

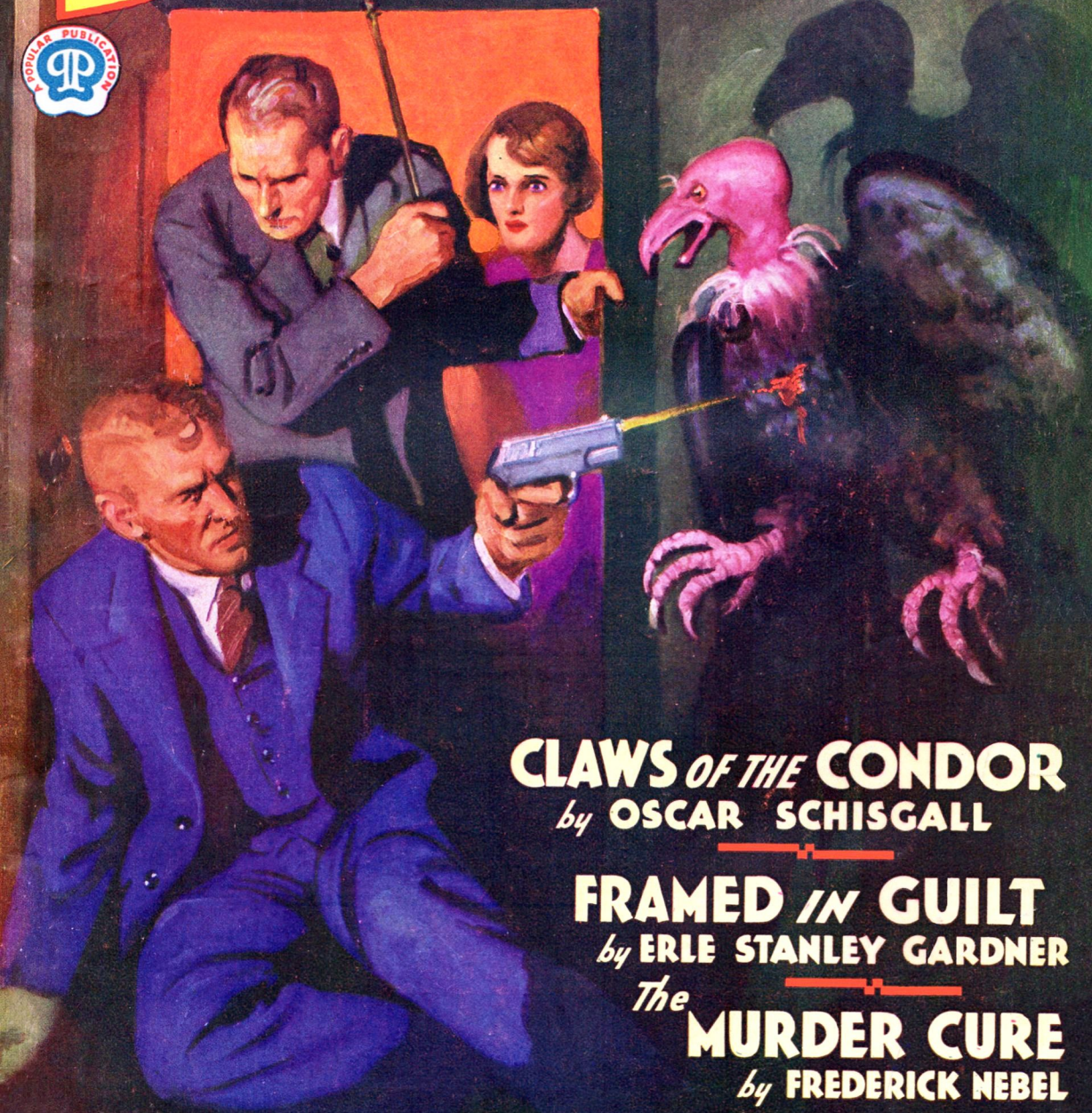
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DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



CLAWS OF THE CONDOR

by OSCAR SCHISGALL

FRAMED IN GUILT

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

The

MURDER CURE

by FREDERICK NEBEL

Send a Name

FOR THE TWINS!



