailbird!" It was Al, Mary's father, speaking.

"But, pa——" Mary cried.

"Aw, Al," Eva interceded, "he ain't honestly a crook."

"I've a sworn duty to perform and I owe it to those who elected me to my position of trust in this community——" It was Al, Sheriff of Cumsaw County, talking now.

"But, pa——" Mary wailed.

"Ain't you had the job long enough?" Eva asked.

"If you feel that way about it," it was Al, Eva's husband, answering now, "all I can do is leave the matter in your hands. Mebbe a mother knows more than a father what to do in a case like this."

"Pa!" Mary cried joyously.

"We could all go to raising chickens——" Eva mused, then stopped.

It was Al, Joe's prospective father-in-law planning now. "If you were only the son of an old friend of the family back in Ohio," he mused, "I might be able to swear you in as a deputy."

Mary and Eva gasped with joy.

"Who do you know back there?" Joe asked through his pursed, swollen lips.

"I don't know nobody," Al replied with crestfallen look.

"Got a gallery?" Joe asked with a twinkle in his one half-open eye.

Al shuddered—and then laughed.

*You risk
good money*



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DEATH MARKS

A crime-action mystery of the aftermath of the gang era

AS A STAGE SETTING for murder, the scene lacked authenticity. The nearly deserted street drowsed in the quietude of the early-morning hours. The doorman of the swanky Graceland Arms, idling under the marquee which ran out over the sidewalk to the curb, cursed the dullness of his life and wished for quitting time.

Diagonally across the street a nighthawk cab driver lounged under his wheel and yarned sleepily with a patrolman who leaned against the door of the cab, languidly twirling his nightstick. Behind them on the sidewalk a loutish news vender periodically raised his voice and croaked of battle, murder and sudden death in the early editions.

The scene was innocent enough—spuriously innocent. For on this stage the stark drama of murder awaited the lifting of the curtain. The supporting cast was on stage. And, as the bored doorman retreated into the lobby of the building for a surreptitious cigarette, the principal made his entrance.

A sleek, black sedan purred to a smooth stop before the Graceland Arms. In the rear seat a swarthy, heavy-jowled man, immobile except for the vigilant flickering of his heavy-lidded black eyes and the rhythmic rippling of jaw muscles as he chewed a cigar, waited in stolid expectancy until a second sedan, carrying four silent, alert figures, ranged alongside. Two of the

convoying car's occupants alighted briskly, scanned the street with hard-eyed thoroughness, their eyes lingering distastefully on the policeman.

"All clear, boss," said one of them, opening the door of the first car. The passenger grunted and stepped to the sidewalk.

"Pull up behind and wait," he snapped. "I'll see what the hell this is all about."

He moved toward the entrance, and his two bodyguards resumed their places in the car. Across the street the patrolman glanced at his wrist watch and sauntered toward a call box in front of the Graceland Arms.

Murder caught its cue.

The taxicab lurched into roaring motion, swerved across the pavement, and the tranquillity of the night was ripped into hysterical shreds by the raving chatter of sub-machine-gun fire from its darkened interior.

Belching death-laden streaks of orange flame, the cab zoomed past the two sedans, splashing a crazy pattern of cracks on their bullet-proof glass, blasting chips from the marble façade of the building.

And on the sidewalk the black-eyed man threw his arms futilely before his bowed head, writhed in a jerky dance of death, plunged head-long, blood-streaked foam bubbling through clenched teeth. His hands

THE SPOT

by Patrick

Lawrence



*As the sedan purred on, the stark drama
of murder awaited only the lifting of the
curtain—*

beat convulsively, clawed at the concrete, then stilled.

The cab sputred down the street, and, close behind, the carload of guards took up the symphony of death, hurling screaming torrents of vengeful lead. From mid-street the policeman went into action, flung a few shots after the fleeing cab; then, apparently realizing the impotence of a single gun in that hurricane of bullets, hurried toward the sprawling figure on the sidewalk.

He bent over the fallen man, something in his hand flashing in the light, and worked swiftly. From the corner the newsboy shouted hoarsely. Down the block the street lights glinted on shield and brass buttons as another officer pounded toward the murder scene. Above the corpse the first policeman straightened, threw a sharp glance at his oncoming colleague, and stepped over the crumpled form into the lobby.

"Telephone?" he barked curtly to the white-faced clerk behind the desk. Dumbly, the clerk pointed a trembling finger toward a corridor behind the desk inclosure, then crept cautiously to the door, staring fearfully at the oily, dark pool gathering sluggishly on the sidewalk.

The second patrolman panted up, bent briefly over the body, then opened the call box with his brass key, yanked down the receiver.

"Clancy calling," he said crisply. "A murder in the street at Maple and Dearborn."

ABOVE the clamor of the agitated, half-dressed crowd in the street a siren wailed dolorously, and the crew of a radio car cleared a path for a gleaming, black roadster

that edged through the throng to the curb.

A youthful figure, jaunty in camel's-hair coat and snap-brim hat, slid out and strode to the outskirts of the crowd that ringed the lifeless heap on the walk. Murmuring excuses, the newcomer wormed his way through the press, came sharply against the bulky back of a loud-voiced citizen, overcoat over pajamas, who blocked his path obdurately while he mouthed denunciations of the police.

The young man laid a polite hand on his shoulder.

"Excuse me, please."

The fat shoulder twitched impatiently.

"Who are you shoving around, you?" roared the critic of the police department, glowering backward.

Abruptly the polite pressure of the languid hand tightened into a steely grip which bit deep into the fat shoulder, and the suave courtesy hardened into crackling, metallic command: "Out of the way!"

Slack-jawed, the fat man shrank away from the cold violence glinting from narrowed, gray eyes. The dapper young man turned away, and the fat man regained a fraction of his voice.

"Who's he think he is?" he blustered feebly. A hard-bitten newspaper photographer, setting up his tripod near by, surveyed him humorously.

"That, my fat friend," he said, "is probably the closest you have ever been to a sock on the jaw. That is Lieutenant Barry Court of the homicide squad, and I'd rather get between a hungry tiger and a rare roast of beef than between Court and a job of work."

"A detective?" gasped the fat man. "He looks like an actor!"

The description was not badly

worded. There was little in the appearance of the meticulously dressed Court to suggest the ruthless man hunter. Faultless tailoring softened the ruggedness of his wiry figure into deceiving slenderness, and the engaging openness of his lean countenance masked lightning sagacity and blind courage which had carried him upward through the detective division to a rank inconsistent with his years.

Acknowledging the respectful salutes of the uniformed officers around the corpse, Court said: "Caught the flash on the radio on the way home."

He jerked up his beautifully creased trousers legs, squatted on the sidewalk and stared at the distorted countenance of the slain man, eyes stonily wide, teeth bared in the grimace of death, the jaws still clamped on the dead cigar.

Court whistled in astonishment.

"Slick Morrell, the mob leader who reformed—like hell," he said softly. "Come to his reward after a full life—a very full life. What happened?" he asked the patrolman on the beat, who stood behind him, a puzzled frown on his face.

"There's something damned funny about this, lieutenant. There was a plant in a taxicab across the street, and they cut Morrell down as he started into the building. The doorman and the clerk say there was another copper in the street during the shooting, and that he fired after the murder car. He came over here, turned Morrell over, went into the lobby and asked for a telephone. Then I guess he vanished off the earth. At least, he hasn't come out again, and the clerk says all the other doors are locked. There's a squad going through the building now, and they may find him."

"Hm-m-m! Too many police-

men!" Court stared down abstractedly at the corpse, then his eyes flared sudden interest as they caught a metallic gleam. Swiftly he stooped over the body, fumbled in the folds of the gaudy topcoat. Wonderingly he examined the shining thing that had attracted his quick eye, and his brow wrinkled as he fingered the fabric of Morrell's coat and vest, slashed in a dozen places.

COURT stood up, his preoccupied gaze sweeping casually around the circle of morbidly interested spectators. A pair of eyes, dimly familiar, caught his fleetingly. When he sought them again he decided he was mistaken. There was no one in the crowd he knew. In the distance a gong clanged resonantly.

"All right, officer—here comes the ambulance. Take the mortal remains of Mr. Morrell around the corner to Eckstein's morgue. Mark him held for the coroner. Come in here, you."

He motioned Morrell's chauffeur, still quaking from his narrow escape.

"What do you know about this?" Court demanded curtly.

"I don't know anything, chief," whined the beetle-browed driver. "All I know is the boss gets a hurry call from his girl—she lives in this building—and we beat it out here from the hotel downtown. The boss gets out of the car, and they cut loose with the gun from the taxicab."

Court quirked an inquiring eyebrow at a detective who had just emerged from the elevator.

"Check on the girl angle, Branigan?"

"O. K. on that, lieutenant. We found her tied and gagged in her apartment. Two guys busted in and fried her finger tips with cigarettes

until she called Morrell and told him to come up here. One was a big blond guy with a beard, a big nose, and glasses. The other was short and dark."

Court turned back to the driver and held up the object he had found beside the body—an open pocket-knife, the blades honed to a razor edge.

"Ever see this before?"

The driver shook his head.

Court shrugged and turned again to Brannigan: "Turn this place inside out. That phony copper is important. I'll call the bureau and send out a pick-up on him."

He strode to the desk, picked up a telephone indicated by the clerk.

"Give the radio and the teletype a pick-up on a hoodlum masquerading as a harness bull, sergeant—some-where on the north side, probably—wanted in the Morrell killing."

At his elbow, the clerk eyed a man slipping through the lobby, threw a startled glance at a hatrack behind the desk, and yelled: "Stop that man! He's got my coat and hat!"

Court dropped the telephone, barked a command to halt. Without checking his stride, the fugitive veered and shot through a pocket. A long rent appeared magically in Court's sleeve. The detective's gun coughed, and the fleeing man stiffened spasmodically, fell with a jarring thud on the threshold. Court knelt beside him, noted the jagged hole in the temple, and yanked open the coat. Underneath, the man was clothed in police brass and blue.

"Gunner Kersten!" said Brannigan, over Court's shoulder. "The last survivor of the Bugs Jernigan mob!"

"Maybe," said Court laconically. He looked again at the keen-edged knife in his hand.

FROM the crowd choking the street outside the door, a tall, bearded man, professorial in appearance, detached himself and drifted away. At the corner he turned and hurried in the darkness to a sedan parked midway in the block. A dim figure crouched at the wheel. The tall man cursed luridly in bitter undertones.

"Kersten made a mess of it, and that lousy copper, Court, rubbed him out. He found the knife, and I think he's beginning to get ideas. He's lived too long, anyway. We've got to work fast. Listen—"

At the morgue Court went through Morrell's clothing and the contents of his pockets with minute care. Then he drove slowly downtown to the detective bureau, groping mentally for light on Morrell's killing and Kersten's seemingly stupid venture with the knife.

A block away, in a street parallel with Court's route, a black car kept carefully abreast. When Court parked in front of the bureau it eased into a parking space down the street, and the driver settled down doggedly to wait.

The desk sergeant hailed Court: "The chief wants you in his office, lieutenant."

Outside the office door Court paused a moment, listening to the hard, measured thump of heavy feet inside—Dan O'Malley, chief of detectives, trying to walk off a mood of exasperation. Court knocked and went in.

"You're out late, chief."

O'Malley, massive and gray-haired, wheeled and glowered at Court, swore colorfully around the frayed stump of a cigar.

"The damned newspapers! My telephone has been red-hot ever since Morrell was blasted. Sit down." The chief motioned to a

chair, then planted himself squarely before the younger man, shook a gnarled forefinger in his face.

"Court, we've got to produce, or some heads will fall, yours and mine among them. I've bragged to the papers that the hoodlums were through in this town, and I thought I was right, since we found Bugs Jernigan's body in a grave of quicklime. With Jernigan dead and Morrell out of the rackets, the last two warring mobs folded up for lack of leadership.

"And now, within a week, they slap us in the face with two killings—Dr. Hanson, the renegade surgeon who did the repair work for the mobs, found in the lake with his skull beaten in; and to-night Morrell, who had become, in effect, a law-abiding citizen."

Court laughed harshly. "Yeah—a law-abiding citizen—cruising around town in a bulletproof car with a carload of gorilla militia behind him. Nuts! And another thing: a few minutes ago I killed Gunner Kersten, trying to slide away from the scene of Morrell's murder in a police uniform. The copper on the beat scared him away from Morrell's body after the shooting, and he dropped this."

Court tossed the knife on the chief's desk. O'Malley looked at it curiously, tried the edge with a cautious finger.

"Finished him with a knife! They wanted to be sure, didn't they?"

"There wasn't the slightest scratch of a knife on Morrell. I went to the morgue to see. But his clothes were slashed to ribbons."

COURT hunched forward in his chair and tapped the desk with an emphatic forefinger.

"Chief, there's something deeper than a routine hoodlum killing back

of this. You know the story we've pieced together from stool pigeons and blind tips.

"Bugs Jernigan and Slick Morrel belonged to Soapy Landers' mob when the Northern Trust Co's armored car was hoisted. The loot was nearly half a million in cash. But the money was hot—the bank had the serial numbers of the bills. So Landers didn't cut it up—he planted it somewhere, even though Jernigan, always a big spender, demanded his split. They quarreled; Jernigan formed a mob of his own and battled Landers and Morrell.

"Later, Landers was killed; Jernigan disappeared, and Morrell announced that he had gone legitimate. Everything was serene.

"But if Jernigan was dead and Morrell was out of the rackets, why didn't Morrell dare make a move without trailing a flock of bodyguards? Why was Doc Hanson bumped off? Why should Kersten try to knife Morrell, when he was already ten pounds overweight with machine-gun slugs? What became of the Northern Trust Co.'s dough? Why was some one so anxious for us to know Jernigan was dead? Gunner Kersten was Bugs Jernigan's pal. Does that suggest anything to you?"

Chief O'Malley threw up his hands in a gesture of disgust.

"You're a good officer, Barry, but you've got a single-track mind. You've never admitted the body we found was Jernigan's, although it wore his rings and watch and Jernigan's dentist identified his false teeth. Even though the body was so far gone we couldn't get any fingerprints, the proofs were good enough for me. Hell! Look here!"

O'Malley fumbled in a desk drawer, tossed a police circular across the desk to Court. "You

know there isn't a hole dark enough to hide a man with a mug like that, with that picture in every police station and sheriff's office in the country."

Court stared reflectively at the face on the circular—a dark face, warped almost out of human semblance by a jagged scar which ran obliquely across the forehead, across the shattered and twisted bridge of the nose, and into a cheek; wide, staring, black eyes—

Court's pulse leaped. He rose tensely from his chair and laid the circular back on the desk.

"Chief," he grated, "I saw Bugs Jernigan to-night!"

Dan O'Malley's eyes grew frosty and his jaw set grimly.

"Lieutenant, if this is your idea of a joke, it has gone far enough. My orders to you are to bring in the man who killed Slick Morrell. That's all." O'Malley motioned to the door and turned away.

Court walked slowly down the hall toward the elevators, mentally re-creating the scene around Morrell's body, cudgeling his brain to recall the face which went with the eyes that had caught his casual glance—the same eyes that stared at him from "Bugs" Jernigan's picture. He cursed himself angrily for his carelessness, tried desperately to think how he might pick up the killer's trail.

"Lieutenant Court!" The desk sergeant's voice recalled him from his bitter reverie. "Here's something that might interest you. Some one stuck up the attendant over at Eckstein's morgue, made him open up the cooling room, then knocked him cold with the butt of a gun. Doesn't seem to be a stick-up—nothing taken."

Court bounded down the stairs without waiting for the elevator,

leaving the dumfounded sergeant gaping after him, flung himself into his car, and hurtled northward through the dribble of early-morning traffic. His eyes narrowed and his lean face set in grim lines. Stickup? Not by a hell of a lot! This was the trail of murder!

"Even with him shot they won't let Morrell rest," he muttered to himself. "I'll bet a month's pay there's a knife wound in Morrell's body now! Damn me for a blind fool!"

Court slid his car to a screeching halt before Eckstein's morgue. As he flung open the door and raced across the pavement another car rolled by, made a lazy U turn and parked near the corner.

IN THE OFFICE the personnel of a scout car worked over the pale-faced morgue attendant, trying to stanch the flow of blood from a deep gash in his scalp.

"What did he look like?" queried one of the officers as Court entered.

"Big, with glasses—"

"Big nose, blond hair and beard," snapped Court. "Am I right?"

The attendant nodded agreement.

"He's had a big night, that guy," said Court grimly. "But it may be his last one." He dispatched the scout car to a hospital with the injured man, then hurried down a corridor to the open door of the cooling room, past the sheeted rows of corpses, directly to the slab which supported the bullet-torn body of "Slick" Morrell.

Hastily he jerked back the sheet. Below the left collar bone, above the shattered wreckage of the chest, was a long, clean gash, from which some object embedded in the flesh had patently been removed.

The detective replaced the sheet, certainly replacing the speculation

in his eyes. This was the key—the answer to the riddle of the outlaw surgeon's death, to the machine gunning of Slick Morrell, to "Gunner" Kersten and his knife.

Slowly, probing the recesses of his mind for the next move, Court walked through the deserted office to the curb. He couldn't afford to guess wrong. Somewhere, he knew, bloodstained, greedy hands were already unearthing half a million dollars in hot money, as surely as they had ripped the secret of its hiding place from the riddled body of Slick Morrell. But where?

Court stuck a cigarette in his mouth, lighted a match. A sauntering pedestrian approached, held up a cigarette.

"How about a light, bud?"

Absently Court extended the flaming match. The man bent his head over the flame, straightened, and Court flinched from the burrowing snout of an automatic. Deftly a probing hand flicked the detective's gun from its shoulder holster.

"What's all this?" Court demanded. The pock-marked, deeply lined face was strange to him.

"A guy wants to see you," replied the other, hard eyes watchful. "Put your hands in your pockets and walk ahead of me to that sedan at the corner. And remember, I get a big kick out of killing a copper."

Court hesitated, and the gun jabbed deeper into his ribs. He knew a dozen tricks to disarm the gunman, but something warned him that this was a break—that this hoodlum was leading him into a solution of the last angle of his perplexity. Obediently he turned and headed for the car.

"You're going to drive, and I'm going to sit beside you with this rod against you," grated his captor, swinging open the door of the car.

"If you even look tough, you get it now instead of later."

Court climbed behind the wheel docilely, kicked the starter.

"Which way?" he asked, as the motor responded throbbingly.

"North—out the drive."

THEY drove wordlessly northward, the gunman sidewise in the seat, the automatic digging relentlessly into Court's side. As they rolled past the last scattered lights into the open country the hoodlum snarlingly demanded more speed. The speedometer registered sixty.

"Step on it," he barked. "This crate'll do ninety."

Court jammed his foot down to the floor boards. The lights of a suburb twinkled ahead, flew past. Farther on, the road split in two directions, and Court slowed down, glancing interrogatively at his silent companion.

"To the left—through Hazelton."

The detective heaved an inward sigh of satisfaction. That was what he wanted to know. Beyond Hazelton lay "Soapy" Landers' farm.

His destination was unmistakable now; the fellow beside him had served his purpose. Now he was in the way, and Court reflected grimly that the odds in the crisis ahead of him were probably heavy enough already. Coldly he prepared to shorten them.

They roared through Hazelton, and on a long stretch of pavement beyond, the finger on the speedometer crept past eighty. Out of the corner of his eye Court saw that his passenger was dividing his attention between him and the blur of pavement spinning beneath them. Carefully, Court drew himself compactly together, braced one foot against the floor boards, jammed his forearms

tightly against the steering wheel. The speedometer neared ninety.

Court yanked his foot off the accelerator and slammed home the brake. Shot from his relaxed position by the sickening force of the maneuver, the hoodlum crashed into the windshield. Above the screaming of the tires Court heard the brittle crunch of the man's skull against the metal standard. The gun exploded harmlessly across Court's lap.

He fought the careening car to a standstill and drew up at the roadside. Hauling the huddled form from the bottom of the car, he satisfied himself, with a swift examination of the battered head, that he had reduced the odds against himself by one.

Court retrieved his gun from the hoodlum's pocket, dumped the body unceremoniously into the rear seat, and hastily yanked the car into gear. That, he told himself, was only the curtain raiser. The big push awaited him at the farm a few miles farther on. And, if he knew his man, there wouldn't be a dull moment.

He whirled into a narrow country road, switched off the lights, and drove the sedan deep into the underbrush that bordered the road. Scarcely a hundred yards farther on lay the old farmhouse which had served as headquarters and hide-out for Soapy Landers. And here, unless all the signs were misleading, he would find his quarry.

Court climbed a fence and walked deep into a field that bordered the farmyard, making his way silently to the back of the house. Indistinctly, he made out the shape of a heavy roadster in the grass-grown driveway, and a beam of uncertain light poured through a chink in a shuttered window near the front.

The detective drew a long breath and his pulse quickened. His hunch had not failed.

HE MOVED cautiously toward the rear of the house, located a door, and gently twisted the knob. The door swung open under his touch, and he slipped noiselessly into the kitchen, musty with the odor of abandonment.

At the end of a passage that led from the kitchen to the front of the house a doorway framed flickering light. Court edged forward, trying each board before he shifted his weight to it. An excited murmur of voices came from the lighted room, and as Court slid farther toward the door two men came into his line of vision. They bent over a bundle on a table, faces thrown into strong relief in the light of a candle stuck to the table top.

With an impatient curse the taller of the two, tawny-haired, bespectacled and bearded, ripped at the fastenings with a knife. The bundle flew open, disgorging a torrent of tightly wrapped packages of bank notes. The smaller man, squat and swarthy, gasped and swore delightedly, fondled the bundles of currency.

"Half a million bucks!" he gurgled rapturously. "Planted in the bed of the creek! And only a three-way cut, with Gunner out of it."

The tall man, black eyes glittering incongruously on either side of his jutting, high-bridged nose, gloated briefly over the display of wealth, then snapped: "Pack it in the suitcase, Maxie. I'm worried about that damned copper, Court. I won't feel right until Tony gets here with him and I give him the works. Where the hell is Tony? He should be here by now."

Court slid around the edge of the door, gun leveled.

"Tony?" he said mockingly. "Don't wait for Tony. He had some bad luck. When you send punks like that out to bring me in, better send a lot of them. One just aggravates me."

He leaned negligently against the wall and grinned irritatingly; but his gun hand was unwavering, and there was no mirth in the steely-gray eyes, alert for the slightest menacing movement.

"Welcome back from the grave, Bugs—temporarily. And I like your new face a lot. It looks more like a face than the old one. Doc Hanson's last job, wasn't it?"

Bugs Jernigan, shaking with the frenzy of frustration, answered with a blast of profanity. Court listened tolerantly, the amused smile playing about his mobile mouth. Jernigan cursed himself breathless, then abruptly dropped his voice to a tone of wheedling smoothness.

"Court, you've got us cold, and I'm ready to play ball with you. You're a smart guy—too smart to spend your life working for sucker dough. There's enough in that pile for us all. Take your cut, and give me a pass."

Court laughed derisively.

"There isn't enough dough in the mint to buy you a pass from me, Jernigan. You're through. You've got a red-hot date with a lot of high-powered electricity. You can burn even for killing a heel like Slick Morrell, to say nothing of the poor devil we dug up with your false teeth in his mouth—"

Jernigan's eyes wavered slightly, and Court streaked a shot toward a furtive movement in the dimness of the candlelight. The squat hoodlum yelped and reeled from the shock of a bullet in his shoulder. In

the instant Court's gun swung away from him, Jernigan launched a lightning kick at the table. It crashed upside down, smashing the candle beneath it. Court shot twice in Jernigan's direction before the wounded Maxie, snarling with the pain of his bullet-torn shoulder, struck his arm up in the darkness, jolting the gun from his hand.

Court clinched desperately with his assailant, crashed to the floor on top of him. Maxie, his breath jarred out of him, brought up his knee savagely into the pit of Court's stomach, wriggled away as the pain-racked detective relaxed his hold.

"He's lost his gun, Bugs," screamed Maxie. "Let him have it!"

Court slithered silently across the floor, bullets ripping splinters out of the boards beside him. The fusillade stopped, and he halted his squirming progress, straining to catch a sound of movement. The floor boards squeaked under a furtive step, and Court heard heavy breathing above him. He lunged forward, and his arms wrapped around a pair of legs. He heaved, heard a grunt of pain as a body slammed to the floor. Then flame-streaked shock and pain tore through his head.

COURT returned to consciousness through a haze of dull agony. His head throbbled from the blow of the heavy pistol butt that had felled him, and some one was hammering at his unprotected face with hard fists.

"That's enough—he's coming out of it," said a voice he identified as Jernigan's.

Court opened his eyes, and saw before him the maliciously grinning face of Maxie, fist poised for another blow. The detective licked his bruised lips, salty with blood.

The sharp beam of a flashlight shone in his eyes, and behind it he saw the hate-filled mask of Jernigan's face.

Dimly, through a surge of pain and nausea, he sensed that his arms were pulled high above his head, that his feet barely touched the floor. Something sharp tore steadily at his wrists. Shackled with his own handcuffs, he was suspended from a heating pipe that traversed a rubbish-strewn, cobwebby cellar, terminating in a rusty furnace in a corner.

"Wise guy—honest copper, eh?" Jernigan sneered. "Well, copper, I'm going to make a martyr out of you. You're going to die for your job."

Maxie shuffled forward and jammed his gun hard into Court's ribs.

"Shall I blast him, chief?" he asked eagerly.

Jernigan held up a restraining hand. "No, Maxie. That's too tame a finish for such a spectacular career as Lieutenant Court's. I've got a much more interesting way."

He stepped close to Court, held the flashlight in his face and grinned wolfishly.

"Court, you've got a reputation as a pretty tough monkey. Let's see if you can take it. Up in the garage there's a drum of gasoline. This joint is going to burn to the ground, and then what's left is going to fall into the basement. You're going to fry, copper, and I wish I could be here to watch you. But I'll be on my way to South America with my share of half a million. I might bump you off the easy way, but I don't like you."

Court grinned painfully, clear eyes arrogantly unafraid.

"A lot of rats didn't like me, Jernigan, but I'm still around, and some of them have been dead a long time."

Jernigan struck him viciously on the mouth, and motioned Maxie ahead of him up the rickety stairs. Then he hesitated, turned back, and fumbled in the detective's pockets.

"Just to be dead sure," he said, holding up Court's key ring, to which was attached his handcuff key.

Alone in the darkened cellar, Court listened to hurried steps and the jangle of metal containers above. A chill of dread ran through him; this looked bad. He strained at the handcuffs, tearing the skin and flesh from his wrists. Then his body sagged hopelessly against the cutting edges of the cuffs.

There was no hope that he could dislodge the heavy pipe, set firmly into the framework of the house. Still less that he could yell and attract attention in time. The house was off a traveled road, and by the time the flames had attracted passers-by, he would be trapped beyond saving.

In a frenzy of rage Court lashed out with his legs, recoiled from the pain of a barked shin. The furnace! Wild hope flared in his mind. Carefully, poised on the extreme tips of his toes, he edged along the pipe toward the furnace. His groping feet located it, and he raised himself with a foot on the edge of the door, easing the biting pain on his bleeding wrists.

He rested a moment; then, setting his teeth, drew himself inch by inch upward until his chin hooked over the pipe. Holding his whole weight by his chin, he swung a manacled arm over the pipe, shifting the burden to the crook of an elbow. Finally, with a desperate heave, he swung a leg upward and over the pipe, hung gasping.

Slowly he drew his body up into the narrow space between the pipe

and the ceiling until he balanced precariously at full length. With numbed, fumbling fingers he probed into his watch pocket, fished out with his finger tips the spare key to his handcuffs, clenched it between his teeth. An instant of maneuvering and the cuffs popped open, dropped in the darkness.

Exhausted, Court tumbled to the floor, listened an instant to the preparation of his funeral pyre, his nostrils full of the pervasive reek of spilled gasoline. Then, lips twisted in a grim smile, he located the rotting steps that led to an outside cellar door, and slipped out into the driveway—

"SHE'S READY, Maxie, and there won't be any time to waste when she goes," said Bugs Jernigan, pausing on the front porch. "Toss that in the rumble seat and get the motor running, and we'll lam out of here when I touch it off."

He handed Maxie the traveling bag packed with currency, and the hoodlum hurried to the roadster, threw the bag in the rear compartment.

Jernigan struck a match, tossed it into the gasoline-drenched hallway, and slammed the door. The oil-fed flames flashed through the house with a dull boom, and Jernigan raced to the car, hurtled into the driver's seat. The roadster sped down the driveway and turned into the road. Behind it, the darkened sky reflected faint radiance that brightened into lurid crimson as the car whirled through side roads toward the city.

"About now," gloated Jernigan, glancing backward over his shoulder at the spreading glare, "things are warming up for the copper. By the time we've ditched the car and holed

up, he ought to be grilled to a nice turn."

He settled low in his seat and urged the car into a burst of speed that carried them within a few minutes into the outskirts of the city. Then he slackened the pace, unwilling to risk a chance pick-up for speeding, with the bag of currency nestling under the cover of the rumble seat.

"This is close enough," he muttered, as they glided smoothly into the warehouse district. "We'd better separate, Maxie. You take the dough and hop a cab somewhere along here. I'll ditch the crate and meet you at the hide-out."

The car slowed, crept toward the curb, and Maxie prepared to get out, grumbling at the painful awkwardness of his wounded shoulder. Then he jerked erect in his seat. Something, with the menacing touch of cold steel, nestled against his ear. Flashing a panicky glance at Jernigan, he saw that the car was gliding erratically across the pavement toward the opposite curb.

Jernigan's hands lifted instinctively, as a cold voice grated through the opened rear curtain: "Grab the wheel, Bugs, and drive slowly and carefully to police headquarters. And you, Maxie, keep those hands in sight!"

Jernigan found his voice in a long, animal howl of rage; but a threatening metallic prod in the back of his head goaded him into despairing obedience. Hopelessly he drove the few blocks to headquarters, with Court sprawled across the rear deck.

"Don't ever try to burn a fireproof copper, Bugs; it's a sign of bad luck," Court added softly as the car came to a halt before the blue globes that marked the entrance to the detective bureau.

Court yelled at a cluster of detectives unloading from a squad car: "Take the guns off these rats and slap the cuffs on them."

