

CRIME STORY

MAGAZINE



No. 4

TALES OF
MURDER,
ROMANCE,
SUSPENSE,
DETECTION.



FIVE BRAND NEW STORIES FOR CRIME FANS



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ALCAN HIGHWAY MURDER

By William Bogart

As if fighting the elements on the great Alaskan Highway was not tough enough, lovely blonde Alberta Reilly and Johnny Davis find murder added to their problems in this fast-moving story of high adventure.

HERE it was . . . the greatest highway in all the world. The Alcan Road! Through mountains and deep valleys, it threaded its way for sixteen hundred miles from Dawson City to Fairbanks, Alaska. A man-made road. Sweat and guts and the prayers of many had gone into its building. Army engineers had worked their hearts out finishing it before disaster struck.

Few women understood the heartache and despair and courage that went into the building of that highway. Few women had even been there, in the beginning.

But there had been one. Her name was Alberta Reilly.

Our story begins with her. Because she had been one of those few who had been there all along. It was she who was waiting for Johnny Davis, who, for a while, had been there with her. She remembered when he had been simply a mechanic in charge of some of the big army transport trucks. Later he had moved up. He'd been put in charge of a construction crew that forged through the wilderness ahead. His ratings stepped up also. And then, that day . . . that

longaway day when he had gone on and beyond, overseas.

"But I'll be back, baby," Johnny had said.

Now he was coming back. He'd wired from San Francisco only a few days ago. Soon they'd be together again. And what plans they had.

The fast-freight trucking business that could be expanded just as fast as they could put on the trucks to handle it! Here was their future. Hers and Johnny's.

It hadn't been easy, these long months. Her father, who had started the business, was unable to get out on the road.

Take now, for instance.

Less than two hours ago the telephone call had come from Watson Lake, just below the boundary of the Yukon Territory. It had come from Joe's Diner, up there on the Alcan Road.

Joe had explained that a trailer job belonging to ALCAN FAST FREIGHT had been found parked in front of his place when he opened that morning. "I understand," he had said tensely, "Chuck Eggers had that run. On his way to Whitehorse, I believe."

"That's right," Alberta had told him. Chuck Eggers was one of her boys, and ALCAN FAST FREIGHT was the highway transport company which she and her father operated.

"Well," the dining car owner had said, "we can't find him. It's the dangdest thing, ma'am. There ain't no trace of Chuck Eggers anywheres. He's just vanished."

That was the beginning of the mystery.

There had not been a driver available to send out over the road to take over the truck, either. What's more, Watson Lake was a good three hundred miles north. Precious time would be lost. Time that was urgent.

For on that truck was an iron lung being shipped to Whitehorse to help save the life of a child who had been stricken with paralysis!

Alberta had quickly reported to her father. "There's only one thing to do," she had told him. "I'm flying up there. If necessary, I'll drive that jot to Whitehorse myself."

So, leaving Tim Reilly in charge of the truck terminus garage, she'd taken off in the plane.

That had been two hours ago.

Now, through the slight overcast, she watched for the silvery grey outline that would mark Watson Lake.

An opaque outline took form through the distant haze. She recognised Watson Lake and started her glide. She picked up the portable microphone which hung from the dashboard.

Identifying her plane, she said, "I'm coming in, Watson Lake. Okay?"

They maintained a small control tower there. In a moment the man's voice answered, "Watson Lake Tower to NC-14243. Come in. Ground wind twenty miles an hour, directly north. Use north-south runway. Watch it. Pretty gusty on the ground." Then the man asked, "Is that you, Miss Reilly?"



He slapped it aside, seized her wrists, and a furious struggle followed.

"Hello, Carl," Alberta said into the mike. She recognised his voice. She had met the airport manager several times on her flights up and down The Road.

She throttled the engine and went into the traffic pattern, though there was probably not another plane within miles. Nevertheless, when you fly, you always follow the rigid rules. You never know.

She was on the cement no more than fifty yards after crossing the approach to the field.

Carl Banning himself came out to meet her.

"Nice landing!" he called out, as she killed the engine. He came around to help her down to the ground. He was a heavy man with sandy hair and square features. Alberta had always disliked him a little because he had not signed up for service during the war. There'd been something about perforated eardrums and being employed in an essential industry.

Alberta said, "Carl, could you take care of the plane for me? You'd better put it in a hangar. I don't know how soon I'll be flying back."



With the chair he drove furiously inwards towards his brutal attacker.

they walked toward the field office, "something about one of your road drivers missing. What's up?"

She shook her head. "I don't know." She wore a leather jacket, gabardine skirt and a kerchief that held her thick wavy hair in place.

A mechanic in coveralls was coming across the field to meet them. Carl Banning hailed him. "Take care of the tower for a bit," he instructed the man. "I'm running Miss Reilly into Joe's place."

Alberta put in swiftly, "Look, I can wait."

"Forget it," said Carl.

"Thanks," she said.

Ten minutes later they pulled up before the roadside diner. She turned to Carl Banning and started to murmur, "Thanks very much for the..."

But he nodded toward the diner. "I'll wait a moment to see if there is any news." He accompanied her.

Joe, the owner, limped toward her. "Maybe I shouldn't have put you to all this trouble, Miss Reilly. But I figured..."

She smiled. She liked Joe. He was a big, shaggy man who looked about as much at home in a white apron as

a mastiff wearing a poodle's knitted sweater. But a "cat" had tipped over on Joe when they had been cutting down trees along this sector of the Alcan Road. He had almost lost his leg. And so, to-day, he ran the diner.

"I'm glad you called, Joe," Alberta was saying. "Has there been any word? Anything at all?"

The big man shook his head.

Alberta bit her lips together, thinking swiftly. Then she named the next regular gas stop farther north, where there was a service station handling Diesel fuel for the trucks. She said with determination, "I'll have to push that truck through to-night. If you hear anything, call up there or leave word."

The airport manager had looked at her quickly. "You mean—you're going to drive that truck?"

"Why not?" she asked matter-of-factly.

He shook his head. "It's a lonely ride."

Joe had gone behind the lunch counter a moment. He returned with some keys in his hand. "I took these out of the ignition switch this morning." He nodded toward the deserted truck. "I'll help you gas up," he offered.

Alberta thanked Carl Banning, watched him drive off down the rutted side road. Then she climbed into the big cab of the tractor unit, slipped the ignition key into the switch and started the motor. She slipped in the creeper gear and eased up to the fuel pumps. Joe had limped over there and was waiting.

He helped her gas up the tanks. They checked riding lights and oil and water. Joe even opened the emergency kit box on the cab running board and made certain that she had plenty of flares.

"I guess you're set," he announced.

HOURS later, the sun dropped down behind the mountains, which closed in all

around her now. Dusk came swiftly. She flicked various buttons, turning on the many red, green and yellow riding lights.

Now, as night closed in, she felt a sense of uneasiness. Chuck Eggers wasn't a lad who drank and walked off the job. He was a good steady, reliable worker. Then why had he deserted the truck far out here on the highway? Where could he have gone in this vast wilderness?

CHAPTER TWO.

THE darkness impressed one with the great isolation of this part of the world. The headlight beams were the only friendly thing in the dark curtain of the night.

Finally, Alberta saw a vague light flickering yellowly in the gloom. That would be the wayside station where she must refuel. She smoothly slowed tractor and trailer without as much as a sway from the long body behind her. She parked and hurried inside.

There was a small lunchroom run in conjunction with the outpost stop. A thin, leathery-faced little man was sitting in a rocking chair at one end of the room, and he was smoking a pipe. He looked exactly like an old sourdough.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said, finally deciding to get up. "You must be Miss Reilly, eh?"

She nodded, a little surprised.

He went on, "Joe called from his place 'bout half hour ago. Said you were coming through."

"Oh," she said, understanding now. "Did he say—"

"Nope."

"Look," said Alberta with sudden decision. "Check my fuel tanks, will you? I'm driving on through to Whitehorse." She glanced around the small interior. "And I was wondering if I could get a bite of . . ."

"Sure thing," said the man. He



Blood smeared Johnny's hands. His knuckles split but he didn't notice.

removed the pipe from his mouth and bellowed, "Ma!"

A woman appeared from a small rear room of the place. She had a pleasant, smiling face.

"This is that Reilly gal I was tellin' you about when Joe called," he said to the stout woman. "Feed her, ma. Bet she's half starved."

Alberta turned the crank on the box beneath the 'phone, and put through a call to Joe's diner. Even though she'd been informed that there had been no news of Chuck Eggers up until a half hour ago, she didn't want to overlook any chances.

While she waited, she saw a car pull up outside, headed north. The car had left again by the time Joe answered.

And he reported no success in locating the driver. The mystery was just as puzzling as ever. She told Joe her next probable stop and hung up.

The sandwiches were ready. She ate one quickly, wrapped the other in the paper napkins which the woman had furnished, downed two big mugs of black coffee.

The woman had more coffee prepared in an old whisky bottle. "You

take this along, too, honey," she offered.

Alberta thanked and paid her. The husband came in. The woman called him Andrew.

"All set," he said. "I checked your air hoses an' everything. You ain't got nothing to worry about, ma'am."

As he took his money, he said, "Oh, there's a feller out there who'd like a ride. Says he's goin' to Whitehorse."

The fellow was sitting on the running board. He stood up quickly as she approached, stared at her, then exclaimed, "Well, say! Are you the driver?"

She nodded.

"I sort of took it for granted it would be one of the regular road boys," he said. He looked somewhat disappointed. "I guess maybe you wouldn't want to pick up a stranger . . ." He let it hang there, waiting.

There was one thing in this huge country of endless distances and scattered communities. You seldom refused anyone a lift.

So Alberta said, "Climb aboard."

"Thanks," he smiled. He stepped aside until she herself had swung up into the high tractor cab. Then he got in beside her and slammed the heavy door.

They did not talk much. Covertly, she sized the man up out of the corner of her eye. He was watching the road ahead. She decided she had never seen him before. He had high, prominent cheekbones in a heavy, strongly lined face. He was quite dark, and there had been an accent in his voice which she could not place. He was not Canuck, however.

She said, "There's coffee in that whisly bottle on the seat. Help yourself."

"Thanks," he murmured. "I'll have some later."

Then, after a bit, "You're Tim Reilly's daughter, aren't you? You own this outfit?"

She nodded.

"I thought so. I've heard of you, and you were pointed out to me once." He paused, then asked, "Haven't you got a brother who was in the U.S. Intelligence during the war?"

The abrupt question gave her a start. Few people knew about Dan. Or if they did, they had forgotten. Time erases things from the memory. And it was going on two years now that Dan had been reported missing in action.

Alberta said quietly, "He never returned."

AN hour passed. The country grew wilder.

Some time later Alberta became aware of a pinpoint of light reflected in the large rear-vision mirror which angled far out from the left side of the cab. She watched it until it became two tiny headlights. The lights grew slowly brighter. The car behind her would soon be passing.

Then, strangely, the car lay back there about a quarter of a mile and paced the truck.

It suddenly occurred to her that the passenger had stopped talking. She caught him watching the rear-view mirror, a peculiar flicker in his dark eyes.

A warning bell sounded in her mind, but she tried to hide her fear. Her left hand dropped from the steering wheel and she reached toward the left pocket of her zipper jacket, as though for a cigarette. Instead, that hand crept behind her, down against the seat cushion, where a heavy wrench was pushed between the seat and back support. She slid the wrench up beside her left thigh. Then she put a cigarette in her mouth.

"Light?" the passenger said, holding a match.

She glanced at the man briefly and said, "Thanks."

It was then that the passenger said flatly, "About here should be all right."

The accent was prominent in his voice now. She flashed him another look. He returned it harshly.

"What did you say?" she asked.

The car behind her had closed in swiftly along the straight length of highway. It was holding not more than a hundred yards behind them.

"I said," the man snapped, "stop the truck. Now!"

His voice was hard as flint.

Capable hands firm on the big steering wheel, she started to ease on the sensitive brakes, following the man's orders. Then, without warning, she yanked the wheel over with all her might.

The trailer whipped across the roadway to the left. Tractor and trailer came to a stop in a V angle that completely blocked the road. The entire move had taken only a second or two.

"Hey . . ." the man beside her started to yell, reaching for the steering wheel.

She picked up the heavy wrench which she had placed beside her leg. She brought the weapon around in an attempt to hit him.

He slapped it aside, seized her wrists, and a furious struggle followed.

The door on her side of the cab jerked open. Another figure was there—one of the men from the trailing car, which had pulled up, blocked by the truck. Together, they dragged her out to the roadway.

The man struck her a blow. She knew she was fainting, but still she tried desperately to hang on to consciousness.

She vaguely remembered words that carried to her numbed brain: "Back up the truck so we can get by! Hurry!"

And the man in the car again, snapping an order. That voice, even though using a strange tongue . . . something hauntingly familiar about it. She tried to think . . . think . . .

The horrible thought came to her.

They did not want the truck or its valuable contents. Why?

Why were they seizing her?

CHAPTER THREE.

JOHNNY DAVIS got off the plane at Dawson Creek at eleven o'clock in the evening.

He found a jitney that gave service into town. He named a hotel and said to the driver, "I hope it's still there."

"Yep, it sure enough is," said the man.

"Two years it's been," said Johnny.

"Then you'll see some changes, partner."

The flivver was pulling up before the three-storey frame hotel. Johnny flipped the driver a bill.

He found that his reservation had been held, but was surprised when the desk clerk told him, "A friend of yours is already up there."

An elderly bell "boy" helped him upstairs with his bags. It was a room near the end of the second-floor hall.

The door was already partway open. The first sight that greeted him was a pair of heavy-shod feet, hooked on a small table that was littered with newspapers.

And seated beside the table and bottle was the ageless-looking little sourdough with skin the colour of well-cured saddle leather.

"Yukon!" exploded Johnny.

The grin started in the older man's small, dark bright eyes. It spread across his face and gave him the appearance of a mischievous gnome.

He jumped up and pumped Johnny's big hand. He squinted his lively dark eyes, looking Johnny over.

"Tell me about it," urged little Yukon. "The war . . . where you've been . . . what's happened . . ."

"Look partner," he said, smiling, "it'll take time. Right now I'm mighty anxious to see a certain lady."

A knowing look danced in Yukon's small eyes.

"Oh-oh," he said. "Alberta, huh?"

Johnny nodded.

Johnny was thumbing through the local telephone book. He found the number. It was getting pretty late, but he guessed someone would be there at the garage terminus.

A man's voice answered. Johnny did not remember it.

"I'd like to speak to Miss Reilly," said Johnny.

Then the man asked, "Who's calling?"

"Johnny Davis. You just tell her, Johnny."

"Just a minute . . ."

Then a voice with a heavy, clear timbre said, "Hello?"

Johnny exclaimed: "Tim! Tim Reilly, how the hell are you?" He added: "This is Johnny Davis."

"Hello, Johnny," he said. Just like that! There was something strange about it . . .

"Johnny?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you come over?" Tim Reilly asked.

"Of course! What did you think?"

"Come over right away," finished the man.

Johnny hung up slowly. He found Yukon watching him intently. He said quickly, "Have you got a car, Yukon?"

"I got me a jeep. It's a rip-snorter."

"Come on!" snapped Johnny, slapping on his hat and starting toward the door. He left on the room light but locked the door behind them.

A few moments later they were speeding across town. They drew up before the truck terminus in less than ten minutes.

In the garage they found three mechanics working on tractor units. A man in white coveralls came toward Johnny when he saw the two come inside. He was very tall, lean, and with a stolid manner about him.

He said, "You're Johnny Davis?"

Johnny nodded.

The man stuck out a big bony hand. "Hawley's the name," the tall man said, "I'm the foreman here. Tim's in the office with someone. Come along . . ."

They followed. Johnny wondered about this guy. He didn't like the way he'd been sized up.

Hawley opened the office door, stood back, nodded and said, "There he is. I'll see you, Davis."

"Yeah," said Johnny, and he motioned Yukon inside.

Tim Reilly turned away from the two men with whom he was talking, then he was hurrying across the large office.

"I was never so glad to see anyone in my life, son!" Reilly said, and there was real warmth in the big man's voice. But there was something about his eyes, something deep down that Johnny quickly sensed. The man was intensely worried.

"Alberta has disappeared," Tim Reilly said grimly. "Two days ago!"

Johnny felt as if he had caught a blow right in the guts. He couldn't speak.

The two men were listening. Tim Reilly said, "These are plain-clothes detectives of the R.C.M.P. They are trying to locate her, Johnny."

Tim Reilly explained about the missing driver. Chuck Eggers. "Alberta flew up there to Watson Lake. She took over. She left there the evening before last, stopped at a road station north of Watson Lake, took on fuel and continued on. The truck was found fifty miles north of there."

Johnny looked sharply at the two R.C.M.P. men. "You have men looking for her, of course?"

One man nodded. "Naturally. At first we figured it was an attempted hi-jacking, but when the truck was untouched, and still parked there, it became quite puzzling. We can't discover any reason for the disappearances."

Johnny looked back at the girl's father.

"That's right," said Tim Reilly. But there was a slight flicker to his grey eyes that only Johnny Davis caught. Then he looked down at his big hands, and for the first time Johnny noticed that the fingers were slightly curled toward the palm, as though bent that way permanently.

"Blasted arthritis," said Reilly. "I don't get around much any more." His face lighted again. "Son, how I need you!"

He turned to the two men, explained, "Davis and my daughter planned to be married as soon as he got out of service. He just got back here from the States to-night. He'll also be taking over the business with her."

Johnny said, "The business can wait!" I'm finding Alberta before I do anything!"

Asking where they could get in touch with him, the two R.C.M.P. men left.

With no preamble, Reilly said quietly, "There's something that no one knows about. Something about Dan."

Johnny started. "Dan? But I thought he was . . ."

"Missing in action? In other words, dead."

Johnny slowly nodded.

The big man said, "Alberta had to say that in the letters she wrote to you. She planned to tell you, though, as soon as you got here." He looked past Johnny toward Yukon.

Yukon said, "Johnny can vouch for me."

"That's right," said Johnny. He was watching Tim Reilly's face. "What are you trying to tell me, Tim?"

"Dan, my son, was never missing in action and he's very much alive. He's working undercover for the U.S. Government. He was here, six months ago. He flew in late one night and left within a few hours. No one saw

him. He wasn't supposed to be seen. He's supposed to be a dead man. I shouldn't even tell you and Yukon, Johnny. But I've got to. I've got to . . . because of Alberta!"

Johnny got it, then. He said slowly. "You think there might be some connection between Alberta's strange disappearance . . . and what Dan's doing for the Intelligence?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

Johnny thought a moment. Then he was on his feet.

"Well," he said with decision, "the answer isn't here. It's up there on the Alcan Road somewhere, and that's where I'm going." He swung toward little Yukon. "How about loaning me that jeep?"

Yukon grinned. "I was just figgerin' on offering it . . . provided I go along, too."

They left a few minutes later.

"I'll drop you off," said Yukon. "Pick you up in about half an hour."

A few moments later Johnny got off at the hotel.

Johnny took the stairs two steps at a time, his movements quick and light-treaded. He pulled the key from his pocket, slipped it into the lock, hurried into the room and felt around for the light switch.

He paused sharply. He remembered he had left the room light turned on!

CHAPTER FOUR.

JOHNNY'S shoulders hunched forward a little. His muscles tensed. Then, cautiously, his fingers reached again for the light switch. There was a whisper of sound as his knuckles brushed against the wall.

It was the tipoff to whoever was waiting. Someone didn't want those lights turned on.

The attack came with blinding speed. Heavy hands reached expertly for his throat, with the sureness of a trained police dog attacking its prey.

Johnny jerked up his knee. There was a mingled grunt of pain and rage as the man fell back. But he was only confused for a bare instant.