You Will Get \$350.00

for the name you send, should it, in the judges' opinion, be the one best suited to these twin babies. Write the name you suggest plainly on the coupon, any piece of paper, or on a postcard, with your own name and address. Use pencil or pen. Style, handwriting or neatness do not count. It is the name you suggest that will be judged. Think of the best name you can and mail it at once.

BE PROMPT! I Will Send You a \$100.00 Cash Certificate At Once!

Send your name for the Twins promptly—to make it worth while to act at once, if your answer is postmarked not later than three days after you read this announcement, I will send you a certificate entitling you to \$100.00 extra in cash, should the judges award you the \$350.00 prize for naming the Twins.

\$350.00

CASH WILL BE PAID JUST FOR A NAME!!!

I want the best name I can find for these beautiful, charming TWIN babies. Look at the two lovely, little, happy faces and think of a good name for them—the most suitable name you can imagine. Youngsters like these deserve the best, and I will pay \$350.00 cash for the most appropriate suggestion. What would you call them? You may be thinking of a winning answer this very minute. Send the best name you know for these handsome twins. It may put \$350.00 cash in your pocket. There is NOTHING MORE TO DO—nothing at all.

Name the Twins THAT'S ALL! Send a name—any name that you think is a good one. Look at the Twins' pictures and pick out a name you like. It may be a name for each baby, such as "Bob and Betty", or a descriptive name, such as "Two Darlings", or a catchy one like "Two of a Kind". Now, think! The first one that comes into your mind may bring you \$350.00 cash. So—think fast, then mail your suggestion TODAY.

Send Your Answer Promptly and You Will Also Qualify for the Opportunity to
WIN \$3750.00 CASH OR A BUICK SEDAN AND \$2500.00 CASH

FREE ASTROLOGY READING

from your birth date

What do the stars say? I will send you a FREE scientific reading of what the stars predict for you if you fill in your birthday date on the coupon when you send a name for the Twins. You will find this forecast interesting and inspiring in planning for the future, and it may help bring success under the guidance of Your Lucky Stars. Amazing reading sent Free. Mail coupon!

This huge prize is entirely separate from the \$350.00 cash offered above. Just sending a name for the Twins will qualify you in a wonderful offer where I will give a cash prize of \$3750.00. You may win \$350.00 just for sending a name, and you might as well win \$3750.00 more as well, when the opportunity is yours. NAME THE TWINS! A couple of minutes of quick thinking may bring \$350.00 to you. Think—ACT—then rush your answer. Do it today—NOW—at once! \$100.00 cash paid extra for being prompt!

Read the Simple Rules

Only one name may be submitted by one person. Only one member of a family may send a name. \$350.00 cash paid for the name selected by the judges as the best. Answers must be postmarked not later than February 28, 1933. Duplicate prizes will be awarded in case of ties. SEND NO MONEY—just your answer.

DIANA DALE PRODUCTS
Dept. 13 Rock Island, Ill.

SEND COUPON TODAY

DIANA DALE PRODUCTS, Dept. 13
Rock Island, Ill.

This is my suggestion for a name:

Name.....

Address.....

Town.....

My birth date is.....

Date I read your offer.....

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It Shows How Easy it is
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Radio Job

*Here's
Proof*



**Made \$10,000 More
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West Orange, N. J.



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\$35.00
to \$106.00 a Week**

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J. A. VAUGHN,
Grand Radio & App. Co.,
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St. Louis, Mo.



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6 Months**

"In looking over my records I find I made \$500 in my spare time in six months. My best week brought me \$107. I have only one regret regarding your course—I should have taken it long ago."

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Indianapolis, Ind.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I'm so sure I can train you at home in your spare time for a big pay job in Radio that I'll send you my first lesson free. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand. Then you will know why many men with less than a grammar school education and no technical experience have become Radio Experts and are earning two to three times their former pay as a result of my training.

**Many Radio Experts Make
\$50 to \$100 a Week**

In about ten years the Radio Industry has grown from \$2,000,000 to hundreds of millions of dollars. Over 300,000 jobs have been created by this growth, and thousands more will be created by its continued development. Many men and young men with the right training—the kind of training I give you in the N.R.I. course—have stepped into Radio at two and three times their former salaries.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Broadcasting stations use engineers, operators, station managers, and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Manufacturers continually employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, service men, buyers, for jobs paying up to \$6,000 a year. Radio Operators on ships enjoy life, see the world, with board and lodging free, and get good pay besides. Dealers and jobbers employ service men, salesmen, buyers, managers, and pay up to \$100 a week. My book tells you about these and many other kinds of interesting Radio Jobs.

**Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra
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The day you enroll with me I send you material which you should master quickly for doing 28 Radio Jobs common in most every neighborhood for spare-time money. Throughout your course I send you information for servicing popular makes of sets! I give you the plans and ideas that have made \$200 to \$1,000 a year for N.R.I. men in their spare time. My course is famous as the course that pays for itself.

**Television, Short Wave, Talking Movies,
Money Back Agreement Included**

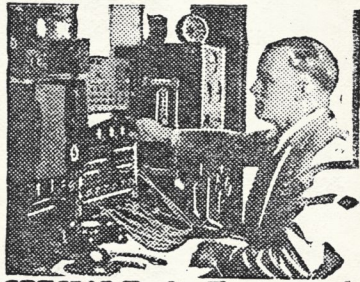
Special training in Talking Movies, Television, and Home Television experiments, Short Wave Radio, Radio's use in Aviation, Servicing and Merchandising Sets, Broadcasting, Commercial and Ship Stations are included. I am so sure that N.R.I. can train you satisfactorily that I will agree in writing to refund every penny of your tuition if you are not satisfied with my Lesson and Instruction Service upon completion.

You Don't Risk a Penny

Mail the coupon now. In addition to the sample lesson, I send my book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It tells you where the good jobs are in Radio, what they pay, tells you about my course, what others who have taken it are doing and making. This offer is free to all residents of the United States and Canada over 15 years old. Find out what Radio offers you without the slightest obligation. **ACT NOW!**

J. E. Smith, President

National Radio Institute, Dept. 3AK7, Washington, D. C.



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My Course is not all theory. I'll show you how to use my special Radio Equipment for conducting experiments and building circuits which illustrate important principles used in such well known sets as Westinghouse, General Electric, Philco, R. C. A. Victor, Majestic, and others. You work out with your own hands many of the things you read in our lesson books. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home easy, interesting, fascinating,

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**I have doubled
and tripled the
salaries of many.
Find out about
this tested way
to BIGGER
PAY**



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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 3AK7
Washington, D. C.

I want to take advantage of your offer. Send me your Free Sample Lesson and your book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." I understand this request does not obligate me.

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The Famous Course That Pays For Itself

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EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 4

CONTENTS for JANUARY, 1933

No. 3

THRILLING MYSTERY-ACTION NOVELETTE

Draw back in fear from the

- Claws of the Condor**.....Oscar Schisgall 8
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GRIPPING STORY OF A REWARD MASTER AND THE LAW

Coppers and canvases can both be

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TWO TENSE NOVEL-LENGTH DETECTIVE TALES

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- The Murder Cure**—A Cardigan Story.....Frederick Nebel 60
With that big dick from the Cosmos Agency and watch him prescribe lead pills for a killer.

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And broadcasts through a murder microphone over Station KXXY.

COMPLETE MYSTERY-HORROR NOVELETTE

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Now read how well we know

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To keep this ace of all detective-story magazines at the top—and what we're going to do about it!

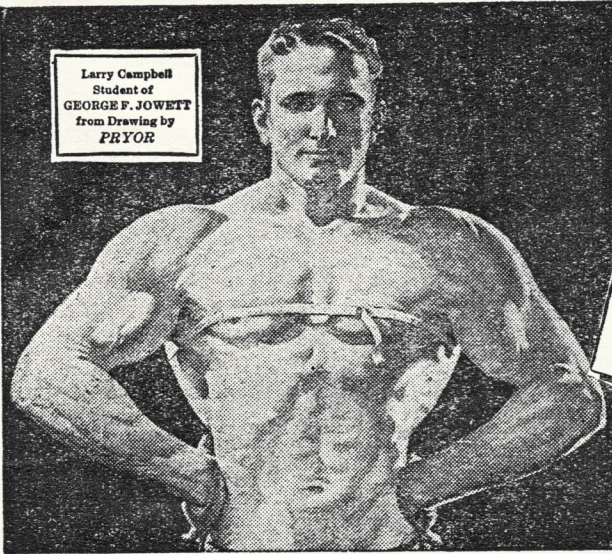
- Cover**—"He Crouched—Blazing Revolver in Hand"William Reusswig
From "Claws of the Condor."