THE BURLY OFFICERS dragged the two hoodlums from the seat and shackled them together. Only then did Barry Court stir from his commanding position in the rumble seat. He fished the heavy bag from the compartment under his feet, vaulted over the side of the car, and held up two sections of a hollow jack handle before the bulging eyes of his prisoners.

"Thanks for coming along so quietly. Don't know what I'd have used for guns if I hadn't found this in the bottom of the car. Lost my own in the fracas out in the farmhouse."

Jernigan swore a last despondent oath. He shuffled obediently ahead of Court into the elevator and down the corridor to Chief O'Malley's office, where a light still glowed despite the gray hint of dawn in the sky.

"What's this, Lieutenant Court?" O'Malley asked, still frostily polite, as Court set the traveling bag on his desk and indicated the prisoners with a wave of his hand.

"This is your answer to the newspapers, chief. I've brought you the men who killed Slick Morrell, as ordered. And this"—tapping the bag—"is a by-product of the job—

the Northern Trust Co.'s half million."

"The hell!" said the chief, startled out of his icy reserve.

"This is a bush-league hoodlum named Maxie—not important," said Court. "But the other one is the genuine article—Bugs Jernigan, the report of whose death was grossly exaggerated."

Chief O'Malley's face reddened and his brows lowered. He glanced at the police circular, back at the distinguished features of the tall man, and prepared to annihilate Court with a verbal blast. Then his eye caught the glint of green from the open bag.


"Go on," he said grimly.

Court turned to Jernigan and deftly rifled his pockets. With a grunt of triumph he produced a crumpled sheet of thin paper and a small silver tube, discolored with a network of dried bloodstains.

"Morrell, knowing that Jernigan was alive and that neither he nor the map was safe, conceived a most original hiding place for it. He had Doc Hanson slip it into this tube and insert it under the skin on his chest. Doc Hanson, who did the remodeling job on Jernigan, was, of course, killed.

Court turned to the shackled men; his eyes hardened; he said, "Maxie, I don't know how much we can hang on you, but you, Jernigan—you're going to fry, and I'll be there to watch you!"





*Men age who
can't sleep—and
murder isn't a
pleasant bed-
fellow.*

by

Edward S. Williams

Sleep To-night

HE CAME to town on the west-bound morning train. His luggage consisted solely of a gentleman's overnight bag, expensive but not conspicuous.

Unobtrusively he walked to the cab stand at the end of the open, gravel-strewn platform. The driver of the one remaining taxi saw only the worth of his clothes and bag, calculating upon the probability of a tip. The driver missed entirely the preoccupied peace, the quiet content in the gray man's eyes that contrasted so sharply with the haggard, deep-lined face. Certainly the driver did not think, "This man is a murderer!" He said merely, "Where to, chief?"

"Why," the gray man said, "I hardly know—"

He glanced again at the waiting driver when the man suggested vacantly, "Hotel?"

"No," he answered, "I think I'll have you just drive me around for a while."

"O. K., chief."

He shut the door and the taxi lurched backward onto the gravel drive, turned and faced the town. The gray man sat motionless and curiously aloof while Market Street flowed past the windows of his cab.

Only once did brief, hot movement touch his eyes. That was when the cab passed the old Theater Building. Gold letters on the dusty glass windows of the second floor advertised the office of Forbes & Son, real estate.

"Forbes & Son——" the gray man murmured. "And—son! So the old man had never taken it down. The firm was still Forbes & Son."

His driver half turned. "Did you say something, chief?"

"Yes." There was force in his

voice now, decision that he had lacked before. "Drive to police headquarters, please." He seemed to sit straighter in his seat.

"Police?"

"That's right." The gray man took a cigarette from a silver case.

HE PAUSED on the steps to light his cigarette before he entered the old brick building. There were twin globes above the door, painted green inside and with the paint flaking off. Black, flaking letters on the outside spelled a blurred "Police." The gray man glanced up at them. He extinguished his match in a thin ribbon of exhaled smoke, then opened the door upon a dingy, barren room. The man behind the rail-enclosed high desk was old, bald, benignant. The gray man asked doubtfully, "Sergeant?"

"That's right—sergeant."

"I've come," the gray man said, "to report a murder."

The sergeant indicated no surprise. He leaned a little farther forward. "Murder?" he inquired gently. "Who's been murdered? I ain't heard anything about a murder here."

"No, sergeant, I don't suppose you have—recently. But there was murder done here none the less, and it has remained a mystery for nineteen years—exactly nineteen years—today. I know, because I am the murderer."

The sergeant said nothing for a moment. His calloused hands unclasped and he rubbed his chin ponderously with a dry, faint, rasping sound. Finally he nodded slowly, his eyes owl-like. He said, "Yep. I remember now. You were a Cooper. Yeah, young Tom Cooper. Wait a minute—" He swung, creaking in his tall-backed, swivel chair, to a dusty filing cabinet behind him. He

rummaged briefly in a bottom drawer, far back; straightened, breathing a little harder for his leaning over.

The gray man waited quietly at the rail. He seemed utterly a disinterested spectator while the other thumbed through time-yellowed papers. Once he inhaled smoke and let it drift slowly from his nostrils, watching the pale, blue banners waver upward and disappear. His eyes were rapt, untroubled. He returned his gaze to the high desk when the sergeant spoke.

"You're right, Tom, here it is. Nineteen years—to the day. Come on inside. You'll find the gate to your left."

The gray man climbed the three steps leading upward and sat down in the chair beside the desk. He smiled. The sergeant leaned far back and folded his hands over the paunch that bulged from his unbuttoned uniform coat.

"So you came back, eh, Tom—to give yourself up."

The gray man nodded, and the sergeant went on in his kindly, rasping voice.

"How old are you, Tom?"

"Forty-five."

"Forty-five—you look sixty."

"Yes. I'm old-young, sergeant. Men age who can't sleep, and murder isn't a pleasant bedfellow."

"No, murder isn't. Well, how'd you come to do it, Tom? Why did you shoot young Forbes?"

The gray man extinguished his cigarette in the ash-caked bowl on the desk.

"It was about a girl, sergeant. You may remember—Ellen Hardy?"

"Yep."

"She was very lovely. At least I thought she was and so did Allen Forbes. That was the beginning of

it. The end was when she chose between us. I killed Allen then."

"Just up and killed him, Tom?"

"No, not exactly. I've tried—one one will ever know how I've tried—to make myself believe that I was insane, that I wasn't myself when I did it. But I couldn't. I killed him deliberately; I planned to kill him. I thought of nothing else for days.

"We fought in a vacant lot, sergeant, nineteen years ago to-night. I goaded him into fighting, forced it on him. And I went to meet him with a pistol—this one—in my pocket. Perhaps, if I had won—if I had been able to batter him into submission, to see him at my feet, beaten—I wouldn't have killed him.

"But he beat me. He knocked me down almost at once. I killed him as he bent over me—to help me up! He was saying, 'Hell, Tom, this isn't right! Ellen would——' and he never finished his sentence. I killed him and I ran, but there was no regret in me—only an instinct to save myself. It was later that remorse came. Then—year after year——"

The sergeant sat with empty, dreaming eyes fixed upon a little patch of sunlight that filtered through one grimy window. The gun in his hand was old, rusted; its chambers were loaded with six corroded cartridges. Two of them were empty, bearing the deep imprint of the firing pin. He placed the weapon on his desk finally. He sat up slowly and took the telephone receiver off its hook.

"Mr. Forbes, this is Sergeant Blake. If you can come over now, I'd like to see you for a minute. I've got the man who shot—Allen, nineteen years ago."

He listened, said, "Yep," and hung up. There was a long silence.

"He's coming over, Tom," the sergeant said after a while. "How do you feel about meeting him?"

The gray man smiled again. "All right, sergeant. I haven't any fear now—or anger—anything. I've come back to balance the account, so I can—sleep. I'm just squaring myself. But what about him? He's an old man now. Will he stand the shock—of seeing me?"

"Let's see," the sergeant mused, "Jim Forbes is seventy-two this year. But he——"

THE DOOR OPENED and for an instant there was silence. Then the man in the doorway advanced slowly to the gate in the rail. The gray man's eyes stared, wavered, and there was no peace in them now, no calm content.

"Well, Tom——" the other said. "Allan!"

The sergeant rasped softly, "He thought he killed you, Allen. He's thought so for nineteen years. He came back to give himself up."

"But—didn't you read in the paper, Tom, that I'd got well?"

"No. No—I didn't read—the paper, Allan."

Again the sergeant spoke. "Any charge against him?"

Allan Forbes shook his head slowly.

"No charges, Sergeant Blake," he said.

Deliberately, ponderously, the sergeant tore the papers in his hands, retore them and dropped the yellowed fragments into the battered wastebasket. He said:

"You'll sleep alone to-night, eh, Tom?"

"Yes, sergeant," the gray man said. "Alone——"

EACH SLEW



SINGAPORE goes to bed early, but the City of the Lion talks in its sleep.

And the man who sat at the wheel of the long, glittering, black car that purred out Serangoon Road could hear and understand the murmuring voice of Asia. He wore a white,

compact turban and a European suit of cream-colored drill. Though his features were sharp and aquiline, there was an expression of blandness that made his Arab face a smooth, brazen mask; yet this was a deceptive sleekness, for even in repose his mouth had the iron hardness of his deep-set, faintly slanted eyes.

Pâwang Ali, the left hand of the

A SLAYER

The newest "Pâwang Ali" Story
by E. HOFFMANN PRICE



*Strategy was at an end!
There was, perhaps,
one play in reserve—*

law, was listening as he drove, not to the voice of Asia, but to the two who shared the broad front seat with him. One was Sir Eric Howard, governor general of the Straits Settlements and high commissioner for the Malay States; the other was Arnold Kemp, police inspector. Both had faces like old leather, and their narrowed eyes were haggard.

"This Ethiopian mess," Sir Howard was explaining in a low voice, "has caused renewed resentment against Europeans. And Central Asia is brewing something to destroy British law and order.

"The trouble maker is a person

they call the Queen of Agharti. They shot a few of her agents. Wild-eyed chaps in Cairo and Peshawar, who had in their possession confidential army orders and all that sort of thing—but that got us nowhere.

"Pâwang Ali, I want you to find this Queen of Agharti through her Singapore agents."

"But I say, Sir Eric," interposed Inspector Kemp, "there isn't any such a person as this queen, and there's no such place as Agharti."

"I know there isn't, Kemp. That is why I'm calling on Pâwang Ali."

The Arab inclined his turbaned head, and answered, "On my head and eyes, *huzur!* The fictitious queen of an imaginary land can be more dangerous than an army."

He swung left toward Moulmein Road. They were conferring in Pâwang Ali's car because not even Sir Eric's residence was private enough for a discussion of the sinister queen whose spies crept through the East like maggots in a monstrous cheese.

Agharti is a fabled subterranean realm in High Asia. Many occultists consider it as a state of mind rather than a locale; but for centuries all Asia had waited for the ruler of the world to emerge from Agharti. Millions of Asiatics would follow any plausible impostor who claimed to be from sacred Agharti.

The peril was very real, despite Kemp's scandalized protest at sending Pâwang Ali, the terror of native criminals, on the trail of an imaginary queen. It simply wasn't the sort of quest that the wily Arab could end with his inevitable "killed while resisting arrest."

"By Jove, Kemp, you miss the point," protested Sir Eric. "The very idea is a menace. Government

in India is already disturbed. I simply can't have any such notions making a madhouse of Malaya. Even Pâwang Ali seems to understand that."

"Thank you, excellency," murmured the Arab, with scarcely a trace of irony. "In fact——"

He was cut short by a strange, blood-chilling moan from the darkness at the right. It was hoarse and yet piercing, an uncanny blend of braying and bleating and strident command.

The two Englishmen shuddered. The Arab snapped off the headlights and braked to a halt at the roadside.

"Sound comes from near-by Chinese cemetery," he said.

"Why stop here?" snapped the inspector, no more pleased by the gruesome groan than Sir Eric.

"Idle curiosity, *sahiban,*" Pâwang Ali replied, sliding to the road.

Kemp and Sir Eric eyed each other.

"Can't afford to have the damn fool get hurt," muttered the governor general, suppressing a shudder as another blast set his teeth on edge.

"I wouldn't worry about that," countered Kemp. "But let's go."

As Pâwang Ali approached the Chinese cemetery, he heard hollow, booming, rhythmically spaced notes. *Bong! . . . Bong! . . . Bong!* Then a stamping and a rustling, and again that ghastly sound that was a strange blend of roar and whistle.

He looked over the wall and into the spread of graves marked by masonry shrines and porcelain demons gleaming in the moonlight, and brazen dragons guarding the doors.

A MAN was dancing near the grave of a recently murdered Chinese merchant. Portions of the

funeral banquet still lay scattered about: roast pigs and ducks, all aglitter with gilt tinsel.

In one hand he held a drum; in the other a trumpet made of a human thigh bone. Its shape was clear in the moonlight; and as he paused in his fantastic posturing, he set it to his lips and tore the night with another chilling blast.

His face was grim and square. His high cheek bones and slanted eyes indicated his Mongolian origin, but he was not Chinese.

He was chanting in a language but remotely familiar even to Pâ-wang Ali, who was at home from Ceylon to Khatmandu. He was glad that he could not understand more than a few words.

The dancer was calling hungry demons to a feast!

"To-night I offer for destruction this body—flesh to the hungry—blood to the thirsty—bones as fuel for the frozen——"

He turned to the four quarters, stamping in rhythm to the gruesome liturgy, smiting his drum, brandishing a dagger, blowing fearsome blasts on his thigh-bone trumpet.

"Come forth, gods and demons! The red feast is waiting——"

Red feast! The grisly words set up hideous echoes in the Arab's brain. He started violently as Sir Eric and Kemp, approaching, instinctively huddled against him. The dancer's trumpet rose in a challenging gesture. His face was contorted and his eyes gleamed fiercely.

"My word!" muttered Sir Eric.

The Arab hurdled the wall. His companions followed him, shuddering, but determined not to let him face the maniac alone.

The devil dancer perceived the three who approached. He glared

unseeingly, as though some sense other than sight had warned him. Suddenly his eyes focused, and his lips drew back in a snarl.

"Ho, demons and eaters of corruption! I challenge you—I invite you——"

"The peace upon you, brother!" intoned the Arab. "We three be men like yourself."

He now saw that the ghoul wore a garnet-colored pleated skirt, a yellow shirt with wide sleeves, a Chinese waistcoat, and over all was thrown the toga of a Thibetan monk; but this was some unclean, black ritual of Tantric Buddhism he was performing.

Pâwang Ali spoke in Arabic, scarcely expecting comprehension. The dancer, gesturing toward the Englishmen, demanded in that same language, "Who are these insects? Why do they interrupt the red feasts?"

"I say, you mustn't talk that way to his excellency!" interposed Kemp.

His harsh laugh and an English repetition of his first insult left Kemp gasping.

"Who are you?" demanded Sir Eric.

"I am one who has attained serenity. I am making gold dust out of offal!"

"Poor devil's balmy," muttered Kemp, groping for a police regulation to fit the problem. "But he simply can't run around in graveyards like this."

The devil dancer's mouth frothed and his features contracted. He tried to articulate. Finally he said, "The demon tiger! Hail, demon, the red feast is waiting!"

His welcoming gesture was followed by the snarl of a Malay tiger echoing from a tomb behind the trio.

They whirled. The grim voice of the jungle slayer left them no time to realize that for years none of the striped terrors had roamed Singapore Island.

They saw only moonlight gleaming on a porcelain dragon. Pâwang Ali laughed bitterly and spun on his heel.

But the devil dancer was gone. A savage, mocking laugh echoed from a cluster of tombs. Something stirred in the opposite quarter. The cemetery had become a maze of moon glamour and illusion.

Sir Eric felt better when Pâwang Ali said that the pieces of flesh scattered about were only roast pork. But the governor general was puzzled by the Arab's cryptic smile.

"The Queen of Agharti," he observed as he resumed the wheel of his car, "now seems less a myth. *Huzur*, the evil you mentioned is manifesting itself."

"How—what the devil—what makes you think that that maniac is one of her spies?" demanded Kemp.

"Premature speech betokens empty head, *sahib*," evaded the Arab. "My ignorance is monumental. But I will inquire."

As they swung back and down Serangoon Road, a bearded Sikh policeman blocked the way. He saluted Pâwang Ali, then salaamed as he recognized the Arab's companions.

"*Sahib* inspector," he said, "I recognized the car. Your assistant commanded that a certain murder be brought to your attention by whom-ever first saw you."

They listened a moment. Kemp's face lengthened.

"But that's insane, Hajara Singh! Henri Villeroy killed by a dagger that came from nowhere and left no wound——"

"No more so," interposed Pâwang Ali, "than a man inviting gods and demons to feast in a graveyard. Unless his excellency the governor general is in haste——"

"By Jove," muttered Sir Eric. "Good old Villeroy dead—— Why, yes, by all means, Pâwang Ali! I'll go with you!"

II.

TEN MINUTES LATER Pâwang Ali pulled up in front of a spacious residence that was half concealed by the luxuriant vegetation inside the compound. He followed his companions into the solidly appointed study and in a moment saw that Hajara Singh had not excessively garbled the account of Henri Villeroy's death.

Assistant Inspector Bradley was in charge, but he saluted and stepped aside to make way for Kemp and the governor general.

Four men in tropical evening dress were gathered about the body of one similarly attired. The black eyes stared glassily; the bronzed face was frozen in a grimace, lips drawn back, exposing white teeth. The corpse of Henri Villeroy seemed to be laughing as at some monstrous jest.

One hand gripped a dagger. The blade was unstained. The dead fingers were frozen about the hilt.

Pâwang Ali glanced at the weapon, then casually announced, "*Sahiban*, this is the ritual weapon of a Thibetan devil dancer. Perhaps some of you have heard of such persons."

Sir Eric and Kemp exchanged a querying glance. They watched the Arab as he appraised the guests.

The host was the Reverend Dr. Willys Beecham, rector of Saint Egbert's; bluff, red-faced, for once he

was bereft of the hearty manner that made his scholarship palatable. The gathering showed how widespread and liberal the doctor's tastes were:

Young Cyril Smythe-Cummings, tall, blond, and gaping a bit, member of a family distinguished in Asiatic diplomacy. Sir Ayyub Habeeb'ullah, a handsome, swarthy Arab-Malay, decorated by the British crown for war-time service, and now in business as well as being quartermaster general to the Sultan of Johore. His string of race horses and polo ponies compelled the admiration and the bets of many of Singapore's sportsmen. And finally, a red-haired, hatchet-faced Scotsman who owned half the tin mines in Malaya, Captain Fergus McAndrew, Smythe-Cummings' uncle, a retired naval officer now in charge of enlarging the Singapore harbor defenses.

The air was thick with cigar smoke. Old, tawny port gleamed from half-emptied goblets. Villeroi's had been scarcely tasted.

Pawang Ali made a profound salaam to the Reverend Dr. Beecham. "Sahib, is that dagger one of your collection?"

"I'm sure I never saw it before," declared Beecham. Confirming nods from his guests clinched it. "Poor Villeroi was telling us about the Javanese ballet that will arrive from Surabaya in a few days. We were arranging among us to finance an initial performance—ah—a preview, you might say, as these Americans put it, don't you know, before presenting it in Paris and London.

"Smythe-Cummings and McAndrews were scrutinizing these photos of the ballet, and I was turning to call the house boy for some reason or other—ah, but of course—that latest consignment of port, you

know. I'd quite forgotten it—and somehow, none of us had poor Villeroi in sight for a moment."

"Quite so," conceded Kemp. "Can't be watching every one every minute, you know."

"And then we wondered at his silence. Most animated person; Latin temperament, you understand. I was fairly well alarmed at his peculiar stare. Very much the same as you see there. Sardonic grin, so to speak. No occasion for mirth at all. And it really didn't seem mirth either.

"Then I saw that dagger. Poor fellow was quite dead."

"Quite," confirmed Sir Ayyub, and as Smythe-Cummings readjusted his monocle, he echoed the assurance. Captain Fergus McAndrews eyed his nephew but said nothing.

Pawang Ali dipped a finger tip into the glass of port, touched it to his tongue. His expression changed.

"Ah—unusual wine, Dr. Beecham."

"It is, I must confess, uncommon," admitted the rector, wanly acknowledging the tribute to his cellar and wondering that an orthodox Moslem was a connoisseur. Sir Ayyub was Malay enough to be modern about such things, but that mysterious Arab!

"So unusual," resumed the Pawang, very softly, "that a few drops would leave a man fatally poisoned."

A long silence was followed by gurgling sounds. Dr. Beecham's face was becoming a plum color; and the other faces lengthened.

They were left with nothing in reserve for the next blast: "But oddly enough, this poison is not what killed Henri Villeroi! First, it is so intensely bitter that no amount of politeness would have made him swallow it. And had any been absorbed by his first sip, excruciating agony would have given

ample warning. He would have cried out before he died."

"Then what did kill him?" demanded Kemp.

"If a poison suggested by the actual symptoms had been injected into his skin," answered the Arab, "he would have been paralyzed before he could make a sound. Doubtless the surgeon——"

As he spoke, he had been circling the corpse. He suddenly checked his speech and paused to scrutinize the back and sides of Villeroi's neck.

"Ah—this might be it," he resumed. "In an area ordinarily not sensitive. A tiny puncture. Look, Kemp *sahib!* Hardly more than a mosquito bite."

WHILE the inspector verified the observation, Pâwang Ali deftly probed Villeroi's pockets. He found a silver cigarette case, a handkerchief, and a wallet. In a waistcoat pocket was a carelessly folded chit, apparently delivered to Villeroi by a native messenger.

V—Don't let Cyril inflict himself on me after the conference. Take him to Hong Li's or to hell, but keep him away from the house. Any more of him and I'll be utterly mad.
L.

The script was feminine and beyond doubt Continental—French, probably.

Pâwang Ali pocketed the note, whoever "L" was, the message implied that Villeroi was a favored friend of some woman who found Cyril Smythe-Cummings more useful than entertaining.

That alone was a prime ingredient of murder. Young Smythe-Cummings, however, seemed harmless enough beside his hard-bitten uncle, and Sir Ayyub Habeeb'ullah, the successful soldier and merchant.

The rector and his guests silently watched Pâwang Ali as he studied the position of the corpse.

"In a corner, sheltered from missiles," he observed. "Then his skin must have been punctured either on his way to this house, or else after he arrived, and by some guest or servant!"

"I say, Pâwang Ali," interposed Kemp, "that's a bit strong, isn't it?"

"So was the poison, *sahib,*" the Arab reminded him.

And then Captain McAndrews stated that Villeroi had come to the rectory in a hired car. Just that, and no more. Terse, but an implied defense of his host.

The car was still waiting, since the conference was not to have lasted very long. The driver, a Tamil, black as coal and lean as a cane, had plenty to say.

"A madman leaped to the running board as I slowed up to wait for cross traffic," he explained. "A yellow-faced man who spoke harshly in a language I could not understand. *Sahib* Villeroi answered in the same tongue. Before I could leave the wheel, he had thrust the madman from the running board.

"His voice trembled somewhat as he ordered me to drive on."

"Madman?" echoed Kemp, frowning. "How do you know he was mad?"

"His face, by the street light, was enough." The Tamil grimaced. "Like a fakir or holy man—staring fiercely. And the way he laughed as he left! He seemed to disappear like a fog."

Further questioning developed a definite picture of the Thibetan who had danced in the Chinese graveyard.

"But if he scratched Villeroi to inject some poison," pondered Pâ-

wang Ali, "how do we account for this dagger?"

"When we find him he'll tell us!" was Kemp's grim prediction. "That chap is too conspicuous to be hidden very long."

That for the time disposed of the celebrant who invited gods and demons to a red feast; and Pâwang Ali, moreover, was interested in a woman whose initials were "L."

He addressed Cyril Smythe-Cummings. "Where were you and Villeroi going from here?"

Smythe-Cummings hesitated. His uncle's frosty blue eyes and congealing face were more than enough. He was decidedly embarrassed when he finally answered, "To Hong Li's place, though I'd intended calling on Miss Montrachet—Leila Montrachet."

"Huh!" grunted McAndrews. "You've at least the redeeming virtue of truth, and of the two places, you chose the better, though I have uncommon doubts as to it being *your* choice!"

Hong Li was the king of Singapore gamblers. No bet was too small, and none too large. Oddly enough, Hong Li was honest, where-in he differed from many of his patrons.

Pâwang Ali smiled blandly and murmured, "*Sahib* McAndrews, you do not fancy the lady?"

"I do not!" burred the captain. "And in spite of what they say about speaking no ill of the dead, I cared less for Villeroi. What I saw of him in Java, several years ago, was ample."

"Yet you are here to-night out of interest in his enterprise?"

"I must confess," interposed the Reverend Dr. Beecham, "that I left Captain McAndrews little choice. The way I worded the invitation, he could scarcely decline——"

"Since he has been taken to the mercy of Allah," interrupted Sir Ayyub, bowing until the blue-white diamond that flamed from his turban was on a level with his waist, "might we not admit that Mr. Villeroi's talent outweighed other qualities?"

Pâwang Ali's smile was equally engaging as he cut in, "*Sahiban*, forgive my abruptness, but I must leave at once to ponder on poisons that the Thibetan madman could have injected so as to take effect only after the victim was among his friends. I hope to outwit the skill that has cast reflections on this distinguished gathering.

"Sir Eric, may I place my car at your disposal, or would you prefer to wait for your own?"

"You might take me back to the residency, if you'll be so good," he said.

But as the Arab's foot drove the throttle to the floorboard, the governor general demanded, "Out with it, Pâwang Ali! How is that Thibetan connected with Villeroi's death and with that damnable Queen of Ag-harti?"

"*Huzur*," was the Arab's thoughtful reply, "in private I can say that Captain McAndrews, who is close to the noble British government, and Sir Ayyub Habeeb'ullah, equally close to the Sultan of Johore, both might well be entangled in a skein of intrigue that originates in Thibet.

"But the madman is far too conspicuous to be an agent of that queen who is a poison filtering through all Asia. When we know why Villeroi was killed, my ignorance will be less dense."

III.

ONCE IN THE STUDY of his house in the native quarter, Pâwang Ali spread out on his broad, teak-wood desk the note he had taken

from Villeroi's pocket. He sat there, eyes half closed, looking at and seemingly through the paper. He was giving his intuition a free hand, letting a score of queries and unconsciously recorded perceptions come to the surface.

Why that unidentified dagger which had in no way harmed Villeroi? And why that poisoned wine which the victim had not tasted? How many assassins had competed for Villeroi's life, and which had won?

It all swung back to the Thibetan who invited demons to partake of a red feast. Crazed as the fellow was, his ventriloquism had tricked Pâwang Ali. He could not be ignored and his presence in Singapore was a sinister hint.

"There are too many starting points," mused the Arab. "And too much insanity. Woman named Leila in process of being driven mad by Smythe-Cummings. Wild man from Thibet, already mad. Reverend rector in similar state, when learning his wine was poisoned."

He smiled whimsically, then added, "Servant of police inspector will presently duplicate prevalent unbalancedness. But first I will find out why Captain McAndrews casts such reflections on the dead man and the live woman."

He jabbed a push button. When a grizzled, shrewd-eyed Chinaman, in the garb of a coolie emerged from a curtained archway, he said, "Hop Wang, hand this note to the police inspector *sahib* and request him to avoid embarrassing Reverend Dr. Beecham's guests until I have made further observations."

He thumbed his directory and found Leila Montrachet listed among the eight thousand European residents of Singapore. The police keep that list up to date. The ad-

dress recalled a lordly house on the road leading to Mt. Pleasant, vacated a year or more ago by an Arab dignitary.

"Leila is a dark woman," he observed, making a play of words on the name that so closely resembled the Arabic word for "night." "And this is a night of evil."

The ringing of the telephone broke into his pondering.

"O man who wallows in the mire," mocked the familiar voice of the devil dancer, "I killed Villeroi to provide the demon tiger with fresh food. And while you seek Leila Montrachet, I will be turning offal into star dust."

The connection was broken before Pâwang Ali could answer.

"Gratuitous information conceals serpents," the Arab reminded himself. "The madman wants me to question Leila. He does not know how I have become aware of her."

Pâwang Ali, however, declined the hint. He changed to black tropicals and a dark turban; and presently he was driving toward the Tanglin suburb where Cyril Smythe-Cummings lived with his distinguished uncle, Captain Fergus McAndrews.

Pâwang Ali parked a block from the extensive estate. Before announcing himself, he proposed to reconnoiter. If McAndrews and his nephew had not yet returned from the police investigation, all the better.

He scaled the stone wall, slipped into the fragrant tropical tangle, and picked his way toward the captain's house. In his black tropicals, he was scarcely visible except in the open moonlight. A light was burning in the right wing. He kicked off his shoes and silently scaled a tall nipa palm. Reaching the level of the window sill, he saw a red-haired, grim-jawed man scowling at

blue prints and papers spread on the desk before him: Captain McAndrews, chewing a cigar.

Pâwang Ali unwound his turban and with one hand deftly fashioned a loop which he passed about his waist and the slender trunk of the palm. With the improvised line-man's harness he could indefinitely retain his perch.

His preparations, however, were wasted. A moment later the telephone rang. McAndrews frowned and lifted the hand set. His shaggy brows rose as he listened, then countered, "if your excellency's mind changed at regular hours, I might make some progress! This afternoon I distinctly understood that you wanted a complete revision of the Pulau Gaja fortification plans."

Fergus McAndrews was not notably tactful, and the evening had not given him any sweetness; but after listening a moment, he answered: "Very well, sir. I'll bring them to the residency at once."

He shook his head, cursed softly, then turned to his safe. He opened it and withdrew some blue prints which he added to those on his desk, then thrust the lot into a brief case. And as he reached for his hat, Pâwang Ali slipped down from his observation post.

By looping the rear of the house, the Arab reached the garage ahead of the white-clad captain.

McAndrews obviously was puzzled by the governor general's message; but Pâwang Ali, in view of Sir Eric's recent remarks, was certain that the precaution arose from doubts as to the prudence of having the plans in the captain's house.

McAndrews himself took the wheel of his sedan. He did not perceive the spindle of darkness that lurked in the shadows; nor, as the

motor roared to life, did he hear the scarcely perceptible stirring and the soft latch click. He had not the least suspicion that more than blue prints rode with him as he cleared the porte-cochère.