He managed to lock his arms in such a manner that Johnny's spine was bent backward. The man's height gave him plenty of leverage. At the same time he twisted so that Johnny was dragged away from the wall and the light switch.

Johnny's right fist lashed out. He judged well this time, and the blow connected. Johnny kept moving. He knew how to use his feet.

Only one man was going to leave this room, perhaps. It was that kind of fight. Already, in this mystery of why two people had so suddenly and strangely disappeared, Johnny was threatened by a menace that struck swiftly.

Johnny heard a click. Night glow showed him the rest. The long-bladed knife had slid deftly into the assailant's hand and jumped open with a snap. It was held low and with the blade pointed upward!

He fell back as the man came in with a rush. His right hand touched a straight-back chair. He scooped it up and around and drove it toward the attacker all in a single smooth motion. The knife drove into the chair, imbedded itself there.

Johnny yanked the chair back. The knife, loosened, clattered to the floor. Johnny dived.

He went flying across the floor in a long slide that carried him in the direction of the knife. His hands were pawing out in every direction, feeling around. He waited for the big man to crash down upon him. Instead, a rectangle of light cut briefly across the bedroom. It was gone again instantly with the slam of the hall door.

He was gone!

Johnny drew up. He swore softly to himself. He rubbed bruised knuckles against the palm of his left hand. Instead of letting rage get

the best of him, he stood there a moment collecting himself.

He'd just had a close call with death. And death was going to be ever close from now on. Because they, whoever they were, knew he was looking for Alberta Reilly. They could eliminate him without any interference in their plans. He knew nothing. And they probably realized that.

But the girl, Alberta, did. There must be some information they wanted, and which only she could give them.

Johnny told himself this had to be true. It would be the one thing that would keep Alberta alive. It was the lifeline to hope.

He switched on the light and found the open knife lying underneath a radiator across the room. He closed it and dropped it in his pocket. He turned and saw that wiry little Yukon had been standing there a moment in the doorway, curiously watching him.

He asked, "Did a Mack truck just take a short cut through here?"

"Almost," said Johnny. He told what had happened. Yukon's little eyes became intensely bright.

Johnny called the ALCAN FAST FREIGHT office. He found Tim Reilly still there. The Irishman said quickly:

"Hawley, my foreman here, is going to make the trip with you. He figures he ought to pick up Alberta's plane at Watson Lake."

"Hawley's a pilot?"

"Yes. He went home a little while ago to get his things together. He'll be back shortly. You can pick him up here at the garage."

"Okay, pop," said Johnny, hanging up. He told Yukon about it.

The little sourdough said nothing for a moment. Then he looked at Johnny sharply and asked, "I thought you called up Tim to ask him something?"

"I changed my mind," said Johnny.

He located a sheepskin, heavy flannel shirt and a fur cap in his suitcases. He also removed the .45 and leather holster and tucked them into the deep pocket of the sheepskin. Along with boots and heavy corduroys, he packed the things into a single bag, looked around the room once, then said, "All right."

On the way out of the hotel he left the key at the desk. "Hold the room," he ordered. "I'll be back."

They drove to the truck garage, found big Hawley in the office with Tim Reilly. The garage foreman said, "I don't like to stay away from here, but I've left a pretty good man in charge of the repair work. We've got to get the plane before snow comes. So if you don't mind . . ."

"Not if you can stand a little crowding," said Johnny. "These jeeps aren't plush-lined sedans, but they're fast. We can make better time than if we took one of the trucks."

"That's what I was thinking."

Grey-haired Tim Reilly saw them off. The Irishman's ruddy face was deeply lined as he looked at Johnny.

"Find her, son," he said.

"I'll call you," said Johnny reassuringly.

Then they were under way. Johnny at the wheel.

Hawley, the foreman, sat in the front seat beside him, Yukon in the rear.

"Better get some shuteye." Johnny told him. "We'll all spell each other at the wheel. We're not stopping for anything. And it's a long haul."

Hawley had settled down in the seat with a pipe in his mouth. He seemed to be waiting for Johnny.

Finally, Johnny asked, "How long have you been with the company?"

"About seven months now."

"Married?"

"No," said Hawley.

"Understand you're from Vancouver?"

"That's right."

It was hard to draw the fellow out.

"Were you in the truck transport business down there, too?"

"Yeah, different places."

Johnny dropped it there for a while. He was somewhat surprised when, a little later, Hawley himself brought up the subject that was in his thoughts.

"Did you know Dan Reilly, Tim's son?"

Why was he asking that question, Johnny wondered.

He said, "No. He was in the army long before the war started."

"Quite a bit older than Alberta, isn't he?"

Johnny nodded.

"He was reported missing in action a long time ago."

The guy wasn't giving out with a thing, Johnny thought. Was he trying to learn something? He kept thinking of that attack in his room to-night, and the fact that Hawley was one of the few persons who had known he was in town. Could there be any other purpose in the man joining them, other than going to Watson Lake to pick up the girl's plane?

At dawn, Yukon took over the wheel . . .

The relentless grind continued throughout that day. They only stopped occasionally for gas and oil, or a quick cup of coffee and some food. Johnny estimated they should pull into Watson Lake some time that evening.

Johnny was at the wheel, rocketing along at ten o'clock that night, when suddenly as they topped a hill and started down grade he saw red flares in the distance.

"Something wrng?" Hawley asked.

Yukon, seated beside Johnny, told him, "Somebody's stuck up ahead."

Shortly Johnny was easing to a stop alongside the road, within the glow of the bright flares and just

behind a big straight job. As they all climbed out they heard a man's exasperated curse come from around near the front of the truck. There was also the sound of a wrench striking metal.

Johnny asked, "Trouble, friend?"

The stocky man nodded. "Thought it was a couple fouled spark plugs. But look. Clean as a whistle."

"Just a minute," said tall Hawley, the foreman, leaning over the engine. "Here's your trouble," he explained quickly. "These wires are cracked."

He opened his heavy jacket, started to reach in his hip pocket. Then he paused, looked at the driver and asked, "Got a penknife?"

The driver took a knife from his own pocket.

Johnny was the only one who had seen the movement of Hawley's hand in the darkness outside the dim glow of the flashlight. The foreman had started to reach into his pocket for a knife.

Was Hawley the man who had been in his hotel room?

CHAPTER FIVE.

JOHNNY had found nothing disturbed in his suitcases, but he imagined that was only because he had arrived before the prowler had been able to search his belongings. What did the fellow seek? Was it Hawley?

Soon Hawley had spliced and taped the wires, replaced the plugs, and the motor ran smoothly again. The truck driver grinned.

They left the driver stowing away his flares. An hour later they rolled up before Joe's Diner at Watson Lake.

"I guess I know why you're up here," Joe said, meeting Johnny's eyes.

Johnny nodded. "Heard anything further?"

He shook his head. "No, there hasn't been a word."

Yukon and Hawley had driven off toward the airport when the south-bound motor transport rolled in. A big, hatless, red-haired driver came into the steamy diner.

His eyes lighted when he saw Johnny Davis.

"I'm a son of a gun!" he roared, pumping Johnny's hand in his powerful fist. "Tim Reilly told me you were back."

"Rusty!" Johnny said.

He saw the look in Rusty's eyes. He said, "You talked to Tim?"

The stocky, thickset driver nodded. "I drive for Tim now, you know. I'm the one took that truck through to Whitehorse when Chuck and . . . Alberta disappeared. I found out something up there." He paused long enough to mention that Tim Reilly had already told him about Johnny being given all the details of the disappearances.

Johnny waited silently.

"There was an iron lung that had to be delivered to the hospital up there. While I was unloading it, the hospital attendant who was helping me happened to mention this hit-run victim they found just outside of town."

Johnny tensed.

"It was Chuck Eggers. He's been unconscious ever since they found him alongside the road. He has one chance in a hundred of pulling through!"

Rusty explained further when Johnny started flinging questions at him.

"The way I figure it, Johnny," he said, "is that Chuck Eggers wasn't a hit-run victim in the first place. Someone figured Chuck knew something that would be helpful to them, or else they merely seized him in order to draw Alberta away from Dawson Creek. They knew she'd investigate . . ."

Johnny was nodding.

"So when Chuck was of no furtl:er

use to them," Rusty said, "they dumped him out after cracking him on the head and leaving him for dead."

Johnny asked, "How come Tim or no one was notified about Chuck Eggers?"

"He was unidentified at the hospital. They'd stripped his clothes clean of any identification."

Big shaggy Joe limped up to them. He had prepared a large bag of sandwiches.

Johnny heard the staccato roar of the jeep coming up the road from the airfield, looked at big Joe and said, "I'd like to get started as soon as possible. We'll need some gas . . ."

ALMOST three hundred miles still lay ahead of them before they'd reach Whitehorse. Once Johnny murmured tightly, "Pray that Chuck hangs on till we get there, fella."

Yukon said, "We're sunk if he don't!"

Some time that afternoon they rolled into the busy town. It was snowing.

First, they headed directly for the ALCAN FAST FREIGHT terminal down in the warehouse district. They learned that Tim Reilly had already been in touch with this terminal. Johnny and his friend had been expected. The talk immediately swung to the girl's disappearance. Johnny was told there had been no further word.

Rusty, whom they had met at Watson Lake, had covered Chuck Eggers well. No one had yet learned that he was right here at the local hospital. That's the way Johnny wanted it, temporarily. He went into the office and put through a call to Dawson Creek. Soon he had Tim Reilly on the wire.

He didn't even tell Tim about the driver, Chuck Eggers. Instead, he asked, "Did Hawley get back all right with Alberta's plane?"

"No, Johnny. I thought he was still at Watson Lake."

"He went directly to the airport last night," Johnny explained quickly. "Said he was going to take off right away."

"That's funny," said Tim Reilly.

It was damned funny, thought Johnny.

He said over the 'phone; "You can reach me here for a while, Tim. I've got a lead on something. I'll let you know."

He hung up, found Yukon, told him, "Stick around here for a little bit. I'm going to the hospital."

A NURSE warned Johnny he could only remain a few minutes. He moved silently across the floor and looked down at the bandaged head of the man in the high white bed.

He shook his head, lips pressed tightly together. There was no telling when Chuck Eggers might regain consciousness—if he ever did!

He found the doctor again. The unconscious driver's room was on the first floor of the two-storey building located on the edge of town. Few houses were nearby. He asked, "Could he be moved?"

The doctor shook his head. "It might be dangerous. He has a serious head injury." Then, "Why?"

Johnny explained what he had in mind. "I'd like to stay all night in the room with him to-night. You said last night he was restless and tried to talk. Perhaps it will happen again to-night."

Then he told the hospital head the entire story, taking the man into his confidence, describing his plan.

Finally the doctor said, "Well, all right."

AT ten that night, Johnny climbed the hospital steps. Two new developments had taken place. He'd been in contact with the airport at Watson Lake.

Yes, he had learned, Hawley, the foreman, had taken off in the girl's Stinson last night. It was presumed the plane had flown to Dawson Creek. When Johnny had asked to speak to the airport manager, he had been informed the man was away for a few days.

Next, he contacted the civil aeronautics authority. He asked for reports on plane movements, and gave them the number of Alberta's Stinson. The plane, he was told, had landed at Whitehorse Airport early that very day!

He'd hurried to the airport—only to learn that the plane had left again before his arrival in Whitehorse, its destination unknown.

Nevertheless, Johnny went ahead with his plan. He dropped the word here and there—especially at the ALCAN FAST FREIGHT garage—that Chuck Eggers, the driver, had been found and was in the local hospital here.

And so at midnight, unknown to anyone except an intern and the night nurse in charge, he kept his vigil in the unconscious man's room!

A HIGH, white screen was placed part way round the high white bed, protecting it against any slight draughts. It was two a.m. Johnny sat in the leather arm chair, just inside the doorway. The door was open only far enough to allow a small sliver of pale light to enter from the hallway outside.

Three o'clock dragged around. From somewhere in the sleeping town a clock struck the hour. Then Johnny sat up with a jerk.

The man in the bed was mumbling!

Johnny touched the man's bearded face, gently.

The mumbling stopped. Johnny picked up the water glass from the table, held it so that the man could drink through the curved glass straw.

Johnny said, "I'm Davis, do you understand? Perhaps Alberta has

mentioned me. Tell me anything you know. Hurry!"

Eggers said slowly, "I think they have a place . . . Lake Laberge . . . not far. Probably using plane. Go there . . ."

Johnny's eyes were bright now. Lake Laberge, outside of Whitehorse. It was wild country, not far away from here. And a plane . . .

Plane! That tied in Hawley, the foreman, again!

Suddenly, a draught of cool air touched Johnny's back.

He had his back to the door when he heard the light footstep. That would be the nurse . . .

Then, warned by some sixth sense, he started to turn back toward the doorway.

The sap in the man's hand was already falling in a descending blow. Johnny tried to duck past it.

CHAPTER SIX.

JOHNNY grappled to get hold of the lead-weighted sap. The man was about his own size. He looked to Johnny like a foreigner. He had never seen him before.

Silently, they fought.

Then, splitting the quiet of the hospital hallways, came the girl's scream. It was followed by excited talking somewhere down the long corridor. Johnny, even as he struggled with the man, heard a voice rap out a question: "Where, blast it?"

Yukon! Footsteps sounded along the smoothly polished hall.

The man suddenly dropped the blackjack, jerked back, turned, leaped toward the hall. He disappeared as if the devil himself were after him.

Johnny's assailant and little Yukon had already gone clattering down the stairs to the main floor when Johnny started through the hall.

He had grabbed up his sheepskin coat as he ran out of the room. He slipped into it and hurried out the side

door at the end of the first floor. He ran down a short flight of steps and followed a curving walk toward the front of the hospital.

Something caught Johnny's eye, beyond the jeep, farther down the street. There was another car parked there. Two figures were struggling in the snow piled along the curb. Instantly Johnny ran that way. He could see the struggling figures clearly. One went down into a snow bank even as he started toward them. The next thing he knew the car had started up and was pulling away. Yukon was digging himself out of the snow bank.

"Come on!" rapped Johnny, running toward the parked jeep. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the tiny glow of red far off. He sent the jeep roaring down the roadway.

The car ahead had turned a corner.

A single car was in front of a hotel around the corner. He pulled up near it and Yukon followed him as he went over to the car, a sedan. Johnny felt the radiator. It was warm.

Johnny looked toward the hotel entrance, said, "It won't hurt to have a look."

They found the lobby deserted, except for a night clerk who sat behind the desk reading a magazine.

Johnny said, "Who just came in here?"

"His name is Jaffe. You'll find him in Room 314."

"Thanks," murmured Johnny.

They climbed to the third floor. They had just reached the landing when both heard the muffled shot. It came from the room near the head of the stairs.

Johnny was carrying his .45 now. Motioning for Yukon to stand aside, he went across the hall, opened the door, saw that a light was turned on inside and went fast into the bed-

The man who had broken into the hospital room lay on the floor, on his

back. There was a bullethole in his forehead. He was quite dead.

Standing over him was a slender, neat-looking, dark-haired man with alert, sharp eyes and good features. A gun dangled from his fist. Johnny's sudden entrance gave him the advantage. He had the neat-looking man covered.

Quietly, the man said, "If you're thinking of firing that automatic, I'd better warn you that you're dealing with the government of the United States. Intelligence."

Dan, Alberta's brother!

Next, Johnny was identifying himself.

Oddly, Dan Reilly was nodding his head as Johnny talked. "I knew you were here in town," he told them. "I just learned a little while ago that you were out at the hospital." He looked sharply at Johnny. "So you found Chuck Eggers?"

Johnny nodded. He explained what had occurred at the hospital. He told about the truck driver regaining consciousness long enough to mention Lake Laberge and something about a plane.

And he saw the sharpening of the Intelligence agent's eyes. "That's it!" Dan Reilly said. "I've been trying to locate their hideout!" He thought a moment. "I've got a plane held ready at the airport now, waiting for a break like this. That's where we'll find Alberta, I'm sure!"

Reilly picked up some papers and a notebook off the bed. "These are what I was after. They contain names and operating points of the entire organization here along the Alcon Road."

"But who are they?"

"Russians. Call them Communists or what have you. Anyway, they've been laying the groundwork in case there is any trouble between Russia and the United States. They've spotted men at key locations along the entire length of the Alaska Highway. In time of war, they'd be situ-

ated to disrupt transport operations along the entire sixteen hundred miles of this vital link between the United States and Alaska."

Less than an hour later they were preparing for the take-off at the local airport.

The white snow lay in a soft, endless, draping blanket from the mountain tops to the deep, narrow valley below.

Yukon finally pointed. "It should be about here, near this lower end of the lake. There's an old lumber road that leads in from Whitehorse."

The pilot's cockpit composed the forward part of the cabin in which Johnny, Yukon and Dan Reilly were seated. They were crowded into the compact space. Snowshoes and rifles were stacked around them.

"Wait!" ordered Yukon. His bright, small eyes were peering intently. "Danged if that ain't a cabin. And look over there about a quarter mile beyond. I'll bet you that's a plane right at the edge of the lake."

Dan Reilly's eyes were thoughtful. He asked their pilot, "Think you can set down there?"

The man nodded.

"All right," Reilly ordered. "But not right in this vicinity. If someone is down there, they've spotted us. Head north and away. Then circle back."

The pilot followed instructions.

Ten minutes later they arrived back near the southern tip of the lake. Gently, the man put the ship down.

They piled out, attaching the snowshoes, carrying the rifles. Now Yukon took over. They tracked almost an hour in silence. Finally, Yukon said, "The cabin is not far ahead."

They moved ahead slowly now, keeping to the heavier growths of trees. A few moments later, Yukon stopped again. He pointed to the right, said, "What did I tell you?"

They all stared. They saw that the

shoreline of the frozen lake was nearby. And there, right against the shore, they saw the prop of a plane protruding from beneath a huge tarpaulin covering. The plane was ski-equipped.

"Wait a minute," Johnny said, and he disappeared that way.

He returned to announce, "Alberta's plane!"

Dan Reilly took over now. He told them, "We can't just barge up to that cabin and knock it off. Too much danger to Alberta, for one thing. And they'd probably knock us off before we got within a hundred yards of the place."

Yukon spoke up brightly. "I'll go on ahead, circle the cabin, create a ruction in the woods beyond the clearing and draw them out there. Then you guys take over."

"You'll get shot," said Johnny.

But Yukon only grinned. "Lissen," he said, "I know how to trap skunks."

Soon he had disappeared through the trees. They waited a few moments, then started closing in. Finally Dan Reilly motioned for them to wait.

The heavy silence of the forests was shattered by gunfire. First rifle shots, then small arms. All saw the door of the cabin burst open. Two men ran out. They disappeared toward the woods.

"Now!" said Dan Reilly.

They moved in fast. Reilly motioned for Johnny to take the cabin; he and the pilot skirted the cabin.

Johnny shifted the rifle to his left hand and got out his .45. The door of the cabin still hung half open. Johnny did not hesitate. He plunged inside . . .

A figure slid out from behind the door. A peculiar-looking pistol was starting to level in his right fist.

Johnny smashed the heavy automatic down. It caught the fellow's gun hand and he dropped the pistol. Johnny closed in and grabbed him.

He guessed, later, that he went a little berserk. He worked the fellow over with his fists. Blood smeared Johnny's hands. His knuckles split, and he did not notice. He was still hammering at the man's hard-lined face when Dan Reilly came in and dragged him off.

"The others . . ." started Johnny.

"Yukon picked off one. I got the other."

The red haze cleared from Johnny's vision. He went across the room, yanked open a connecting heavy door to the room.

"Johnny!" Alberta Reilly cried out.

"Baby," he said softly, and folded her into his arms.

