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CLUES

SEPT. 10
1939

DETECTIVE

STORIES

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HOUSE OF PLUNDER

complete mystery novel

THE BLACK WIDOW MURDERS

and other stories



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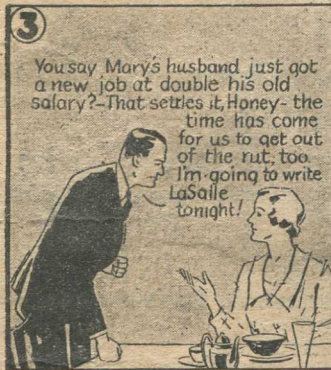


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STREET & SMITH'S

CLUES

DETECTIVE STORIES

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COVER BY MODEST STEIN

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THE STORY TRAIL

THERE is a story behind everything. The things and people you see today as established, definite parts of the community or the country, were at one time struggling for a beginning. Whether the beginning was as honest and upright as the current standing of the family or person is something else again. There are so many people, and so many groups, who cry righteousness to all the corners of the earth, and are really willing to put plenty behind their appeals, who might not be so loud in their proclamations of what is right and what is wrong if their own activities were fully traced.

In "House of Plunder," the book-length novel which starts on page 9, you have some idea of this. Today, the family is a name well established. Yesterday, however, the family name meant nothing more than a pirate, a freebooter, a soldier-of-fortune. That was the beginning of a great family, and the present head of the family was interested in getting as much factual information as possible on the early beginnings of his tribe. What might happen in a case like that? Almost anything; and almost anything did happen, as Edward Ronns so entertainingly points out in this complete novel. Start it right now, and think back on the possible color and excitement that may lie in your own family background.

"The Black Widow Murders," the Benton Braden novelette on page 59, is another of the Johnny Pike se-

ries that you readers have liked so well in the past. The Black Widow is the name of a deadly species of spider. Here, however, the Black Widow is the designation of a siren just as deadly, though much more beguiling. She spins her web just as effectively, just as fatally, as the deadliest of spiders—and her bite is just as deadly, for behind her is a scheme that is cunningly daring, and absolutely ruthless.

Let's take a look at what comes ahead. Our next issue will have a cover that will strike you as a real piece of art. It is done by Modest Stein, one of the best oil illustrators in the country, and its theme is the novelette "The Manchu Skull," by Emile C. Tepperman. Tepperman is a top-ranking mystery writer who will be a welcome addition to the list of Clues-Detective writers, and this particular novelette is really a fine piece of work, in every way matching the splendid cover painting. Its setting is in Chinatown; its characters a fine mixture of mystic Chinese, businesslike Americans, the left-handed swordsman, and a beautiful girl. Much is risked for the priceless jade skull; blood as red as the fiery rubies over which it is spilled flows—and over it all, the eerie menacing spell of Chinatown! If you want something to make you shiver, this is it!

Tepperman, incidentally, is a native New Yorker, and knows Chinatown inside, outside, and all around. He also knows how to weave a plot that keeps you interested, although perpetually puzzled as to the next possible move. Tepperman, for the summer months, lives some distance above New York City, on the banks of the Hudson River near West Point. Has two children, a

wife who helps check his material and also serves as idea-getter on research trips.

Another good yarn in the coming issue is "A Swing at Murder," by William G. Bogart. Suppose you were eating your dinner at a famous restaurant and murder popped up. And supposing you were a detective. You'd look into it. And you'd find that there were a dozen men there; eleven alive, and one dead. But there was one more plate set than there were diners—and no one would say who that extra diner was. Was he the killer? Why the murder? On the surface, it looks as mixed up as the letters in a bowl of alphabet soup—but in the end you'll find that this "Swing at Murder" was quite a trick.

The book-length novel will be "Death Comes at Night," by Carrington Phelps. Plenty of mystery, plenty of thrills. A young man; a beautiful girl in trouble; a moonlight night. Start of a romance—but, in this case, start of a line-up of murder and deviltry. Fredric Sinclair, Harold A. Davis, and others will add nice, fast-moving short mystery stories to give you a really well-balanced issue, so don't miss it.

"With Intent to Kill" is one of the best yarns that Fredric Sinclair has given us for quite a while, and you readers who have asked us for more and more of his material in the past will like it even better than usual. It's not just a short story, either; it's a complete novelette, long enough for you to put your teeth right into it and chew a while on the tense situations that pop up one after the other.

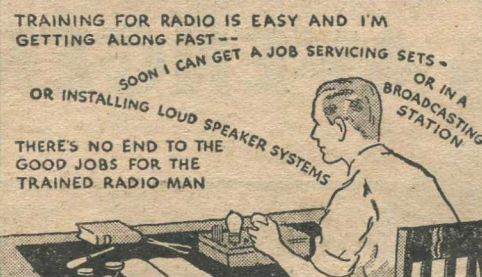
Our readers have recently shown a very decided interest in the things which are taking place in Clues-Detective Stories. A few of them have asked whether we care to have suggestions as to the kind of stories they would like to see, or criticism of stories as they appear. Why not? There are two ways to run a magazine. One is to select the material the editorial staff feels is what the public wants, and then keep pushing it out at the readers. Perhaps it is exactly what the public wants, and things go along nicely. But very often public taste changes, and if the magazine doesn't keep pace with its readers, it falls by the wayside. The other way is for the editors to give the readers the best material that can be gotten, and that agrees with what the readers want—to continually check up on the wishes of the readers, and give them new stuff even before they actually ask for it.

There are various ways of checking the pulse of the public, and all of them are being constantly used. But one of the best comes from the letters which readers send to the editor, expressing their likes and dislikes, and giving their suggestions. So, if you have any suggestions, if there is anything you would especially like to see in Clues-Detective Stories, tell us about it! We'll do our best to please you!

There are plenty of tricks which can be pulled with a telephone, especially phones of the dial type. Most of them, of course, are the schemes of people who have nothing more than malicious mischief in mind when they devise them, and it is only right that such things be given as little publicity as possible,

Continued on page 100

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!



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HOUSE OF PLUNDER



By EDWARD RONNS

PERRY WARREN, with fifteen cents in his pocket and high hopes in his heart, flicked his fingers to his hat brim in a wry gesture after the departing taxi and stared upward. From where he

stood on the curb, the building blocked out nine tenths of the blue, smiling sky. It was a huge, white building.

"Lucifer," Perry said, "here I come."

He pushed through the doors and took the first elevator to the tenth floor. Striding long-leggedly down the marble corridor, he wore twin frowns perched over blue eyes. His clothing was expensive, his hat jaunty. He kept jingling the nickel and the dime in his pocket. He was a tall, wide-shouldered young man with a pleasant, tanned face. Thick black hair threatened to merge with his brows, and lines of humor webbed from the corners of his eyes.

The outer office presented the contrast of glittering metal furniture with red-leather seats and a prim, gray-haired secretary dressed in severe black. Guarded by a highly polished chromium rail, she looked at Perry Warren through rimless spectacles and tightened her mouth in a faint pucker of disapproval.

"Mr. Panfield will see you immediately," she said. She seemed to resent Perry's easy entrance.

His first impression of Panfield's office was one of dusty gloom, again incongruous with the modern appointments outside. There was an immense roll-top desk huddled against one cold wall, and tattered law books on homemade shelves stood against the other wall. One solitary window, overlooking the sheds and piers of the Port of New Orleans, struggled against the beaming sunlight with all the dampening effect of a year's accumulation of rain spots. The window was closed tightly, like a trap, against the balmy air outside.

The little figure at the desk gradually became defined as the Panfield personage. His scalp was ridged, completely bald except for two tufts of gray hair that stood up over each pendulous ear. His eyes were a milky egg-white, sunk deep in wrinkled pouches. The mouth opened like an oyster shell to snap:

"Warren? Perry Warren?"

Perry nodded, suddenly mute.

"You received my letter?"

Perry nodded again. He handed the envelope to the shriveled little man. Panfield snapped it open and scanned it carefully. He made clicking sounds and then swiveled with a screech of dry bearings and waved a hand toward a chair.

"Sit down, Warren."

Perry's long figure folded abruptly into a chair. He balanced his hat on his knee. Panfield stared at him for a long minute, toying with an ivory-handled letter opener, adjusting an onxy inkwell, smoothing his palm over the stained green desk blotter. Finally he cleared his throat.

"You have been highly recommended to me as a capable young man I can trust."

Perry, feeling the lone nickel and dime in his pocket, nodded and said: "My time is valuable, Mr. Panfield. If you will get to the point."

PANFIELD coughed. He put on a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, lifted his chin sharply, and stared at Perry through the half moons at the bottom of the bifocals.

"Very well," he said. "How would you like to be an heir?"

"An heir?" Perry was startled.

"How would you like to be Neil Randolph, inheriting an estate of approximately a half million dollars?"

Perry Warren just stared. He knew his mouth was open, but he felt powerless to close it. He leaned forward sharply and crushed his hat in thin brown fingers.

"Don't kid me," he said.

"I assure you this is not a jest."

Perry said dryly: "But don't you think Neil Randolph might object? He might be just a little bit piqued."

"Neil Randolph is abroad. He doesn't know."

Perry stood up and put on his hat. He turned to the door and said: "Good day, Mr. Panfield."

"Wait!"

Perry stared evenly with blue eyes that had suddenly gone cold and lost their smile. "I may be hard up," he said softly, "but I'm not quite ready to work con schemes."

Panfield said impatiently: "You're hotheaded. 'I don't think you'll do at all— Sit down, damn you!'"

Perry took his hand from the knob and sat down.

"Tell me more," he suggested.

Panfield waved his hands, harassed. "It's complicated. Anthony Randolph was my friend—my very best friend. He died two days ago. As his attorney, I handled all his affairs, including his will, of course. He cut his wife out cold, together with a nephew. He left everything to Neil."

"That's nice for Neil."

"Listen. Tony Randolph was a fool in some respects, and now he is a dead fool." He paused, leaned over the desk. "I don't think he died a natural death."

Perry straightened slowly. His blue eyes were suddenly very bright. He said, gently: "Murdered?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"By whom? Why?"

"I can't say. I've kept my suspicions from the police because they are just that—suspicions, and no more. You are going to find out for me if I am correct; you are going to discover just what is taking place in that house. And it will be dangerous."

Perry shifted in his seat and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Why must I play-act the heir? What's the matter with Neil Randolph?"

"Neil is somewhere in South

America. It would take too long to locate him and bring him back. You need not worry about being recognized as an impostor. Neil Randolph ran away from home when he was fourteen, and no one in the house at present knew him then.

"It's a strange house, full of strange things. It's a house stuffed with the past. Next to Johnny Quitman and William Walker, the Randolphs were the worst of the old Southern filibusters during the wild years that followed the Civil War. The house is steeped in the filibuster tradition. Old Jonathan Randolph made the family fortune in the '70s out of freebooting and what today would be regarded as out-and-out piracy. But you'll learn all that.

"The people in the house are like sticks of dynamite. I want you to particularly watch a man named Meguera—Señor Meguera, an ex-representative from a Central American country. He was closing some sort of a deal with Tony Randolph when Tony suddenly died. He is still a guest in the house. Then there is also an Englishman, Ian Mitchell. And Carol, the widow, won't be easy to handle. You'll meet them all, as Neil Randolph, the estranged returning heir. I'm hoping that your sudden arrival will act as a lighted fuse on these people and bring some facts to light. Things will happen. Dangerous things! It won't be a picnic, young man."

Perry Warren's eyes went sleepy. He brushed his thick black hair from his inch-high brow.

"It sounds real cute," he murmured.

"Then you'll take the job. I need not remind you that it is a position of utmost trust. And if Tony Randolph was really murdered, as I suspect, you will be in danger of your

life from the moment you arrive—So—you will impersonate Neil Randolph for me?”

Perry said: “I’ll try.”

“Trying is no good,” Panfield snapped. “One murder is one too many. You’ve got to succeed—or else. Your pay will be one hundred dollars a day.”

SUCCEED—or be murdered, Perry reflected. It was a crazy proposition, playing proxy for an heir. He studied Panfield’s thin, wrinkled face. The little bald-headed man was sincere and in earnest. He believed in what he said. And beggars, Perry remembered, couldn’t be choosers. He fingered the fifteen cents in his pocket and thought of his little law practice and the empty days, waiting for clients.

He nodded soberly. “It’s a bargain,” he said. “But how many people will know that I’m really not Neil?”

“Just myself. If it were known, the plan wouldn’t work. Whatever is going on down there will come to the surface when you arrive to take over. I’m sure of it.”

Panfield searched a desk drawer and came up with two sealed envelopes. He tossed them over to Perry.

“These are your credentials and the combination to the house safe. You will go down at once, of course—as Neil Randolph. The sooner the better. I’ll come down myself tomorrow morning. I’ve got your tickets to Mercerville, all bought and paid for. I’ve notified Miss Lucy Wayne, Randolph’s secretary, that you are coming. She’ll send a car for you.” Panfield stood up. For the first time he smiled, baring mathematically-even teeth. “And good luck—Neil.”

Perry took his skinny hand and

shook it carefully. He said: “I’ll probably need it.”

CHAPTER II.

DEAD DOG.

MERCERVILLE was dismal with rain. Perry Warren stood on the sagging platform and watched the ancient locomotive move like a prehistoric monster into the gathering gloom. Shrugging in his light-silk trench coat, he pulled down the brim of his hat and picked up his two suitcases. They were both new and shiny and filled with equally new clothing. The street before him was a crooked alley of mud between dim, frame houses that were built on stilts. The air was warm, the prevailing southerly Gulf wind bringing with it thick rain and a suffocating sense of oppression.

There was no car waiting for him.

Perry glanced at his watch, squinting in the premature gloom. He swore softly. Stepping from the platform, he went up the grass-grown sidewalk toward the only light that shown in Mercerville, over a rickety sign that swung in the wind. Amideo’s. A black coupé was parked in the rain here. Perry opened the door of the house and walked in.

The place was a combination general store, tavern and hotel. It smelled of shrimp and lobster. There was a smooth, black counter, a few marble-topped tables and chairs. A notice tacked up over a series of wooden mailboxes announced that rooms might be had for fifty cents a night. There were two men and a dog inside.

Perry said to the man behind the counter: “I’m Neil Randolph. There’s supposed to be a car waiting for me.”

The man said: “Neil, huh? Hi.”

He was short and squat and very dark of skin. His face was gross, and even his hair, sleek and white, added no distinction to his features. He wore blue overalls over a checked shirt. He studied Perry's figure carefully. "You been gone a long time. You're growed up."

"Ten years," said Perry. "About the car—"

"There ain't been no car—has there, mister?"

The man at the table shook his head and said: "Call this coffee, you damn guinea? It's slop! You don't know how to make coffee."

He was well dressed, with a thick, solid chest and narrow hips and very long arms. He had a saddle nose. His eyes were gray, his hair an indeterminate color. He kicked at the dog scuffling around his feet and said:

"There's been no car, Mr. Randolph. That's mine, outside. It'll drown if this squall doesn't let up."

The white-haired man with the gross face said: "You want some coffee while you wait, Neil?"

Perry nodded. The saddle nose was alternately shoving the yellow-haired dog away with his feet and complaining bitterly about the coffee. His eyes, Perry noticed, were fixed on the dark rectangle of a doorway beside the counter. The gross man took time to roll a dispirited cigarette and then sauntered into the darkened room. Perry got the impression of the sound of rain momentarily increasing. A light bloomed in the doorway and revealed a segment of the kitchen and a coffee urn. Presently the dark-faced man came back with a thick cup and put it down on the table.

The saddle nose said: "Don't drink it, Mr. Randolph. It's mud."

The proprietor said tiredly: "You

gotta nerve, mister. Scarin' my customers away."

"It's still mud."

There came a low, vicious snarl from under the table. The saddle nose cursed explosively and stood up and kicked at the dog. It backed away, still snarling. The saddle nose picked up Perry's coffee cup and poured some of the steaming liquid into a saucer. He said:

"There's only one living thing I'd feed this stuff to, and that's Fido."

He put the saucer down on the floor, near Perry's table. The yellow-haired dog was suspicious. It edged closer and didn't approach the saucer until the saddle nose sat down again. The man stared morosely and said to Perry: "Four-to-one it kills him."

The dog took a chance. Its hackles subsided and its tail came out from between its legs. It sniffed at the saucer gingerly and stepped away. The saddle nose made a gurgling sound.

"Even he won't touch it."

He was wrong, however. The dog came back again, sniffed, stuck out a red tongue and lapped at the steaming brown liquid. He seemed to like it. He lifted his head and stared at Perry.

What followed was startling. The yellow dog backed up, suddenly stiff-legged. The head came up and emitted a long, melancholy howl. Then it lay down on its side and rolled. It rolled over and over, under the tables, and Perry hastily got to his feet, out of the way. His face was pale. The dog came up against the far wall with a dull thud and twitched a moment, then its legs slowly stiffened.

THERE was no sound except for the sibilant hiss of the rain outside.

The saddle nose moved forward and touched the dog.

"See?" he said glumly.

The proprietor's mouth hung open. He whispered: "*Maria!* It *did* kill him!"

The saddle nose broke the silence. He touched Perry's arm and said: "Let's look."

Perry suppressed a shiver and nodded. The kitchen was dirty, the walls painted yellow. There were rotogravure pictures pasted around. The top of the big coffee urn was off, and on the shelf above it, a red can was tilted on its side, the lip jutting over the edge of the shelf.

The saddle nose said: "There are a lot of rats around here."

The proprietor said shakily: "Is the poison! Is kept for the rats. Big ones, they are. So big!" He gestured with his hands. "I'm sorry, Mr. Randolph. So sorry! It was an accident." He stopped and mopped his face with a big red handkerchief. He crossed himself.

The saddle nose stared unwinkingly at Perry. "I didn't mean that kind of rat, Amideo— Let's look outside, Mr. Randolph."

Perry followed him through the back door and stood on the porch. His hands were shaking. He put them in his pockets and stared into the gloom. The rain made driving curtains of wetness against the thick vegetation in the background, hissing and crackling and spilling down the roof of the porch. Perry shivered again.

The man with the saddle nose said: "It's no use. He's gone."

"Who?"

"Whoever put the poison in your coffee."

Perry said slowly: "You think it was deliberate?"

"I was watching the kitchen. Somebody was moving around in

there. He went out just before Amideo went in to pour your coffee. And my coffee wasn't poisoned, even if it did taste bad."

"Then you gave mine to the dog—to test it?"

The saddle nose shrugged. He stared at Perry, then looked away again, into the teeming wetness beyond the porch. He took a gun from his pocket, absently polishing the barrel with his palm. It was a big gun, a heavy automatic, gleaming blue in the light from the open doorway behind them.

"You ought to have one of these."

Perry said: "I do: In my suitcase."

The saddle nose said: "It won't do you any good in there." He put the gun away. "Guess he's gone, whoever he is."

Perry stood a moment after the man turned away. His fists were clenched tightly in his pockets and his wrists ached, but the faint shiver traveled up his arm to his shoulders. If the dead dog and the absent car meant a deliberate attempt to keep him from the Randolph house, then there was all the more reason for getting there tonight.

Turning abruptly, he went back through the kitchen. Amideo was sorrowfully cleaning the coffee urn. He started to explain about the rats once more, and Perry shut him up with a wave of his hand and entered the front room. The saddle nose was putting on a soggy slouch hat.

Perry said: "Wait a minute!"

The stocky man paused. He had a toothpick between thin lips and his gray eyes examined Perry lidlessly.

Perry said: "How about giving me a lift to the Randolph place? Do you know where it is?"

"All right." The man's voice was flat, toneless. "Come along." He



*Mitchell grabbed Carol by the shoulders, forced her back.
"If you double-cross me, I'll kill you!" he said.*

announced abruptly. "I'm Cas Laramie. I'm working this territory."

THERE was little time for more talk. They were out in the rain and wind and darkness once more. Perry slid inside the coupé and Laramie switched on the lights. The dash light outlined the solid lines of the man's jaw and exaggerated his curiously shaped nose. Laramie dropped something heavy in Perry's lap.

"Just in case. Hang onto it until we get there."

It was the big automatic.

Perry said: "Thanks," automatically, and peered through the arc cleared by the windshield wiper. Twin red eyes winked at him from far up the road.

"There's a car up ahead," he said.

Laramie nodded. He was a good driver. The road was wide, a generous double lane of smooth concrete on a causeway raised above the surrounding mainland. It went inland straight as an arrow, cutting through dark, vine-covered cypress swamp and tidewater bayous. The rain lessened as suddenly as it had begun.

In ten minutes Laramie said: "The car's gone."

Another ten minutes, and Laramie swung the car abruptly into a dirt side road that the rain had converted into a trough of mud. The rear wheels spun with a high, protesting whine. The saddle nose swore softly and threw the car into reverse, and the coupé lurched backward onto the concrete once more.

"You'll have to walk the rest of it."

Perry returned his gun. He picked up his two suitcases and got out on the road and stared ahead. Lights gleamed from a dark, bulking house behind a stone wall.

Laramie called: "Take care of yourself, Mr. Randolph."

The coupé's motor roared, the car swung in a hard U-turn and headed back to Mercerville. Perry stared after it, rain making soft pattering sounds on his shoulders. Then, shrugging, he hiked up the muddy road toward the Randolph house.

CHAPTER III.

GIRL WITH A GUN.

THE sand section of the road lasted only a few yards; after that, it was gravel. It curved sharply to the right after entering the grounds and made a wide loop between dark, waving oleander bushes. Perry followed it, ignoring a flagstone walk that led to the white-pillared front porch and the big door.

The drive swung to the back of the house and a large, detached garage. Perry put down his suitcases and tried the door. It was unlocked. It swung inward with a thin creak of hinges, and the smell of gasoline and exhaust mingled with the wet scent of magnolias nearby.

Perry stepped silently into the darkness. There were three cars here: a large Lincoln sedan, a convertible and a roadster. He went around to each one, feeling the radiator shells. The convertible's hood was warm. His hand came away wet from the metal.

Swearing softly, he started for the garage door.

A girl's voice said tightly: "Would you mind—not turning?"

He swung around anyway. She stood in the doorway, a small figure in a loosely wrapped coat. She wore no hat. Her hair was dark and damp, curling about her face. Her eyes were wide, deep blue, fixed on Perry's lighter ones. She held

a flashlight in one hand and a gun in the other.

It was a curious little gun. A double-barreled derringer, with an ornate, silver-mounted frame. Her fingers were white around the trigger.

The girl's breath sounded sharp and thin as he faced her.

"You're carless," she breathed. "I almost—fired."

"You wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"You're not the kind of girl who goes around shooting people they don't know. Or any people, for that matter."

He stared at her damp, loose hair, then at her legs. They were nice legs. Her silk stockings were wet. She had been out in the rain. Perry wondered if she'd been driving the car that preceded him from Mercerville; and he began to dislike his job. Staring aside from the blazing eye of the flashlight, he said: "You must be Lucy Wayne, the secretary."

She nodded silently.

Perry eyed the curious little derringer in her hand. "I'm Neil Randolph."

"Yes?" she said. Her voice was tight. Too tight. She was jittery. Her eyes were too wide, weighing him too desperately. There was fear in the deep blue under the girl's dark lashes. "Do you always enter by the back door?" she asked.

"It's a policy of mine. Sometimes you avoid people with guns."

Her red lips twitched in a faint, reluctant smile. "You don't look like . . . like I expected."

"What did you expect?" he demanded.

Faint pink flushed her cheeks under his direct, sober gaze. "Neil had a . . . a reputation for—"

"You expected to see a walking wreck, eh?"

"Well—yes." Her voice was defensive.

Perry said: "Well, I'm not. Now put away that gun and show me into the house. I'd like to look it over."

The faint smile left her lips abruptly at the tone of proprietorship in his voice. Her eyes looked hostile. But she lowered the gun. Perry stepped swiftly forward and took it from her cold fingers and weighed it in his palm.

"Where on earth did you get this thing?"

"The house is full of them. They are mounted on all the walls."

Perry said dryly: "Nice house." He tried to catch her glance again, but she wouldn't look at him. He said suddenly: "You forgot to send the car for me."

"Did I? I didn't know you were coming."

"Didn't you get Panfield's wire?"

"No."

"Well, somebody did."

"I . . . I don't understand."

Perry said softly: "Somebody from this house took the convertible and drove to Mercerville and dumped poison in Amideo's coffee-pot."

The girl's face went white. She dropped the flashlight, and the glass lens broke with a sharp tinkle, plunging the garage into darkness. Perry stepped forward and took her arm. She was trembling.

"I don't believe it," she whispered. "No one here would do such a thing!"

Perry said harshly: "They resent my coming back, don't they?"

"Yes, naturally. But—poison!"

"It missed fire," Perry said.

The girl led him into the house through a side door, walking with quick, light steps down the corridor.

Perry had ample time to verify the girl's statement about the guns. Even in this apparently little-used entrance, there were deep-stained mahogany boards with antique flintlocks mounted on either side. The house was utterly silent, save for a steady drip-drip of rain water from a gutter somewhere. There was a faint, sweet scent of Cuban tobacco in the air.

Lucy Wayne paused inside a small sitting room with a huge bay window and took his hat and trench coat with a faint apologetic smile.

"The servants are all off to a carnival down the coast," she explained. "You'd better stay here while I see where everyone is."

Perry nodded agreeably and folded his long frame in a wing-back chair. His eyes left the girl and drifted over the room with a lazy sense of distant interest.

LUCY glanced at him once and then went down the hall to the ell and turned to the right. The corridor here was in darkness. She dropped Perry's hat and coat in a heavily carved walnut chair and paused a moment at the second door and looked back.

The hall was empty. She pressed her hand to her throat, aware that her breath was coming in quick, short gasps; her fingers trembled as they reached for the knob.

"Poison, poison!" her mind whispered frantically.

The study was in darkness. She closed the door before putting on the light and listened again. There was no sound. Walking across the floor, she snapped on a green-shaded lamp that stood on a library table and made a complete turn, surveying every corner of the study. It was a comfortable room, with solid comfortable furniture. As in all

the other rooms in the house, there was a portrait of old Jonathan Randolph on the wall, in a small oval frame hanging between double pairs of crossed sabers. The face was stern, grimly forbidding; the eyes were cold as they stared down at her. The girl shivered a little and crossed to the picture; took it down. The gleaming metal eye of a safe winked at her.

Her movements were hurried as she worked the combination. Occasionally she stopped to listen or to stare at the door. She gasped with relief as the safe swung open. There was a lot of cash inside, bundles of currency. She paid no attention to it. She burrowed behind the money to extract a small, tooled-leather folder. She opened this and took out a faded scrap of yellow paper.

There were crude markings on the paper, in the semblance of a map. One edge was jagged and torn. Lucy replaced the leather folder and carefully folded the fragile paper, then closed the safe door.

The corridor was still silent, crowded with crouching gray shadows. Lucy closed the study door carefully and went down the hall, but she didn't return to where she had left Perry Warren. She went up the back flight of stairs, annoyed at the trembling of her legs and the way her knees seemed to have turned to jelly. She paused at the head of the second floor corridor. There was just the tap-tap of expiring rain and her quick, nervous breathing. She wished her heart would stop beating so fast.

In her room she turned swiftly to the dresser, took a large bottle of green-tinted bath salts and emptied half its contents in a tray. Then she placed the folded paper inside

the bottle and replaced the green crystals. She arranged it so that the paper was completely hidden inside the bottle. That done, she gave a quick sigh of relief, went downstairs, hung up Perry Warren's hat and coat in a hall closet, and returned to the tiny sitting room.

The tall, lean young man was still sitting where she had left him. A quizzical smile touched his lips as he watched her enter.

"You've been running," Perry said.

"No, I haven't."

"Your face is flushed. It looks quite attractive."

Lucy felt a swift tinge of annoyance, and his mocking little smile disturbed her strangely.

She said quickly: "We'll probably find everybody in the library."

CHAPTER IV.

THE LIGHTED FUSE.

AN hour later Perry Warren stood with his back to the big stone mantel in the library and said: "Well?"

He looked very tall, peculiarly dominant, half the room cast into a flickering shadow by the fire behind him. His pale, blue-gray eyes flicked lazily over the people in the room.

It was a vast room, the walls burdened with memories. There were oil portraits of all the Randolphs, dating back to an era when the Louisiana Territory was almost equal to the combined area of all the rest of what was then the United States. Dominating the group of paintings was a huge portrait of old Jonathan Randolph, the founder of the family fortune, in a massive gilt frame overhanging the white mantel. The free spaces on the walls were decorated with a formidable

array of weapons: an old Sharps .45 rifle, two Sniders, an old, remodeled Enfield, bits of spars from the privateer *Jonathan R.*, derringers, muskets, lariats, and even a saddle, mounted with gleaming silver.

There were four people in the room, besides himself and the girl, Lucy Wayne. On a green couch to Perry's right, sat Carol, the widow—a tall blonde girl with a ripe-red mouth and faintly slanted green eyes and pale, creamy skin. Her lips were slightly parted. Her eyes never left Perry's tall, somehow oppressive figure.

Seated on an arm of the lounge was the Englishman, Ian Mitchell. He was a very big man, in rough tweeds and slacks and a yellow polo shirt open at the throat. He had his arm on the back of the couch, his fingers curled about Carol's shoulder. Perry's mouth twitched a bit, and he turned to the yellow-haired nephew, young Lloyd. A thin, young man with red cheeks and pale, weak eyes and a sagging mouth. His eyes never came away from the blond woman.

In a dark shadowed corner sat the Central American, Meguera. He was smoking Cuban cigarettes endlessly, filling the air with their sweet, heavy scent. His thin brown lips were curled in a faint smile; his dark, impassive eyes under heavy lids regarded Perry Warren's figure with detached amusement. He had a long narrow head, little ears that gave him a hard, predatory appearance. Perry quickly sized up Señor Meguera as the toughest of his customers.

Tension coiled tightly in the big room. He spread his feet a little on the brown bearskin rug and said again: "Well? Whose convertible is it?"

"Mine." Lloyd jerked his weak

eyes from the blond woman and stared at Perry without interest. He blurted: "Why?"

"Did you drive it tonight?"

"I? No! It hasn't been out of the garage."

"But it has. Someone used it. I'd like to know who."

The yellow-haired boy said truculently: "The car is mine. It doesn't matter to you if anyone used it."

"It does matter. I want to know who left the house tonight and drove to Mercerville."

There was no answer. Carol leaned slowly forward and rested her chin on the heel of her hand, stared steadily into the fire with bright-emerald eyes. Ian Mitchell stirred restlessly.

From the shadowed corner came Meguera's soft, liquid voice, speaking with a faint Western accent: "I believe Miss Wayne went out for a while."

Lucy said quickly: "That was just now—I told you. I thought I saw someone on the grounds."

Carol suddenly lifted her head and challenged Perry Warren. "I fail to see the reason for all these stupid questions. Your manner, to say the least, is—"

"Unpleasant?" Perry interrupted. His glance drifted to Lucy Wayne, in the background. He smiled faintly. "Well, I feel unpleasant. So would you, if someone just tried to poison you."

His voice was soft, pitched low, but it had an explosive effect. Lloyd's red cheeks turned darker, flushing furiously. Carol paled and touched her full lower lip with a coral-tipped finger. Mitchell stared at his hands with sudden interest. Meguera smiled.

Perry glanced once more at Lucy. She was watching Lloyd, trying des-

perately to meet his eyes, and failing.

It was curious, Perry thought, that no one asked for details. It was almost as though they didn't care—the attempt having failed.

Carol broke the humming tension.

She said shrilly: "It's a lie! You are simply looking for an excuse to put us out! You—"

Ian Mitchell said tiredly: "Oh, Carol."

Perry decided to drop his first bombshell. He stared at the blond woman, his face expressionless, and said softly:

"Perhaps I will!"

MEGUERA caught up with Perry at the foot of the main staircase. The dark man was still smiling. He made a tall, elegant figure in his dark-blue cheviot; his little hairline mustache followed the upward curve of his brown lips.

He said: "Mr. Randolph—if I may speak with you a moment."

Perry turned. "Well?"

The dark man spread his slender white hands. "In private," he said. "In here." He threw open the door to the study.

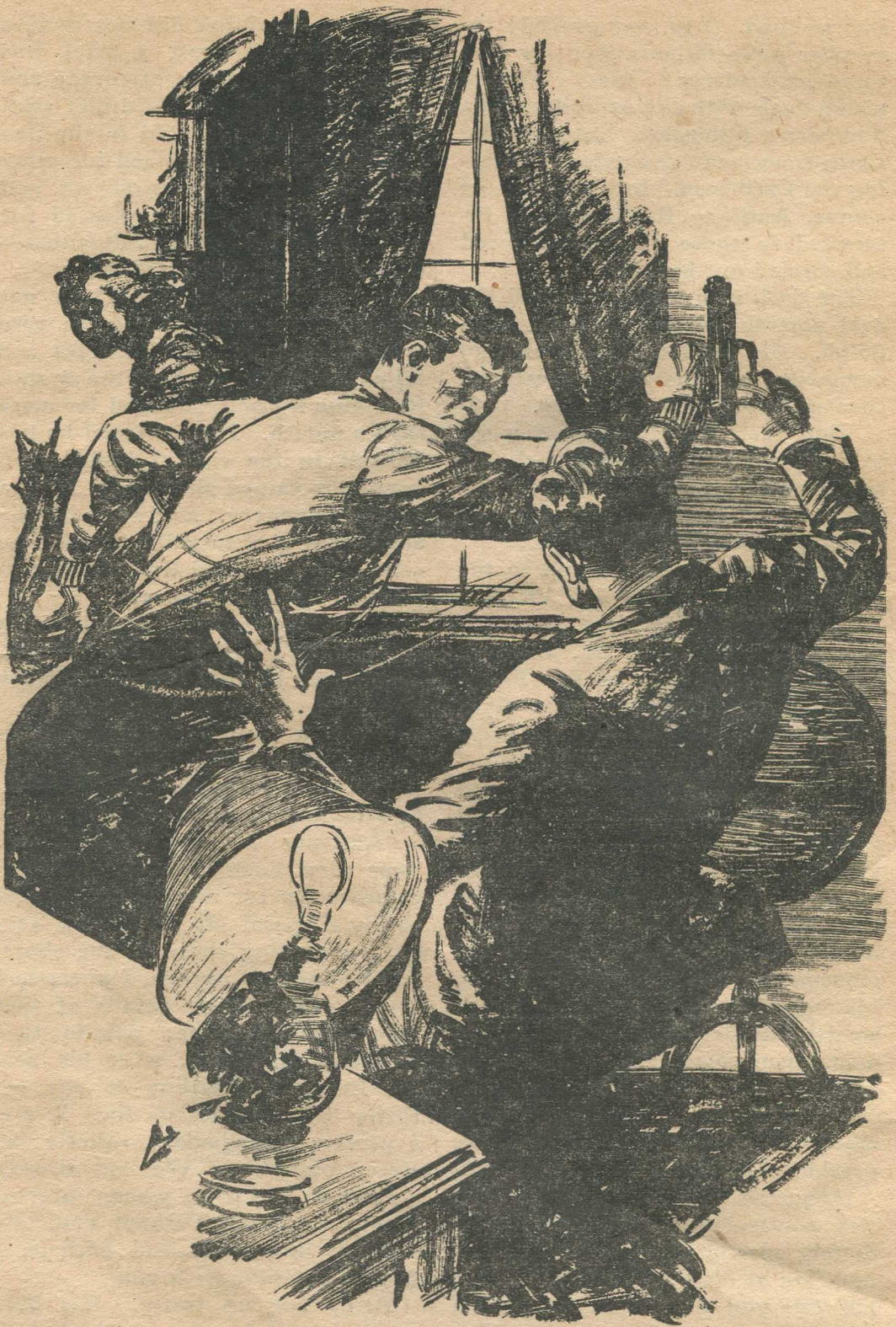
Perry followed him in, selected a seat and sank into it. Meguera rested on a corner of the heavy table and slowly tapped a cigarette on one polished fingernail.