Just short of the botanical gardens, Pâwang Ali's premonition was justified. A lumbering bullock cart blocked the way. McAndrews tramped on the brake. The heavy car slid to a crunching halt.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "Move it away, you——"

"Yes, *tuan*," the driver of the cart respectfully assured the wrathful captain as he stepped from the running board.

AND THEN the roadside shadows came to life. Dark figures swarmed from cover, enveloping the captain before he could raise a hand, pounding and belaboring him as he valiantly battled against the overwhelming odds. Pâwang Ali, bounding from the far door, looped the rear of the car for a surprise attack; but as he cleared the gas tank, one glance afforded two distinct and revealing impressions.

First, Captain McAndrews had been laid out flat with a club. Second, while his pockets were being rifled, one of his assailants left the group and bounded to the car. He immediately reappeared with a brief case.

"Is he unconscious?" he demanded of his men.

But the reply came from the lean, dark figure at the rear of the car: Pâwang Ali's pistol blast sent the looter pitching against the fender. The Arab swung right as a shard of steel whizzed from the group. It spattered through the side window of the car. He had ducked the deadly *kris*, but the effort had deflected his aim; and though the rat-

tle of his pistol was followed by a howl, the raiders gained cover before he could search them out.

Swiftly moving targets by moonlight were too much, even at that close range. The ponderous *kerbau*, bolting in panic, interposed half a ton of hide and muscle and the heavy wooden bed of the cart. The distraction was but momentary, yet it gave the looters an instant of grace.

The captain was stirring and groaning by the roadside; but what poured from the capsized cart and into the mud distracted Pâwang Ali from the unconscious officer.

Three large wooden frames, glazed with single panes, a quick-focusing reflex camera, and some battery-operated flash bulbs were in the tangle.

That gave a different flavor to the encounter. The looters had come prepared to slip the plans into the frames to hold them flat, then by the light of successive flash bulbs photograph the lot.

Their victim, missing only his wallet and watch and loose silver when he recovered, would not know that his confidential papers were no longer secret.

"The peace upon you, captain *sahib*," said Pâwang Ali as McAndrews began to resume the struggle where he had let off. "One of the devils was killed while resisting arrest."

McAndrews recognized the left hand of the law. His face lengthened as Pâwang Ali explained the significance of the encounter.

"Are you sure it was Sir Eric who called you, captain *sahib*?"

"Do you suppose I could mistake that riveting-hammer rattle of a voice?" was the dry retort. "And if it had not been Sir Eric, the trick

these demons were planning would have no point."

That clinched Pâwang Ali's original suspicions. He drove the captain's car back to where his own machine was parked, resumed the wheel, and followed McAndrews to town. Villeroi's death was in the background for the moment. This thwarted act of espionage put all the emphasis on the Queen of Agharti. The madman, however, must be a connecting link. Thus, murder was still the key to the riddle.

"Since Sir Eric phoned the captain, there must be tapped wires to give them information they could use in a moment," he reasoned. "Ay, *wallah!* This thing was already brewing. That call merely gave an old plan a readier fulfillment. But how would they have worked had not Sir Eric phoned the sour-faced captain?"

That query suggested answers picked from the evil riddle at the rectory; and thus Pâwang Ali, instead of joining McAndrews and the governor general, set out to find Leila Montrachet.

The Thibetan knew of her; Cyril Smythe-Cummings was interested in her; his uncle despised her; and Villeroi was her confidant. Little doubt that Pâwang Ali was right when he repeated to himself, "Leila is a dark woman, and the evils of the night are only beginning—"

And as he said it—in Arabic—it was more than a play on words. It was a prophecy and an accusation.

IV.

LEILA MONTRACHET'S house was a palace not far from Mt. Pleasant. It rose white in the moonlight, externally a square, uninviting fortress.



*Pawang Ali was glad that he could not understand all of the chanting.
The dancer was calling hungry demons to a feast!*

A Chinese amah in black pajamas and blue tunic admitted Pâwang Ali to a spacious reception room whose Arabic simplicity had been masked by a bizarre, ornate blend of Chinese and Hindustani decoration and European furniture; yet there was no clash.

"Leila," pondered Pâwang Ali as he appraised that striking combination of vermilion lacquer and gilt and carved teak, "can be no less than an enchantress to avoke subtlety out of what should be a clash."

And then the mistress of the house came gliding into the amber glow. She was shapely, and the long, sleek lines of a silver gown splashed with scarlet combined with her high-piled black hair to exaggerate her height.

Artifice accented the length of eyes, dark and cryptic as the scarlet smile that greeted the Arab. There was a ripple of cream-whiteness that reminded him of a languid serpent; Leila was extending a hand all aglitter with cool sapphires.

"I have so often heard of Pâwang Ali! How good of you finally to call, between slayings of those who resist arrest."

She was using only a phrase that was common property in Singapore, yet the soft mockery of her voice made her words a greeting to an executioner. The Arab accepted her invitation but selected a seat that placed his back against a solid wall.

"Instead of a red slayer, I seek a poisoner," he explained. "Perhaps you could tell me who might kill Henri Villeroy?"

He seemed to be studying the pattern of the Feraghan rug, but he was watching Leila. For an instant her eyes were windows opening into an inner hell of wrath and terror; then came the grief and query and

surprise that should have come at first.

"Oh—what happened? You don't mean—but is Henri dead? How could—"

"For bringing you such bad news I crave pardon of Allah," he sympathetically murmured. Then, deftly falsifying his account of Villeroy's death, he concluded, "The poison took swift effect, but he spoke your name, as though a warning were to follow. Whom could he have suspected? Who might seek your life next?"

She shook her head. She was calm now. Too calm, too poised.

"I don't know. Henri had certain difficulties in Java in organizing that ballet. His methods—well, they were high-handed at times. The enthusiasm of an artist, you know."

She was sidetracking him. Doubtless she did tell the literal truth, a necessary ingredient in an infallible lie. She did not want him to intervene. The only flaw lay in her ignorance of the Thibetan dagger, else she would have not offered hints leading to the Java.

"Some one might have come on ahead of the ballet he is expecting?" resumed Pâwang Ali, pretending to swallow the bait.

His glance covered a multitude of details of the eye-baffling shadow and color of the room. One object stared from the massed bric-a-brac and embroidered silk; an ivory truncheon, heavily studded with silver and turquoise. It was a Thibetan sorcerer's *sceptre-dorje*, used in alternation with the drum and thigh-bone trumpet.

Villeroy's possession of the ritual dagger at the time of his death could not be coincidence; and his lovely associate must likewise in some way be linked to Thibet. That scepter was, therefore, more than a curio.

"Some enemy might have followed Henri," admitted Leila after a moment.

"Then be on your guard," warned the Arab as he arose to end the interview.

"Why should vengeance extend to me?" she countered.

"He who mixes with the blacksmith becomes smeared with soot," quoted Pâwang Ali.

But that did not perturb Leila. She graciously thanked him, then gestured toward the amah, who preceded the Arab down the long, dim hallway leading toward the front.

WHEN the amah reached the door, she stood aside, holding it open. But before Pâwang Ali reached the threshold, a massive panel chunked solidly into place, blocking the doorway. The silent swiftness of it caught him off guard. It seated before he could check its drop. He flung himself sidewise, suspecting a fatal ambush, but there was neither hiss of a hurled knife nor thud of a bullet. His pistol, drawn as he whirled, had no target in that shimmering lane of deception.

The dropping of a second panel closed the farther end of the hall. He was trapped.

The scented silence mocked him. His deft fabrications had only warned Leila.

Holstering his pistol, he drew a short, thick-bladed dagger, knelt at the threshold, and tried to pry the panel upward. A glance convinced him that that would not work. He began cutting at the threshold so as to give his weapon a more favorable angle of leverage. It was of wood, nearly as refractory as the teak of the panel.

But why imprison him? If she feared to make an attempt against

his life, how could she have more confidence in a trap that at the best could not last very long?

Leila, however, had underestimated her quarry. Far beyond the reach of the tallest man was a row of circular windows blocked with iron bars and opening to the flat roof. He unwound his turban, knotted into one end a handful of coins, and whipped the length of silk toward the window. Two trials, and he engaged a bar. Then he seized a heavy, teak screen and used it to drag the weighted end of the cloth clear of the ledge so that it would slide down. In a few moments he had a double bight that he could just reach by bounding upward with arms fully extended.

He was counting on pitting his strength against the inevitable corrosion of the iron in that tropical climate. But he had scarcely reached the ledge when he heard Leila's voice from beyond the heavy panel.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she deplored. "This terrible house! It's full of the oddest things! I touched a switch, intending to light your way out. My amah tells me I've locked you in!"

"Perhaps," suggested Pâwang Ali, "pressing some other button might release the panels."

"I've tried that, but nothing happens. Whatever must you be thinking! So I'm sending for a carpenter to come and cut a hole in the panel."

Pâwang Ali laughed softly.

"That would be too destructive. Surely there must be some way of releasing the device. In the meanwhile"—his voice became more remote as he spoke—"I shall be trying the one nearest the entrance. Maybe I can pry it up—"

But instead, he wedged himself into the circular window casing. As

he had expected, the bars were corroded where they entered the masonry. One was particularly weak. He planted his foot against it and with his shoulders firmly supported by the casing, he slowly straightened.

The bar bent. He reversed his position and from the opposite direction repeated the maneuver. Its mate likewise bowed.

Leila, knowing that he could not hear her regrets if he were at the farther panel, had cut short her apologies. Thus she would not suspect that her prisoner was wedging himself between the two sprung bars. It was a tight squeeze, but the wiry Arab made it. Presently he was on the flat roof of the house that had once belonged to a Moslem dignitary.

Despite his momentary advantage, Pâwang Ali did not try to double back and spy on Leila, convinced though he was that something urgent had moved her to detain him. Her remarks were too plausible to be true. The most he could make of his escape would be through a swift move to the next link in the chain.

"The carpenters," he said, smiling ironically at the moon as he let himself into the garden, "will be long in arriving. In the meanwhile, she has already had time to telephone to whatever ally she may still have."

The most he could make of his escape would be through a swift move to try the next link in the chain of intrigue. Sir Ayyub and Cyril Smythe-Cummings were thus far untried. The others were unknown for the time, or inaccessible.

"She is not bent on vengeance," he reasoned, "since she has not heart enough to avenge anything as useless as a dead man. Fear gnaws at her, yet she is averse to a lawful ally. Cyril Smythe-Cummings will

hardly be at Hong Li's place. He is the weakest link, and there is no subtlety in him."

So saying, Pâwang Ali again headed west toward Tanglin.

V.

A LIGHT in the left wing confirmed Pâwang Ali's opinion that young Smythe-Cummings had returned to his rooms; but as he advanced down the walk that wound among palms and clusters of whispering bamboos, he slackened his stride. While his normal gait had the silent smoothness of a prowling tiger, this would no longer suffice.

More than the bamboos were stirring in that fragrant tropical tangle. There was a momentary shifting in the darkness. One glimpse of something that cast a shadow where none should be, warned the stealthy Arab.

He crept toward a clump of plantains. From the shelter of the broad leaves he could just detect the outline of a crouching man and the momentary glint of bare steel. There was a faint reek of *arrak*—the raw liquor that sets Malays on the trail of murder.

The fellow was watching the left wing.

Pâwang Ali had a ring-side seat at a sinister performance. He drew his dagger, cut off a stalk of bamboo, and hollowed out the pith at the butt end. Then he rammed the hilt of the weapon into the opening. He now had a first-class spear that would silently cross the moonlit gravel path which would defy even his stealthy approach.

He shifted the deadly shaft into line.

"Not a word, father of a pig!" he whispered as the steel sent its frosty warning through the lurker's jacket.

It was his intention to capture the fellow; but his plan was abruptly altered. From within the house came a yell, a crash, the roar of a pistol. A white man was beset by the intruders whose lookout Pâwang Ali had surprised.

A Malay pitched headlong through the curtained window, howling and flailing a *kris* whose bright steel showed dark in the moonlight. Pâwang Ali had no further need of stealth. He jerked his pistol into line and bounded forward. The human projectile, crashing into the shrubbery, heard his companion yell a warning. A hurled *kris* hissed over his shoulder. But as the breath of doom fanned his cheek, the Arab's pistol cracked. The fugitive doubled as though kicked in the stomach. Pâwang Ali pivoted in time to avoid the sweeping blade of the one who for an instant had been his prisoner; but though his pistol barrel parried the cut, the weapon was knocked from his grasp as a wild shot spattered into the foliage.

The Malay bounded forward, but the agile Arab flattened beneath the hissing blade. As he moved, his arm lashed out. The man with the *kris* measured his length.

He was quick, regaining his balance in a split second; but he was matched against a man whose muscles moved by instinct that short-circuited reason. The pistol was too far away for Pâwang Ali to reach before the Malay closed in. He came to his knees with the shaft of his improvised spear gripped like a quarterstaff.

The butt flickered out, brushing aside the trenchant steel, then the lance head darted forward. And as the Malay clutched at the missile buried in his throat, Pâwang Ali bounded to the sill.

Not more than a brace of split seconds had elapsed between the initial alarm and the deadly intervention. Another pistol blast roared from the room. There was a heavy thud, a yell, a groan. As the Arab cleared the sill, he saw a bullet-riddled Malay huddled against the wall. Cyril Smythe-Cummings, slashed and blood-soaked, tried to shift his smoking revolver to shoot down an assailant who was advancing, blade in hand.

Smack! The Malay ducked behind a door jamb. Smythe-Cummings slumped, too far gone to get a better line of fire. Pâwang Ali snatched a chair as the assassin, seeing his victim lose his weapon, emerged to finish the butchery.

The assassin recoiled, seeing an enemy. Then his blade shot out. It landed, point-on—but the seat of the heavy chair stopped the missile. Pâwang Ali catapulted his buckler straight ahead of him. It landed, but the impact was not true. Its force was partly wasted on the door jamb. He stooped to snatch Smythe-Cummings' revolver.

"Allah curse you!"

The barrel jumped into line as the Malay turned to bolt.

Click!

Misfire. And as he dashed after the fugitive, a door slammed. Pâwang Ali charged down the hall. The door was locked. From without he heard a rapidly receding sound of flight across the grounds, but the fugitive's scarred face was indelibly burned into the Arab's memory. Somewhere in Singapore he would again meet that live clue!

He returned to the battlefield.

Smythe-Cummings was sitting on the floor, but slumped against the desk. His face was gray, splashed with red. His evening clothes were blood-soaked.

Pâwang Ali leaped to the telephone; but the wounded man detained him.

"Thanks — but don't — bother. Bally nuisance, getting out of bed — just to pronounce another chap — dead."

ODDLY ENOUGH, Smythe-Cummings seemed rather cheerful about it. These unfathomable British! Pâwang Ali was perplexed. He never could quite catch the keynote of the *sahibs*. He approached as Smythe-Cummings gestured.

"Listen — no end — important — warn uncle — danger — Leila man she —"

An agonizing struggle for articulation. His lungs were flooded with his own blood. His lips moved to no purpose; but for a long moment his eyes hardened to blue lance-heads.

"Yes, *sahib* — easy now — I understand — What of Leila and her danger?" urged Pâwang Ali, hoping to spur that grim resolution to another word.

A desperate effort ended in a gurgle, and Smythe-Cummings' eyes became glassy. He slumped in a grotesque red heap: a riddle in blood, a challenge to the left hand of the law.

Pâwang Ali rose, surveyed the disordered room. On the desk was an overturned inkstand. The fluid was trickling to the carpet. A pen, still wet, lay on the floor. Near it was a trampled sheet of paper. The sudden jerk of the last pen stroke and the wet ink showed that Smythe-Cummings had been writing when attacked by the intruders.

Pâwang Ali seized the message. It was addressed to the dead man's uncle.

Frightfully sorry to embarrass you this way, but I've made a mis-

take. No, other way out for me. But —

The implication was obvious. The assassins had intervened in time to check the confession. Pâwang Ali retrieved the heavy military revolver. The Circassian walnut stock and the engraving on the butt indicated that it was a privately owned weapon.

Cyril Smythe-Cummings had borrowed his uncle's revolver — an odd accessory to letter writing.

"Neither," reasoned Pâwang Ali, "is it illogical that though on the verge of suicide, he would resist a murderous attack. It is better to die by another's hand."

For a long moment he stared at that incriminating note. Smythe-Cummings had expected his uncle to find him, to understand, and to do the polite thing. Pâwang Ali fumbled for a match.

"Contrary to police manual," he observed as he ground the charred note to bits, "but that will make no difference when the heart of the riddle is approached."

He called headquarters. As he awaited the arrival of the police, he made a swift search of the rooms of Captain Fergus McAndrews and his dead nephew.

Cyril Smythe-Cummings' pockets yielded nothing but a wallet, keys, some loose change, and an unsigned chit covering a wager on one of Sir Ayyub's horses. The bet, a hundred dollars Straits, had been placed at Hong Li's. Nor did the room yield anything of immediate significance; but Captain McAndrews' quarters were richer.

In the bedroom lay a heap of clothing. McAndrews had hastily changed on his return from the rectory. The meeting there had been only an interruption of his many duties. But not even the crusty

captain's open contempt of Villeroi and Leila prepared Pâwang Ali for what he found in a waistcoat pocket: a half-emptied vial whose stopper was pierced by a sharp, steel wire. It was arranged like an iodine applicator, but the remaining fluid was clear, yellowish, and viscous.

Viscous, so that the stab of the wire would surely carry home a fatal dose!

Only a chemist's test could confirm the Arab's opinion, but he anticipated no contradiction; no poison known in the East could have been administered by the Thibetan madman and left the victim unharmed and unaware until an hour later.

He muffled the vial in a handkerchief, pocketed it, then went to the door to admit the police. That done, he set out for headquarters.

There he found Inspector Kemp at his desk.

"*Sahib*, what are the surgeon's findings?"

"Pretty much as you hinted," answered Kemp. "A mixture of vegetable alkaloids. Devilish mess. Can't pin it down to any one drug. Oddly enough, it's the same as the stuff in the wine. Autopsy showed he had drunk wine, but no traces of poison."

Pâwang Ali nodded, and observed, "Villeroi, therefore, was dead when his wine glass was poisoned."

"But that Thibetan dagger?" demanded Kemp. "That's the utterly insane touch!"

"It was not poisoned?"

"No. Clean as a whistle. That's the baffling thing about it."

"And this, *sahib*," interrupted Pâwang Ali, smiling wryly as he handed Kemp the vial found in McAndrews' pocket, "makes the bafflement richer."

He explained its origin.

"You're crazy!" snapped the inspector. "Just fancy Captain Ferguson McAndrews working out a personal grudge that way! Utter rot! Quite out of character."

"Poisonings have occurred in Scotland, *sahib*," was the Arab's soft-voiced reminder. "And consider the psychology of the poisoner; he is one who must slay and refrain from flight. One whom circumstance compels to abide near his crime, not one who may strike and flee."

"By Jove!" Kemp's face became as bleak as his eyes. "But why?"

"Ponder on the suicide attempt that became murder," countered the left hand of the law. "Remember, I do not accuse any one. I merely say that when the honor of a man's house is in peril, there is no weapon he might not use. And this Leila Montrachet seems more than merely a lovely woman leading a young man to extravagance. So much so that I am about——"

But the inspector's telephone broke into Pâwang Ali's words. Kemp, listening for a moment to the dry, level voice that came over the wire, then slammed the receiver and cursed heartily.

"Murder and burglary!" he growled as he caught his breath. "Like one of these blasted tennis matches—round robin, you know, where every one meets every one else."

"This circular robin," smiled the Arab, "is rapidly eliminating competitors. But who is slain?"

"Leila's amah. Killed by mistake. Wearing her mistress' gown."

"Let us go in my car, *sahib*," suggested Pâwang Ali. "I enjoy opportunity of lawfully violating speed limits."

Kemp agreed; but having before

driven with the Arab, he did not relish the prospect!

VI.

A SIX-FOOT patrolman, wearing a massive turban, was posted at the entrance of Leila's house. Upon entering, Pâwang Ali saw that Assistant Inspector Bradley, having arrived from the Wayang Satu station, was already at work.

Leila, distressed but charming, met the left hand of the law and his companion.

"Monsieur Ali, you can't imagine how mortified I was at your being imprisoned——" She gestured toward the panels which had trapped him. They showed signs of the chisel work that had released them. "But how did you ever leave before the carpenter arrived?"

"A trick I learned in Thibet," was the suave response. "But let us hear of this tragic death of your amah."

She led the way across the room toward a stairway to the second floor. Pâwang Ali, as he followed, surveyed the spacious, shadowy room. The ivory-and-silver scepter was gone; but he made no comment.

Pausing at the threshold of a bedroom, as ornately furnished as a movie set, Leila gestured toward the body of a woman wearing a gown of silver cloth, which was now splashed not only with scarlet, but the darker red of partly dried blood. A knife wound gaped between the shoulders. Her black hair, undisturbed by the attack, was arranged like Leila's.

"I wasn't entirely pleased with the gown," she explained, "so I asked my amah to put it on. We're very much the same figure, you know, and she was ever so helpful that way, letting me see how my gowns would look to some one else.

"Anyway, the doorbell rang and I went down to answer it as poor Ah Lan was neither quite in nor quite out of that dress. Only it wasn't the doorbell after all. It was the telephone. And in the midst of it, I heard a disturbance upstairs. Ah Lan screamed.

"I picked up a pistol, but reached my room too late. I found her this way, and a man pawing through the dresser. I fired and missed; he dashed out to the roof, over the parapet, and——"

"Can you describe him?" demanded Kemp, noting the bullet marks in the stucco of the wall.

"Not well," she admitted. "But he was oddly dressed. Something like a Buddhist monk. I caught just a glimpse of his face. Some sort of a Mongolian. The most malicious and wrathful expression—why, I was fairly paralyzed for a moment. And he laughed—— Oh, it was like a wind howling through a graveyard!"

"Anything missing?"

"I've been too upset to notice," she admitted. "But I don't think so."

During the account, Pâwang Ali's glance had shifted about the room. While the details checked with the story, he was interested in the cake of mud adhering to the sill of the window opening to the flat roof; but not so much as to keep him from cutting in, "Your Thibetan *sceptre-dorje* is gone, *sitti*. The one that adorned the salon."

For that to be missing implied an intruder who strangely combined unusual stealth with uncommon bungling.

"Oh—that?" Leila's poise barely held. For an instant her eyes revealed terror smoldering behind her lovely mask. Then she smiled, shrugged, and carelessly added,

"Well—if that's all he took—it's just a trifle I picked up from a peddler in Rawalpindi, a few years ago."

"By the way," asked Kemp, "who phoned you?"

"Sir Ayyub Habeeb'ullah," was the ready answer. "Very kind of him. He knew how much I thought of poor Henri."

Plausible—just as much so as the idea that the Thibetan madman had killed the amah by mistake and taken the scepter.

Pāwang Ali renewed his scrutiny of the room. It would have been easy for some one, spying on the house from without, to have mistaken the amah for her mistress. He turned toward the stairs; in a moment he was in the courtyard. There his flashlight picked out shoe prints too blurred to be of much use as identification. A cord fastened to a hook engaged at the crest of the wall showed how the assassin had entered.

The madman from Thibet must be more than a background figure in the evils of the night. Leila's possession of the *dorje* could not be casual. Sorcerers' wands are not for sale to tourists. She was undoubtedly more closely tied to High Asia than her known history admitted; and Villeroi's first attempt at an exotic ballet had taken him to southern Thibet.

"Miss Montrachet, can't you give us a hint as to why that madman would pick on you?" persisted Inspector Kemp.

She shook her head. Her dark eyes seconded the appealing melancholy of her smile.

"No, Inspector Kemp. I've not the least idea why any one would molest me. In fact—"

Leila's denial was interrupted by heavy footsteps, and a stern, famil-

iar voice: "I can very well name a number of reasons why heathen or Christian might harm you!"

CAPTAIN McANDREWS, just brushing aside the Sikh patrolman who had followed him from the door, stood glaring from the threshold, hat still jammed down to his ears.

"Thanks to you and Villeroi, my nephew made a fool of himself! And you need not try to convince the inspector of your ignorance. Some one put a poisoned needle in my pocket, to implicate me in the death of that scoundrel, but neither the police nor Sir Eric took it too seriously.

"So I'm here in my own interest to ask you who would kill Villeroi? Who would try to rob me of government plans? Who would murder my nephew to keep him from telling me what was on his mind? The lad had hinted just enough to convince me you've done more than rob him! Which is something no one expected."

He stood there, grim and stern, eyes ablaze with wrath. Then, his gnarled forefinger leveled like a lance at rest, he demanded, "Inspector, search this house for evidence of espionage!"

Leila's eyes narrowed venomously, but her smile was as sweet as her voice when she agreed, "Please do, Inspector Kemp. And since Captain McAndrews is so prejudiced, don't you think he might have killed Henri?"

McAndrews snorted, but despite the sound, did not spit on the Feraghan carpet as he turned toward the door. But though no one sought to detain him, a guttural exchange of Hindustani and a scuffle of feet in the hallway checked him.

Two policemen had their hands

full with a prisoner whose curses rolled like distant thunder: the square-faced Thibetan madman. His slanted eyes blazed malignantly, and his mouth showed signs of recently having frothed. In the amber glow of the salon his skin looked like yellow parchment drawn over bones.

The two Sikhs kept him under control. A third carried an aggregation of unusual articles; the thigh-bone *kangling* that had emitted those terrific, soul-searing blasts accounted for the Sikh's distaste; a drum, a ritual dagger, and a *dorje*.

"Your scepter, *sitti*," remarked the Arab, reaching for the sorcerer's wand. Then he addressed the prisoner in a Nepalese dialect.

"I am Tsong Khapa," the fellow answered in acceptable though mechanical English. "A *naljorpa*—one who has attained serenity."

He flashed a baleful glare at Leila and snarled, "O you who wallow in corruption! Beware of the wrath to come! I celebrate the red beast in one hundred and eight cemeteries and on the shores of one hundred and eight lakes, summoning the demons."

He laughed harshly, then added, "I killed Villeroy. Be warned, O stupid insect!"

"Take him to headquarters," directed Kemp.

Pâwang Ali intervened: "*Sahib*, let me have charge of the prisoner. I will guard him. On my head and eyes."

The glance that accompanied the request was more than a hint. Kemp swallowed his qualms, and agreed.

Pâwang Ali addressed Tsong Khapa in Nepalese. From the corner of his eye he watched Leila's reflection in a mirror. He purposely lowered his voice, not enough to be

inaudible, but so that she would have to make an effort to hear.

"*Rimpoche*," he said, using the courtly designation for a lama, "the universe is but a mirage which springs from the mind and sinks back into it."

The red wrath left the *naljorpa*'s fierce eyes. From the mirror Pâwang Ali caught a flash of Leila's intentness. She was listening, and understanding.

"You can escape them, *Rimpoche*," continued the Arab. "But with all your wonder working, you cannot prevail against them for long. Come with me. It was written that I help you. We are all bound to the wheel. The slayer and the slain."

The *naljorpa* nodded.

"Give me the ritual implements," directed the Arab. "We two will discuss this in private."

He knew now that Leila had understood his patter of Thibetan lore. That would drive her into the open.

Kemp dubiously shook his head as he watched the white-turbaned Arab and the grimy devil dancer stalk toward the gate; but that exchange of Nepalese and Sanskrit had impressed and baffled him too much to object to Pâwang Ali's unorthodox procedure.

VII.

WHEN they reached Pâwang Ali's house, he said to his guest: "Tsong Khapa *Rimpoche*, if this does not please you, there are other rooms that might be to your taste."

"I can meditate in the midst of a battlefield," admitted the *naljorpa*.

Questioning him would be futile; but concealed microphones and periscopes would spy on him and betray him when he thought he was alone. While Leila's accusation gave the

law a good start, it was more important to know why the barefooted *naljorpa* had gone to such trouble to get an ivory scepter.

Could it contain papers and evidence which Leila had challenged the police to find in her house? It was not even impossible that Tsong Khapa was her ally and not her

enemy: for from the beginning, this had been a maze of illusion.

The Thibetan seated himself, cross-legged, in the Buddhist position of meditation. He noted that Pâwang Ali likewise was "sitting like a lotus." His expression softened as he recognized the correctness of the posture.



A chill raced down the Arab's spine as he recognized that growl. The animal must be drugged or utterly crazed.

"O thou wallower in the mire," he abruptly began, "you seek a slayer."

"He hides only from himself," countered the Arab.

The *naljorpa* made a sign of assent. The answer was occult enough to please him.

"You also are the slave of illusion. He slew that which was nothing. He himself is likewise nothing. I am the slayer, yet I also am not. Villeroy was punished by his crime, and not for it."

A long pause. Then, "The truth is in Hong Li's gambling house. Now go back to your litter of offal."

Pâwang Ali bowed ceremoniously. "Very well, *Rimpoche*. Command my servants during my absence."

But the *naljorpa* seemed not to hear him. He was staring fixedly at the ivory scepter. He muttered, swaying as to the cadence of music felt rather than heard.

Pâwang Ali left the room and summoned Hop Wang.

"Watch the *naljorpa*," he commanded. "Thwart him in nothing but attempted escape. Let Tsang Ah Fong join your vigilance."

It was late, but one more move was necessary to complete the circuit of death's playground. Pâwang Ali removed his suit of European tropicals and put on the *kaftan* of an Arab dignitary. As he snapped the broad belt from which hung a *tulwar*, Hop Wang entered to announce Captain McAndrews.

"Pâwang Ali," said the captain, "the police found that my telephone had been tapped. And while I did not realize it at the time, I am sure now that my nephew was tricked into revealing what he knew of my work."

"Perhaps," murmured the Arab, "you now recollect something that would point at the slayer of Vil-

leroi? In spite of Tsong Khapa's confession?"

"That confession," was the sour comment, "is as sensible as the attempt to implicate me."

"Javanese poison, captain *sahib*," Pâwang Ali reminded him, "is not entirely unknown to you. But what is your suspicion?"

"Before this round robin of murder is over, that Montrachet woman will be the only survivor. Man, get to the heart of things! Hong Li's gambling house, the only remaining source of information about Villeroy. Find out there if any one but my nephew or me had a motive for closing his account."