After a while he became aware that another figure was standing there. Johnny slowly let his arms fall away from the girl. The man standing there was stolid, pale-eyed Hawley.

"Mr. Hawley works for Dan, Johnny! He's told me while we've been held captives here!"

Dan Reilly and Yukon had come into the rear room.

Hawley said, "We figured these foreign espionage agents were also

being placed in garages and truck terminals along the Alaska Highway. That's why Dan visited his sister's garage some time ago."

Dan Reilly added, "I think our job is done. The ringleader is dead. His name was Carl Banning. He was the airport manager there at Watson Lake."

It was Alberta who told them: "Yes! When he discovered I was going to Whitehorse, he planted a man on the Alcan Road and had the fellow ask me for a lift. Then, farther up the highway, they grabbed me. Banning himself was driving the car."

The rest of it was quickly explained. Hawley, the foreman, told them, "They figured Alberta knew where you were operating, Dan. They needed that information. They thought we knew, though we didn't. That's the only reason we were kept alive." He shook his head. "But it wouldn't have been for much longer."

Johnny saw Alberta trembling. She was about ready to break down, now that danger was past. He put his arm around her and said softly and intimately, "Baby, let's take a little walk outside."

THE END.

*The Case of the***CRYPTIC NOTE***by Milton K. Ozake*

A bogus brother who turns up as a corpse in a cupboard doesn't help Henry Topp with the Law as he tries to avoid a frame-up in this fantastic tale of mixed identities.

HER father opened the door and I said, "Hello, Mr. Paulson. I'm back. Is Mildred home?"

"Is it really you, Henry?"

"Sure. Got back sooner than I expected." Then I realised that the look on his face was of incredulity, mingled with horror. "What's the matter? Has——"

"Let me touch you, boy!" His hands pulled me into the hall, grabbed my shoulders. "It's really you! You're alive!"

"Of course it's me!" I exclaimed. "What is the matter?"

Instead of answering, he dropped my arm and ran toward the rear of the house, shouting, "Mildred! Come here, quick!"

Baffled, I put my suitcase in a corner and walked into the parlour when Mildred came running in with, "Henry! Henry!" Throwing herself into my arms, she began to cry. "It is you, Henry, isn't it?"

"Honey—for our sake!—tell me what's going on! First your father—and now you. You're acting as though you thought I were dead."

"That's exactly what we did think! Oh, it's so good to see you!" She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. Her long blonde

hair brushed my cheek and its familiar scent touched my nostrils. I held her closely for a moment, then pushed her away so I could look into her eyes.

"What's this nonsense you're babbling, Mildred?"

"We thought you'd been burned to death—and I've been crying my eyes out!"

"Dead?" I queried. "But—I've only been out of town. You knew I was going to Canada for a few weeks. Whatever made you think I was dead?"

"Wait!" She crossed the room and returned with a newspaper clipping. "Read this, Henry":

**FLAMES TRAP SALESMAN:
BURNS TO DEATH.**

Henry J. Topp, salesman for a local manufacturer, was burned to death in a garage at the rear of his apartment, 120 East Ohio street, late last night.

Coroner Stephen Fisher reported that Topp, just returning from an auto trip, either dozed or was overcome by carbon monoxide fumes after putting his car into the garage. A spark, possibly from a cigarette Topp may have been smoking, started a fire in

the upholstery of the sedan, which spread rapidly.

Topp's body, charred by the fire, was identified by jewellery found on the remains.

His fiancée, Miss Mildred Paulson, 1230 Wayne Avenue, said that Topp had been in Canada and must have returned unexpectedly.

"But this is fantastic!" I exclaimed. "You mean you actually believed this? You really thought I'd come back and been burned to death?" I gestured with the clipping. "Why, you knew I didn't drive to Canada! I left the car here and went by plane!"

"I thought——" she shook her head helplessly. "I don't know what I did think, Henry. It was such a shock! For a day or so, I couldn't believe it, but after talking to your brother, I——"

"Brother? I don't have a brother!"

"You don't?" Mildred's blue eyes widened. "But he said he was your brother. Gave his name as Paul Topp; he said he read about the accident in the paper. He also said he hadn't seen you for several years, but that you'd written to him and mentioned my name. So Dad and I——"

"Mildred." I took her shoulders between my hands and shook her gently. "I don't have a brother. I have no relative named Paul. I didn't write to anyone about you. Well, what did this so-called brother of mine look like?"

"He was your height and built like you: Big shoulders, dark hair, brown eyes—and rather nice. I was so upset I could hardly think, so he made all the arrangements for us."

"Arrangements? What arrangements?"

"Why—for the funeral."

I stared at her, imagining her



"What do you want?" His eyes travelled up and down Mildred.

slim figure clad in black, standing mournfully before a flower-decked bier. "You mean there's been a funeral, too?"

"Of course! Oh, it was horrible! You can't imagine how I felt!"

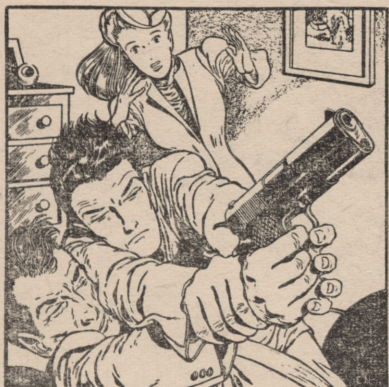
"I guess not," I admitted. "In fact, I can hardly believe a mistake like that could happen. Why didn't someone wire me? The factory office knew where I was."

"But we thought you were dead! There wouldn't have been any sense in sending a wire to Canada, when——"

"You're right," I interrupted, "but, you see, it wasn't me in that car."

"But the jewellery, Henry! I saw the cuff-links, your initials on them. And the wrist-watch was the one your mother gave you when you graduated from High School."

"I didn't have the watch with me, Mildred. It stopped running and I'd neglected to have it repaired. When I left for Canada, the watch and cuff-links were in my dresser." I paused, then exclaimed



Joe and I were grappling. I got his right arm by the wrist.

ed: "Good Lord! I wonder if someone else has my apartment!"

"No, your brother said——"

"I tell you I don't have a brother!"

"I mean—well, he said that, as long as the rent was paid to the end of the month, he'd stay there a few days, see that your things were packed, and——"

"Mildred! Do you mean that fellow is there now in my apartment?"

"I think so." She hesitated, then nodded. "He said——"

"Never mind what he said," I told her grimly. "Get your coat. We're going to the apartment and I'm going to tell that bird plenty!"

CHAPTER TWO.

I UNLOCKED the door to my apartment. What I saw made my blood boil. The furniture upholstery had been slashed with a razor. Great handfuls of padding had been thrown on the floor. The desk drawers had been pulled out and emptied. Old letters, bills, even bottles of ink, littered the floor.

"Oh, what a mess!" Mildred moaned.

Then I walked on into the bedroom. It was a shambles.

"The dirty——!" I clenched my fists. "I'd like to get my hands on him!"

"Your clothes—they're ruined!" Mildred began gathering the rumpled piles together.

"Leave it there," I said, and walked back to the living room. "I'd certainly like to know what he was looking for. "Look"—I pointed to the drapes—"he even slashed their lining, searching for something!"

"But—what could he have been looking for?"

"Darned if I know!" I walked back and forth across the room. "You know, Mildred, the fellow who was burned to death, the one you thought was me, must have thought I had something valuable hidden here, too. If he had my watch and cuff-links on his person, then he had been here, in this apartment, before he went to the garage."

"Maybe he was a burglar!"

"No, I don't think so. A burglar would enter, take what he could, and leave."

"You mean he was someone who knew you?"

"Yes. It was someone who had taken the trouble to find out where Henry Topp lived, where he kept his car, and exactly what kind of a car it was. He came here for a particular purpose. He didn't find what he wanted, so he went to the garage. While searching my car, he accidentally set it afire and was burned to death." I stopped my pacing suddenly as a second thought struck me: "Or, maybe someone else caught him in the act of rifling the car and murdered him! Perhaps they came to look for the same thing he was after!"

"But what was he——?"

"That's the question. As far as I know, there isn't a thing in the place worth stealing." I gestured at the room. "It's something small, or they wouldn't have had to slash and tear everything. A jewel, perhaps, or a document, or——"

"Henry."

"Yes?"

"That man—the one who said he was your brother—he must have been searching for it, too! That's why he came here, and stayed, and"—Mildred's eyes widened—"why, he might have been the one who ruined the furniture and——"

"Probably." I agreed, "and he may be the one who caught the first fellow in my car and left him to be burnt to death. What did you say he looked like?"

"He was your height and had hair and eyes like yours." She closed her eyes a moment and thought. "He had thick eyebrows and a rather long nose and nice hands. He had on a brown suit—tweed, which looked expensive, and he wore a snap-brim felt hat. Brown, too."

"How old?"

"About 35. He had a nice voice and he sounded educated."

"That may help. The police have a rogues' gallery and you may be able to identify him." I walked to the telephone, picked it up, then hesitated.

"What's the matter?" Mildred asked.

I put the 'phone down. "It just occurred to me that the first burglar came to this particular apartment because he knew I lived here. The second fellow may not have known the first. He may have thought he was killing Henry Topp!"

"Oh, no——!"

"In which case," I went on, "call-



*A girl was stretched on the floor
... she moaned weakly.*

ing the police would accomplish nothing except warn someone that they'd killed the wrong man and that Henry Topp was again in residence."

"You mean, they'd come back?"

"Possibly. If they still thought I had what they wanted." I kicked at a pile of upholstery stuffing in the centre of the floor. "I can't imagine what they were looking for."

"Money?"

"Not money. Anyone who knows Henry Topp knows that he's too poor even to marry the girl he loves." I looked at her and smiled.

"Maybe you had something valuable but didn't realise it."

"Like certificates of stock, bonds, deeds to real estate, rare stamps, options on old wells, and such?" I shook my head. "I've never had enough extra money to indulge in things like that. No, what ever they wanted was small and extremely valuable, but whatever value it had wasn't obvious—or I'd have known about it." I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "It's something I must

have acquired recently, otherwise they'd have been here sooner. A paper? A letter?" I stared at her. "Mildred—I think I've got it!"

"What, Henry?"

"What did I do with it? I went to the pile of bills, letters, and stationery taken from the desk and strewn about it. "No, I didn't leave it on the desk. What did I do with it?"

"Henry, what are you mumbling about!"

"The day before I left for Canada I got a letter in the mail. It had my name on it and was sent to this address, but it didn't make sense. It read like gibberish. Just two lines, typewritten. I put it back in the envelope and——" I eyed the room speculatively.

"Could you have taken it to the office?"

"No, I don't think so. I put it back in the envelope, and——" I snapped my fingers—"I think I put it in my coat pocket! Let's see, I was wearing my grey gabardine suit."

I went to the hall closet and jerked open the door and—Mildred screamed.

The body of a man slowly tilted forward, then crashed to the floor at my feet. Between his shoulders the hilt of a knife was visible. The blade had been driven deep!

CHAPTER THREE.

"HENRY! He's the man who said he was your brother," gasped Mildred.

The corpse was clad in a brown tweed suit, was about my height, and had broad shoulders. He'd been dead quite a while, for rigor mortis was complete. I unbuttoned his jacket and drew out a wallet from his inside pocket. It contained \$42 in bills and several identification cards bearing the name Samuel

Grommet. I wiped the wallet with my handkerchief and slipped it back into his pocket, saying: "We've got to get out of here."

Mildred started toward the door.

"Wait." I stepped over the body and swiftly examined the closet. My suits had been stripped from hangers, pockets had been turned inside out, and thrown on the floor. They were all there—except the grey gabardine.

"Is it . . . there?" asked Mildred.

"No. Either they took the whole suit, or"—I rubbed my chin thoughtfully—"perhaps I took it to the cleaners."

I opened the door, made sure no one was in the hall, and we left quietly for the cleaners, which I entered, leaving Mildred to wait on the sidewalk.

"Got my cleaning ready, Pop?" I asked the old man in charge. He found a hanger and brought it to the counter. The grey gabardine, cleaned and pressed, lay on top.

"I had some papers in the suit," I said casually. "Did you notice them?" He went to a wooden drawer, pawed around it, found an envelope, studied it, and brought it to the counter. "This it?"

"Yes." I smiled. "Thanks, Pop."

Mildred's eyes questioned me as I came out. "Got it," I said tersely. When we got to the corner, I said: "There's a restaurant near here. We'll have a bite while deciding what to do."

I waited until the waitress left our booth, then I took the envelope out and opened it. The mysterious message was still inside. I read it, shook my head, laid it flat on the table so Mildred could see the two typewritten lines:

Seville najo tousan boxes inaro.
Inamid ufa sawbuk sumit icein
sumit bux.

"It doesn't look like any language I ever saw," I remarked.

"Seville is the name of a city in Spain," observed Mildred. "And **sumit** seems like a Latin verb."

"I had some Latin in High School," I told her, "but this certainly isn't Latin. It may be some sort of secret code."

"Maybe if we read every other letter——" She concentrated, then shook her head. "No, that doesn't work." Pronouncing each syllable phonetically, she began reading the words aloud.

"Mildred!" I exclaimed. "That's it! Do it again!"

"Do what?"

"Read it again, like you just did."

She read the lines aloud again. "Do you get it?" I asked excitedly. "It makes sense—almost. Listen." I took the sheet from her and translated slowly: "See Willie not Joe 1,000 boxes in a row. In amid of a sawbuck some with ice in some with bucks."

"But that doesn't mean anything!" Mildred objected.

"Not to us," I admitted, "but it means something to somebody. Don't forget that two men have been murdered on account of it." I studied the lines, repeating them again. "Amid must mean the middle. A sawbuck is ten dollars, or maybe just the number ten. Ice means——" I gasped suddenly. "Good Lord! Ice is an underworld term for diamonds! And bucks, of course, is money!"

"Diamonds!"

"Uh-huh. Let's see, now. See Willie not Joe——" I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "The fellow whose body we found in my closet was named Samuel. Willie, then, is the one we want to locate—and Joe must be some one who is being double-

crossed. There are a thousand boxes in a row some place—and Willie knows where. But Willie doesn't know where the loot has been cached. This note must be the tip-off. The diamonds and money are in a row, or box, or section, or shelf No. 10."

"Then Joe is the murderer?"

"Probably. Joe doesn't know where the loot is, so he has been trying to find this note which was sent to me by mistake. I don't understand that. How did it happen to be sent to me?"

I studied the envelope. It was addressed to Henry Topp, 120 E. Ohio Street, Bellwood, Indiana. That was me, all right.

"Say, wait a minute!" I got a 'phone book, brought it to the table. "If I'm right——" I ran my finger down the column of T's, stopped at Henry Topps.

"And I'm right!" I exclaimed. "There is a Henry Topps, not Topp, but his address is 824 Wayne Court! Someone looked up Henry Topps in the 'phone book, came to my name, and addressed it to me."

"But who's this Henry Topps?"

"I don't know," I said grimly, "but we're going to find out—right now!"

We flagged a taxi and told the driver to stop at Mildred's house, where I left the grey suit. Then I directed the driver to 824 Wayne Court. It turned out to be a brick, three-storey, six-flat building, the modern kind with a small lobby and a panel of shiny mailboxes. Topps, according to the panel, lived in the north flat, second floor. I glanced at Mildred, shrugged, and rang the bell.

The door buzzed instantly and, pushing it open, we started up the stairs.

"Who is it?" a gruff voice demanded.

"Me," I said loudly.

A grunt sounded and I looked up to see a fat, unshaved face staring suspiciously down at us. There was a brown felt hat on his head and he wore a loose plain overcoat. I had just decided he was about to go out, when I noticed the bag of groceries under his arm. I grinned, nodded, and kept climbing the stairs. When we reached the landing, he was standing in front of a door, waiting for us.

"Yeah?" he growled. "What you want?" His eyes travelled up and down Mildred. She came closer to me, slid her arm through mine, and I felt her shiver.

"We're looking for Mr. Henry Topps," I said.

"So what?"

"Are you Mr. Topps?"

"Yeah."

"I have some information for you."

"About what?"

"About Sam Grommet."

At mention of that name, he backed into the flat and motioned us inside. He shut the door, locked it, took off his hat and coat, throwing them carelessly across the arm of a chair.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Some of the boys are looking for you," I said, ignoring the question. "They think you got some information in the mail lately—and they want to be in on it. Sam was one of them. He's dead now."

"Yeah?" His fat face quickened with interest. "Sam got pushed, eh? Why?"

"The word is out that Henry Topps has certain info. in his possession. One of them came looking for you, but someone gave him the wrong address. I think Sam killed him. Then Sam took up the search

—and someone killed him. I don't know where the third fellow is now, but—if he's at all smart, he'll locate you sooner or later. I came to warn you."

"What's your angle?"

"I thought you might know where Willie is."

The fat face blanked out. "What's Willie got to do with this?"

"If we're to locate the stuff, we've got to contact Willie." I kept my voice quiet and my eyes glued to his.

"One-Eye said there'd be a tip-off," he growled. "I been waiting, but I ain't got it."

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm here. I've got the tip-off."

"Yeah?" His eyes bored into mine. "Let's see it."

I put one hand in my pocket. Just as my fingers touched the letter, Mildred jerked suddenly against my side as a hard voice snarled: "Reach for the ceiling, quick!"

CHAPTER FOUR.

I jerked my head toward the voice.

A slim, ugly man stood in the doorway of the bathroom. His eyes were blue, cold, and triumphant. His hand held a large automatic which moved in a slow arc, menacing us.

"Put 'em up and keep 'em up! He rasped, coming into the room slowly. "That includes you, too, Hank." He jerked the gun toward Topps, who slowly lifted his thick arms.

"What's this for?" the latter demanded.

"Just a social call," the stranger said, smiling slightly. "Thought I'd drop in and see if anyone left a letter for me."

"There ain't no letter," Topps said.

"No?" The gun moved toward me. "I believe you mentioned something about a tip-off. Hand it over."

"Why should I?" I stalled.

"Because this spits lead and might

poke holes in you." With which he snapped: "I haven't time to kid. Han' it over!"

The gun was pointed at my stomach. I could feel Topps staring at me, and I knew Mildred was trembling. So I lowered one arm slowly, felt in my pocket, brought out the envelope.

"Don't give it to 'im!" Topps protested. "You can't get away with this, Joe! Be reasonable. Let's talk things over."

"Who says I can't?" Joe asked coolly. "You and Willie played me for a chump. Well, I'm not bein' double-crossed by a coupla heels." The gun gestured toward me. "What you waiting for? Drop it on the floor!"

I did so and backed away. As the envelope struck the floor, Joe stepped on it. Hank, his fat face dark with fury, started forward. The gun jerked in his direction. He stopped.

"Joe," he pleaded, "you ain't got no right to do this! Ella sent it to me. We'll deal you in, like we promised."

"Shut up," Joe ordered, "and get back against the wall." He bent slowly, his eyes on us, until his fingers found the envelope. He straightened and dexterously extracted the message with one hand. A frown creased his forehead as he read the typed lines, and his face reddened.

"What's this lingo?" he demanded.

I looked at Hank. Relief showed on his fat face. His eyes were fastened on the letter. A lump of fear hardened in my stomach as I realized that his legs were tensing, ready to jump. As he sprang toward the gunman, I rammed my shoulder against Mildred and knocked her out of the line of fire. In the next instant, I threw myself at Joe's legs. The automatic exploded with

an ear-deafening bang and I heard Hank groan.

Then Joe and I were grappling and punching. He fell, dragging Topps and me with him. I got his right arm by the wrist, twisted it, and the gun thumped on the floor. I kicked it away from his clutching fingers.

"Mildred!" I gasped. "The gun—get it!"