Watch for the February Issue

On the Newsstands January 7th

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Larry Campbell
Student of
GEORGE F. JOWETT
from Drawing by
PRYOR



"I have added
7 inches to my chest
4 inches to my biceps
5 inches to my neck
... by using the
Jowett System of
Physical Training"
Larry Campbell

Larry Campbell came to George Jowett for help when he was 20 years old and weighed only 110 pounds—a weak, underdeveloped stripling. TODAY he is a perfect physical specimen—a strong man who has won many strength competitions.

"I Guarantee To Add At Least...

3 INCHES TO YOUR CHEST **2 INCHES TO YOUR BICEPS**

... or it won't cost you one cent! Signed: GEORGE F. JOWETT

WHAT I did for Larry Campbell—I am sure I can do for you! I wish you could see Larry in action today—a perfect example of my weight resistance method—the only method that gives the true weight lifting muscles. I've seen Larry lift more than 225 pounds overhead with one hand—and Larry is only one of hundreds of my pupils who have excelled as strength athletes.

I want to tell you fellows—there's something about this "strong man's business" that gets you—*thrills* you! You'll get a great kick out of it—you'll fairly see your muscles grow—and in no time at all, you too will be doing the one-arm-press with a 150 pound weight!

All I want is a chance to prove to you that I can add 3 inches to YOUR chest and 2 inches to each of YOUR biceps. Those skinny fellows that are discouraged are the men I want to work with. I'll build a strong man's body for them and do it quickly. And I don't mean cream-puff muscles either—you will get real, genuine, invincible muscles that will make your men friends respect you and women admire you!

Test my full course, if it does not do all I say—and I will let you be the judge—then it won't cost you one penny, even the postage you have spent will be refunded to you.

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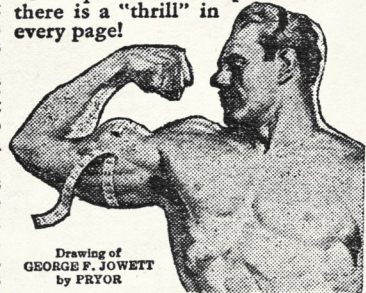
I will not limit you to the chest. I can develop any part or all of your body. Try any one of my test courses listed in the coupon at 25c. Or, try all six of them for only \$1.00.

Rush the Coupon Today

Mail your order now and I will include a FREE COPY of "NERVES OF STEEL, MUSCLES LIKE IRON". It is a priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. Full of pictures of marvelous bodied men who tell you decisively how you can build symmetry and strength the equal of theirs. Reach out—Grasp This Special Offer.

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His free book is included with your order. It describes his rise from a puny boy to one of the world's strongest athletes with a chest measure of 49 inches and an 18 inch bicep! His book explains why he is called "Champion of Champions"—and there is a "thrill" in every page!



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Include FREE Book "Nerves of Steel, Muscles Like Iron"

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Address _____

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**GYRO
Works
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Water
Pressure**

The Gyro Brush harnesses the terrific power of water pressure. Water from an ordinary garden hose runs through the handle of the Gyro, and revolves the center brush at a speed of more than 1,000 revolutions per minute. This powerful revolving brush INSTANTLY removes all dirt, mud and the dreaded "traffic film." It cleans cars SPOTLESSLY CLEAN. Yet it is guaranteed never to mar or scratch the finest surface. Can be used on any finish—Duo, lacquer, etc. Soft, velvety outside brush prevents the water from splashing or dripping, and acts as a chamois and cleaner in one. Gyro not only washes, cleans and polishes, but it prolongs and beautifies the car finish as well.

WASHES-CLEANS-POLISHES *in one operation!*

NOW—A NEW WAY TO WASH CARS. Gyro Turbine Brush—the sensational new invention—*actually makes car washing a pleasure!* Saves time, labor and money. Eliminates chamois, soap, and spray. No more scrubbing and heaving. No more messy, bothersome, hard labor. Gyro cleans cars without hard physical effort in less than 15 minutes easy, pleasant work.