McAndrews' seamed face was a frozen mask, but it betrayed the internal strain.

"Thank you, *sahib*," acknowledged Pâwang Ali; and as he ceremoniously bowed, the captain turned and stalked from the room.

HONG LI, oddly enough, was becoming a unanimous choice; but having it twice seconded within the hour was disconcerting.

"If one gives you a goat, go quickly to it with a rope," the Arab murmured to the silence of the room. "After all, a strange grave is better than an empty sack."

And so saying, he left his house to tempt whatever fate was waiting at Hong Li's.

The narrow streets were no longer crowded with stocky coolies, turbaned *babas*, and Hindu women. Singapore was asleep—but its odors kept watch.

The tang of salt breeze was lost in the spicy fumes that breathed from the barred doors of Chinese merchants and the rank stench exhaled from nameless alleys. Offal cried to the Asiatic night; and through it all glided white-robed

vengeance invading the labyrinth of peril.

As Pâwang Ali approached Hong Li's place, he heard the subdued chattering of birds and the snarling of caged beasts. He was passing the market where animals awaited purchasers in the morning: parrakeets, ring doves, civet cats, apes, and reptiles.

From an alley ahead of him came the sorrowful wail of a *sampin* and the voices of Chinese singsong girls.

The madman's hint seemed substantial. "A hundred drunkards are better than one gambler." The old wisdom of his race was the source of Pâwang Ali's intuition, and the key to the red secrets of the City of the Lion.

The alley ahead was like the exit from a grave. A drunken Malay tottered to his feet and caught at Pâwang Ali's sleeve. His unsteady fingers slipped, and he lurched back into the wallow.

A narrow gateway opened into a court whose obscurity was lessened at the center by the sky glow. Hong Li's door was at the farther side.

Another half dozen paces—and as the gloom again thickened, the Arab's instinct warned him. He felt the gaze of fierce eyes. As he flung himself aside, a low, rippling snarl confirmed his intuition. A length of tawny, black-spotted fur flashed past him, visible for just an instant as it rose, then sank again into the gloom.

A leopard was tracking him. From the darkness came the thud of its feet as it landed. Phosphorescent eyes glowed in the shadows. Swift as the Arab was, the beast again faced him, ready to strike. Flight was impossible. The attempt would be fatal.

No man, however agile, could escape. Blank walls, barred doors, and

unseeing windows surrounded the arena which Pâwang Ali shared with that monstrous cat.

Odd that it growled! The silent, deadly stealth of the leopard forbade sound.

His pistol was useless in the gloom against a target that moved as swiftly as thought and certainly as death. He could see only the green hell of its eyes, yet it could see him and his every move as by daylight.

That eager, vibrant snarl! Why? The leopard should strike silently.

The dark hulk became a tawny flash as it rose into the lesser gloom, straight for the Arab's throat. Yet the man slayer's stroke did not quite succeed. Pâwang Ali felt the savage rake of claws. The beast's shoulder knocked him sprawling; but during that instant, the man was more active than the beast.

He resisted his instinctive effort to break his fall to the flagstones. He snatched the free end of his turban cloth and drew his Khorassan *tulwar* as he dropped. The beast whirled, this time closer and snarling with an eagerness that was almost articulate. More than hunger or wrath moved it.

A chill raced down the Arab's spine as he recognized the note in that fierce voice. The leopard must be drugged, utterly crazed.

AND THEN the man attacked. His left arm was swathed in the turban cloth, and the curved Khorassan blade gleamed like a shard of the new moon. He flashed forward, but his swiftness was more than matched. Savage teeth and slashing claws ripped and mangled the cloth but could not quite reach the Arab's arm. The *tulwar* stroke drew blood from the tawny hide, and the beast's outcry became pure wrath. It no

longer sought to pass Pâwang Ali! It now recognized an enemy and its fury made it a murderous whirl of fur and fang.

The Arab felt the deadly slash of claws, but as he was bowled over by the feline slayer, his muffled forearm protected his throat.

The beast was on him. As it wrenched the forearm caged in its deadly jaws, the hind feet drew up to rake him open——

But the Khorassan blade sank, hilt-deep, true and deadly, rising red from between the corded shoulders. A gush of hot blood, a twitching and a mortal howl as the jaws relaxed, and the raking hind legs became limp.

"*El hamdulilahi!*" muttered the Arab as he struggled clear of the leopard. "Allah be praised!"

His throat was intact, but his entire body was a crisscross of gaping scratches. His legs were buckling. He marveled at the size of the beast. Nearly five feet long, not counting its tail; a splendid slayer almost as large as a small tiger.

Tsong Khapa and Captain McAndrews, he began to recollect, had sent him to Hong Li's place. Then he remembered the Malay sot lying at the farther end of the alley.

Why had the leopard ignored the drunkard?

"By Allah, could Tsong Khapa have invited this demon to a red feast?"

He shivered, then as his strength returned, Pâwang Ali shouldered the dead leopard.

His lean, scarred face was long and thoughtful as he stalked back to his house, bent under his dead burden. There was something uncanny about the attack. It had been trying to pass him! It had at first considered him as an obstacle, not a target. And its eager almost articu-

late cry indicated the beast's thought.

"But how could that be?" the bewildered Arab asked himself. "He sounded as though his mate were somewhere beyond me, awaiting him. Ya Allah, what madness is this? What devilment of the night—what fiendishness of that man who dances in graveyards——"

It was a weary march, but finally Pâwang Ali reached his house.

"Bring me fresh clothing," he ordered as Hop Wang admitted him. "Satan the damned walks abroad to-night."

In the far shadows of the room was one who "sat like a lotus." Pâwang Ali shed his befouled slippers and approached the meditating *naljorpa*. But half a dozen paces from his supposed guest he halted.

It was no man, but a dummy. Some tapestries taken from a shaded nook of the wall; a pair of Moro *kampilans*, blades and scabbards lashed together made the skeleton of the dummy; then a small brazen bowl for the averted face.

"That brother of Satan did this under the eyes of my servants, and walked out under their very noses!"

The wily Thibetan had used a trick known to many *naljorpas*: making their minds a blank, withdrawing their personality, they achieved not physical invisibility, but a "negativeness" of presence that made them unperceived. Tsong Khapa's earlier demonstration in the Chinese graveyard kept Pâwang Ali from censuring his watchers.

He turned to scrutinize his own discarded clothing. As he pondered, he half closed his eyes.

"Though that devil cat sees in the dark," he said to himself, "he tracks more by smell than sight. Yet he also was the victim of illusion."

The Arab's eyes suddenly made

him a brother of the dead leopard. He pounced at the grimy *kaftan*, plucked the sleeve, sniffed it. There was an odd stain on the soiled silk, and the odor it emanated was revealing.

"*Wallah!* In the stench of that alley, I could not detect this one among so many smells, but the grandfather of leopards had a nose keener than any man's!"

Valerian! An essential oil which, though repulsive to human nostrils, drives felines almost mad. It was clear now that some one had set the beast on the Arab's trail. Murder by remote control. The psychology of the poison slayer. The sender of the leopard must be the one who had killed Villeroi.

"Your bath is ready, honorable master," announced Hop Wang. "And this leopard?"

"Leave it here," directed Pâwang Ali. "I am going back to Hong Li's place. Though treachery sent me there, the mocker picked that place because to *him* it seemed a plausible one."

VIII.

IN HONG LI'S gambling house jades and bronzes and lacquer smiled at an acre of Chinese and Turkestan rugs; yellow-faced dignitaries in pastel-hued silks, swarthy Arabs in white *djellabs*; Malays with gleaming eyes and taut mouths pitted their fortunes against Hong Li's games: *Main po*, *pak kop piu*, and oddly in contrast, a roulette wheel which kicked a treacherous ivory ball against a four-zero handicap.

In one corner sat an old man with a round, benevolent face: Hong Li, who smiled as he listened to the whisper of cards, and the tinkle of broad, gold pieces that only gam-

bling passion could exhume from the chinks and crannies of native houses.

Pâwang Ali glanced about the salon, watched silent waiters serving refreshments to wealthy loungers. In other rooms coolies were wagering ten-cent pieces. No one was too poor, nor too rich for Hong Li.

"A gambler is worse than a hundred drunkards," he repeated to himself, sensing the cold, savage desperation of the players. He felt the tension of that luxurious den; he knew that a score of murders could arise from it.

An enemy had given him truth.

Then he saw Sir Ayyub, still wearing evening dress and a white turban from which gleamed a diamond. The gem was flawed and yellow, worth but a trifle compared with the steel-blue stone that had dazzled the eyes at the rectory. But before he could further observe the most spectacular of Singapore's sportsmen, Hong Li arose to receive his latest caller.

"The honorable Pâwang Ali flatters my poor place," he greeted.

"I am abashed in the presence of your rich patrons," deprecatd the Arab, returning the ceremonious bow.

Not to be outdone by Pâwang Ali's fluent Mandarin, Hong Li concluded with compliments in Arabic: "The rising of the moon makes the stars hide from shame."

"Who am I in the face of the distinguished Sir Ayyub?" countered Pâwang Ali, still intrigued by the flawed, yellow gem that defiled the turban of the sultan's quartermaster.

"Alas," murmured Hong Li, "more often he makes private bets with Henri Villeroi, whose presence long adorned my poor house."

Hong Li's face and voice were bland, but his slanting eyes were poisoned almonds, carved of jet,

cryptic, charged with a meaning as intense as it was elusive.

"Jewels drip from the tongue of the honorable Hong," murmured Pâwang Ali, still watching Sir Ayyub's brazen mask from the corner of his eye.

Hong Li perceived the glance.

"My elder brother already has a mouth stopped with pearls," he countered, bowing and backing toward a red door that was opening to admit him.

There was little doubt that the honorable Hong by this time knew as much of the night's murderous tangle as any but the actual participants. Moreover, it was his business to know about his patrons, particularly those whose signed chits were accepted in place of cash; and he had lived long because guarding knowledge was an instinct.

Hong Li would say no more until Pâwang Ali had expanded the vague hint into a compelling fact; yet what he had said concerning private wagers was enough. However, that flowery exchange had warned Sir Ayyub, and the evening was at an end—for Pâwang Ali.

He turned to join the Malay dignitary, but Sir Ayyub was crossing the threshold of one of the exit doors before the left hand of the law could join him. It was an open question whether or not he had deliberately evaded the encounter; and in neither case could Pâwang Ali hope to shadow him. He could, however, by making use of another of the many exits, meet Sir Ayyub before he emerged from the tangle of alleys and learn more about the quartermaster's off-color diamond. Financial pressure took strange turns!

A vermilion panel slid aside, admitting Pâwang Ali to a narrow passageway whose further opening

he could just distinguish. When he reached its end, he was half a block closer to Palembang Road; and then he saw that his timing had been correct. In the half light he caught the white blur of a turban and a full-dress shirt.

A man was stepping from a horse-shoe of blackness across the narrow street: Sir Ayyub, beyond any doubt. But Pâwang Ali's salutation was still halfway to his lips when dark forms emerged from the shadows to encircle the white-turbaned dignitary.

There was a curse, a gasp, a darting stab of steel. A man groaned, and above the shuffling of feet came the sobbing gurgle of breath leaving a slit throat. A sharp smack—but neither the flash of a pistol nor the stench of powder.

Sir Ayyub was down, clubbed across the head.

And then Pâwang Ali reached the tangle that was closing in with bare steel, to finish their victim. For once he did not intend to submit a report. "Killed while resisting arrest." He wanted a prisoner. It was important to know why Sir Ayyub had been attacked.

He whistled shrilly as he leaped into the deadly mill. His yell was the full-throated bellow of a Sikh policeman, a sound that no side-street assassin can hear and keep his mind on his work.

The trick served its purpose. As the barrel of Pâwang Ali's pistol smacked across a Malay skull cap, panic gripped the pack. They scrambled madly, blades still undyed. Sir Ayyub lay groaning in the mud. Another smashing blow, but it missed, catching a shoulder instead of a head.

"*Wallah!*" roared a guttural voice, "it is but one man! Stand fast, brothers of a dog! Kill them both!"

The squad of assassins tightened and swung back. The stroke of a *parang* swept the pistol from Pâwang Ali's hand before he could jam it against a corded stomach. He was forced to the defensive. Raking steel deepened the trace of leopard claws.

He drew a small, deadly *kris*, but in the thick of the tangle his murderous stabs were wasted; and then when the wavy blade did sink home, the weight of the press forced his weapon home beyond withdrawal. He abandoned the hilt and with bare hands plied a succession of muscle-tearing Chinese wrestling holds.

Steel bit and stung, but the snap of bone and the crackle of wrenched tendons and howls of anguish brought a savage gleam to his blood-blinded eyes. He hurled a brawny Malay crashing against a pilaster, kicked a Chinaman catapulting into the gloom, flung himself clear—

But the assassins were also clear. They broke, but he hurled himself at a straggler, catching him about the ankles.

Chunk! The fellow pounded to the ground, shaken in every joint, half out, but still struggling.

FROM THE LEFT came a blast that nearly shattered Pâwang Ali's eardrums. Another, and nitrous flame seared his cheek. He flattened into the mud. By the momentary flare he saw that his captive now lacked the better part of a head. Sir Ayyub, recovering his wits, had snatched a pistol from the tangle, riddled the prisoner and cheated Pâwang Ali's private inquisition chamber.

The Arab's teeth clenched as he noted that the others had vanished. He and Sir Ayyub were alone with the straggler and the one impaled by a *kris*. In spite of himself, he

would have to fill out the report. "Killed while resisting arrest."

He retrieved his flashlight and played it on Sir Ayyub's riddled target. The dead assailant was the survivor of the attack on Cyril Smythe-Cummings.

Two patrolmen came pounding down the alley, pistols drawn. Pâwang Ali hailed them; and after supplementing Sir Ayyub's story, he concluded, "Every one is bent on slaying. But it seems at last that from overloading, the camel of mystery has a broken back."

"You have the answer, Pâwang Ali?" asked Sir Ayyub as they headed toward the water front.

"I would have if I knew why you were attacked."

"Allah," murmured the quartermaster general, "is the knower."

Late the following morning, as Hop Wang poured syrupy, foaming coffee into a tiny porcelain *fenjen*, Pâwang Ali demanded, "What have you learned of this dead leopard?"

"For several days," replied the grizzled Chinaman, "no dealer in the animal bazaar has had any spotted slayers."

Pâwang Ali thoughtfully regarded the great cat that lay on the floor. "He comes from Africa, not Asia. And note the fur on his rump. A patch worn off because pacing his cage brought him constantly in contact with some brace or bar—"

Pâwang Ali paused to pluck a few yellow hairs from the adjoining draperies and the carpet. A leopard's coat is always shedding. Then his frown brightened.

"This beast is uncommonly tall. Hop Wang, find all those who keep African leopards in private menageries. Note the shelves that are put in the cages so that the captive may lie as on the limb of a tree,

after his native fashion. There will be one who cannot deny ownership of a beast whose back scraped the underside of the shelf. Stray hairs will tell."

Pâwang Ali spent the afternoon conferring with Inspector Kemp, whose vain combing of Singapore for a trace of the missing Thibetan magician had not improved his temper. And between soft answers, he bent over a sheet of paper, smiling cryptically as he dipped a pen in purple ink, writing and rewriting half a dozen lines.

His work finally passed inspection. He was particularly pleased with the "L" that closed the note.

"Let us go to my house, *sahib*," he proposed. "Hop Wang may have news for me—and I have an errand for him. While we wait, honor me by tasting some Javanese curry my cook has just perfected."

"Be damned to Java!" growled Kemp; but he could not resist his ally's amiable smile.

An hour passed, and the curry somewhat appeased Kemp's impatience. Then Hop Wang appeared.

"The honorable leopard," he reported, "came from menagerie of exalted Sultan of Johore."

Kemp's oaths were impressive as his dismay.

"I say, Pâwang Ali," he concluded, "we simply can't handle this through police channels. His highness——"

"It is, after all, a novelty to be hunted by a sultan," smiled the Arab.

He turned aside, handed Hop Wang an envelope without an address and singsonged a few words in Cantonese. The Chinaman bowed and left the room as his master said to Kemp, "*Sahib*, be pleased to accompany me."

IX.

THE INSPECTOR followed Pâwang Ali into an adjoining room. There the Arab set to work with make-up. Kemp watched the lean, aquiline face become squarish and sour and grim; and finally the keen eyes became Mongolian slits that mirrored madness.

"Strike me blind!" he exclaimed. "And the devil of it is, I simply can't tell just when you stopped being Pâwang Ali and began being Tsong Khapa. But why masquerade?"

"This may trick Leila Mont-rachet," explained the Arab. "While we have found no proof that she and Villeroi are the international trouble makers Sir Eric set me to find, last night's tangle of assassination hints that one of their victims is striking back. Just as the leopard set on my trail suggests that some one fears that I am close to the answer—which, as a matter of fact, I am not.

"Among other things, Leila lied about the assassin who killed her amah. That person wore shoes. Tsong Khapa goes barefooted. She protected a slayer lest he be captured and expose her. She must still be afraid."

"Why was the amah wearing her gown?" demanded Kemp.

"Suppose Leila anticipated observation, and wished an alibi? Any one watching her house would have mistaken the amah for Leila herself. Remember, *sahib*, my visit alarmed her so that she trapped me. I had barely escaped when assassins attacked Cyril Smythe-Cummings. Remember, also, that my first call on Leila was after the thwarted attempt to steal Captain McAndrews' blue prints.

"Yet all this proves nothing. But

by impersonating a madman, I may catch Leila off guard. In trying to divert his wrath, she may tell me much."

Pâwang Ali went on foot to his destination. A new amah opened the door when he rang for admittance to Leila's house. He thrust her aside and stalked into the salon.

Leila was a gleaming length of coral and saffron that glittered like dragons' scales. Her lovely face froze as she saw the grimy madman.

"You falsely accused me of killing your amah!" he growled. "You claim to have caught me in the act. My escape from the police proves that I have the power of invisibility. How could you have surprised me?"

That shook Leila.

"It was another," she admitted. "One I did not recognize——"

"One you feared to name!" he interrupted, pressing home with a bluff; but before he could force her into an admission which would give him his next play, Pâwang Ali was himself disconcerted.

Looking past Leila, he saw that the turquoise-studded, ivory scepter had been replaced. Tsong Khapa himself had returned the loot! In an instant, however, he capitalized his dismay.

"Look!" His grimy hand indicated the wall. "Did you see me return what I took? Can you any longer mock the messenger of the gods?"

While she still groped, the amah entered, announcing Sir Ayyub. Leila's color receded, and she recoiled. There was no doubting her terror. But though Pâwang Ali now was certain that the sultan's quartermaster was one of those whom Leila feared, the real test was ahead.

"Show him in!" he snarled, catching Leila by the arm and checking

retreat. Then, in a whisper: "I wrote him in your name, saying that you wished to make peace before Pâwang Ali destroyed you both. Let him think I am your ally. He may not harm you, but I will unless you do as I say."

She had scarcely nodded agreement when Sir Ayyub entered.

"Why is he here?" he demanded, indicating the supposed Thibetan. "You did not mention him in your note."

"I wrote in haste," she temporized.

"Haste! Allah curse your grandfather, you had enough time since last night, wondering whether I recognized your assassins in the alley near Hong Li's place! But if you really want peace, maybe we can agree. Luckily for you, none of your thugs was captured to be questioned by Pâwang Ali."

He paused and suspiciously eyed the false magician. While he had accepted Tsong Khapa as her ally, he needed reassuring; and at the same time, Leila's fear of the supposed Thibetan had to be allayed, or the trap would finally fail.

Pâwang Ali was dancing on quicksand. An instant later he was engulfed.

Leila's eyes widened as her glance shifted. She cried out in amazement and gestured. There was a stirring in the farther shadows. Tsong Khapa—the real Tsong Khapa—was approaching. He had lurked, unperceived, watching and listening. Strategy was at an end! But Pâwang Ali had one play in reserve.

"Tsong Khapa *Rimpoche*," he said, turning toward the hall, "let me leave you to your work."

"Stay, Pâwang Ali!" The Thibetan's laugh was iron. "I followed her from Central Asia. I intervene only to keep her from avoiding her doom. I killed Villeroy, and she is

next, the false Queen of Agharti. They have convinced countless unenlightened ones that the spiritual realm of Agharti is an earthly land. They have, for gain, led fools to their ruin. I am in Singapore to slay."

THE SILENCE which followed was like a strangler's cord. The two enemies turned toward each other for support, wondering whether they could escape by combining against Pâwang Ali, who thus far had no legal evidence.

"Tsong Khapa," murmured the Arab, "did not administer the poison that killed Villeroi. And the wine was poisoned as a distraction. It was known that I knew that from the beginning. That is why a leopard hunted me by night. And that attempt betrayed the poisoner.

"Sir Ayyub, your master, the sultan, will be displeased when he learns that you stole the beast he imported from Africa."

The Malay's swarthy face became yellow, but his mouth resolutely hardened and he retorted, "Prove that, Pâwang Ali! Villeroi was my friend. But he was among enemies last night."

This was leading to the poison found on Captain McAndrews, but it was drowned by a clamoring and pounding at the door. A file of the sultan's bearded *askaris* marched into the room.

Inspector Kemp and Fergus McAndrews followed the soldiers.

"I arrest you in the name of his highness, the Sultan of Johore," announced the commander of the guard, approaching Sir Ayyub, "for embezzling four hundred thousand dollars and falsifying accounts."

"But there was no fraud!" protested Sir Ayyub. "There was a

shortage but I made it good out of my personal funds."

That rang true; but the sale of his turban jewel had come too late. And the sultan's spies, watching Sir Ayyub, had found the forged note requesting him to call on Leila.

"Wait," interposed Pâwang Ali. "First of all, he is wanted for the murder of Henri Villeroi. Villeroi, tricking him with wagers which could not be won, lured him to embezzlement; and that done, he blackmailed him, compelling him to buy silence by ferreting out State secrets and influencing the sultan against the British government.

"It is all clear now. Sir Ayyub, in desperation, killed Villeroi, his oppressor, and then tried to silence Villeroi's ally before the investigation forced her into the open."

"Can you prove that?" demanded McAndrews. "Can you clear me and my nephew?"

"It hangs by a hair," answered Pâwang Ali, his smile a riddle in bronze. "Is Sir Ayyub's car outside?"

"Wait!" interrupted a hoarse voice from the left. Tsong Khapa again held the stage. "I killed Villeroi. And there will be further slayings to-night!"

"*Sahib* Kemp, see if there is leopard hair in Sir Ayyub's car!" commanded Pâwang Ali, turning toward the *naljorpa*. "Quick!"

But Tsong Khapa dodged the Arab's grasp. His mouth frothed; his eyes glared. He radiated wrath and malice beyond human power. Unarmed, he was deadly as a tiger.

"I killed Villeroi!" he reiterated. "Though leopard's hair traps a slayer, I slay again! Each slays a slayer and, in turn, is slain!"

The insane jargon and wild gestures were but a momentary distract-

tion—but that moment sufficed to draw attention from Sir Ayyub.

A long bound carried him toward the wall. He snatched the silver-studded scepter. Had he drawn a weapon, the guard would have cut him down, but his erratic move caught them flat-footed.

An instant was lost; more than enough for a Malay to run amok. The heavy scepter crunched home. Leila dropped, a grotesque huddle of coral and gold. Her black hair was splashed with red. She scarcely quivered.

Pâwang Ali, closing in, ducked a second flailing sweep of the ivory bludgeon. Sir Ayyub wheeled.

There was no rifle fire. The room was too crowded. Half a dozen bayonets snapped into line.

"Halt!"

Sir Ayyub did not hear. The salon became a red haze, all aflame with steel; and in a moment the Malay was as motionless as the woman who lay crumpled on the Feraghan carpet.

"Behold how I slew the second of them!" boomed a fierce, deep voice. "I, Tsong Khapa, the avenger!"

He smiled, and there was no madness in his eyes. He was calm, lordly.

"You may understand, Pâwang Ali," he continued, "even if the others cannot. That night in the Chinese cemetery I was celebrating the red feast after having slipped into Villeroy's pocket a dagger with which he was to slay himself, since it is forbidden that the occult brotherhood of High Asia take any

life. But another struck before the spell could work.

"I stole this woman's ivory scepter to magnetize it so that wandering demons would turn it against her. It is lawful for me to summon demons so that evil may attract evil."

"But why didn't you expose these spies to the authorities?" asked Kemp, perplexed by roundabout vengeance.

"I had no proof that *your* law would accept," he explained. "But you saw the working of the law. We are all bound to the wheel, life after life, world after world. *Aum, mani padmi, hum!*"

And before the sonorous rumble of Sanskrit subsided, Tsong Khapa was crossing the threshold.

"Stop him!" shouted Kemp as though suddenly recovering from a blow on the head.

Pâwang Ali caught his arm.

"*Sahib*, the police manual does not mention gods and demons. And Tsong Khapa did well. He helped the hair of a leopard wipe suspicion from the house of Captain McAndrews."

"By Jove!" admitted Kemp, "so he did. But now that you mention it, how did you make the guess that set Sir Ayyub off his chump?"

"I knew that the beast must have been hauled from the sultan's menagerie in a car. While Captain McAndrews could have poisoned his nephew's enemy, he could not have raided the sultan's cages. All of which simplified this slaying of slayers."

*Ivy Frost is back again next month in
BONE CRUSHER, by Donald Wandrei*



Fifty Grand Pay-off

by Ronald S. Betts

JIMMY MOON'S FACE was grim. He sat at the wheel of his sleek black roadster and raced it west on Sunset Boulevard, into the black night which had come down on Hollywood over the majestic mountains in the east.

The dim light from the dashboard of the car cast an eerie glow on Moon's face. It revealed his sharp

eyes, half-closed as he peered ahead. It accentuated the heavy worry lines on his forehead, the tight set of his lips, the pointed strength of his strong jaw.

Fear—the kind of fear which is born of dread anticipation—ate him like some sickness. It seethed through his body, making his heart pulsate more rapidly.

Ten minutes earlier, Jimmy Moon had had a tip-off.

It wasn't unusual for him to get tip-offs. His column about Hollywood was known from border to border and coast to coast as the best daily news chat on the movie colony. It was syndicated in one hundred and fifty-nine daily newspapers.

They called Moon the ace columnist of the West coast. He saw all, heard all, and told plenty about Hollywood.

But the tip-off which he had received ten minutes earlier—the tip-off which had brought him out into the night, racing madly toward Beverly Hills in his black roadster, like a jet bullet out of a gun—had been ominously different from the others.

It wasn't a newsy item—but a plea, desperate and shrill, pervaded with sheer, unconscionable terror: "I'm going to be murdered!"

Jimmy Moon had been sitting in his private office, just past the city room of the Los Angeles *Globe*. It was not much past eight-thirty and he had been finishing up his column for the next day when Louis Fane had called him on the phone.

Fane, a too-affable gent who liked the ladies and made a living mysteriously and precariously, was now holding down a press-agent job. He had called to give Jimmy Moon some dope on Gloria DuVal, rising young movie star.

While Fane was still on the wire, Jimmy Moon's other phone rang. "Hold it a second," he had said to Fane. "Another call is coming through here."

He had lifted the other hand set. "Hello?"

"Moon? Jimmy Moon? My Lord—I've got to speak to Moon!"

"You're talking to him."

"Is that you, Moon?" It had been a woman's voice, high-pitched, brimming with dread. "This is Dolly Lee. You've met me. You don't know me well, but you've met me."

She had spoken in jerky, fear-filled gasps.

"I remember you."

"Listen!" she had cried. "I'm out at Harvey Grant's home in Beverly Hills! I've been trying to blackmail him!"

"What?"

"Oh, I admit it! I'd admit anything now! He's locked me in this room and he's gone somewhere. He said that when he came back he was going to kill me! I'm going to be murdered! My Lord—you've got to do something! I'll confess the blackmail—anything—only get here and stop him before he shoots me!"

"Right!" Moon had snapped. He had hung up quickly on that phone and then said into the other one, "Hello, Fane? Listen, I'm busy. I can't talk now. Give me a ring tomorrow, or else drop in here yourself. So long!"

Then came the dash to the roadster and the trip toward Beverly Hills, wind whining over the cowlings of the roadster as he kicked it along dexterously.

Jimmy Moon had checked on one thing for sure. The woman—Dolly Lee—had called him at exactly eight thirty-five. And the last thing he had said to Kelly, city editor of the *Globe*, was: "Trace all calls on my wires!"

FIVE MINUTES LATER he was rushing along in the darkness. To his left, far down the mountainside, the myriad lights of Los Angeles twinkled like some fairyland. They looked cheerful in contrast with the thick blackness through which he was speeding. He turned on the

powerful spotlight on the side of the car and began playing it on the curbsings, where the names of the streets were painted.

Soon he saw the one he was looking for—Oakcrest Drive.

He braked the roadster sharply and threw the wheel over. The car careened into the street, the tires squealing under the terrific pressure.

He roared a single block farther, then jammed all four wheels to an instantaneous stop in front of a beautiful Spanish-type home, which sat back off the avenue amidst many trees on a spacious lawn.

Jimmy Moon leaped quickly from the car. There were lights, he saw, on the second floor, but none on the first.

He realized he was panting with excitement and dread. He wanted no trouble here. Harvey Grant was one of his closest friends—one of the most popular unmarried juveniles at the studios. Grant was making big money. He was a nice-looking fellow with a pleasant smile. They often played tennis and golf together.

Moon crossed the sidewalk and started toward the house on a run. The bulky weight of his .45 pistol, which he had slipped into his pocket when he had left the office, slapped his thigh.

He was halfway across the lawn when he heard a shot!

It came from the second floor, sharp and clear, and it echoed across the intervening space.

Simultaneously, a woman's voice screamed a ghastly, hair-raising cry of terror and pain!

Instinctively, Jimmy Moon shuddered, the tremor shaking his whole body as though he had slid along a washboard. That scream hit his ears first, then rippled grimly through his body, leaving him breathless.

Then there came another shot, cracking out loudly.

And, after that, there was silence—the heavy, ominous silence of death.

Moon ran to the door, pounded on it once, then tried the knob. To his surprise—the door was open.