I heard the quick tap of her heels crossing the floor, and then she was standing there, the big gun in her right hand, pointing it at us.

"Stop!" she ordered in a high, shrill voice. "Stop it—or I'll shoot!"

Joe relaxed abruptly and I threw myself free. Gasping for breath, I stumbled toward her and took the gun from her trembling fingers. Hank was sprawled on the floor, his face contorted with pain and a widening swath of blood on his shirt front. Joe, his lean and mean face full of fury, got slowly to his feet.

"Get back," I ordered, "and face the wall." When he did so, I added: "Put your hands behind you." Reluctantly, he obeyed. "Mildred," I said, "take Topps' neckties"—I jerked my head toward a dresser—"and tie up his hands. Then do the same to his ankles."

"Look, fella! Let's make a deal—" "Not to-day," I scowled. "Hurry, Mildred!"

I watched her loop his wrists and ankles, and nodded approvingly when she finished.

Topps groaned as I tore his shirt away. The bullet had clipped his side, making a flesh wound that bled freely, and was undoubtedly painful.

"Water and some towels, Mildred," I decided, "and see if there's some iodine in the bathroom."

While I washed the wound, Mildred tore a sheet into strips. I made two pads, laid them over the

wound and fastened them. Hank groaned considerably, but he seemed to be more scared than anything else.

When we finished, I helped him to the bed, then faced Joe, who had been watching us with the ugliest sort of sneer.

"Now after that first aid," I said, "maybe we can do a little talking. Exactly who are you?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing—except that I'm the guy who got the message, and I'd like to know what all the shootin's for." I weighed the gun in my hand suggestively. "But maybe you'd rather talk to the law?"

His eyes glared into mine as he responded: "Where do you come in? You weren't in on the job."

"No," I admitted. "But Ella sent the tip-off to me, and I was to take it to Willie—not you. I figured you're the Joe she meant. Right?"

"She was crossin' me, the dirty—"

"Watch your language," I warned. "Incidentally, who knifed Sam Grommet?"

His eyes narrowed warily. "Sam was a small-time jerk."

"That's what you think," I said. "Sam tore my apartment apart, looking for the tip-off—and so did someone else. Sam got knifed—and the other party woke up in a burning garage. As it is, I still have the note"—I waved it tauntingly towards him—"and you and Hank Topps look ripe for a gaol vacation."

"Look, young fella"—his eyes were hard, but there was a note of desperation in his voice—"Ella has been crossin' me because of Willie. I don't know how you figger in this, but Willie, Hank and I did the job—then beat it after giving the job to Ella to hide. She got in a jam and landed in the State pen before

she could reach us. All I'm doin' is tryin' to get my cut."

"Sounds reasonable," I admitted, "but murder is serious. Did you kill Sam?"

"No, but I guess Willie did."

"He's the one called One-Eye?"

"Yeah."

"How about the fellow who burned to death? Who was he?"

"One of Willie's punks. Sam caught him fingerin' the apartment, followed him to the garage, and got him. The fire was an accident, though."

"How do you know?"

"I heard Sam gabbing about it. Willie didn't believe it. That's why he knifed Sam."

Topps moaned a little, opened his eyes and tried to sit up.

"Hello, Hank," I said. "Feel better?"

"The note!" Topps muttered. "Lemme see the note!"

"I've got it," I told him. "It says to look for a thousand boxes in a row. That mean anything to you?"

He nodded no.

"How about you, Joe? It mean anything?" I asked.

"What if it does?"

"We might make a deal."

"All right, I'll take a chance." He hesitated a moment, then said: "Ella worked as a sort of clerk in a big factory—"

"Where is it?" I interrupted.

Joe smiled coldly. "That's what I know—and I'm not talkin' until you make a real offer."

I eyed him, knowing he had me up to that point. I had the note, but he knew the factory. But I had two aces to his one. In addition to the note I had the gun. It fitted my hand nicely.

So I said to Mildred, "you can untie him."

CHAPTER FIVE.

"HOW 'bout my gun?" Joe asked, when his hands were free.

"I'll keep it a while," I said, "just in case." I slid the automatic into my pocket. "Maybe we ought to take Hank with us." I nodded toward Topps, groaning on the bed.

Joe shook his head. "He isn't goin' anywhere," he said flatly. "Let's move before we get company."

He led the way downstairs, Mildred and I following. His car—a blue sedan—was in front. I let him get in first, then, with my hand on the gun in my pocket, I got in beside him. Mildred sat in the back.

Joe drove several miles before he came to a sudden halt in front of a dirty brick building.

"This is it," he said. "Now what?"

"The room with the boxes," I said. "That's our first stop." I glanced at my watch. "It's too early; there'll be someone there."

"It doesn't make any diff. to me how many people are there. For such big dough I'll do plenty. Just foller me and don' say nothin'," he cautioned. "You sure you know where the stuff is?"

"It's where the boxes are."

"Okay. I know the room where Ella worked, and I'll see we get there. I'm dependin' on you to grab the stuff while I keep everybody off your neck. The girl stays here in the car."

"All right. You heard him, Mildred?"

"Y-yes, Henry!"

Joe reached under the dashboard, and brought out a second automatic. He slid it into his pocket, climbed out and slammed the door. I hesitated, but he gestured impatiently and started toward the building. As I got out of the car I noticed a small sign beside the gate: GREAT NORTHERN APPLIANCE CORP.

My heart leaped as I realised that the factory in which we were to stage a holdup was the one where I was employed as a salesman.

Joe seemed familiar with the premises. He led me through the side gate to the employees' entrance at the rear. Pushing through the door, he nodded to the watchman and strode past. My duties rarely took me to this part of the shop, so I stepped past the watchman hesitantly. He glanced at me, went back to reading his racing paper.

I quickened my stride and caught up with Joe, who with one hand in his coat pocket, had slowed to a saunter when approaching the stock parts department.

"This is it," he said, pulling the door open. "Don't try to pull anythin' funny. I'll be watchin' you—and might shoot first and talk later."

I nodded and followed him into the big room. A steel counter laden with packing cases confronted us. The room beyond housed aisle after aisle of steel storage cabinets, each containing a specific variety of spring, nut, or screw, for the many appliances manufactured by the Company.

"Okay," said Joe. "This is where Ella worked. Get goin'!"

Girls were walking back and forth in the aisles, opening drawers, comparing invoice numbers with data on the boxes, etc.

"Hurry up," Joe prompted, "and try to look like you belong here."

Casually, I approached one of the aisles and studied the numbers on a card tacked to it, looking for 10. With Joe on my heels, I walked so rapidly that I collided with a dusty-faced girl who came hurriedly out of one of the aisles with her arms full of boxes. She slipped and the boxes teetered dangerously. I tried

to catch them but two on top crashed to the floor.

"Sorry," I said, bending to pick them up.

"Aw, that's all right. "The girl let the boxes plop heavily on to a counter.

"Leave'm there!" Joe grated in my ear. "Let the kid pick 'em up!"

"Just a minute, Joe," I said. "It was my fault, not the young lady's." I finished picking up the parts. "Are you girls assigned to particular sections of the stock room?" I asked.

"Sure. Why?"

"Do you remember where Ella used to work?"

"Ella who?"

"What was Ella's last name?" I asked Joe. He glowered at me, but said: "Ella Castro."

"Don't know her. Why?"

"Well, have you any idea where Number 10 is?" I asked, trying to grin persuasively.

"Ten? Oh, that's way in back, where all the old stuff is." She waved a thin hand towards the rear. "Me, I take care of the newer things."

"Thanks," I said, and the girl smiled, rolled her eyes at me before walking away.

"Just a minute, baby," Joe interrupted as he slid his arm through hers and pulled her toward him. "Suppose you show us where No. 10 is."

The girl jerked away. "Listen, smarty!" she glared. "Who do you think you are, pullin' me—" But her eyes popped as the gun came out of his pocket.

"Come on, come on!" Joe urged. "Let's have some action."

Fearfully, the girl led us to the rear, pointing to a section of wooden boxes arranged in tiers. "That's No. 10," she quavered, "can I—can I go now?"

"Keep quiet," Joe ordered, tightening his grip on her arm.

There were five tiers. I went to the third one and eyed it sceptically. According to the note, the diamonds and money were in the middle of Section 10. This was the centre of that section—but there were hundreds of boxes, any one of which might be the right one. I counted them, first vertically, then horizontally. Fifteen boxes high, twenty-five wide. Eight from the bottom, and thirteen from the side. I located one box, pulled its handle. It was locked.

"Where are the keys?" Joe barked, twisting the girl's arm.

"There ain't none. The bins ain't locked. There's nothin' in them but ol' parts."

Joe pushed the girl toward me. "Watch her," he commanded. Grabbing the handle of the box, he pulled mightily and in vain. He pounded it with his fists, then strode to a work bench where an assortment of dusty tools lay. He returned with a crowbar, forced it into a crack at the top of the box, and slowly put his weight on it. The box snapped open.

"See!" the girl said scornfully. "There ain't nothin' in there but a lotta old—" She stopped and gaped as, with eager fingers, Joe lifted out a tray of rusted screws and bolts, revealing a layer of neatly stacked cases in the bottom of the box.

"That's it!" Joe exclaimed excitedly. "Good old Ella—one hunnert gran!" He fumbled among the cases until his fingers found a chamois bag. And from it a glittering stream of uncut diamonds poured into his hand.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed.

The girl let out one quick scream, then froze with horror for, as the diamonds disappeared into Joe's poc-

ket, his gun was arching toward her head.

"Don't!" I cried.

I tried to knock the gun from his hand, but he turned and flung me back against the wall of boxes and brought the gun down hard on my head. An A-bomb of light burst behind my eyes, then I realised I was falling—falling—

CHAPTER SIX.

THE blast of a gun blew into my consciousness while I was on the floor, my nose was scraping into cold concrete. There was a babble of voices, the sound of running feet, then the peal of a bell ringing far away. I lifted my head, managed to grasp the edge of a shelf, pulled myself erect, then stood there, swaying dizzily.

A girl was stretched on the floor. As I stared down at her, she moaned weakly and moved her legs. Then I thought of the diamonds! Painfully, I turned my head and looked for the box. It had been torn from the tier, emptied and thrown on the floor. The stones and cash were gone!

Mildred—the car—outside. I stumbled toward the front of the vast room from which the clamour was coming. A gun cracked outside as I turned a corner, then the rat-a-tat-tat of a tommy gun punctuated the uproar.

A moment later the desperate Joe appeared in the doorway, his hair dishevelled, his blue eyes frantic. His shirt front was smeared with blood. In his right hand he held the automatic; his left arm guarded a bundle. He saw me, pointed the gun at my head, and it clicked twice. It was empty! So he flung it at my head and hurdled the counter. I ducked, then clutched at his coat and jerked him around.

With an oath, Joe dropped the bundle and fired his fists at my chin as I stepped in, buried a blow in his stomach, then punched rapidly at the white blur of his face. He eluded me and fled toward the stockroom aisles.

I was not too groggy to forget the automatic in my pocket. I pulled it out and it soon stopped him. Joe screamed once, spun around, then crashed to the floor.

"Henry!"

Dazed, I turned as police officers streamed into the room and Mildred threw herself into my arms.

"Henry—you're all right?"

I nodded with a smile and kissed me.

"I was scared to death!" she murmured.

"Me, too," I admitted, realising suddenly that I had the gun in my hand. I lifted it, stared at it wonderingly.

"Young man, I'll take that gun," a police officer said, and asked: "Is this Mr. Topp?"

"Yes. Henry is my boy friend," replied Mildred.

"Glad to meet you. I'm Lieutenant Gregory." The officer extended his hand. "Things were rough there for a while, Mr. Topp, but, thanks chiefly to you, everything is under control now.

One-Eyed Willie is dead, of course."

"Dead!" I exclaimed. "How'd—"

As soon as you and Joe left," Mildred explained, "I drove to the police station and told Lieutenant Gregory what had happened and—"

"That's right," he interrupted. "At first, we thought she was crazy, talking about you being dead, then alive, and then a couple other people being dead because of diamonds and money. Fortunately, she persuaded me to send a squad car with

her. Just as we arrived, Joe Moroni came running out and One-Eyed Willie gunned him."

"But One-Eye couldn't have known we were here." I stared at them bewilderedly.

"According to your girl, you left Hank Topps on his bed. He must have dragged himself to a 'phone and tipped off the gang. Don't forget, they had a lot of loot at stake."

"But——"

"Anyway," Lieutenant Gregory went on, "One-Eye was here," waiting for Joe to come out with the loot. He fired at him, but only wounded him slightly. That's when we arrived. One of our boys machine-gunned Willie. Joe recognised the squad car and ducked back into the building. We'd have gotten him eventually, of course, but you simplified things."

"And the diamonds and money?"

"We found the stones in Moroni's pocket. I imagine this contains the money." He indicated the bundle Joe had abandoned when I grabbed his coat. "Ella was Joe's girl and, after the diamond Syndicate robbery, she was entrusted with the loot while things cooled off. We've been watching them, hoping they'd make a slip—but they had us stumped. While Joe was in California, Willie made a play for Ella. A simple double-cross with Hank Topps acting as go-between for Ella and Willie."

"But why didn't she send the note directly to Willie?" I asked.

"Because One-Eye was so busy with the heat on him that he couldn't stay in one place long enough to have a definite address. Also, Ella needed money. She hoped for a parole, and wanted Willie to get the money, pay her lawyers' fees, and wait for her in some safe place. See?"

"I guess so," I said.

"A squad is on its way to pick up Hank Topps," Gregory went on, "and he's the kind of a guy who'll sing—plenty! We'll get all the details from him."

"Did you tell him about the note?" I asked Mildred.

"He just laughed," she said, "but then I told him about Ella and Joe and Willie and Hank—and he saw I was serious."

"It was a dull afternoon," Lieut. Gregory grinned. "Besides, she's a pretty girl, Mr. Topp, so I decided to come along, if only for the ride." His face sobered as he added: "Incidentally, there's an insurance company reward for recovery of those diamonds. You'll have a rather nice nest-egg—in case you're thinking of getting married."

I looked at Mildred.

She blushed, then giggled. "Some people still think Henry's dead," she murmured.

"That's what you don't think!" I exclaimed and put my arm around her waist.

THE END.

The Case of the

RED-HEADED GIRLS

by Harry Whittington

Pat Raffigan—best-dressed private eye in the business — he admits it himself — is out to find a missing red-head and uncovers the strangest racket of his adventurous career!

RAFFIGAN wakened from uneasy sleep. Although he was instantly awake, his green eyes stretched wide, he was completely blinded by the ferocious glare of a "baby spot" held inches from his face.

"You'll be all right," said a soothing feminine voice.

Raffigan swung out at the blinding light, but found nothing.

For a moment, waking, he'd been unsure where he was. And now he remembered. He'd arrived at Midwest City after one, come directly to the thirty-floored Plaza-Arms Hotel, signed for a room, gone at once to bed. His breathing subsided.

This was Midwest City's finest hotel. A man paid fifteen bucks a night to toss on its faultless linen. He was on a routine call to find the missing red-headed daughter for distraught parents.

"Turn off that light," Raffigan said. "Or so help me, I'll yell. I'll yell till they can hear me in Hoboken."

"You won't yell, Gig, tell Mr. Raffigan why he won't yell."

A man spoke. "Because I'll slap his teeth in if he does."

Light-blinded, Raffigan couldn't see the man called Gig come near, but he sensed movement at his left.

There was, too, the unpleasant odour of excessively-used, cheap after-shave lotion.

Raffigan dodged to the right. But Gig was prepared for that. A wide reaching, open hand slapped Pat back against the headboards.

He tensed himself, pulling up his legs, to hurl his body off that bed upon the man at his left.

But the woman's voice stopped him. "Stay where you are, Raffigan," she said amiably. "You're not hurt. Yet. You'll be all right, if you'll just behave."

There was still a dull pain along Raffigan's temples.

"All right," he said. "You want something. What is it?"

The girl said, "See, Gig. I told you he'd listen to reason." She spoke again to Raffigan. "Put out your hand."

Raffigan obeyed.

She laid two oblong squares of cardboard across his hand.

"What's this?" Raffigan said.

"A plane ticket," she replied. "And a baggage check. You can leave on the nine a.m. flight. You'll be home in less than two hours."

Raffigan dropped the cardboards into the breast pocket of his green-and-brown striped pyjamas.

"I don't suppose they'd be good for a later flight?" he inquired.



Raffigan looked at him again, waiting for his chance to strike.

"Say, to-night? After six o'clock?"

There was no laughter in her voice now. "That ticket is good for the nine o'clock flight," she said.

"After that, you won't need no tickets to nowhere—if you're still in town," Gig told him.

"Remind him, Gig," the girl directed.

Raffigan opened his mouth to yell, but the back of Gig's hand drove Pat's teeth into his lips, cracked his head against the headboards. He dragged himself away, his blindness adding to his feeling of panic, but Gig's hand re-crossed with unbelievable force, and re-crossed, slapping him mercilessly until his teeth chattered together loosely.

"The nine o'clock flight, Raffigan," the woman's voice stabbed through the agony in his head. "It's four o'clock now. You've five hours to get on that plane."

But Raffigan was through listening. His mouth filled with blood. His cheeks stung where they'd been raked by a ring on Gig's hand. The buzzing in his head wouldn't cease.

"All right, Gig. Let's get out of here."

He heard his door opened and he sprang from the bed in blind pursuit. But he stumbled over a straight chair and sprawled on the floor.

He heard the woman's gently mocking laugh from the door. "I thought you'd do that. So I put the chair there. Good-night — sucker."

Swearing at himself, Raffigan got up. Arms stretched in front of him, he fumbled his way into the bathroom.

Who were those people? Who'd let them know he was in Midwest City?

Forcing back the rising feeling of helpless fright building up inside him, he leaned over the wash-basin and began to bathe his eyes with cold water.

At last he could see the shadows of his hands bringing the ice water up to his face from the bowl.

Still coldly angry, he picked up his telephone and asked for Room 827. What sort of a double-cross was this? he demanded. Only the people in 827 knew he was to be in Midwest City.

"This is Raffigan," Pat said when a man's hesitant voice finally answered. He set himself to deliver a tongue lashing when the voice interrupted.

"Oh, thank the kind Lord, Mr. Raffigan. Thank the Lord, you're here. Where are you?"

"I'm in the hotel," Raffigan said sharply. "You said I could see you at eight. Could I talk to you now? I think there is need for hurry."

"There is, Mr. Raffigan," said the voice. "There is. Please come to the room, any time. We've not been able to sleep. Knock three times, sharply—so I'll know it's you—for sure."

"I've one other call to make,"

Raffigan said. "I'll be there within an hour."

He replaced the receiver, frowning. There was terror and anxiety in that voice.

Twenty minutes later, he entered the Midwest City police station. He showed his badge and credentials, and was led into the office of the Identification Lieutenant.

Raffigan, holding the plane tickets by the edge, extended them to the small, prematurely grey man.

"There are some fingerprints on these things," Raffigan said. "I'd like you to tell me as soon as possible, whose. I think they're a woman's, and I think she'll have a criminal record a block long. All I want is her name."

When he came out of the police station, Raffigan stood for a moment on the sidewalk. Across the narrow street, in the dingy doorway of a watch repair shop, closed at this hour, stood a lone man in a grey top coat.

Raffigan walked half a block toward the Plaza Arms. Before a sporting goods window he halted. After studying the fishing gear displayed there, he whirled suddenly.

Across the street, ogling the display in a key shop, was the man in the top coat.

Raffigan started in a run across the red brick street.

The man in the top coat broke and ran.

Raffigan stood there at the curb and glanced after the fleeing form.