No wonder agents are finding this new device a whirlwind seller. Autoists, garages, gas stations, auto laundries, fleet owners, service stations, etc., buy on sight. More than ever auto owners are saving money and washing their own cars—that's why Gyro agents are steadily increasing their profits.

A Tremendous Market!

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Here's a real seller. Profits assured by unique demonstration features and scientific selling plans. Exceptionally large earnings reported by agents everywhere. *Big profit margin on every sale.* Only 10 brushes a day will net you \$17.50—\$105.00 clear profit for a six-day week. *Desirable territories still open.*

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**GYRO BRUSH CO., Dept. J-61,
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Rush special proposition and complete details of your money making opportunity FREE. Also reserve territory for me.

Name

P. O. Address.....

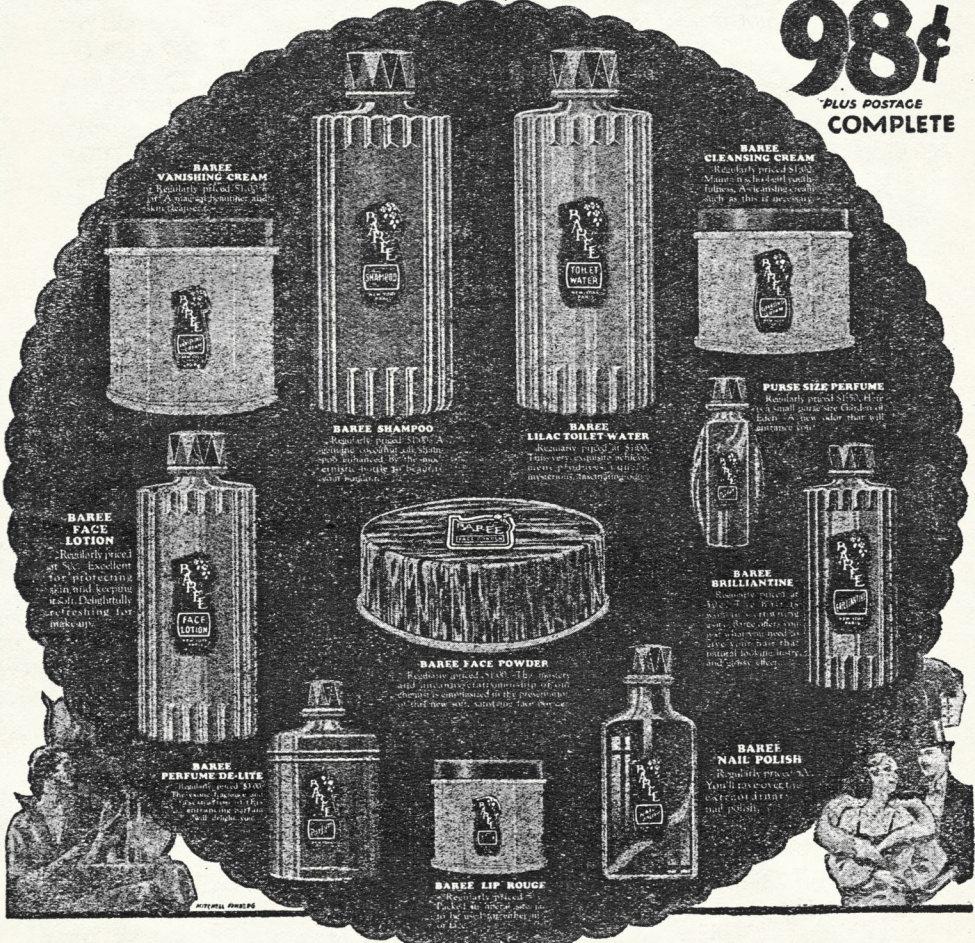
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Canadian Agents write to Gyro Brush Co., of Canada, 110 Dundas St., London, Ont., Canada

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City.....State.....

Shade of Face Powder.....
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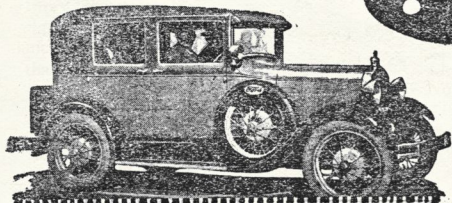
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NAME

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TOWN..... STATE.....

Give me your measure and I'll PROVE You Can Have a Body like Mine!