He went in, found the staircase and tore up the stairs. On the second floor, the bitter odor of burnt gunpowder reached his nostrils, made them quiver.

He saw an open door down the hall and ran to it. When he reached it, framed in the doorway, he looked in.

HARVEY GRANT was standing opposite him, staring at the floor. Behind Grant was an open window. The night wind played with the curtains. Grant stood with his back toward the window. Jimmy Moon saw that the actor's face was a waxy-white.

Moon glanced at the floor.

A girl was lying there. She was pretty, with blond hair and beautiful figure. She was dressed in a striking black satin semiformal gown.

She was lying on her back. There was one bullet wound just below her throat. It had bled profusely, staining her clothes. The other bullet wound was in the center of her forehead, a black hole with just tiny flecks of blood on the outer rim of the circle.

Jimmy Moon's eyes lifted up to meet Harvey Grant's. There was horror in both their gazes, as they stared dumbly at one another. Grant—so Moon thought—appeared dazed.

"Harvey!" Moon said with abrupt suddenness. "You poor fool! Why did you do it?"

Grant slowly shook his head. His face looked dreadful. His lips

moved, but no sound came out. Finally, he blurted: "For Heaven's sake—Jimmy—"

Moon watched him. "What?"

"I didn't do it! I didn't do it!"

Jimmy Moon sighed. "Harvey, you'll have a hell of a tough time proving that. You're finished, washed up. Why on earth—"

"Jimmy!" Grant said, agonized. "You've got to believe me. None of my other friends will. You've got to believe me! I didn't do it!"

Moon's neck muscles rippled as he half shut his eyes and considered the actor thoughtfully. "Who did?"

"I don't know!"

"Listen," Moon said, "I'll talk a second." He hastily lighted a cigarette and puffed on it between words. "A few minutes ago I got a telephone call from this dame. She said she was here, said you had locked her in this room, said you were going to kill her. She admitted she'd been trying to blackmail you, but she was so scared that she was going to die, she was ready to take the rap if I could get here in time to save her. I got here too late."

"Jimmy—"

"Cut it. Listen some more. You've got to have an answer for that. If you've got one, O. K. If you haven't—you'll hang!"

Grant sank down into a chair and covered his face with his hands. "Oh, my Lord, it's finished then!"

"Harvey," Moon said, "I'm not trying to beat you down. I'm your friend. I want to believe. But I'm giving you the picture the way the police will see it. You've got to have an alibi. If you haven't—" He paused. "Listen, Harvey, ten minutes ago—was this dame in this house?"

Grant nodded slowly. "Yes."

Moon shook his head. "That sews it up. Who else could have done it?

You got any servants in to-night?"

"I only have my butler, John Vider. But it's his night off. Nobody—nobody else was here."

"Suppose you give me your story."

GRANT took a deep breath. "When I came home from the studio, it was pretty late. I went in and found this girl in the living room. I'd never seen her before. She said her name was Dolly Lee. She said she wanted a thousand dollars from me or else— I told her to get out. She ran upstairs and I followed her. She held the door on me and yelled she was going to tear her clothes off and start screaming if I didn't pay the thousand."

Moon puffed on his cigarette. "Keep talking."

"I said I'd be damned if I'd pay and just then, on the other side of the door, I heard a shot. She screamed horribly, and then another shot cracked out and there was no more sound. I came in and there she was. Then you—"

"I know. Then I came. I was in the street. I heard the shots."

"The window!" Grant said. "She was shot from that window, Jimmy. She must have been. That was the only way. I didn't do it, I tell you. I never saw this girl before to-night!"

A wailing siren sounded in the night. Jimmy Moon frowned and walked over to the window. The roar of an auto engine came into hearing. From the window, Jimmy Moon could see the police car as it hurtled down the block to plunge to a shrieking halt in front of Harvey Grant's home. Grant gasped: "What—"

"Cops," Moon said. "They wasted no time. It begins to look phony, Harv. Maybe you're on the level. I

think so. I'll play along with you. These cops got here too quickly. They've been tipped, wait and see." Jimmy Moon turned and glanced at the gun on the floor. "Whose rod is that?"

"Mine," Grant said dully.

"Lord!" said Moon. "You're sure tied up. She's killed in your bedroom after she puts the finger on you, and then your own gun does the job. Somebody's fixed you right, Harv."

The police were pounding on the front door.

"I'll let them in," Moon said. "Keep your mouth shut, Harv. Ask for your lawyer. I'll go to work on this. You'll hear from me."

"Th-thanks, Jimmy," Grant said, gratitude in his eyes.

"Think nothing of it," Moon snapped. "I think you're framed, that's all. It's pat—too pat!" He left the room.

Downstairs, he opened the door. Sheriff Cartwright of the Los Angeles' Homicide Bureau stepped in, followed by two of his men. When Cartwright saw Moon, he looked surprised. "Jimmy! How in hell did——"

"Hello, sheriff," Jimmy Moon said dryly. "What's on your mind?"

"Tip-off," Cartwright said gruffly. "A dame named Dolly Lee called, said she'd been blackmailing Grant and that he had locked her in a room here and was going to kill her. We came right away. What is it, a gag?"

"Oh, no!" Moon smiled thinly. "No gag, sheriff. The dame is dead all right—shot twice with Grant's rod."

Cartwright gasped. "Where's Grant?"

"Upstairs."

Cartwright turned to his two men. "He's up there. Arrest him. I'll be

right after you. I'm calling the coroner. Where do you come into this, Jimmy?"

Moon sighed. "I got the same tip-off you did," he said. "I also got here too late." His eyes narrowed. "Listen, Cartwright. We've been around together a long time. You know me. I know you. Get this: Harvey Grant didn't bump that dame."

"He'll have a swell time proving that," Cartwright said. He shook his head. "I'd like to believe you, Jimmy. Harv Grant's a good kid with a good future. But my hands are tied."

"I know, I know," Jimmy said. "But you treat him nice. Take it easy on him."

"What are you going to do?"

Moon set his jaw. "Hell, sheriff," he said with a grim grin, "I figure I might as well go out and find the real killer."

Cartwright smiled at him thinly. "O. K., Jimmy. But remember—killers don't like nosey people."

"Yeah," Moon said evenly, "and guys like me hate killers——"

HE DROVE BACK to Los Angeles in his speedy roadster, burning up Wilshire Boulevard until he reached the *Globe* building. He parked the car and then went upstairs to Kelly's office. Kelly was city editor of the Los Angeles *Globe*—Moon's boss, a big Irishman with bright-red hair.

"No luck," he said when he saw Moon.

"Did you trace the calls?" Moon asked.

Kelly nodded. "That's what I'm telling you. No luck. We couldn't trace them. All we got was a dead-end street. They were made too fast, Jimmy."

"Anything else new?" Moon asked.

"Yeah. Louis Fane is in your office. He wants to see you."

Jimmy Moon nodded, left Kelly and went into his private office, where he found Louis Fane sitting and smoking a cigar. Fane got right up, grinning from ear to ear, and he said: "Hi, Moon!"

Moon nodded curtly and asked: "What's on your mind, Fane?"

"Jimmy," Fane said, "I've got a swell story here on Gloria DuVal." He pulled out several typewritten pages from his pocket. "How about giving the kid a break? She's good for it. She's coming right along. She could stand some of your publicity."

"Sure," Moon said absently. "Leave the story here. I'll use some of it."

"Say, thanks!" Fane said. "She'll be glad to hear that. Sorry I called when you were busy before—sounded like a lot of excitement."

"It was," Moon said. "A dame called, said she was going to be bumped off, asked me to save her. I was too late. When I got there, she'd been bumped."

"No kidding!" Fane said in horror. "Gosh! Just like that?"

"Just like that. Maybe you know her. Her name was Dolly Lee."

"Dolly Lee!"

Fane's face became mottled with waxy shock. The cigar dropped from his mouth, his cheeks twitching, his hands trembling, as he sank back into a chair. "My Lord!"

Moon stared at him. "What the hell! What's wrong with you?"

"Dolly Lee!" Fane gasped, struggling to speak clearly. "Listen, Jimmy—for Heaven's sake——"

"What?"

"Dolly Lee was my wife!"

"Your wife?" Moon gaped at the press agent. "Your wife?"

Fane nodded his head slowly. "We've been married six years," he explained in rasping tones. "But we haven't lived together for the last two. Last time I saw her was in New York. She—who killed her?"

Moon shrugged. "Don't know."

"Why was she killed?"

"She was blackmailing."

"I thought so." Fane sighed mournfully. "That was it. That was what broke us up. I found out one night, way back in New York, that she was working the badger game on the side, you know—a happy wife by day, a dirty chiseler by night. That's what split us up. I walked out on her, came West. I don't know who did it, Jimmy, but by Heaven, I hope he gets away. She had it coming. She was rotten and——"

Moon asked cannily: "Was she insured, Fane?"

"Insured? Hell, no! Who'd insure her? I didn't. I didn't want any part of her." He shuddered. "She did time back in New York. They caught her once. You could get the dope on it if you wired."

"The police'll do that," Moon said. "Where'd you meet her?"

"At a theatrical agency, a long time ago. We teamed up, did a pretty good vaudeville act. Fane and Lee, maybe you heard of us. Sam Levy was our agent. We did pretty well for a while. She seemed like a good kid. We got married. And it took me a couple of years to find out what a rat she was, playing suckers on the side, playing the faithful wife for me—— Lord!"

"Why didn't you divorce her?"

Fane shrugged. "A married man has a kind of protection. I got around a lot after we split. Being married instead of single—you know

how it is. No breach of promise stuff for me——”

Moon half closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. “You’re kind of sweet on Gloria DuVal, Fane. Stop me if I’m wrong.”

“You’re right.”

“Like to marry her?”

“I’m going to.”

“You wouldn’t,” Moon said evenly, “have bumped off your wife so you could marry Gloria DuVal?”

“Jimmy, for Heaven’s sake!” Fane rose to his feet, his eyes bulging. “Don’t say things like that! Murder! I could have divorced her easily—right here in California on almost no grounds at all—incompatibility. Gloria knows I was married to her. There wouldn’t be any point. Jimmy you don’t think I would have——”

“Take it easy,” Moon snapped. “I’m not accusing you. I’m just covering the ground. As a matter of fact, she telephoned me at the same time you did, so that lets you out.”

Fane settled back, still white. “Gosh, Jimmy, you had me going there, for a minute. I don’t like stuff like murder.”

“I was thinking,” Moon said, “that maybe Dolly Lee never phoned me. Look at it this way. Harvey Grant has been framed good and proper. Somebody, knowing Dolly Lee was going to Grant’s to work the badger game on him, stole Grant’s gun, then telephoned me, made his or her voice sound like Dolly Lee’s, got me out there and meanwhile bumped Dolly Lee just before I arrived, leaving the gun—Grant’s—on the scene, to make a sure circumstantial evidence conviction!”

“You think this Grant was framed then?” Fane asked.

“Sure!”

“Well,” Fane said thankfully, “all I can say is, I’m sure glad I was on

the wire with you when she phoned—whether it was an imitator or Dolly herself. I might have been in a jam.”

THE TELEPHONE on Moon’s desk jingled noisily. He leaned over and picked up the hand set. He said: “Hello?”

“Jimmy?” It was Kelly in the outer office.

“Yeah, chief.”

“Just got a news flash from Cartwright.”

“What is it?”

“Harvey Grant’s been cleared. They caught the real criminal in the Hotel Rochelle on Hollywood Boulevard.”

Moon sat up and blinked. “No kidding! Who was it?”

“John Vider,” Kelly said. “Grant’s butler. He wrote a note taking full blame for the crime and explaining why he did it. Then he hanged himself in a coat closet. Take a run down there. Cartwright wants to see you.”

“On my way,” Moon said, and hung up.

He said so long to Fane and went out. He went to police headquarters where he found Harvey Grant, shaken but relieved, about to be liberated. He spoke to Grant privately.

“Heard the news?”

“No,” Grant said. “They just said they’re freeing me.”

“Your butler hanged himself, left a note confessing the whole thing—Vider, you know.”

“Vider!” Grant cried. “Jimmy—why?”

Moon shrugged. “Probably she was blackmailing him and he tried to make you take the rap.”

“That’s nonsense!” Grant said.

“That’s the way it is,” Moon said. “I’m going to take a run down to

Hollywood and see for myself. Glad you're out, Harv."

Moon then drove over to Hollywood and when he reached the Rochelle, which was situated on the Boulevard, three blocks west of Grauman's Chinese Theatre, he parked the car and entered the building.

Cartwright was there, waiting for him. It was a single room. The bed had not been slept in at all. John Vider was hanging from a coat hook in the closet, his own tie noosed around his neck. Cartwright showed Moon the note.

It said:

I have just committed murder and my conscience will not let me forget it. I killed Dolly Lee. She was blackmailing me. I saw how I could kill her and throw the blame on Harvey Grant, my employer, whom I hated. I learned from her that she was going to work the badger game on Grant to-night. I took Grant's gun. Then I telephoned a columnist and the police and imitated her voice and asked for help. After that, I shot her dead, threw the gun beside her and left Grant alone with her to face the arriving police. It was a perfect crime, but my conscience would not let me alone, so I am confessing and taking this way out. May the Lord have mercy on me.

John Vider.

"Very, very pretty," said Moon. "He writes a good line. He should have been a newspaperman. But this note is typed! Where's the typewriter he used?"

"Oh!" Cartwright said. "He could have used any machine. He signed it."

"That signature could be forged," Moon snapped. "Don't be thick, Cartwright. What did the coroner say?"

"Says he strangled to death by hanging," Cartwright replied testily. "Nothing else?"

"Well—there was a bruise on the back of his head."

"Of course, there was! I'm getting this play now! I'll be seeing you."

"Hey," Cartwright called after him. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to show you," Moon replied breezily, "that John Vider is as innocent as Harvey Grant!"

MOON drove back to his office at the *Globe* recklessly. As soon as he arrived there, he picked up his telephone and called Sam Levy, theatrical agent, three thousand miles away in New York. It was a startling conversation, but when Jimmy Moon had finished it, grim satisfaction pervaded his face and he knew he had called the trick.

He went out and saw Kelly, the city editor.

"Chief," he said, "I crave information in a hurry."

"Yeah," Kelly said. "And that means work—for me."

"I want to know where Dolly Lee was living in town."

The entire staff went to work. It took them five minutes to cover the major hotels in Hollywood and, when they were finished, one of them—"Pinky" McGuire, the love-lorn writer—had found that Dolly Lee had a single room at the Beauchamp Arms on Cahuenga Boulevard, not two blocks away from Sardi's.

Just as Jimmy Moon was leaving, his telephone rang.

"Hello," he said.

"It's Fane," Louis Fane replied. "I just wanted to ask——"

"Sorry, Fane," Moon said. "I'm in a hurry. I'm going over to Dolly Lee's room and see how her bank books read."

Fane whistled. "You found out where she lived then?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Can't tell you," Moon said. "So long. I'm in a rush." He hung up, then quickly lifted the hand set and called police headquarters. "Is Cartwright there?"

"No," said the cop who answered. "He's still out on that John Vider thing, Jimmy."

"Can you get in touch with him?"

"Sure. What for?"

"Tell him to meet me in Dolly Lee's room at the Beauchamp Arms in half an hour."

"O. K."

Moon opened his desk drawer, and from it, he took out a ring of keys, skeleton keys, a collection of which he was proud. He dropped them into his coat pocket. They clinked as they struck the cold-blue barrel of the .45-caliber automatic pistol which nestled in that pocket. He patted the pocket once, felt the reassuring weight of the big pistol, then smiled to himself and went out. As he passed by Kelly in the city room, he said: "Hi-ho, chief! I'm off to the wars. Keep your forms wide open. You'll have some live news in half an hour."

"Is that a threat?" Kelly jeered, grinning.

"A promise!" Jimmy Moon said evenly.

He left the office and went down to his roadster.

Twenty minutes later, Moon arrived in front of the Beauchamp Arms on Cahuenga Boulevard. He turned off the engine of his car, locked it and dropped the keys into his pocket.

HE GOT OUT and walked around the apartment house to the rear. He wanted to avoid the night clerk who was on duty in the entrance foyer. He climbed the stairs

in the rear, and examined the name plates on each door as he passed by each floor. Dolly Lee had lived on the second floor, he presently learned.

Jimmy Moon paused, took a deep breath, and extracted the ring of skeleton keys from his pocket. He stooped down, started to insert the first key in the lock and then—on the spur of the moment—he tried the knob of the door first.

It turned easily.

Moon looked surprised. The door wasn't locked!

He smiled thinly to himself and pushed it open slowly, his right hand wrapping itself around the butt of the pistol in his pocket. The expectant glow in his eyes faded abruptly. He looked disappointed. The room was empty.

"Hell!" he said.

He stepped into the room and shut the door quietly behind him.

It was a small single room with a Murphy wall bed, that is, the bed was set into the wall, to be pulled down at night, and left up during the day. The bed was up now. There were some clothes on the chairs.

Moon moved across to the desk on the other side of the room. Hastily, he began opening the drawers and searching through them.

"Hell!" he said again.

They were all empty.

His eyes caught sight of the dressing table and he started for that, intent upon searching it. Halfway across the room, he stopped abruptly.

There was creaking.

He turned very slowly.

The Murphy bed, a moment before hidden behind a section of the wall which revolved in a semicircle, was now in plain sight. The wall had moved slightly around.

A man had stepped out of the niche in the wall where the bed had been concealed.

"Hold it, Jimmy, hold it pretty! Watch your hands!"

Jimmy Moon felt cold through and through. His body went taut, as he froze in the position of turning.

The first thing he saw was the black, ominous mouth of the barrel of the .32 revolver which poised in the outstretched hand across the room.

He sighed softly.

Then his eyes slowly traveled up from the hand, over the chest of the man, up to his face.

Jimmy Moon chuckled wryly.

"Hello, Fane," he said evenly. "I thought you might be here."

"Fancy that!" Louis Fane said, sneering, his hand gripping the gun tightly. "Did you now?"

"You know I did," Moon replied coldly.

Fane laughed. "Were you looking for something, Jimmy?"

"Yeah," Moon said casually. "Bank books. I was looking for Dolly Lee's bank books. But they're not here."

"Sure they are!" Fane said, smiling crookedly. "They're here all right, in my pocket." His voice dropped, grew suddenly grim. "What kind of a fool do you think I am, Moon? I saw your play. I saw you were on the second you said bank books over the phone. But you're the only one! You're the only one who's guessed it. Do you know what that means?"

"Bump-off," Moon said tersely.

"You called it!" Fane snapped. "Watch those hands!"

Moon took a deep breath. "Want me to put them up?"

"Where you can grab at that

shoulder holster? Not much, pal. You put them in your pockets."

"I haven't any shoulder holster," Moon said. He smiled. It was the truth, but he knew Fane would not believe it.

"You heard me. In your pockets, liar!"

Moon shrugged. "O. K., Fane," he said evenly. "Just remember—you asked for it." He put his hands into his coat pockets.

INSTANTLY, he tightened his right hand around the .45 pistol, flipping off the safety with his thumb as he did so.

Fane asked: "You called Sam Levy in New York, didn't you?"

"How'd you know?"

"Just guessed. What'd you learn?"

"Oh," Moon said. "Things. I asked about the vaudeville team of Fane and Lee. I found out that Dolly Lee sang pretty well—and that Louis Fane was the tops—when it came to female impersonations!"

Fane twitched. "Nice going. That cinches it. You're washed up, Moon. I shouldn't have let you in on this in the first place, but I thought you'd give the killing publicity, with Grant as the fall guy. And I needed you for an alibi. But you rebounded and now—it's curtains!"

"For you," Moon asked, "or for me?"

Fane grinned nastily. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Moon replied, "that you've got a gun pulled on me. But I've got one on you right in my pocket, savvy?"

Fane dropped his eyes, glanced at the bulging pocket, went white. "You're—you're lying. You're bluffing—"

"Call me!" Moon snapped.

"Damn you!" Fane cried piercingly. "Damn you, I will!" He fired once at Moon, the revolver jerking like a living thing, the jagged dagger of flame spitting out of the muzzle while the detonation cracked soundly against the walls of the room, blue smoke bowling out of the muzzle in the path of the slug.

Moon stepped aside. Fane's rage had made his aim erratic. He had fired blindly at Moon's body, without stiffening his wrist. The gun had jerked, gone up, the bullet slashing into the white ceiling.

"Damn you! Damn you!" Fane snarled.

He pressed on the trigger for another try.

Moon grimaced and fired his gun. There was no roar, the gun went *chug* emptily. Jammed!

Cold horror pervaded Moon. He plunged across the room in a mad reckless hurtle at Fane's gun hand. Somehow the pistol had jammed! And Fane——

Fane fired twice, just as Moon reached him. Jimmy caught his wrist at the moment the fire splashed from the muzzle, knocking the wrist down and sending the two slugs into the rug where they hit the floor with thuds like blows of a sledge hammer.

Then, whipping his right fist around in a short cross, Moon caught Louis Fane high on the left side of his face, close to his ear.

It was not a knock-out blow. It was too high for that. But it had impetus and it careened Fane across the room, into a corner, where he fell with a reverberating crash, cursing and snarling.

Moon started for him again, but this time Fane raised the gun and held it on a direct line with the columnist's body.

"You dirty——" Fane started to say.

Moon, turning his eyes toward the door, interrupted, crying: "No, Cartwright! For Heaven's sake, don't kill him!"

Fane leered: "That's an old one, Moon! That won't save you!"

Crack!

THE REVOLVER whizzed out of Fane's hand and hit the wall next to him. Nobody looked more stunned and stupefied than Fane did. Moon dashed forward and picked the gun up. Fane stared down at his hand, a hole in it, blood dripping from the hole.

And in the doorway, his .38-caliber police gun in his hand, stood Sheriff Cartwright.

"An old gag maybe," Moon told Fane, "but this time, it was on the level. Hello, Cartwright."

Sheriff Cartwright shook his head. "Some day, Jimmy," he said severely, "you're going to get yourself killed."

Moon laughed. "I'll say this for you, sheriff. You never arrive in time for the fracas, but you're always here in time for the arrest. There's your man. Louis Fane shot and killed Dolly Lee to-night at Harv Grant's home in Beverly Hills. Fane then hit his cohort, John Vider on the back of the head, knocked him out, then hung him with his own tie in the closet, where you found the corpse!"

"This guy?" Cartwright said, amazed. "But how could——"

"Listen," Moon explained rapidly. "Fane did it and here's how. He got in touch with John Vider, Grant's butler. He offered Vider money, probably, to work the gag with him. All right, to-night Fane called me about some fake publicity. He was really calling to get

an alibi from me. At the same time, and in the booth next to him, Vider also called me.

"The second the other call came through, I told Fane to wait a moment while I answered it! Then Fane jumped into the other booth, imitated Dolly Lee's voice, and told me about the coming murder. As soon as he had hung up, he dashed back to the first booth in time for me to tell him that I was in a hurry and couldn't talk to him then. It was perfect!"

"I'll be damned!" Cartwright said.

"Then Fane dashed to Grant's, climbed up by the bedroom window, shot Dolly Lee and threw Grant's gun—which Vider had gotten for him—into the room. Then he jammed. You and I arrived there and caught Harv Grant holding the bag. By then, Fane must have realized that the job was too pat, or maybe he didn't trust John Vider. So he killed Vider, made it look like suicide, and threw the blame for the murder on Vider, by a fake suicide confession note. Get it?"

"I get it," Cartwright said. "Keep talking."

"Well, that's all," Moon said, grinning. "Except that when Fane knew that I was on the search for Dolly Lee's bank books, he got the idea that I knew what it was all about and he came here, planning to kill me before I spilled anything to the police."

"Bank books?" Cartwright said, frowning. "What is this? I don't get the bank-books angle. Why did Fane kill his wife?"

"That's it!" Moon snapped. "Don't you see? Fane wanted to

marry Gloria DuVal. But he had to have plenty of money to support her and put up a front. There was only one way to get that money. Dolly Lee was not insured but——"

"But what?"

"Dolly Lee, apparently, had worked the old badger game on some other suckers. As a result, she must have had plenty of money in the banks here. Fane realized that—since she had left no will—all her property would have come to him—her husband!"

"Hell!" Cartwright said. "That's only theory. You can't——"

Moon sighed and stepped across to where Fane was still sitting dazedly in the corner. He reached down and went through Fane's pockets, found two bank books, brought them out.

He opened them and read the amounts of the deposits.

"Sheriff," he said, "I forgive you your dumbness. Dolly Lee had twenty grand in one bank and thirty grand in another. Her savings from blackmailing the poor suckers who didn't know any better—fifty grand altogether. Her death meant that he was due for a fifty grand pay-off when her bank accounts came to light, probably after the case had cooled down. A fifty grand pay-off, sheriff, and there you are."

"Well," said Cartwright in awe, "I'll be damned!"

"And as for me," Jimmy Moon said, heading for the door, "I'll be off for the office to write this story, before Kelly loses his bright-red hair, tearing it out in the anxiety of waiting. See you in jail, Cartwright. So long!"

A Bag of Tricks

by K. KRAUSSE

*Rex Hawk was
in a trap and
he knew it!*





The door opened—a vision of feminine loveliness—a small gun was in a carmine-nailed fist—

THE peremptory pounding on the door of his private office caused Rex Hawk to drop the report he was studying. Simultaneous with the commencement of the pounding, the stuffed owl on his desk blinked twice.

Eyes narrow slits, the private investigator stiffened slightly, leaned forward in his chair. Translated simply, that double flash meant: "Danger—beat it!"

Vaguely puzzled, Rex Hawk flicked a gun from an underarm holster. In all the four years of their association, he had never received that signal from his youthful assistant. Often enough the stuffed owl had blinked a grave "On guard!" warning. But what threat could possibly have induced "Bing" O'Toole to urge flight?

The hammering on the door became more persistent. Through its steel thickness, muffled, unintelligible shouts reached him. Thoughtfully, he shot out his left hand to the nearest of the two telephones on his desk, swung the dial.

Innocuous in appearance, the instrument was a prop. It disguised a clever switchboard that controlled a dozen secrets of Rex Hawk's office.

Instantly, from a hidden, delicately adjusted annunciator, came a gruff: "We know you're in there, Hawk! Open up! Or do you want us to break down the door?"

Another voice—Bing's—cut in with: "I told you the chief ain't here. Anyhow—you'd need dynamite to break down that door. It's solid steel."

The gruff voice ground out a curse. Rex Hawk could almost see its owner whirl.

"Shut up—you! Grogan, ram that damn kid's teeth down his throat.

Maybe it'll help him remember how to open this door!"

A chair crashed.

Rex Hawk's eyes hardened. Then his thin lips curled in a crooked smile. He holstered his gun, twirled the dummy phone's dial again. The dictograph's loud-speaker stopped its metallic transmission of scuffling sounds. The door swung wide.

Framed on the threshold stood a burly man. His seamed, square face was frozen in a startled expression. In his upraised fist he held a clubbed service pistol, poised for a blow.

In the outer office, Rex Hawk saw Bing struggling in the arms of a thickset, barrel-chested man.

He snapped: "Take your mitts off that kid, Grogan! If you want to try some fancy dentistry—come here and tackle a man your own size. And you Noyell—close your gaping mouth and talk—fast! What's the idea of starting a rough-house in my office?"

GROGAN released Bing, spun on his heel, and sprang to Noyell's side. Bing, breathing heavily, cast his boss a worried glance, and proceeded to straighten his rumpled tie. No one, save Rex Hawk, noticed him edge toward the door, and disappear into the hall.

Noyell closed his mouth, thrust forward an already jutting, belligerent jaw. He palmed his pistol, trained it at the private detective's midriff, and strode into the office.

Hard eyes glinting maliciously, he sneered, said: "I kind of thought that young squirt was lying about your being out! And the idea is this—you're taking a ride with me—downtown. You're under arrest!"

Rex Hawk tilted back in his swivel, laughed shortly. He calmly lighted a cigarette, said through smoke: "Yeah? Listen, copper—

you've had it in for me ever since I made a monkey out of you in the Maxwell murder. On that, and a number of other occasions, you said this town was too small to hold both of us.

"I've spiked a couple of your attempts to break me—without reprisal. This time you're pushing me too far. I'll go to Centre Street with you all right. But whatever your trumped-up charge against me is, you'd better make it stick! Because——"

Detective Lieutenant Noyell's teeth bared derisively.

"You scare me to death," he interrupted jeeringly. "This time I've got you dead to rights! And the charge will stick so tight, not even your bag of tricks will keep you out of the hot seat. The rap is murder!"

He clipped to his companion: "Fan him, Grogan—and cuff him. He's as slippery as an eel. There's no telling what he might do. Then search the dump. Meanwhile, I'm telling you this, Rex Hawk, one funny move out of you and you take it—the hard way!"

Rex Hawk had risen slowly to his feet. Eyes incredulous pin points, he stared at the exulting face of the man who hated him.

"Murder? Who am I supposed to have murdered—and when?"

He raised no protest as Grogan searched him and relieved him of the two guns he habitually carried. And he meekly permitted the plain-clothes man to encircle his wrists with handcuffs.

Noyell leered. "Go on, play innocent—see what it gets you! Next you'll be telling me you never heard of Burton Kellock. He was found in his home with a bashed head, half an hour ago. Which, according to Kellock's butler, was a short time

after you left there. Funny coincidence—that! Incidentally, that same butler also said he overheard you threaten Kellock a few days ago! We've got you dead to rights. And you're going to burn—to a nice crisp brown!"

II.

GLISTENING globules of sweat moistened Rex Hawk's corrugated brow. His brain moved in swift circles.

A week before, Burton Kellock, reputedly a retired gem collector, had retained him to recover a stolen ruby of fabulous value. He had been successful in his assignment, returning the jewel to its owner without dragging the police into the affair. This was at Kellock's urgent request.

The reason for Kellock's desire for secrecy became apparent later. For instead of paying him the five-thousand-dollar balance of a stipulated fee, Kellock had coolly welshed on his bargain, informing the private investigator that the ruby was hot, that he—Kellock—was a fence. And what was Mr. Rex Hawk going to do about it?

Rex Hawk had swallowed his chagrin. Though he'd been party, unwittingly, to a deal involving stolen goods, he knew he could not collect his fee—legally. And Kellock had shrewdly surmised that he wouldn't squeal to the cops for revenge. What Kellock hadn't guessed was that his fertile brain was even then evolving a plan to exact payment.