"It is rather delicate—so soon upon your arrival. But your attitude with Mrs. Randolph decides me that you are a man who faces facts without undue sentimentalism. Frankly, I wish to talk business with you. My time—"

"Go ahead," Perry invited.

The man's dark eyes lingered on Perry's lounging figure, then dropped to the thick cigarette in his fingers.

"My business was with Tony be-



Perry lashed out with his fist. His knuckles cracked on something in the man's hand. A gun!

fore he died. You may possibly remember your father's flair for history—particularly that history which deals with the exploits of the Southern filibusters among the Latin-American countries bordering the Caribbean. In particular, of course, Anthony Randolph was interested in those exploits financed and carried out by—him."

The dark man nodded toward the oval portrait of old Jonathan Randolph. His hooded eyes dwelt momentarily on the stern features, then switched back to Perry.

"One such expedition was made to my own country—San Felize—shortly after your Civil War. Perhaps you would like to hear of it."

Perry nodded, said: "Go on."

"Jonathan's adventure was on the same order as those of William Walker, the Californian. His privateer, the *Jonathan R.*, dropped anchor in the harbor of San Felize one day in May, more than sixty years ago, and disembarked a force of about one hundred Americans—mostly young men from ruined Southern families. They were all well armed. They seized two coast towns within a week, marching along the beach, and stirred the natives to revolution. Jonathan Randolph, of course, was head of the movement. Within another week, his ragged force, with its nucleus of smartly trained, hot-blooded young men, penetrated the jungle and reached the capital. The battle there lasted two days, and when it was over Jonathan Randolph was president of San Felize."

Meguera's thin lips curled with wry amusement. "Jonathan immediately opened negotiations for recognition of his government. I need not tell you that there was much hue and cry raised here, condemning his action. But in those days—

Jonathan Randolph did not receive recognition. Indeed, a trial was held here on charges of piracy and deliberate plunder. He didn't care. He confiscated the gold in the San Felize treasury, organized his army with his young men as officers, and ran the country as he pleased for more than six months. After that—there was counterrevolution.

"Exactly what happened is not quite clear. Randolph's forces were crushed, and those who were not killed were sent back to the States. Randolph himself vanished for more than a month. It is believed he hid himself in the coastal jungle, and how he remained alive while hunted is still a mystery. But when he disappeared—to eventually return here—he took with him the contents of the San Felize treasury."

Perry interrupted: "I fail to see why you're telling me all this. I'm sure it can be found in any history book."

Meguera smiled and waved his very white hand. His brown eyes under their sleepy lids seemed to be laughing at Perry.

"Anthony Randolph," he said, "was very much interested. As an ex-secretary for my country, I had at my disposal all the official records, including those of the short-lived Randolph régime. I unearthed some very amazing details of that long-forgotten time; details that Anthony Randolph, with his zeal for facts, was willing to pay me thirty thousand dollars for. It was a private arrangement, strictly between ourselves. We had already agreed on the price when, unfortunately, he died. Perhaps you, too, will be interested—and perhaps I can do business with you."

Perry got up lazily. His blue eyes were hard under his thick dark brows, meeting Meguera's squarely.

"I am sure," he said bluntly, "that you won't."

Meguera's dark brown face turned several shades darker. He dropped his cigarette and took a long time to pick it up. He was smiling again when he straightened and faced Perry with an expressive little shrug of his immaculately tailored shoulders. His brown eyes were veiled, hooded under his sleepy lids.

He said softly: "Perhaps you will change your mind, young Neil," and went out.

Perry, staring at the empty doorway, felt a chill despite himself. He considered the people he had just met: Lloyd's young, embarrassed jitters—dangerous; Mitchell's big surliness—a powerful man; Carol's shrill cheapness; and Meguera.

Of them all, he disliked Meguera's slow smile the most.

He paused, took a handkerchief and slowly patted his inch-high brow. He thought of Panfield's expression, and reflected somewhat ruefully that he was lighting the fuse with a vengeance.

CHAPTER V.

MESSAGE IN SCARLET.

THE clock at the head of the stairs bonged eleven times, slowly. Light from the dim little ceiling-bulb spun and danced on the sedately swinging pendulum. Mitchell, leaning his heavy shoulders against the wall across from it, watched the sheen of the little brass arc absently.

The house was silent again. The squall had passed and become just a memory, kept alive by the tapping of rain water as it gurgled along the drains. From the close-pressing swamp came a miscellany of night sounds; the frogs and the owls

were busy letting the ragged moon know they were alive.

Mitchell stirred, moving with a swift, catlike grace for a man of his size. His broad sunburned face was taut. Pausing at the door at the end of the corridor, he knocked, very softly.

"Carol," he whispered.

He waited, eying the empty gloom of the corridor. He felt the door open silently behind him, and a hand touched his arm. He stepped backward into the room, his glance never leaving the hall shadows until he closed the door and turned to face the woman.

She wore a negligee of thick, yellow silk with a silver dragon embroidered on her breast. Her oval face was pale, her lips a red gash against the chalky whiteness of her skin. Her body swayed toward him like a long-stemmed flower.

"You're a fool, Ian."

Mitchell said softly: "I had to see you. How did it go?"

"All right."

"He'll do it?"

Carol smiled and touched Mitchell's face with her cool palm. "Of course, he'll do it. Wouldn't you, if I asked you?"

Mitchell just stared at her. His throat hurt. He spoke hoarsely: "Damn you, I think you enjoyed it. You weren't acting with him."

"Ian—"

His fingers dug with sudden cruelty into her soft shoulders. He forced her back until he was bending over her.

"If you double-cross me, I'll kill you." His whisper cut across her face like a white-hot brand. "Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

The big man released her. Carol sank back, her breath coming in long

gasps. She sobbed: "You fool . . . you fool."

Mitchell's broad face contorted. "This Neil—you said he was a weakling. You lied to me."

"No, I didn't! I didn't know! I only knew what Tony used to tell me—"

He clapped his hand over her mouth. "Lower your voice! He isn't like his father. He's clever."

"Yes!"

"He's dangerous. You'll have to step lightly. Do you understand?"

The smile on the woman's face was suddenly crooked. "I understand. You'd better go, Ian."

Mitchell hesitated. His pale gray eyes swept her from head to foot, and then with a sudden shrug he turned and left the room.

THE corridor was still empty. The clock's pendulum still swung tirelessly in its little glass case. It was ten after eleven. Mitchell leaned over the stair well and listened, his big hands gripping the rail. There was a low light on downstairs, in the front part of the house. Cursing softly, he started down the steps, his crêpe-soled shoes making no noise.

Señor José Meguera was in the study. The dark man was sitting in a deep, fat-cushioned chair, his slender figure lost in the shadows. The air was thick and sweet with his cigarette smoke. Occasionally a spot of red glowed in the darkness and brought to life thin brown lips and mustache and fragile chin against the black.

Mitchell stood in the doorway and said abruptly: "Coming to bed?"

Meguera's cigarette moved with a short jerk of surprise, then in a long arc as he crushed it out in a tray.

"Presently."

Mitchell hesitated, and Meguera's laugh came in low, liquid tones through the darkness.

"Even you do not trust me, eh?"

The big man said "No!" bluntly.

Meguera said: "Very well." He stood up, crossed the room like a tall, slender shadow, and paused by the wall. "It is a good, strong safe, Mitchell."

"Yes?"

"Very strong. One would need the combination to open it noiselessly. Good night, Mitchell."

The big man took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his lips.

"Good night."

PERRY WARREN stepped through the doorway from the bathroom to his bedroom in time to see his hall door swinging softly shut. In the moment that he paused in surprise, the latch caught with an inaudible click and the door was closed. It was more like the memory of movement than movement itself.

He crossed the room with three long-legged strides, tossing the towel on the bed as he went. He yanked at the door, stepped out into the corridor. There was nothing there. Nobody. Or perhaps the shadows hid someone; he wasn't sure. He wasn't even sure that he had seen the door move—until he turned back into his room.

Bright-red lettering was penciled on the mirror over the dresser. It was a blue, circular mirror, and when he snapped on the wall lights on either side of it, the lettering deepened to rich purple. The clumsily blocked letters read:

I know who you are not.

Breath eased softly from between Perry's lips. He stared at the mes-

sage a long time. A chill settled on the nape of his neck, and his stomach squeezed itself into a hard, tight knot. He bent forward and carefully touched some of the red stuff, then sniffed at it. It had an indefinable perfume. He tasted it. Cherry. He stepped back, frowning.

He murmured incredulously: "Lipstick!"

He shook his head with puzzlement. Someone knew that he was not Neil Randolph, that he was an impostor. But who? And why keep the knowledge from the others? Staring at the red, silent letters, he felt uneasiness crawl around inside him.

He said again, "Lipstick!" and then went back to the bathroom. He returned in a moment with a wet washrag and set to work on the mirror. He had the red letters erased in a moment. Then he remained standing and staring at the mirror, his brow corrugated in a frown. Straightening, he pulled on a dark sweater over his naked chest, slid his feet into canvas shoes and silently padded from his room.

Voices drifted up the stairwell from the ground floor, Perry stood listening, but distinguished only the tone of Meguera's suave speech and then Ian Mitchell's clipped words. He flattened against the dark wall as footsteps came up the steps. The Latin-American passed within a yard of him, smiling faintly, his thin brown lips curling at the corners. His little ears and long narrow head gave him a wolfish appearance.

Mitchell followed. Perry remained hidden, watching the meaty-shouldered Englishman. The big man walked catlike down to the end of the corridor, tapped softly, and waited. There was a sudden flash of white, a glimpse of Carol's yel-

low negligee, and then darkness folded in about the hall.

Shrugging, Perry crossed the corridor and tried Lucy Wayne's door. It opened at his touch and he stepped inside.

The room was large, with two huge windows that reached within a foot of the floor. There was a large straw rug, two wicker chairs with bright-flowered cushions on them, a bed without head or footboards, and a dresser of bleached mahogany.

The room was empty; Lucy wasn't there.

"Bunch of insomniacs," Perry muttered.

A soft, pink-shaded lamp was alight over a small desk. A wastebasket stood on the floor in the circle of brightness. Perry crossed the room toward it, picked it up and delved into the crumpled little balls of paper inside. He fished out a wrinkled telegram form. His blue eyes expressionless, he smoothed it out and held it under the little pink lamp.

The message was from Panfield, addressed to Lucy Wayne. Scanning it, Perry's mouth went bitter. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror, and his eyes were shocked. The girl had lied to him. She had known he was coming—And Panfield had simply announced him as "Neil Randolph." Whoever had written on the mirror hadn't gotten the knowledge that he was an impostor from the little old lawyer.

Lucy's purse lay on the dresser. He turned toward it suddenly, stuffing the telegram in his pocket. He took from the purse an assortment of small bills and coins and keys, a gold pencil, and a note that began, "Lucy, darling," and ended with Love, Lloyd." Perry paused, an-

noyed at the strange dismay that suddenly crept into him. Lucy, in love with Lloyd? He cursed softly, and behind a large bottle of green bath salts he found what he was searching for—a small red-and-gold lipstick.

He made a dab with the crimson stuff on the mirror and stepped back to examine it. He couldn't tell. It looked the same shade as the writing on his mirror, but he couldn't be certain, because this mirror lacked the blue tinge. He was about to taste the red stick when a voice said in a whisper:

"Well—really!"

IT was Lucy again. She had no gun this time. Her hair was dry, dark and lustrous, tumbling around partly bare shoulders. She wore a green wrap that contrasted nicely with her rich, dark hair. Her face was still pale, freshly scrubbed. Her eyes drifted wonderingly from Perry's figure to the lipstick in his hand and then to the tentative dab on the mirror. The corners of her eyes crinkled.

Perry felt slow red creep up his neck.

"I came to return your lipstick," he said.

"I wasn't aware that you had it," Lucy said sarcastically.

"I found it."

"Where?"

He said: "All right. On your dresser."

The girl stared at him. She closed the door silently, leaned back against it for a moment and then, with a slight lift of her soft shoulders, crossed the room and took the lipstick from his fingers and dropped it among the scattered contents of her purse.

She said: "Did you find what you were really looking for?"

"Perhaps."

"What were you looking for?"

"I'm not quite sure."

Her lower lip trembled a little. A faint frightened shine huddled behind her eyes. Perry looked very tall, very capable; his smile made her shiver. She reached for a cigarette on the dresser and tried to use a little gold lighter. The spark failed to catch. Her fingers trembled. Perry leaned over her and spun the tiny wheel and held the flame against the end of her cigarette.

He said softly: "Where have you been, Lucy?"

She shook her head from side to side and stared steadily at the wisp of smoke trailing from the end of her cigarette.

Perry said: "You're mixed up in it, aren't you?"

"Mixed up in what?"

"Whatever's going on in this house."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do."

She said in a dull, flat voice: "Neil—Neil, why did you come in here?"

He just grinned.

She said: "Why did you come to this house at all?"

"To collect my inheritance."

She shook her head again. "No. You've got another reason. You deliberately threw a scare into Carol tonight, and you antagonized Meguera. You were looking in the garage for something. You seem to be searching for something in this house."

He said: "I am."

"Then tell me what it is. Perhaps I can help you find it."

"Perhaps you can. But I doubt whether you would."

"What is it? Tell me."

Perry looked steadily down at

her, and he wondered again at his uneasiness in her presence. He took her hand and led her to a satin-covered chair and made her sit down in it. He stood in front of her; he kept one hand in his pocket.

He said softly: "I'm looking for the person who killed Anthony Randolph."

The girl dropped her cigarette. It fell to the floor and smoldered on woven straw carpet. Perry put his foot on it and crushed it out. The air was filled with a faint acrid scent of burnt straw. Lucy Wayne leaned slowly forward and buried her face in her hands.

"No—no!"

Perry lifted her chin and made her look up at him. Her eyes were wide, horror-stricken. Her face was dead-white. She was shivering.

"He wasn't murdered," she whispered.

Perry said gently: "I think he was."

"But it . . . it couldn't be! It mustn't be!"

"I think he was murdered," Perry repeated.

"But—how?"

"I don't know yet."

Her shivering increased in violence. Her soft body quaked in his grip. Terror shone bright in the rich blue of her wide, staring eyes. The scent of her hair reached him and decided him. He bent down and lifted her chin a little more and kissed her on the mouth.

Abruptly her shivering stopped.

"Don't," she whispered.

"Why not?"

"I'm . . . I'm engaged to Lloyd."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes! I love him."

Perry said softly: "You're lying."

The girl pulled away from him. The fear faded from her eyes, replaced by sudden hostile anger. Her

underlip trembled like jelly. She started to speak, and Perry said bluntly:

"You're always lying."

She sank back, staring at him. Perry took the crumpled yellow telegram from his pocket and tossed it onto her lap. She stared at it dully.

"That's what I mean," he said.

He went out.

THERE was no light shining through the slit under Perry's bedroom door when he returned. He paused and rocked slightly on his heels, his hands loose at his sides. His eyes narrowed slightly, and his thick brows went up until they almost merged with his low hairline.

He had left a light burning in his room. Now it was off.

He turned the knob slowly; very slowly. When it had gone down all the way he suddenly pushed forward, dropping to one knee. There was no sound except his leg striking the floor. Light from the hall reached long, yellow fingers over his head into the darkened room. Nothing stirred. No shots came out of the blackness toward him. Perry stood up and snapped on the light. He closed the door and stared.

His suitcases had been opened! His clothing was scattered over the rug, the bamboo chairs, the bed. He knew before walking over to his bags what would be missing. He was right.

His credentials were gone! Both envelopes which Panfield had given him were missing. One which established his identity as Neil Randolph; the other which contained the combination to the study safe.

His gun was still there, a large, blue .45. He lifted it in his hands and stared blankly at the wall. Someone had emptied the cartridge

clip. He searched further, in a corner of his suitcase, for his box of extra clips. It was gone. He had a gun, but no ammunition. He tossed the blue-steel weapon atop a pile of his clothing and made a wry, tired sound deep in his throat.

CHAPTER VI.

THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

LUCY couldn't sleep. Moonlight flooded the room through the wide windows that opened on the second-floor gallery. She sat up abruptly in bed and listened. The house was silent, save for a man's voice, talking distantly. She wondered who it was. She thought about the man who called himself Neil Randolph; and despite herself she felt her lips lift in a little smile, recognizing the dangerous glow inside her as she recalled his kiss. His presence seemed to fill the room—his slender height, the wide safe swing to his shoulders, his faintly formidable smile. He had kissed her as though he meant it; not like Lloyd's clumsy attempts at affection. The glow inside her faded with the thought of Lloyd, to be replaced by a feeling of intense guilt. She was being unfair to Lloyd.

"Oh, I mustn't!" she whispered tightly. "I mustn't think of that. I've got to think of Lloyd."

Imps of doubt tortured her. Her jitters came back as she surveyed the moonlit room.

Old Jonathan Randolph's spirit never seemed to leave this house. This house built on blood and war and piratical, maniacal raids. Blood and war and plunder. A house of plunder. Lucy Wayne shivered.

She got out of bed and slipped a robe over her silk night clothes and reached out for a cigarette. She scratched the match on the box

twice before it sputtered to life.

The cigarette tasted harsh and raw, burning her throat. She crushed it out with a soft, impatient sound. She listened to the rustling night sounds from the bayou: the roar of an alligator, the flap of a disturbed pelican's wings, the endless croaking of frogs. She went to the green bottle on her dresser, picked it up, put it down. Her fingers were cold and wet and slippery.

The man passing on the gallery would have gone unnoticed had he not brushed the open leaf of the double window. The frame swung inward with the faintest of protesting creaks. Lucy moved swiftly forward and stepped out into the night.

"Lloyd?"

The man was a dark blot of movement against the moonlit sky. He towered tall and thin over her, his yellow hair faintly gleaming.

"Lucy." His whisper shook. "Get back in your room!"

She breathed: "Lloyd—what are you doing? What—"

"Get back in your room!"

"I'm not afraid, Lloyd. Listen to me. What are you doing?"

"I'm going through with it!"

The girl leaned back against the open window, her fingers touching her cheek. Her hands felt icy. She repressed a shiver.

"You mustn't do it," she whispered.

"Yes, I will. I've got to."

"Why must you?"

The blond man said: "He'll find out you lied to him about sending the car to Mercerville. He knows something's going on. I might as well be hanged for a wolf as for a lamb, Lucy."

She said flatly: "Neil knows already."

Lloyd reached out and touched her arm, closing thin fingers convulsively in her flesh, so deep that it hurt. "Then I've got to do it, you hear me?" he whispered. His voice was tense, desperate. "Otherwise, we'll never be happy."

Lucy felt helpless, more helpless than she could ever remember being. She whispered: "You're hurting me," and when he took his hands away, she said: "It's wrong. We don't have to do it. Let the whole thing go. Perhaps Neil isn't as bad as he seems. Perhaps he'll—"

"Not him!"

Her fingers gripped his arm. "Lloyd, please. If you love me—"

He said brutally: "Who said I did?" And then, quite softly: "Of course I do, but—"

"No, you don't," she whispered numbly.

"Lucy—"

She didn't answer. She turned away from him. The blond man hesitated a moment, then cursed weakly and moved on down the gallery. Lucy stood still in the darkness of her room and wondered why she couldn't cry.

After a while, she slipped on a pair of straw mules, pulled the wrap tight about her shoulders, and slid from her room.

PERRY stood in the downstairs hall, hidden in dark shadows. In the gloom, his lean face looked detached and bodiless, glistening with the sodden warmth of the night. He made a sharp angle of his elbow and stared at the luminous green hands of his watch. Eleven thirty. He stood and listened to the croaking of frogs, the roar of a bull alligator in the swamp nearby. The air was thick with the scent of night flowers. There was no sound in the house.

He could open the study door or not, as he chose. It was a large door, a double leaf affair, painted white, with twin bronze lever handles. Light glimmered through the slit at the bottom and touched off a gleam of gilt on the portrait of Jonathan Randolph hanging on the wall.

He pressed his ear to the door and listened. A murmur of voices reached him—two voices. One was soft and husky, and Perry frowned abruptly in the darkness. The other was deep and grumbling. Occasionally a clicking sound came through the panel.

Perry straightened, his mouth grim. He had come down on impulse, to open the safe, deciding not to wait until morning. With his combination gone, he had fully expected events in the study. He had been perplexed by questions that seemed only to be solved by the contents of the safe; and now somebody else evidently had the same idea. Perhaps the mirror-writer. He pressed down very softly on the door handle—and the light blinked out.

For a moment he stood frozen with surprise. Then, with a surge, he smashed the door open and stumbled into the room.

The darkness was alive with vague blots of movement. Somebody cursed—the deep voice. Breath hissed sharply. The room was as dark as a mine shaft and twice as oppressive with its charge of hidden danger.

A white fist blurred out of the darkness. Perry moved his head and the fist shot over his shoulder. He drove forward, planting a looping left into something soft. Peppermint breath puffed suddenly in his face.

Perry whirled as air stirred be-

hind him. His shoulder bumped into something soft and yielding and slippery. A frightened gasp sounded beside him.

He said: "Lucy!"

He reached out, his fingers hooking into clothing. There came a yank and a ripping sound and Perry was left with a shred of silk in his hands.

Something exploded high up on his cheekbone, rocking him backward. He stumbled, lashed out with his fist. His knuckles cracked painfully on metal in the man's hand. A gun! A lamp overturned with a crash in the darkness. The man cursed. Perry tripped and hit the wall with the back of his head; his skull struck something metallic. Jarring pain knifed through his head in a dizzy shower of bright, wriggling, red spirals. Steel banged and clicked sharply shut, and even as Perry sank to his knees, he knew what it was.

The safe door. It had been open!

The man's breath came pantingly through the darkness. His voice was a low, faraway whisper, hurried and insistent. Clothing rustled. A door opened into the balancing darkness of the hall, and then closed. The man's footsteps retreated, his breath whistling low. There was no other sound in the house.

Perry remained on one knee, motionless. He didn't dare move. The darkness shielded him, protecting him from the man with the gun. He felt a little sick, scarcely breathing. He sharpened his eyes against the gloom, but saw nothing.

There came a quick click and a black patch darkened the slightly lighter rectangle of the casement windows. Perry relaxed a little. The man with the gun was gone.

Groping, he found a match and

struck it. In the dancing glare, he made out his own position, back against the wall. For an instant the room leaped at him with every detail sharp and clear. He made out the overturned lamp; half of a roll of peppermint lozenges; a patch of torn silk on the chenille rug; the closed round eye of the safe; and a loose packet of currency, fastened with a gray paper band. The numerals on the band danced before his eyes. One thousand dollars. In hundred-dollar bills.

He dared not keep the match aflame any longer. The man with the gun could still be near, lurking outside. Perry flicked his wrist, and darkness, like a warm velvet blindfold, snuffed the room out of existence. Moving carefully, he picked up the scrap of silk and the peppermints and the money and put them all in his pockets. He felt a surge of angry dismay, as he fingered the tatter of slippery silk. The money must have come from the safe—now automatically closed. Time enough to investigate that later. But the silk—

A VOICE from the doorway said: "Hello! Something happen?"

It was Señor Meguera. The dark man stood with his hands in the pockets of a red dressing-gown. His thin, wolfish head and little ears were limned against the dim hall light.

Perry said grimly: "Robbery, my friend."

The dark man's breath was sucked in with a sharp hiss. His head jerked up. He sprang forward into the study and fumbled at the safe in the darkness.

"But it is locked!"

"The guy knocked me against it and slammed it shut."

"Then you—you do not know what is missing?"

"Not yet."

Meguera's figure was tall and lean in the darkness. He rubbed his palms together with a dry rasping sound. He said: "I shall see who is missing from their rooms."

Perry stood in silence and watched him go. When Meguera's light, whispering footsteps faded, he stepped to the window. It was ajar. Warm moist fingers of the Gulf wind stirred in his hair. The moonlight made the carefully tended lawns look smooth and black. He moved quickly through and flattened against the wall of the house. The pond glittered and the hibiscus hedges stirred soggly. The night was alive with movement, but Perry failed to make out any human forms. He started around the house, walking on the wet grass beside the path to avoid any footfalls.

He passed an oleander bush, and a gun was jammed hard into his ribs. Perry froze.

"Don't move!" the man said.

Out of the corner of his eye Perry caught an oily high light running like a wet finger along the gun barrel in the man's hand. Breath eased in a whisper from Perry's lips.

"All right. So you've got me."

The man chuckled softly. "You've got nerve, kid. Plenty of it."

Perry thought of his stomach, contracted into a hard, compact knot of taut muscle. Nobody had ever shoved a gun at him before, save for Lucy and her antique derringer. It was not a pleasant experience.

CHAPTER VII.

BODY IN THE DARK.

PERRY bit his lips and turned, very slowly. The man was short, barrel-chested, with long arms. He

wore a low-crowned, jaunty fedora, the brim flattened low over gray eyes, casting a sharp shadow over the upper part of his face. Moonlight shone on the square chin, the small tight-lipped mouth, and the nose. A saddle nose. With a growing sense of unreality, Perry said:

"You're Cas Laramie. The man in Mercerville this evening. You were hanging around—"

"Sure!" The mouth under the oddly shaped nose twitched. "Too bad your pal got away."

"Pal?"

"The one who opened your safe. At least, you claim it's your safe. Isn't he your pal?"

Perry grinned. "That's a hot one."

"What's so funny?"

"You're the lad who played hide-and-go-seek in the study with me."

Laramie shook his head. "No."

"Then how do you know so much about it? Where do you fit into the picture?"

Laramie said softly: "I'm the crooked little piece that goes into the middle."

Perry eyed the man's gun.

"And I'm in the corner."

The saddle nose drawled: "Not necessarily. That all depends." His gray eyes raked Perry's face, then he glanced quickly up at the house. None of the windows was alight. A breathless hush seemed to have fallen over the night. Laramie said quietly: "Let's you and me take a walk."

Perry looked at the man's big gun and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. The path wound across the grounds, toward the stone wall surrounding the estate. A servant's cottage loomed up before them, the windows boarded up. Laramie walked around to the back door and pushed it open effortlessly.

"Let's go in where we can talk."

Perry said: "Meanwhile the guy who beaned me is getting away."

"He won't get far."

Perry preceded the saddle nose into the darkness. A match sputtered. Laramie set an oil lamp on a dust-covered table and pulled up a chair with the toe of his shoe. "Sit down."

Perry shook his head and remained standing, his hands loose at his sides. Puzzlement crinkled his thick brows. Laramie stared at him with sober gray eyes and said:

"I guess you're wondering who I really am and why I'm interested."

"It wouldn't hurt to know."

The saddle nose nodded, dipped his free hand into his pocket and slid a metal badge across the table, beyond the muzzle of his gun.

"I work for Uncle," he said.

Perry, staring at the gleaming metal shield, felt a cold shock. He stared at the badge for a long time, then he looked at the stocky man. A Federal agent. A cold shiver trickled down his spine; he wetted his lips slowly.

"I don't see why the Federal government should be interested. You have no jurisdiction over a local case."

Laramie pocketed his badge. "You will understand better in a few minutes. He said abruptly: "You're really Neil Randolph, the old man's heir?"

Perry hesitated. He thought swiftly of Panfield's instructions, and of Lucy Wayne. He thought of the girl most. As for Laramie—badges could be faked, a dime a dozen. There was too much at stake to risk telling the truth now.

He said: "Of course I'm Neil Randolph. Why ask?"

Laramie shrugged. "Doesn't it strike you as peculiar that Anthony

Randolph should neglect his wife and nephew completely and leave everything to a runaway son he hadn't seen in ten years? Especially when there was bad feeling between you and your father?"

Perry said cautiously: "A lot you know about it."

Laramie lifted his solid shoulders, stared down at the gun and drummed his fingernails on the ridged butt. When he looked up his gray eyes were lidless.

"You got here fast," he said. "You were supposed to be abroad."

"I wasn't."

"Where were you?"

"In New Orleans."

"Very neat," Laramie murmured. "Maybe you knew the old man was going to die?"

Perry's knuckles turned white as he gripped the table edge. He leaned forward, his nostrils slightly distended. "What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about a Riensch test that was made on Anthony Randolph's body. Arsenic can be detected if there is one part in twenty thousand. We found plenty of arsenic in Anthony Randolph's body. He was poisoned. Murdered!"

Perry sank down in a chair. He chewed his lower lip, stared at the dancing shadows cast on the ceiling by the oil lamp, and finally at Laramie's square face across the table from him.

He said softly: "So that's it! Murder!"

"Yeah," Laramie drawled.

"I still don't get it," Perry rapped. His eyes smoldered. "Why should the Federal government be interested in a local murder?"

"I can't tell you that. Not now."

"It's Meguera, then! There's something queer about him. Did the San Felipe government ask your help, or what?"

Laramie just stared. Then he said: "Meguera is part of it. You've got a slice of the cake, too. You got here just a little too soon—for Neil Randolph."

Perry took a breath. "Then you think I'm not Neil."

"I'd like some proof," Laramie shrugged.

Perry thought of his rifled suitcases upstairs. It was too pat. This demand for his credentials came too soon after they were stolen. He stared carefully at Laramie and said:

"My papers were stolen just before someone tried to get at the safe. I had the combination among them. That's why I was watching the study; I thought the papers stolen from me would be put to use. But I was tricked and whoever got my papers also got away with the contents of that safe, whatever they are."

Laramie asked: "Then you don't know what's missing?"

"No!"

The saddle nose sighed and examined his gun. "That big Englishman—who is he?"

"I don't know much about him. He seems to be a friend of Carol's. His name is Ian Mitchell."

"Iggy Mitchell," Laramie grinned. "Baptized Ignacas Mickelaunas. A mug from Chi."

"A racketeer?"

"Uh-huh. A fancy-pants."

Perry shivered slightly. He was not quite used to all this. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. Murder and gunmen. Girls who looked like angels and turned out to be liars and safecrackers. He began to wish for the empty lazy days of his nonexistent law practice. And he silently cursed Lucifer Panfield and his confidence.

Laramie dropped the automatic in a side pocket and stood up, said: "All right!"

Perry got up with him. "What are you going to do?"

"Let's find your papers. Let's find Iggy Mitchell."

Perry said: "If it's my identity that's troubling you, Panfield will be here tomorrow. He can tell you who I am, whether you find my papers or not."

"Panfield?" Laramie asked.

"Anthony Randolph's lawyer. He's the one who—sent me down here."

"What's he look like?"

Perry described the bald-headed little lawyer. Laramie listened, his face inscrutable, and then blew out the lamp and plunged the room in darkness. Perry stepped outside with the other directly behind him.

Laramie said: "Come on! I want to show you something."

THEY skirted the pond and headed down the path toward the highway. The house brooded somberly behind them; there were no lights on, even now. Perry wondered fleetingly what Meguera was doing. At a bend in the gravel driveway, a short distance from the vine-covered wall, Laramie stopped.

"It's somewhere around here," he muttered.

He took a flashlight and sprayed yellow brightness down the path. The light was reflected in the lenses of a car parked just inside the gate. It was not Laramie's car; neither was it one from the garage. Perry had never seen it before.

Laramie's flash danced on the gravel road. Perry stood with his stomach playing tricks on him again. He momentarily considered grabbing Laramie's gun, and aban-

doned the impulse when the torch suddenly steadied.

He sucked air with sick horror. In the edge of the circle of brilliance was a hand! An old, veined hand, the fingers bunched into taut talons, digging deep into the rough gravel.

"Here," Laramie said.

Perry whispered: "Good God! It's Panfield!"

The little old lawyer lay sprawled in the middle of the driveway, half-hidden under the brush that dripped silent tears of rain over him. His legs were spread-eagled, his face buried on one outflung arm. A pool of dark blood glittered under his thin, aged body. The blood came from a tight, mouthlike wound in the left side, under the heart.

Lying half on the grass and half on the gravel was a glittering sliver of steel, tipped with glistening red. There were a lot of insects around it. It was one of the Civil War sabers Perry had seen about the house. It had been used to kill Panfield!

Laramie dropped to one knee and carefully turned the man's head. There was a mottled purple bruise on Panfield's fragile-looking jaw. Laramie touched it gently.

"Somebody clipped him first, before using the sword. That doesn't make much sense, does it? Knocking the old man out, then running him through. Unless the killer didn't have the sword at first."

Laramie suddenly straightened, swung the flash upward so that its beam shone full in Perry's blue eyes—eyes that would never get accustomed to the sight of violent death. He couldn't see beyond the blazing glare.

"But I saw him today," Perry whispered. "This morning."

Laramie held the flash on Perry's



In the circle of brilliance

face for another moment, then flicked it off. Darkness spread a blanket over the body in the path.

"Somebody didn't want him to show up," Laramie muttered. "Can you guess why?"

Panic fingers tore momentarily at Perry's brain. Panfield had been his only link to his true identity as Perry Warren. Panfield was the only one who could have explained his false assumption of Neil Randolph's name. If Perry admitted now that he wasn't Neil, he would be nailed down tight for the killing, without the lawyer to back him up. The whole plan, he saw now, had hung on a crazily dangling thread. But it was too late now! He had to go on being Neil Randolph. He

had to solve these wanton killings before the real heir showed up. He *had* to!

And there was more involved. There was Lucy Wayne. He wanted to find the key that would answer her riddle, too.

Laramie said again: "Can you guess why Panfield was killed?"

Perry looked at him. He wondered at the cold calm that settled over him, faced with the question.

"Of course. Somebody wants to keep my identity in doubt to delay my taking over this property. Somebody wants me out of the way—if not permanently, then for a time, anyway. You know that. There've been obstacles to my coming down here since this all began. You were



lay the little old lawyer in the center of the driveway.

with me in Mercerville. You know what happened there."

"Ye-ah," Laramie drawled.

Perry straightened at something in the man's tone. His hand slowly knotted into a hard, white-knuckled fist.

"You think *I* did this?"

"If you aren't Neil Randolph, you could have."

Perry said: "That's crazy."

"Sure! So is everything else about this case. You could have intercepted Panfield down here and killed him to prevent his showing you up for a fraud."

Perry said: "But I didn't do it!"

"Just the same, you're going to Mercerville for a while."

"To jail?"

"On suspicion of murder."

Perry said: "Like hell!"

He swung hard. His movement caught Laramie completely by surprise. The Federal man had his gun in his pocket, and his right hand dropped instinctively to reach for it. The maneuver left his jaw wide open. Perry's knuckles made a sharp cracking sound on skin and bone. Laramie tumbled backward, his face convulsed. Perry leaped after him. The other's gun shone cold and blue in the moonlight. Perry grabbed for it with his left hand, swung in a wide loop with his other. The shock when he landed jolted through to his shoulder. Laramie tottered forward and became a dead weight leaning against him.

Stepping backward, Perry lowered the man to the ground, picked up Laramie's gun from the damp stones of the path. He took Laramie's flashlight for good measure. He cursed softly, then turned and ran at a rangy trot up the path toward the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NIGHT OF FEAR.

THE house seemed empty. Perry went up the big staircase two steps at a time. Carol's bedroom door stood open, showing no one inside. He turned and stalked, gun in hand, toward Lucy's room. The light was out—and Lucy wasn't in. Perry came out into the gloom of the corridor, the whites of his eyes gleaming. From down the hall sounded a faint creak. He moved swiftly and silently in that direction, halting outside of Lloyd's door.