I'll give you PROOF in 7 DAYS that I can turn you, too, into a man of might and muscle. Let me prove that I can put layers of smooth, supple, powerful muscles all over your body.

If you are underweight I'll add the pounds where they are needed and, if you are fat in any spots, I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

And with the big muscles and powerful, evenly-developed body that my method so quickly gives you, I'll also give you through-and-through health—health that digs down into your system and banishes such things as constipation, pimples, skin blotches and the hundred-and-one like conditions that rob you of the good times and the good things of life.

Here's All You Do!

Just jot down your name and address on the coupon below, mail it to me—and I'll send you, absolutely free, a copy of my new book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound, flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same easy way.

I haven't any use for apparatus; I don't dose you or doctor you. Dynamic-Tension is all I need. It's the natural, tested method for developing real men inside and out. It distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over your body, gets rid of surplus fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep that win you the admiration of every woman and the respect of any man.

NOTE: No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED make such an offer!

Charles Atlas

Holder of the title:

"The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"—won in international contest against ALL strong men willing to compete with him.



Charles Atlas as He is Today.

Gamble a 2c Stamp—To Prove I Can Make YOU a New Man!

Gamble a 2c stamp today by mailing the coupon for a free copy of my book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It tells you all about my special Dynamic-Tension method, and what it has done to make big-muscled men out of run-down specimens. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique, by my own secret methods. What my system did for me, and these hundred of others it can do for you too. Don't keep on being only 25 or 50 percent of the man you can be! Find out what I can do for you.

Where shall I send your copy of "Everlasting Health and Strength"? Jot your name and address down on the coupon, and mail it today, CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 33-1, 133 East 23rd Street, New York City.



CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 33-1, 133 East 23rd Street, New York City.

I want the proof that your system of Dynamic-Tension will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City.....State.....

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Claws of the Condor

by
Oscar Schisgall

Author of "The Hooded Terror," etc.

McKane had come unscathed from the jungles of Brazil with his cargo of snarling beasts. Come only to be struck down in a welter of crimson on his own quiet hearthside. What terror talons had left their bloody mark? Or had some human bird of prey swooped to the kill?

CHAPTER ONE

The Beast King

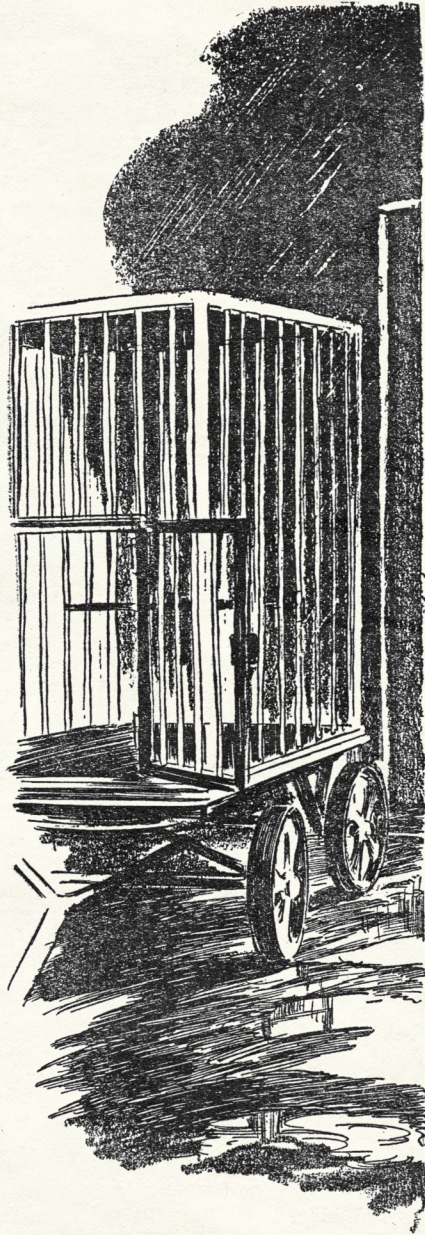
WHEN Charlie Codwell swung off the train at Parthenon, with a gladstone in his hand, he knew he was plunging into trouble. It was inevitable, and so he faced it stoically.