He had left the double-crossing fence with a parting shot. "Chiselers like you have been killed for less. Mark my words, Kellock, some day you'll wind up in an alley with a cracked skull!"

Undoubtedly that was the threat the butler had overheard. And now Kellock was dead.

Rex Hawk realized he was in a spot. At five o'clock that day, in answer to a telephone call, purportedly made by Kellock's butler, he had gone to the fence's home. His conclusion that Kellock had had a change of heart evaporated, gave way to anger and puzzlement, when the wily receiver denied sending for him. He had returned to his office with vague misgivings, wondering what lay behind the fake summons.

Now he knew. He had been trapped in a murder frame like any dumb novice. Trapped by whom?

True, the circumstantial evidence was flimsy. But men had gone to the chair on less. And then, Noyell, prodded by his all-consuming hatred for the private dick, would move heaven and earth to build up an airtight case against his avowed enemy.

As his thoughts centered on Noyell, Rex Hawk felt his neck muscles grow taut, the short hairs stiffen. It didn't seem possible, yet it—

His lean jaw squared in an ugly line. He jerked his manacled hands to the dummy phone, unforked the receiver, and whipped the dial around.

"Hey!" Noyell barked, brandishing his pistol. "Stop that! You're not calling a mouthpiece until—"

A slamming door cut the cop short. He lanced his hard eyes right, saw the office door had closed, and guessed Rex Hawk had managed it somehow with an automatic device.

He spat out a curse. "Up to your tricks again, you— Open that door, or, by Heaven, I'll drill you where you stand!" His knuckles grew white around his gun.

Rex Hawk laughed a short, harsh laugh.

"I expected you to say that. Drill and be damned! But you won't get a chance to say you shot me down resisting arrest. This room is absolutely air-tight. You've noticed it has no windows, no other door. In ten minutes a poison gas will completely fill this place, and you will be dead. Dead!"

GROGAN let out a startled gasp. He had been searching Rex Hawk's overcoat, which hung on a rack. Something of scintillating brilliance dropped from his hand to the floor. The object clicked, and bounced once on the inlaid linoleum.

Noyell, eyes riveted on Rex Hawk, cheeks blotched feverishly, husked: "You're—you're bluffing!" But his gun hand trembled.

Rex Hawk shrugged. "Why don't you call my bluff?" Attracted by the clicking noise, he glanced at Grogan. His sharp eyes caught the gleam on the floor.

With a muffled exclamation he pounced forward, stooped, and held up between his thumb and forefinger a huge, blood-red ruby. His brain exploded. Two stones like it couldn't exist in the world. It was the same gem he had recovered for Kellock.

"Where did you get this?" he flung at Grogan.

Grogan paled, fell back a pace. "In—in the small change pocket of your overcoat," he stammered.

"You lying rat! You planted it there!" Rex Hawk spun toward Noyell. "So that's the set-up! You're a fine specimen of human vermin! A crook and killer hiding behind a police badge. You swore to break me—not because I'd wounded your vanity, but because

you were afraid I'd eventually uncover your criminal activities.

"Somehow you found out Kellock was a fence. You learned I had a grudge against him. You seized a made-to-order opportunity to clean him out and frame me. You decoyed me to his home to-day. After I left, you killed and robbed him. Kellock's safe contained a large sum of money, and a fortune in jewels. This ruby was among them. I know.

"It wasn't until two days ago that Lord Walloughton, in London, discovered a paste imitation had been substituted for his stone. You recognized it from the description circulated in this country. You decided it was too hot to risk disposal. So you got Grogan to pretend he found it here to clinch a murder rap on me!"

A spasm of emotion twisted Noyell's granite face.

"You're crazy!" he grated. "What you say about Kellock is news to me. I knew him as a gem collector. He was dead, his safe clean. The evidence pointed to you. I thought you might be dumb enough to hide the loot in your office. As for planting the ruby on you—I never saw it until just now."

"Neither did I!" Grogan blurted, cringing before Rex Hawk's blazing eyes. He sniffed suddenly, clutched Noyell's arm wildly. "Gas! For Heaven's sake, chief, make a deal with him! He'll kill us all! Don't you see he ain't bluffing?"

Noyell's tanned face went white, but his stubborn mouth curled in disgust. He braced his gun arm against his side.

"Let him go, you mean? You louse! I'll see him in hell first!"

Grogan choked back the groan that sobbed in his throat. A wild light sprang into his hunted eyes.

Without warning he lunged upward with his fist. It caught Noyell flush on the point of the jaw.

THE deadly force of the blow snapped the detective lieutenant's head back. For a split second he swayed on his feet, trying to summon strength from somewhere to pull the trigger. But the gun dribbled from nerveless fingers. Then his knees buckled, and he fell prone.

Grogan sucked in a hissing breath, ran a thick tongue over dry lips.

"For Heaven's sake, Hawk," he panted, "shut off that gas! Noyell is the kind that would cut his nose off to spite his face. I ain't built that way." He started fumbling in a pocket, produced a small key. "Here—let me take off those cuffs."

"Don't bother," Rex Hawk said dryly.

He tucked away the ruby which he still held in his fingers. Then he manipulated his hands in a peculiar fashion. They seemed to diminish in width, and the cuffs slipped to the floor.

"One of the renowned Houdini's simpler stunts," he told the fascinated Grogan. He went on: "Now I'll trouble you for my guns. I have others. But these are my pets."

Grogan handed them over mutely.

The sweetish, soporific smell of gas was now very marked. Grogan tried to speak, wound up in a fit of coughing. His watering eyes held desperate appeal.

Rex Hawk seemed unaffected by the gas. He rocked on his heels, gazed steadily at the plain-clothes man, and said gently: "It was shrewd of you to realize I wasn't bluffing. Perhaps you're wondering how I can stand the gas?"

He chuckled, paused. Grogan gulped hard, made animal sounds in his throat.

Suddenly Rex Hawk's suavity dropped from him like a papier-mâché mask. He lunged forward, grasped Grogan's shoulders in a viselike grip.

"I have wads of chemically saturated cotton up my nostrils—crude gas mask, but very effective. If you appreciate the significance of that—you'd better talk—fast! Did Noyell bribe you to plant the ruby in my coat?"

Grogan appeared to have difficulty in keeping his eyes open and his head erect. Chest heaving laboriously, he croaked: "Honest to Heaven—he didn't! The glass was there!"

"You're lying! Come clean! In less than a minute it'll be too late!"

"I've come clean! The stone was in your pocket." Grogan's body wilted. Rex Hawk released him. The cop sank to his knees, clawing at his throat.

"I—I'm dying! For Heaven's sake—Hawk—give me a break! Noyell didn't buy me to help frame you. Ain't I showed I was willing to play ball with you by clouting him?"

"The act you put on to save your own hide was very touching. Very." Hawk smiled caustically. "I'm inclined to think that rather than face what he'll hand you when he comes to, you'd talk."

He turned, swept his hat and coat from the rack. In three strides he was at the rear of the office.

"Wait!" Grogan cried. "You ain't leaving me here—to croak!"

He tried to jack himself upright, but almost overcome by the gas fumes, fell weakly on his face. His haunted eyes followed Rex Hawk as the latter touched a hidden spring in the wall. A panel slid open, disclosing a lighted room beyond.

"Did I say the gas would kill

you?" Rex Hawk pivoted his head, grinned mockingly. "A slight exaggeration. You'll only sleep for a short time. And—pleasant dreams, Grogan!"

III.

THE ROOM into which Rex Hawk admitted himself was large, but it seemed too small for its contents. A well-equipped, up-to-date laboratory ranged one wall, a complete costumery another. A small arsenal vied for space with a miniature machine shop along the third.

A number of metal files, and book-cases, choked with hundreds of volumes covering every branch of science and criminal activity, lined both sides of a frosted glass door. This showed the legend in reverse: Autumn Research Co.

None but Bing O'Toole knew that Rex Hawk was the Autumn Research Co. This room served him not only as a workshop, but also as a secret means of ingress and egress to his office, for it was located in the adjoining building.

Bing, who had been patiently waiting, sprang to his feet upon his chief's entrance. A youth in his early twenties, he looked younger. Short in stature, delicately molded, he belied his Irish name. For an Italian mother had given him black hair, brown eyes, and an olive skin. His father had contributed a ready grin and a keen wit.

He had proven himself time and again a loyal and invaluable assistant to Rex Hawk. He greeted: "You took a hell of a chance, Rex. Noyell hates the very air you breathe. I didn't like the expression in his eyes when he told me he wanted you on a murder rap."

Hawk smiled thinly. He flung his hat and coat on a chair, extracted two tufts of cotton from his nos-

trils, and tossed them into a wastebasket. Then, not wishing to punish his prisoners unduly, he shut off the flow of gas into his office. Another switch turned on a ventilator.

"So that accounts for your take-a-powder signal. You thought he'd pull the I-killed-him-resisting-arrest gag."

"Well—you did cost him a promotion in that Maxwell case, besides making a laughingstock of him. For that, his kind will kill if he can get away with it. Especially if he was making you the fall guy for another crime."

Rex Hawk nodded, flipped a cigarette to his lips.

"I guess you're right at that. Noyell is cold-blooded enough to kill—if he could get away with it."

"I listened in on your powwow. What do you think? Are Noyell and Grogan behind the Kellock murder?" Bing plopped back into his chair, watched his chief's face intently.

Hawk shrugged. "Frankly, I don't know. I may be wrong, but when I called Noyell a killer and a crook, he went white—with anger—not guilt.

"On the other hand, Grogan was scared silly. He had to be to knock down a superior officer. If he were in cahoots with Noyell he would have blurted out the whole story to save his yellow hide. No; it looks as though that ruby was in my pocket all the time. The question is—who put it there?"

He fished out the stone, peered at it quizzically. "A pretty bauble, isn't it? Lord Walloughton had it insured for one hundred grand."

He put the gem back in his pocket, fell to pacing the only clear space in the cluttered room, in long pantherish strides.

"All of which doesn't alter the

fact that I'm in one sweet pickle," he mused aloud. "I'm a fugitive—wanted for murder. Noyell will have orders issued to gun me down at sight. And he'll try his damndest to carry out his own orders. I can't keep him locked up forever and——"

"Well, chief," Bing drawled, grinning. "What's the matter with your bag of tricks? Empty? I've seen you in worse jams and fox your way out."

"You Irish hybrid," Rex Hawk retorted, smiling, "it's going to take more than a cute trick to spread this particular jam on a slice of bread. I've a hunch it's going to take lead—and plenty of it."

SUDDENLY he stopped and snapped his fingers. He whispered tensely, as if to himself: "Kellock's butler!"

"What about Kellock's butler?" Bing wanted to know.

Rex Hawk dropped his cigarette, ground it under a heel, and scooped up his wraps.

"Stacey—that's the butler's name—has popped up too often in this affair. He's the starting point I've been trying to think of. He fingered me to the cops. He heard me threaten Kellock. And—by Heaven—he took my coat when I visited the fence early this evening! He could easily have planted the ruby on me!"

Bing rose eagerly.

"O. K. Let's go interview Stacey. Kellock's place must still be packed with cops, every one looking for you. I'm curious to learn how you'll arrange a private tête-à-tête."

"Nix," Rex Hawk said. "This is my party. Anyway—I've got work for you to do."

He crossed the room, flung up a window that opened on a fire stair.

Pausing to cock an eye at his watch, he half turned.

"It's six o'clock," he told Bing. "In half an hour, at the most, Noyell and Grogan will come to. Get into your furs. Put on your sister act. The phone in my office is dead. Sure as fate they'll pound on the door. Let them out.

"But be sure you listen in on them first. I'm not giving them a clean bill of health—yet. And they might have some interesting things to say to each other. When they leave, shadow them. The first chance you get, call our usual number and leave a full report."

Bing grimaced, sighed half resignedly, half disappointedly. He began pulling a modish outfit of woman's garments from the costumery.

"If I ever quit you cold, Rex," he complained, "it'll be on account of this female-impersonation business. Do you know—there hasn't been a time I had these glad rags on some fellow didn't try to flirt with me?"

"It's your fatal charm," Rex Hawk said. "But don't let it get you down."

Eyes twinkling, Rex Hawk stepped out of the window.

But as he sped down five flights of stairs into the black maw of an alley, his amusement left him. An expression of grim purpose took its place. It boded ill for the person responsible for his present predicament—a fugitive—wanted for murder—

He emerged from the inky shadows of the alley on West Thirty-sixth Street. The bone-chilling February wind furnished a good excuse for his turned-up coat collar, in which he half buried his face. Under his pulled-down brim, he cast eyes warily right and left, on guard against chance recognition by some strolling plain-clothes man.

He wormed his way to the curb through the homeward-scurrying crowd that always packed the sidewalk at this hour. After a wait of five minutes, a vacant hack came in view. He flagged it, got in, and gave the driver an address in Washington Heights.

As the taxi rolled uptown, he removed the ruby from his pocket and thoughtfully commenced polishing it in a handkerchief.

Twenty minutes later he paid off the cab half a block from Kellock's house. It was the third in a row of six identical brownstone fronts. On the street, they presented a solid front. And except for the six identical steps marking each residence, they might have comprised a single three-story apartment house.

Before he reached it, Rex Hawk saw Kellock's home was lighted from top to bottom. The usual sprinkling of the morbidly curious that is always attracted to the scene of tragedy stood before it.

AS HE APPROACHED, the door opened and two men bearing a long, wicker basket trudged down the steps.

An eager, muffled buzz issued from the spectators. Two uniformed policemen rapped peremptory commands. They cut a path through to the morgue wagon idling at the curb. It stood in line with a headquarters squad car, and two prowlers. Bing had been right. The place was still packed with cops.

Rex Hawk noted the house adjoining Kellock's showed lights in the ground-floor windows. Two or three faces were pressed against the panes, watching the proceeding outside. He scowled with distaste, turned to the next. This was entirely dark.

He ran up its steps, held his finger on the bell.

After a ten-second wait he tried again. Nothing happened. Except for the faint *bur-r-r-r* of the bell, the house was silent as a tomb.

Without troubling to assure himself that no eyes were on him, he took a small flat case from a pocket. A slender steel instrument inserted in the lock, twisted deftly once, twice. It clicked open.

Locking the door behind him again, he shot the needle beam of a clip flash down the dark hall. Like a gliding shadow, he quickly made his way to the rear, found the kitchen. Rummaging methodically through drawers and closets he discovered what he wanted—a good length of clothesline.

With the rope under his arm, he scaled two flights of stairs, located a folding ladder on the third floor that led to the roof. In a moment he was under the stars, catfooting it to Kellock's roof.

As it developed, providing himself with the rope had not been a needless precaution, for a hasty examination proved Kellock's roof trapdoor bolted from within, and the bolt inaccessible.

Of the two chimneys spewing smoke heavenward, he chose the one nearest the rear. Encircling it with the rope, he tied a secure knot. Then he tested the line against his weight. It held.

"So far, so good," he muttered. "Now if this string will hold while I'm three stories above ground—"

He dropped the rope over the roof's edge at a spot below which he'd marked a dark window, then cautiously lowered himself. Slowly, hand over hand, he went down, dangling in mid-air like a huge, shadowy spider on a slender thread.

When he came abreast of the win-

dow, he took a hitch in the rope with his foot. He tried to push the window up. A hissed curse of vexation escaped him. It was locked.

He hadn't expected this. He couldn't assemble his folding jimmy with one hand. To go back to the roof, and relocate his rope was out of the question. He dared not slide to the window below, as a light gleamed through its drawn blind.

So he dug out his gun, struck the windowpane a sharp blow near the frame, where the catch should be.

Glass tinkled on the floor inside. He'd broken through a hole as big as his fist, but the rest of the pane remained intact. He held his breath a full minute, straining his ears for some indication that the noise had been heard. He knew if one of the numerous cops in the house came to investigate, it would be his finish.

But nothing happened. He exhaled slowly, sighed with relief. Gripping his gun in his teeth, by its trigger guard, he thrust a finger carefully through the aperture with its jagged edges. The catch snapped back.

Soundlessly he raised the window, cleared the sill into a room, and froze in rigid immobility.

The patter of carpet-deadened footsteps came to him from the hall. They paused before the door. The doorknob rattled.

Rex Hawk palmed his gun, cast narrowed eyes about. Enough moonlight filtered into the room to show the dim outlines of a bed. In a leap he was behind it. He crouched down, out of sight, just as a switch clicked and the ceiling bulbs glowed into life.

A gust of wind billowed the window drapes, nipped at the shade. Rex Hawk swore inaudibly, and tightened his fingers about his auto-

matic. But whoever had entered the room was apparently preoccupied with his own thoughts. The open window did not seem to interest him.

The unknown sidled to a closet, took something from it, and recrossed the chamber. Rex Hawk heard bureau drawers being opened and shut.

He ventured a furtive glance over the top of the bed, and smiled grimly. Here was a coincidence almost too good to be true. The man, who was hastily throwing things into a suitcase, was Stacey, Kellock's butler.

Rex Hawk straightened, glided noiselessly to the center of the room. Gun leveled, he drawled: "You're not thinking of going places, Stacey!"

IV.

STACEY WHIRLED, backed against the bureau, clutched its edge with frightened fingers—all in one convulsive movement. He was a rangy individual, partly bald, with an elongated chin that gave him a horsey appearance. His deep-socketed eyes were bleak with fear. His jaw hung loose from shock.

He stammered hollowly: "Rex Hawk! What—what do you want?"

Rex Hawk smiled crookedly, but his tone was acid.

"I'm not fool enough to think you'll give me what I want—without a battle. But remember—the belch that comes out of this black snout can win any argument!" He hefted his gun. "You went out of your way to finger me for the Kellock killing. I want to know exactly where you figure in on the deal."

"I—I don't know what you mean. I discovered Mr. Kellock's body directly after you left here this eve-

ning. The police questioned me and I told them what I knew."

"But not everything you knew. Just enough to tie a rope around my neck. O. K. I left here; and shortly afterward Kellock is found dead. Which means nothing in itself. But you told the cops you overheard me tell Kellock that some day he'd wind up in an alley with his skull cracked. That threat is something the district attorney could bite into. Now—if you overheard that much you must've heard the rest of our conversation—which would clear me. Why didn't you spill all of it?"

Stacey's face became the color of slate. "But I only heard that part," he insisted.

Rex Hawk laughed ominously, ignoring the butler's statement.

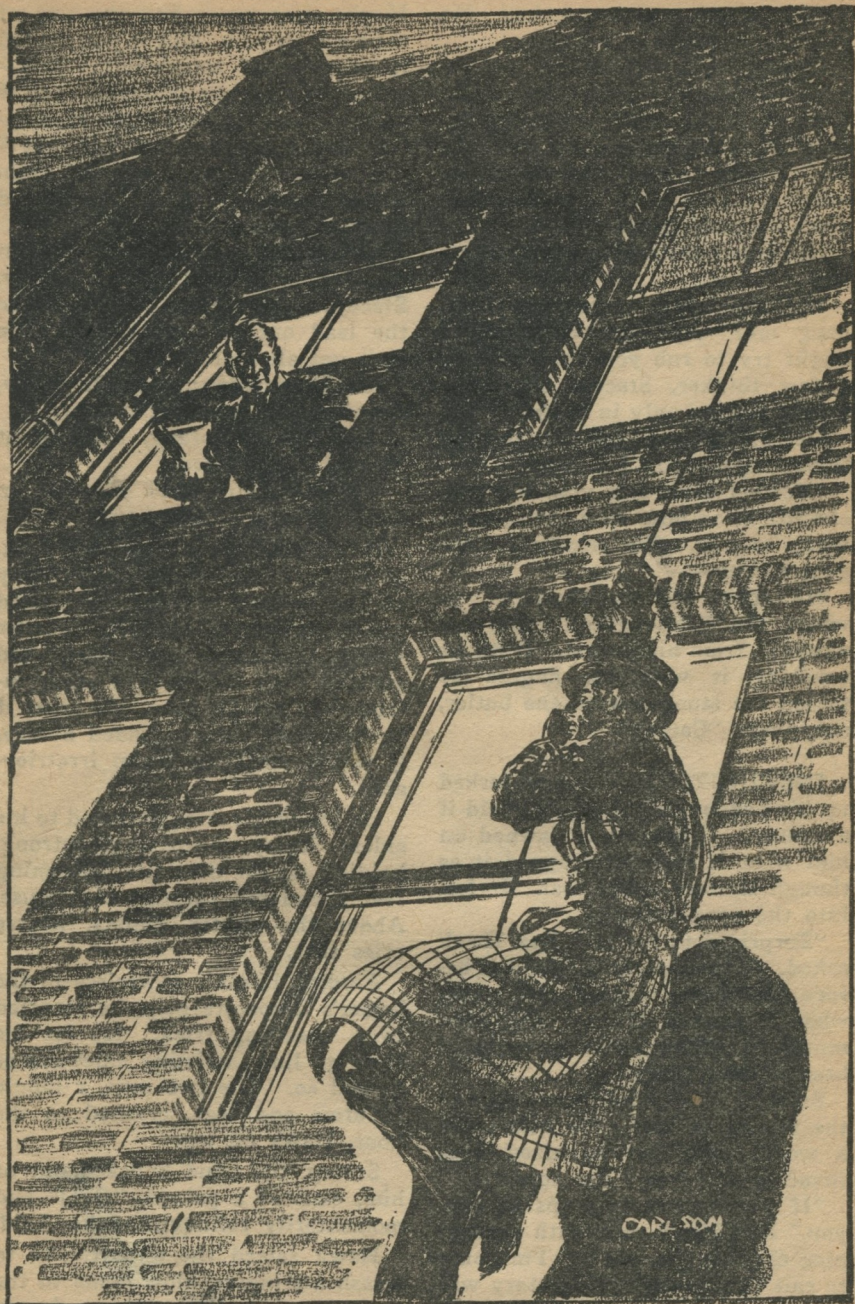
"I'll tell you why you forgot to mention the rest of it—because you killed Kellock yourself!"

"No! No! You—you're mistaken!"

The private dick went on relentlessly: "Apparently you have a talent for eavesdropping and spying. You ferreted out somehow that your employer was a receiver of stolen property. You learned that—besides stolen jewels—he kept big sums of money in his safe. That day when you got an earful of my quarrel with Kellock, you had an inspiration.

"You waited until you were able to spot the combination to Kellock's safe—which must have been to-day. First you vacuumed it. Then you lured me here by a fake phone call, planted the ruby in my coat, and killed Kellock after I left.

"And now you're letting no grass grow under your feet." He indicated the hastily packed suitcase. "You seem in a hell of a hurry to go places!"



The rope seared his palms—bullets whizzed over his head—and he prayed that the rope would reach the ground—

The butler's mouth twitched. He glanced sideways at the door.

"You—you're mistaken," he repeated hoarsely. "I did not kill Mr. Kellock. I thought I was doing my duty when I informed on you. As for running away—the police requested me to move to another address because—because——"

Rex Hawk arched his brows amusedly.

"Because your testimony will hang me? And they're afraid I might try to rub you out? You're a fast thinker, Stacey, but those things happen only in books."

He paused, as though turning something over in his mind.

"Now—I could gag you, and play chopsticks on your face until you're ready to talk. But there's a more genteel way——"

He took the handkerchief in which the Walloughton ruby was wrapped from his pocket. Without touching it with his fingers he tossed the stone toward the butler, snapping: "Catch!"

INSTINCTIVELY Stacey jerked up his hands, caught it. He held it a moment. Then, as it dawned on him what it was, he dropped it as though it were a hot coal. It fell into the open suitcase.

"Surprised to see it?" Rex Hawk asked. "Fortunately, I found it before the police visited me. And, when I learned Kellock had been murdered, your whole sweet plot became clear to me."

Stacey's horselike face showed the ravage of fear. He didn't say a word. But his agonized eyes roved again toward the door.

"If you expect the cops to help you," Rex Hawk said, with a satiric chuckle, "forget it. I'm going to call them myself. My story will give them something to think about.

Maybe they won't find the rest of the swag on you. Maybe you mailed it to yourself somewhere. But—unless I'm mighty mistaken—you're going to have a hard time explaining your fingerprints off that ruby!"

A trickle of saliva exuded from Stacey's colorless lips. He started to speak; changed his mind.

At that moment, a hoarse voice in the downstairs hall bawled: "Hey, Stacey! For Heaven's sake—shake the lead out of your pants! We ain't got all night!"

Rex Hawk stiffened involuntarily, shot his eyes toward the door.

And Stacey sprang, bleating at the top of his voice:

"Help! Help! It's Hawk! In here! Murder! Murder!"

Hawk growled a curse, fell back, off balance, before the sudden fury of the butler's attack. He smiled grimly in spite of himself. Murder—hell! Whether the other had guessed it or not, he had never intended to use his gun. He knew if he killed, or even wounded Stacey, it would spell his doom irretrievably.

He found his arms pinioned to his sides; Stacey, surprisingly strong, holding on for dear life. Running feet thundered through the house. Above the clatter, shouts, hoarse cries rose.

Finding himself powerless in the butler's desperate grip, he resorted to a wrestling trick. He let his body go limp, twisting sideways as he did so. The two men, a tangle of arms and legs, crashed to the floor, Hawk on top.

Stacey, the wind knocked out of him, emitted a pained, "Oof!" and momentarily relinquished his hold.

Hawk seized the opportunity to smash a stinging blow home to the horse-faced butler's jaw. Stacey

yelped once; his eyes became glassy, and his body went inert.

Hawk catapulted himself to his feet, ran to the window, pocketing his gun. He had one leg over the sill, his hands on the rope, when the bedroom door banged open. Four cops, pistols waving, stormed in.

The first one was Detective Lieutenant Noyell.

Noyell shot Hawk one hate-primed look, growled, "You——" and fired point-blank.

But Rex Hawk was already sliding down the rope. The slug whizzed harmlessly over his head. As he dropped, plummetlike, the rope seared his palms. He gritted his teeth against the pain that brought beads of perspiration to his forehead, and prayed fervidly that the clothesline reached to the ground.

It didn't—not quite. He found himself in space. Luckily he fell only about ten feet, hitting on all fours. The frozen dirt on which he landed jarred every bone in his body, but he was up in a flash.

Cursing the bright moon that made him a visible target, he sprinted across the back yard. As he ran he glimpsed silhouettes over his shoulder, framed in the windows of Kellock's house.

Guns barked. Lead plopped about his feet. He sucked in his breath sharply as one pellet whined perilously close to his ear.

He reached the rear fence, climbed over it. He landed on the concrete pavement of an apartment-house courtyard. Behind him, bullets beat an angry tattoo in wood. The shadowy outlines of three doors loomed before him. With unerring judgment he chose the one leading to the basement passageway.

He sped through it.

On the street he slowed down to

a brisk walk. He had come out on a business artery, which was far from deserted at that hour. A running figure might arouse suspicion. Besides, he had plenty of time. It would take Noyell and his cohorts several minutes to circle the block in pursuit.

He hadn't taken many steps before a cruising hack passed. He whistled it to the curb.

"Downtown," he told the driver.

V.

IN THE GLOOM of the cab, Rex Hawk brushed off his clothes, smoothed down his ruffled hair. He had left his hat behind in Stacey's room. Lighting a cigarette, he leaned back in the cushions and chuckled dryly.

"Well," he ruminated ruefully, "that was one bluff that was called without so much as a raise! Either Stacey is as innocent as a newborn babe—or he put up the fight of a cornered rat."

He sighed glumly. One thing was positive! He was no nearer a solution of Kellock's murder than he had been when he started. He was still a fugitive, wanted for murder. If anything—he was enmeshed deeper than before.

Apparently Stacey had told the truth. The cops had intended to pigeonhole the butler. Now they would claim he—Rex Hawk—had attempted the life of a material witness.

The ruse to stampede the butler into some damaging admission had failed. True, he might not be Kellock's killer. But logically—with Grogan eliminated—he was the only one that could have planted the ruby in Rex Hawk's coat. Considered from every angle, if he hadn't dealt

the fatal blow—at least, he could name the murderer.

The private investigator wished he had dared double on his tracks and tail Stacey. Perhaps with a second attempt, he could hose something out of him. Upon reflection he admitted to himself that the prospects of success in this respect were very remote. Judging by the butler's recent actions, he was hardly the type to crack very readily, even under duress.

No; only some tangible evidence linking Stacey with the plot would loosen his tongue. Some tangible evidence—

A sudden idea brought an exclamation to Rex Hawk's lips. Eyes glowing, he tapped on the taxi driver's window, said: "I've changed my mind. Let me off at the first drug store."

The cab jockey grunted: "O. K., boss," and drew up at the next corner.

In the drug store, Rex Hawk hastily consulted the phone directory, dialed a number.

A gruff voice growled: "Hello!" "Is Lieutenant Noyell there?" Rex Hawk asked.

"Naw—he left."

"Is Stacey—Kellock's butler—there?"

"He's gone, too," the gruff voice retorted, and clipped: "Say—who's this?"

Rex Hawk ignored the question, said: "Do you happen to know who has the ruby?"

"What ruby?" A guttural curse. "Say—who the hell are you anyway? And what're you driving at?"

The private investigator chuckled. "I'm talking about Kellock's ruby. I'd like to know where it is. And this is—Rex Hawk."

The wire crackled with explosive oaths. "Rex Hawk! Why you

—Noyell told us about that ruby. You know damn well where it is! You've got it, you crooked fool!"

"Oh—I have, have I?" Rex Hawk laughed with genuine amusement. "I just wanted to be sure——"

"Of all the crust! First you come here, and now—— Where are you?"

"Of all the dumb cops! Do you really expect me to tell you that?"

Eyes twinkling, Rex Hawk slammed down the receiver, and strode out.

HE signaled a cab, drove twenty blocks, got out before a lunch room. He hadn't eaten supper and his stomach was rumbling vociferously for some fuel. But instead of sitting immediately at a table, he boxed himself in a phone booth.

A throaty contralto answered his ring. He said: "Hello, sweetheart, got anything for me?"

Besides being the telephone operator for a small, midtown hotel, Bella Steward was on Rex Hawk's pay roll. She served as a relay medium for communication between Bing and the private dick when both of them were out of their office.

Bella answered: "Not a thing, Rex. Were you expecting a call?"