His mouth tightened. Someone beside his client in 827 at the Plaza Arms knew he was in town, and they were prepared for him. He shook his head. He'd arrived at one a.m.

It was five thirty-six a.m. as Raffigan strode across the lobby of the Plaza Arms.



Pat threw up his automatic to fire at close range on Decker.

The clerk smiled at him.

"You weren't on duty here at one o'clock this morning?" Raffigan said.

The clerk smiled. "No sir. We change at four."

"I'm looking for the clerk who checked me in," Raffigan said. "Do you know where I could find him?"

"Why yes." The clerk checked his files. "He has room 1019, here in the hotel. His name is Frank Hall. But, of course, everyone calls him Gig."

CHAPTER TWO.

PAT RAFFIGAN knocked for the third time on the door of room 1019.

From within there was no answering movement.

He took the knob in both his hands. He had to drive his shoulder against it three times before the lock snapped quietly under his weight.

The sun lighted the small room as Raffigan closed the door behind him. The bed was empty, rumped, the pillow hollowed and soiled by a greasy head.



The bright blade of the knife gleamed over the girl as she lay.

Raffigan sniffed deeply. There was about the room the strong odour of cheap after-shave lotion.

Raffigan checked the bathroom, the small, shallow, cedar clothes closet. Then, pulling a straight chair against the wall beside the closed window, he sat down to wait directly across from the door.

On the dresser top were three framed, tinted pictures. Though all the faces were unlike, all three had bright red hair.

The only fact Raffigan had so far been told about the missing girl he'd been summoned to Midwest City to seek was that she had red hair.

On the floor beside Raffigan's polished shoe was an advertisement throw-away from the Plaza Arms hotel.

From it smiled a brightly red-headed woman. "Hear Ruby Garnet, the Scarlet Amazon, in the Firelight Room on the roof. Intimate songs. Midwest City's Newest Sensation. Now in her 18th Week."

Raffigan sat there staring at the

red-head. But he was thinking about Frank Hall, the man they called Gig.

He was listening for sound beyond the door, and was quite startled when the window at his side was slowly raised.

Silently, Raffigan slipped from the chair and pressed himself, tall and straight, against the wall.

A dark, greasy head came cautiously into the room. And then the man saw Raffigan. With a yell he tried to withdraw.

Leaping, Raffigan brought the side of his hand down across the back of Gig Hall's neck.

Gig, offering no protest, collapsed across the sill, and Raffigan dragged him in from the fire escape. At that moment Raffigan became aware of the hot stickiness on his hands. Gig Hall had been shot with a .45. Raffigan released him and the man sank lifeless to the floor.

Running into the bathroom, Raffigan washed every trace of the blood from his hands. He came warily back into the room, expecting every second to hear movement in the hall. Going to the dresser, he gathered up the three tinted pictures of the red-heads, scooped up the advertisement for Ruby Garnet, the Scarlet Amazon, and stepped quickly out into the hallway.

He saw the light of the elevator brighten the corridor, heard the inner door pushed back as he ran, with the pictures stuffed under his coat, to the stairway.

Raffigan saw three men, one of them in the bright blue of Midwest City police, bound out of the elevator. But he was already going down the steps, four at a time, by now.

As he came out on the fifth floor, dragging in deep breaths, a chambermaid passed, her arms loaded

with towels.

"Honey," Raffigan gasped. He touched her arm. "Is there a vacant room on this floor?"

She glared at him. "Do you want me to call the police?"

He dug a five dollar bill from his pocket and extended it. "No," he said. "That's what I want to do."

"There's a telephone in this room," she told him, unlocking a door.

Raffigan told the operator to connect him with ID bureau at police headquarters. He spoke into the mouthpiece. "Hello, ID? This is Pat Raffigan. Is there anything on those fingerprints?"

"Look! This isn't the FBI, Mr. Raffigan! What do you expect? Miracles? I can tell you one thing," the officer said sharply. "Give up on that woman angle. Those fingerprints are too big. They belong to a man."

Raffigan replaced the receiver.

He'd been assaulted in his room, in another minute he'd have been neatly framed for the murder of Gig Hall.

He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to seven. Three minutes later he was rapping sharply at the door of Room 327.

The door cracked to the length of the inside chain. A small, grey-haired man peered out at Raffigan. Then he opened the door.

"I'm Paul Willoby," he said. He indicated the slender, pretty-faced woman of fifty-eight sitting near him. "This is my wife, Claire. We've been waiting for you, Mr. Raffigan."

"We've been praying you'd come," the woman said quietly. Raffigan saw then why she hadn't gotten up from her chair.

Her right leg and her right arm were in casts.

"Claire was struck in the street

four days ago," Willoby explained. "It was a hit and run driver."

Raffigan saw tears glisten in her eyes. "We—we've been here a week, Mr. Raffigan. But it seems like a year, already. We telephoned Western Union the wire we sent you. I was afraid for Paul to go out again—and, of course, like this, I couldn't."

Raffigan looked at them. The smile on the little woman's face didn't waver, but it had a set, fixed look. Her courage, he saw, was like a mask over her terror.

"Why do you stay here?" Raffigan said. "If you're in such terror of the place?"

Willoby shook his head helplessly. "We came a week ago, Mr. Raffigan, looking for our daughter, Lenny. We went to the police. They did nothing. And then—it began to happen."

"I was run over in the street," Claire said. "Then Paul was taken by some men. They used—hot water—rubber hose, and warned him worse would happen if he didn't get out of town."

There was a sudden, sharp knock at the door. The Willobys drew together involuntarily.

CHAPTER THREE.

THE man at the door—tall, slender, dark haired—frowned.

"My name is Harlan," he introduced himself. "I'm manager of the Plaza Arms. I'd like to talk with Mr. and Mrs. Willoby."

"I'm a close friend of the Willobys," Raffigan said. "Anything you have to say to them can be said before me."

Harlan studied his immaculate nails for a moment. "Then I'll come directly to the point," he said without smiling. "I'm afraid we'll have to have your room, Mr. Willoby."

"Would you mind saying why? Is

it we haven't paid our rent?"

"You have," Harlan agreed suavely. "But, I'm sorry, this particular room is held for transient guests, you see. We didn't know you'd be here this long when we let you have the room."

"Nor did we," Willoby answered flatly. "But, as you know, my wife has been seriously hurt. We cannot leave now."

"I'm sorry," Harlan replied. "But I must adhere to hotel policy. The room must be vacated by five o'clock to-night."

"I paid for this room until Sunday," Willoby protested.

Harlan shrugged. "You gave me a cheque," he assented. "But I'm afraid, Mr. Willoby, it has been returned, marked insufficient funds. I didn't like to say this, before your friend, but you owe now for five days' rent in arrears. Of course, this matter will have to be settled before you leave this afternoon."

Raffigan spoke. "Suppose you bring us that cheque which has been returned."

"I don't have it just now," Harlan replied silkily.

"Well, then, until you get it," Raffigan said, "suppose you stay away from Mr. and Mrs. Willoby. And I suggest you see they continue to get the service your hotel chain advertises so highly. If you don't, you'll certainly have a lawsuit on your hands."

"Who are you?" Harlan demanded.

"What difference does that make?" Raffigan inquired. "I'd suggest you attend to the matter of your employees being shot as they clamber about on fire escapes of the most expensive hotel in Midwest City."

Harlan's face blanched. "A most regrettable incident. One of our

clerks attempted a robbery in a room, and was shot. The matter did receive our immediate attention."

"That's good," Raffigan said. "I think you can count on the Willobys being here until Sunday, or until you can produce the cheque which has been returned from their home town bank."

When they were alone again, Mrs. Willoby sighed. "I was sure everything would be all right, Mr. Raffigan, if only we could get you to help us. This whole town seems to be in the grip of some paralysing terror. Nobody will help us. Either they're dishonest, like that man, Harlan—or they're afraid."

"Suppose you tell me the whole story," Raffigan suggested.

"As you know," Willoby began, "we live in Rexville. We've lived there all our lives. My father owned our drug store before me. Claire and I grew up together. We expected Lenny to live quietly there as we had."

Claire had been holding a picture in her lap. She turned it up.

Raffigan looked upon a red-headed girl, brightly intelligent, eager, too beautiful, and obviously unafraid.

"That's Lenny," Willoby said. "She was headstrong and ambitious from the first. We knew she wanted a career, and we did everything we could to help and encourage her."

Then, she heard about Midwest City's second large beauty contest, open to all girls. But the ads. suggested that red-heads were most desired, because Midwest City was at the moment crazy about a red-headed singer who'd taken the country by storm."

"Ruby Garnet," Raffigan said softly.

"Yes," Willoby said. "She was one of the judges."

"When Lenny didn't return home, and stopped writing, we came here," Claire said. "We went to see Miss Garnet. But she said she wasn't the chaperone for every girl who'd come to the contest."

"Were any other girls missing after the contest?"

"Not that we heard of in Rexville," Claire replied. "But we nearly went out of our minds when we'd read stories in the newspapers—all of them from Midwest City——"

Paul Willoby handed Raffigan four clippings from out of town newspapers. All were almost identical. UNIDENTIFIED GIRL SUICIDES. One leaped from a scenic tower. Another hurled herself from a train. Two died from poison.

All were red-heads. Natural or dyed.

In every case, Police made extensive efforts to locate families, establish identities, without success.

"Any one of them might be—our Lenny," Claire said.

"I don't think so," he said. "I'm sure your daughter is still alive——"

"Have you—any reason for this belief?" Willoby whispered.

"Both of you." Raffigan replied. "Don't you see? If your daughter were dead, there'd be no reason to attack you, no reason to drive you out of Midwest City."

"Can you—save her?" The two whispered the words in unison.

"Perhaps," Raffigan answered. "Perhaps, if we act quickly enough, we can find her before it's too late."

But going up to the 11th floor to his room, Raffigan frowned at his reflection in the elevator mirror.

He cursed as he went along the corridor toward his room.

He knew now why that woman and Gig Hall had visited his room

last night.

They'd found out about the wire the Willobys had sent to Raffigan. They'd been unable to stop the wire, and so they'd tried to stop Raffigan!

What sort of a set-up was it? A beauty contest. Red-heads by the hundreds. Girl billed as the Scarlet Amazon. In her 18th sensational week. Girls disappeared. Men were shot and crawled back in their rooms to die. An elderly couple appeal to the city police and get the brush-off.

Maybe you can find the girl, Raffigan told himself angrily. But suppose you do find her? She may be alive now. But will these people let her go on living?

Raffigan hesitated. Maybe if they let it alone, maybe if he sent the Willobys back to Rexville, Lenny might come back.

But instantly he remembered those clippings. UNIDENTIFIED GIRL SUICIDES. How long before Lenny Willoby would be found like that, another unidentified red-head, in a town where titians were a dime a dozen?

He took his key from his pocket and inserted it into the lock. The door of his room pushed slowly open.

CHAPTER FOUR.

RAFFIGAN was carrying the pictures of Gig Hall's red-heads under his coat. He tossed them, one by one, into the room ahead of him. Nothing happened.

Removing his gun from its holster, he slipped off the safety catch. Pushing his door open all the way with the toe of his shoe, Raffigan surveyed the room before him.

It was bedlam. His suitcase had been emptied, and his clothing was strewn over the floor.

In a straight chair, tilted against the far wall, a man awaited Raffi-

gan. His snap brim hat back off his unsmiling face, a detective badge glinting on the lapel of his coat where he'd temporarily pinned it, he held a police-model .45 on his lap.

"Cut out the comedy, Raffigan," he said. "Come in and shut the door."

Raffigan shut the door behind him, leaned against it, gun still level in his hand.

"Put that thing away, Raffigan. Ain't you got no respect for the law?"

"Not in this town. Who are you?"

"Name's Decker, Raffigan. Lieutenant Decker. Homicide. Midwest City police. Now will you put away that cap gun?"

Raffigan snapped on the safety and replaced his automatic without taking his eyes from Decker's face.

"All right," Raffigan said. "What do you want?"

"Several things," Decker replied. "First, I got word for you from ID. Those fingerprints you were so hot on belong to you, and to some person, evidently a man, so far unidentified."

"Unidentified," Raffigan said bitterly. "That word gets over-worked down in your office, Decker."

"Found some more of your fingerprints, Raffigan. On a chair down in room 1019. There was a man killed in that room."

"With a .45," Raffigan reminded him. "Or a small cannon."

"The instrument of death," Decker replied, "isn't nearly so important in a case like this when you can stack up little things like motives, witnesses, fingerprints. There are .45's and .45's. Ballistics isn't so infallible that——"

"In other words, you picture me in a neat little frame?" said Raffigan.

"It isn't the duty of the police to

frame criminals," Decker pointed out. "We only apprehend them, if possible, and bring them to justice."

"Then I'm under arrest?" Raffigan inquired.

Decker shrugged.

"It's eight-thirty," he said calmly. "You still have a half an hour, Raffigan. You can catch that plane and get out of here. We're not anxious to prosecute this case. The hotel accepts the theory that Hall was shot in an attempted robbery. You've got a clean record. And Gig Hall deserved what he got."

"Would you drive me out to the airport?" Raffigan said.

Decker nodded and got lithely to his feet.

Raffigan dragged in a deep breath. Quickly scooping up the clothes and tinted pictures he carried them to the suitcase on a straight chair.

A folded square of paper caught his attention, and under the wad of his clothes, Raffigan closed his fist over it.

He snapped the suitcase shut, but neglected to lock it.

Decker was chewing his gum. "You're smart, Raffigan. You're very smart to get out of this now."

"I don't have a plane ticket anymore," Raffigan said.

Decker smiled and handed him the two pasteboards Raffigan had left earlier at the police station.

"Very thorough," Raffigan said.

They went through the lobby to the sleek pale blue Buick five passenger coupe at the curb.

Raffigan's eyebrow went up at the sight of the car. Only the high aerial on the rear bumper revealed that it was a police car.

"I'm in the wrong racket," Raffigan said.

Decker smiled crookedly as he tooled the shining car out into the busy morning traffic.

It was a breathless ride through Midwest City's teeming streets to the gaudy administration building of the Midwest Municipal airport.

"Congratulations," Decker said as he parked. "You made it. With five minutes to spare."

He looked down into the yawning mouth of Raffigan's small automatic.

"Don't be a fool," he snapped.

Raffigan looked at the Homicide detective. His face was ashen, but in it was cold anger and determination. And Raffigan knew in that second that Decker had a great deal more at stake in this thing than on-looker's role as police officer.

No wonder they couldn't identify those fingerprints. No wonder the Willobys got the brush from the police department.

"Planes make me airsick," Raffigan said lightly. "I always travel by bus. They make me sick, too. But at least, I know what causes it."

"All right, stop talking in riddles, Raffigan. What do you want?"

Raffigan looked at him again, narrowly. He could see that Decker was tense, drawn up inside, waiting his chance to strike.

"I want protection," Raffigan replied. "There are people I've got to see in this town, Decker. And you're going to help me see 'em."

CHAPTER FIVE.

DECKER drove slowly back into Midwest City. The gun in Raffigan's hand didn't waver.

"Who was behind this beauty contest?" Raffigan said. "Who sponsored it, in the newspapers?"

Decker smiled secretively. "Mayor Vance."

"Let's go to his office," Raffigan said. "And Decker, don't try any tricks. I'd just as soon hang for two killings—as for one."

Decker's face paled.

There was no delay getting into the Mayor's office at City Hall. The Mayor was a pompous windbag, a cheerful greeter who evidently didn't even realize the tragedy that stalked in the streets of Midwest City.

"Why yes," said the Mayor much impressed by Raffigan's man-of-distinction appearance, "I, indeed, had the honour of officiating at the beauty contest."

"Do you have any list of the entrants?" Raffigan asked.

"I believe there was such a list. You might get it from my secretary."

Unwillingly, she went to a filing case. She stalled for minutes under Decker's unwavering eyes. Her face was ashen when she handed Raffigan the typewritten sheets.

"What do you intend to do with that thing?" Decker inquired blandly when they were again in his Buick.

"Why, we'll start at the top of the list," Raffigan replied mildly, "and we'll call on all those girls. All of them we can find, that is. First thing you know——"

He left the sentence unfinished but Decker completed it for him smoothly.

"First thing you know you'll be laid out on a slab, Raffigan. Stiff. Cold and dead."

"After you," Raffigan replied.

The first address was a downtown beauty salon.

Raffigan carried his suitcase into the shop.

He stood just behind Lt. Decker as the smartly dressed woman, red hair closely cut, approached.

Raffigan noted the woman's eyes waver as she met Decker's gaze. But Raffigan spoke quickly.

"I'm looking for a red-headed girl."

The sophisticated woman regarded him with a wry smile. "In a town like this?" she said. "Why don't you just look for a needle in a haystack?"

"I may do that, too," Raffigan replied. He opened the suitcase and took out the pictures he'd brought from Gig Hall's room. "Do you know any of these girls?"

The woman's face tightened. She looked at the pictures. Then at Raffigan. But always her gaze was drawn to Decker. She shook her head negatively.

"All right," Raffigan said. "Do you have a girl named Margy Allen working here?"

Glad to escape the spot upon which she found herself, the manager disappeared into the rear of the shop. A moment later, a girl with orange-red hair came from the row of booths.

"I'm Margy Allen," she said.

Raffigan showed her the pictures. "Do you know any of these girls?"

The red-head studied them. "I saw them once," she said. "They were in the contest. But I didn't know their names. They were from out of town."

"Sure they were," said Raffigan. "You've lived here all your life, haven't you?" Puzzled, the girl nodded. "But you didn't get to first base in the beauty contest, did you?" Still frowning, the girl shook her head.

"Did you have a place to rehearse?" Raffigan inquired.

"Certainly," the girl said. "The whole basement of the Plaza Arms. The contest was held in the Fire-light Room on the Plaza Arms roof. The idea was to find another Scarlet Amazon."

Raffigan dropped the pictures back into the suitcase, snapped it shut, and prodded Decker. "Shall

we go?"

They were silent in the reckless run through the busy streets. Raffigan could see that Decker was working himself up to some desperate move.

They pulled into the curb before the Plaza Arms hotel.

"Stick close to me," Raffigan said. "I've been followed and I don't want to get shot. You're the best protection I've got."

Decker faced him squarely on the walk.

"You can still clear out, Raffigan. But I warn you, once you enter that basement, you don't turn back."

He led Raffigan through the lobby. At the elevator, Raffigan spoke tersely to the operator. "Down to the basement."

"I'm sorry, sir," demurred the operator. "The basement is closed."

"I'm just about to open it," Raffigan said. "Do you run this thing, or do I?"

The operator looked with staring eyes at the automatic in Raffigan's hand. "Down," he said slowly.

There was a quick drop. Still carrying his suitcase, Raffigan nudged the detective lieutenant.

All the fear seemed suddenly to have gone out of Decker and he was again chewing his gum.

The pounding of a piano struck them as they came out of the cage.

Decker stepped out and to the side in a wide, bare room.

Raffigan, trying to see everything at once, followed. He saw Decker whirl away from him, heard the snap of a pistol.

Pat threw up his automatic to fire at close range on Decker, but the elevator man's arm hooked him under the chin, hard.

Decker's looping left raked across his jaw and in the whirling stars and planets that shot across his

eyes, Raffigan saw a huge, beautiful, red-headed woman, her lips twisted with cynical laughter.

CHAPTER SIX.

PAIN shot through Raffigan in violent waves. The elevator operator's arm about his throat was choking off his breath. He was suffocating.

He kept thinking that he had to live. He knew all the answers now. He had to get out of there to tell the truth about the Scarlet Amazon, about those beauty contests. About police detectives who drove new blue Buicks.

He knew he braced his legs apart, even though he didn't know how he did it. And from that moment he stopped sinking, and began to lift up again, still gasping for air.