"After all," he had reasoned with his partner, Stacy Trent, that morning, "that's what we criminal lawyers are for. We're supposed to push our heads into other people's troubles, and to keep them out of jail."

"But this," the gray-haired Trent had assured him, "won't be a criminal case, Charlie."

"How do you know?"

"Jordan McKane has too much sense and money to become involved in any-



thing crooked. You know who he is, don't you?"

"Of course. Big-game hunter. I've seen him in the roto sections of the Sunday papers many—"

"Exactly. I've known him a good many years. You'll probably find he wants to



He cupped the tiny flame, tensely examined
the Brazilian.

discuss something pretty commonplace."

"Listen," Charlie had grunted, "Jordan McKane certainly didn't telephone for a criminal lawyer to travel ninety miles out of New York to talk about tiddle-de-winks."

Convinced of this, he felt prepared for drama when, at nine o'clock that night, he reached the village of Parthenon.

HE WAS the only passenger to leave the train. A heavy rain hammered through the darkness; it bubbled on the station platform like boiling water. And where Charlie alighted there was no shelter. He clutched his coat collar tightly around his throat and raced fifty yards for the protection of the station-shed. There he stopped, drenched and a little breathless, to look about for the man who was to meet him. Either Mr. McKane himself, Trent had said, or his chauffeur.

But peering along the length of the platform, Charlie Codwell could see nobody; that is, nobody gave the station agent, up near the baggage car—and a girl.

The girl, he noted with some astonishment, was hurriedly approaching him.

"Mr. Trent?" she asked quickly.

"Why, no. I'm Mr. Trent's partner, Charles Codwell."

"Oh!" Her sudden smile was like a flash of sunlight through the darkness and rain. She extended a gloved hand. "How do you do? I'm Claire McKane. Sorry dad couldn't make it himself in this weather—he's got a touch of the old jungle fever again. So I'm the reception committee."

"Proving," thought Charlie as he squeezed her hand, "that even jungle fever has its bright side."

Aloud, however, he said something much more restrained.

They hurried through the thrashing downpour to a low-slung, powerful coupé.

And his eyes, lively with surprise, told him that Claire McKane was as lovely a figure as he had ever beheld. She wore a belted green slicker, gleaming wet with rain, and a cleverly tilted green *bêret*. Moreover, she was slim and erect and had a most bewitching profile.

"Dad told me he was expecting Mr. Trent," she admitted as they drove away. "You certainly didn't resemble the tall, gray-haired man of fifty he described. But then, you were the only passenger, so I took a chance."

Charlie smiled. "Trent," he explained, "is overburdened with court work right now, and he asked me to run up in his place. I'm just the junior partner. Nobody ever notices whether I'm around or not, anyhow. But of course," he added more soberly, "if your father wanted to see Trent on a personal matter—"

"I can't tell you *what* it is!"

The peculiar emphasis of her words and the fact that she suddenly frowned caused Charlie Codwell to glance at the girl in perplexity. He saw her jam down the accelerator with grim recklessness. Her mouth hardened, and she drove fast—much too fast, he thought, for a night so wet and slippery. The tires hissed savagely as she followed a dark road curving endlessly among the black trees of a forest.

"You appear," he observed, "rather worried."

"I am! Worried and annoyed."

He waited expectantly; yet she drove fully a hundred yards before she added: "I'm not used to seeing dad as upset as he's been the past few days. Usually he tells me things. But this time he's worse than the Sphinx."

"His health, perhaps—"

"Oh, no! He's had this jungle fever on and off for eighteen years. It isn't anything very serious; troubles him for a few days, then vanishes. . . . No, it's

something else, Mr. Codwell. It's something I—I don't understand!"

He meditated over this in silence, remembering that Jordan McKane had solicited the advice of a criminal lawyer. And as they sped around a long curve, the girl said: "I thought you might know what it is."

"I?" he queried in surprise.

"Well, he must have explained it to you over the telephone." She darted a quick look at him. "Didn't he?"

"As a matter of fact," said Charlie, "your father spoke to Trent, not to me. And I don't think he told Trent anything. Simply insisted that one of us hurry up here to give him some advice. That's all I know, Miss McKane."

SHE was very clearly disappointed. He saw her teeth press into her lip, and for several minutes she drove without talking. They climbed a hill and started down its far side before, of a sudden, she tossed back her head and forced a smile.