Someone was inside. He could hear faint, whispering movements and then footsteps moved cautiously toward the door. Perry flattened against the wall, reversing the gun so that he gripped the muzzle. He raised his arm as the door handle suddenly went down and someone stepped through.

It was Lucy Wayne again. She had changed her night clothes for a trim suit of dark blue and a wide-brimmed hat. She carried a tiny overnight bag in one hand. She didn't see Perry until he dropped his gun arm, and then the movement caught her eye.

Her lips parted, and he clapped a swift hand over her mouth. She struggled frantically against his grip, but she didn't drop her bag.

Perry breathed softly: "Quiet," and then turned her around and shoved her quickly inside Lloyd's room.

It was empty, utterly dark. He took Laramie's torch and snapped the button, blazing light over the girl's white, frightened face. Her eyes were wide, staring. A muscle jiggled in her cheek. She stood with her hands behind her, holding the little night bag.

Perry's glance jerked first to the

floor, then beyond her to the wall against which she flattened. A little scrap of curled, green paper lay on the rug, the wrapper from the roll of peppermint drops. Gleaming on the wall was a saber. It was mounted diagonally, as though it was part of a pair. But the twin to the heavy blade was missing. Perry knew where it was—on the path.

He said in a flat, brittle voice: "All right. Where is Lloyd?"

The girl's lips twitched. He watched her breast rise and fall with her swift, frightened breathing. Her eyes were very wide, the blue merging with black in the glare of the torch.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know."

Perry touched the scrap of green wrapper with his toe. The girl's eyes followed his foot fascinatedly in the circle of brightness, then lifted back to his face.

He said quietly: "Lloyd was the one who opened the safe. This proves it."

"No—I tried to stop him."

"That's not all he did. He used that saber."

"Used—the saber?" Her breast suddenly stopped moving.

Perry said: "Listen, your boy friend Lloyd isn't the blushing cherub he appears to be. Panfield arrived here tonight, instead of tomorrow morning."

"Panfield," she repeated dully.

"He's dead. He's in the path by the gate. He was killed with one of Lloyd's sabers—silently."

The girl made a little moaning sound. Her face was chalk-white in the torchlight. She said: "Not Lloyd. Not Lloyd! He wouldn't do it. Why should he do it?"

"Panfield may have seen him leaving by the study window."

She shook her head, kept shaking

it from side to side, like a child stubbornly refusing to accept something. Perry reached out and took the overnight grip from her numb fingers and opened it, his eyes fixed on her. He took the large bottle of green bath salts from the case, weighed it in his hands.

"What is this?"

"I—nothing."

He said impatiently: "Oh, hell—"

The girl said dully: "All right. It's the map. You'd find out sooner or later. You found out enough already. Meguera came here to sell Mr. Randolph his half of the map—" She paused and stared doubtfully at him. "Do you know anything about old Jonathan's expedition to San Felize?"

"Meguera told me. He didn't mention the map, though." Perry felt sudden excitement bubbling up inside him—excitement tempered by the knowledge that Panfield was now dead. This was what the bald little man had wanted him to learn. But the knowledge came too late for the little lawyer. Perry could use it, however, and meant to. He said, his voice taut: "Then the map is valuable?"

The girl nodded. "It's hard to tell. The San Felize treasury funds were never recovered when old Jonathan was kicked out. Of course, any attempt to find the money would have to be under the supervision of the San Felize government—and would probably prove unprofitable for the promoter. San Felize would keep the money. It's supposed to be about a half million."

"Meguera claimed he had found his half of the map in the old records of a San Felize government building, but what he had didn't make sense, beyond giving him a lead to here. He needed the missing part. When he lost office down

there he came to Mr. Randolph on the off-chance that the other half of the map would be here. And it was. Mr. Randolph had it. He made the study of old Jonathan's exploits his life work. Naturally he wanted to buy Meguera's half of the map, and they had actually come to terms—thirty thousand dollars—when Mr. Randolph died."

Perry stood like rock, his mind racing. "Lucy, did anyone besides you and Meguera and Randolph know about all this?"

She shook her head. Some of the color had come back to her cheeks. "No!"

Perry turned with a swift movement, suddenly thinking of Laramie. He gripped the girl's arm with tight fingers.

"Lucy, stay here. Never mind what I said about Lloyd. Promise me you won't try to leave."

Her lips parted. She hesitated only a fraction of a second. "All right, Neil."

Perry said: "Swell! I'll be right back, baby."

He stepped through the door, into the corridor.

He didn't see the man's face. Something blurred down from above him, crashed on his forehead, riveting pain through his skull to the base of his brain. He half turned, even while falling, lifting his gun with a ton weight attached to his wrist. But the gun wasn't in his hand. He heard it strike the floor, and then the ground suddenly tilted over, slipping out from under him, and buried him in darkness.

LUCY'S first thought on awakening was: "I mustn't be afraid. I mustn't."

She lay motionless, wondering where she was, listening and remembering. She could remember

the arm that flashed in the doorway, striking down Neil; and then the darkness, followed by a cold hand over her mouth and muscular arms brutally rushing her from the house into the night. She had screamed just once, and that was all she knew. The clenched fist, flashing out of the darkness, followed by a sick sensation that left her falling endlessly into a black pit.

An owl hooted dismally from beyond the window. There was a faint breeze rustling in the brush that grew there. The sound of voices came to her from beyond the door; a man's voice and a woman's voice. Ian Mitchell and Carol. Cigarette smoke hung in thin threads in the air.

Lucy's eyes drifted around the moonlit room. She stared at a little latticed window for a long time and then touched her mouth, wincing suddenly. Her lips hurt. She brushed her fingertips over her cheek, feeling the tender spot where Mitchell had struck her. How long ago was that? Since she saw Neil go down in the doorway? From the freshness of the air she concluded it was near dawn—a couple of hours, anyway.

Sliding from the old leather couch, she went on stockinged feet to the door and listened. Ian Mitchell and Carol were still talking. She couldn't make out what they were saying, and she didn't try very long. Turning to the window, she tested the lattice frame. It was fastened loosely, with a half inch of space between the frame and the wall. If she could find a stick—

She stumbled in the darkness over a chair and stood rooted, pain throbbing through her leg. There was no alarm from the other room. Her breath came a little easier and then, her hand on the chair, she felt a

sudden surge of hope. The spokes in the back were loose, wobbling under her weight. She lifted off the top bar and worked at the dowels. The third one came away in her hands, and she breathed a quick prayer of gratitude. The solid stick in her hand made an excellent wedge.

The window catch yielded with a soft snapping sound, and the frame swung away from her. She waited, suddenly aware that there was no more conversation in the next room. Then she heard Carol's voice again and turned once more to the window.

It was difficult, getting through the tiny rectangle. When she dropped, it was as though she were flying feet first into a bottomless pit. Her stockinged feet struck hard, damp wood, and she gasped in pain from the shock. She leaned back, examining the moonlit swamp that pressed chokingly around her, seeking a landmark. And she nodded, breathing deeply.

The veranda led around to the front steps and then a plank walk. Lucy moved quickly and silently in her bare feet. The walk ended with a little rickety landing and a flight of crazily tilted steps going downward. She was on an old, long-abandoned levee. Water lapped ten feet below her. Moonlight shone on lazily drifting hyacinths, a rippling trail of a muskrat, and the brass works of a small cabin cruiser. Her heart pounded high with hope.

She glanced back once at the house from which she had escaped, a rambling lodge, part of the Randolph estate. The big front window was lighted, the door was closed. She could see Carol, tall and statuesque, cross the room and sink into a chair, a cigarette in her lips. Lucy tightened her mouth and hurried

down the swaying flight of steps with trembling legs.

The cabin cruiser bumped solidly against the landing with the push of the sluggish tide. Lucy stepped aboard, turned to the rope and worked at the slip knot with aching, shaking fingers.

A VOICE drawled: "Going somewhere, Lucy?"

It was Ian Mitchell. His voice was a bombshell that burst in the girl's ears. The big man stood in the cabin doorway, smiling. Lucy stood suddenly stiff and taut. Then despair seized her, snapping the tension that had kept her going. She found suddenly that her legs would not support her. She sank limply to a seat and stared with blank eyes at the big man.

"You knew all the time that I was getting away," she whispered.

Mitchell's mouth curled. "Of course! I let you get this far deliberately. The greater the hope, the greater the disappointment. It's an old gag, my dear."

She asked listlessly: "Why don't you let me go?"

Mitchell moved away from the cabin wall with a twitch of his huge shoulders. He looked immense, blotting out the sky as he stood before her. She trembled uncontrollably. The whites of the man's eyes glistened, reflecting the moonlight on the water. A corner of his mouth suddenly jerked.

He said: "You'll have to talk first."

"But I don't know anything."

His big hand flashed out, slapping her. The rest of his body was utterly still. Lucy moaned and slid from her seat.

Mitchell bent down carefully and picked her up.

"Tell me!" he said.

Lucy whispered: "I can't. I won't."

He slapped her again, with his left hand. When she slid sidewise, panting and wild-eyed, he jerked her roughly to her feet, pulling her tight against his big body. His mouth looked lipless when he spoke:

"You double-crossed me. You and Lloyd. He's hiding somewhere and I can't get at him, but I've got *you*. Where is it?"

The girl was limp and silent in his grip. The big man pushed her away from him suddenly, and she stumbled backward, striking hard against the cabin wall. A little whimper of sound escaped her. She would have slid from her feet again, but Mitchell caught her arm.

"I'll kill you, do you hear? No little two-by-four tramp is going to hold out on me. Where is that map?"

She whispered: "I won't tell you!"

Mitchell's breath tightened with anger. He said: "All right—all right." He shook her. "You asked for it. I'll—"

Carol's voice said: "Ian, stop!"

She stood on the float, staring into the deck well. She was still smoking a cigarette. Her bright yellow hair gleamed as moonlight sifted through it. Her green eyes looked dark and faintly dismayed as she stared at Lucy.

She said to Mitchell: "You beast. You'll kill her."

"That's right," Mitchell agreed. "I will, if she won't tell." His eyes were hooded, sullen. "Get back to the house!"

"Ian, I—"

"Get back in the house!" He turned again to Lucy, touched her lightly on the shoulder with one finger. She shrank away as though he had struck her. Her eyes were

wide and staring; her lips parted; her breathing long and shallow. Her whole body shuddered.

"You'll tell," Mitchell promised softly. "You'll tell—"

CHAPTER IX.

BLONDE BABY.

IT was not quite one o'clock in the afternoon of the next day when Amideo stepped to the front porch of his Mercerville Hotel and decided to examine the world. He found it not quite to his liking, as he had found everything else lately. It was going to rain some more. Gray stormheads massed over the blue-green Gulf waters beyond the headlands, a background for the motionless tramp freighter hove to at the point. Lightning flickered blue-white in the sky, and there was a wind stirring in the palmettos. The air was oppressive despite the breeze, laden with a sultry charge of the storm to come.

Amideo muttered: "Is a crime," and turned as Cas Laramie called for him from inside the hotel.

The short man looked clean and fresh. He wore a gray slouch hat and a brown sack suit and his jaw was close shaven. His wide, hard mouth quirked quizzically. He had a strip of court plaster stuck on one cheekbone under his eye.

Amideo's glance moved disgustedly to the steaming cup of coffee Laramie was setting on the table.

"This," said Laramie, "is coffee. Not the mud you hand out as an excuse for it."

Amideo complained: "You want service, yes? You want ever'ting, yes? Just right. And what do you do? You go in my own kitchen and make your own coffee. Is that right?"

"Yes," said Laramie. His gray

eyes twinkled faintly. "Did you bury the dog?"

Amideo made a sound deep in his throat. His fat, round face quivered.

Laramie said: "Is that freighter still hanging around offshore?"

"All morning."

"It's not moving?"

"Nope. Maybe afraid of the storm."

Laramie nodded. "Maybe."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. A squat, fat little man with a huge black mustache and a tight-waisted black coat crossed the room with an air of importance about his sloping shoulders. His muddy little eyes sought out Laramie at the table and he pulled out a chair, sank heavily into it and folded his hands across his paunch. His mustache drooped.

Laramie said: "Well?"

"I have looked at him, señor. It is not the man."

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure."

"Maybe you couldn't recognize him, Señor Tortuba."

"*Porque non?* The other man was . . . ah—" Tortuba shrugged, spread his pudgy hands, and the corners of his mouth curved sharply downward while his underlip jutted forward. "I have seen him. He is not the man."

Laramie felt pleased. "All right," he said.

He finished his coffee and went upstairs. The corridor was painted an ugly yellow, with a ragged runner rug not quite reaching to the rear window, where a eucalyptus tree brushed painted leaves against the pane. He turned to the third door and softly stepped into the hotel room.

Perry Warren lay sprawled on the bed, asleep. Laramie closed the door and stood listening to his

breathing. It was deep and regular. Laramie touched the court plaster under his eye and smiled ruefully, then crossed the room and shook Perry's shoulder.

"Hey, get up!"

Perry's first thought was that he was back in his little law office, waiting for another day empty of clients. Then the memory of yesterday's events returned, bringing with it the taut tension of his predicament. He sat up with a start, staring at Cas Laramie's grin.

"Hell," Perry said. "You!"

"Take it easy."

Perry touched his throbbing head gingerly. "What did you hit me with?"

"I didn't hit you. I found you like that."

He said sharply: "You didn't hit me?"

"Uh-uh. I found you by-by, so I brought you here. Amideo's."

Perry lurched to his feet and abruptly sank back with a groan, clutching at his head with both hands. Laramie's connection with the case no longer mystified him. The map and the San Felize treasury cache presented international complications. But, remembering Lucy's entanglement with the business, he said nothing, and did not even wonder why he shielded her.

Laramie made a clucking sound and surveyed Perry with a critical eye. "I gave you a mickey. I didn't want you bothering me for a while. You'll feel better when you drink some coffee—I made it myself."

"But I thought I was due for jail."

"I took a look at Mercerville's jail. I wouldn't even have put Amideo's pup in it. Hence the mickey and this hotel room."

Perry shook his head in cautious puzzlement. It still didn't make much sense. He got to his feet and

walked slowly to the window, staring out over the Gulf. The freighter offshore stood out black against the gray thunderheads.

"You took a chance, putting me in here. An elephant could waltz out of here with no trouble at all."

Laramie shrugged. He straddled the lone chair backward and rubbed his nose with a pensive finger, shoving his soft hat back on his brow.

"I made a mistake," he said. "You might have kept your little crew together. You might even have nabbed the son who bopped you."

Perry turned and said: "Make sense, will you?"

"I don't think you killed Panfield, and you couldn't have poisoned Tony Randolph. If not the last, then you probably didn't do the other. They both tie together. So if you want any apology, you can have one."

Perry said: "I mean I don't understand about keeping the people together. Aren't they all at the house?"

Laramie shook his head. "No."

"Who's gone?"

"Young Lloyd, for one. And the pretty little girl. The secretary."

"Lucy?" Perry rapped. He wondered at the sudden tightness about his heart, and why his voice went suddenly hoarse. "Where? How?"

"I thought maybe you could find out just that little thing," Laramie suggested.

"But you—"

"After I got you bundled up I rounded up the other members of the household. At first, it looked as though everyone had taken a run-out powder. Then Carol, the blond baby, showed up, and a little later, Mitchell. Then Meguera. Both men said they'd been looking for the burglar. Both had very muddy shoes."

Perry shrugged, wetted his lips. His tongue felt dry, swollen. Laramie paused and tossed him a pack of cigarettes and matches. The smoke felt cool, trickling like silver into his aching lungs.

Laramie went on: "I waited for Lucy and the nephew to show, but they didn't. They haven't returned yet. So I took the occasion to announce the results of the Riench test made on Tony Randolph's body."

"And what happened?"

"Carol took a nose-dive to the floor. It was nicely timed. I was supposed to gawk at her figure while the other two composed themselves; but I didn't. Mitchell turned yellow. Meguera just smiled."

Perry shivered slightly. "I know." He took a deep breath. "Look, Laramie. I've got to help. I want to find that girl!"

"What's the matter with finding Lloyd, too?"

Perry said: "It's the girl I'm interested in. She didn't run away. She was going to, but she promised me she'd stay. I don't think she'd have broken her word to me willingly." Even as Perry spoke, though, he felt imps of doubt pricking him. Lucy was so obviously in love with Lloyd, he thought, willing to do anything for him. Suppose Lloyd had burgled the safe, and she had gone off with him and the loot? He shook off the thought impatiently, not liking the taste of it. He said: "I'm going to find her, wherever she is."

Laramie nodded. "I was hoping you'd try. I've got business—out there." He waved his hand toward the window and the freighter anchored in the distance. "Me and Señor Tortuba."

"Tortuba?"

Laramie said: "You don't know



The girl fell backward, falling against the fender. Perry's arm shot up toward the gun in her hand.

him." He fished in an inside pocket and tossed two envelopes on the bed beside Perry. "I found your papers."

"Where?"

"In Lucy Wayne's room. You ought to have a long talk with that young lady—when you find her."

THUNDER rasped in the roof of the sky, like a man clearing a dry throat. Bright, fluid lightning did a fantastic dance over the tops of the cypress swamp.

Perry took his eyes from the straight ribbon of white road long enough to glance at his wrist watch. Three thirty. His mouth twitched raggedly at one corner. He pressed a little harder on the gas, and the coupé's tires sang a high, protesting song on the concrete.

The big sedan seemed to come from nowhere. It swung into the road with a spurt of dust from skidding rear wheels, rocked a moment and flirted with the shoulder of the road. Perry jammed on his brakes and felt the wheel take a healthy bite out of his stomach as inertia threw him forward. The sedan straightened. Perry cast a quick glance to the right, recognizing the entrance to the Randolph estate. His mouth tautened. He stepped once more on the gas.

Through the rear window of the sedan ahead he could see a pheasant feather and bright-spun gold glistening under a wide-brimmed hat. He stamped harder on the accelerator. The front fenders of the coupé drew abreast of the sedan's rear wheels. He tooted the horn once, and a startled, white face momentarily turned above the driver's seat and stared at him. The sedan swerved, lurched, and roared forward.

Perry cut toward the right. There came a grinding crash as metal bent

metal, fenders locked. The rear of the sedan bounced sidewise. He had to swing hard as the big car cut across the road, momentarily out of control. There came another crash. The sedan slowed, moving in a zig-zag path. Perry edged the coupé alongside and crowded the big car to the shoulder of the highway. In a moment both autos came to a stop.

The silence of the deserted road was startling after the racket of the motors. There was only distant thunder and jagged blue lights clawing at the gray sky.

The blond woman got out of the big sedan, her face pale. It was Carol. She wore a light reefer coat and the sport hat with the pheasant quill. She had on low-heeled shoes; her green eyes were bright with anger.

Perry came around the coupé and drawled: "Hello. Are we going places?"

Carol touched her cheek and said: "You!"

Perry nodded. "You're in a hurry, aren't you?"

"I thought you were in custody."

"I was released."

Her red mouth twitched. "They should have kept you there."

Perry wagged a chiding finger. "Is that nice? Tell me where you were going, like a good girl."

Her eyes studied him very carefully. She hugged a brown alligator purse close to the taut swelling of her breast. She wore a light-orange sweater and a white skirt under the reefer coat.

She said slowly: "I . . . I got a note. I was going to . . . to see what it means."

"Maybe I can tell you," Perry offered.

Thunder rolled overhead. A grayness had crept into the world, and the lush vegetation of the swamp on

either hand seemed to stand still, expectant. Lightning played blue lights on the woman's pale features.

"I don't know if I should show it to you."

Perry said quietly: "I would if I were you."

"All right." She hesitated just another moment, scanning him from behind her long lashes. Then she opened her purse. "Take a look at this," she said.

It was a gun. A small, nickel-bright .32 revolver. The woman held it close against her stomach, and the little black eye of the muzzle stared at Perry. Carol's red lips twitched in a crooked smile.

"I don't like you," she whispered. "I never did like the thought of you."

Perry said: "Put it away!"

She shook her head and said again: "I don't like you." Her voice was very soft.

Perry dived forward. His movement was explosive, sudden. The woman's red mouth came open, and then she closed her eyes and the little .32 banged. The sound was instantly swallowed up in a crash of thunder that shook the emptiness around them. The bullet fanned hot air past Perry's cheek. He struck the woman just above her knees, sent her crashing back against the sedan. She stumbled, fell against the front fender. Perry's arm shot up toward the gun in her hand, above her head.

The woman sobbed: "You devil. Don't touch me. I wish you'd never come. You should have stayed—"

Perry twisted sharply. For an instant his mouth went savage as the woman cried out in sudden pain. He got the gun. He stepped back a little, the revolver loose in his

lean brown fingers. He wasn't breathing hard.

He said: "You're going to take me to Lucy."

Carol stared at him, her red lips trembling. Her breast heaved and swelled against the tight orange sweater.

She said softly: "Damn you—damn you."

Perry said again: "Take me to Lucy!"

"I won't!"

Perry's eyes smiled. "So you know where she is. Take me to her."

Carol shivered suddenly. There was something in the tall man's smile that sent a shudder through her whole body. Her shoulders slumped in the reefer coat.

"All right," she whispered.

Rain came down, whispering softly over the empty road and the crouching brush that bordered the swamp land.

CHAPTER X.

SHAPES IN THE RAIN.

PERRY said: "Here. Here it is."

Carol said: "Give me your hand."

He helped her into the stern cockpit of the boat. The launch rocked a little with her shifting weight, and her fingers clutched at Perry's wrist. They were cold and taut. He followed her aboard and looked across the gray, streaming rain that curtained the bayou.

"Which way?"

"You'll have to pole." Carol's face was a dim white oval in the gloom. She had taken off her hat, and her blond hair glistened with wetness. "The propeller is no good in the hyacinths; it gets tangled."

Perry grinned. "Thanks for telling me."

He took an oar, braced himself

against the gunwale, and shoved off. Water made lazy gurgling sounds as the shore dropped astern. Hanging vines grazed the top of the cabin with a wet, scraping sound. Carol got up from her seat and moved close to him, so that her warm body leaned against his wet leg. She was shivering, although the air and the rain were tepid.

She said: "Neil, I want you to know that I didn't plan all this. I didn't figure on all these things. I didn't want them. I—"

His voice was grim. "Save it!"

From the comparatively open expanse of the bayou, Perry poled the cruiser into a narrow, mouthlike hole opening in the dense cypress jungle. The day grew several shades darker. Occasionally something heavy and solid slid into the water ahead of them with a little splash; dim white shapes flapped through the streaming rain.

"You take the next turn to the right," Carol whispered. "It leads you into the Bayou Palaque. Hug the shore until the second channel shows. You take that one."

The channel was clogged with thick-piled masses of drifting hyacinth. Perry worked at the pole, his shirt sticking close to his body as rain pattered on his shoulders. Carol left him presently and moved up to the bow; her voice drifted back to him, hushed and tense, giving occasional directions.

The Bayou Palaque was like a vast plate heaped and gorged with silently drifting flowers. The air was heavy with a thousand scents, released by the rain. Perry followed the right-hand shore until the second channel opened darkly ahead. Carol came back to the stern and said: "Stop poling. It's dead ahead."

He could see it now. A long, low-roofed lodge, half-hidden among

angling, sodden vines. The old levee was overgrown with vegetation. The house, on stiltlike piles that were like spiders' legs, loomed above and ahead of him.

Perry slid the dripping oar along the deck and dried his hands on his thighs. The boat slid silently forward, losing headway as the white hyacinths massed high against the bow. But they would reach the rickety wooden steps leading up from the landing before losing headway completely.

The click as he cocked the little .32 was loud in the murmuring rain.

Carol touched his arm.

"She's in there. She—I hope she's all right."

Perry nodded, his face expressionless. He didn't dare think of any other possibility. He realized he was holding the gun tightly, too tightly. He relaxed his grip and let the weapon dangle loosely from his fingers.

The bow of the launch bumped the wooden float.

"Come on!" he said.

The girl shook her head. Drops of rain glistened on her long lashes. Her green eyes were frightened.

"No. I—I'll stay here."

Perry said: "You're coming with me. If your boy friend is in there, you'll be a guarantee of good behavior."

He stepped ashore and held out his hand. Carol hesitated. Her underlip was trembling. All the brittle hardness that had surrounded her like a glittery shell was gone; she looked, Perry thought, like a frightened little child. He said: "Come on," again, and Carol took his hand and stepped out after him.

Perry reached the top of the rickety flight of steps, the girl beside him. He held the gun ready. His heart was beating fast, and his

fingers were warm around the gun butt.

A dim gray shape wheeled through the air and flashed silently across the path to the house. It disappeared in the rain over the swaying cypress trees. The blond woman sucked air with a little hiss of horror; Perry paused a moment and stood scanning the dim scene. There were other gray shapes in the air, circling silently and patiently, wings spread wide and motionless, sharp hooked beaks glistening. Buzzards. Perry shivered and felt cold inside.

The door to the house gave no trouble. Perry stepped up on the veranda, motioning Carol aside, and suddenly kicked hard at the panel. It made a loud cracking sound as the flimsy lock gave, and banged inward.

Perry waited.

There was no sound from the interior. Nothing stirred, except for a huge, brown rat that suddenly scampered over the rotted floor boards, leaving a track of tiny prints behind it. Perry glanced at Carol; the woman's face was very white. Her bright hair clung in damp curls to her cheeks.

Perry stepped quickly inside, flattening against the wall. He pulled Carol behind him, her body in her wet, clinging clothes warm and trembling against him. In the gloom he could make out the big room, the dusty fireplace, the tumble-down furniture. There was no rug on the floor. A table with a red-and-white checked cloth over it stood beneath one small window. There was a half-empty bottle of milk, half a loaf of Italian bread, and traces of sandwich meat. A little wood-stove nearby had the iron door open, showing white ashes standing cold inside.

Perry called out once—and waited.

His voice echoed through the house. He could hear the muted hiss of the rain and Carol's tight breathing. No other sound.

Shrugging, he stepped forward across the room, paused, and called again. No reply. He went through a door into a side room, his eyes jerking swiftly to all corners. A bare room. A round wooden table, one backless chair, a broken window frame, an ancient leather couch.

Lucy lay on the couch.

Her hair was a dark halo around her face. There was a bruise high up on her cheek. There were traces of tears under her eyes. A gag was over her mouth, and her wrists and ankles were tied. Her eyes widened and became very bright as Perry stood staring at her.

He was aware that his heart was pumping crazily in his chest, that a wave of intense relief had made his legs suddenly weak. He managed a crooked, glad little smile and then crossed the room to the girl and unfastened the gag.

She whispered huskily: "Neil—"

He wanted to say: "I'm not Neil Randolph. Don't call me Neil. I'm Perry Warren."

Instead, he said: "You're more trouble than a chicken crossing the road, honey." He sat down on the lounge beside her and lightly touched the bruise on her cheek. She winced and made a little whimpering sound. He said softly: "Who did it?"

"Mitchell."

He stared at her. "Mitchell, huh?"

She nodded and wriggled. He went at her bonds, got her wrists loose, and then her ankles. Her arms, free, went about his shoulders. He bent his head to kiss her, and the thought of Lloyd suddenly made

him stiffen. He stood bending over her and did not move. His lips were wry.

The girl looked away from him, puzzlement in her eyes. She took her arms away from him.

"Try to walk," Perry suggested hoarsely.

She said: "All right," and tried to stand, but she couldn't. Her legs were numb. He slid his arm around her and guided her slowly back and forth across the room. After a while he said:

"What did Mitchell want?"

"The map."

"Did he get it?"

She nodded miserably. "He made me tell him."

Perry stared at her. He took off his coat and put it around her shoulders; she kept on shivering.

"Did Mitchell—I mean—"

"No, Neil. He just wanted the map. At first he asked me where Lloyd was—he thought I knew—and then he said he'd overheard us talking—you and me—and wanted the map. He said something about Meguera being willing to make an exchange."

Perry looked thoughtful. "Exchange what?"

"The map for whatever Lloyd took from the safe. The money, probably."

"But why should Mitchell snatch you?"

"He thought perhaps Lloyd double-crossed him. And I was in it. After learning about the map he changed his plans."

Perry said: "I thought you and Lloyd—"

"No. I took your papers for Lloyd, yes. And I knew he was going to try the safe. He didn't tell me so, but I—just knew. I tried to stop him. You know that."

He said: "If you weren't working



Mitchell dropped his automatic.



Perry came forward.

with Lloyd, why did you help him?"

"He just—asked me to. He said—he described you as . . . as—"

"Different from what I am?"

"Yes, Neil," she said softly.

"Lloyd was afraid you'd cut him off—penniless. He had a wild idea of getting what he could. After all—"

Perry took his arm from around her. "You're in love with Lloyd—very much?"

She said dully: "What do you think?"

He was silent for a moment. Then: "This is going to hurt you, Lucy."

Her chin came up. "You can tell me. I can guess most of it, anyway. Tell me."

Perry said: "Carol and Mitchell wanted the money in the safe. They decided to use Lloyd as a cat's-paw. Carol simply asked Lloyd to get the money for her—and he did."

The girl stared at the floor. She wet her lips with a pink tongue. "I know," she whispered. "Lloyd couldn't stand up against her. He was infatuated, I guess. She's a beautiful woman. Perhaps she promised him—something."

"And Lloyd in turn used you to get the safe combination," Perry said bluntly.

The girl said: "Yes," dully. "I—"

PERRY'S startled exclamation cut her short. He caught only the slightest glimpse of the face in the window. A dim, large oval with dark eyes that met his fractionally and then disappeared.

Glass tinkled sharply. Perry stifled a curse and whipped his arm around Lucy, pulling her down with him. The roar of the gun blasted twice over the gentle hiss of the rain. Twin puffs of disintegrated wood leaped from the opposite wall.

Perry yelled: "Carol!"

There was no answer, just the fading echoes of the gun. Thunder rolled distantly, and then the hiss of the rain came back.

Lucy's voice whispered. "Neil—Neil—"

"You're hurt?" His voice cracked high, suddenly charged with despair.

"No, but—"

"Stay here. Stay down. Don't move."

He got up and raced for the door, bending low. The big front room was empty. He called again: "Carol!" and cursed his carelessness. The front door was open. Rain was busy tattooing a little design on the floor, edging cautiously over the threshold.

Nothing was to be seen outside. He flattened behind a post on the veranda and scanned the waving wall of green that surrounded the lodge. It was growing rapidly dark.

He started to leave the post and another shot spat out of the gloom. Perry took the three veranda steps with one leap and hit the plank walk with his stomach. Movement stirred a tangle of brush to the right. He lifted the .32 and fired in that direction, twice. The high bark of the little revolver echoed back and forth through the wetness.

There was no reply.

A sudden drumming of sound came from beyond the edge of the levee, where the crazily tilted flight of wooden steps led down to the float. The noise enlarged to the rhythmic throb of a marine engine. Perry sucked air sharply and got up, ran toward the steps.

He was in time to see the stern of his launch sweep in a choppy circle across the channel and head back toward the bayou. Before the rain and darkness folded in he caught a glimpse of a dark figure huddled over the wheel, and Carol's bright-

blond head beside him. Then there was nothing, just the white, petal-covered water, and the swamp.

Lucy was at his side. She said: "Who was it?"

"Mitchell, I suppose. He got away in the boat."

Lucy was silent. The rain dampened her hair, made it curl about her throat. She looked tiny and forlorn in the wide shoulders of Perry's coat.

He swore softly. "How did Mitchell get here without a boat of his own?"

"There is a way. Along the levee. It goes toward the house across the swamp in one direction, and toward Mercerville in the other. It's four miles, the last way." She shivered and stood very close to him. He put his arm around her and she pointed, said: "Look!"

A GRAY shape came circling out of the misty gloom and settled with a cracking flap of huge pinions on the ground just beyond the raised veranda. Perry stared at the hideous bird and felt cold creep along his veins.

He said: "Lucy—" and then was silent. His face went gray. He started abruptly back along the plank walk. The buzzard had its ugly head under the veranda floor. At Perry's approach it turned and studied him with little red eyes and then waddled off toward the brush. Perry scanned the sky once more; other gray shapes were wheeling constantly or watching from the cypress knobs. The coldness inside him congealed to a certainty.

He kneeled, struck a match, cupping it in the shelter of his hands, and peered under the veranda. He remained on his knees a long time. The match hissed out as rain struck it, and he lit another. When he

finally straightened and faced the girl his eyes held shocked horror deep in their pale-blue depths. He would never get used to death, he thought.

Lucy said faintly: "What is it, Neil? What's under there?"

He said: "You don't want to look, honey. It's a dead man."

"A . . . a . . . another?"

He gripped her soft shoulders. "Yes. Another. But this one's been dead for a while. A couple of days. There isn't much left of him, except his clothes."

Lucy made a little sound in the back of her throat. Perry's fingers dug hard into her shoulder, and she said: "I'm all right, Neil. Who is it?"

"I've never seen him before. I couldn't tell, anyway."

"Maybe I—"

"No, don't look."

"But, Neil, who—"

"I don't know," he said, "but I've got a pretty good idea." Explosive ideas were blasting the cloudy problems from his brain. And suddenly he knew a lot of answers. He said: "Lucy, did anyone ever come to this place besides Mitchell and Carol?"

"You mean while they kept me here?"

"At any time."

The girl said: "Lloyd used to stop here when he went alligator hunting. The shack belongs to us—to you, I mean. It's part of the estate."

"Anybody else?"

She frowned. "Meguera once went along with Lloyd, hunting, but I don't whether they stopped here." She paused suddenly. "Wait a minute. They did. Lloyd told me about it day before yesterday—before you came. He said he thought some tramp or hobo was living in the lodge. He said he'd left Me-

guera there once and then come back to the lodge to look for him and that he'd heard voices quarreling. Meguera said he'd found a tramp inside." Lucy's eyes scanned Perry's face anxiously. "Do you think this . . . this dead man is a tramp, Neil?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then who—"

Perry took her arm and drew her away. "Think you can walk to Mercerville with me, Lucy?"

"Along the levee?"

"Yes."

"I can do it. I feel all right now."

Perry said: "Then, let's go!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAPTAIN AND THE SHIP.

LUCY said: "Let me down, Neil. I'm not tired. I can walk all right."

Perry paused and let the girl slide from his arms. He stood on the mud-washed pavement of Mercerville's main street, in front of Amideo's. There was a light inside, looking warm against the teeming wetness around them.

He said: "Lucy, listen. I'm not—"

"Neil, look!"

Something in her voice jerked him upright. He followed the direction of her gesture, and stared at the house across the street from the hotel. It was a small bungalow affair with scabby shingles and loose shutters. Yellow light shone faintly through the windows. A dim figure moved jerkily and the door came open.

The man stumbled and fell to his knees and began to crawl. He was short and fat, and his sleek white hair gleamed in the faint light. It was Amideo. Blood trickled from a wound on his forehead, and he paused to shake his head slowly from side to side. Then he began

backing down the steps, still on his hands and knees.

Perry said: "Hell!"

He turned and crossed the dark, deserted street with long, loping strides and stood in front of the crawling man. Amideo didn't look up. He kept on his hands and knees until his head bumped into Perry's leg, and then he gasped: "*Madre de Dios!*"

He stood up slowly.

Perry rapped: "What the hell is this?"

"Lloyd—is in there! Inside."

Perry said: "Who hit you? What happened?"

"I see a light inside and this Meguera go in—"

"Meguera?"

"Is him. Then somebody else. Big fella. I go in and look around, and there is big fight, and Amideo gets socked on bean. Amideo crawls out. Then is you."

Perry stood in silence. His mouth tightened, and he took the gun from his pocket and said: "Stop your bleeding."