He threw up his left arm, and hauled forward with a handful of the elevator operator's hair.

The man howled as his feet left the ground and he was arched over to come crashing down on Decker, who tried to hurl himself out of the way.

For a second Raffigan stood there gulping air.

His eyes, clearing, sought the huge red-headed woman. He saw her arm go back, saw the glitter of a knife as she poised to hurl it at him.

And then he saw something else. He saw a small red-headed girl throw herself against Ruby Garnet and the two of them went down.

Decker was struggling out from under the elevator operator and the cumbersome .45 was at last in his fist.

Raffigan threw down on him with the automatic. The sound of its firing was music in his ears. It was protection. It was the one kind of argument these desperate people understood.

Decker screamed and the .45 toppled harmlessly from his hand. Raffigan leaped across him and dashed to the two women who still struggled on the floor.

The bright blade of the knife gleamed over the girl who'd thrown herself upon the Scarlet Amazon.

As it came down, Raffigan kicked.

He heard Ruby's wrist snap. She began to scream vilely as the knife clattered across the room.

Raffigan grabbed at her. Forcing her to stand with her arm twisted up her back, Raffigan spoke quietly to the other men in the room.

"Pick up your marbles, fellows," he said. "It's all over. Get every woman from every room down here and get 'em quick. We got a date upstairs."

There were half a dozen girls, all red-heads, when they'd been rounded up from the cubicles about the wide room.

Raffigan herded them all up a rear stairway into the office of Harlan, the manager.

Harlan began to howl his protests until he saw Decker's bleeding shoulder, Ruby's broken wrist and the unwavering automatic in Raffigan's hand.

Raffigan picked up the telephone.

"Who're you calling, sucker?" Ruby said. "The police?"

Raffigan shook his head. "The F.B.I., baby. Kidnapping—even when you kidnap red-headed dames—is still a federal offence. We'll let Uncle Whiskers talk to you smart cookies."

Fifteen minutes later the F.B.I. agent shook his head. "We knew about it, Raffigan. We knew something was wrong with these beauty contests, but we just didn't have anything to go on."

"You still don't," Ruby Garnet said blandly. "So we ran a beauty

contest. The biggest men in town sponsored it. Call it crooked and see where it gets you."

"I call it crooked," Raffigan said. "The prize winners were the talented babies. Isn't that right, Ruby?"

The red-head shrugged. "So what?"

"But they were the talented babes from out of town. The girls who'd left home to seek their fortunes on the stage. So you people took them over. The girls who'd rather be rich and famous than go back home in defeat. Girls who wouldn't even write their folks if you said not to."

"Even if you were right," Ruby said. "It's not criminal."

Raffigan's green eyes snapped. "Listen, baby, I'll see you behind bars, if I have to swear out a warrant on you for breaking and entering my room."

"I? Did that?" Ruby laughed.

"You," Raffigan told her. "Your fingerprints are on these plane tickets Decker returned to me. If they're not still there, ID has pictures of 'em. But they wouldn't identify them, because Decker stopped them. But they told me they were too big for a woman's hand. But they're not too big for yours, Ruby. The Scarlet Amazon. But I don't have to use that. Not for you. Where do you send these talent winners South America? Mexico City? The Orient? Baby, those circuits are pretty rugged."

"That may be," said Ruby. "But I went through it. If a girl wants to be famous badly enough, she'll go anywhere."

"But if they protest," Raffigan went on relentlessly. "Do you release 'em? Or do those girls become the unidentified suicides?"

"Prove that one," Ruby snarled.

"Okay. You asked for it." Raffigan opened his suitcase. He spoke

to the F.B.I. man. "Would you recognize pictures of the girls who committed suicide?"

"I see them in my sleep," said the agent.

Raffigan tossed the three pictures on the desk. "Are these three of them?"

The agent nodded. "Yes. Those are three of them."

"Gig Hall's girl friends," Raffigan said to Ruby. "He got in it over his head, didn't he? He wanted out. But you laughed at him. Forced him to go on doing your dirty work, as he did in my room this morning. When Gig tried to warn those girls away, something happened to him, didn't it?"

"Gig Hall is dead," Ruby said. "He'll hardly corroborate that."

"He already has," Raffigan contradicted her. "He went back to my room this morning after you'd had him slap me around. He threw everything out of my suitcase. Decker found him there, and shot him. But Gig Hall was smarter, anyway. He left a note in my suitcase."

He unfolded the wad of paper he'd found in his suitcase.

"Raffigan," he read aloud. "Must talk to you. This thing is too hot for me. I want out. Please see me in room 1019. I'll help you break it, if you'll save my life. Ruby Garnet's behind it, and Decker and Harlan. A racket in girls. Please don't fail me, or it's curtains for me, Gig Hall."

Lenny Willoby was still dazed when Raffigan led her into room 827. Her mother and father wept over her and kissed her.

Claire Willoby shuddered. "You broke it up, Mr. Raffigan," she whispered thankfully. "This town owes you a great deal."

THE END.

The Case of the

JEWELLED DAGGER

by Philip Ketchum

To find a corpse at a wedding is shocking enough, but when it's the bridegroom with his new sister-in-law's knife in his back, you can expect strange developments in this speedy mystery-drama.

IN the morning there had been all the rush of last minute preparations. In the early afternoon the wedding. And now, the reception. Joan was tired. She was tired of agreeing that sister Donna had been beautiful in her wedding gown and that Bill Glascoe, the groom, was a wonderful man and had a brilliant future. She wished that all these people would go home so that Bill and Donna could leave on their honeymoon and she could rest.

"Joan, dear, you are bearing up beautifully," said a voice in her ear.

Joan turned and saw siren-like Edith Winstead smiling at her. There was a hint of mockery in Edith's smile. There had been a barb in her words.

"Thank you, Edith," said Joan.

"At least you have him in the family," Edith continued. "Watch your step, dear," she advised. "Hands off."

Joan was furious. She watched Edith drift away, still chuckling and looking back. She then saw Frank Sanderson, her uncle, leave the group which had gathered around Bill and Donna. He headed toward his study door and was joined there by Andy Ballard, one of his close

associates. Her uncle was a short, stocky man, not quite fat. He was still under fifty. Since the death of her mother and father, almost ten years before, Uncle Frank had looked after her and Donna, giving them, perhaps, more freedom than was wise, but to some extent filling the void left by the death of John and Lorna Carter.

The rest of the group was breaking up, too. The groom and Ben Mobridge were heading toward the back hall. Donna was calling her. Joan joined her sister and, though Donna was smiling and her voice sounded gay, there was a strangely troubled look in her eyes.

"I've already been deserted by my husband," declared Donna. "Isn't that terrible?"

Those who heard her, laughed. Several offered advice which was supposed to be humorous. Donna shook her head to these suggestions. "It wasn't another woman," she insisted. "It was a man who took my husband away."

She leaned closer to Joan. "Bill wants to see you for a minute," she whispered. "I don't know what it's about, but he says it's important. He's in the music room."

Joan reached for Donna's hand.



A white powder slid from a paper.

It was ice cold. She squeezed it. "I'll not keep him," she answered in a matching whisper.

She started across the room toward the back hall, wondering about Donna's message. She was stopped several times. In one group she heard Miss Winstead's high and unpleasant voice. "I tell you, Ben Mobridge was looking daggers at the bridegroom," Edith was saying. "But, of course, before Bill came along, Donna and Ben were very close."

Joan came to the back hall and, stepping on to it, she was met by Andy Ballard.

"You're not running out on us, are you?" he grinned.

"Not at all," said Joan. "I'll be back."

"You know, that's an idea," said Andy, "but—why not run out? You and me?"

He took one of her arms. He was a big man, and his eyes were owlish behind thick lenses. He came here often for business conferences with her uncle. He was unmarried and in his mid-thirties and had never made himself offensive, but Joan had

never been able to like him. She pulled free and managed a laugh.

"I couldn't possibly run out, Andy," she insisted. "A girl's sister only gets married once, you know. It wouldn't be fair to Donna."

She moved on, then, and could feel Andy's eyes following her. At the door to the music room, she looked back, expecting to see him still watching her, but he was gone.

Long ago, the music conservatory had been a play-room for Joan and Donna, cheerful with its windows to let in the afternoon sun and with French doors leading out to a wide, flag-stone verandah. Joan knocked on the door, turned the knob, pushed it open and stepped inside.

The room was dark, the curtains drawn. She reached for the light switch, turning away from the partially open door. As she did so someone moved around that door, someone who had been waiting there in the darkness. A hand grasped her shoulder and pulled her roughly backwards. Another hand came down on her mouth and chin, muffling the scream which must have been there. The door slammed shut.

"Don't make a sound," her assailant growled. "I don't want to kill you!"

Joan twisted, jerked, clawed at the arm across her breast. She broke free and felt her dress tearing at the shoulder as the man grabbed at her. She tripped over a chair and fell to the floor. As she got to her knees she heard the man at the French doors. They opened, closed, and she was alone in this room.

She could have screamed, then, but she didn't. Screams would bring people and some who would come might have heard what Donna whispered to her. There would be talk. There would be ugly rumours which would completely ruin Donna's mem-

ory of this day. It hadn't been Bill who had grabbed her. Joan was sure of that. But people like Edith Winstead wouldn't believe her.

Joan stood up, felt shaky. Who had seized her she didn't know. She had caught no glimpse of his face. His whispered words had touched no cord in her memory. She crossed to the wall, clicked the lights and turned to look toward the French doors. She turned and felt her body go rigid. She wasn't alone in this room.

Bill Glascoe was with her, lying on the floor near the piano, one knee half doubled up under his body, one arm half circling his head. And from his back, almost squarely between his shoulders, protruded the hilt of a knife.

Joan stared down at Bill with unbelieving eyes. She heard a voice which must have been her own, whispering, "No—No—No!" She dropped to her knees at Bill's side, her eyes fastened on the hilt of the knife. The knife was hers. Ben Mobridge had brought it to her from India. She had kept it upstairs on her desk where she used it as a letter opener. And now—

There was a sound behind her at the verandah door. Joan caught her breath, jerked to her feet, whirled around. The door opened. Ben Mobridge came into the room. He was staring wide-eyed from her to the figure on the floor. He came slowly forward.

"How did it happen, Joe?" he demanded. "Why did you do it?"

"But I didn't!" Joan protested. "I swear I didn't."

Ben's face was haggard. He moved past her, knelt at Bill's side, felt for his pulse, then stood up.

"It's your knife, Joan," he muttered. "It's the one I gave you.



The hilt of a knife stood up between his shoulder blades.

Your dress is torn as though Bill had grabbed at you when he fell. If you didn't do it, you had better get out of here."

Joan pulled her dress together at the shoulder, still shaking her head. Ben didn't believe her, and if he didn't, who would? She had known him as far back as she could remember. She had no closer friend in the world.

Again Ben stooped over the figure on the floor. When he straightened up he held the knife in his hand. He wrapped it in his handkerchief and put it in his breast pocket.

"Come on, Jo," said Ben. "Let's get out of here."

He took her arm. He tried to start her toward the verandah door but Joan held back. She wouldn't run away, she couldn't leave Donna to face this alone, no matter what it cost. She tried to explain this to Ben, but he wouldn't listen. And now, suddenly someone was knocking on the hall door, knocking insistently.

"Walk right on in," called a voice. "Bill's there. I know he's there."



He held out another knife to the district attorney.

Ben dropped her arm. "Don't mention the knife," he grated. "No matter what you say, don't mention it!"

And then he was rushing toward the verandah door. He reached it, opened it and stepped outside.

And now the hall door was opening. For Joan Carter there was no escape.

CHAPTER TWO.

JOAN sat in her uncle's study. How many minutes had passed since that moment in the music room when the hall door had opened, she didn't know. Donna was quiet, now. Her hysterical screams no longer grated. Dr. Priam Preston, a guest at the reception, had given her a sedative. He had just told her uncle that Donna was sleeping.

This study, usually a quiet and friendly room, wasn't that way tonight. Detective Capt. Peter Wyatt had made it his headquarters with police coming and going. At least fifteen people had been questioned.

Reporters had made it only as far as the door. In the room now with Joan and Donna were Wyatt, their Uncle Frank, Dr. Preston, Andy Ballard, and a young man who was apparently a police stenographer.

Wyatt was tall, heavy, middle aged. His eyes were hard, sharp, probing. They gave you no peace. They were never still.

"Let's go over it again, Miss Carter," Wyatt was saying. "You went back to the music room because your sister sent you."

"She said Bill wanted to see me."
"Why?"

"She didn't say; she just said it was important."

Joan twisted her hands together. She wanted to scream. She had gone over all this before. She had answered all these questions.

"Why was it important?" Wyatt asked again.

"I don't know," said Joan.

"Have you any idea what it could have been about?"

"No."

"All right," said Wyatt. "You went back to the music room, opened the door, the light wasn't on. You stepped inside. Before you could turn on the light, someone grabbed you, slammed the door, dragged you half-way across the room. You broke free and the man fled."

Joan nodded.

"Doesn't that sound rather silly?" asked Wyatt.

"No," said Joan sharply. "He was in the room when I entered. If I had turned on the lights I would have seen him, I might have screamed. He pulled me away from the lights, stopped me from screaming. He got away before I could get the lights on. It isn't at all silly."

Wyatt grunted. "You can't—or

you won't—tell us a thing about him," he muttered. "You say you don't know whether he was tall or short. You must have touched his wrists in your struggle, but you don't know whether or not he wore a wrist watch. You say he clasped a hand over your mouth. Was there a ring on his hand?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about things like that. I'm not a detective."

"But you strike me as a pretty smart girl. When you had the chance, you didn't scream. When you turned on the lights and saw Bill's body on the floor, you didn't scream. As near as I can figure it out, you must have been in that room at least five minutes before anyone else came in. You didn't struggle in a man's arms for five minutes. What did you do?"

"I—thought of Donna," said Joan.

Wyatt wheeled to her uncle's desk. He picked up the ornamental scabbard which fitted the knife Mobridge had given her and which had been used to kill Glascoe. The scabbard had been found by one of Wyatt's men in the shrubbery near the verandah outside the music room. He walked back toward Donna.

"This is yours, isn't it?" he asked.

Joan nodded yes.

"It belongs with the knife which you say was on your desk. The coroner says that the fatal wound could have been made by a knife the size of the one which fitted this scabbard. Of course, you wouldn't know anything about that."

There was a portentous pause; then Wyatt went on: "Your desk is in your room. You told me earlier the knife was on your desk this morning. Who could have gone up there and stolen it?"

"Anyone," replied Joan, "while we were at the wedding. Or after

we returned. People were all over the house."

"Let up on her, can't you?" broke in Sanderson gruffly. "She had nothing to do with what happened. Can't you see that?"

"Not yet," answered Wyatt. "To be brutally frank, she could have killed him. She had the opportunity. And the knife—she could have tossed the scabbard where we found it. She could have hidden the knife elsewhere. Her dress could have been torn by Glascoe as he fell to the floor. From what I gather, she was in love with him. Maybe she couldn't stand it to have him marry—"

Joan jumped to her feet. "That's not true!" she cried. "I wasn't in love with Bill."

"The man you want," said Sanderson, "is Ben Mobridge. He's the one who went back to the music room with Bill. He hasn't been seen, since. He knew of the knife. He gave it to Joan as a present—a souvenir."

Wyatt frowned, turning the scabbard over and over in his hand. "Tell me more about Mobridge," he suggested. "He lives less than a block away," responded Sanderson. "Since he was a kid he has played with Joan and Donna. They went to school together. During the war Ben was overseas until about a year ago. When he came back, the old threesome picked up where they left off, but pretty soon it was just Donna and Ben. What happened between them, I don't know, but a month ago Donna came to me and said she was marrying Bill Glascoe."

"Glascoe worked for you, didn't he?"

"He was one of the best men in our organisation."

"Where did Mobridge work?"

"He's an artist, draws and paints."

One of Wyatt's men came to the door and called him and they stood at the door for a time, whispering.

Ballard, who had been standing near Joan, leaned toward her. "Is there anything I can do, Joan?" he asked in a low voice.

"Nothin', Andy," said Joan. "Thanks."

"They have men searching the grounds outside, using flashlights," he announced. "They're looking for the knife. If I knew where it was——"

"If you knew where it was," remarked Joan. "What do you mean?"

Andy moistened his lips. "I could get it for you. I could carry it away. You can trust me, Joan."

"But I don't know where it is."

"I'm afraid we don't have much time," said Ballard.

Joan stared at him, wide-eyed. He believed she had killed Glascoe. That's what his offer meant. He believed her guilty, but was still willing to help her.

Wyatt came back from the door. "They've got Mobridge," he announced. "Or at least they think they have. I'll be leaving now, but I'll be back. I wouldn't want Miss Joan to decide on a sudden trip. I might want to talk to her again."

"I'll be here," said Joan quietly. She wouldn't, but she didn't know that when she went upstairs to her room. Sanderson and Dr. Preston went with her and the latter gave her something to help her get to sleep, though she insisted she didn't need it. Uncle Frank talked to her for a while, trying to reassure her, but unable to conceal his deep anxiety. He finally left and Joan went to bed and fell almost immediately to sleep.

It was still dark when she awoke

and she was groggy from the sedative. The light in the room was on and her uncle was there and a nurse and a man Joan had never before seen—a tall, thin, grey haired man with a tight-skinned, lean face.

Her uncle was talking to her, but Joan couldn't understand him. She fell asleep while he talked and was shaken awake. Then she was alone in the room excepting for the nurse, who was forcing her to dress. She didn't want to, and fought against it, but the nurse insisted. She also objected to going downstairs and getting into the car outside. She tried to come fully awake, but couldn't.

These people were taking her some place and she had promised not to go away. The car was moving, now, swiftly through the night and sleep was claiming her again.

CHAPTER THREE.

JOAN awoke in a strange, small, white room. Sunlight streaming in through curtains gave a glare which hurt her eyes. Where she was, she didn't know. She remembered, vaguely, the beginning of an automobile ride, but she couldn't recall its end. She was still a little groggy.

A middle aged woman in a nurse's uniform came in smiling and said, "Good-morning, Miss Carter. It's a glorious day. Are you ready for breakfast?"

"Where am I?" asked Joan.

"Your uncle will explain everything," said the nurse. "He will be here soon."

The nurse felt her pulse. "Steady and strong," she declared.

A man in a white jacket brought in her tray; the nurse raised the head of the bed and set the tray across her lap. All the time she did this the nurse kept up a cheerful patter of inconsequential talk.

The breakfast was good. Joan ate slowly, thinking back to what had happened the day before, and trying to recall what her uncle had said when he had wakened her in the middle of the night. Dr. Preston, she decided, had given her a powerful sedative.

Uncle Frank and the lean man she had seen the night before came into the room shortly after her breakfast tray had been removed. The lean man, her uncle explained, was Dr. Hippocrates Huling, a friend of Andy Ballard. This place was the Huling Health Home, just outside of San Francisco.

"We brought you here last night," said her uncle. "It was the only thing to do. I tried to explain, but you kept going back to sleep."

"And I tried to tell you I didn't want to go anywhere," said Joan.

The worried look returned to Sander-son's face as he went on: "After you went to sleep, Wyatt came back to the house and wanted to see you. He wouldn't believe you were asleep until I took him up to your room. He tried to wake you, but couldn't. He said he would be back early this morning. He meant to arrest you."

"He can arrest me here," said Joan.

"Not right away," said Sander-son. "Dr. Preston is co-operating. He said that after Wyatt left last night, you completely broke down, grew hysterical. He insists that it would impair your health to question you further until you are more calm. Preston is an important doctor. He can make that stick."

Joan bit her lips. "Why shouldn't I be questioned if it would help find the man who killed Bill?"