Rex Hawk frowned. He knew that Noyell had returned to Kellock's home after regaining consciousness. And he guessed that Grogan had been dispatched to headquarters to get what was coming to him for his attack on his superior officer. So Bing's tailing either of the two cops could hardly be expected to pay any dividends.

But he was anxious to contact his assistant. He wanted to ascertain where Stacey had been taken—a job Bing could tackle to perfection.

He said: "I'm expecting a call from Bing. When he rings, tell him

to contact me at this number." He read it to Bella from the phone. "That's all, sweetheart."

He folded himself out of the booth, picked a table where he could keep his eye on the door, and ordered a meal. He also told the waiter: "A phone call will come for me. See that I get it, please. The name's Byrd."

He was on his third cup of coffee, and fourth cigarette, twenty-five minutes later, when the waiter summoned him to the phone. He said to Bing: "All right, kid, give an account of yourself."

Bing answered seriously, "Noyell and Grogan came to fifteen minutes after you left. I listened in on them like you said I should."

"Did you hear anything interesting?"

"Yeah. Grogan let go one crack that puts Noyell behind the eight ball."

Rex Hawk pricked up his ears. "What was that?"

"Hold your horses," Bing said, "I'm coming to it. Noyell woke up first, boiling mad. I heard him curse Grogan, and jump to the phone. Of course, he found it dead. Then Grogan woke up, and he cussed some more."

"Never mind being graphic," Rex Hawk clipped. "Give me the meat."

"But the trimmings are important," Bing protested, continuing rapidly: "Anyway—Noyell says to Grogan: 'You yellow lug, you let Hawk pull a bluff on you and get away!'"

"Grogan says: 'What's the use of beefing? He would have gotten away anyhow—the way he had us caged.'"

"Noyell rips out: 'He won't get far. The dragnet'll pick him up. What I'm beefing about is the sock

you handed me. And for that I owe you this!'"

"With that he hauls off and socks Grogan. 'And what's more,' Noyell adds, 'I'm going to break you if it's the last thing I do!'"

"Noyell is always wanting to break some one," Rex Hawk commented. "Some day he'll lock horns with the wrong party and break his own neck."

"I think he has," Bing observed meaningly, and went on: "I heard Grogan pick himself off the floor, saying: 'That slap evens us up, Noyell. But you try and break me and I'll tell what I know!'"

"Noyell whispers very low: 'What do you mean by that crack?'"

"Grogan says: 'I mean I'm up to your being teamed with Stacey on the Kellock deal! You lied to Hawk when you told him you thought Kellock was straight. I was at headquarters, in the next room to you, that day Stacey came in to find out if he could pick up a dollar by squealing on a receiver of stolen goods. The fence was Kellock. I didn't hear all of it, because you lowered your voice then. But I can add up the rest. You pumped Stacey, learned about Hawk's threatening Kellock, and saw your chance to pick up some easy dough, and at the same time square your grudge against the Hawk!'"

Bing stopped to catch his breath.

Rex Hawk murmured tensely: "Very, very interesting. What then?"

"This," Bing replied: "I thought it high time for sister to open the door. I was afraid Noyell would kill Grogan on the spot, and claim you did it. Then where would we be? Sure enough, when I opened the door Noyell had his gun out, and murder in his eye."

Rex Hawk whistled softly. "Good

boy. You used your head that time. Now—with that much definitely established, I can go to work on Stacey—sweat the truth out of him. I don't think he had a part in the actual killing. Maybe he didn't even know there was to be any bloodshed. I think he'll talk now—to duck a murder rap. Too bad—I had my mitts on him, but he got away. We've got to find him."

"Find him?" Bing echoed. "He's here—in the Parker Hotel!"

"You've got me hanging on the ropes," Rex Hawk muttered dazedly. "Explain!"

"Well"—Bing chuckled—"Noyell and Grogan swallowed my sister-looking-for-brother gag. They went out; so did I. They got in a squad car, drove off. I trailed them in a cab—to Kellock's. I hung around. Incidentally, what was all the shooting about?"

"All about me—thank Heaven. Go on."

"After the shooting, Noyell came out with a horse-chinned bozo——"

"Stacey."

"Yeah. I heard Noyell call him that later. They got in the car. I followed it to the Parker, where Stacey registered. He's in Room 707, and Noyell is with him now."

Eyes gleaming, Rex Hawk said: "Sit tight, Bing. And keep your eyes on Stacey. I'll be right down." Before hanging up, he added: "I don't know what I'd do without you, kid!"

"You'd do—all right," Bing replied, laughingly. "But I must say—you'd look like hell in skirts!"

VI.

TWENTY-FIVE minutes later Rex Hawk strolled into the lobby of the Parker Hotel, a second-rate hostelry off Times Square. A newly

purchased hat was pulled low over his face. In a far corner, his sharp eyes spotted a comely, fashionably dressed brunette ensconced in the shelter of some imitation palms. Only her hat and penciled brows showed above the edge of the open newspaper, held in her brightly tinted fingers.

He sauntered in her direction, over age-yellowed tiles. Casually, he stopped in front of the girl to light a cigarette.

Without looking up, Bing said, in a tone pitched to carry a bare two feet. "Stacey didn't show. Noyell went out quarter of an hour ago."

Behind his cupped hands, Rex Hawk murmured: "O. K. I'm going to 707. If anything pops, ring me there on the house phone."

He blew out his match, tossed it into a sand-filled brass urn, and headed for the elevator. On the way he got rid of his cigarette.

On the seventh floor, he slipped along the worn runner of a narrow, dimly lighted corridor. He came to a halt before 707. No illumination showed through the transom or under the door—which wasn't strange. Although it was still early, Stacey might have gone to bed.

He pressed his ear against the door in a listening attitude. His scalp tautened as he thought he discerned a slight movement within. But when the sound wasn't repeated, he decided he'd been mistaken.

Stealthily, he tried the knob, turning it by cautious degrees. The door opened. Slowly, silently, he edged it inward. Rex Hawk wasn't taking any chances of walking into a trap. He hadn't the slightest doubt that Noyell had armed Stacey, giving him instructions to shoot first and then ask questions.

Gun ready for action, he squeezed

into the pitch-black room through the partly open door, closing it behind him. For five seconds he did not move. Every muscle coiled he waited in a half crouch. But no orange-flamed, leaden welcome came.

Instead, once more he heard the soft pat of a creeping footstep. Pulses pounding, he strained his ears into the darkness. Then smiling at his own tenseness, he let his breath go. The footfall, he told himself, came from another room. Walls in these cheap hotels were only paper thick.

But, even as he reached this conclusion, his breath welled in his throat again. Prickly darts of horror chilled his spine.

For his nostrils had picked up the sweetish, nauseating smell of freshly spilled blood—human blood!

CASTING caution to the winds, he groped along the door jamb, found a light switch, pressed it. The sudden brilliance blinded him for a second. Then his eyes focused on the gruesome object in the center of the room.

Stacey lay in a pool of his own blood.

Rex Hawk's slitted eyes raked the room in swift survey. The same suitcase that the butler had been packing in Kellock's home was at the foot of the bed. Its contents were scattered about in wild disorder. The butler's pockets had been turned inside out.

THOUGHTS RACING, the private dick pressed his ear against the battered man's chest, hoping for a faint heartbeat. It was useless. Stacey was dead.

The blood was still flowing out of his wound. He could not have

been killed more than three or four minutes before.

Rex Hawk straightened, brows warped. He was in the middle of his third stride toward a door on the opposite side of the room, when the jangle of the phone caught him up short. He might suddenly have come in contact with a stone wall.

He spun on his heel, sprang to the wall phone. If it was Bing calling to warn him— He had no illusions. He knew if he were found in this room now, with the dead butler, it would be his finish.

Cursing the necessary delay, he wrapped a handkerchief around the receiver. But he never removed it from its hook. For at that moment the door was shoved open.

He stared into the hard, surprised eyes of Noyell. Rex Hawk's own eyes took on a surprised tinge.

Noyell snapped out of his momentary stunned paralysis first. Diving for his gun, he barked:

"Caught you red-handed this time, you—"

Rex Hawk hefted his own gun, said quietly: "Steady, Noyell. Pull your gun out—hilt first. Throw it on the bed. Quick! You've given me the answer to this mystery. If you listen to reason—"

The phone that had been clamoring all the while stopped abruptly.

Noyell, his heavy face purple, spat out a curse. "Sure I'll listen to reason!" he cried hoarsely. "Like this thing—"

He had taken out his gun. But, instead of tossing it on the bed, he flipped it in his hand. It roared—spat flame.

Rex Hawk ducked wildly—but not fast enough. He felt hot lead singe his cheek.

"You fool!" he rasped.

Aiming wide purposely, he flung lead toward Noyell. The cop

dodged instinctively, pressing his trigger again. But Rex Hawk had closed in. He gripped Noyell's gun wrist in fingers of steel, twisting the arm cruelly. At the same time he crashed the flat of his automatic against the detective's jaw.

Noyell let out a bellow of pain, dropped his gun; tried to shake sudden haze out of his eyes. He lurched forward, sought to twine the fingers of his free hand around Rex Hawk's throat.

High heels drummed in the corridor outside, and Bing, a vision of feminine loveliness, ran into the room. A small gun flashed in his carmine-nailed fist. As he took the situation in at a glance, apprehension flamed in his mascara-lashed eyes.

He jabbed his gun in the small of Noyell's back, chopped off: "Freeze, Noyell! Or by Heaven——"

Noyell froze.

Rex Hawk gulped air, snapped: "Keep him covered, Bing. If he acts up, blow out his brains. He won't miss them!"

He whirled on the balls of his feet, dashed across the room to a door, which, when he'd booted it open with a pistonlike ram of his foot, showed bathroom fixtures. He jumped sideways as the door crashed, grated: "Come out—Grogan! Hands high—you're finished!"

Even Bing raised penciled brows. Noyell croaked dazedly: "Grogan?"

Getting no reply from the bathroom, Rex Hawk strode in. The open window told a vivid tale. He leaped to it, poked his head out.

THE MOON was behind a cloud. But he could make out a shadowy figure twenty feet away, hugging the side of the building, creeping along a narrow ledge toward a fire escape.

He rapped out: "You haven't a chance, Grogan! Don't move!"

His answer was a venomous oath. A gun crackled.

He clamped his lips in a grim line, took deliberate aim. But he did not fire. Grogan had tried to jump the remaining three feet to the fire escape—missed. His scream echoed all the way down the chasm formed by the hotel and the neighboring building.

Rex Hawk felt his stomach turn sour. He pulled away from the window, before the impact of the hurtling body with the ground seven stories below. Hard as he was, he knew, if he heard it, he would be sick.

He reëntered the bedroom, wiping sweat from his brow and blood from his cheek. Bing, pale under his make-up, shot him an unspoken question. He shook his head.

"No—I didn't shoot him. He fell. Run down—search him. Bring up what you find on him."

Bing made a grimace of distaste for the job, but said, "O. K., chief," and went out. Like all public places during a drama involving gun play, the hall was devoid of humanity.

To Noyell, Rex Hawk said cuttingly: "Do you see it now? Or must I draw a picture of it for you?"

Noyell's agate-hard eyes were uncompromising.

"I recognized the voice of the man who cursed you—and took that nose dive just now," he admitted reluctantly. "It was Grogan, which lets you out—this time. But suppose you show me how your great brain accounts"—he waved an arm at Stacey's body—"for all this."

Rex Hawk smiled faintly, bowed mockingly. "The plot culminating in Kellock's murder had its incep-

tion the day Grogan overheard your conference with Stacey. Yeah"—as Noyell raised questioning brows—"I know about that. Because the butler wanted to make some blood money by squealing on his employer, Grogan sized him up as a skunk and potential criminal. In other words, one of his own kind. He waylaid him, propositioned him, and together they hatched the scheme to kill and rob Kellock. I was to be the sucker to take the rap—and you, the monkey to handle the hot chestnuts."

Noyell scowled darkly, remained silent.

"You're familiar with the rest of it," Rex Hawk went on. "Except this: When I accused you and Grogan in my office, I was stabbing in the dark. Later I reconsidered and it occurred to me that Stacey might be the guilty party.

"Remember I had taken the ruby from Grogan? Well, I went to Kellock's to have a talk with Stacey. Unless he were a hardened criminal—which I didn't suppose—I thought he'd crack if I pulled a bluff on him by planting the ruby in his possession. I didn't believe he knew you had already questioned me and seen the stone. He didn't crack. Instead he almost pulled the house down on my ears. I had to leave there in a hurry."

The private dick grinned broadly at the memory, continued: "When I learned later that Stacey hadn't turned the ruby over to the cops, I was convinced, however, that he was implicated in Kellock's murder. Although I must admit I thought at the time he was your accomplice. He kept the stone because he did not expect any one to believe me if I—when caught—said I'd handed it over to him. He was a shrewd article, but greedy.

"I trailed him here—where you considerably hid him to save him from me. I wanted to have another talk with him, but I found him dead—dead no more than two or three minutes. His body and his suitcase had been ramsacked. Bing had been covering this hotel. He'd seen you go out fifteen minutes before I arrived. Since you couldn't have come back and killed Stacey you were automatically eliminated. I realized that the moment you walked into this room."

Noyell's hard eyes glittered like cold steel.

"I'd forgotten to leave Stacey a gun," he said ill-naturedly. "I came back to give him one. How'd you know Grogan had killed him?"

Rex Hawk masked a smile. "If it wasn't you—it had to be Grogan. Only you two knew Stacey as a money-mad rat."

"As simple as that, eh?"

"As simple as that. After you left, Stacey got in touch with Grogan, by prearrangement, gave him his whereabouts. You see, the butler had the loot—for expediency's sake. That's why he put up a fight when I paid him a call. He knew if he were searched it would have meant his finish.

"Grogan scorched rubber down here for the divvy, getting into this room via the fire escape. I think he decided on the spur of the moment to kill Stacey and keep it all himself. I had supposedly already attempted the life of the butler. And the set-up against me was too pretty to waste.

"Apparently I trotted in here just as Grogan was ready to leave. He might have shot me. But that would have spoiled his plan to have me fry for his crimes. Since I blocked the door, he had to take a chance on

crawling over a ledge outside. I thought I'd heard some movement in here when I entered, but you barged in. And things happened so fast I couldn't investigate."

NOYELL'S obstinate mouth now twisted in a smile that brought no humor to his cold eyes. "You were damn lucky, Hawk—this time! But next time—"

At this point the door opened and Bing entered, escorted by two cops who, to judge by their ogling glances, had been easy victims of "her" charm. They became business-like as soon as they glimpsed the corpse on the floor, and Noyell's glowering face. Saluting awkwardly, they snapped to attention.

Bing gave Rex Hawk a bundle of bank notes, and a handful of glittering jewels.

"I found that junk on Grogan, chief," he said in the girlish alto he could imitate so well. "And there's a jittery hotel manager out in the hall. He says you're ruining his hotel. What'll I tell him?"

"If he waits a few minutes," Rex Hawk said, "he can come in and cry on Noyell's shoulder."

He selected one item from the

jewelry, thrust the money and the other jewels into Noyell's hands.

"There's the Kellock loot," he said. "This"—he held up for a moment a huge, blood-red ruby—"I'm keeping. An insurance company has a twenty-thousand-dollar reward for its return. It strikes me I've earned a fee in this case—twice."

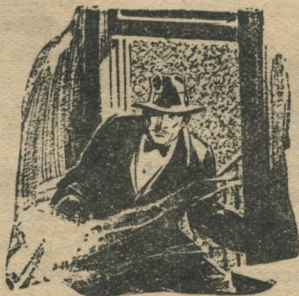
He paused a moment, added: "But I'd be willing to split the reward with a friend. What do you say, Noyell? I can forget our differences—if you can."

Impulsively he put out his hand.

Noyell bit his lip, jammed his fists with the money and jewels into his pockets. His smoldering eyes were pin points of red.

"Keep the money, Hawk," he growled, his stubborn jaw jutting forward malignantly. "You and I won't be quits until I've broken u!"

For a tense moment, hot anger flamed across Rex Hawk's face. Then he smiled, shrugged resignedly. He linked his arm in Bing's, said: "Come along, sweetheart. What can you do with a guy that'd rather hate you than have ten grand to spend?"



HOT-ICE MAN

by Richard B. Sale



I was numb, seething with excitement, brittle as an icicle!

THE FIRST TIME I met Mary Lane, she was high as a kite, standing at the cocktail bar in the Villa Varo Club with a lemon sour in her right hand and a pretzel in her left.

It was a nice Southern California night, not too cold, not too warm—and weary of the day's work, I wandered into Johnny Varo's night spot.

Varo is a nice boy, outside of being a dollar-grabber. He likes me. He stepped over to the bar with me while Danny Farrell brought out the cointreau for my drink. "Too bad," he said, "you don't write one of them chatter columns, Charlie. I've got more MGM movie stars here to-night than MGM and Warners combined." He nudged me and pointed down to the other end of the bar. "You see that dame?"

I said: "I see her, Johnny. I like seeing her. She's easy on these weary orbs of mine."

"That's Mary Lane," Varo said.

"Imagine," I said, ogling in mock amazement. "And would I shock you unduly, my friend, if I asked you who in hell Mary Lane is?"

Varo said: "She's the big musical comedy singer and dancer from New York. Acme Pictures took one look at her in 'Be Good!' and signed her up for a picture. She hit the coast about a month ago for the opus. They finished shooting it this morning. From what I hear, the gal is rough and ready. Spends a lot of time in Caliente and shoots her winnings on the wheels down there. She wandered in here about half an hour ago, all alone, and she proceeded to get oiled."

"And that ain't all, Charlie," said

Danny Farrell as he shoved a stinger across the bar toward me.

"Why, Danny, you eavesdropper!"

"Sure," he said shamelessly, "I heard you talking."

Varo frowned. "What do you mean—that ain't all?"

"Well," Danny said, "she came right to the bar when she first arrived. Before she had a drop to drink, she said: 'Does a guy named Charlie Drake come here a lot?'"

I sighed. "Isn't fame awful, Johnny? What'd you say then, Danny?"

"I said: 'Sure, lady. He practically lives here.' And then she said: 'Do you think he'll be in to-night?' And I said: 'Sure, he will.'"

"Then she didn't say anything and she just ordered a lemon sour. When I gave it to her, she said: 'When Charlie Drake comes in, will you point him out to me?' And I said: 'O. K., lady.' Then she started drinking. Now ain't that something?"

"You put it aptly," I said. "Well, have I been pointed out to the young lady yet?"

Danny said: "Not yet. I kind of thought I ought to tell you first. Some one might be fixing to have you bumped off or something."

"Don't be a fool," Varo growled. "A dame like Mary Lane doesn't play finger lady for killers."

"Since I am the *corpus-delicti*," I said dryly, "can I get a word in edgewise? First, how often does this Mary Lane come here?"

"Seldom," Varo replied. "She's been in here three times since she arrived in Hollywood. The last time she threw a brawl, they all got polluted. She passed out cold with the rest. We had to pour them home."

I finished my drink. "Make me another," I told Danny. "And then

let the lady know that I have arrived and——"

FIVE MINUTES LATER I felt a short tug at my arm and I turned around. There she was, holding another lemon sour and swaying slightly. She said: "You're Charlie Drake!" and she pointed her finger at me.

She was pretty, about five feet three with reddish-brown hair and a lovely face. Her eyebrows were mere hair lines, her lips bright and full. She had dark-red polish covering her nails entirely, blotting out the little white half moons. Her voice was low, sweet; her eyes shined at me, made sharp by the mascara on the lids.

I said: "And you're Mary Lane."

She blinked. "How'd you know me?" Her tongue gave her trouble. Her words were fuzzy.

I said: "Who wouldn't know you? Movies, stage——"

She sipped her drink. "Know how I knew you? I rec'nized you from your pic'ures in the paper, I did, I did." She kept a straight face.

I said: "You're pretty good. I don't look like my pictures at all."

She blinked at me again and finally said: "Let's sit down somewhere, Charlie. I wanna talk t'you."

"Sure," I said. "A pleasure, lady."

We walked down to an empty booth away from the dance floor and the orchestra and we sat down. She kept looking at me. She finished her drink, grabbed a waiter, and ordered another.

I said: "Hitting the bottle sort of, eh?"

"I'm scared," she replied. "Honest, I'm scared stiff!"

"Why?"

"I'm scared." She giggled drunk-

enly. "You know what? I think I'm gonna be killed."

I lighted a cigarette and frowned at her. "Are you just tight or are you on the level?"

She giggled some more. "Oh, I'm tight all right. But I'm on the level, too. I think I'm gonna be killed."

"Who's going to kill you?" I asked.

"Can't tell you." She pouted. "Won't tell you."

I said sharply: "O. K., O. K., then why the hocus-pocus? Why bother me at all?"

She looked sober for a moment. "I want you to do something for me."

"What?"

She dropped her eyes and pulled her purse onto the table. It was a small white thing, glugged with rhinestones. She opened it and took out a little package, handed it to me.

It was about two inches square, wrapped up in thick manila paper and tightly sealed with red-bordered stickers. She said: "Put it away."

I slipped it into my pocket and shrugged. "So what?"

"I want you to hold it for me. Somebody's after it. I want you to keep it until I ask you for it back."

"What is it?"

"Won't tell."

"Who's after it?"

"Won't tell either."

I said dryly: "You're a big help."

Her eyes were watery. "Will you? Will you hold it?"

I sighed. She was a pretty kid. "I'll hold it."

"Oh, thank you," she said. "Thank you one and all, Charlie." She was getting pretty drunk. I thought she might start to cry or pass out on my hands. I got her to her feet and started her out. I said: "Come on, lady. I'm taking you home."

She lived in an apartment-hotel

on Wilshire Boulevard, not far from La Brea Street. It was a nice place, Buena Vista Lodge. I found a night clerk at the switchboard who got up and took hold of her.

"I'll take her up," he said, grinning. "I've done it before. Thanks, mister——"

When I got home to my own humble abode in Los Angeles, I took the little package out and looked at it. I had half a mind to open it and see what was inside. If she'd been sober when she gave it to me, I would have. As it was I didn't, feeling I'd be taking advantage of a drunk.

I locked it in the top drawer of my desk finally, and then set the alarm clock for eight thirty and hit the hay.

IT WAS nine a. m. when I reached the offices of the Los Angeles *Dispatch* next day, and I was all in a dither. I skipped the usual sweet amenities with Harriet Bruce, the light of my life, and I snapped: "City ed in?"

"He is," she replied haughtily. "And come again sometime, when you can't stay so long."

I left her there and went through the city room where the boys and girls were in the throes of publishing an evening paper, and I went into the city ed's private office without knocking.

"Good morning, Charlie," he said laconically, without glancing up from under his green eyeshade. "And what brings you to work on time to-day?"

I replied: "In short, my friend, I am taken aback!" I tossed a seven a. m. edition of the *Examiner*, a morning paper, on his desk and pointed a finger at the headline. "Is that on the level?"

The city ed regarded me soberly,

grunted once or twice, and picked up the paper, glancing at the story. The headline read: LAGNA TO INVESTIGATE \$50,000 GEM THEFT. The inverted pyramid read: "Famous Jewel Sleuth Will Attempt Recovery of Missing Diamond Pendant."

And the lead in the news story ran:

The Zenith Insurance Co. announced to-day that it had employed Ron Lagna, famous gem sleuth, to investigate the theft of a \$50,000 diamond pendant belonging to Mary Lane, popular stage and screen star. The pendant was reported stolen from Miss Lane's apartment late yesterday afternoon when she returned from Acme Studios. Besides Lagna, who will operate in a private capacity, Captain George Shane of police headquarters is in official charge of the case.

The city ed nodded. "Sure, it's on the level. We caught it on the wire just after you knocked off last night. Why so hot?"

"Hot?" I said. "Why, I carted Mary Lane home last night from the Villa Varo and all the time the little chiseler was talking to me she knew a fifty-grand pendant had been heisted and she never said a word."

The city ed sighed. "What difference does it make?"

I said evenly: "Listen: She came to Villa Varo last night looking for me. And when she found me, she gave me a little package to hold for her. She said she thought she was going to be bumped off. She told me to hold it for her until she asked for it back."

The city ed ogled. "Charlie—you don't think—maybe—"

I asked: "What?"

"No," he said. "We couldn't stumble onto a scoop like that. I thought for a second that Mary Lane might have pulled a phony

theft of her own jewel. The Zenith people are offering a reward of five grand for the return of the stone. But that wouldn't work. She couldn't return it herself and claim the reward." He stared at me. "But something's fishy."

"Are you telling me?"

"You didn't open the package?"

"No," I said.

"Well," he said balefully, "have you any scruples now?"

I caught a cab down on Sixth Street and rode it hard out to West-lake where I live. The city ed's hunch had reached me. I had a high, excited feeling in the pit of my stomach. I took out my keys, unlocked the door, and went in.

My heart dropped into my shoes, bounced up to my throat and then hit my ankles again.

The apartment was a shambles. Everything was turned inside out.

I leaped across to my desk. The top drawer was wide open. There were no chisel marks on the thing, no violence at all. The drawer had been opened with a skeleton key.

And the little manila package which Mary Lane had given me was gone—

BEFORE I had a chance to collect myself, the door opened and Captain George Shane walked in. His homely face was lined with worry and he was chewing dully on a lighted cigar.

I said, surprised: "Cappy!"

"Hello, Charlie," he said somberly. He looked around. "What in hell hit here?"

"I wish I knew," I said. "Somebody lifted something."

"What?"

I said: "Can't tell you."

"Maybe you don't want to remember," Shane said

I said: "What's biting you, Sherlock?"

He sat down and stared at me. "Ever hear of Mary Lane, Charlie?"

"What about her?"

"She's missing."

I snapped: "Missing!"

He nodded. "Then you do know her?"

"I met her last night at Villa Varo. She was drunk. I carted her home."

Shane licked his lips. "Go on."

"That's all there is."

"No," Shane said, "that isn't all there is. You took her home. You gave her to the night clerk at Buena Vista Lodge. Then you left. Half an hour later you telephoned her and told her to meet you here and that it was urgent. She left her place. She didn't come back. Where is she?"

I said: "Listen, Cappy, don't give me that third-degree stuff. I took her home and that's the last I saw of her."

"You called her at one thirty a. m."

"That's a damn lie."

"All right," Shane got to his feet. "Charlie, I've known you a long time. It's like you to run a bluff on a dumb cop like me. But the inspector is sore and I've got to play rough. You know something about that fifty-grand heist. You know something about Mary Lane. I'll bet you five bucks you've got her right here, and I'm going to see."

I sighed and sat down. "Sure, go ahead and take a look."

He went into my bedroom and called out: "What's in this closet of yours?"

"Opium, heroin, cocaine, a counterfeit machine, two moonshine stills and all my suits, both of 'em."

"Wise guy," Shane grunted. I could hear him open the door. He

gasped, then hurriedly closed it. I got up and went in. His face was white. His cigar was on the floor. His eyes were popping.

I said: "What's wrong?"

"Charlie——"

"Yeah?"

"Listen, Charlie, look at me. You're on the level, ain't you? You're not kidding me? You never saw Mary Lane after you took her home last night? That's the truth?"

I went taut. "What's in the closet, Cappy?"

"You open it," he said, stepping back. "I had one look."

I gritted my teeth, turned the knob and swung the door open. I let go of the knob instantly and staggered against him, gasping.

Mary Lane, the little redhead whose weakness was lemon sours and roulette wheels in Caliente, was hanging from a coat hook in the closet. There was a piece of rope around her neck and an expression of terrified stupefaction on her mottled face.

CAPTAIN SHANE shook his head. "Charlie—you're framed!"

I stared at him. "How'd she get in here?"

In answer, Shane asked: "How'd the guy who made a mess of your apartment get in here? She was planted when the bird went through your stuff and lifted that 'something' you spoke about. What was it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. That's on the level. Last night the girl gave me a package to hold for her. It was lifted this morning. I kind of thought maybe it was the pendant."

"You thought right," Shane snapped. "I'll bet my badge it was the pendant. There's something fishy in the whole heist. I don't

believe it was stolen at all. Take a look at this."

He handed me a letter. I read it.

Charlie, darling—

We can't get away with it. We were fools to make believe the diamond was stolen. The reward isn't worth your taking the chance of claiming the reward when you return it. I should never have listened to your scheme in the first place. Darling, bring back the pendant and I will tell the police I misplaced it. All my love,

Mary.

"I'll be damned!" I said.

"Too pat," Shane said. "I get the lay now. This letter was planted right in plain sight in her apartment."

"That's it," I snapped. "She was made to write it! Blackmailed into writing it, Cappy! Blackmailed into seeing me at the Villa Varo! Blackmailed into giving me the diamond to keep for her. That was part of the plan. The guy who did it killed her, stuck her in my closet, stole the diamond for keeps, and is trying to make me the fall guy!"

"That's it," Shane nodded. "So what?"

I leaped to the telephone and called the *Dispatch* where I got the city ed and said: "Listen, chief. I want everything you've got in the morgue on Mary Lane. *Everything*, understand? And when you've got all the dope, call me back here and spill it to me." I hung up.

Simultaneously, there was a knock on the door.

Shane whispered: "You handle it. I'll stay in the bedroom. See what happens."

He went into the bedroom and closed the door. I walked over to the front door and opened it. A tall, thin, dark man, well-dressed,

his eyes set close together, smiled at me. "Mr. Drake?"

"I am."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, please," he said. "I'm Ron Lagna, the Zenith private detective."

I said: "Come in," and stepped aside to let him in.

Without any warning, he cracked me solidly on the jaw and I careened across the room and fell onto the sofa, my head throbbing as he turned back to the door, closed it, and locked it.

I got up, furious, and started toward him with my fists working. He smiled, pulled out a .32 revolver and leveled it at my stomach as he snapped: "Behave, Drake, or you get it before your time."

I stopped, stared at him. "What is this?"

"This"—Lagna smiled—"is your own gun."

I gaped. It was. I had had it in the top drawer of the desk, where I'd put Mary Lane's package.

"Yes." He nodded. "I took it an hour ago. Sit down at your desk and do what I tell you."

I went over to the desk and sat down. "Take a pen and paper," he said evenly, holding the gun against the back of my neck. "Write what I tell you. Ready?"

I nodded, numb with seething excitement, brittle as an icicle.