Turning, he left the front porch and went around to the back of the bungalow. The screen door hung on crazily tilted hinges.

Perry said softly: "Come on out, Meguera!"

Breath sighed in the darkness inside the house.

Perry said again: "Come on out."

Meguera appeared suddenly in the doorway. He presented a startling appearance. His face was bruised, battered to a brown pulp. His lip was cut, bleeding. Only his brown eyes remained the same, hooded and expressionless. He held up his empty hands. He wasn't smiling.

"Lloyd's in there."

"Dead?"

Meguera said: "No! He'll be all right."

"Let's see," Perry suggested.

The blond young man lay in a corner of the empty, crummy kitchen. He was bound tightly in yards of rope. His eyes were closed and his breathing was stertorous. One side of his face was crusted with dried blood. He was unconscious. He wouldn't be any help at all.

Perry said: "What goes on?"

"I was waiting around here for Laramie, in Amideo's," said Meguera. "I saw Mitchell come down the street. Carol was with him. They both acted strangely, so I watched, and they went in here. I followed, and Mitchell trapped me and got my gun away and knocked me out. I don't know where he and Carol went. I'd probably have done all right if Amideo hadn't interfered and upset my plans for a surprise."

"I'll bet," Perry said dryly.

A light flickered momentarily in Meguera's shaded eyes. "This is the truth!"

"Maybe. Hasn't Laramie returned yet?"

"No!"

Lucy and Amideo appeared in the room. The fat little man had a bandage around his white hair. Lucy sighed with relief at sight of Perry.

"Are you all right?" Then she caught sight of Lloyd in the corner, and gasped. She started impulsively forward, her face white, and Perry touched her arm and stopped her.

"Listen, once. Find the sheriff. Get all the cops you can. Tell them to go out to the freighter offshore." When Lucy hesitated and looked at the unconscious man in the corner, Perry said in a flat, lifeless voice: "Lloyd will be all right. Do as I say and hurry."

She turned away without another word. Perry stared at Amideo and

then at Meguera. He felt pressure creep along the muscles of his shoulders. Meguera still wasn't smiling. The man's dark, battered face was blank. He swayed slightly on his feet.

Perry said: "You've got your boat, Amideo?"

"Si."

"Then let's go."

Meguera stopped rocking on his feet. "Where? What's the idea?"

Perry said: "We're going on a cruise. You're coming along, too. You're walking ahead—where I can see you."

FIFTEEN minutes later Amideo cut the motors of his fishing boat and the bow bumped against the towering walls of the anchored freighter. A rope ladder dangled down the steel plates.

Perry gestured with his gun.

"You first, Meguera. Then me. You come too, Amideo."

"Is crazy," Amideo grunted.

Meguera went up the rope ladder, Perry behind him, holding his gun and carefully avoiding coming too close to the man's heels. On deck they stood in silence, listening to the rain on the steel plates.

Perry gestured with the gun and Meguera, shrugging, led the way across the forward well deck to a ladder that mounted to the bridge. Yellow light flooded the black steel plates, streaming from the ship's housing. Walking down a short corridor, Perry found the captain's cabin at the end.

"Inside!" he said.

Meguera preceded him through the doorway.

A tall, thin man with a wisp of a beard sprang to his feet, letting a pen fall to the floor. The steel point stuck in the carpet and the holder vibrated in a rapid, blurred arc.

"Damn it!" he said. "Damn it. More trouble."

Perry said: "No trouble at all." He watched Meguera's dark bruised face from the tail of his eye. "I'm looking for your passengers."

The captain's craggy face looked harsh in the brittle yellow light. "If you mean Laramie and Tortuba, they went ashore." He swung to Amideo. "Didn't you take them ashore?"

Amideo said: "No."

In the silence the captain stooped and picked up the penholder. He thundered: "Damn!" He turned to Meguera. "You said they went ashore."

The dark man shrugged. His mouth was listless. "I thought so, myself."

Perry asked: "So you were aboard, too?"

"I heard that Laramie wished to speak to me, and so I came aboard," Amideo replied.

"Did you see him?"

"No!"

The captain said: "You said you did."

Meguera said: "You are mistaken."

Perry rocked a little on his heels. His blue eyes were hard, grim little lines webbing from the corners. The captain made a sucking sound between his teeth and said:

"I'm sorry I ever got into this."

"Into what?" Perry asked.

"I'm not supposed to take on passengers. This Meguera here asked me first. He offered me a thousand dollars for every hour I waited here for him. Then the big guy and the blond girl. I don't know. Laramie told me to let 'em come on, he said he was a dick, but I'm sorry I listened to him. I don't like this at all."

Perry said softly: "The big guy and the blonde—they're still aboard?"

The captain nodded. "Yes, somewhere."

Perry said: "Let's look."

AMIDEO and the captain took the starboard side. Perry and Meguera took the port. The dark man walked a little ahead of Perry, who kept his hand deep in his pocket, around the gun.

They were crossing the open stretch of deck before the aft hoist when the shot came whining out of the dark. The crack of the gun followed an instant later, to be instantly swallowed up in the wind and rain. Metal spanged on the steel deck plates.

Meguera jumped and cursed very softly. Perry dropped to one knee, sharpening his eyes against the darkness, waiting for the second shot. He moved back, a little at a time, until he reached the deep shadow of the cabin wall. Meguera slid along with him until they crouched side by side.

"It came from there."

As though anticipating his words, bright-orange flame penciled toward them. A bullet spattered lead above Perry's head. From far up forward came a querulous shout.

"From the aft hold," said Meguera.

Perry shouted: "Mitchell!"

A third shot cracked dimly. The shot came nowhere near.

Perry said: "Come on," and got up, sprinted across the deck toward the companionway. He heard Meguera's feet pattering beside him. A fourth shot cracked, much louder this time, and the bullet nicked Perry's cheek, drawing quick blood.

He dived at the dim shadow in the companionway.

Mitchell's breath sobbed and bubbled. The man's gun whistled

through the air, cracked on Perry's shoulder. Perry staggered, came forward again. His knuckles cracked sharply on the big man's jaw.

"That's for Lucy," Perry gasped.

Mitchell cursed. He was a dim bulk on the tiny platform. Below them yawned the dimness of the hold, smelling of past cargoes of bananas. The big man came forward, his eyes gleaming with a hot, white shine. He said: "I'll kill you. Wait. I'll kill you."

Perry's foot lashed out, kicking at the big man's wrist. Mitchell dropped his automatic with a sudden grunt of pain, and it clattered with loud metallic echoes down the iron steps. Perry came forward, his left slashing upward. His knuckles crunched solidly on flesh and bone.

"That's for Lucy, too."

Another blow thudded in the darkness.

"So is that!"

Mitchell's breath whistled. He stepped backward, suddenly shouted in alarm. Perry leaped after him, clutching for the wildly waving hand before him. He missed. There came a series of dull bumps as the big man crashed down the companion steps. Perry waited, drawing deep breaths. He turned, looking for Meguera, and swore bitterly. The dark man had disappeared. He started down the steps, moving carefully.

Scrabbling noises sounded among the crates and dim boxes piled below. A man's breath rasped hoarsely, swearing in a monotonous tone.

Perry called: "Stop it, Mitchell!"

"To hell with you."

Perry dived over the rail. His shoulder crashed solidly into Mitchell's body, and the big man's gun, recovered, went off with an echoing blast that reverberated through the

vast hold. Perry's right thudded into the man's middle. Mitchell staggered back against a pile of crates that wobbled dangerously with his weight. He came forward again, taking slow, dragging steps toward Perry's figure.

"Don't . . . don't hit me again."

Perry said: "Drop your gun."

The big man swayed and let the gun slip to the floor. Perry kicked it aside, bent forward slowly. As he straightened, the lights came on in the high ceiling, glaring with blinding brightness. The vastness of the after-hold leaped into startling clearness.

Meguera stepped carefully around the corner. He had a gun in his hand. His face was contorted. Mitchell turned his bloody head toward the dark man and suddenly dropped to his knees.

"Don't shoot. For God's sake, *don't*—"

Meguera's brown lips twitched. He was smiling again. He lifted the gun and fired.

The echoes of the shot coincided with the dull thud of Mitchell's head as it struck the floor. The top of the big man's scalp vanished into a red mess.

Perry turned slowly toward the brown man. Meguera's gun was leaking writhing plumes of smoke around his thin, dark face.

Perry said: "That was smart."

Meguera nodded carefully. "Yes!"

"You had to do that, didn't you?"

"He was dangerous."

Perry said: "He'd already dropped his gun."

"He was still dangerous."

"To you—yes."

Meguera stood very still. His crooked little smile kept jerking his mouth out of shape. His eyes never left Perry's. Drumming feet

sounded distantly overhead. Finally the brown man said quietly: "I see. It won't work, eh?"

"No!"

"Yes, it will." Meguera licked his lips and slowly raised the gun. "You are next."

Perry said: "I've got a gun, too."

"It makes no difference."

Gunfire exploded simultaneously, racketing in the huge hold. The hammer of Perry's little .32 made a harmless little click in the din; it was empty. Meguera's bullet streaked far overhead to make a tiny pinging noise against iron.

The dark man's face was still smiling. He took a step backward and glanced up, once, and then leaned against a crate. He put his gun on top of it and went through the motions of washing his hands. Bright blood bubbled down his throat, staining his tie and shirt. He touched his neck carefully, with one finger, and looked up again. His eyes returned to Perry and he laughed; the sound was ghastly. Then slowly, very slowly, he slipped down to the floor.

Perry glanced up at the companionway.

Carol was coming down the steps. The blond woman's face was a rigid mask of white pain. She held a gun with both hands, and it was still smoking. She didn't look at Perry.

She put the gun down on the crate beside Meguera's and began kicking the dead man.

She said: "You killed Ian. You killed Ian." She said it over and over again, kicking the dead man each time.

Perry took a swift step forward and slammed her on the jaw, hard. She stumbled forward, tripped over Mitchell, and came up against the far wall of the cargo alley.

Abruptly she began to cry.

CHAPTER XII.

KILLER AT SEA.

CAS LARAMIE came down the steps, chafing his wrists. Behind him, his black mustache drooping, was the round, bulbous face of Señor Tortuba. Crowding down in a solid troop behind them came the captain and Amideo, two sailors, and a man in oilskins with a star pinned on his chest. Behind the sheriff was Lucy and Lloyd. The blond young man had his arm around Lucy's shoulder.

Laramie's gray eyes swept the scene in one comprehensive glance. He sighed, still rubbing his wrists, and looked at Perry.

"You did a nice job. Suppose you make sense of it all, huh?"

Perry felt around Mitchell's body, and came up with two segments of the map and a thick bundle of currency. He dropped them on the floor and sat down.

He said: "Mitchell got this stuff from Meguera. It was Meguera who poisoned Anthony Randolph. He did it because Randolph wouldn't consent to his scheme to conduct a secret search for the gold that old Jonathan had looted from the San Felize treasury. That was all a long time ago—so any search would have to be made under the supervision of the San Felize government. Randolph wanted to do it that way. Meguera wanted a secret expedition to steal the cache from the country. When Randolph refused, Meguera killed him, hoping to steal Randolph's half of the map in the confusion that would follow. That's my guess, anyway. We can't ask Randolph and we can't ask Meguera, now." Perry smiled tiredly. "Meguera didn't count on Neil Randolph showing up. Panfield was right, after all."

Señor Tortuba suddenly pushed

forward past a gaping second officer. He brushed his mustache impatiently, peering at Perry with little, excited black eyes, and turned to Laramie.

"I tell you again, Señor Laramie, this is *not* the man!"

Perry stared. "Who are you?"

Laramie smiled, said: "Señor Tortuba is a member of the . . . uh, San Felize Secret Service—or something. San Felize asked our co-operation in getting the map. That's how the Federal government got into this mess. Tortuba's been working with me on the case. He knew Neil Randolph in Central America."

Perry said abruptly: "I'm not Neil Randolph." He heard Lucy's startled gasp, and went on: "Neil Randolph is dead. I'm Perry Warren. Panfield hired me, but even Panfield didn't know that Neil was dead. I found his body in the swamp. Meguera had killed him, too. He had to, after poisoning Randolph. Neil was the sort who'd hog it all, having finally inherited. He probably met Meguera abroad and they cooked up the plan to get Meguera into the house on the pretense of selling Meguera's half of the map to Randolph. I doubt if they intended to part with their section of it. They wanted Randolph's. When the old man was killed, Neil wanted no more part in the business. He probably hadn't too much love for his father, from what I hear, but you can't tell. He probably balked at going on with it when he learned of Meguera's poison act. So Meguera had to kill him—and did."

"Carol and Mitchell didn't know about the map business until last night. They wanted to go off together, but they needed money, and Mitchell cooked up a scheme to get that which was in the safe.

Carol vamped Lloyd into trying to open it for her, and Lloyd in turn got Lucy Wayne to remove my credentials and the combination and turn them over to him. Lucy didn't know Lloyd intended to break the safe until it was too late. When Lloyd went through with it, Meguera thought he'd gotten away with the map, and snatched him.

"Mitchell thought that Lloyd's disappearance meant a double cross. So he took Lucy to find out where Lloyd was. She didn't know—but she did have the Randolph part of the map. She'd been afraid of Lloyd's activity, knowing he was under Carol's thumb, and she removed the map from the safe. Mitchell forced her to tell about it and got it. Then he came after Meguera and got Meguera's half, too, because Amideo blundered on the scene. Meguera killed Mitchell just now in the hope that Mitchell would take the rap for everything. But I knew—and Carol knew—

"I had Meguera tabbed when he used Lucy's lipstick to warn me that he knew I wasn't Neil Randolph. It was a hell of a blunder. The writing was awkward, foreign—'know who you are not'—and the fact that Panfield alone knew I was not Neil indicated that there was someone in the house who'd actually known Neil abroad. The obvious answer to that was Meguera, with his occasional awkward diction. Then when I found Neil's body, it all clicked together and I had the answers."

Perry turned to Cas Laramie. "I couldn't come out and admit I was Perry Warren, an impostor, after we found Panfield dead. It would have looked as though I'd gotten ideas of my own and killed him in order to play the part of heir for good. I was in a spot. Meguera,

lugging Lloyd off down the path, was surprised by Panfield's sudden arrival and knocked the old man out. You remember the bruise we found on Panfield's jaw? That was Meguera's work, in the heat of surprise. Then he realized he couldn't let Panfield come to and expose him as Lloyd's snatcher. He had to silence the old man for good. So he ran back to the house and slipped into Lloyd's room, got Lloyd's saber and returned and"—Perry's mouth went wry—"killed Panfield with the sword while the old man was still unconscious. Then Meguera left the sword beside the body to frame Lloyd. With Lloyd missing, it would all look very neat."

Laramie sighed and said: "I guess that's about it." Turning, he stared distastefully at Lloyd. "I don't suppose you can be prosecuted for burgling your own safe. I took the trouble of checking up on Randolph's will and, next to Neil, you were in line for all the plums. The estate was yours when you monkeyed with the safe, because Neil was already dead when you did your favor for Carol. I guess it's not worth the trouble bothering you."

Lloyd turned red and looked away to Carol, and his lips twitched.

Perry sat down on the box, stretching his legs, and lit a cigarette.

The sheriff took charge of the proceedings.

Tortuba and Laramie went off, the former spouting voluble Spanish.

LUCY stood on deck, watching the sheriff and the crew help Carol and Amideo file slowly down into the boats waiting below. Lloyd stood beside her, his hand folded over hers on the rail.

"Lucy," he said, "I've been an awful fool—about a lot of things."

She nodded. "Yes!"

"Lucy—I'll make it up to you. I'll give you everything. I can make you happy, darling."

Once, Lucy thought, she would have been thrilled through and through to hear Lloyd say these things. She wondered why. Now she marveled that it had no effect on her, leaving her indifferent.

She said quietly: "Lloyd, I don't want to hurt you. It's just that things have been changed by what's happened. No one could go through all this and remain the same. I haven't. I don't love you, Lloyd. It was a mistake. I've been wrong."

"But, Lucy—" Lloyd began.

"I don't love you, Lloyd. Don't you understand?"

Laramie came along a few minutes later. He stared down at the waiting boats, then paused beside Lucy at the rail. His gray eyes had a faint gleam behind them.

"Waiting for someone?"

"I'm waiting for Perry."

Laramie said: "He's not going ashore. He's going to San Felize with Tortuba. Tortuba's nuts about him. He gave Perry the job of locating the San Felize treasury funds with the map. Perry took it."

"He—took it? He's going away?"

Laramie nodded. "Are you coming ashore?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

PERRY WARREN sat on a tight-coiled hawser and listened to Señor Tortuba's glowing description of the glories of San Felize. He was only faintly interested. The freighter slid silently forward into the night, the light on the bow leading the way with scarcely a dip. The rain had stopped. The deck trembled gently underfoot with the vibration of the engines. Perry

kept staring at the vanishing shore, and at the little lights that bobbed over the black water—Amideo's boat, returning to the mainland. He kept wondering if he had made a mistake. He decided to make inquiries on a return trip as soon as he landed.

A small soft voice said: "This is really nice, isn't it?"

Perry got to his feet with a swift lunge, and then stood very still. Lucy Wayne stood before him, smiling, and her lips trembled. Her eyes were very bright.

Perry said huskily: "You didn't go ashore!"

"No!"

"But Lloyd—" he said.

"Lloyd is happy enough with his inheritance."

Perry tilted up her chin and kissed her. The kiss seemed destined to last forever.

Señor Tortuba coughed explosively. Perry took his arms from around Lucy and stared pointedly at the little fat man. Tortuba didn't go away.

Perry said: "Lucy, you just can't stay here. We'll be four days at sea. It just isn't—"

Señor Tortuba coughed again.

Perry said: "Will you please go away?"

Tortuba stayed.

Lucy smiled and stood very close in Perry's arms. She said: "Why can't I stay? You love me, don't you, Perry?"

"You bet I love you. But—"

Señor Tortuba cleared his throat and said: "Shall I make arrangements with the captain? A sea captain offers all the facilities."

Perry said with vast relief: "Yes, go call the captain! Tell him to bring his little black book."

Señor Tortuba finally went away.

THE END.

THE BLACK WIDOW MURDERS



By BENTON BRADEN

The Black Widow Murders

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CHAPTER I. SUICIDE CLUB.

NOW, looky here, Mr. Johnny Pike," Penny McGee said, shaking her red head in mock severity, "if you brought me to lunch at the Carlrutz just so you'd have an excuse to stare at that sleek blonde at the other side of the room, I'm gonna walk out on you. Look at her! That black silk dress fits so tight that it'll blow a seam if she swallows another mouthful of food. She's one of those blasted sirens, Johnny. You look at me and play safe."

Pike turned his eyes back and looked across the table at Penny. "You've got me wrong, Penny," he chuckled. "I hadn't even noticed the gal in black till you mentioned her. I was looking at the man who is with her. From where I'm sitting, I can only see the girl's back. But now that you've called my attention to her, I'd say she's a brunette."

"It makes no difference," Penny laughed. "Blondes and brunettes should both be poison to you. You stick to redheads and you'll never get two-timed."

"Yeah, but what happens to guys that two-time redheads?" Pike asked with a shudder.

"They get what's coming to them, Johnny. They wake up with daggers in their hearts—or their throats cut from left to right. Let that be a warning to you. But who's the man you were so interested in?"

"I wasn't particularly interested in

him," Pike denied. "It's just that I hadn't seen him for a long time. In fact, I hardly know him. His name is Hartwell Lang. He's got dough, a lot of it. I remember he got in a jam in Paris a couple of years ago. The rumor was that it cost him plenty to pull out of it. I've seen his wife a time or two. I don't think that's his wife with him."

"You don't mean to tell me that there are actually guys in this town that run around with other women? Boy, am I shocked!"

"You look shocked," Pike observed dryly. "And you're going to twist your neck off, trying to get a glimpse of the girl's face."

"I can't make it," Penny confessed. "But whether I can see her face or not, I can guarantee that she isn't his wife. Look at that moon-face of his. He's pouring his soul out to her. He's in the agonies. The poor sap!"

Penny McGee was right about that. Hartwell Lang was leaning across the table, his eyes imploring, a little wild. "We can't go on like this, Angela," he said hoarsely. "I can't live without you! It's driving me crazy!"

The coldly beautiful woman across the table smiled at him. Her heavy lashes lowered a trifle, partially shielding the big greenish eyes. "I can't say that I'm enjoying the situation, Hartwell," she said softly. "I'll confess that I'm quite mad about you. But you can hardly contend that it's my fault. You are

the one that happens to be already married."

Lang winced a little. "Yes, I'm married, Angela. But I'll get a divorce! I'll get rid of her. I'll do anything you say. Anything! But we can't go on like this any longer. You're the only thing in this world that I've ever really wanted. You're so lovely—so lovely that sometimes I'm a little afraid of you."

The green eyes flicked for an instant at those last words, as though she were mildly alarmed. Her manner suddenly changed. The coldness seemed to go out of her face. She was smiling, her eyes were misted and dreamy as she swayed toward him.

"I . . . I can't hold out any longer, Hartwell," she breathed. "I've tried—but I love you too much. I'll do anything you say! I know you'll marry me just as soon as you're free. In the meantime—" She slid her hand across the table and placed it in his.

"Angela!" he choked. "You've made me so happy—I could die!"

Hartwell Lang did die. He was dead within thirty-six hours. But it wasn't exactly happiness that killed him. The visible evidence indicated that he had died by his own hand.

HARRY ANSON, the dynamic little columnist, leveled an accusing forefinger at Penny McGee and Johnny Pike. "This was the chance of a lifetime—and you muffed it!" he barked in a voice that was familiar to millions of radio listeners. "You sat there and watched Hartwell Lang and this dame for an hour. Now this Hartwell Lang turns out to be the eighth member of this suicide club that's got the town on its ears. And you didn't even see the dame's face! Ye gods!"

"But how were we to know that Lang was going to be that eighth member?" Penny McGee demanded hotly. "So far as we knew, he was just another palooka, giving his wife the run-around. How could we guess what was coming off? Do you expect me to be psychic—on the salary you pay me?"

"You didn't have to be psychic!" Anson yelled. "This Hartwell Lang was no palooka. His picture's been in the society columns. Johnny told you he had been in a scrape in Paris. He'd rate a crack in the column. You should have got the name of that dame. That's elementary stuff. I thought I taught you that long ago. Yet neither you nor Johnny took the trouble to stroll by the table and take a gander at her face."

"What of it, Anson?" Pike asked mildly. "The fact that Lang had a luncheon date the day before he kicked himself off doesn't mean a thing."

"You think it doesn't?" Anson threw up his hands in disgust and sank back into his swivel chair. Then he leaned forward again and spoke slowly, dramatically. "That dame," he said, "was the Black Widow!"

"Never heard of her," Pike shrugged.

"The cops have heard of her!" Anson snapped. "They'd give their eyeteeth to get their hands on her. So would I. If I knew who that dame was, I could come damn near to breaking this case. And this suicide club is the biggest thing that's been dumped in our laps for years. Eight men dead! A complete mystery."

"Where does this Black Widow come in?" Penny asked.

"The cops aren't putting that out," Anson replied. "They're keeping it under their hats until they can nab

her. But I got the tip through one of my lines. Now, get the whole picture. Eight men have died! Every one of 'em well known, well-to-do. Not one of them ever mixed up in any kind of crime. All of 'em had clean records as far as the law is concerned. Each of these men apparently committed suicide. Found shot through the head—with the death-gun in their right hands. Not one particle of evidence to prove that they weren't suicides."

"But the cops have their suspicions," Penny put in.

"Sure! Because the motive for suicide, in each case, has been very vague."

"But each of them left a letter," Penny demurred, "saying he had joined the suicide club. Hartwell Lang left the same kind of note. His letter said that the suicide club was an adventure in the occult, that he and the other seven men who had gone before him had made a pact to attempt to pierce the curtains of death. He said that if the experiment were successful they would be able to communicate with the living within the next year."

"Yeah, but that was a lot of malarkey," Anson frowned. "Those letters were all written on a typewriter. They had the fingerprints of the dead men on them. But not one of them was signed. The cops aren't falling for that 'mystery of death' stuff. They're going on the theory that all those men were murdered."

"But why? Why should anyone want to murder all those men?" Penny asked, her eyes a little wide.

"You ask me that!" Anson said ironically. "When you had the answer right in your hands? The Black Widow is the answer."

"Where does she come in?"

"When the first two men committed suicide," Anson explained, "the cops thought it was a scheme to defraud insurance companies. Both of those men carried big insurance on their lives. But some of the ones that have died since had only trivial amounts of insurance. So that idea was exploded. The cops next checked on the wives of all these men. They didn't get anywhere. The cops went after all the other angles. It was always dead end. They were completely baffled—until the Black Widow showed."

"How did they learn about this Black Widow thing?"

"By checking back. This could be done because all these men were fairly prominent. They lived in good homes, had servants. They dined in first-class restaurants and were known to many people. The cops checked back step by step—from the moment of the deaths. They had a host of dicks working. They didn't seem to be getting anywhere—until they condensed the data and made comparisons. Then they found that at least three of the dead men, possibly four, had been seen with a mysterious lady in black—a day or so before their deaths."

"But the cops couldn't find out who she was?"

"No! They couldn't find out because the ones who had seen her with the about-to-dies only vaguely remembered her. All they could be sure about was that she was dressed in black, wore a half-veil, and one of these slappy hats that come down over one side of the face. The answer to that is that the dame didn't want to be recognized. She was covering her face as much as possible. And black is about as inconspicuous a color as there is.

There's not much to describe about a black dress."

"I can tell you one thing about it," Penny said. "It wasn't wholly black. There was a white line on each sleeve. Not a straight white line. But a line with jags in it, like a streak of lightning. And there was a bit of white on her hat."

"That practically identifies her," Anson said sarcastically. "There probably aren't over a hundred thousand dresses in this town that could be described the same way. Jeepers! If you'd only spotted that dame."

"But we didn't," Pike said with a broad smile, "so you might as well forget it."

Anson came to his feet and leaned over the desk. "Forget it?" he howled. "What do you think I'm in this business for? This is the biggest case that's broken in years. Eight men dead! I'll lay ten to one there's more slated to die! Forget it? I'm gonna bust this case wide open. I'm gonna nail that dame the cops call the Black Widow. She's made to order for me. Kiss-of-death stuff! She looks once into these guys' eyes and they go crazy, go out and blow their heads off. That may be the answer. Maybe she hypnotizes 'em. Maybe she has occult powers herself. Men look at her and die! A lady of death!"

"Take an aspirin and come out of the haze, Anson," Penny said dryly. "This dame we saw was putting away too much food to be occult."

"That's the way I'm gonna play it," Anson insisted. "I'm going to cut loose with that Black Widow in my next column. I got my tip under cover; so I'm under no pledge of secrecy. Tomorrow, the whole country will be talking about the Black Widow. Not only that—but I'm gonna pledge myself to bust the

case wide open or quit!"

"You're crazy, Anson," Penny protested. "You put yourself on the line like that, and they'll laugh you out of town—if you don't deliver."

"But," Anson smiled slyly, "I'm gonna deliver, Miss Penny McGee."

"How?" she asked sharply.

"You read my column and see, little cuckoo. See how the old master-mind works when the pressure is on. Now—I want you to do something for me, Johnny. You knew Hartwell Lang slightly—enough to go up and see his wife. The cops don't even know that you and Penny saw the Black Widow. You go up and see Mrs. Lang—make a stall—just hint around. Let her know that you saw Lang lunching with the dame. Maybe Mrs. Lang can give you a tip on who the dame is—if you play it right."

"You're not getting me into this," Pike said cautiously. "I'm not going to run myself ragged over this Black Widow. The whole thing sounds like a pipe dream to me. There's no proof whatever that these clucks did not actually kill themselves. There have been cases of suicide clubs before. Why not another one?"

"Have it your own way," Anson said magnanimously. "So it's a suicide club. Now just do me this one favor—because you and Penny muffed the lady in black. Run up and see Mrs. Hartwell Lang. Then phone me the dope—and forget it."

Pike hesitated a moment, then muttered: "O. K."

CHAPTER II.

POWER OF THE PRESS.

MRS. HARTWELL LANG was a rather colorless little woman of about thirty. She wore a gray dress

that could hardly be called glamorous. She was standing when Pike was ushered into the long living room. She didn't invite him to sit down. Nor did she move herself. She eyed him without interest and said: "Yes?"

"My name is John Pike, Mrs. Lang. I'm sorry to disturb you at a time like this."

"You are a reporter?" she asked dully.

"Not exactly. I'm here at the request of Harry Anson, the columnist." Pike had made up his mind to make it short and snappy. He didn't care if she threw him out without saying a word. "I happened to mention to Anson that I saw your husband lunching at the Carlriz day before yesterday. There was one . . . er . . . detail that might turn out to be important in the investigation that is being made."

"What is it?" she asked calmly.

"Mr. Lang was lunching with a lady—a lady dressed in black. Do you know who she was?"

She swallowed hard and looked a trifle upset for a moment. Then she said, a little bitterly: "I do not, Mr. Pike. I'm not surprised that he was lunching with . . . with another woman. That's not exactly unusual. He has lunched with numerous other ladies in the past. Ladies in white and blue and red—and all the other colors. I was unfortunate enough to see him on one or two occasions. As to this particular woman—I don't know. It's possible that I know her. Can you describe her?"

"Not definitely. She was dressed in black—and rather good-looking, I think," he said lamely.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pike. I couldn't help you much from that description. Now please don't get the wrong impression. Don't think I feel bitter toward Hartwell for what

he did in the past. As a matter of fact, I'm terribly sorry about his death. I'm anxious to do anything I can to help in solving the case. I can't believe he killed himself—knowing him as I do. But Hartwell and I haven't been living together as man and wife for a year. We've just drifted apart. So I can't pretend to be absolutely grief-stricken at his death. I'm sad, depressed about it. Now that he's gone, I'm trying to remember the good things about him—and forget the rest."

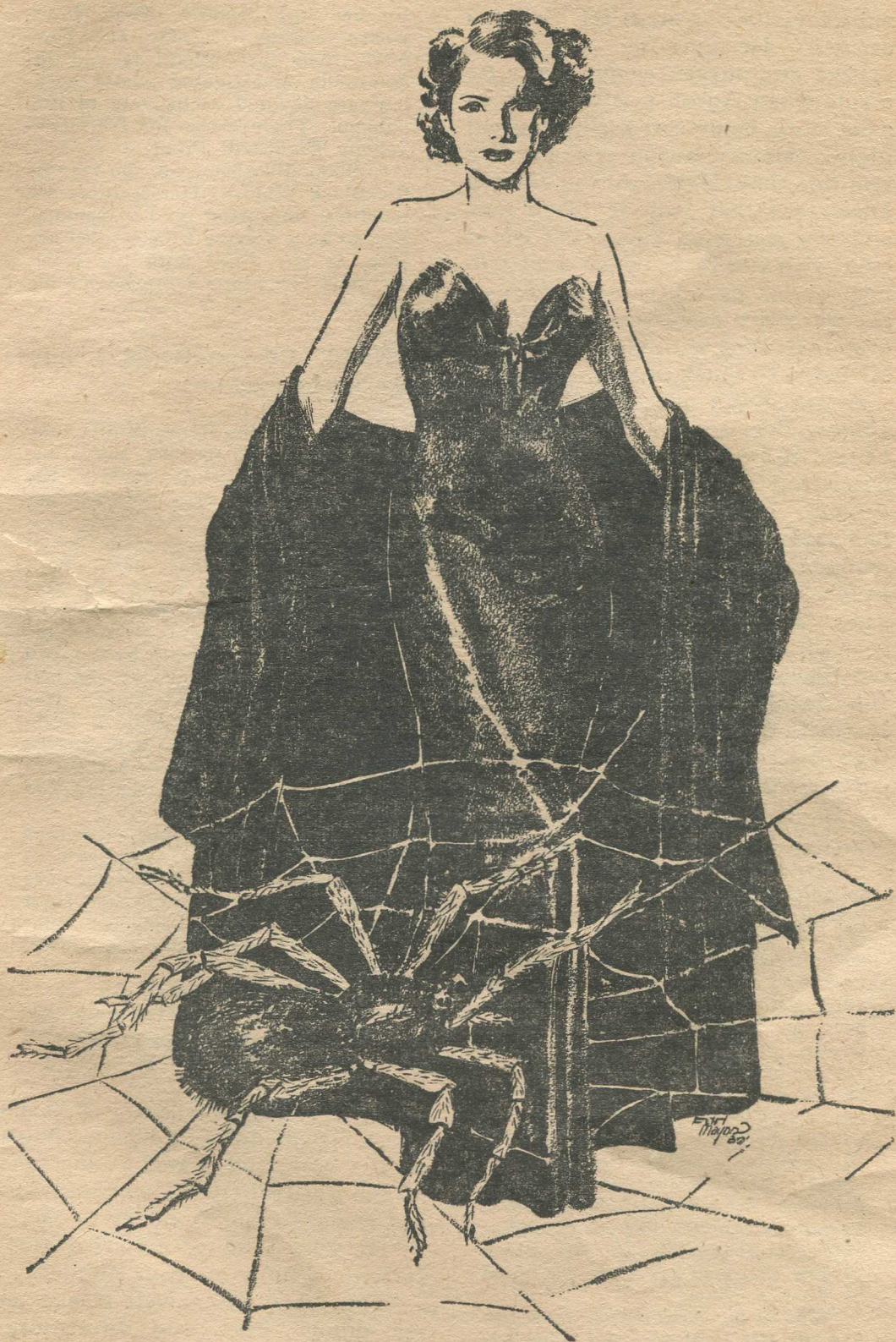
"When did you see him last?" Pike inquired.

"Oh, I saw him nearly every day. He still lived at the house here. We were both making the best of a rather unpleasant situation. We just never quite got to the point of arranging for a divorce."

"I don't want to make myself obnoxious," Pike told her with a faint smile. "But could you give me the names of any of these other women?"

"No! A wife is always the last one to be told of such things, Mr. Pike. And I'm rather proud of the fact, now that he's gone, that I never descended to snooping. I never spied on him—or even asked questions. But, doubtless, some of his men friends could tell you some of the things you want to know. The police will find out everything, too. I know there's no use trying to cover anything up. I've already told the detectives everything I know. If Hartwell was murdered—I want to see the guilty parties brought to justice. Is that all?"

It was. Pike left, made for the nearest phone, and reported to Anson. To Pike's surprise, Anson showed no disappointment at the lack of results. Anson didn't ask so much as a single question. "Much obliged, Johnny," Anson said al-



The Black Widow

most jovially. "Forget it! See you around." He hung up.

Pike was puzzled about that. As a rule when Anson was working on a big story, he pestered Pike day and night. Maybe Anson was kidding him this time. Maybe Anson already knew who that lady in black was, and was going to knock the world cold with the facts in his next column or his next broadcast. Anson always went dramatic, sensational, even in dealing with his best friends. He loved to shock people.

Anson didn't miss fire this time. Johnny Pike got the shock when he bought a copy of the paper at the newsstand and glanced at Anson's column. It was a sensation. Anson had reviewed the case; then he had exploded the story about the lady in black. He brought her in with a bang. The story was sprinkled with such phrases as "the mortal sting of the Black Widow" and "the beautiful, deadly orbs of the Lady of Death." But it was the heavy black type that made Pike blink—and curse a little. It read:

"The existence of this Black Widow, whose baleful and inexplicable influence has carried eight men to quick and violent death, has been known to the cops for some time. But the cops, in spite of persistent and diligent investigation, have been unable to establish her identity. Up until the present moment, she has been as unattainable as a vapory wraith.