"It would do that. Wyatt is after you. He claims to have found someone who saw you on the verandah just outside the music room door

near where the scabbard was found. Wyatt would hammer you with questions until you would grow hysterical again. He's a hard and stubborn man."

"I can't stay here indefinitely," said Joan.

"You won't have to. A few days will change everything. A few days will give us a chance to get Moberidge. He killed Bill. I'm positive of it. The police, of course, are still looking for him. The report that they had found him last night was wrong. I have hired private detectives to work on the case, too."

"But Ben didn't kill Bill."

"He must have. He hated Bill. He hated him because Glascoe had taken the girl he loved. He went to the music room with Bill. Don't forget that. And he was the man in the room who grabbed you."

Joan shook her head, frowning. What her uncle had said, could be true.

Her uncle was saying: "Stay here in bed. Take it easy. Don't worry. Leave everything up to us. We'll find Ben and let Wyatt go to work on him. Ben will break. I'm sure of it."

"I'm not afraid of Wyatt," said Joan. "I want to go home."

"And we want you, but you wouldn't go home, Joan. You'd go to gaol."

Joan was still sleepy and her eyes closed. With an effort she opened them, remembering suddenly that she hadn't asked about Donna. She tried to now, but couldn't form the words. Her eyes closed again.

"She'll sleep for several hours," said a voice which was unfamiliar.

Dreams tortured her — strange, fantastic, frightening. They faded and she awoke as the early shadows of evening were pushing through the window. Someone was in the

chair near her bed. A familiar figure. Andy Ballard.

"It's nice here, isn't it, Joan?" he beamed, his voice the hushed one a person uses in a sick-room.

"How's Donna?" Joan asked abruptly.

"She's taking it very well. I haven't seen her, of course. No one has but Uncle Frank and Dr. Preston."

"I want to go home to be with her," urged Joan.

"To-morrow, maybe," he said. "You'll be feeling much better to-morrow."

"I want to go home," insisted Joan.

Andy frowned, moving his chair closer to the bed. "They still haven't found the knife," he said under his breath. "You can trust me, Joan. Where is it?"

She bit her lips. "I don't know, Andy; do you think I killed Bill?"

"It would make no difference to me if you had."

"But I didn't! I didn't! I want to go home. Call the doctor. Tell him I want to go home."

Andy came to his feet. He reached for one of Joan's hands and held it for a moment, pressed it. His fingers were moist, almost sticky.

"Easy, Joan," he advised. "I'll tell the doctor. Rest for a while. Try to sleep some more."

"I don't want to sleep," repeated Joan. "I want to go home."

Andy left and, though Joan didn't want to sleep, she must have dozed, for she awoke to realisation that night had come. A dim lamp glowed on a stand. She was hungry, weak, still groggy from the sedative.

Then the hall door opened and a short, heavy-set man wearing a white jacket entered. He stood for a moment just inside the door, star-

ing toward the bed. Joan stiffened, feigning sleep.

The stranger moved forward stealthily. Joan could feel a scream building up in her throat. Her hands, under the covers, were tightly clenched.

The man came to the edge of the bed, lifted his arm and held his hand for a moment above the glass of water on the night stand. A white powder slid from a paper into the glass, dissolving into the water. Quite abruptly, the man slithered back into the hall, closing the door silently behind him.

Joan sat up in bed, stared at the glass of water, knowing that she didn't dare to drink. Artificial sleep—even death—might be in that glass.

Joan knew now she had to escape—get away to-night!

CHAPTER FOUR.

WHERE her clothing was, Joan didn't know. Her eyes circled the room. There was no closet but against one wall stood a bureau. She threw back the covers and swung her feet to the floor. She was afraid for a moment that she was going to faint. Soon she risked the few steps across the room to the bureau and looked in the drawers. They were empty.

Joan made it back to the bed as footsteps sounded in the hall, stopping at her door. Someone opened it and looked inside. Joan again played asleep, the nurse closed the door and moved on.

Once more Joan left her bed. This time she walked to the window, pulled aside the blind, and looked out. Fog hid the stars and the air was cold, damp. She needed something more than the thin pyjamas before she tried to get away.

Walking back to the bed, she

heard a voice at the window—low, whispering, calling her name. She swung around and heard the window open wider. A hand raised the curtain and she saw Mowbridge.

"Thanks for coming to the window, Jo," Ben was saying. "I knew you were here but, until I saw you, I didn't know your room. This is luck. I'm paying you a visit."

Joan crawled back into bed, watching Ben climb through the window opening. This was the man her uncle was sure was a murderer. The police were hunting him.

He closed the window, pulled down the shade, crossed toward her bed.

"Ben," Joan whispered, "I've got to get away!"

He was grinning, shook his head. "It's a first-class rest home. I've checked up."

"I ought to be with Donna."

"According to what I've heard, you're supposed to be in a state of collapse."

"And from what I've heard," snapped Joan, "you're the man who killed Bill Blascoe!"

"Uh-huh," said Ben. "Not me."

"What did you do with the knife?"

"Hid it."

"Why?"

"Because it was yours and because you were in the room."

"Who did it?"

He ran his fingers through his hair, frowning, and answered, "Jo, I came to see you because I wanted to ask you several questions. Who owns the Carter Machine Tool Company?"

"Donna and I, that is, we own the controlling interest, but, according to father's will, it is tied up in a trust until we are married, or until we are thirty."

"Then Donna's share would have

come into her possession with her marriage to Bill?"

"Yes."

"Your Uncle Frank is the trustee."

"Yes, and he's been wonderful to us."

"He didn't oppose Donna's marriage?"

"Not at all."

"All right," Ben nodded. "Now you listen to me for a minute and see what you can figure out of this: At the reception, shortly before Bill and I left the room, Bill mentioned to Donna that he wanted to see you before he and Donna left. Donna suggested calling you, but Bill said he wanted to see you alone. He made a joke of it, but he looked worried. He said he would go back to the music room. He asked Donna to send you there. Maybe a dozen people heard this. Your uncle was in the group."

"And Andy Ballard?" Joan demanded. "Was he there?"

"Yes, but wait—let me finish. Bill didn't leave right away. Some of those standing near us did. There was time for someone to have gone to your room and picked up your knife. Bill finally broke away. He said he had to see you first. He asked me to come back. I took a walk, across the verandah and to the summer house. I smoked a cigarette, then came back. I found you in the room, bending over Bill's body."

"Andy Ballard!" declare Joan. "It was him!"

"Why?"

"Andy and Bill were both big men in the company. Andy was older and closer to my uncle, but—if Bill married Donna—Bill would move ahead of him."

"Maybe."

"There's more you should know, Ben. Andy has asked me twice

when we were alone what happened to the knife. He said he wanted to know so he could help me."

"That might be true."

"Not if he is the murderer. If Andy is the murderer he knows the knife was left in Bill's body. He doesn't know you came back to the room. The knife is gone. He is sure I must have hidden it. He wants to know where it is so he can help the police find it. If they find that knife they'll arrest me."

Ben's lips tightened.

"There is still another point,"

Joan went on. "Uncle Frank told me the doctor here was Andy's friend. Andy arranged to send me here. A little while ago an orderly slipped into the room and poured a powder in that glass of water, then tip-toed out. Ben, I've got to get away from here."

"And you are—now," said Ben. "Where're your clothes?"

"I don't know."

Ben crossed to the door, looked out into the hall, then quickly closed it. "Someone's coming," he whispered. "A man in a white coat. Maybe the orderly. When you hear his footsteps outside the door, call, 'Doctor! Doctor!' Get the idea?"

Joan nodded. She watched Ben move to where he would be hidden by the opening door. She listened, heard footsteps approaching, took a deep breath, and called, "Doctor! Doctor!"

The door opened and a figure she recognised stepped into the room. The man's eyes went immediately to the untouched glass of water on the bed-stand, then glanced at her.

"What is it, Miss Carter?" he asked.

Mobridge's clenched fist came down against the back of the man's head, just above the neck. It didn't seem to Joan to be a hard blow, but

the man in white wilted, dropping to the floor with scarcely a sound.

Ben closed the door. "It's trousers and a white coat for you, Jo," he said. "The shoes will be like boats on your feet. I'll have to carry you to the car."

The trousers would have gone around her twice, the coat was big. The shoes she wouldn't even consider. Ben lifted the orderly into her bed and tucked the covers around his chin.

"Sleep well, you lug!" he murmured.

Joan was waiting at the window. She had it open. Ben climbed outside, held up his arms and lifted her down.

"I can walk," Joan insisted.

"Barefoot and over this rough ground," grinned Ben. "Never!" He started out toward the road, carrying her, but he didn't look as though he enjoyed it. There was a terrible scowl on his face.

CHAPTER FIVE.

THEY drove back to San Francisco where Ben stopped near a restaurant and brought her a hamburger and coffee.

"I can't take you home," said Ben. "You'd either be arrested or sent back to the rest home we just left."

"What have you been doing with yourself?" Joan asked vaguely.

"Staying with a couple named Jim and Molly Morehead. It's a little cramped, but it might do. I'll 'phone them."

He made the call and when he returned, his scowl was back again.

"What's wrong?" Jean asked.

"Donna's in the hospital. Jim told me the report had just come over the radio on the latest news broadcast. Dr. Preston called to see her early this evening. He

found her stretched across her bed, unconscious. An empty box which had contained sleeping capsules was on the floor. The radio called it attempted suicide."

Joan bit her lips. "Donna wouldn't try to kill herself, Ben. There's not such a streak in her anywhere. It must have been attempted murder. It was like—well, it was like what almost happened to me at that rest home."

Mobridge was nodding as he slid under the wheel and started the car. "Someone," he said under his breath, "is on the make with murder. I think I know who it is."

* * *

It was foggy and cold. Joan slept late. When she awoke Jim Morehead and Ben were gone. She had breakfast in the kitchen while Molly ironed and kept up a steady chatter of conversation. The late news reports over the radio had said that Donna was in a serious condition.

"Ben is going to see Dr. Preston," Molly told her. "He said you were to wait here until he returned. They are hunting for you, by the way."

"For me?"

Molly nodded. "They say you wandered away from the rest home where you'd been placed. As they put it so neatly, fears are expressed as to your safety. "You look all right to me."

Joan was feeling much better, but it was hard to wait. Finally there was a 'phone call and Milly summoned her to take it.

"I've seen Dr. Preston," Ben said. "Donna is going to live. He has assured me of that."

Joan felt as though a great weight had slipped from her shoulders.

"I've learned several other interesting facts," Ben continued. "First of all, Dr. Preston agrees with us that Donna isn't the type to at-

tempt suicide. He says his visit to her yesterday afternoon was mostly accidental. And listen to this, Jo: Yesterday afternoon, Andy was out at your house to see your uncle. Before he left he went upstairs to see Donna. I learned that from your uncle over the 'phone."

It was Andy Ballard who had killed Bill Glascoe. Joan now was positive. He had meant to kill her. He had almost killed Donna.

"What are we going to do, Ben?"

"Does Molly have a dress you could borrow?"

"I have one of her dresses on now."

"Jo, would you be willing to take a chance to trap the killer?"

Joan's heart was beating faster. "What do you want me to do?"

"Borrow some money from Molly. Do you know where Andy lives?"

"He has an apartment not far from the Fairmont hotel. I know where it is."

"His apartment number is 608. Its name is the Ellender," said Ben. "And Ballard is there now. I want you to join him. When you get there, take the elevator to the sixth floor. Walk down the hall to his apartment, go inside, and wait for him there."

"But I thought you said he was home?"

"I'm going to take him out for a drink. I'll make sure the apartment is unlocked when we leave. When he comes back I want him to find you there. I'll not be far away. Can you make it by two-thirty?"

"Easily."

"And don't worry, Jo, no matter what happens."

"But what shall I do?"

"Just ask him to help you. Just be there. That's the important thing."

Joan hung up. She turned to

Molly and told her what Ben had said.

"Nothing ever happens to me," remarked Molly. "I wish I could take your place, or go with you. I'll 'phone for a taxi. You get ready."

And Joan was ready long before the taxi came. The thought of being alone with Andy even if Ben was near gave her shivers.

"Quit worrying," said Molly Morehead. "I can see you're upset. If Ben is on your side, you're foolish to worry. Jim and I know you can count on him."

Joan managed a smile. The taxi pulled up outside and she turned to the door.

Ben had said two-thirty, and at that time Joan's taxi pulled up in front of the Ellender apartments. She stepped out, paid the driver, then glanced about the street. The fog had lifted, but not much. No one she could see was paying any attention to her. Joan stepped inside the apartment house and walked to the automatic elevator.

She rode it to the sixth floor and, at 608, knocked. There was no answer. She turned the knob and pushed, the door opening easily. Joan stepped inside and closed it, moving toward the fireplace. Suddenly she stopped. The room wasn't empty.

On the floor, partially hidden by the davenport, was a man's figure—Andy Ballard's! He was lying on his stomach, almost in the same position as Bill Glascoe. The haft of a knife stood up between his shoulder blades. Her knife! The one which had been used to kill Bill Glascoe!

It was Mobridge who had taken the knife from Glascoe's body. He had sent her here. Joan remembered suddenly how Ben had struck down the rest home orderly—just

as someone had stepped from behind the door in the music room on the night Glascoe had been murdered. Why hadn't she seen it before? Ben Mobridge must be the murderer!

There was a sound behind her. Joan whirled around as the door had opened. The wily Wyatt stood there and with him were others. He moved toward her.

"You are under arrest, Miss Carter," he was saying. "Suppose we go down to headquarters."

CHAPTER SIX.

THE room to which they took Joan was large, and nicely furnished. Her chair was comfortable. Uncle Frank was seated near her. His face was haggard, grey, old. Arthur Henderson, her attorney, was talking in undertones to the district attorney. Now, he came toward her, scowling.

"They are going to question you, Miss Carter," he said slowly. "You don't have to answer any questions you don't wish to answer."

"She should be under the care of a physician," muttered Uncle Frank.

The district attorney walked back to his desk. He nodded to a stenographer at a stenotype machine. Captain Wyatt was here, and other policemen.

"Miss Carter," said the D.A. "I shall have to ask you some questions. If you can't answer we without incriminating yourself, remain silent or say, 'No answer,' Do you understand?"

"I understand," said Joan.

"Did you kill Mr. Glascoe?"

"No."

"Did you kill Mr. Ballard?"

"No."

"Is this your knife?"

The D.A. held up for view the one with the jewelled haft.

"It is mine," answered Joan.

"This knife," said the D.A., "has been the subject of a police search for two days. It fits the scabbard found in the shrubbery outside the music room of your home. It is of the type and length which killed William Glascoe. It was used, today, to kill Andrew Ballard. When did you last see it?"

Joan bit her lips and said, "No answer."

"Miss Carter, were you jealous of your sister?"

"No."

"Were you in love with William Glascoe?"

"No."

"Did Andrew Ballard know where you had hidden the knife?"

"I didn't hide it," said Joan.

"Where is Benjamin Mobridge?"

"I don't know."

"Miss Carter, why did you return to Mr. Ballard's apartment this afternoon?"

Joan shook her head. "I didn't."

"You were arrested there."

"But not when I returned. I was arrested on the occasion of my first visit."

The 'phone on the D.A.'s desk started ringing and was answered. He listened for a few moments, then nodded. "Send him in," he said.

The door opened and Mobridge entered. His glance circled the room, but rested only briefly on Joan.

"You might as well consider yourself under arrest," said the D.A.

Ben walked forward, noticed the knife on the desk and picked it up. "An interesting weapon, isn't it?" he remarked under his breath.

"Very," said the D.A. "I understand you gave it to Miss Carter."

"But I didn't," Ben answered.

He laid the knife back on the desk, reached into his pocket and drew out something wrapped in a

handkerchief. He unfolded the wrapping and held out another knife to the D.A. "This is the knife I gave Miss Carter," he said quietly. "The two are almost identical."

Others in the room gathered at the desk, Joan with them. Two knives lay on the green blotter pad. Both had jewelled hafts, but the knives were not identical. The gems didn't match.

Joan stared at them and looked up at Ben.

"This one," he said, "is the souvenir I gave Miss Joan Carter. It was used to kill Glascoe. I drew it from his body and have had it ever since. I didn't kill him, but I now know who did."

There wasn't a sound in the room.

"This other knife," Ben continued, "was made by a man in Chinatown on order for the—murderer—after I had assured him that the knife which was used on Glascoe had been tossed into the bay from Golden Gate bridge."

There still was silence in the room except for Ben's voice.

"At the time I said I had tossed the knife into the bay," he continued, "I didn't know the man I was talking to was the murderer. I was trying to reassure him. I didn't know the truth until I went to Ballard's apartment and found Andy dead. This second knife had been used to kill him."

"You can prove all this, of course?" said the D.A.

"I know the man who made the second knife," Ben answered. "I knew there were not many who could duplicate a knife from a drawing or a description, or who would keep silent about what they had done. I have one close friend in Chinatown—an artist. We located the knife maker and—the murderer."

The police, I'm sure, can dig up more supporting evidence."

A man standing near the desk swung away to race for the door. Wyatt caught him just as he got the door open. Joan didn't look; she knew who had fled. He had been standing next to her. A few moments before he had been holding her hand.

"Yes, it was Frank Sanderson, the girl's uncle," Ben was saying. "He is head of the Carter Machine Tool Company, but only until the girls marry, or reach the age of thirty, still single. Donna's marriage threatened his control, particularly because of Glascoe's job in the company. I think that Glascoe knew this and wanted to warn Joan to be careful when he asked to have her sent to the music room to see him. Bill was going to talk to me, too, after talking to Joan, because he knew of my interest in her. As it happened, he was killed before he could talk to either of us.

"Sanderson planned to pin the murder of Glascoe on Joan. Donna was married to Bill, even though Bill was dead. As a married woman she was a threat to him, so he tried to kill her, by doping her with sleeping capsules. He killed Ballard because Andy, who was pretty close to him, might see what he was driving at—start digging into the affairs of the machine tool company

and into Sanderson's movements, and you'll uncover all you need for a conviction."

Two men were now holding Joan's uncle. He made no denial. His shoulders slumped. Joan took one look at him, then looked away. She didn't want to remember him like this. In the old days, when she and Donna had been younger and his position of control hadn't been threatened, Uncle Fred had been wonderful to them.

"You've taken a lot into your hands, young man," the D.A. was saying to Mobridge. "I'll deal with all of it later."

Ben came over to Joan standing and said, "Forgive me for calling you down to where I knew you would be arrested. I had to do it. There wasn't any other way to bring this thing to a head."

His hands were on her shoulders, he was grinning, and it was comforting to lean against his chest.

"I didn't ever tell you," Ben whispered, "but it was never Donna I loved the most. I only helped her to make Bill jealous, then I stepped out of the picture. And I wasn't interested deeply in anyone until just the other day. Then I looked at you again. I'm going to be around for quite a while, Jo, if it's all right."

"It's all right," said Joan. "It's very much all right."

THE END.

If Danny could get out he'd have a fortune and someone to take the rap for the murder he had unintentionally committed. He'd covered himself that far when he planted the evidence.



The Case of the

DOUBLE-CROSSER

NOBODY saw Danny Blure enter the apartment house; he had darted into the alley and gone to the service entrance. By lucky chance, he found the service hall empty. He entered the elevator, closed the door, and punched the button for a stop at

the fourth floor. Danny's bachelor suite was on the fifth.

He would have had a story ready, if seen, but it was better that he did not have to use it. When he got his bag packed now, he could go down in the service elevator; if he met the janitor Danny would toss off a remark about wanting to cut through the alley because he was in a hurry.

The janitor would not think the move unusual. Danny Blure had been a tenant for more than three years, had always paid rent on time, and tipped generously. The janitor would not think he was skipping with a few clothes and leaving an unpaid bill.