"Then write this: 'I do hereby confess that I killed Mary Lane after she refused to go on with a scheme which I had planned, i. e., to fake a theft of her diamond pendant, return it to the insurance company, and claim the five-thousand-dollar reward. In a fit of fury, when she suddenly refused, I took her life and now, repentant, I am taking my own and hope that it will compen-

sate her loss. I loved her. Charles Drake.' Have you got that?"

I had it. I nodded. "What are you going to do, Lagna?"

He laughed softly. "Enrich myself by approximately fifty grand. Put a P. S. on that letter: 'I have hidden the pendant where it will never be found, so there is no use looking. Even if I were alive, I could never retrieve it. It is permanently lost. Adios. C. D.' Got that?"

"I have it," I said tautly. "What are you going to do?"

LAGNA seemed amused. "Your own apartment. Your own confession—and your own gun!"

The telephone rang. It startled the both of us. I was in a cold sweat. Had "Cappy" Shane heard? Or was he daydreaming in the bedroom. Lagna stared at the phone a second or two, then said: "Sit still." He picked it up, disguised his voice and said: "Yeah?"

The party on the other end of the wire talked for four full minutes. "O. K.," Lagna said finally, and hung up. He smiled toothily. "Nice going, Drake. I got here soon enough. Checking on Mary Lane through the *Dispatch* morgue, eh?" He lifted the gun.

"Listen," I said, stalling, "let me get this straight. Are you the guy who arranged the party, the guy who called Mary Lane last night at one thirty and said he was I?"

He smiled and said nothing. He raised the gun in his hand, brought it closer to me, the black muzzle on a line with my forehead. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't speak—

An explosion shattered the thick stillness of the room as a gun detonated.

But not the gun in Lagna's hand.

It was Cappy Shane's poked out from the bedroom door.

Lagna's head jerked queerly as the bullet struck it. He sank to the floor very slowly, the smile never leaving his face, his eyes never closing, the gun still clenched in his hand.

We found Mary Lane's diamond in his pocket.

I wilted and said weakly: "You took your damn time about doing that, Cappy!"

Shane frowned. "Didn't really believe he'd go through with it until I heard what your chief told him on the phone."

I tried to catch my breath. "What was that?"

Shane said: "I listened in on the extension in the other room. I knew darn well Lagna was imitating you. Your paper told him about the time in New York when Mary Lane shot and killed her husband, Beadley Soreno. Her contention was that it was self-defense. Soreno was supposed to have been beating her. Her sole witness, the man who corroborated her testimony that it was self-defense, was Ron Lagna. Get it?"

I said: "I get it. It wasn't self-defense. And Lagna had it on the girl that she'd committed murder. He used it to blackmail her. Is he dead?"

"He's dead," Shane said, picking up my confession.

I glanced at it. "Did you hear him dictating that to me?"

Shane said: "I heard everything. But what the hell—this isn't your handwriting!"

I grinned wanly. "What did you expect me to do—let him get away with the thing entirely?"

MUFFED!

*The fast-moving
story of a plot
that failed*

by Hal Murray
Bonnett



*It was a case of a
man trying to do
two things at once
—and doing neither
well!*

THE NIGHT itself was hot, but beneath the canvas walls of the tent which formed the business office of the Manwell Greater Shows it was fairly sizzling.

"Crusher" O'Shea, looking remarkably cool under the circumstances, stood squarely in front of Pete Manwell's scarred and road-beaten desk.

"The girl's name," Crusher said, "is Stella Grady." He had to speak in a loud voice to make himself heard distinctly above the roar and the din outside.

Pete Manwell's heavy features showed irritation. He scraped back his chair and got to his feet.

"Damn this heat!" he growled. Then he added, "What do you want with her?"

Manwell was a big man. Everything about him looked hard. He had an outthrust, belligerent jaw, and bushy brows almost concealed his gray-green eyes. His collar, which had probably been white that morning, was now grimy and sweat-streaked. So tightly was it buttoned, that the flesh of his neck puffed and protruded around the top of it until it gave the impression of a red toy balloon about to burst. The double-breasted coat of his dark suit was also buttoned tightly around his stolid figure.

Crusher O'Shea's eyes became filled with tiny sparks, but in no other manner did he betray anger at the other man's tone of voice. In the old days, when wrestling had been a great deal more on the level than now, Crusher had held a championship. He had ruled his division thoroughly and predominantly until he had tired of the crooked trend the game was beginning to take and had quit. Those years on the mat had taught him many things, and among these was the fact that control of

one's temper is often as important as the perfect control of one's muscles.

"Stella Grady," he told Manwell quietly, "telephoned me a short while ago."

Manwell lighted a cigar and regarded Crusher O'Shea with his almost hidden eyes.

"You say you're a private detective? What the hell could the girl want with you?"

"That's what I intend to discover."

Pete Manwell appeared to give the matter an instant of thought, then he shrugged his massive shoulders and pointed the butt of his cigar toward a chair.

"Wait here, and I'll see if I can find her. I think there's a girl by that name working in one of my shows. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Manwell went out, and Crusher was left alone. He sat down in the chair and leafed through a magazine which had been lying on Manwell's desk. It was ten minutes before the showman returned. As he entered the tent, Crusher threw the magazine aside and stood up.

"Well?"

"She's gone," Manwell said. "She complained of being sick and isn't in the show to-night. I went on back to the tent where she sleeps, and she's not there, either. There're supposed to be two dames to a tent, and there's only one suitcase in the tent. It's got the other girl's label on it."

"Maybe she went to the train."

Manwell shook his head. "She wouldn't do that. We don't live in the railroad cars. There're only two passenger cars, and the other six cars in the train are used to haul the equipment. We pitch sleeping tents right on the show ground or else go to a cheap hotel if there's

one close. The railroad cars are on a siding a half mile away from here." Manwell grunted. "You might as well forget her. She's just pulled stakes for some reason or other. Dames are always coming and going around these kind of shows. What'd she say when she called you?"

For an instant Crusher O'Shea was silent. At last he said, "She didn't have a chance to say much. She said her name was Stella Grady, and that she was with the Manwell Greater Shows which was playing at the show grounds at the end of Warton Street. Her voice was unsteady—broken. She was frightened. In the middle of a sentence—before she had a chance to say much—she was cut off."

Manwell's eyes gleamed from the shadows of his heavy brows. "Did you trace the call?"

"The call was made from a pay station in a drug store a block from here. It's a busy place, and none of the clerks could give me any information."

The showman let his heavy body into the desk chair.

Crusher rested his hands on the desk and leaned forward, his lean face without expression.

"Let me see your records—everything you've got about that girl."

"I haven't got much." Manwell reached for a file box and flipped through the cards it contained. He withdrew one and glanced at it.

"Stella Grady," he said. "Age, twenty-three. Previous experience as a chorus girl in the 'Starlight Revue'—a Broadway musical. Home town, Seattle."

Manwell replaced the card. "That's all I've got. It's an old story—tough times, no work, no money. Finally a job of this sort." The showman rubbed his heavy jaw thoughtfully. "There're worse jobs

than working in my show, though, at that." He waved his big hand as though to push the matter aside. "I'm busy now," he added bluntly. "Of course, I have, you might say, a more or less fatherly interest in my people here with the show, and if there was anything I could do to help the girl, I wouldn't be the man to hesitate a minute. But as it is, she's gone, and that's all there is to it." Manwell bent his head over some papers on his desk.

Crusher O'Shea accepted the dismissal without another word. He turned and strode from the tent.

OUTSIDE, he hesitated and let his eyes take in the panorama of the carnival. In his ears blared the jumble of the barker's voice and the calliope's whistle. Passing in front of him he saw men and women who were underweight or overweight, listless-looking. His keen eyes saw men and women who should be in their prime, but through lack of exercise or by dissipation of some sort or other, were making their lives a burden to themselves and to every one with whom they associated. It was disgusting. Unconsciously, Crusher O'Shea closed his hand and sent his own whipcord muscles rippling along his arm and up across his shoulders.

A voice said softly at Crusher's side: "Are you Mr. O'Shea?"

Crusher turned his head and looked at the girl who had spoken. She was a tall blonde, strikingly good-looking. In her hand she carried a small suitcase.

Crusher nodded. "O'Shea's the name."

The girl was breathing heavily. Her eyes were never quiet, darting here and there, fear lurking in their depths.

"I—I'm Stella Grady. You must help me get away from here."

Crusher studied her face for the bare fraction of a second, then he took the suitcase from her hand. "This way," he said, "to my car."

They threaded their way swiftly through the crowd and along the lane of parked automobiles which were in the graveled lot set aside for the purpose. Every few steps, Stella Grady glanced over her shoulder apprehensively.

When Crusher's roadster was reached, she said: "I'm going to crouch on the floor boards out of sight until we've safely reached the street and are several blocks away." Her voice became tense with emotion. "If a tall man with a little black mustache tries to stop us, for goodness' sake don't let him do it. Shoot him—do anything. He'll murder me if he finds me."

Crusher pursed his lips. "Who is this man?"

"He's a gangster. His name is Jim Cowly."

"Why does he want to kill you?"

"He doesn't necessarily want to kill me, but he'll do that rather than let me escape from his clutches. I'll explain it to you when we're safe."

The roadster slid from the parking lot and into the street. The girl crouched down out of sight, and remained there until the blare of the carnival was left behind.

"Is there a car following us?" she asked. "A big maroon sedan?"

Crusher glanced into the rear-view mirror and shook his head. Stella Grady took her place on the seat beside him.

"I want you to take me to the Parkway Hotel," she said. "Once I'm there I'll be safe enough. I'll take a room there for the night, and catch a plane early in the morning for the West. I'm going to Seattle.

"I've been hiding in the rear of a concession run by a person I can trust. When I saw you go to Manwell's office, I thought you must be O'Shea, so I slipped out when I saw you leaving and reached you before you got away."

Stella Grady crossed her shapely legs and adjusted her dress. "I didn't want to take my troubles to Mr. Manwell," she continued, "because he has a terrible temper and such a rigid sense of justice. I was afraid that if I told him about the way this gangster had threatened me, he'd hunt for Cowly. Jim Cowly is a dangerous man, and he might have shot Mr. Manwell, so I just decided to keep my trouble to myself and hire a good private detective for protection.

"I found your name in the classified ad section of the telephone directory, and I liked it because it sounded Irish like mine. I slipped into a public phone booth and called you. Then, before I'd got to say all I wanted to, I saw this terrible Cowly and a pal of his come into the store. I hung up quickly and got out a side entrance before they saw me."

"Why didn't you take a cab and get away right then, so long as they hadn't seen you?" Crusher wanted to know.

Stella Grady moved closer. Her shapely shoulders gave a shudder. "I forgot to tell you about the other man. You see, there are three of them. One of them has been trailing me all the time, though he didn't enter the drug store with me. But I saw him waiting across the street. Cowly is the leader, but the other two men are just as dangerous as he is. I knew if I tried to get farther away from the show grounds, so that it would look like I was trying

to make a get-away, my life wouldn't be worth anything."

Crusher glanced sideways at the girl, and she put a hand on his arm. "I know what you're going to ask me," she said softly. "Please don't. It will be much better if I don't explain why Cowly was so set on getting me. Please be satisfied with knowing that once I get to the hotel I'll be safe and your responsibility will be over. They won't think of looking for me at the Parkway, and they won't be expecting me to take a plane in the morning. My home is in Seattle, and that's where I'm going. I'll never hear of Cowly again!"

AT THE PARKWAY Hotel, Crusher O'Shea carried the girl's suitcase into the lobby where a bell hop took it from him.

Stella Grady extended a folded bill on which showed the figure twenty. "Does this cover the amount I owe you?" she asked.

For a fraction of an instant Crusher hesitated, then he took the bill and slipped it into his pocket. "It quite covers it," he told her.

"Good night—and thanks," she said.

Crusher left the hotel and walked toward his car. Instead of getting into the roadster, however, he crossed the street and walked close to the buildings until he could see into the hotel lobby again.

The girl who had called herself Stella Grady was not registering at the desk. She had approached the boy who held her bag. After speaking several words to him, she took the suitcase. Her trim ankles flashed swiftly across the lobby, and she went out a side door.

Crusher, his dark eyes narrow slits of concentration, moved on swift feet to the corner, still keep-

ing sheltered by the buildings. From a darkened doorway he gazed along the intersecting street toward the place where Stella Grady stood at the curb. She raised her hand in a signal to a cab, and Crusher ran back to his roadster.

He turned his car around the corner just as the tail light of the girl's cab was disappearing around the next corner. He pushed the roadster no closer than that all the way back to the grounds where Manwell's Greater Shows played.

He saw the blond girl pay off the cab and disappear into the noisy crowd thronging the midway. He lost her then as he was forced to turn the roadster into the parking lot.

After he had left the car, he moved through the crowd slowly, his eyes narrow and watchful, trying to pick up the figure of the girl again. At the far end of the midway he saw her as she came out of the tent which served as Pete Manwell's office.

Crusher stepped between two concessions and waited for her to pass. She went by, walking swiftly, looking neither to right nor left, and Crusher fell in behind her.

She went straight along the midway until she reached the tent over which was the sign, "Vanities." She went into the tent through a rear entrance.

In front of the show was gathered a motley group of men. A barker, sweat pouring down his pasty face, was yelling in a raucous voice. A half dozen girls stood on the platform behind him, looking out over the crowd with bored, disinterested eyes. Unconsciously, as though from force of habit, they kept swaying to the rhythm of a four-piece orchestra which occupied the other end of the platform.

Crusher stopped at the edge of the crowd.

The barker leaned forward, his voice dropping a little, becoming confidential.

"And, brothers," he exclaimed, "believe me when I tell you that you'll regret it all your life if you fail to see the super-added attraction of our little show.

"Gentlemen!" The barker's voice dropped still lower. "Stella Grady in her sen-sa-tion-al muff dance. We offer this little girl to you at no added price. Imagine if you will this beautiful creature—a gorgeous girl, attractive enough to grace the palace of a king. It is a dance of art, gentlemen! You will want to stand up and cheer for this little girl. Stella Grady, gentlemen, in her famous muff dance!"

The barker's voice rose. "The show's ready to begin. Step right up and get your tickets. Twenty-five cents, two bits, the fourth part of a dollar. Right this way, gentlemen."

The girls left the platform and disappeared into the tent. The orchestra followed them.

Crusher O'Shea had raised his eyes to several large posters strung along the wall of the tent behind the barker. According to the words beneath them, they were paintings of Stella Grady in various poses from her dance.

The paintings were far from good, but still, the artist, crude as he had been, had made one thing evident: Stella Grady was a brunette!

Crusher bought a ticket, entered the tent and sat down at the rear in a dark corner.

THE SHOW BEGAN, and for fifteen or twenty minutes there was a hodge-podge of stale gags. Then, with a crash and blare from the or-

chestra, the dance of Stella Grady was announced. Lights dimmed and a blue spot played on the stage.

Crusher leaned forward, his expression one of intense interest. Into the spotlight glided the *blonde* who had called herself Stella Grady and who had hired a detective to escort her safely away from the show grounds!

Crusher O'Shea pursed his lips in the manner of a man who has made a decision. As soon as the girl had left the stage, he got up and walked back to the ticket taker.

"I saw this show the other night," Crusher said, "and I could swear that isn't the same girl who did the muff dance then. It isn't, is it?"

The man grinned, shook his head. "No," he admitted. "That ain't Stella. She quit the show to-day, but we got her dance billed, and so there wasn't nothing to do but have one of the other dames take her place. This dame's name is Rita Conlan—she ain't bad, either."

"She's very good," Crusher agreed. He kept his eyes on the stage, making a pretense of being interested in the rest of the show. As though merely curious about an unimportant fact, he added: "Why did the other girl quit?"

"She had a streak of luck," the ticket taker confided. "She got word from some lawyers in Seattle or some place that her brother whom she hadn't seen for years had died up in Alaska and willed her a sizeable piece of dough. He'd struck it rich, I guess—gold. They were both orphans, and there wasn't any other heirs, so Stella got the whole business. She deserved a break like that, too. A swell kid who'd just been down on her luck. She didn't belong in a layout like this, but I guess she had to eat, and she couldn't get anything else to do."

Crusher nodded thoughtfully. "When did she leave?"

"I guess she went this evening. I saw her late this afternoon, and she said good-by in case she didn't see me again. I ain't seen her, so I guess she's gone."

The man grinned. "I just happened to think of something that's kind of funny. That muf dance must be good luck or something. I heard Rita, the dame that's doing it now, telling one of the other girls this afternoon that she figured on quitting the show in a day or so, too. She said a guy from her home town had written to her and wanted to get hitched up, and she was gonna do it."

The show ended abruptly with a final blare of the orchestra. Crusher was the first one out, and he strode purposefully down the midway toward Pete Manwell's tent. His lean face was without expression as he went inside.

Manwell had been sitting behind his desk, hunched in his massive chair, apparently deep in thought. He looked up with a startled curse as Crusher entered. The cigar Manwell had been smoking flopped downward as his lips went slack. Then, abruptly, the big man gained control of himself and the cigar jerked erect as his jaw jutted forward.

Crusher spoke first, his voice that of a person who believes he is passing on good news so that another may enjoy it also. "I found Stella Grady," he said.

"You did?" The carnival owner's tone was guarded.

"Yes. I located her and took her to a hotel where she would be safe."

Manwell cleared his throat and smiled. "That's fine."

"She was in danger from a gangster named Cowly," Crusher con-

tinued. "I don't know just why, but he was going to kill her if he had a chance."

"Good Lord!" Manwell raised his bushy brows. "Can you imagine that! She's safe now, eh?"

Crusher frowned. "Well, she thinks she is, but I'm not so sure. Some of these gangsters are pretty tough customers. The girl intends to leave for Seattle in the morning, but if this man Cowly wants her as bad as she seems to think he does, I'm afraid he might find some means of locating her and killing her on the way. I've been thinking it over, and I've decided that the girl should, by all means, have a guard."

"A guard, eh?" Manwell's big fingers drummed on the desk. His eyes seemed to rest on the blunt tips of his shoes.

"Yes," Crusher told him. "She should have protection. She might not agree to it because of the expense, so I thought I'd tell you about her case. You seemed to take an interest in the girl, and you said if there was anything you could do, you'd do it."

"You mean you want to go along with her as a guard and have me pay you?"

"That's it."

Manwell snorted. "Don't be an idiot!"

"I'd hoped you'd be willing to help." Crusher frowned again. "However, I don't intend letting that girl go right ahead and walk *into danger*. I'm going back to the hotel where I left her and talk the matter over with her. If she thinks she can't afford the service of a guard, or thinks she won't need one, I'm going to send one of my operatives along with her without her knowing it. I'll stand the expense myself. I've got a girl working for me who used to be a chorus girl her-

self. I think I've heard her mention that she was in 'Starlight Revue'—the same show your employment record card says Stella Grady was in. They'll probably know each other, and if Stella Grady won't listen to me—won't permit me to go along with her, I'll have this operative of mine talk to her in the morning. Maybe I'll send my assistant rather than go myself. The two girls should get along good together, talking over old times."

"Yeah."

Pete Manwell got to his feet and glanced at his watch. "Wait a minute," he said. "It's later than I thought it was. There're some instructions I've got to give a couple of the ticket men about a special price I want to try out on the midnight show. I'll be back in a minute."

When Manwell returned a few minutes later, he resumed his seat behind his desk, wiped the sweat from his face with a large, purple-bordered handkerchief and relighted his cigar.

"I've decided," he said abruptly, "that it probably is my duty to lend some help in this thing you're undertaking." His heavy hand went into his coat pocket. "Here's a ten spot. Not much, but it'll help."

Crusher took the bill. His tone was conversational. "I noticed as I passed the tent where Stella Grady worked that she was billed for some sort of a specialty dance. Her leaving must have put you in a spot, didn't it?"

The carnival owner's eyes flashed momentarily, but to all other appearances the question had not disturbed him. "No," he said, "I just had one of the other girl's take her place."

"Oh. Well—thanks for the ten. I'll be sure and tell Stella about how

you were anxious to help her." Crusher wheeled about and left the tent. He strode straight to his roadster and drove to the Parkway Hotel.

THE PARKWAY was small, with a plain, unattractive lobby. Crusher stopped at the desk and spoke to the clerk. "Is there," he asked, "a Miss Stella Grady registered here?"

The clerk squinted behind shell-rimmed glasses. His voice sounded slightly astonished. "Yes, sir."

"How long has she been here?"

"Why—why she registered about ten minutes ago."

A thin smile curled Crusher O'Shea's lips. "Call her and tell her that O'Shea would like to see her a moment."

The clerk turned to the telephone. After an instant he glanced up. "It will be all right. She's in Room 312. Wait—I'll call a boy."

"Never mind. I'll find it."

When the tall blonde opened the door of 312, she was attired in a negligee of green silk. Her hair was brushed back from her forehead, and part of her face was covered with a white cream. In her left hand she held a bit of tissuelike paper which she had evidently been using to remove the cream.

She laughed lightly. "I'm afraid you've come at rather a bad moment. However, I'm glad you did come. After you'd left me here to-night, I remembered about my trunk being on the train, and I wanted you to get it for me. I called your residence telephone number, but couldn't get any answer."

"You haven't taken any chance of venturing out yourself?"

"Of course not. It would be too dangerous. I haven't dared leave

this room all evening—since you brought me, that is.”

“What about the trunk?”

“It’s at the train which is on a siding in the Eighteen-hundred block, Brown Street. If you go now, there won’t be anybody there but a watchman, and I’ll give you a note for him. Of course, I could have an express truck get it, but Jim Cowly might have one of his men watching the train, thinking I’d send for my trunk, and he’d follow the express truck right straight to me.

“You’re used to doing this sort of thing, probably. After you get the trunk, you can put it in the back of your roadster and make a lot of crazy turns and do back-tracking until you’re sure you’ve lost anybody who might be trailing you. Then, when it’s safe, you can come on here with it.”

The girl turned to the mirror and began wiping at the cream. “Why did you come here now?” She said it as though the thought had only occurred to her.

“I had something I wanted to talk over with you,” Crusher told her. He had remained standing just inside the door, his back to the wall. Suddenly his hand held an automatic. His voice was like the crack of a whip.

“The gentleman,” he said, “who is hiding in the bathroom, will please come out—his hands in the air.”

The blonde spun around, her breath slipping through her teeth in a startled gasp.

“What—what are you talking about?”

“About the man in the bathroom. When I entered this room I could detect a trace of cigar smoke. You’re not even smoking a cigarette. If he doesn’t come out by the time

I count three, I’m going in after him, and I’ll go in shooting. More than that—you’ll be walking in front of me.”

“You—you wouldn’t dare——”

The girl’s words trailed off as she gazed into Crusher O’Shea’s hard face. She turned toward the closed bathroom door. Her voice was very tight. “Please, Ed! Do as he says. For Heaven’s sake, do it!”

Crusher began counting. “One—two——”

The bathroom door opened and a short, thickset man with a broken nose walked out, his hands in the air.

“Lie down on the bed—face down—both of you,” Crusher instructed.

The girl said hotly: “What the hell are you trying to pull?”

Crusher O’Shea grinned at her. “You must have taken me for an awful sap, you and Manwell. Go on, get on the bed.”

The man offered no resistance as Crusher took a revolver from his pocket. “I thought this was a lousy play from the first,” he grumbled.

Crusher tied his wrists behind him, then bound his ankles. After that he turned to the girl, ripped more strips from a sheet and proceeded to bind her in the same manner as he had the man.

“The way it seems to me,” Crusher went on, “it was a mighty big surprise to Pete Manwell when I came on the hunt for Stella Grady. He didn’t know she’d managed to get a call through to me. However, when I did show up and made it apparent that I wasn’t intending to stop until I’d found the girl and discovered why she had called me, he left me standing in his tent while he came to you and explained to you that you were to impersonate Stella Grady for my benefit.

“That yarn about the three des-

perate gangsters was too thick to swallow, so I kept my eye on you. I followed you back to the carnival, and I saw you doing Stella Grady's dance. I talked to the ticket taker and made sure that you weren't Stella Grady."

Crusher finished tying the girl, stepped back and surveyed his work with a hard, critical eye.

"I knew Manwell had spirited Stella Grady away, but I didn't know where to. I told him I was coming back here to the hotel to see

you. That made him have to send you back in a hurry. I also told him I was going to send around a girl who knew Stella Grady. That put Manwell in a spot, and he had to get rid of me. I see he's chosen the show train for the place to do it, so it's a good guess that's where he's got the real Stella Grady."

"Don't be a fool!" the blond girl snapped, her words muffled by the fact that she was face-downward on the bed. "I'm Stella Grady."

Crusher didn't answer her. He



Crusher preferred to fight with his fists—that was more in his line—like wrestling.

took more strips from the sheet and fashioned gags for the girl and the man. When he had them in place, he went out, locked the door and went down the stairs.

THE EIGHT CARS used to transport the Manwell Greater Shows had been shunted to a siding which had originally been built for a factory that had long since ceased to function. The huge, brick buildings of the factory, windows broken, doors sagging on their hinges, formed a black and dismal alley on one side of the bright-yellow cars. The other side of the train showed its brilliant color to a deserted and dirty, unpaved street. Lights glowed behind drawn shades at the windows of one of the train's two passenger cars.

With no more sound than a shadow might have made, Crusher O'Shea moved along in that space between the train and the factory. His feet falling with the stealthy tread of a panther, he went by the seven dark cars until he came beneath a lighted window of the first car. The window was clear up, the shade drawn to within an inch of the bottom.

Crusher peered through the crack.

Pete Manwell, a butt of a cigar between his thick lips, sat on one seat and had his feet propped on the opposite one. His coat had been thrown open, exposing his ponderous, heavily muscled stomach and chest. He was talking to a tall, thin-faced, hard-looking man sitting across from him.

Without a sound, Crusher O'Shea turned from the window, walked with his easy, free-muscled tread around the end of the last car and approached the entrance. The steel door was closed, and he banged on it with his fist.

For a moment nothing happened, then the door was swung open and the tall, thin man confronted him.

"Well?" he asked.

"You're the watchman?"

"Yes."

"I came after a trunk belonging to a girl named Stella Grady," Crusher said. "I've got a note from her for you."

The thin man stepped aside. Crusher saw that the muscles around his mouth were twitching. "Come on in," the man said. "I'll get it."

Crusher nodded and followed him into the car and along the aisle between the plush-covered seats. His shoulders were hunched slightly forward. A thin smile was on his lips. It was a weird smile so oddly without humor that it was gruesome. His dark eyes were bits of flashing fire. Pete Manwell was not visible.

The thin man stopped suddenly and turned, pointing to a space between two seats. Then, as he spoke, he took a step to the side, so that Crusher was forced to turn almost completely around to see the place to which he pointed.

"Is this——" The man's words sounded oddly flat. He couldn't keep his eyes from darting up. Crusher O'Shea was watching those beady eyes like a hawk. As he saw them flicker, he spun and ducked.

A heavy blackjack fairly sizzled through the air, cutting the space where he had stood. Crusher's long, muscular fingers darted outward like the thrust of a serpent's tongue. The fingers wrapped about Pete Manwell's wrist and jerked downward.

Manwell screamed in pain. Surprise and anger made the sound a blubbering. Propelled by the force of those powerful fingers, coupled with the forward lunge he had made as he swung the blackjack, Manwell

crashed into the thin man, slamming him over the arm of a seat.

As Manwell spun around, recovering his balance, his right hand clutched at a holster beneath his coat. His left hand brought up the blackjack.

It was a case of a man attempting to do two things at once, and doing neither of them well. The blackjack was still ascending; the gun had not cleared the holster when Crusher O'Shea smashed a right to Manwell's jaw.

The carnival owner's head snapped back; his eyes glazed; his body went limp. He fell backward into the aisle.

The thin man struggled to his feet, his fingers pawing clumsily at his coat pocket where there was a suspicious bulge.

Still smiling, his eyes burning furiously, Crusher caught him up as would a bulldog catch a terrier, but still there was nothing awkward or misplaced about that hold, despite the speed of it. Too many years of experience in hand-to-hand conflict were behind Crusher O'Shea's movements. It was his game—and he was a master of it.

The thin man screamed as he felt himself lifted high into the air. He tried to beat at Crusher's face with his fists.

Crusher swung his head easily aside, lifted the man a little higher, and slammed him down. He landed squarely on top of the unconscious Manwell, flopped over against the edge of a seat and screamed again as he saw Crusher O'Shea take a step toward him.

"Where," Crusher asked, "is Stella Grady?"

The thin man's voice was a hoarse whisper. "She—she's in the next car."

"Get up," Crusher told him.

When the man had crawled to his feet, Crusher took the gun from his pocket and dropped it into his own pocket. He also removed the gun from Manwell's shoulder holster. "Catch hold of Manwell," he told the other, "and drag him inside that little closet at the end of the car. Then you go in after him."

Crusher stood where he was, his lips a tight, hard line, while the thin man complied. Then he strode to the closet, shut the door and turned the key in the lock.

STELLA GRADY was lying on the floor behind the last seat in the next car. Crusher had snapped on lights as he entered, and he found her there, securely tied hand and foot and gagged, an expression of utter hopelessness on her attractive features.

"I am Crusher O'Shea," the detective told her. He dropped to his knees, undid the ropes around her wrists and ankles, then removed the gag. He shook his head as words sprang to the girl's lips. They were broken, incoherent words of a relief so sudden and so poignant that she was on the verge of hysteria.

He helped her to her feet, then lifted her into his arms when he realized that the tight binding which had been around her ankles had left her legs, at the moment, like things of wood.

As he carried her from the train, she twisted her head so that she could look up into his face.

"How—how in the world did you manage to find me? How did you discover what was happening?" she asked.

Crusher O'Shea's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I would say," he told her, "that Pete Manwell tried to cut in on a muff dancer, and he muffed it."

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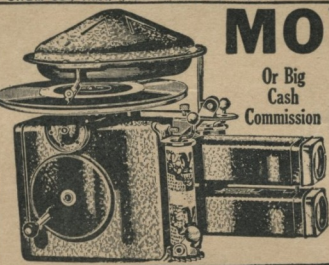


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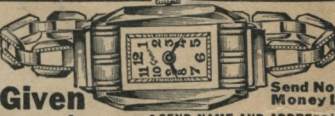
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