"But now the Black Widow no longer will move secretly and furtively in the accomplishment of her wicked designs. The Black Widow will positively be identified and exposed! Exclusively exposed by this column! Yet only one man, unless it be her accomplices, has ever seen her face. Unfortunately for the Black Widow, that man has never yet failed to solve a crime.

"Who is this man that promises to find the Black Widow and bring her before the bar of justice to answer

for her dark crimes? Yeah, folks, you're guessing it already. It is none other than that relentless and indomitable investigator whose services are devoted exclusively to this column. The peerless and fearless—Johnny Eight-ball Pike!

"Johnny Pike has seen the face of the Black Widow. Her features are indelibly impressed on his memory. For an hour Johnny Pike studied her face, as she dined with her latest victim a few scant hours before his death."

"Nuts!" Pike muttered, his face red—but he read on:

"What does the Black Widow look like? According to Pike, she is one of the most beautiful women he has ever seen. Her eyes are lustrous, impelling, hypnotic. Are those eyes the answer to the strange deaths of the eight men who have known her? Has she the weird power to gaze upon a man with those peculiar, fateful eyes, charm him—destroy his will—drive him to death by his own hand? Is the Black Widow the evil promoter of the Suicide Club? Has this lovely creature, with a brain twisted by an unnatural hate for the opposite sex, deliberately set out to destroy ten, twenty—even a hundred men?

"Johnny Pike is going to answer those questions, folks. He has seen the face of the Black Widow! He is combing the city for her right now. Inevitably he'll find her. But will he find her before she strikes again?

"It is hardly necessary for me to remind you, my devoted readers, that further details and developments will be promptly reported in this column."

PIKE sailed into Harry Anson's office, slammed the newspaper down on the desk, and glared at the face of the guilty little columnist. Anson was grinning from ear to ear.

"Hi, yuh, Johnny," he cried gleefully. "What's on your mind?"

"You know damn well what's on my mind," Pike said wrathfully. "What kind of brainstorm have you

been having? You must have gone completely screwy!"

"Gone screwy?" Penny McGee said from her seat at the end of the desk. "He's been there and is on his way back. After all, you can't blame him. It's not his fault that three months before he was born his mother saw a whirling dervish. He was born a little dizzy and has gradually been getting worse, day by day. He thinks that," she pointed at the paper, "was a swell idea."

"If that's a swell idea, then I'm the Black Widow myself!" Pike snapped. "What are you trying to do, Anson? Make a sap out of me?"

"Nix, Johnny! The idea is that we're going to find that Black Widow."

"We are?" Penny grimaced. "You mean the idea is that Johnny will find her."

"Then he's got another guess coming. He can count me out," Johnny blazed.

"Anson thinks he's already got you counted in, Johnny. It's his usual idea of putting you on the spot. The Black Widow and her pals will read the column. They'll be afraid that you'll try to tear down their playhouse, so they'll come around and gun you out. But you'll be too smart to let them get you. You'll turn the tables on them and—"

"The idea is goofy," Pike said flatly. "Every crook in town has learned not to believe a thing that's printed in Anson's column. The Black Widow and her crew have got away with eight kills—without leaving a clue. That means that they are plenty smart. They won't fall for that old gag. They'll read that column and laugh. They'll know it's a bluff."

"Don't be too sure about that, Johnny," Anson said confidently.

"You notice that I planted one undisputed fact in that story. The Black Widow did lunch with her latest victim a few hours before he died. Take it from me—she won't laugh that off. She'll know that somebody saw her there! She won't know that you didn't get a look at her face. Now, that dame is nobody's fool. She's going to take the trouble to find out just how big the fire is."

"It won't get a tumble," Pike insisted.

"I'll bet my socks that it will," Anson said, rubbing his hands together in intense satisfaction.

"I've got a hundred that says it won't!" Pike challenged.

"I'll take twenty on it myself," Penny chimed in.

Anson's smile broadened to a beam. "You babes in the woods better save your dough for your old age," he chortled. "I ain't got the heart to take your money." He turned toward the door and shouted: "Joe!"

Joe Marks, Anson's bodyguard and general handy-man, lumbered into the room. Joe was big, amiable with those he liked, tough and rough with those he didn't like. He looked at Anson.

"We've got a doubter in camp, Anson said in a honeyed tone. "Mr. Pike, here, doesn't think that my column gets results. Kindly inform Mr. Pike just what happened during the past few hours, Joe."

Joe grinned. "Well, it was this way, Johnny. Anson shows me that column before it hits the street. He says he's afraid somebody might get fancy ideas and gun you before you know what's goin' on; so he shoots me up to your place to keep an eye on you. So I spot myself up there by your apartment—with a gat under each shoulder. I had to wait

three hours before you showed. I was keepin' well under cover so you wouldn't get next to me. Well, nobody tried to gun you."

"Of course not," Pike frowned.

"But there was a guy tailin' you," Joe Marks stated very positively.

Pike stared for a moment. "You're sure about that, Joe?"

"I couldn't miss. You weren't payin' any attention so the guy didn't take much pains to cover. He was a little, slim feller in a blue suit and dark hat. He tailed you right here. I phoned Anson as you entered the building. It's the Black Widder, Johnny. She's put one of her stooges on you."

"You see how it is, Johnny," Anson said airily. "Now all you got to do is let that stooge make a break and give his hand away. Then you can figure out a smart play, spot the Black Widow, and—"

"And I can forget the whole damn business!" Pike said shortly. "I called on that Mrs. Lang, didn't I? I asked her the questions and gave you the answers, didn't I? That lets me out. I'm going to enjoy reading all about the Black Widow, Anson. I won't miss one of your columns." Pike stalked out.

"Where does that leave you, wise guy?" Penny McGee asked Anson a minute later. "You won't get anywhere—with Johnny walking out on you."

But Anson didn't seem to be at all perturbed. "He just *thinks* he's walking out on me, Penny," he said lightly. "I know that guy better than he knows himself. Pike is a restless guy. He can go just so long without stirring up something. And when he's smacked squarely in the face with a mystery, he can't sleep until he figures it out. Sure! He pulled out of here in kind of a huff. But when he starts down the street

he isn't going to resist the temptation to see if he's being tailed. When he spots that guy in the blue suit he's going to start thinking—asking himself questions. There'll be only one way he can get the answers. Don't worry. He'll go after 'em."

"You've sure put yourself out on a limb," she said thoughtfully. "Suppose Johnny slips up. After all, the fact that a guy is tailing him doesn't amount to much. Suppose he doesn't spot the Black Widow. And has to admit to the cops that he didn't even see her face. What'll happen then?"

"You can answer that question yourself, Penny. You eat off this lousy business, too. I've bet the whole works on Pike. He's never let me down yet."

Anson's psychology was right. Pike walked two blocks fast, looked neither to right nor left. Then his curiosity got the better of him. He checked. There was no doubt about it. The little guy in the blue suit was trailing along behind.

Pike's face hardened a little. His brow wrinkled. He had a hunch he would like to see that Black Widow again, see her face. What kind of a looking dame would she really be? What kind of game was she playing? It was a rough one, no doubt. Eight men were dead. Why? Who was cashing in? Pike's brain began to race. He could grab that tail in less than a minute. But the chances were that the tail, if he knew anything, would shut up like a clam and deny that he was even following Pike. This Black Widow would be too smart to use a tail that didn't know his stuff. She'd also be too smart to fall completely for the guff in Anson's column. But she'd try to find out just where she stood. How would she work it? Pike went directly to his apartment. For an hour he walked up and down his

living room. At last his face relaxed a little. He went to the telephone and made a call. If the Black Widow played it like he figured she would, he'd be able to get a line on her.

CHAPTER III. BRIDGE SCHOOL.

AT ten o'clock that night Pike left his apartment, faultlessly attired in tails. The perfectly fitting coat was specially tailored. There was no sign of the guns that were concealed near his hips. He had wanted to ask Penny McGee to go with him, but had given up the idea. He might be wrong. The Black Widow might not try a smooth play. She might have decided that the only sure way out would be to cut loose with a submachine gun. He couldn't take a chance with Penny on that.

His eyes missed nothing as he got into the taxi. He saw, after a block, that a car was following. But the car kept its distance, made no effort to close in. In fifteen minutes Pike climbed from the taxi and entered the Club Arax. In less than two minutes he was seated at a not too inconspicuous table. The floor show was on. Pike ordered a Scotch and soda, tossed it off quickly, ordered another.

He wasn't interested in the floor show. With seeming carelessness, he inspected the tables about him. The place wasn't crowded. It wasn't difficult. The show ended after thirty minutes. The lights, that had been lowered for the finale, blazed again. The place began to buzz with conversation.

A girl slipped into one of the chairs at his table. She was blond, young, had large eyes. She was laughing.

"How are you, Johnny?" she

greeted. "Long time, no see."

"Hello, Madge," he smiled back. "I didn't know you were working here."

"I've only been here a week," she told him. "The same old job, though. I'm supposed to be a tonic to tired customers."

"Do I look like a tired customer?" he chuckled.

"Not by a long sight, Johnny. You look swell. You know"—her eyes sparkled—"it's a wonder that Black Widow didn't spend an hour looking at you—instead of you looking at her. Was she really the looker that Anson said she was—in his column?"

"Yes and no, Madge," he said humorously. "She was as beautiful as they come. Outwardly. But there was something in her eyes that made me think of . . . of death rays."

Madge blinked, shuddered a little. "Eight of them they say she's driven to suicide," she said solemnly. "Say! You don't expect to find her here tonight, do you?"

"Hardly. She'll probably take pains to keep out of my way. Because she knows that if I see her again, I'll grab her and turn her over to the cops."

"I'd hate to be in her place—with you after her, Johnny. Well, I got to circulate. I'm supposed to—"

"You're supposed to stick right at this table and entertain me," Pike interrupted. "You run out on me, and I'll complain to the management."

"Am I flattered?" she said. Then her eyes narrowed. "I'm no push-over, you know, Johnny. What's the gag?"

"There are some things I want to watch—without being too direct about it. You keep up the chatter.

If I mumble something, pretend it's funny. You'll get fifty bucks for the act—and for not asking questions."

"Fifty bucks! Let's go. I'd do five a day for that."

She began to talk with enthusiasm, but Pike hardly heard what she was saying. His attention was diverted to the two men who had taken seats two tables to the right of him. He hadn't seen them enter the room. But he had sensed that they were watching him. Without concentrating his eyes on them Pike was inspecting them with seemingly casual glances.

He tensed a little. The two men were dressed in Tuxedos, and they were plainly stiff and uncomfortable. Their jackets bulged a little in the wrong places. They were heeled and ready for action. They sat there, hardly moving. Yet there was not a moment that one of them was not watching Pike.

It had been an hour since Pike had entered the Arax. The club was becoming crowded. The orchestra was blaring and couples filed past Pike's table on their way to and from the dance floor. Drinks were circulating fast and the place was getting very noisy. Madge was talking gaily, laughing shrilly. Pike laughed and talked, too, but there was no point to his words. His mind was on other things.

Now he was paying only scant attention to the two men who sat at his right. But he was looking directly into the face of every woman who passed his table. Nearly all of them smiled at him. Some moved their lips a little. Two or three of them gave him the nod. But Pike was always shifting his eyes on to the next one.

The act continued for nearly forty

minutes, marred only by the almost violent manipulations of a candid-camera fiend who was putting on a show at the next table. The guy, a sandy-haired, sharp-faced little fellow, was snapping pictures all over the place. Suddenly he jumped over and shoved his box almost in Pike's face.

"This is Eight-ball Pike!" he screamed. "Another celeb! Bingo! I got him."

Obviously he wasn't satisfied with a single shot. He snapped another from the edge of the table. Then he got down on the floor.

"Put your head up, Pike!" he yelled. "Look at the ceiling! I want one of those soulful shots that I can use—"

"Get next to yourself!" Pike frowned. "You're a pest! Scram!"

"Just this once, Pike!" the little fellow insisted. "Just one—"

"You heard what he said, you mug!" Madge cut him off angrily. "You must be from the hills. That stuff went out with the Big Apple. You can't annoy customers in here." She had already signaled to the waiter. The waiter came over, looked at Pike uncertainly. Pike flicked up his right thumb. The waiter picked the sandy-haired lad off the floor, jerked him to his feet and hustled him toward the entrance foyer.

Pike looked around. The two men who had sat at the table at his right had disappeared. Pike lingered another fifteen minutes, then left, too.

ANSON'S eyes looked anxious when Pike walked into the columnist's office the next morning. Penny McGee's expression was critical.

"So you threw yourself a party last night," she said accusingly. "You went to the Arax. I heard all



Tripp's gun roared, but the table hid Pike's figure from him.

about it. Madge Lorrance. Humph! She's got a boy in military school. Was that your idea of relaxing?"

"I like the Arax," Pike grinned. "It's large—and roomy."

"Large and roomy!" Penny scoffed. "I never noticed you were a fresh-air fiend before. The Arax is a dump. What was the real attraction?"

"I had an appointment there with a very charming lady. A lady known in certain social circles as—the Black Widow."

Anson's eyes bulged. "You don't mean—you saw her there?" he gasped.

"Sure I saw her," Pike announced calmly.

"You saw her—and didn't grab her?"

"Naturally I didn't grab her. I wouldn't know her if I met her on the street right now."

"What kind of double-talk is this?" Anson sputtered. "You say you saw the Black Widow—and yet you don't know her?"

"That's it exactly, Anson. There were a lot of gals in the Arax last night. I should say that at least forty of them passed by my table while I sat there. I have every reason to believe that one of them was the Black Widow."

"But you couldn't spot her?"

"No! I didn't see a single girl in a black gown."

"Don't be that way, Johnny," Penny begged. "You know we're both on needles. Spill us the story."

"Sure! Here's how I figured it, Penny. I knew that the Black Widow and her pals wouldn't go the whole hog on that come-on in Anson's column. But they'd be a little nervous about it. The tail they put on me proved that. And it proved that they'd check at the first opportunity. I gave them an opportunity, gave it

to them quickly. I picked the Arax because there's never any trouble getting a table there. Yet there's always a lot of people there, too. They can seat a big mob there. It looked like the right set-up to me."

"It worked out that way?"

"Yes. I hadn't been in there an hour until two guys came in, took a table to the right of me, watched me. I knew they had gats. And I could guess they were planted there to knock me over if I recognized the Black Widow when I saw her. Then, sometime during the evening, the Black Widow paraded past my table. She probably looked me squarely in the eyes, maybe smiled. Several of the dames did. Of course, I didn't know which one of the forty dames she was. So now she and her two yeggs are satisfied that the cracks in the column was a bluff."

"But where does that get you, Johnny?" Penny said, perplexed. "You can't possibly remember the faces of all the women you saw in the Arax. You admit that you wouldn't know her if you passed her on the street right now."

"That's right, Penny. But I had a singer out. I had Freddie Hallet planted at the next table with his candid camera. Freddie had a busy evening. He snapped every dame that came within shooting distance of me. To make it good, I had him put on an act just as those two yeggs started to leave their table. A waiter gave him the rush. He went out of the Arax at the same time the yeggs did. He was cussing me, but they didn't give him a tumble. They weren't interested any more. The proof is that I wasn't tailed when I left the Arax. The Black Widow had assured herself that she had nothing to worry about as far as I was concerned. Maybe she's guessed wrong?"

Pike opened the large envelope he carried in his left hand, pulled out a stack of pictures, laid them on the desk. "There are Freddie's enlargements," he said. "Now it's a question of elimination."

Anson picked up the pictures, shuffled them for a minute. "Let's get busy," he snapped. "I know a bunch of these dames. The three of us can discard most of them right now after we compare notes. Then it'll be a simple job of checking up on the unknowns."

In half an hour they had reduced the stack of suspects to seven pictures. Pike went out with them.

LATE that afternoon a head waiter that Pike knew, pointed at one of the two remaining pictures that Pike showed him.

"I've seen that one in here four or five times, Pike," he said. "I don't know her name but she was always with Max Tripp. You know Max?"

"I know him by reputation. He used to be a big-time gambler. But I hadn't heard his name mentioned for a year or two. What's he doing now?"

"I wouldn't know," his informant shrugged. "But he looks prosperous."

"He comes in here regularly?"

"No, I don't believe I've seen him in the last month."

It took Pike an hour to run down another gambler who knew everybody in the racket. Mike Durant frowned when Pike mentioned the name of Max Tripp.

"Tripp went high-hat on us," Mike said with a scowl. "I ain't seen him in a game for a couple of years."

"What happened to him?" Pike asked carelessly.

"I guess he was smart at that,"

Mike conceded. "Max read some of these stories about the lads that make big dough teachin' contract bridge. Now you know that Max could handle a deck of cards with anybody. So he went after that bridge. Studied some of the books and learned the theories of the sharks. Max had a good education and could put up a good front. The next I hear of him, he has opened up with a school and is teachin' the game to suckers. I suppose he plays with some of his rich students for stakes. With what he knows about a deck, he could trim the best of 'em. Anyway, I hear he is makin' plenty of dough and won't hardly speak to any of us old pals. That goes both ways. We ain't got no use for him, either."

"You know where his school is, Mike?"

"It's over on Fenton Street somewhere. I don't know the exact number. I guess it's a classy layout."

Pike took a taxi over to Fenton Street. But it wasn't until the next morning that he located the spot. He went into a cigar store on a corner, loafed awhile, engaged the clerk in conversation.

"Isn't the Tripoli Bridge School in this building?" he finally inquired.

"It was in this building," the clerk replied.

"It's moved?"

"It folded," was the reply. "Just closed it up. It was a pretty fast layout. More of a gambling joint than a bridge school, I'd guess. They say they played for some high stakes up there in the private rooms. It was on the third floor. Maybe the cops put the quietus on it. I don't know."

"What became of the people that ran it?" Pike pursued.

"I wouldn't know. I never saw

the guy that was supposed to be the owner. He never wasted any time in this neighborhood when he wasn't at the school. He faded when he closed the joint. That's all I know about him."

"Maybe he made enough to retire on," Pike suggested.

"I wouldn't be surprised. He did a roaring business. Sometimes there'd be a hundred dames up there."

"Dames?"

"Sure. He ran a hen-joint. A nice quiet place where the hens could gather and play for as high stakes as they wanted. I've heard 'em say that the guy that ran the school could flip the cards, too. I guess he taught some of the smart ones a lot of tricks that weren't in the books."

"How long has the school been closed?"

"At least a month."

"You'd have no idea where I could find the man who ran it?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I wouldn't be surprised that the place got too hot and he lammed."

Pike frowned hard as he left the cigar store. He suspected that Max Tripp was going to be hard to find. He was sure of it after he had checked a little. He finally covered the utilities. With no results. Max Tripp didn't have so much as a telephone registered in his name. Apparently he had done a nice job of vanishing.

CHAPTER IV.

MURDER COAST TO COAST.

THREE days passed. Harry Anson was fuming and fretting. Following Pike's instructions, Anson hadn't mentioned the Black Widow in his column for two days. His competitors hopped on him. They

hinted that he had gone overboard on a fake tip. When Anson didn't reply they poured it on heavily. Anson and Penny McGee squirmed, poured it on Pike in turn. Pike told them to keep still and sit tight.

On that third day Pike entered an apartment house on Vorhan Street. He went up to the fifth floor, walked to a door and took a bunch of keys from his pocket. He had already spotted the lock. One of his master keys did the trick. He opened the door and slipped inside.

Pike worked fast. There were seven rooms in that apartment. In the closet of one of the bedrooms he examined a score of dresses hanging from a rack. His eyes lighted as his fingers handled the silk of a black dress. There were jagged white stripes on the sleeves. On the shelf above was a hat with a little white braid on the top of it. Pike spent twenty minutes in the apartment. When he reached the street, he was grinning. But he knew he had much to do yet, and he had a hunch that he'd better work fast.

It was three days later and past midnight when he rang the bell of the door in a fashionable apartment house. The man who opened the door was in a dinner jacket. Pike knew he had just returned from an evening out. The man was about forty, brown-haired, rather pleasant-appearing. He regarded Pike questioningly.

"I'd like to talk with you for a few minutes," Pike said a bit awkwardly, "on a matter of great importance."

"Who are you?" the man asked suspiciously.

"My name is John Pike. I'm here at the request of Harry Anson, the col—"

"You're Johnny Eight-ball Pike!" The man grinned. "Come on in. I've read a lot about you in Anson's column. What about that Black Widow and the suicide club? The other columns have been riding you folks about it. Are you getting anywhere on it?" He reached the center of his living room, waved Pike to a chair, took one himself. He lighted a cigarette after he had offered Pike one. He looked exceptionally cheerful, one might say happy.

"Yes, I think I'm getting somewhere," Pike began slowly. "But everything is under cover. That's why I wanted to speak to you in confidence, Mr. Thurston. Arthur Thurston is right, isn't it?"

"Right. I'm Arthur Thurston. But why should you want to speak to me about the Black Widow and the suicide club? I know nothing about them."

"I know you're speaking the truth, Mr. Thurston. You know only what you've read in the papers. You know, of course, that there are eight known members of the suicide club—and that they are all dead."

"Yes, I know, Pike. But what does all that have to do with me?"

"You, Mr. Thurston, are the ninth member of the suicide club!"

Thurston gaped unbelievably. "Ridiculous! Preposterous!" he burst out after a moment. "You must be mad, Pike! Or have acted on a wild, unfounded tip. I can assure you that I am not involved in any way in that fantastic suicide club."

"That's exactly what the other eight men thought, Mr. Thurston. Not a one of them knew he had joined the suicide club—until just before he died!"

Thurston stared and his eyes wavered a little under the certainty of

the tone in which Pike had spoken. "But . . . you must be mistaken—"

"I didn't come here until I was absolutely sure of my facts," Pike said firmly. "These other eight men had no inkling of what was going to happen to them, either, Thurston. But they were on the roster of the suicide club just the same. 'Suicide club' is a misnomer, of course. The proper word is 'murder'!"

"But who would want to murder me?" Thurston protested. "I haven't a real enemy in the world."

"But you have a very good friend, Mr. Thurston—to put it mildly. You know a very beautiful young lady. Her name is—Angela Sterne."

Thurston's face was red with anger as he shot to his feet. "Now, look here, Pike," he cried harshly. "You might as well understand that Angela Sterne's the loveliest, sweetest girl in the world. And the girl I'm going to marry!"

"I must be mistaken, then," Pike said dryly. "I was under the impression that you were already married."

Thurston's face became even redder. "I am married," he admitted. "But only technically. My wife and I haven't hit it off for months. She's promised me a divorce. Angela understands that. She's willing to take things that way."

"That's just what Hartwell Lang thought, Thurston."

"Hartwell Lang!"

"Sure. Hartwell Lang was the eighth member of the suicide club. He's dead now. Yet he was absolutely sure that Angela Sterne was the—"

"It's a lie!" Thurston shrieked. He clenched his fists and poised himself to rush at Pike with flailing fists. His face was livid with honest rage and injured vanity. Pike braced himself and set his jaw.

"You'd better hold it, Thurston!" he said steadily. "Because, you're going to listen to what I have to say—even if I have to sit on you while I tell you. Damn it! You're the doomed man! You're the one that's marked for death! Do I have to beg you to protect yourself? I'll admit that Angela is as lovely a creature as was ever born into this world. She has the face, the eyes, the voice, of an angel. Nine men out of ten would fall for her, think themselves the luckiest men in the world to get her. But Angela Sterne is—the Black Widow! A thousand times more deadly than the lowly spider for which she was named. I know what I'm talking about. Listen to the story and I'll prove it to you."

Pike talked forcefully, even savagely. And as the minutes passed, Thurston slowly sank back into his chair. He sagged. His face grew gray and haggard. Horror tinged his eyes as he came to the realization that Pike was telling the truth.

THE door of the apartment opened and a girl walked in. She wore a light-blue dress, a blue hat, a rather heavy veil that hid the features of her face. Her green eyes flicked over the room and, for just an instant, her face was hard and calculating.

But when she turned to the man who was closing the door behind her, she lifted the veil and faced him with a dazzling smile. There was no doubt that she was beautiful. Now her eyes were soft, surrendering.

"I hate to wear a veil, Arthur," she said in a crooning low voice. "But I can't face people with you until . . . until I'm your—"

"I understand, Angela," he said, smiling. "Whatever you do is all

right with me. You know that."

"Yes, I know," she sighed. "I'll try to forget that part of it. And just remember that I love you—and you love me." She turned and let her eyes go over the room. "Why, it's lovely," she cried. "It's just the kind of place I'd have picked if I had done it myself." She walked quickly about the room, apparently admiring every detail of it. She stooped by a cabinet, opened the doors. She was laughing as her hands came up with a bottle.

"You thought of everything, didn't you, Arthur?" she said gaily. "Let's have a drink—just to celebrate. Celebrate—our home."

"That's a swell idea," he said with enthusiasm. He reached into the cabinet and brought out glasses. He placed the glasses on the glass top of the cabinet, opened the bottle, filled them. He handed one of the glasses to her, took one himself.

"To home, Arthur!" she cried. "Let's drink to—home, sweet home."

"Here we go!" he said huskily. He brought the glass to his lips, drained it. She raised her glass to her lips, too. But she seemed to fumble it. It slipped through her fingers and dropped to the floor.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll pour you another." He turned to the cabinet, got another glass, filled it, handed it to her. She took it but didn't raise it to her lips. Instead she watched him. Her green eyes were unsmiling as she watched.

He blinked. "I feel kinda funny," he said thickly.

"You look a little pale, Arthur," she told him. "Sit down a minute. The drink just hit you the wrong way. You'll feel better in a minute. Liquor will do you that way sometimes. I remember once when—" She went on, spoke swiftly, while

he staggered backward two steps and lowered himself awkwardly into a chair. His head rolled to one side. There was a vague, faraway look in his eyes. He didn't seem to be able to focus his eyes upon her.

She moved closer to him and whispered: "Sleep, Arthur. You're very tired. Sleep for just a minute. Then you'll feel all right."

He gave a deep sigh, and his eyes slowly closed. She waited a full minute, then took hold of his shoulder and shook him. He didn't respond.

She turned from him and quickly crossed the room. Taking the phone from its pedestal, she dialed a number. After a moment she spoke sharply. "Number nine is ready!" She replaced the instrument, went back across the room, looked down at the figure that was sprawled in the chair.

She whirled as she sensed movement at her left, faced the man who came through the door that led from the rear of the apartment. Her face went white.

"Who . . . who are you?" she asked shrilly.

"I'm the butler," was the even answer.

"You're not. He . . . he said he didn't . . . wasn't going to—"

"He changed his mind. He thought it might be a good idea to have a third party present. He had an idea you might be—"

"You!" she screamed. "You're . . . you're Pike!" Her hand went down to the right, swept back her skirt, came out with a gun in it. But Pike was ready for that. He leaped in, caught her arm before she could get the gun around. He twisted her arm, and she dropped the gun.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she

said fiercely. "You haven't got a thing on me."

"What about my dead friend in the chair there?" Pike snapped.

"He's not dead! You can see he's breathing. The whiskey must have been doped."

"Who doped it?"

"I don't know. The bottle was in the cabinet. He bought it today—had it sent up here."

"Then who was it that slipped into the apartment about two hours ago and planted the bottle of doped hooch? It was a man."

"I don't know! I don't know anything about it."

"Was it the man you called a minute ago—when you said 'Number nine is ready'?"

"I didn't call anyone," she denied frantically. "You can't prove a thing."

"Maybe we'll be able to prove something when Max Tripp gets here," Pike said roughly. "All right, Thurston. Cut the radio in while I take her back and tie her up."

Pike pulled her through the door into the rear hall. Thurston came out of his chair, crossed to the radio, turned the switch. "O. K., Anson," he said.

"THIS is murder, coast to coast!" Anson's excited, crackling voice came from the loud-speaker. "And this is Harry Anson, giving you the details of what has happened and what will happen. We have not only found and exposed the Black Widow, ladies and gentlemen. We have not only unveiled the mysteries of the so-called suicide club which has already taken the lives of eight men. Tonight, we have brought you from the murder room itself, the attempt of the Black Widow to kill her ninth victim. But the Black Widow is only a lure for a far more

sinister criminal who works behind the scenes.

"You have heard the actual words spoken by the Black Widow and Arthur Thurston, her intended victim, as they entered the apartment that he, as the supposed dupe, had prepared for her. Through a planted microphone you have heard every word that was uttered. You heard her, after she thought Thurston had been thoroughly doped, go to the phone and make a call, announcing that number nine was ready.

"That call, we are almost sure, was made to Max Tripp. Max Tripp is the master-mind behind the suicide club. Formerly a professional gambler, he got the idea of starting a bridge school. He employed several clever women to work for him. They made the contacts and brought in the pupils to his school. Many wealthy women in this city came to the school. Eventually the school part of it was dropped, and it became a straight gambling resort where contract bridge was played for high stakes.

"Max Tripp, being a card sharp himself, cashed in. But he saw greater possibilities. Many of the gambling-crazy women who played at his place had wealthy husbands. Max made a specialty of them. He gave them unlimited credit, took their I O U's for large sums. He and his assistants studied every detail of the lives of these victims. Then they threatened them, extorted money from them in many cases. Remember that Tripp picked his victims shrewdly from the hundreds of women that played at the Tripoli Bridge School. He preyed only on the reckless and disgruntled wives who were already at odds with their husbands. Among those money-mad, prodigal, embittered

wives, he found some who, at heart, were as ruthless and vicious as he. He had their I O U's for vast sums. He was in a position to suggest an easy way out for them. Thus the idea of the suicide club was born.

"John Pike, in his search for the Black Widow, uncovered the Tripoli Bridge School and Max Tripp. He knew that Max Tripp was behind the Black Widow and the murders. But Tripp had apparently vanished without leaving a trail. It might take weeks to find him. Pike marshaled all his facts and drew conclusions. Five of the eight wives of the men who had been murdered were in town. Pike had each one of them shadowed, day and night, by private detectives. One of these wives made a visit late at night to an apartment on Vorhan Street. Pike managed to get in that apartment. He found there, the dress that had been worn by the woman who had been seen lunching with Hartwell Lang the day before he died. A man and at least three women were living in that apartment under assumed names. The man was Max Tripp. Pike trailed the woman who calls herself Angela Sterne. He saw her meet Arthur Thurston, and he guessed that Thurston was slated for death.

"You can guess the rest of it. Thurston agreed to go through with it for the purpose of bringing the killers to justice. He had leased the apartment. This evening, one of Tripp's associates, using the key that Thurston had given Angela, slipped into the apartment and planted a bottle of doped whiskey. Pike, of course, spotted it and changed it back on them. Thurston faked it when he drank that supposedly doped liquor.

"You heard the Black Widow make that call. Now, ladies and

gentlemen, I'm going to switch you to a car in which my bodyguard, Joe Marks, will broadcast with a short-wave set. Take it away, Joe!"

"It broke just as Pike said it would, boss!" Joe's heavy voice boomed from the loud-speaker. "Max Tripp came hustlin' out of that apartment on Vorhan Street, jumped in his car and drove away. I'm behind him with this car we had ready. He's makin' for the apartment that Thurston rented. We ain't more than four blocks from there right now, so you better take it back."

"You get the picture, folks?" Anson's voice snapped again. "Max Tripp is going to that apartment, to kill with a gun the man he thinks is helpless. Then, as in the other cases, his plan is to leave unassailable evidence of suicide. But he will be surprised, folks, when he opens that door and looks into the gun of Johnny Pike. Listen, folks! Listen when Pike nails him!"

CHAPTER V.

THE WIDOWS CONFESS.

PIKE had come back into the room. He motioned for Thurston to get back against the wall. Then he drew an automatic from his left shoulder holster, stepped toward the door, and waited. He waited hardly a minute. But the front door did not move as he expected. Instead a harsh voice sounded from directly behind him.

"Drop that gat, Pike! Drop it! I'll blow a hole in your back if you move! Drop it!"

Pike let the gun slip from his fingers and thud to the floor.

"Turn around!" came the command. Pike turned, looked into the enraged, distorted face of Max Tripp. Tripp had come through the hall from the rear.

"I happened to turn on my radio just before I got here!" Tripp snarled. "You were a sucker, Pike, to let Anson talk you into this."

"He didn't talk me into it," Pike denied coolly. "It was my own idea. Anyway, you haven't a chance to get away. Every cop in town will be looking for you."

"A lot of good that will do you!" Tripp raged. "We took pains to get a key that would fit that back door when we came in this evening. Angela and I will get out the same way I came in. We gotta chance to make it, Pike. But you haven't! Because if it's the last thing I ever do, I'm goin' to put a bullet through your—"

"Drop your gat, Tripp! Drop it before I—"

Tripp didn't hesitate an instant. He whirled with his gun spitting lead. There was a second when he seemed completely confused. Then he realized that the threatening voice had come from the only place it could have come from—the radio. He whirled back toward Pike.

But Anson's quick thinking had given Pike the break he needed. He had dived to the floor and got his hands on his gun again. Tripp's gun roared again, but the table hid Pike's figure from him, and he was trying to shoot through the table top.

Pike could only see, from his place on the floor, Tripp's leg. He fired at Tripp's right knee, saw the knee buckle. He shot at the other knee and knew Tripp was coming down. Tripp had another gun out. He blasted away desperately as he crumpled to the floor. Pike shot just once more—as the upper part of Tripp's body crossed his vision. Tripp didn't move after he hit the floor.

"Pike? Are you all right?" Anson was screaming from the radio. Pike turned his head toward the concealed microphone. "Yes," he said. "Tripp is dead!"

"And the suicide club dies with him!" Anson said in his professional tone, though his voice was very shaky. "Now for more details. Mrs. Hartwell Lang is being questioned. Also Mrs. Thurston. They have both admitted that Max Tripp has their I O U's for very large amounts, but they deny that they helped plot the actual murders. Mrs. Lang was the one who went to the hide-out in Vorhan Street. She says that Tripp met her there, told her that he expected two hundred and fifty thousand dollars when her husband's estate was settled. His threat was that if she failed to come through, he would tip the police to facts that would prove that she had committed the murder. Other wives are being questioned. The exact extent that the wives were involved will doubtlessly be determined within the next few hours. We know now that there was more than one Black Widow. At least three girls were being used as lures. All the accomplices have been spotted, and the final clean-up will be a routine job for the police.

"Pike thinks that Tripp had set his clean-up at two million. Pike thinks that Tripp and his crew were alarmed when, in my column, I promised to expose them. But the Thurston case was already set; so they decided to go through with it.

"Flash! Mrs. Thurston has just confessed that she, herself, introduced Angela Sterne to her husband. But she didn't admit it until she was confronted with the signed statement of her husband. Our time is up. This special broadcast will be back on the air over a nation-wide hook-up in exactly thirty minutes. Keep tuned in for any further details."

DAY was breaking when Anson, Penny McGee and Pike sat down to ham and eggs at Murati's. Anson waved his fork in the air.

"Did we bust it!" he crowed. "Twenty million people heard every word that was said. Twenty million people heard me make that killer turn around when I was three miles away from him. Twenty million people heard it all—from coast to coast!"

"Yeah," Penny said resignedly. "And now, Johnny, you and I are going to have to hear it all over again—from boast to boast!"