But that was what he would be doing—skipping. Not from an unpaid rent bill. He would be skipping from the menace of violent death which now hovered over him and seemed to press him down with an overpowering weight.

The elevator stopped at the floor. Danny tried to compose himself before opening the door. He might encounter someone here, though this was an hour when the maids would have their regular tasks done and be gone. He took a deep breath in an effort to control his trembling, tried to wipe the set look of a man in terror out of his face.

Nobody was in the little service hall. Danny went quickly and almost silently up the rear stairs to the fifth floor. Nobody was there. He peered along the hallway at the door of his own apartment; he gave a sigh of relief when he saw the hallway was empty.

So far, he was safe. Now he would hurry into his apartment and lock the door. He would pack swiftly, get down in the service elevator, walk out of the apartment house—and disappear. It would be dusk when he emerged, the best

hour for safety.

Danny got his door key out of his pocket to have it ready, for he did not want to linger in the hallway a second more than necessary; one of Fox Agnew's killers might spot him. One of those hopped-up cold-blooded, inhuman trigger-men might sneer at him and begin emptying an automatic into his body.

His hands were clammy as he hurried along the corridor. He was licking at lips dried by the heat of terror. Like a wild animal, Danny flinched at the slightest sound that might warn of danger.

WHY had he done it? Why had he tried to go it alone? He might have known that Fox and the gang would suspect him some day, prove his guilt to their satisfaction, give him a facetious warning, then blast life out of his body.

He didn't believe Fox Agnew knew of the little apartment he had here; Danny had two homes. One was in an apartment house in another section of the city, a place where men and women came and went much as they pleased. This one was an ultra-respectable place; it was the address on the books of the firm for which Danny worked.

In both places he was known as a salesman of women's expensive lingerie, which he was, really. Danny worked under his own name. His commissions gave him a splendid living, for the goods he sold were fashionable, exclusive fine merchandise at high prices. His clientele was composed of young women of fashion and social position and wealth and older women with wealth enough to ape the younger women's ways. And the firm for which he worked was an importing company of high integrity.

Danny called on these women by

request, after their interest had been solicited by the firm itself. He was tall, and women called him handsome. He had a low, well-modulated voice that aroused thoughts of romance in women; they bought double when Danny Blure showed them his samples.

They did not know, nor did his firm, that Blure had a side-line which netted him far more than his honest commissions, and which, for obvious reasons, was not revealed on his income tax report.

Two years before, he had made the acquaintance of Fox Agnew, believing it accidental and not knowing it had been contrived cleverly by Fox. Agnew and his boys were well known to the police; occasionally one of his boys was caught wrong, and even Fox's expensive mouth-piece could not save him. But Fox himself always escaped; the police knew, but could not prove.

Danny Blure's acquaintance with Fox had resulted in a deal. Danny wanted money, and plenty of it. He worked in an atmosphere of wealth, and the odour of it was in his nostrils. These wealthy women to whom he sold lingerie . . . women with fortunes in jewels, perfume at a dollar a drop, with gowns and hats bearing Paris labels, silly women tossing money around! Their men with club memberships and yachts and seats on the Exchange! Why should they have so much and Blure so little?

Fox Agnew had whispered to him how he could get an abundance of money easily, and without danger to himself. He had only to keep his eyes open in the houses and apartments he visited on business. He had only to report certain things to Fox—where jewels were kept; how rooms were arranged; the number

and habits of servants—things like that.

Fox had his working gang, both men and women, and they would do the rest. They would follow up Danny's relayed information by making a raid. Sometimes it would be only a passkey job, and at other times a party stickup. And Danny would get his percentage in a way that would not incriminate him.

So Danny Blure became associated with the Fox Agnew gang.

IT had paid him well from the start. He kept his criminal side-line independent of his regular business. He continued to turn in more orders and build up his legitimate commissions. The more places of wealth to which he gained an entree, the more valuable information he had to send to Agnew.

But Danny Blure was of the never-satisfied type. Why take a small percentage when he could get it all? He had decided that in some cases the danger would be small; he wouldn't try to sever relations with Fox Agnew, for that would invite suspicion and possibly disaster. But he could go it alone occasionally, take on another side-line.

In a clever hiding place in this bachelor suite of his in a respectable building, he had all the money Agnew had given him. Danny had not spent or flashed it; he had sense enough to live well within his legitimate income, so any investigation—if it ever came to that—would reveal nothing suspicious.

He wanted to amass a big stake, so he could go away to some place where he was not known and live like a young prince for a time. He had a vision of marrying some rich woman and having it easy the remainder of his life.

Fox Agnew, Blure felt sure, was

a man who could not be fooled long; Fox would consider any outside moves to be rank treason, and would send his boys to exact a terrible punishment. So there remained for Danny the necessity for making one big haul. He decided he would work toward that end, would put the loot into his hiding place with the money Agnew had given him from time to time, and which he had not banked—remembering the income tax report.

Then, he would go on as usual for a time, and finally disappear, market his loot, and travel. He would be smart.

Without doubt, the police were continually watching Fox and his associates. They might possibly have the idea that the Agnew gang was responsible for a wave of jewel thefts and party hold-ups. As a farewell gesture, then, Danny would pin his crime on one of the Agnew gang, and keep himself in the clear.

He had contacted Fox Agnew only by telephone since their deal, and his percentages had been delivered to him in cash, small bills, by a clever method. There was nothing to link him to the gang.

THE go-between Fox had contact him at times met Danny in a cafe. The go-between was nervous, and as they talked and the money was slipped to Danny, the nervous go-between pared his nails with a little gold knife.

When they parted, the go-between was careless enough to leave the knife on the table. Danny had been watching for such a chance; he picked the knife up carefully with his handkerchief and put it into his pocket.

Now he was all set for the big knock-off. He had spotted his prospective victim. She was a Mrs. Ma-

tilda Doring, a silly old woman who lived with a gadding niece, who left jewels scattered around, who ogled him and sent for him repeatedly.

Danny had been in the apartment so much that he knew it as well as the servants, who were two maids. He knew the servants' day off duty. And he knew that Mrs. Doring was half wrecked by arthritis and had cancelled all social engagements while under medical treatment.

The right moment came. The niece was away for the week-end; Mrs. Doring would be alone on her servants' night off. Danny knew how to get into the apartment with small risk of being seen.

He had clothing he had purchased at a second-hand store, the sort he never wore. He had a close-fitting reddish wig which would show beneath the brim of his hat. He had a thick handkerchief made into a mask, with small holes for the eyes.

It had not been difficult to get to the door of her apartment and ring without being seen. As Mrs. Doring came slowly to the door, shuffling like a half-crippled person, Blure slipped the mask up over his face. When she pulled the door open, she saw the masked man holding a gun that menaced her.

Danny was inside and had a hand clapped over her mouth before she could scream. He kicked the door shut behind him and heard the latch-lock snap into place. He thrust Mrs. Doring into her chair and stood before her, his eyes blazing, using a voice not his natural own when he spoke: "Get me your jewels and money—quick! Hand 'em over to me, lady! You want to go on livin', don't you?"

Trembling and on the verge of collapse, Mrs. Doring opened a wall safe in her bedchamber and let Danny help himself to jewels and

money. He thrust the loot into a coat pocket and ordered Mrs. Doring back into the living room of the apartment.

It had been easy, he was thinking; now he had only to get out of the place and away without being seen. The apartment was on the second floor on the side of the building. Danny had come up a fire escape that extended entirely to the ground, and from the fire escape had walked into the hall and to the apartment's front door. He would leave by the same route.

He compelled Mrs. Doring to sit in the chair again. "I'll have to tie and gag you, ma'am," Danny told her, in the false voice he was using.

That frightened her more than what had happened already. Her voice was raised in alarmed protest: "No—not that——!"

The sound of her shrill voice brought terror to Danny. In a frenzy of fear at discovery, he struck once with the gun to silence her, struck her on the side of the head. Mrs. Doring toppled off the chair to the floor and sprawled.

Danny whirled toward the door, listened there a moment, heard no sound in the hall. He stepped back and took the gold knife from his pocket and shook it out of the protecting handkerchief. The fingerprints on it would give the police a lead in the wrong direction, he thought.

He opened the door cautiously and saw the hallway empty. Removing his mask, he closed the door and hurried to the fire escape and went down it rapidly. In a few minutes he was in the clear, a distance down the street.

THE following morning, he went to work as usual, his nerves quiet again. He got his samples and

a list of prospects the firm furnished him, and started out. At a corner news stand, he bought a late edition of a morning paper and scanned it rapidly as a taxi carried him toward his first customer of the day.

Terror struck him again. He read how Mrs. Matilda Doring had been found dead by one of the maids. She had been killed by a blow on her head, the report said; the wall safe in her bedchamber was open and empty of jewels and money.

Fear began leaving him. His pockets were stuffed with loot, but he felt sure that Mrs. Doring had not recognised him. The unusual clothes, the false voice and wig, had protected him; now, all Blure had to do was get home and store his loot in the secret hiding place.

Danny Blure had a sudden attack of nausea. He made a fight to control himself. He feared the taxi driver might glance in the rear-vision mirror and see the guilt in his face. He tossed the newspaper aside as if it had been something impregnated with poison.

"Changed my mind—stop at the next corner," he told the driver.

The taxi turned in to the curb. Danny's hand was shaking as he paid his fare and mumbled something about forgetting to attend to an important telephone call. He picked up his sample case and walked swiftly along a side street.

In a small secluded cafe he sat at a table and ordered a drink, and got out his prospect list and pretended to be studying it. He wanted time to think, to control his attack of nervousness. He was a killer! He had struck the old lady too hard; theft was bad enough, but now he was a killer!

He remembered the knife he had dropped. The owner of that knife

had a police record, and his fingerprints were on file. It wouldn't take the police long to pick him up. He would be blamed for robbery and not Danny Blure. If the man had even a legitimate alibi, the police would scoff and say it had been arranged in advance.

He, Danny Blure, had nothing to fear. The loot was well hidden. He would wait for a time, and then quit his job, and disappear as he had planned.

Danny knew he was in no condition to visit prospective customers and take orders. He couldn't keep his mind on his work; he wouldn't be able to exert upon women customers the charm that brought him success. So he would simply kill the day somewhere, he decided, and return to the office, with no sales to report, as happened occasionally.

WHEN he did return to the office in the evening, he found on his desk an office note to call a number he did not know. Danny called it. But it was not the voice of some woman eager to buy lingerie that came to him over the wire.

It was the stern voice of Fox Agnew saying, "Listen, Danny! You had to do a double-cross on me, did you? Not satisfied with your percentage. Had to try it alone—"

"Wh—what—?" Danny stammered.

"Listen to me carefully, Danny. The cops picked up one of my boys. My mouthpiece has talked to him. He's facing a murder rap, Danny—facing the hot seat. You did that; he's a good boy—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Danny broke in.

"Cut that kind of chatter, you punk! That knife you planted—my boy remembered he had left it on the cafe table when he parted from

you. And we've been watching you. Danny We've been a little suspicious of you."

"But I—I don't know—"

"Keep your ears open and your mouth shut, Danny. My boys are after you now; you're going to get it, punk! You don't know when or where, but you'll get it. Maybe you'll see a gun muzzle, and angry eyes above it, and that's the last you'll ever see."

With a trembling hand, Danny replaced the 'phone on its cradle as the connection was broken. He was thankful nobody was near to see him, for he knew his face revealed his terror. He got out of the office and the building, glancing behind often, like a fugitive.

There was but one thing for him to do now—get home, get the loot, get out of town and keep going. He could market the jewels some time in the future; he had plenty of cash to pay travelling expenses.

SO here he was safely at home, without having been seen entering. He listened at the door of his suite as he fumbled with his key. Not the least sound came from inside. Perhaps Agnew did not know of Blure's apartment in this respectable house; perhaps Fox's gunmen were watching the other place.

Danny unlocked the door and pulled it open, glanced through the entry hall quickly, closed the door again and stepped into his living room.

"Freeze!" a low stern voice ordered.

Danny's eyes focussed on the muzzle of a gun which seemed to approach him and grow larger in size. A touch of light glinted from it. Danny's body seemed suddenly ossified by shock, his mind to stand still in its thinking.

He couldn't take his eyes from the gun muzzle. He expected to see a spurt of flame and gas through which a slug of metal would be hurled to tear the life from his body. He drew in his breath in a sharp sob.

He raised his eyes slowly, taking his sight away from the gun muzzle. He looked into another pair of eyes that glittered blackly from beneath lids almost closed—the eyes of a killer. One of Agnew's boys, he thought. Then, Fox must have known of his apartment here.

"You—you——" Danny mouthed.

"Take it easy, and be quiet!" the man who held the gun cautioned. "You walked in one me, chum; this is a stick-up."

"Stick-up——?" Danny acted like a man who did not quite understand.

"That's right. I came in with my little passkey and went through your place, and I didn't find much. Years ago, gents had jewellery, but now they don't use it so much. It's tough for a man in my line. So I'll have to go through you and see if I can find a wallet. Face the wall, chum, and get your hands up."

Danny was shocked by bewilderment, scarcely capable of thought and action. Only a passkey thief, and he had believed this visitor to be one of Fox Agnew's boys. Then he had a quick suspicion that the man really was one of Fox's gang, and that he would shoot as soon as Danny turned his back.

"No—no——" Danny muttered.

"Flatten against that wall, chum?"

DANNY reeled back against the wall, suddenly weak. He put up his hands, clammy palms trembling as he pressed them against the wall's surface. He felt the other man's hands exploring his body. His

wallet was taken, also the gun he wore in a shoulder holster.

"So you're packin' a rod," the man said.

"I—I'm a salesman—got a permit."

"That's all right with me, chum. Wish I had a permit." He tossed Danny's gun into a corner of the room and made Danny turn and walk to a chair and sit. Standing a few feet away, he leafed through Danny's wallet and extracted some currency.

"This haul isn't paying me for my trouble," he complained. "Let's go into your bedroom now. I'll have to tie you up so I can make a get-away; you've seen my face, and could identify me. But I'm no killer."

Danny was compelled to go into the bedroom. He was forced to stretch out on his face while the passkey thief took off Danny's belt and fastened his wrists behind his back with it. Then he turned Danny over and gagged him with a handkerchief. And finally he lashed Danny's legs from feet to knees with strips from a sheet taken from the bed, and tied his ankles to the bed posts.

"That'll keep you quiet and busy long enough for me to get away," the passkey thief said. "Sorry, chum, but it's your fault for walking in on me as you did."

He left the bedroom, and Danny heard the hall door opened and closed. Stretched there, he realised that his body was bathed in cold sweat. A surge of relief came to him, and his terror left him.

Danny was still safe. Now he could get his loot from the hiding place, pack a bag quickly, get away. Agnew might have his boys watching the airport, so he wouldn't try to take a plane; Blure decided to go to the edge of the city and catch a

bus going in any direction, and travel until he could make a long hop by train or plane.

The passkey thief had been careless fastening his victim's wrists with the belt, for Danny found he could reach the buckle with his fingers. It was difficult to get the buckle unfastened, but he accomplished it. He tossed the belt aside, sat up on the bed and got his legs and feet free, reeled out upon the floor.

He put on his belt, went to a small table in a corner of the bedroom and poured himself a stiff drink and downed it. Then he hurried into the living room and went to the door to make sure the latch had snapped and the door was locked.

Back in the bedroom, it took him only a moment to go get a travelling bag from a shelf in a closet. He opened dresser drawers and grabbed a few articles of clothing, hurried into the bathroom for shaving and toilet articles, and tossed them into the bag.

Now it was time to get the loot from its hiding place. He would have to work swiftly, he was thinking. Dusk would be coming in an hour, and he wanted to leave during the gathering night.

He returned to the bathroom. With a razor blade, he chipped around two of the tiles high in the wall, where the cement had been removed and soft putty substituted. He took out the tiles carefully and disclosed an aperture behind water pipes, and from this he took several packages of currency and the jewels he had removed from Mrs. Matilda Doring's wall safe.

Working swiftly, he carried money and jewels into the bedroom and put the loot in the bottom of his bag beneath the clothing. He had no

time to hide it better. To get away quickly was the thing now, before one of Fox Agnew's boys faced him with automatic in hand.

He snapped the bag shut and started to turn toward the door of the living room.

"Freeze!" a voice said, for the second time since he had entered the apartment.

DANNY whirled, terror clutching at him again. It had been a woman's voice. She was standing in the doorway, a well-dressed blonde whose age he guessed at about thirty. And the gun she held looked as formidable to Danny Blure as the one he had seen in the hand of the passkey thief.

"Step right into the living room," she ordered. "And remember I can shoot."

Danny gulped as he looked at her, obeyed as if the legs which carried him were not his own. He went into the living room and backed against the wall at her gestured order. "I'm glad to get out of that closet in your entry hall," she told Danny. "It's hot and stuffy in there."

"Who are you? What do you want here?" he asked.

Fear came to him again. This was it! Agnew had plenty of women in his mob, hard-hearted molls who knew how to shoot. Perhaps Fox had sent this woman; maybe she was the sweetheart of the man who owned the knife, and had asked to be sent so she could have her revenge.

"Thanks for digging out all those jewels and that money for me," she told Danny. "I was here when that passkey worker came, and had to hide in the closet. I saw him ransack the place and get nothing. I was only waiting for him to leave

so I could get busy myself. Women are generally better searchers than men."

"You're a passkey worker, too?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "The stuff you got from behind the tiles in the bathroom is what I hoped to find. I'm Magda Renton, a policewoman."

"A policewoman—you? You don't look like a female cop to me," Danny told her. "Let's get right down to business talk. Gorgeous. Maybe we can make a deal of some sort. You interest me."

"You don't interest me, except as a crook, and your well-known charm isn't working to-day as far as I'm concerned," She informed him. "Don't make a move to get your gun where the passkey man tossed it into the corner! I didn't have time to pick it up myself. Make a move toward it, and 'Ill blast you down!" Her eyes were glittering now. "I was in the W.A.C. during the war, and learned to shoot. If further information is needed, let me relate that I hold the women's championship for the police pistol range."

"But—I don't understand——" Danny gulped.

SHE spoke as if discussing an ordinary event of minor interest. "Oh, it's quite simple. The Doring affair, you know. The police have had eyes on you for some time; they learned that jewel robberies followed in your wake. They witnessed some of your contacts. We had everything we need except the loot from the Doring job, to pin this murder on you. Now we have that

—thanks to you for digging it out for me."

"It's a lie!" Danny stormed. "What's your game. You're no lady cop. If so, why'd they send you here?"

"A lady cop is a little more gentle when it comes to searching than a rough copper," she explained. "I was to search your place, and if I found nothing, leave everything shipshape so you'd not suspect we'd been prying. In that case, we'd have kept on watching you. Sergeant Doyle is downstairs; he was to 'phone up and warn me if you came in. So you must have slipped in the back way—more evidence of guilt, though we'd not need it now. And that cheap passkey thief—I got a good look at him, and he'll be picked up. I'll get a pat on the back for this day's work."

Terror had seized Danny Blure with a terrible grip this time. He could not reach his gun in the corner; and he sensed she would surely shoot him if he made a hostile move. Terror of death was upon him—not from the muzzle of a gun held by one of Fox Agnew's boys, but death in the electric chair.

Watching him carefully, holding the gun ready for quick use if he made a move, she stepped to the 'phone and spoke to the switchboard below: "Please tell Sergeant Doyle to hurry up here. I've got Danny Blure and the loot from the Doring job."

Sagging against the wall, all strength drained from him, watching her as she watched him with keen eyes, Danny waited.

THE END.



A BLUE DIAMOND BOOK