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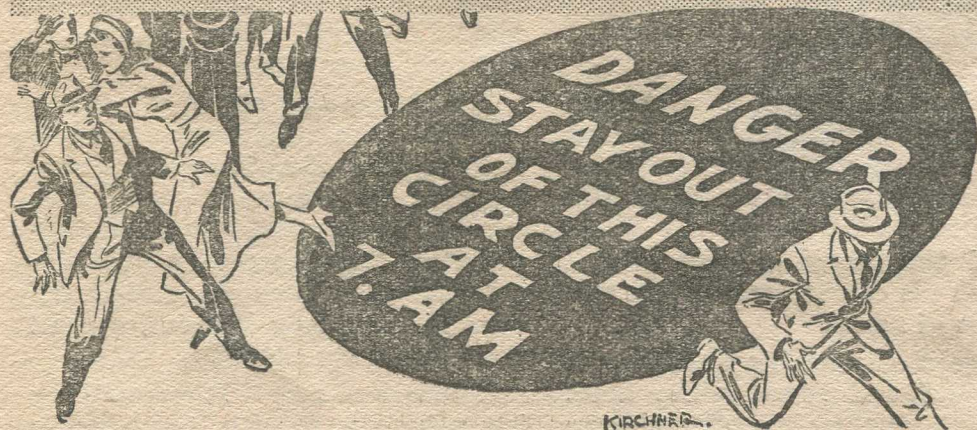
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THE PAINTED CIRCLE

By NORMAN A. DANIELS



KIRCHNER.

THE PAINTED CIRCLE

BY NORMAN A. DANIELS

SERGEANT MIKE SHANNON scowled at the picture in the morning paper. He was propped up in bed, digesting the news before going to sleep. Shannon worked the night shift in the homicide squad. The item in the paper and the picture irritated him. Dan Cullen was getting out of prison within sixty days and if Shannon ever hated anyone—it was Cullen. The ex-big-shot racketeer had murdered and bombed his way to power, and it had always been Shannon's disappointment that an income tax rap alone had put him away.

He flung the paper on the floor, got up and walked over to the window to pull down the shades. He forgot about the curtain as he looked eight stories down into the street, now busy with the seven-o'clock morning traffic. There were about fifty people gathered in the middle of the sidewalk across the street, gathered so close together that Shannon couldn't see what had happened.

He hastily donned his clothes, slid his service pistol into his pocket and ran into the hall. He buzzed for the elevator, fumed at the delay, and finally he rushed across the street toward the crowd. There was a clock on the corner, lacking just two minutes of seven.

Shannon elbowed his way through the crowd and forced them back. He stared at the sidewalk; then he grunted derisively. Advertising men would go to any extremes to

get publicity, but this seemed to be the limit. There was a huge circle painted in white on the sidewalk. Neatly lettered within its bounds were the words:

DANGER! STAY OUT OF THIS
CIRCLE AT 7 A. M.

"The guy who painted that gets a summons," Shannon growled. "What kind of a fool stunt is it anyway?"

He began asking questions of those around him. None had seen the circle painted. Apparently, someone had accomplished the deed just before dawn and without being disturbed.

The clock on the corner began tolling the hour. At the last note of seven, someone gave vent to a shrill scream. Shannon looked upward. There was an object hurtling down the twenty-odd stories from the roof of the big building. It looked like a man, coming down feet first! Shannon yelled a warning and took cover himself.

The descending object struck the sidewalk with a hideous sound, like the snapping of a thousand wooden matches. A woman fainted. Men turned away, and Shannon approached the object with grim determination. Then he closed his eyes for one long moment, opened them again and stared.

This was no man! It was nothing but a dummy, smashed to pieces by the fall. Smashed, that is, except for the face. There was something

familiar about the gray hair, carefully glued to the dummy's head. The features were finely painted in. Shannon tried to think who this dummy looked like.

It was no advertising stunt, but whoever had dropped this over the edge of that building, had imperiled the lives of pedestrians. Shannon turned on his heel and ran into the building. He showed his badge to a sleepy elevator operator and was whisked to the top floor. He got out, ran along the corridor and finally reached the stairway to the roof. As his head came above the roof, there was a shot and a shouted warning. Shannon ducked, whipped out his own gun and then, carefully supporting his hat on the barrel, shoved it up for a target. No shots ruined the hat, and he jerked his head up again.

He could see two men running like mad toward the building next door. They had placed a wide plank between the two roofs. Shannon sprinted after them. One bent down and started to draw the makeshift drawbridge away. Shannon let two chunks of lead whirl through the air just above the man's head. He ducked and left the plank where it was.

Shannon slowed to negotiate that catwalk, and he thought he heard something move behind him. He turned quickly, gun held out straight and ready. But there was no one in sight. He glanced at the door of the roof stairway. It was moving slightly. Someone had been hiding on the roof and had darted through that door to safety while Shannon concentrated his attention on the two fleeing men.

He started in pursuit again, crawled over the board and shivered as he looked down at twenty stories of sheer wall. He saw his men a

moment later and fired another shot. One of them stopped, drew a gun and began pumping lead at him. Shannon went into a nose dive, skidded around the corner of a chimney and smiled tightly.

A bullet nicked a chunk out of the chimney, and Shannon returned the fire, taking careful aim. He saw the gunman suddenly drop his weapon, clap his left hand to his right wrist and turn around. Shannon had scored a bull's-eye! He was up and racing after the two men, traveling as fast as he could over the uneven roof.

SUDDENLY both men vanished from sight. Shannon saw an entrance to the building. He approached it warily and then sped down the steps when no whining lead came up to check him.

But he was too late! Once or twice he saw bloodstains on the stairs, but all sight of the two fleeing men was lost. He emerged on the ground floor, found himself half a block from where the dummy had fallen and hurried back there.

Two patrolmen were kneeling beside the dummy. They had turned it over on its back. Shannon stopped abruptly and his jaw dropped another notch. There was a dagger, driven to the hilt, just above where a man's heart would have been. Someone had stabbed the dummy!

Reporters in droves came up. News photographers took dozens of shots. This was distinctly news! Shannon answered their questions as best he could. There wasn't much to go on. He was as stumped as the next man.

Then Shannon thought of that mysterious person who had slipped off the roof and down the stairs. He walked back into the office building and got the only elevator boy on duty.

"You took me up to the top floor a few minutes ago. Remember? Now—who else used the elevator after that? It's still long before regular office hours, so you couldn't have been very busy."

"Nobody used it," the operator replied. "I was taking some packages up on the freight elevator about five minutes after I let you off. I stopped at sixteen, and I heard a door slam. That's all I know."

"It's enough." Shannon got into the lift. "Take me up to the sixteenth floor! And if those reporters outside ask questions, you don't know a thing."

Shannon got out on the sixteenth, and methodically rapped on every door and tried every knob. Sixteen—twenty was locked, but Shannon distinctly heard a muffled voice from behind the door. He used his gun butt to create miniature thunder on the panels.

"Open up in there!" he shouted. "This is the law! Don't stall. I heard you talking."

The door opened, after a moment, and a man with tousled hair and a worried look peered out. Shannon pushed the door wide and kept his gun ready.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "There's no lettering on your office door."

"My name is Forbes—Benjamin Forbes. I . . . I'm in the contracting business. I . . . I've been working all night, and I guess I must have been asleep when you banged on the door. If you heard me talking, I was probably having nightmares. And no wonder—I'm losing my shirt on a big job, and I spent almost all night trying to figure a way clear."

Shannon walked into the office, went directly to the desk and picked up the phone; then he set it down again with a shrug.

"I was going to call headquarters, but I guess I'll be getting back, instead. There's been plenty of excitement downstairs, Mr. Forbes. Somebody stabbed a dummy and flung him off the roof of this building. Sounds crazy, doesn't it? Believe me—it is!"

Shannon left without asking a single question. He didn't have to. Forbes had lied! That telephone had been warm—warm from Forbes' grip. It had even been a trifle moist, as though the palms of his hands were covered with sweat. Shannon decided to arouse no suspicions, but in his mind he decided that Benjamin Forbes was going to be examined critically.

On the sidewalk again, he found the reporters eagerly discussing the case. One said: "That dummy certainly looks like Van Arden, the ex-D. A. The resemblance is so strong that I almost got a hunch."

SHANNON got the same hunch and beat the reporters to it. He climbed into a radio car, drawn up at the curb, and gave the driver orders to race at top speed to the home of Joseph van Arden, retired district attorney. They covered the distance in less than ten minutes. Shannon jumped out of the car, raced up to the front door and leaned against the bell. A yawning servant answered.

"Van Arden in?" Shannon asked. "Be sure now! Did he come home last night?"

"No, sir." The servant looked startled. "He didn't come home at all, sir. I don't know what's wrong. He's never done this before."

"Who did he buy his clothes from?" Shannon asked. "What kind of a suit and shoes was he wearing when he left?"

"His clothes come from Maxtor on

Fifth Avenue. He wore an oxford-gray suit with dark-brown shoes, sir. What's happened?"

"I don't know—yet. If he comes home, have him call Sergeant Shannon at headquarters."

Shannon jumped back into the radio car. "Turn around and see how many lights you can pass," he yelled at the driver. "I want another look at the dummy!"

SHANNON found a new crowd gathered around the remains of the dummy. He pushed them aside, ripped open the coat and glanced at the tailor's label sewed to the inside pocket. These were Van Arden's clothes all right. Shannon didn't question that any farther. He grasped the dummy by one leg and one arm, carried it across the sidewalk and dumped it into the radio car. Then he had himself and the dummy driven to headquarters.

Before he finally gave up trying to trace Van Arden's movements, Shannon found that the streets were full of newsboys shouting what was practically an extra. The front page had a late photo of Van Arden and beside it, a picture of the dummy's head. The resemblance was uncanny. Every edition played up the story heavily. Shannon finally gave up and went back to his apartment, tired and puzzled.

The only lead left was that of Benjamin Forbes, the contractor. If he had a good reason for lying about his actions, then there was no case at all. And who could do much about it, anyway? There was no law on the statute books saying it was a crime to stab a dummy and fling it off a roof.

Shannon slept from eight o'clock straight through until five, when his telephone jangled him awake. It

was a patrolman on the beat outside his apartment.

"Sarge—thought you ought to know this. Somebody's been at it again. That same circle on the sidewalk has a couple of new words added. Paint is still wet. Says 'Today too.' Looks like another dummy is going to drop into your lap."

Shannon thanked the patrolman, ordered him to take up a fixed post at the corner and then called headquarters. Before dawn really arrived, Shannon had men posted in various windows and on neighboring roofs. All were hidden and waiting. If another dummy was tossed into space toward that circle, the men who threw it would never get away.

AT five minutes of seven, the neighborhood was calm. At one minute of, a car came slowly down the street, but no one, including Shannon, paid much attention to it. As the clock started to toll the hour, the car pulled to the curb, the rear door opened and what seemed to be a man came catapulting out. It landed on the sidewalk, half inside the circle. The car was off with a grinding of gears. It swept around the next corner and before pursuit was begun, it had vanished.

Shannon ran over to where the object lay. It was another dummy! This one had what seemed to be a bullet hole through the back of its head. Shannon eyed the features critically and gasped. No need to wonder who this resembled. It was the image of Draco—one of the kingpins of the underworld. A man who dealt in violence and death.

Shannon didn't wait much longer. He unpeeled the coat from the dummy, flung it over one arm and hopped into a radio car. He knew

where Draco lived. A weeping woman came to the door.

"He isn't in—hasn't been here all night. I . . . I think finally something happened to him. I told him he ought to stop. I . . . I am his wife."

"Take a look at this coat!" Shannon held the garment before her. "Was Draco wearing that when he vanished last night?"

She looked once and then fainted. Shannon swore and called a maid. He hurried back to the painted circle, found reporters and cameramen having another field day and broke it up by carting the dummy to headquarters. He spent several more hours trying to trace Draco. He had vanished just as completely as Van Arden.

"BUT what on earth is the meaning of it?" Inspector Dolan wanted to know. "We have a hundred detectives working on the case and we don't even know what is behind it."

"Van Arden and Draco are missing. They didn't go away of their own accord," Shannon argued.

"I know that," Dolan persisted. "But suppose we find them? Then what? I'm trying to figure out why those dummies were made to resemble the missing men—why one was stabbed and the other shot through the head. There's no sense to this whole business, sergeant."

"I'm going to put some there," Shannon said. "You gave me permission to clean this up and I'll do it. Van Arden's trail can't be checked, but Draco—he's a big-shot crook. His pals would know something about him. They'll know who is most apt to knock him off—if he has been killed. I'm starting at that angle, inspector. Keep the boys looking for those two and put a guard around the circle on the sidewalk."

Shannon taxied far downtown, paid off the driver and spent several hours prowling through cheap hotels and taverns. He finally found what he was looking for. At a cheap bar, he discovered a wizen-faced, shifty-eyed little runt of a man. He sidled up to him.

"Hello, Barton. Why not have a real drink—in a booth? We can talk there."

Barton nodded, gulped down his beer and scurried toward a booth. He pulled the curtain in place, but Shannon opened it again and sang out an order for rye. He didn't drink his—Shannon rarely did. But he kept feeding it to Barton until the little crook was foggy. Intent on watching him, Shannon didn't see the bartender slip into a phone booth and dial a number.

"Look here," he said to Barton, "you've been around Draco ever since Dan Cullen was sent up the river. I know your secret testimony helped put Cullen away, but nobody else even guesses it. You were paid plenty for the dope. Now's your chance to earn some more money. Draco is missing. Who snatched him and why?"

"I dunno," Barton sniveled. "Honest, sarge, I don't know anythin' about it. Me—I'm ready to blow town, see. Dan Cullen will be gettin' out pretty soon. He knows I talked and he'll try to cut my heart out. You gotta let me dust. It ain't safe for me in this town any more. I gotta have dough, too."

"Then why not talk and get it?" Shannon suggested. "Protection as well. You were in on Draco's rackets right up to your filthy little neck. If somebody snatched him, you know why. Spill it!"

Barton shuddered and wagged his head. "I don't know nuthin', sarge."

Those guys ain't trusted me lately. They don't talk in front of me. I dunno what's goin' on no more. I—"

Shannon suddenly raised both hands shoulder high. From behind the curtain, a gun was jabbed into his ribs. Barton gave a squeal of terror, tried to get up, but a man thrust the curtains apart and slammed the small sneak thief across the face. He grabbed his throat, drew back a fist and all but broke Barton's jaw. Then he turned to Shannon and scowled.

"O. K., copper. You've been plenty nosy, so now we'll tell you everything. Keep your mitts like that, turn around slow and stand still while I frisk you."

Shannon obeyed. It would have been suicide to do otherwise. His gun, blackjack and handcuffs were taken from him. Obeying further orders, he stepped out of the booth. The bartender had closed the front doors, locked them and pulled down the curtains. There were no customers in the place. The man who held the gun kept one hand deep in his coat pocket. When he finally removed it, Shannon noticed that it was heavily bandaged.

"Looks like somebody pinked you—with a .38," he said with a smile. "You don't like to play cops and robbers on a roof, do you?"

The gunman scowled and stepped forward. He raised his gun and raked the barrel across Shannon's face. The big detective growled and made a grab for the man. Something landed against the back of his head. Shannon raised his arms again, swaying dizzily. He wasn't ready to be gunned or blackjacked out of existence, yet.

A radio, playing softly in one corner of the café, was stilled for a

second. Then a news announcer spoke:

"Another—the third—in this amazing series of dummy murders has just been enacted. A dummy was thrown off the roof of the same building to land in the center of the circle on the sidewalk. This dummy had a rope tied tightly around its neck. First reports indicate that it bears a striking resemblance to Harry Harris, head of the local internal revenue office."

Shannon betrayed no emotion at all, but this new affair made his brain reel more than the rap on the head. The thug with the wounded hand was, without question, the man Shannon had plugged on the roof. The other man looked about the same build as the second crook who had fled over that same route.

"Walk out of here slow," Shannon was told. "Use the back door. There's a car parked outside and two guys are waiting there. They'll plug you if you so much as whistle. Get in the car and don't try any tricks!"

Shannon shrugged and obeyed. At least he was getting deeper and deeper into this mystery; but when he finally would solve it, no one else would ever know. Shannon had no qualms about his immediate future. These men were killers!

OUTSIDE, he found two more men waiting. He got into the car at their gestured orders. They got in beside him and shoved guns into his ribs. The first two hurried back into the café and returned, dragging Barton's limp form behind them. They hurled him into the tonneau and got into the front seat themselves. The crook with unbandaged hands drove. No word was spoken, no boasts or threats made. This mob

worked with the efficiency of some grim machine.

Shannon was permitted to watch the countryside whiz past—and that spelled trouble! They didn't care if he knew where they were taking him, which meant that they didn't expect him to return. Barton groaned once, and he was instantly kicked on the jaw.

Finally the car turned off the highway, rolled over a newly created, rutted road bearing marks of heavy truck tires. Shannon suddenly gathered his destination. They were taking him up to where a huge dam was being constructed. At this hour of the night it would be deserted, except for one or two watchmen. Anything could happen here!

The car stopped. Barton was hauled out and thrown to the ground. Guns jabbed Shannon and urged him to alight.

"Take off your clothes!" one of the gunmen snapped. "Be quick about it or I'll put a slug through your head!"

"But it's cold," Shannon started to protest. The gun barrel rested against his temple and the killer's finger was white on the trigger. He'd carry out his threat without blinking. Shannon sighed and began peeling off his clothes.

Another man joined the group. He was dressed in cement-smeared overalls and a floppy hat. He carried a battery-powered lantern in his hand.

"Two more?" he asked, with a note of terror in his voice. "Boys, I don't like this nohow."

"Shut up!" one of the killers snapped. "You're getting your cut and if you don't want to start eating cement, keep your trap closed. Mike, polish off that stool pigeon! Take his clothes off first so you won't get 'em all blood."

Shannon gulped. These men weren't going to waste time asking questions or torturing their prisoners. They were out to kill and seemed ready to get it over with promptly. One of them turned on Shannon and scowled.

"This copper dies different," he said. "Orders are orders and we tie him up and let him die slow. Tie his wrists and his ankles. Do a good job, because if he gets away it's the chair for us."

Shannon waited no longer. He brought down one hand, slapped the gun out of the killer's fist and rapped him a healthy blow under the chin. The killer went down and Shannon did a nose dive toward the gun. His fingers closed around it, but at that instant three of the thugs struck him almost simultaneously. Gun butts rapped against his skull, a scientifically directed shoe clipped him under the chin. He shivered in pain and groaned, as the gun was yanked out of his limp grasp.

They hoisted him up and ropes were hastily applied while he was still too groggy to resist. Then, with both his arms gripped by two of the thugs, he was forced to watch the final act with Barton. The little sneak thief was hoisted to his feet, propped against a tree and shot through the head twice.

"Now take both of 'em inside, so Mickey can fix up the dummies," the leader of the thugs snapped. "Hurry up—we ain't got all night!"

A SWARTHY, grinning man had two dummies tied to posts inside one of the shacks. There, under a strong light, he studied Barton's bullet-riddled head and slowly created his image on one of the dummies. Shannon was next. He pretended to be half conscious, but every nerve and muscle was attuned,

seeking the slightest chance for escape. There seemed to be none. He wondered what the leader had meant by saying that he was to get it slowly.

Shannon discovered the answer to that one faster than he wished. After the artist had created his face on the dummy, Shannon was pushed into the open and dragged up a ramp to where a huge cement bucket was waiting. It was filled to the brim with soft cement. Shannon looked out over the framework of the giant dam. He realized his fate now, and perspiration broke out over his whole body.

He was to be dumped into one of those cement forms and left there to die. Here, undoubtedly, were also the bodies of Van Arden, Draco and Henry Harris. Here, too, would go the body of Barton, the squealer. Although he was dressed in nothing but his underwear, Shannon's face dripped sweat. There wasn't the slightest way out! His hands and ankles were firmly tied. Even now Barton's corpse was being carried up to the bucket and thrown on top of the cement.

From below, the watchman called out a signal that everything was ready. The motors controlling the huge cement bucket were whirring smoothly. Shannon was tripped, picked up and carried over to the bucket. The two crooks laid him on top of the cement beside Barton. Then they stepped back, grinning.

"So long, copper," one of them said. "You've had this coming for a long time. If it makes you feel any better, we drag down ten grand for turning you into a cement wall."

The leader of the quartet raised his hand and called down to the watchman. The bucket began moving up and out, sliding along its well-greased ways. Slowly, it ma-

neuvered over the dam at a height that made Shannon grow sick. The moment the bucket was raised, Shannon turned over on his stomach and shoved his head overside. The watchman was bringing the bucket directly over one of the huge pilings. There he'd trip the bottom of the bucket and spill the cement and the bodies of Barton and Shannon into the forms. By morning, the cement would harden and more would be poured down.

Shannon frantically tried to free himself, but that was impossible. He forced himself to remain calm. Grimly, he peered around until he saw a jagged edge of the bucket just above where Barton's body lay. The bucket was old and well worn. This thick slab of steel had come loose by the constant friction of cement being poured into it.

Shannon wriggled across Barton's corpse over to this spot; then pushed himself into a sitting position. The bucket was slowing up now, centering above the great tomb that was also a dam.

Shannon raised his tied arms as far as he could and hooked them over the jagged steel edge. His lips moved in prayer! This was the closest he'd ever been to death, and the horror this method entailed made him nearly sick.

Then suddenly, the whole bottom of his tiny world seemed to slip from under him! The cement plopped through the bottom of the bucket. Barton's body followed it. Shannon's feet dropped down, but that projecting piece of steel held him safely. The ropes were cutting into his wrists because of his weight. He saw Barton's corpse turn over and over as it hurtled down into its grave of cement.

A wave of dizziness came over Shannon and he fought it off with

an effort. He was still in grave danger. They might not bring the bucket back or if they did, might spot him clinging desperately to the inside of it. Minutes passed and nothing happened. Shannon decided they were going to let the bucket stay where it was.

He discovered that the sides were lined with chunks of cement, accumulated over a long period of use. It had hardened and presented a means of securing a foothold. His feet were bare and that helped. Shannon slowly raised himself up until he felt his wrists ache, as blood raced back into the fingers.

Grimly he continued hoisting himself upward until he secured a good footing. Then he began sawing at the ropes with the jagged piece of steel. He spent half an hour at this, working cautiously lest his feet slip or a whole section of that wall of dried cement give way.

Finally, his wrists were free. He clutched at the edge of the bucket, pulled himself up and, for the first time in an hour, began breathing normally. His nerves settled down. He untied his ankles, then he slid around the side of the bucket until he reached the thick steel arm. He worried his way down this until he reached ground.

COVERED with cement, he looked like some grim statue come to life. He made his way slowly toward the watchman's shack. The car used by the killers was gone. He crept up to the shack, raised his head and peered through the window. The watchman was heating a can of soup and he kept glancing around nervously, as though he was afraid the victims of that cement bucket might return in a supernatural form.

Shannon made his way to the

door. There was no lock on it. He tripped the latch and opened the door wide. The watchman turned swiftly. His already white face turned leaden. His eyes bulged and he crouched in horror. He raised his hands to cover his eyes.

"No!" he shrieked. "No! Go away! Go away!"

"Sure," Shannon said. "After I finish with you!"

He drove an uppercut from near the floor, straightened the watchman up and laid him down as limp as a wet rag. Shannon wiped his hands, looked around and found enough hot water to cleanse himself. Then he disrobed the watchman and appropriated his clothing. He sat down and ate the soup with relish, wondering how on earth his appetite had returned so well after this harrowing experience.

Shannon tied the watchman securely, threw him into one of the small tool sheds and locked him in there. He found an old run-down car along the road and appropriated this cheerfully. The drive back to the city was uneventful. He knew that he looked like some freak, for the watchman's clothes were much too small.

Shannon parked in front of the building from which the first dummy had been thrown. He looked up. There was a light in one of the offices on the sixteenth floor. Shannon grinned, drove the car into an alley and behind the building. Then he used a freight elevator to reach the sixteenth floor. He walked up to the office door of Benjamin Forbes, contractor, and rapped on the panels.

"Open up," he said. "It's me—from the dam. Something went sour."

The door was quickly opened. Forbes peered at Shannon without

recognition. All he saw was a man dressed like a watchman at the dam.

"What's happened?" he queried impatiently.

Shannon smiled and drove a healthy fist to Forbes' jaw. "It's just about to happen," he said grimly, as Forbes dropped to the floor. Shannon went to work then, behind locked doors.

It was morning when he finished. He slipped out the back of the building and crossed the street to his apartment, avoiding the crowd that had gathered around the painted circle on the sidewalk again.

Feeling no urge for sleep, he showered and dressed himself in comfortable clothing. Then he examined a gun carefully, put an extra supply of ammunition in his pocket, took another pair of handcuffs from a drawer, and sallied out into daylight.

WHEN the café from which Shannon and Barton had been kidnaped opened for business, the crooked bartender raised the window shades and received one of the greatest shocks of his life. Seated atop his bar was Detective Sergeant Shannon—who should have been reposing at the bottom of a few tons of cement.

There was a gun in Shannon's hand. "Last night," he said calmly, "you tipped off certain pals that I was questioning Barton. You were responsible for my being snatched. Now tell me who those four killers are and where they live. The truth—because you're going to be tied up, and if you lie, I'll come back and put a bullet through your rotten heart."

"I'll talk," the bartender groveled. He still couldn't be sure that this wasn't a ghost threatening him. "I'll talk. Honest, I didn't know they

were gonna bump you. Them birds are holed up on the second floor at 207 Carmody Drive—it's a tenement house, but they're the only ones living in it."

Shannon socked him once, tied him up and stowed him away in the dampest part of the cellar that he could find. Then he drew himself a glass of beer, drank half of it, walked out and locked the door behind him.

HE found the address readily and studied the building. Those four killers had been up all night. They'd be asleep now—at nine thirty in the morning. Rats of their type hated sunlight.

Shannon slipped into the house by using a master key. He crept up the stairs carefully, listened at each door until he heard the sound of snoring. He tried the door, found it locked and went to work with a pair of tiny pliers that turned the key on the other side of the door.

He entered on tiptoe and surveyed two of the killers sound asleep, side by side, in bed.

Shannon massaged his fist, walked over to the bed and gently slapped one of the men across the face. He opened his eyes, blinked and tried to scream. Shannon whacked him once. The other crook awoke and went back to sleep again—by inducement from Shannon's fist. He was beginning to like this job.

In another room he found the other two. Shannon drew out handcuffs, he quietly encircled the wrist of one man, hooked him to his mate and then shook the bed.

Both men sat up. One gave a weird yell of fright and burrowed his head under the blankets. The other tried to reach for his gun and found that his right hand was practically helpless. Shannon sat down

on the edge of the bed, his own weapon pointed at the two thugs.

"Let's tell stories," he suggested. "We'll start with the mug who paid you to commit four murders. Of course, if you don't feel like talking, I might just put you to sleep again and keep that up until either your jaw breaks—or you use it to spill what you know."

They talked—for fully half an hour. Shannon smiled contentedly, walked over to a window and shoved his gun out. He fired two quick shots and yelled to the patrolman who came running down the street.

AT three in the afternoon, Shannon sat in Inspector Dolan's office. Huddled in a chair beside him was Benjamin Forbes, his whole body quaking. In cells below this office were four killers, on the first leg of their journey to the electric chair.

"I've heard all about it," Inspector Dolan admitted. "I know Van Arden, Draco, Harry Harris and Barton were all murdered and their likeness in dummies thrown onto that painted circle. I know I received one of the greatest shocks of my life when a dummy resembling you came hurtling down—and wearing your clothes. Now will you tell me what it's all about?"

Shannon rubbed his chin. He'd never felt more contented in his life. "Take those four men who were murdered, add me to their number, and what have you? Five men who are cordially hated by a guy named Dan Cullen, at present eagerly awaiting parole in a Federal pen. Cullen is behind it. He knew that if Van Arden, Harry Harris and myself lived when he got out, we'd try to send him back to prison. Draco had usurped Cullen's throne, as top man of the underworld. Cullen wanted it back and the easiest way was by knocking off Draco. Barton had squealed to the Federal investigators and had Cullen sent to prison. Therefore, Barton had to die, too. Those four hoods in our cells downstairs were hired by Mr. Forbes here, to murder those whom Cullen fingered for slaughter. They were paid so much a murder and paid only when Cullen said so."

"O. K., O. K.," Dolan agreed. "But the dummies? What was the idea?"

"Cullen is in prison," Shannon said. "News like that could reach him only through the newspapers. When he read how Van Arden's likeness—a dummy—dropped on the sidewalk with a knife through the heart, he was satisfied that Van Arden was dead. Then he instructed

Continued on page 100

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WHIRLING DIGITS



By HOWARD E. LUM, JR.

WHIRLING DIGITS

BY HOWARD E. LUM, JR.

DAVE and I had sunk all the money we possessed in a deal which, to my jaundiced eyes, seemed to be getting sicker and sicker every day. Bought too high, too much cut-throat competition and all that sort of thing. We were worried. There is one thing sure in spite of all the magic nines or eights or tens or even thirteens, for that matter. If things start to go haywire, they usually, if not invariably, continue right through a cycle. Dave would say the threes have got us or the twos maybe, I don't know. At any rate, it didn't take so long to find out that if we were going to salvage any chestnuts out of the brightly burning fire of our own stupidity, we would have to do it fast. In other words, sell out for cash at a rotten loss. The very best that we could hope for was about two thousand dollars apiece out of five thousand apiece that went in. Well, we beat that by about fifty-odd dollars, which gave us dinner and a show, et cetera, over the four thousand that we got.

It was about five o'clock when the sale was finished, so with the money in our pockets, we ambled down East Forty-fifth Street to the apartment.

"I suppose you would call this a lucky street. The digits add up to nine," I remarked bitterly.

"It is."

"Yes, for theatrical ventures. We might better try the show business next time. We certainly couldn't

have lost money any quicker," I replied.

Well, we reached the apartment, got our mail and went upstairs. I hadn't any more than opened the first letter when I became aware of Dave's concentrated stare. He was obviously trying to get my eye. He had walked to the other side of the room where he couldn't be seen from the bedroom. He put his finger over his lips, commanding silence from me, and then started to talk a lot of drivel about why Harry had not left any word if he didn't intend to show up. Since, to the best of my knowledge, neither of us knew any one by that name except a waiter over at the corner restaurant, it dawned on me that he was putting on an act for the benefit of some party unknown or invisible, at least to me.

Dave continued to chatter. "If Harry doesn't show up with the money in a few minutes, I'm going to call him up and find out what the hell is keeping him. If he thinks he can play around with four thousand dollars of our money, he's kidding himself."

Of course, while all this was going on, I could only say things like "Take it easy—what are you worrying about—he'll be here" and all that sort of thing. Then I reached for a cigarette and in turning around toward the table, my eye caught the cause of all the play-acting.

The closet door in the bedroom was open and directly beneath a light gray suit of mine, was a pair of well-blackened shoes about the

size of violin cases. They were not my shoes. They were not Dave's. It was odd the way that pair of shoes fascinated me. I tried my best to keep from looking that way. I cooked up an excuse to myself to reach for a magazine and in turning to get it, my eyes not only took another look at the big pair of shoes but also noticed that the top bureau drawer was open, the drawer where Dave kept his .45.

In turning back, my heart went up in my throat as I got a glimpse of another pair of shoes, also black but smaller. There is nothing so dreadful about a couple of pairs of shoes, except that Dave and I keep our shoes in a wardrobe off the bathroom and then too, there seemed to be pants legs right down to the tops of these four shoes. I looked around for something else to pick up which would give me another chance to take a squint toward the closet. That was when I saw an old copper penny on the floor where it had fallen from Dave's vest pocket.

"That's my lucky piece," said Dave as I reached for it. I mustn't get separated from that."

Then I had to listen to a lot of tripe like "—13 stars around the edge—one of my luck numbers, 13—dated 1827 too, get it? 8 and 1 makes 9, 7 and 2 makes 9, 9 and 9 is 18, and 1 and 8 is 9. Or you can figure it 1 and 7 is 8, then the middle ones, 8 and 2 are 10, 10 and 8 is 18 and 1 and 8 is 9. If you take the 13 stars and add the 9 of the date, it's 22. 9 and 22 are the best numbers and if you add just the 2 and 2 in 22, it's 4 which is another one of my lucky—"

"Please, please," I interrupted. "Put it back in your pocket and good luck to you."

"Here's a hot one for you," he said

ignoring my plea. "If you take the number 123456789, all the digits, reverse it to 987654321, subtract the smaller from the larger and you get 864197532. In all three of these numbers the sum of the digits is 45. Since 4 and 5 equals 9, the whole thing means something to me. If I could only—"

"Ah, stop that nonsense," I yelled.

RIGHT about now, I was just beginning to realize that we were in a very unenviable spot, to put it mildly. What actually got me so jumpy was all this silly chatter about Harry and numbers. Where was it getting us? Why not make a break for it? We'd gambled on things almost as bad before. My nerves were really riding me and if it hadn't been for the thought of running out on Dave, I'd have made a bolt right past that open closet door in nothing flat, let happen what might.

And still Dave continued talking about Harry not coming with the money. You wouldn't have to be very smart to figure out that Dave's stalling more or less, than taking a breather on one knee while the referee counted the nine, but what was going to happen next? Finally he said that he had decided to call him up, he wasn't going to be bounced around any longer. He reached for the telephone and dialed. I braced myself for the attack which the crooks in the closet were bound to make when they heard him dialing the 'phone.

"Busy," said Dave loudly and disgustedly. "Maybe he's trying to get us."

He hung up and leaned back in the chair. The telephone rang almost immediately.

"Hello," said Dave. "Where the

hell have you been? . . . Oh, yeah? . . . Well, get over here with that dough and don't waste any time. . . . What do you mean you can't come up? . . . Can't she come up with you? . . . Well, I see what you mean. You can't very well bring your wife up if she's going to have a baby shortly. . . . All right, make it snappy. We're going out tonight to a hotsy affair, and we've got to get shaved and into tails. . . . Five minutes? . . . O. K., we'll meet you downstairs in the lobby."

Dave hung up and turned to me. "Can you beat that? Harry's wife is going to have a baby. Come on! Never mind your hat. We've got plenty to drink up here. We'll just go down and catch this bankroll and then have a drink when we get back here."

It was all Greek to me, but I followed Dave out. On the way down, Dave looked at me with a very sick smile, and my knees were pretty unsteady. Down in the lobby, he called police headquarters and told them there was a couple of stick-up artists in the closet in our apartment; they would be waiting there five or ten minutes at most and would probably make their departure either up or down the fire escape.

AFTER all the excitement was over and our two visitors comfortably installed in cells, Dave and I had a drink.

"Somebody tipped them off that we were carrying that money."

"Well, isn't that a wonderful deduction?" I replied. Then I regretted my sarcasm, for after all, I was vaguely conscious of the fact that I hadn't been any too brave. I really hadn't come through the way Dave had.

"Wasn't it lucky somebody called

us at just that minute?" I said. "You couldn't have kept on stalling much longer. Who was it, anyway, Dave?"

"Nobody called up."

"Nobody called up? Then what made the telephone ring?"

"That was that trick I was trying to tell you about this morning," said Dave.

"You mean to say you called *yourself* on the telephone?"

"Sure! It's a trick number, I tell you."

"Maybe you'd better give me that number. I might have use for it some day. I don't mean, use it the way you did. I was thinking what a swell way to get rid of a bore. Have a very important engagement and then make believe the party calls you on the telephone to say that you're already on hour late, through a misunderstanding."

"If I give you the number, will you promise to lay off nagging me about my weakness for numbers?"

"Sure, I promise."

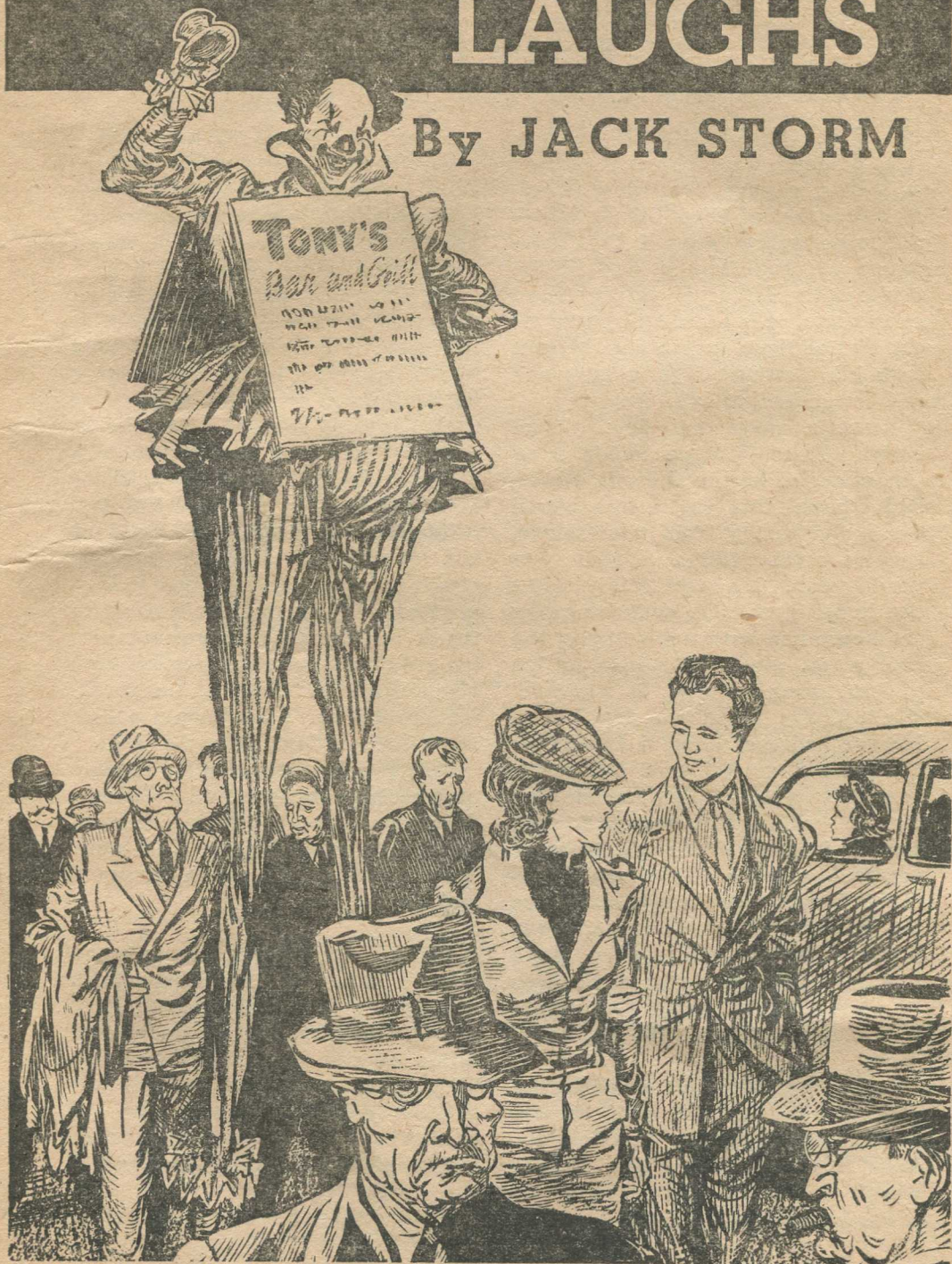
"Well, you take the receiver off the hook on the dial phone, wait for a dial tone and then dial 7-1162. Then you hesitate until you hear the dial tone. Then you dial 7 again. You put the receiver back on the hook, and in a few seconds your telephone rings. Of course, the telephone company knows all about it, but you didn't, did you? You won't remember the number, either. Now take that number for instance. Seven eleven right together like that. The digits add up to nine and seven and two add up to—"

"Ah, stop it, will you?"

Dave looked at me in a hurt sort of way. "No sense for figures, have you? But anyway, you go to admit that telephone trick saved four thousand dollars for us."

A CLOWN LAUGHS

By JACK STORM



A CLOWN LAUGHS

BY JACK STORM

MR. CALVERTON swung down Barclay Street against a strong northwest wind. At the corner of West Street, where the wind swirls around the Telephone Co. Building, he waited for traffic with fifty other Jersey-bound commuters. He looked just like all the rest of them except for the fact that his overcoat was unbuttoned and he smiled to himself.

What a wonderful day it had been! The Colossus Advertising Co., of which he was the sole owner, had crossed that vague line which divides certainty from uncertainty, success from failure. Today was the big day. No more worry about the house now. Of course buying the house had been a mistake in the first place. Imagine a man of his present wealth living in Zeeville! Well, Grace loved the big house. No one had ever lived in it, and its complete newness, two baths, oil burner, two-car garage, and all that sort of thing had weighed very heavily in the balance against more reasonably priced suburban offerings. Then, too, the property was distinctive. On a corner, and one hundred and fifty feet deep, there was lots of room for the children to play. He was glad that Grace held club meetings in the big living room.

It had been a terrific struggle, but now it was over. In fact, he was glad about everything but Zeeville. What a name for a place! There wasn't much the matter with the town, but where on earth did they

get that Zee from? Why couldn't it have been Hillville or Mountville? Well, he would tell Grace to donate a thousand dollars to the town improvement committee. That would make them name conscious.

On the train, he smiled again at the memory of overhearing his wife tell some friends that her husband was a big man in the advertising field. Women were like that. Was there anything so wrong about being a clown? A real honest-to-goodness clown with Bells Brothers Circus? If it hadn't been for that bad arm injury, he might have been with the big top yet. And whose business was it if he was still a clown? Certainly he had no one but himself to thank for the idea of getting into his old clown make-up, getting onto a superhigh paid of stilts and parading around for a few hours a day, advertising Tony's Bar and Grill.

Yes, it was that peculiar rhythm of wheels on rails which made Mr. Calverton keep asking himself, "Whose business is it?" The words seemed to fit right in with the sound and the motion.

WHAT could be a bigger laugh than a tumbling, fumbling clown committing the smoothiest, most painless, and completely undetected crime of the year? A clown can almost live on laughs, but this was better. After all these years of heartbreaking work, a clown has the last laugh all to himself—and wealth thrown in.

What could be more logical or

more innocent than for a clown to be walking along on his stilts and stop for a minute to rest and look around, his arm on a ledge over the top of a doorway down on Maiden Lane? A ledge just below the scene of the big diamond robbery, three days earlier. . . .

The clown moved his arm and his hand touched something. A husky canvas bag—big, but not so big that he couldn't slip it into his blouse and walk down to his office on Pearl Street, thrilling inside until he almost dizzied and fell down. . . .

Nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand would have visited every fence in town and a few hock shops, too, in their stupid haste to turn such a wealth of ice into real money. He had no one but

himself to thank for the hunch which drove him to books. Diamonds used in the drawing of fine wire! A natural! Of course that sort of thing did not bring the money he could have from dangerous sources, but why be greedy? A little patience, a little study—the whole situation was in the bag. Now he could open a jewelry store, and sell the finer gems he had retained. . . .

The papers had told how the bandits escaped, how when the proprietor raised a window to call for help, one of the holdup men shot him dead. Who could know that the stickup men didn't get the bag of diamonds that landed on the ledge when the proprietor dropped them out of the window?

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10 CENTS

THE PAINTED CIRCLE

Continued from page 92

Forbes to pay the killers. The dummies were to publicize the stunt, let Cullen know his orders were being carried out. There would be no evidence of bodies for they are sealed in the wall of a dam. Forbes is Cullen's brother—not quite as crooked—but willing to do most anything for money. Remember how I worked for five years trying to get something on Cullen? Say, I found out more about him than he knows himself. As soon as I spotted Forbes, I began thinking and—you see the result.”

The telephone jangled. It was for Shannon. He answered, spoke a few words and listened a lot. He hung up with a sigh of satisfaction.

“That was the warden at the Federal pen. He says Cullen got the morning papers and read how a dummy resembling Forbes had

dropped from a building onto that painted circle. He's nearly gone crazy—been tearing up the place trying to get out. He's gone stir cuckoo, all right, spilling everything he knows, saying all he wants is a chance to get at the rats who killed Forbes.”

“But that dummy resembling Forbes?” Inspector Dolan frowned. “We found it on the sidewalk this morning. Now you bring Forbes in—dressed in nothing but his underwear. Who threw that last dummy off the building?”

Shannon grinned broadly. “I did. I wanted Cullen to read all about it and bust a blood vessel. Now he's where I want him—right behind the eight ball and right in front of the electric chair. He's guilty of first-degree murder in ordering those kills done. Inspector, can I have the job of going up after him? It would be a pleasure.”

THE STORY TRAIL

Continued from page 6

and people caught using them should get just punishment. The telephone is not only a public utility, but in our day has become a public necessity, and really should be treated as such. In “Whirling Digits,” on page 93, you will see the telephone playing a rather important part in the fight against crime. Possibly you'll never have need to use this idea for your own protection, but it's one to remember, just in case.

A New York City detective friend dropped in the office the other day for a chat. The subject turned to the difference between fact and fiction in detective stories, and just

for a matter of curiosity, we checked over about two dozen stories which we either printed or had in our safe, to see how close they came to actual experience.

Of the twenty-four stories, only four of them seemed to this detective to be somewhat out of line with real facts—and every one of these four was a specialized crime which is handled by another department, and therefore not as familiar to this particular detective as his own field. This was called to his attention, and more or less changed his view on them, he admitting that possibly his unfamiliarity with the subject made things that are entirely possible seem impossible.

There's probably a great deal to the fact that police officers and detectives are among the most delighted fans of detective magazines.

WITH INTENT TO KILL



By FREDRIC SINCLAIR

WITH INTENT TO KILL

BY FREDRIC SINCLAIR

CHAPTER I.

MURDER COMES TO A PARTY.

SHE hung from the neck, the heavy bathrobe cord around her neck pushing her eyes out and darkening her face. The toes of her feathered mules just managed to scrape the floor, and as she twisted, they shuffled a listless and futile rigadoun. Except for the mules, she was clad only in a thin negligee.

"Nice shoulders," said Emmett.

Strange bit the end off a cigar and spat carefully. He said: "Mug her, Adonis, and cut her down and keep quiet."

He looked the room over with veiled, sleepy eyes. The eyes of Gordon Strange were his one peculiarity. They surveyed the world with no apparent interest. They appeared mildly bored by all they saw. They never seemed to be fully awake, blinking at everything with drowsy ennui. When he did manage to open them fully and look at anything directly, they were both gentle and cynical. In color, they were a pale, transparent gray.

The rest of Gore Strange's face, however, was more in fitting to the man who wore it. The nose was a ruthless, bony hook. The mouth, thin and almost cruel, fitted smoothly over hard white teeth. It seldom smiled.

Now, as he took in the room, his eyes blinked slowly and sleepily at each object they focused on. A

muscle in his cheek danced. "Know her, Emmett?" he asked, finally.

Emmett Patrick held onto the bathrobe cord with one massive fist and sawed at the tough texture with an inadequate-looking pocketknife. "Her?" he grunted. "Not me, Gore, not me." The knife hacked through the remaining strands. Easily Emmett held the body aloft while he folded the knife with one hand and put it in his pocket; then he lowered the dead girl gently to the carpeted floor. Her legs buckled disjointedly. She crumpled there on the floor like a broken toy. "Besides, even if I did know her, which I don't, I wouldn't be able to recognize her. Her own mother wouldn't know her with her face all tongue and eyes," he added.

Strange stroked his nose. "Her name is Belle—Belle Charteris."

"How do y'u do it, with mirrors?"

Strange blinked slowly. "When I went to school, they taught me to read. Her name's tacked in half-inch letters on the door."

"I came in that door first, and I didn't see no name," said Emmett.

The door in question banged open and a small man with large glasses and a black bag bustled into the room, "Mornin', Gore; mornin', Emmett. Lovely day for a murder—or is it murder?"

"Does it matter?" said Strange. "It'd be a lovely day to you if it were a massacre."

"That's right," beamed the small man, "the weather is always nice. Well, boys, where's the body?" He

peered anxiously at them. "There is a body, isn't there?"

"Emmett's shielding it from you, doc," said Strange. "He's afraid it's too much body at one dose."

The doctor glared at Emmett. He elbowed him out of the way and surveyed the dead girl's veiled nudity with truculence.

"Who cut her down?" he demanded.

"I did," said Emmett.

"Umph! Meddlesome nitwit," fumed the doc. He plumped down on the floor and straightened the body out. Zipping open his bag, he emerged triumphantly with a handful of paraphernalia and began his examination.

STRANGE watched him for a moment, then sauntered across the Oriental rug. He stopped at a table in the center of the room and stared down at it with brooding interest. A pack of cards sprawled across it, as though someone had flung them there. Four partly filled glasses testified that four people had played cards, as did the four chairs drawn around the table. Strange picked up one of the glasses and sniffed at it. A gin-buck. His eyes sleepily contemplated the rest of the room. A swanky set-up with spindly-legged furniture, tapestried walls and latticed windows. To his right, a bedroom opened off the room and, off that, a black-and-white tile bathroom.

Emmett loomed alongside of him.

"Wasn't Keno Lazzeri's latest flame a dame called Belle?" Strange asked.

Emmett slapped his thigh. "Front and center! I've been tryin' to place this broad ever since y'u baptized her. Keno Lazzeri picked her out of a Third Street honky-tonk an' made a lady out of her. She played

hostess at his card games, warbled in his night club an' cooked his breakfast."

Strange's mind shifted into high gear. Keno Lazzeri, big-time gambler and proprietor of the Stetson Club, famous for its revolving bar. Keno had a finger in every racket in town. The front door was open to him at the city hall, and he was welcomed at the board and hearth of the city's better families. It was rumored that Keno wore a tuxedo for breakfast and slept with a tommy-gun. He was a suave, educated, highly polished tough guy. A hard nut and Strange didn't like him.

The doctor finished his examination. He rose to his feet, brushed off his knees and zipped the bag shut. "She was slugged from behind by some blunt instrument! Undoubtedly a sap. There's a bruise behind her right ear, another one on her cheekbone like somebody rapped her. Then she was strangled." He started for the door. "After that, she was strung up by the neck. Anything else?"

"Yeah," said Emmett. "What's her name and who killed her?" He winked at Strange.

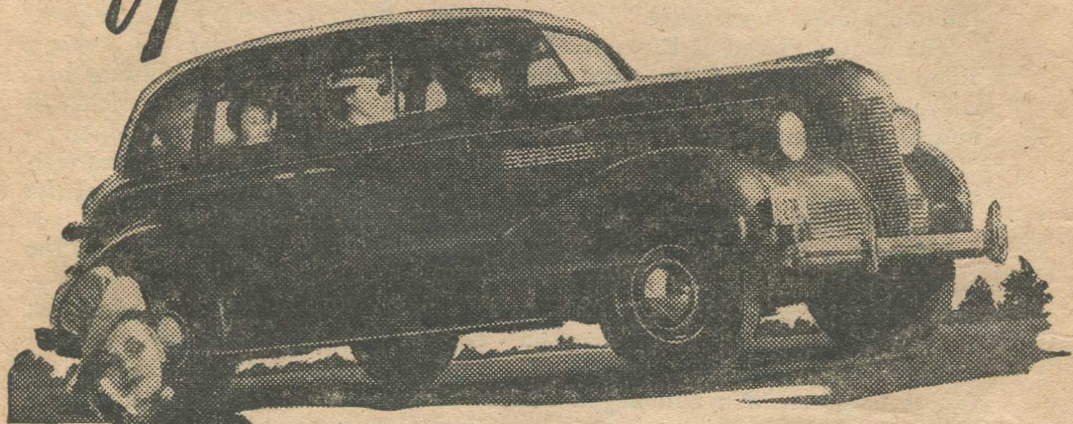
Doc Milbrandt stopped at the door, his hand on the knob. He said: "Her name is in mile-high letters on the door, but I don't think you can read, so just call her Susie. Somebody who didn't like her rubbed her out, quite possibly Fu-man-chu, Gunga Din, or Dracula. Does that straighten you out?"

"Uh?" said Emmett.

"Score five for the doc," murmured Strange. He ground his cigar in an ashtray. "How long's she been dead?"

"About eight hours," Doc Milbrandt answered, eying his wrist watch. "It's ten o'clock now; say sometime between one and two

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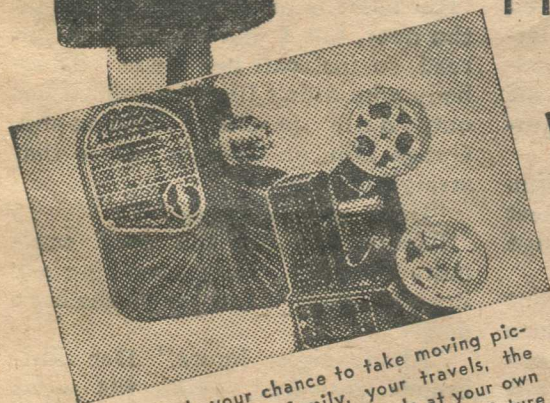
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thirty this morning. Anything else?"

"Nope. Thanks, doc. Emmett, get that house dick, Horan, up here!"

HORAN was six foot three. He weighed two hundred and fifty pounds and looked it. His face was bloated, with a red blubbery mouth and mean eyes. He wore a derby that was two sizes too small for him. He stood in the doorway and looked uneasily at the corpse.

"Come in, Horan, come in," said Strange. "You know this dame, eh?"

Horan sidled into the room. He licked his lips. "Yeah, I know her," he said.

"What'd Keno pay you to bump her off?"

Horan got excited. "Me bump her off? I ain't been near this room in a week."

Strange grinned crookedly. He said: "You have been in here, though, eh?"

Horan realized his mistake. He said: "Sure, I have! What the hell! I've been in nearly every room in th' joint."

"Must be an honest bunch around here," chortled Emmett.

"Who played cards here last night, Horan?" asked Strange.

"Gosh, I don't know, Gore. Y'u think I watch everybody that comes in?" The big man was uncomfortable under Strange's sleepy stare.

"Listen, Horan, quit stalling!" said Strange sharply. "I know that Keno got you this job here. That house detective business is a laugh. You're lookout for his card games. You're supposed to be bodyguard to this dame. You're in and out of this room twenty times a night. Now tell me, who played last night?"

"Honest, Gore, I don't know," whined Horan.

Emmett circled the room and came up behind him. He reached out an

immense paw and grasped Horan lightly by the neck. "We know you don't know anythin', fatty," he breathed in Horan's ear, "but just tell us who was up here last night."

Horan twisted in his grasp, and Emmett tightened his fingers. The house detective winced. "Now, don't start anythin', you guys," he whimpered. "I don't know nothin', honest!"

Strange walked up to him. Horan watched him coming, fear twisting his face. Strange slapped him lightly on the chin, twice. "Talk, Horan," he said, "or I'll sweat fifty pounds off you in as many minutes."

"All right, all right! Don't hit me!" The big man wilted in Emmett's grasp. "Keno Lazzeri was up here, an' the dame, there. Gregory Randall and the mayor dropped in. Mike Populoupos got here just as the play was getting hot. That's the truth, so help me!"

CHAPTER II.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

STROKING his nose, Strange regarded Horan with lidded eyes. Gregory Randall was publisher and owner of the *Morning Courier*. A man in his forties, a hard-headed, two-fisted business machine. He was ruthless and domineering, had a finger in politics and hankered for power. His paper was a sensation sheet with an army of reporters that outnumbered the police force. Wherever there was news, there was a *Courier* newshound. He was a force in the city that swayed judges and district attorneys.

Strange grimaced. What a nice set-up this was turning out to be. Keno Lazzeri, Gregory Randall and Mike Populoupos. Mike the Greek, who owned all the taxis; who owned a chain of twenty-four-hour eating

houses; who owned the opposition paper to the *Courier*; who owned the opposition night club to the Stetson Club; who owned three hotels and a flock of apartment houses. A mountain of a man, so fat that he could hardly walk, he sat in his specially built chair and guided his multifarious affairs with astute cunning.

Strange sighed. Hell's bells! To top off this mixed clique was none other than Thomas Hastings, his honor, the mayor.

"What time did they get here; when did they leave; who lost and why?" he asked Horan.

Horan wrinkled his brow. He said: "Keno got here first, about ten o'clock. Randall and Hastings came right after him and Mike Populoupos blew in about eleven. She—she was here before any of 'em, of course." He took off his derby, patted his thin hair nervously. "I don't know when they left. I checked out around four o'clock an' they were still playin'. Mike the Greek was forty grand winner, then."

"What time did you say you left?"

Horan squirmed in Emmett's grasp. "Mebbe three thirty, four o'clock," he said.

"She was dead then," said Strange flatly.

"At four o'clock?"

"Yeah, at four o'clock. She was a good hour dead at four o'clock."

"She was right here, I tell y'u. Mebbe it was three o'clock. She was here, though. I was talkin' to her."

"Talking to her, eh?" Strange drawled. "What about?"

"Why . . . uh . . . about a lotta things," Horan said uneasily.

"What, for instance?"

"Oh, hell! Lotta things. She was scared. I tried to make her feel good."

"Scared? Of what?"

Horan licked his lips. He said: "She was scared of Keno Lazzeri. He'd found out that she was two-timin' him with Randall."

Strange said: "Don't make me laugh! If she two-timed Keno it's certain he wouldn't be playing cards with Randall."

"Say!" said Horan, "you don't know Randall. He makes guys like Keno jump through hoops for him. Keno Lazzeri's just a punk workin' for Randall."

"He is, eh? That's interesting," said Strange. "What a nice picture! Randall steals Keno's girl. Then Keno asks him up and they sit together all night like a couple of old chums playing cards. Nuts!"

"And I suppose Mike the Greek cut up paper dolls to entertain 'em?" broke in Emmett.

Horan looked sour. "That guy sets my teeth on edge," he said. "All he did was try and promote a fight between Keno, Randall and the broad. Honest, I was chewin' my nails when I left. The Greek kept 'em at each other's throats all the time. I thought sure someone was goin' to get hurt."

Strange glanced at the dead girl. "Somebody did," he reminded.

Horan looked sideways at the corpse. "Yeah, that's right. Somebody did," he said.

"Where do you check out at night?" asked Strange.

"Downstairs. At the desk. I turn in my keys there every night. Johnny Hommel was on duty. He keeps a record of all the help."

WALKING over to the ivory French phone, Strange got connected with the desk on the main floor. The clerk on duty asked him to wait a minute while he looked up

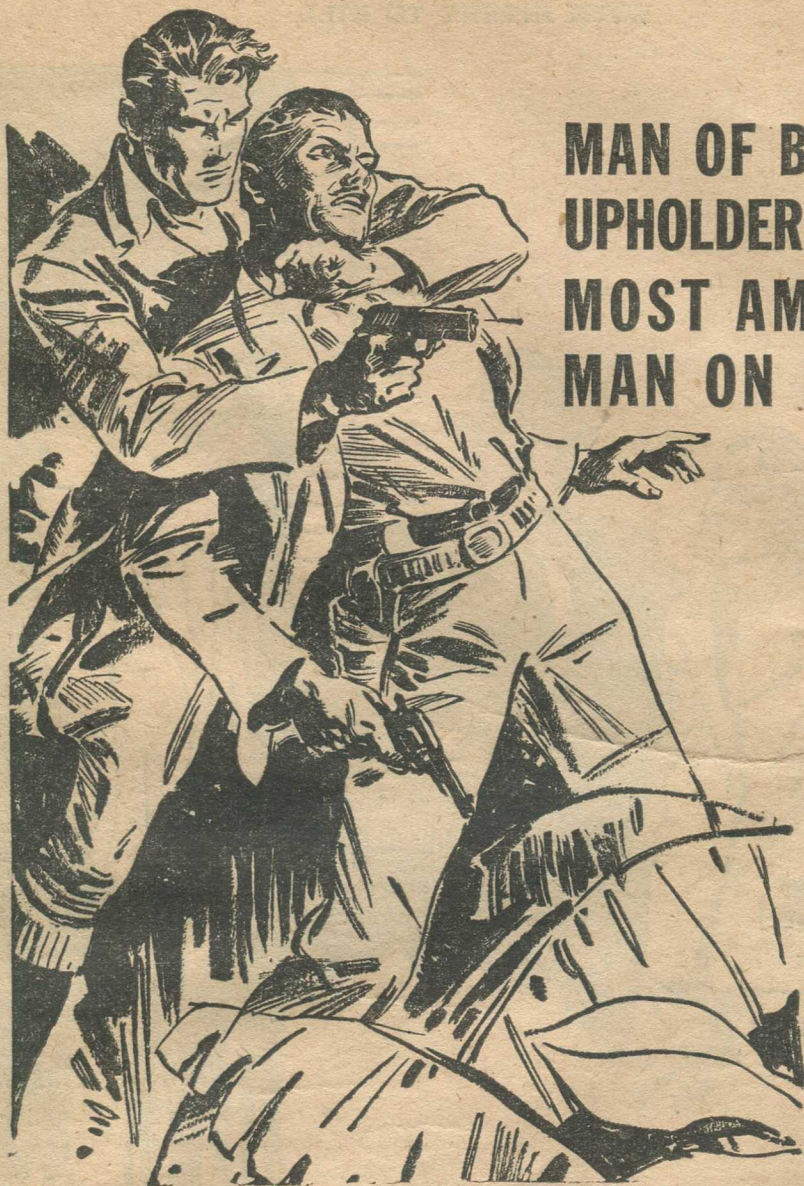


She hung from the neck, the heavy bathrobe cord around her pushing her eyes out and blackening her face.

last night's time. He returned and told Strange that Horan had checked out at half past three.

Strange was just placing the phone back on its holder when he heard Horan's whimper blending with Emmett's quick, indrawn breath. He

whirled, dropping the phone, crouching. He froze in that position, his eyes drowsily taking in the scene before him. Further movement would have meant death! Two men stood grinning in the doorway. One held a tommygun carelessly in the



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crook of his arm. The other waved a squat automatic.

"What's a'matter, flattie?" jeered one of the hoods. "Y'u paralyzed?"

"He's got a cramp, ain'tcha, buddy?" the other sneered.

Strange shot a glance at Emmett and Horan. Horan's knees were quaking, his mouth working. Emmett stood perfectly still. He was in the direct line of fire. Strange relaxed slowly, straightening his long body, lowering his hands. The white-faced gunman growled at him. "Don't try what y'u're thinkin', sweetheart, or I'll punch holes in y'u."

Strange said: "You can't get away with it, wise guy."

"Listen to th' guy, y'u'd think he was J. Edgar Hoover."

Joe looked around the room. He said: "Where's the broad? We gotta bring the broad along, too—" He broke off as his eyes fell on the scantily clad corpse. "Cripes! Look at that!" he gasped. "Hey! What is this? We ain't supposed to lug a stiff down that fire escape, are we, Lou?"

Lou looked startled. He growled: "Hell, no! Almost naked like that! What do they think we are, undertakers? Gee, look at her face!"

"You boys are going to get hurt," Strange said. "Better lay off!"

Joe strutted up to Strange. "Who's gonna get hurt, uh?" he crowed. He shifted the tommygun. "Lousy copper!" he snarled and lashed out with his fist. Strange rolled his head and the hood's fist caught him on the side of the mouth. He felt a tooth crack, his lips became numb. He licked his lips. "Have your fun, small fry," he gritted.

"Lay off, dim-wit, lay off!" hollered Lou. "Y'u'll get plenty of time for that when we get 'em in the car."

"I hate cops! I hate their guts,"

growled Joe. "Don't you hate cops, Lou?"

"Sure I do. Sure!" soothed Lou. "But we got work to do. Frisk them guys, Joe, an' let's get outta here."

Joe's lips curled scornfully. "Oke, oke, don't get your teeth in an uproar. Wait'll I get rid of this fiddle."

He bent over to lay the tommygun on the floor, and Strange went into action.

With a short brutal jab, he stabbed at Joe with his foot, flinging himself sideward at the same time in a twisting leap. His shoe thudded into Joe's face with a squashy plop. The heel of his brogan ground Joe's nose and mouth and teeth together in a crimson mess. The gunman yelped, caroming backward, arms flailing the air. He landed on the back of his neck, skidding along the rug in a twisted welter of arms and legs. He stopped with his head wedged beneath a chair.

Lou jerked up his gun. "Y'u lousy, two-bit copper!" he screeched. He yanked on the trigger just as Emmett unlimbered his .45. Lou's shot missed Strange. He sensed the danger of Emmett but pivoted too slowly. Emmett's slug caught Lou high in the forehead, tore half his skull away, slammed him backward on sodden legs into the hall. Lou was dead on his feet, his face a mangled horror. He bent at the middle, crumpling slowly and suddenly fell sideways.

STRANGE uncoiled himself from behind the Morris chair, rubbing his mouth where Joe had hit him. Emmett grabbed Horan's fleshy cheek in a massive fist. He twisted his gun into the house detective's ear. "These guys friends of yours?" he growled.

"Gosh, no!" Horan's legs buckled. Sweat gathered in beads on his fore-

head. He was suddenly very sick. Emmett pushed him away and followed Strange into the hall. The elevator indicator was rounding the fourth floor and coming up fast. It stopped in a flicker of red lights. The doors rolled smoothly back and two uniformed coppers barged out, Positives clenched in their fists, faces set. Emmett's .45 covered them. He looked disgusted. "You guys'll never live long enough to get pensioned," he said sourly, shoving the gun back in its shoulder clip.

The coppers looked sheepish. They fumbled with their guns, stuck them back in their holsters. They saluted Strange.

"Stick around, boys," he said. "I'll have the wagon and Doc Milbrandt up in a little while. While you're waiting, sit on that guy for a while." He motioned toward the apartment where the gunman he had kicked was beginning to moan.

The elevator operator was staring white-faced at Lou. "Is . . . is he dead?" he asked, his throat working.

A pert little face with cupid-bow mouth, tilted nose and a hat that threatened to fall off red curls at the first sneeze, peered over his shoulder. "If he isn't, dearie, he's doing a good act," she observed.

Emmett's face brightened. He said: "How you smell 'em! They ain't even cold yet."

"Hello, Irish," the girl greeted Emmett. Well-rounded calves high-heeled the delicious bundle that was Patsy Flynn out of the elevator. She brushed past Emmett, trailing an elusive perfume of lavender and musk.

Strange grinned inside. Patsy Flynn of the *Courier* was his particular curse. He'd ducked and dodged her, barred and restricted her on

every case of importance he had handled in the last five years; but if she didn't show up, he was disappointed.

The *Courier* had hired Miss Patricia Flynn six years ago, and had never regretted that action. She was their star reporter. She smelled news like a camel smells water. Violent death drew her like a magnet. Beneath the saucy bundle of curls that snuggled around her neck was a brain as alert and keen as any Strange had ever met up with. She had cracked more cases for him than he cared to admit. He respected her brain, admired her grit and brazen impudence, and deep within himself, loved her fiercely.

She grinned at him. "Hy-ya, Gore! Who's the corpse?"

"Don't tell me you don't know?" he frowned.

She stared down at the blood-smeared face of Lou with disapproval. She said: "Well, his make-up's running, but . . . nope! Never saw him!"

"Name's Lou," grunted Emmett.

"Do tell!" She sauntered to the apartment door and peered in. "Lawdy! Lawdy!" she gasped. "You two guys been running amok? More stiffies than I've seen in a month of Sundays. What'd the dame die of, pneumonia?"

"One of 'em's alive," volunteered Emmett.

Patsy raised her eyebrows. "A live corpse! Dearie, that's news what is news."

Strange chuckled. Emmett got red in the neck and glared at the bluecoat, who in turn shuffled his feet, pursing his lips in a soundless whistle.

Patsy cocked a blue eye at Strange. "Let down your hair, Gore, and tell all," she cooed.

He was walking toward the elevator, prodding his gray felt into shape. "Come along," he invited. "I want to ask you some questions."

She beat him to the elevator, grinning up at him as he moved back in the car. "Now talk, honey, and tell Patricia who cut your lip, where all those dead people came from and what do you think of Twinkle Toes in the fifth at Belmont. If you play

nice, I might be able to tell you a few things."

Emmett clumped into the car. "Down," he said to the operator.

Patsy nudged Strange. "Isn't he wonderful?" she whispered.

"Nuts!" said Emmett.

THEY stood at the curb while Emmett wagged his arm like a traffic cop at a cab parked across the



Using Patsy for a shield, Randall yelled, "I'll scatter her brains all over this room if anyone so much as breathes!"

street with the vacant sign up.

"Did you want a taxi, mister?" asked the driver, making a three-point landing in front of them.

"Yeah, but you'll do," said Emmett sourly.

Patsy scrambled in first, showing three inches of silk-clad limbs that neither man had known existed before. When Strange eased down in the seat she snuggled up to him, passing her arm through his. "Where we going, honey?" she asked.

"Stetson Club," Strange told the driver.

Patsy hitched her skirt higher so that the silk of her stockings glistened tightly across round knees. "Keno Lazzeri, eh?" she murmured. "You're aiming high, boy."

Strange's jaw was set. His eyes contemplated the head of the cabby

sleepily. "Where do you fit in this picture, kitten?" he asked.

"Who, me?"

"Yeah, you," said Strange. "Or was it a social visit you were making on Belle Charteris, deceased?"

Patsy laughed and took her arm out of Strange's. "You're too damned suspicious, Gore," she said.

"That's my business," he told her.

"It gets in my hair," she said, "and I don't like it. After all, we're supposed to be friends."

"Sorry," said Strange, "but, after all, you work for Randall. Randall played cards there last night. This dame, Belle, and Randall were crossing Keno. And your arrival was opportune, if you get what I mean."

"You mean you think Randall knew about this murder and sent me up there because he knew I was

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friendly with you?" she asked angrily. "Or maybe he asked me to destroy some damning evidence. Or maybe I was finger-girl to those two hoods."

Strange said gently: "Calm down, kitten. What I meant was, did Randall send you up there on an assignment? In other words, did he know that something was wrong at the Plaza apartments?"

"You picked a funny way to say that!" she blazed.

Strange smiled wearily. "You flare too easily," he said. "Did Randall send you up?"

"No! In case you forget it, I live at the Plaza. I heard shots; I came; I saw." She chewed her lower lip. "And if it's any interest to you, I quit the *Courier* last night."

Strange was startled. His eyes almost opened wide. He said: "Yeah?"

Emmett leaned across Strange's lap. "About time y'u quit hellin' around," he said. "News ain't that important."

Strange placed the palm of his hand against Emmett's nose and pushed. "Relax, Mortimer, relax," he said.

Patsy said: "Randall's a heel."

"You've known that a long time," said Strange. "You didn't quit on account of that?"

"He's power mad, that guy!" Patsy went on. "I've been doing a little research work on my own hook. He's tied up with Mike Populoupos in the dope business, in the numbers racket and in the illegal liquor game. The two of them have their fingers in every pie in this State. Randall's running for governor this year, and with the power and money he and Mike Populoupos have, he stands a good chance to get in." She paused to light a cigarette. "They've got the mayor under their thumbs and

if he squawks, they press down. The poor little mutt! I feel sorry for him. He's square as can be, but they've got him in a corner. I quit because I won't work for a two-faced hypocrite like Randall. I uncovered his own private garbage can, and it smelled to high heaven!"

DURING this tirade, Strange sat quietly, his sleepy eyes gravely watching the driver commit everything but mayhem as he weaved through traffic. He stroked his nose as Patsy finished. "Where's Keno Lazzeri fit in?" he asked.

Patsy said: "In the corner, with a dunce's cap on. He does all the strong-arm work. He thinks he's a big shot. But Randall and the Greek laugh at him."

"Keno's smart and hard," frowned Strange. "It doesn't tie."

Patsy sneered: "Keno's soft as butter when a dame plays him. This Belle what's-her-name had Keno walking on his heels."

Strange inspected his nails. "Randall didn't make any passes at you, did he?" he asked casually.

"Several of them," said Patsy. She looked out of the window. "I sort of liked the guy, Gore. I worked hard for him. I thought he was right. I knew he was power crazy, but, after all, that doesn't make him a snake. For the last month my assignment has been sob-writing. If you've noticed, the *Courier's* been lambasting policy rackets, dope dens and corrupt politics. An extensive drive to make our city cleaner and better. I put my heart into it. And then I stumbled on the fact that these same policy rackets and mud roosts are controlled jointly by Randall and Populoupos! The drive was just a pile of hooley to boost him along in his governorship campaign!"

"Did you tell Randall what you know?"

"Like a sap," said Patsy, "I did."

The cab pulled into the curb. "Stetson Club!" sang the driver. "Six bits!"

"You've got something there, buddy," said Emmett.

They got out of the cab, Strange paid the driver and they walked up the corrugated-rubber matting that stretched from the black-and-silver door to the curb.

A big Negro was polishing the door handles to the tune of the Lambeth Walk. He bobbed his pate at them, flashing ivories from ear to ear. "Mawnin', mawnin'," he chanted, and cracked the polishing rag like a bootblack.

CHAPTER III.

SNATCHED!

INSIDE the Stetson Club was muted activity. Swampers in rolled-up pants and splotchy aprons flung mops at the floor without enthusiasm. Chairs were piled atop tables. An odor of stale cigar smoke, perfume, sweat and alcohol wafted faintly and unpleasantly to the nostrils. On the carpeted stairs leading up to the gambling rooms, two gray-haired women whispered, heads together, flicking their dusters haphazardly at the banister. The famed revolving bar wasn't revolving. Behind it, a bartender in his shirt sleeves polished glasses.

Strange and Emmett ranged alongside the bar. Patsy straddled a leather-cushioned, chromium-legged stool. The bartender placed the glass he was polishing tenderly on the back bar and came toward them.

"What'll it be this mornin', folks?" he husked.

"Three beers," said Strange, "and buzz Keno!"

The barkeep had the glasses under the tap. "Keno ain't in!"

"Where is he?"

Placing a beer in front of each of them, the bartender looked at Strange. "Y'u're Gore Strange, ain't y'u?" he asked.

Strange nodded.

"Even if I did know where Keno is, which I don't, I wouldn't tell you, copper," he said. "That's what us taxpayers pay you guys for, t' find things out by yourself."

"He's a communist," said Patsy, sipping her beer.

Strange reached across the bar and took hold of the drink peddler's tie. He pulled him down and across the bar so that their noses almost touched. He said: "Even if you don't know where Keno is, which you do, keep a civil tongue in your head before I pour you back in one of those bottles." He unloosed his grip on the tie, and the bartender staggered backward. He bumped into the back bar, knocking over a bottle of Scotch and some high-stemmed glasses. The glasses broke with a tinkling shatter.

FROM behind them a cold voice said: "Enjoying yourself, Strange?"

Emmett choked on his beer. Patsy turned so fast she almost fell off the high stool. Strange swung slowly, elbows against the bar. "Good morning, Keno," he said. "Get your hat, we're going down to headquarters!"

Keno Lazzeri was tall and well built. He filled his clothes nicely. Dark, arrogant, sophisticated, he appealed to women and knew it. His eyes were large and softly brown with long lashes. When he smiled, his lips turned inward against nice teeth. He was smiling now, thin lipped. His legs were braced apart, hands plunged deep in his coat

pockets. His bodyguards ranged on each side of him. Doda Grippa grinned broken-toothed from his right. On his left Chunky Griffin ravished Patsy's legs with tiny, malicious eyes.

"Headquarters, eh?" Keno eyed Strange. "What for? My income tax is paid up."

"What about your dog license?" called Emmett. "I don't see no tag on them two mutts trailin' you."

Keno's eyes swiveled to Emmett. He said: "You're a scream, Irish. I'm practically ready to split . . . you wide open."

Emmett grinned. He said amiably: "Any time you're ready—beautiful."

Lighting his cigar, Strange tossed the match in the bar gutter. He said: "For the present we'll book you as a material witness—we can do that, you know."

Keno said: "Material witness to what? Sassing a cop?"

"Murder's enough," Strange said.

Keno stuck his jaw out. "What is this, Strange—a joke?"

"Not so you could notice. A dame was murdered! We want to ask you some questions about it."

"A dame! Because some dame's murdered, you want to ask me questions!"

"Not some dame. Your dame, Keno," Strange told him.

Keno looked puzzled. "I don't get it," he said.

Strange spit a shred of tobacco. He said: "You played cards last night with Randall, Mike the Greek and the mayor. Right?"

Keno nodded, his face tight.

"The game was in apartment twelve at the Plaza," Strange continued. "This morning a cleaning girl found a woman hanging from the chandelier in apartment twelve at the Plaza." He puffed on his cigar. "She notified us."

Keno swallowed. "It still doesn't



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click," he said. "We didn't have any dame up there last night."

"What about Belle?"

"Belle! She didn't show up—" Keno's eyes widened. "Say! Who was this dame?"

"It was Belle Charteris," said Strange.

"Belle! I tell you Belle wasn't there!"

"She was there, all right. Deader'n hell. After all, it's her apartment."

Keno's eyes were miserable. Strange almost felt sorry for him, admired his acting and hated his guts all at the same time. Keno recovered quickly. His eyes hardened. "I don't know anything about it," he said. "She wasn't there all night. I was expecting her, but she didn't show up. If you say she's dead, she must be dead. But I don't know anything about it!"

Strange shrugged and said: "Mebbe so. But you're still a material witness—for the present."

"You can't pinch me, Strange!"

Emmett stood up, flexing his big arms. He said "Should we take him, Gore?"

Chunky Griffin hauled a gun out of his pocket. "Sit down, baboon!" he grated.

Emmett looked narrow-eyed at him. Patsy swung her legs gleefully. "Slug him, Irish!" she piped.

Doda Grippa turned cold eyes on her. He said: "Pipe down, fluff-duff, or I'll spank you."

Moving her purse, Patsy showed a small blue-barreled, pearl-handled revolver clenched in her fist. It pointed at Doda. "Them's harsh words, Doda," she said softly, "and a lady's liable to take offense."

Women with guns bothered Doda. He stared fascinated at the tiny gun in Patsy's fist. He licked his lips but didn't say anything.

Emmett walked toward Chunky, arms swinging loosely at his side. Chunky's eyes darted from the big man approaching to Patsy and her tiny gun. He took a step backward. Emmett cuffed his gun aside and closed in. He hit Chunky in the stomach. The gunman sat down with a worried look. He drew up his knees, dropped his gun and groaned. He looked green.

Keno said: "You can't get away with it, Strange!"

"Take him, Emmett!" said Gordon Strange.

Emmett stepped over Chunky. He grabbed Keno by the shoulder and spun him around, pulling his coat down over his arms. The night-club proprietor offered no resistance. His body was taut, quivering, as Emmett slapped him in a lightning fan. He extracted a snub-nosed .38 from Keno's pocket, dropped it at his feet and kicked it spinning across the floor.

Keno's eyes were smoldering. "I'll even things," he said thinly, "with interest."

Strange yawned, finished his beer and motioned to Patsy. She slid off the stool, still holding the little gun. She waved it airily at Doda. "So long, hamfat."

THEY pushed through the silver-and-black door, Emmett bearing down on Keno's wrist, which he held fondly in the crook of his arm. The big Negro was still polishing. He started to bow and grin, but when he saw Keno he froze, his thick lower lip hanging open. "Yas, suh; yas, suh!" he said mechanically.

A big black-and-white cab moved slowly in low gear down the street. It pulled up in front of them, as they stopped at the curb. The driver touched his cap.

"Some service!" admired Emmett. He jerked Keno. "Come on, baby, get in."

Strange eyed the cab. The interior seemed strangely dark and, oddly, he couldn't see through the windows. It dawned on him suddenly that the windows were painted. He started to grab for Patsy, Emmett, and his gun all at the same time. The back door of the cab swung open. "Get in, children," said a soft voice. "And stand still, Gordon, or we'll leave you behind in pieces!"

Lolling in the back seat of the cab was an immensely fat man. A round, white face gleamed above the dark topcoat he wore. His large paunch flowed from triple chins to knees that looked like basketballs. Pudgy, shapeless fingers held a sawed-off shotgun that was pointed unwaveringly at Emmett's startled face.

Saucer eyes, without lids, blinked gently.

"If I should squeeze this trigger a fraction of an inch more, your head would be blown back into the Stetson Club," he said. "Get into the front seat and keep your hands on your knees! While I keep this abbreviated shotgun against the back of your colleague's head, Gordon, climb in alongside him. Quick!"

Mike the Greek made no idle threats. Strange shrugged. If he so much as twitched, Emmett was a dead man. He squeezed into the front seat alongside Emmett.

"And you, my dear," purred Mike the Greek, "will sit next to me."

Patsy shuddered. She climbed in and seated herself gingerly alongside the mountain of flesh.

Keno stuck his excited, gloating

Continued on page 120



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1 You, who are worried because of excessive falling hair and approaching baldness, will be interested in the story on this page which is published through the courtesy of the Vitex Hair Institute, 521 Fifth Avenue, New York. Below you will find pictures showing how subjects are treated in an effort to encourage hair growth.



3 Here you see a trained scalp expert applying VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER. An intermittent vacuum and massage is also used to induce increased circulation so necessary for the hair roots. Cleanliness is a necessary requisite for uninterrupted hair growth. Vitex's Conditioner contains precious ingredients that clean, stimulate and help purify . . . it is amazing how much dirt can settle in the hair and scalp and clog up the pores.



4 Now the subject feels the tingling effect of chemistry used and knows that VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER is really at work. VITEX HAIR INSTITUTE has prepared its tested products so that everyone can use them at home and enjoy their benefits. So easy to use . . . no attendant is necessary for result getting applications.



2 A microscopic examination of your scalp would probably reveal that there are foreign agents attacking and clogging up hair growing areas and interfering with natural hair growth.

In many cases science, through the use of chemistry, has been able to correct this condition by encouraging increased circulation . . . causing a cleaning away of unwanted local elements and thereby permit the roots to breathe and function naturally without interruption.



5 & 6 Here's a laboratory photo of Vitex Hair Institute's chemist concocting the precious ingredients which are used in VITEX'S Hair Reconditioning Method. Those who appreciate the social and business value of a healthy head of hair, should know there are fourteen local causes of baldness . . . thirty years experimenting, study of research and application have now made it possible to present readers of this magazine with a scientific aid that has proven itself to be very helpful.



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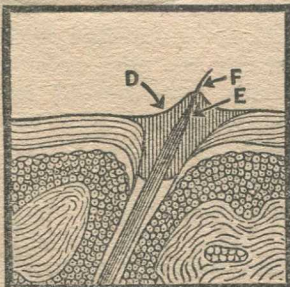


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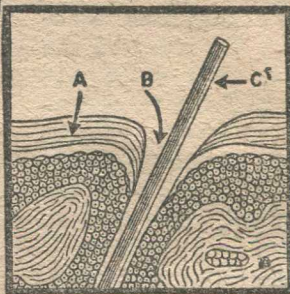
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Continued from page 117

face in the door. "Thanks, Mike!" he said. "Talk about the nick of time! You taking them out to the mansion?"

"Yes," said Mike.

Keno said: "Fine!" He ground a fist into Strange's ear. "I'll be out later. I've a score to settle with these monkeys."

Mike carefully transferred the shotgun to his left hand, keeping its barrel pressed against Emmett's head. Puffing and wheezing, he dipped into his coat pocket.

"So sorry, Keno," he said gently, "but I've a score to settle with you." He jerked up his hand. Patsy screamed and slapped his arm. There was a sharp crack. Keno toppled backward out of the car.

"Move, Christopher!" said the Greek.

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER CORPSE.

FOR the next ten minutes, Christopher, the driver, manipulated the large car through traffic with adroit ease, bearing toward the outskirts of the city. Mike the Greek had been talking almost all of that time. Mike enjoyed talking. It required no physical exertion. His voice was soft and pleasant to listen to, and he possessed a gift of words. So, as the tires of the heavy taxi whirled them out of the city and into the country, Mike talked. But even in his greatest eloquence, he didn't forget to keep the muzzle of the sawed-off shotgun pressed firmly against Emmett's neck.

"Tell me, Gordon," he asked, "whatever became of my two messenger boys, Lou and Joe?"

Hunched in the front seat, Strange chewed on his cigar. He said: "So you sent them. I was wondering where they tied in. Lou's dead!

Joe's in jail if he's still alive." He twisted around to look at Mike. "You want us bad, eh, Mike?"

"Joe and Lou never did work well together," murmured Mike. He stared thoughtfully at Strange. He said: "Truthfully, Gordon, I dislike doing this. But you should be more careful in cultivating your friends."

"Meaning?" asked Strange.

"Meaning Miss Flynn," said Mike. "She knows too much. Far too much." He smiled blandly at Patsy. "I've heard a great deal about you, my dear. You have an inquisitive mind. You also possess brains, which is amazing."

"Thanks!" gritted Patsy.

"Not at all," said Mike. "But you also have a tongue, which is unfortunate. Having stumbled on the fact that Gregory Randall and myself are connected with certain, ah, should we say, questionable enterprises, you should have remained quiet. You would have been well paid. But you didn't. Naturally, since your flare-up at Randall's office, last night, we've had you trailed. Last night, immediately after quitting your job, you went directly to Gordon Strange's—"

"Patsy!" said Strange. "Did you?"

Patsy said: "Yes," and blushed.

"Naturally, when we heard that Gordon and his assistant were seen going into the apartment building where you live, we decided action was the only policy," purred Mike. "Hence, here we are."

"You're afraid that what Patsy knows will put a crimp in Randall's political plans?" asked Strange.

"At this stage of the game, we can take no chances," Mike said smoothly.

Strange stared moodily at the road slipping beneath the big wheels. There was no traffic and Christopher

was giving the gas pedal his full weight. Strange knew now where they were going. The Greek owned a country home out this way. He said: "And you bumped Keno off for the same reason?"

"Precisely," said Mike. "Dead men tell no tales, you know. However, Keno was removed for several other reasons. He was greedy. He believed he was more important than he actually was. He became quite demonstrative on several occasions. And he cheats at cards."

"Quite a game last night, eh, Mike?" remarked Strange.

"A farewell party to Keno," Mike chuckled.

"Keno's girl friend must have got pretty well plastered. She's hurt badly!"

"Keno's girl friend?" said Mike. "There wasn't any girl there. It was a stag affair."

Strange sat up straighter. "You're sure about that?" he asked.

"Positive!" said Mike. "A woman would have made the evening almost enjoyable. I can always appreciate a woman." He looked down at Patsy. Slowly, deliciously, he ran his saucer eyes over her legs, her thighs, her breasts. "And you, my pet are all woman!"

Strange twisted around. "Lay off, Populoupos!" he gritted. "If you so much as touch her, I'll—"

Mike smiled urbanely. He removed the barrel of the shotgun from Emmett's neck and stabbed it playfully at Strange. It caught him on the chin, cutting into the flesh, leaving a round, angry ring which oozed blood.

"You'll what?" laughed Mike.

Patsy could feel the quivering of his gross body as he laughed. She clutched the little pearl-handled gun in her fist but dared not use it. The Greek's finger was crooked too tightly around the trigger of the shotgun. A mere twitch would blast

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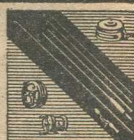
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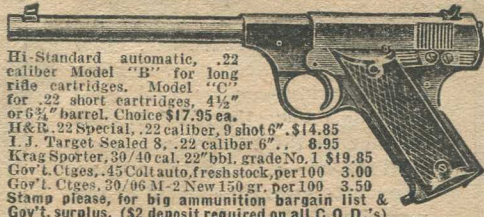
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all of Strange's head from his shoulders and a good portion of Emmett's.

Strange's lips were white. He said: "Mike, I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

The shotgun prodded him again. "You won't kill anybody, Gordon, because, figuratively speaking, you are a dead man."

"While there's life there's hope," grunted Emmett.

"Spoken like a true numbskull," applauded Mike sarcastically. "Your wit is remarkable."

"So are you, you fat slob," returned Emmett glibly.

Patsy gasped. The fool! This mound of flesh was like a volcano ready to explode and the dumb Irishman was feeding him hot coal. She glanced at Mike's face. It still retained its unrippled placidity. But the saucer eyes were wide open now, with tiny, swollen veins sprouting from their corners. She eased her gun closer to the Greek's broad side.

CHRISTOPHER slowed suddenly and executed a ninety-degree turn. Rubber slithered on gravel and they were traveling up a narrow driveway that wound haphazardly through thick shrubbery. About a quarter of a mile ahead, Strange could glimpse the gabled, slated roof of Mike Populoupous' country home.

"My home is my castle," the Greek intoned dryly.

"Buddy," said Emmett, "you need a castle."

The shotgun barrel raked brutally across the back of his head. Emmett sagged limply.

"The Irish are noted for putting their feet in it," purred Mike.

Emmett revived enough to croak: "There's one place I'd like to put my feet, fat, and that's right in your puss!"

Christopher brought the car to a smooth stop. He slid from behind the wheel, crossed quickly in front

of the car and opened both doors. A heavy Luger nestled in his hand. He stood by the front bumper, the gun covering them as they alighted. Emmett reeled a little as he stepped off the running board. Strange grasped his elbow and steadied him. The big Irishman shook his head groggily. "All I ask is one crack at that Greek sugar-bowl," he said through clenched teeth, "just one crack."

Mike's eye fondled Patsy. "Get out, my dear," he said. "Business before pleasure, always. After that—" His eyes blinked slowly, deliberately.

Patsy's hand tightened on the gun hidden by her purse, her face white. With three jerks of her finger she could puncture as many holes in this obese monstrosity. But for what? Christopher would matter-of-factly blast down Strange and Emmett and quite possibly herself. She made a wry face. Paraphrasing Emmett, while there was life there was hope, she slid ungracefully from the car, her suede handbag wrapped around the gun.

Panting and grunting, using the shotgun for a cane, Mike the Greek extricated himself from the cab. He stood there on bowed legs, breathing hoarsely through thick lips, like a vast wad of dough that had somehow become animated. He waved the shotgun at them. "Into the house," he wheezed. "Hurry!"

Strange was the first through the door and the first to see the dead man on the floor. He stopped short, sucking in his breath. Emmett muttered to himself. The Greek prodded Strange with the shotgun. "Keep moving, please," he said.

Strange stepped aside. "Friend of yours, Mike?" He jerked his head toward the sprawled figure.

Mike blinked slowly. Watching

him, Strange saw his eyes swivel up the dim, high-ceilinged hallway. He waddled past Strange. "Watch them, Christopher!" he whispered. He prodded the still figure on the floor with his foot.

"Look out, Mike, he'll bite," said Emmett.

"You! Pipe down! See!" Christopher's gun ground into Emmett's ribs.

"Cripes!" said Emmett. "It does talk!"

Patsy giggled. "Irish, how have you lived so long?"

"That's a mystery," growled Christopher, "that's going to be solved any minute."

Watching, Strange again saw the Greek's eyes slew uneasily up the hall. "Got many of these cuties lying around the place, Mike?" he asked casually.

Patsy edged forward. "Who is it, Gore? Anybody we know?"

Strange said: "It's his honor—the mayor."

Patsy gasped incredulously. "No!" She craned her neck around Gore's shoulder.

Curiosity got the better of Christopher. He edged around Emmett and took a furtive peek at the dead man. "Sucker!" said Emmett softly. He rabbit-punched Christopher in the back of the neck, his fist traveling a short, vicious arc. Christopher squawked, once. He nose-dived to the floor, the Luger spinning from his hand. He clawed for the gun. Emmett kicked him in the mouth. Christopher subsided.

Mike the Greek swung the shotgun up, his face startled. He was hours slow. Strange slammed into him in a butting, flying tackle that carried the two men five feet backward. Strange pumped his fists elbow-deep into Mike's body. They crashed to the floor with the fat

man on the bottom. Strange slugged with satisfaction at the Greek's chins and rose to his feet. He grinned at Emmett. Emmett grinned at Patsy.

Patsy slipped the little pearl-handled gun back in her purse. "You boys took a long time to get wound up," she said.

"That's patience," said Emmett.

Patsy snickered: "Or something."

Strange was bending over the body of the mayor. He straightened and said: "He hasn't been dead long, and somebody gave him one hell of a shellacking before they bumped him."

"Who?" asked Emmett.

DOWN the hall a door swung slowly open. Emmett yanked out his gun. Patsy fumbled with her purse, shying behind Strange. The door creaked to a stop. A bald, glistening pate with a frightened face under it peered into the hallway.

Emmett said: "Looking for someone, baldy?"

The face had trouble talking. "Who . . . who are you?" it finally managed.

"We are the boys in orange and blue," Emmett said disgustedly, "and get the hell out from behind that door before I blow your nose off!"

"Yes . . . yes, sir!" gulped the face. A trim, wizened little body clad in a gray-striped suit carried the face into the hallway. Terrified eyes beneath heavy framed glasses slithered to the three bodies on the floor, then jerked to Strange's face.

"What's your name?" asked Strange.

"Chau-Chauncey Middleton," the little man told him.

"Chauncey! My gawd!" breathed Emmett.

Biting off the end of a cigar, Strange held a match to it. He said: "You're the mayor's secretary?"

Chauncey's eyes swerved to the stiff face of the dead man. He shuddered. "I was his secretary," he said.

"You kill him?"

"Me?" Chauncey's face was incredulous. "Heavens, no!"

"Who did?"

Courage was returning to the little man. Strange could see it seeping into his thin frame, stiffening his back, glinting in his eyes. He said stiffly: "I believe this is an affair for the police."

"It is." Strange told him. "We're the police."

"You are?" Chauncey nearly collapsed with relief. "Are you really?"

"Cross my heart," Strange said solemnly.

"Who rubbed out your boss?" growled Emmett. "And quit stalling!"

Chauncey jumped. "I am not stalling," he said coldly. "I am merely ascertaining identities. In an affair as serious as this I'm going to be mighty careful to whom I impart information. How do I know who you are?"

"You don't," Strange told him. "But what good would it do if you did?"

Chauncey drew himself up. He said coldly: "Sir! I am a small man. I could offer no resistance to whatever force you might employ. But my lips would remain sealed."

"Attaboy!" applauded Patsy.

The mayor's secretary peered at her. He gasped: "Miss Flynn! You here! Oh, my dear, this is no place for you."

"That's all right, Chauncey," she assured him. "You see, these lugs do happen to be the law."

Patsy's words made up his mind. He turned on his heel. "Will you be so kind as to follow me?" he said.

They trailed after him down the hall. Chauncey paused in the doorway of the room he had just left. He raised an arm and pointed. "There," he said dramatically, "is the man who murdered Mayor Hastings."

The room was either a large den or a small library. Heavy bookshelves were built up like tiers in a crypt, their bulk throwing dark shadows on the sparsely carpeted floor. A large, many-paned window, set high in the paneled wall, directed a shaft of light squarely on a swathed, bulky figure that lay on the floor.

Emmett said: "What is it, a mummy?"

"That is Gregory Randall," said Chauncey triumphantly.

"Do you mean to say that Randall is under all those blankets and curtains and drapes and things?" asked Patsy open-mouthed.

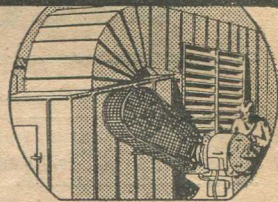
"Yes. You see, I was too nervous to bind him securely," explained Chauncey, "so while he was still unconscious, I wrapped him up in all that stuff. It is impossible for him to extricate himself." Chauncey looked sheepish. "I read about that in a detective story."

"My aunt!" breathed Patsy.

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"Little man," said Emmett, "you have had a busy day."

"Unwrap him, Emmett," Strange said.

Emmett worked five minutes over the swathed figure and unwound everything but the kitchen sink. When he got to the bottom and found Randall, the bound man looked more dead than alive. His face was a pale, ghastly green. He gasped like a fish out of water. He glared weakly at the apprehensive Chauncey and then was suddenly very sick.

"Perhaps I hit him too hard," worried Chauncey.

"Ye gods!" said Strange, "what haven't you done to him?"

CHAPTER V.

DISSENSION AMONG CROOKS.

SEATING himself gingerly and wearily in a leather-backed chair, Chauncey wiped his face with a handkerchief. "He deserves it," he said. "He and that Greek person have made a hell on earth for Mayor Hastings. They've used him as an unwilling tool in all of their filthy doings. They threatened his family. Insidiously, they gained control of the political machine until the mayor was a mere puppet."

"Today, Mayor Hastings absolutely refused to do their bidding any longer, come what may." The little man covered his eyes with his hand. For a moment he was silent, then he continued: "It was terrible. They argued. Then they fought with their fists and Randall was knocked down. The mayor was just leaving when Randall shot him in the back. I hit Randall with an inkstand."

Randall weaved to his feet. "You little squirt!" he said thickly.

Strange stepped between them. He grabbed him by the lapels and shook him hard. "Sit down!" he said, and slammed him into a chair.

"I'll have you broke for this, Strange," snarled Randall.

Strange laughed. "Yesterday you were a big shot. Today you're small potatoes. You're done, Randall! You're kapoot!"

Randall sneered: "Think so?"

Strange shook his head. "I know so," he said. "Patsy and Chauncey have enough evidence against you to stretch your neck ten inches in the right place."

Randall's eyes switched to Patsy. "Tart!" he spat.

Emmett clumped forward. "Button your mouth or I'll fill it with a fist! My fist!" he growled, waving a hand the size of a ham under Randall's nose.

"My hero!" chirped Patsy.

Strange said: "Oke, hero. The damsel's honor is still untouched. See if you can find a phone and get some of the boys out here." He lit his cigar. "Take a look at Mike and Christopher, while you're at it."

"No need for that, Gordon," said a deadly, gentle voice from the doorway. "We're doing quite well, thank you."

"That man's here again!" Patsy said under her breath.

Mike the Greek filled the doorway. In his dimpled, pudgy hand he held a blue-barreled revolver. Behind him, Christopher's thin, dark face peered maliciously over a mountain-out shoulder.

Strange said: "I'm slipping, Mike. I forgot you utterly."

Mike nodded. "But I haven't forgotten you! I dislike being mauled, Gordon." He waddled into the room. Christopher slipped past him and darted at Emmett.

"You kicked me!" he hollered, his damaged face twisted in rage.

"I should have kicked harder," said Emmett.

Christopher threw a fist at the big detective. Emmett nodded his head

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and the blow slid along the side of his face, nearly taking his ear off.

Mike reached out and grabbed Christopher. He spun him around and pushed him away. Emmett stood rigid, his eyes following Christopher.

Randall got up and walked up to Strange. His voice was nasty. "Who's day is done?"

Strange removed the cigar from his mouth. He flicked a shred of tobacco out with his tongue. He said: "You're still kapoot, Randall!"

Randall's eyes were mean. He kicked Strange viciously in the groin. Strange moaned. His face whitened. He fell writhing to the floor.

Chauncey said: "You miserable skunk!"

Patsy screeched like a wild cat and leaped at Randall, claws unsheathed.

Emmett's big hands flexed. He started for Randall.

Mike said: "Freeze, Irish!"

Christopher ran behind Emmett. He jabbed a gun into the big man's spine. Emmett stopped. His voice was thin between clenched teeth. "Christopher," he said, "when I hit you, you'll starve to death bouncing!"

Strange propped himself up on his elbow. Sweat beaded his forehead. A muscle in his cheek jig-gled. He said evenly: "First time I ever saw a louse with pants on!"

Randall started for him. Mike the Greek grabbed him by the arm. "Stop it, you fool, he's just trying to antagonize you," he said. "Use your head instead of your hand and figure out how we're going to get rid of them."

Randall nodded, breathing hard. He said: "We'll get rid of them. Take them down in the cellar! We'll get rid of them all right!"

"Killing the mayor was a mis-

take," said the Greek. "You shouldn't 'a' done that. There's going to be a smell about that."

"Don't be telling me I made a mistake!" yelled Randall. "He was going to spill everything. Keno told him plenty. Keno's been double-crossing us all around. He's got to go, too, Mike!"

"Keno," Mike told him, "has gone. I removed him personally."

A HARD laugh spun both men around. Mike, for all his bulk, pivoted easily on the balls of his feet. He held the gun stiffly in front of his paunch. He gaped.

Keno Lazzeri lolled just inside the door, hands deep in the pockets of his coat. His lips were thin and white, curling in against his teeth. Gauze and adhesive tape on one side of his face gave it an oddly lopsided look. Beside him, Chunky Griffin and Doda Grippa threatened the room with fistfuls of guns.

"You're so crooked, Mike, that you can't even shoot straight," Keno said, without moving his lips.

Mike smiled genially. "The metaphor might also apply to why you're so hard to hit," he said. "Miss Flynn bumped my arm, however."

Randall said thickly: "Let's talk this over, Keno. Don't do anything you'll be sorry for. For God's sake, let's talk this over!"

"I won't do anything I'll be sorry for," Keno said grimly. His hands moved suggestively in his pockets. "That was a cute trick, murdering that dame up in my apartment. If you didn't get me, the law would, eh?"

Mike raised his eyebrows. "What dame?" he asked.

"You know what dame, you fat Greek slob! Belle Charteris!"

Veins in the corners of Mike's eyes began to swell. "I didn't even

know she was up there, dead or alive," he said. "I thought you had thrown her out."

Randall said eagerly: "See, Keno, see! You've got us all wrong."

Strange hunched his shoulders, moving his hand slightly toward his gun. Chunky Griffin's rod slanted toward him. "Stay put, copper!" he rasped.

Keno's cheeks were sucked in. His nose was pinched. A cheek muscle jerked. He said: "I've got you, right!" He rolled his body like a striking snake.

Just behind Emmett, Christopher jerked up his gun. It roared at Emmett's shoulder, choking him with powder smoke. Chunky Griffin grunted. He stumbled back against the wall, dropped his gun and doubled over, clutching his stomach. He jackknifed to the floor. Emmett swore softly. He plummeted to his knees, hauling out his .45. Doda Grippa snapped his wrist. His gun belched. Christopher shrieked, took a faltering step and crashed heavily on his face.

Like an immense rubber ball, Mike the Greek bounded backward and sideward. Keno jerked up his pockets, firing through the cloth. Mike shuddered. The gun he held in front of his stomach spewed lead. Strange counted the slugs as they thudded into Keno's chest. Their



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impact flung Keno up against the wall on his toes, held him there, while he tried to center his gun on Mike's bulk. His legs bowed suddenly at the knees. The gun slipped from a limp hand. He sighed, his chin dropped on his chest and he slid to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Mike leaned weakly against the bookshelves, sucking in wheezy mouthfuls of air. He dropped his gun and gripped with both hands at his chest. His legs kept slipping out from under the great weight of his body. Slowly, majestically, he slid to the floor in a sitting position, his back to the books, short, fat legs stretched before him.

With a frightened face, Doda Grippa ran for the door. Strange's arm jerked up. His gun cracked. Doda stumbled, his legs wobbled. He skidded along the floor on his chin.

Randall was crouched near Mike. He held a gun which he hadn't used. His face was twisted, the eyes wild. As Strange's attention was centered on the fleeing gunman, Randall leaped toward Patsy. She screamed as he grabbed her. Brutally, he twisted her around in front of him. Using her as a shield, he backed slowly toward the door.

"I'll scatter her brains all over this room if anyone so much as breathes!" he said in a curious, high-pitched voice.

The bald, shiny head of Chauncey rose from the depths of the leather chair directly behind Randall. In his hands he held a ponderous, metal-backed law book. His thin face white and determined, he raised the heavy book high above his head and brought it down with devastating force on Randall's skull. Randall's eyes rolled up into his forehead so that only the whites showed. He fell heavily.

"You . . . you cad!" said Chauncey with feeling.

ON the floor, sitting grotesquely like a deflated Buddha, Mike the Greek gasped: "And they lived happily ever afterward." His face contorted as a spasm of pain rippled his vast body. His eyes closed, then opened again slowly, as though heavy weights were attached to their lids. "Who killed Belle Charteris, Gordon?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"The house dick, Horan," Strange told him. "He made a mistake when he claimed he was talking to her at four o'clock. She was dead then."

Mike tried to nod his head. His chins waggled. "The stupid oaf loved her, and she strung him along," he said. "She was that kind. He probably killed her in a jealous rage and then tried, in his clumsy way, to make it look like Keno did it."

Strange nodded.

Mike sighed: "Because of two women I am forced to die. Women, Gordon, are a curse." With effort he focused his eyes on Patsy. "God bless them!" he croaked. His hands clawed at his chest. Blood seeped through his tightly pressed lips, ran slowly down his many chins. Desperately, he tried to keep his eyes open. They drooped slowly. He tried to grin but it was a grimace. "My blessings," he wheezed ironically. Saucer eyes closed. His head sagged on his shoulder.

From across the room, Emmett hollered: "Hey there! Chauncey has fainted!"

Strange grinned down at Patsy. "Let's go home, kitten. I've things to tell you."

Patsy's voice was muffled against his chest. "Actions," she said, "speak louder than words."

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"Was losing weight and pep. Nothing helped until I got Ironized Yeast. In 6 weeks I gained 12 lbs. and am full of pep. Everybody admires my physique, too."



Ralph Loeffler
Arlington, Wash.

R. Loeffler

THOUSANDS of skinny, rundown people who never could seem to gain before have quickly put on pounds of solid, naturally attractive flesh, with these remarkable scientifically tested little Ironized Yeast tablets. What's more, instead of that terrible tired feeling and jittery nerves, they now have wonderful new strength and energy, eat well, sleep soundly and with improved looks and new pep have won new friends and popularity.

Why they build up quick

You see, scientists have discovered that many people are underweight and rundown, often tired and nervous, simply because they don't get enough Vitamin B and iron from their daily food. Without these vital substances you may lack appetite and not get the real body-building good out of what you eat.

Now you get these exact missing substances in these amazing little Ironized Yeast tablets. The improvement they bring in a short time to those who need Vitamin B and iron is often astonishing. Thousands report gains of 10 to 25 lbs., wonderful new pep—a new natural attractiveness that wins friends everywhere.

Make this money-back test

Get Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today. If with the first package you don't eat better and FEEL better, with much more strength and pep—if you're not convinced that Ironized Yeast will give you the normally attractive flesh, new energy and life you have longed for, the price of this first package promptly refunded by the Ironized Yeast Co., Atlanta, Ga.

Only be sure you get the genuine Ironized Yeast, and not one of the cheap, inferior substitutes often offered which do not give the same results. Look for the letters "IY" stamped on each tablet.

Special offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this special offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with the first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 508, Atlanta, Ga.

TUNE IN ON JOHN J. ANTHONY'S HELPFUL GOOD WILL HOUR. See your local newspaper for exact time and station.



IMPORTANT

Beware of
Substitutes



It's A DATE... with *Chesterfield*

... the cigarette that's different from all others

It's the RIGHT COMBINATION of mild, ripe,
home-grown and aromatic Turkish tobaccos
. the world's best . that makes Chesterfield
the milder and better-tasting cigarette . .

*A HAPPY COMBINATION for
MORE SMOKING PLEASURE*