"Oh," she decided, without much conviction, "let's not be moody about it! I'm sorry. I'm supposed to be playing the gay hostess, and look at me!"

"I am," Charlie assured her, "very closely."

She smiled more warmly. "So I've noticed. . . . Well, you'd better begin drawing a deep breath, Mr. Codwell. In a few minutes you'll find yourself in one of America's craziest households. I hope you don't mind sleeping with a jaguar's roars in your ears."

"Never tried it," he laughed. "Does it sound much like the subway?"

"We-ell, when all dad's animals decide to talk up at once, there's quite a din. You know, I suppose, that we have a complete menagerie—noise and smell included?"

"Trent told me about it," Charlie said.

"From what I gather, your father must be a remarkable man."

"He is!" Claire spoke with pride. "He's one of the few men in America who bring jungle beasts back alive. Eventually he sells them to zoos, of course. But dad likes to keep them on his estate for a month or two first, to study their habits. Primarily, you know, he's a naturalist. Right now he has a tremendous Brazilian collection under observation. He arrived with them three weeks ago. A couple of jaguars, a condor, a few peccaries, snakes, monkeys, scorpions—oh, everything!"

"Pardon me," said Charlie, "if I seem to shiver. Where does he keep these precious pets? I mean, am I apt to share the guest room with a scorpion?"

The girl laughed enchantingly. "Oh," she explained, "we have a special building for them behind the house. They're in individual cages. The only one who really lives with them is Milo."

"Milo?"

"Milo Sabatéo. He's a Brazilian half-breed—half Indian, I believe. But he certainly understands animals! Dad's had Milo for nine years."

Charlie Codwell, peering into the darkness ahead, began to perceive that whatever his interview with Jordan McKane might yield, it would assuredly produce a startling background. A menagerie of untamed jungle beasts, a Brazilian half-breed, and a celebrated animal hunter all gathered on an isolated estate some fifteen miles out of Parthenon. . . . He felt, almost, as though he were speeding into a land of unrealities. A land of nightmares. Its only promise of normality, so far, was this exquisite girl at his side.

He offered her a cigarette, which she refused; and then, as he lit his own, he ventured: "Your home must be overrun by sightseers. I can picture them coming with peanuts—"

"Dad won't permit sightseers," she said

decisively. "He entertains only invited guests—and usually one at a time. This week, for example, we have only Doctor William Todd."

"Yes. Trent mentioned him. A scientist, isn't he?"

"He's curator of a mid-western zoo that's going to buy part of dad's collection. You'll find Doctor Todd very pleasant, though a bit—well, eccentric, I'm afraid. But then, I take it your business will be only with dad and Harvey."

Charlie raised his brows and took the cigarette from his lips. This was the first he had heard of a "Harvey" in the case, he confessed. "Who is he?"

"Why—" The girl hesitated, clearly surprised. "Why, I thought you knew. Harvey Anderson is dad's assistant. Also, he's—er—"

"Er—"

"He's—my fiancé."

"O-oh," said Charlie, and was somewhat startled to hear the empty collapse of his voice. He looked at the wet road ahead, a little blankly. He looked back at the girl again, as if bewildered. Then he shifted his position, repeated, "Oh," and subsided.

FOR the rest of the drive their conversation became rather desultory. Charlie smoked and did not straighten until they swung into an entrance between high brick walls. Such walls, he supposed, were intended as a barricade, should any of Jordan McKane's animals manage to escape.

They rode up a gravelled drive to a white Colonial mansion half hidden behind huge naked trees. By the time he emerged from the coupé, the girl had run up four steps to the dark, sheltered porch and was ringing a bell.

"Leave your bag, Mr. Codwell," she called. "I'll send Quincy for it."

But Charlie carried the gladstone up to

a door which was opened, after an inordinate delay, by a lean, gray-haired Negro in a white jacket. This was Adam Quincy. He grinned and bowed as they entered, took the visitor's bag with the insistence of a Pullman porter.

"Where's dad, Quincy?"

"Dunno, Miss Claire," he cackled naively. "Upstairs, I 'spect. I'll go on up and tell him—"

"Never mind. You take Mr. Codwell's things and show him into the library."

With a smile and a nod to Charlie, she ran swiftly up the broad staircase. As he relinquished his wet garments to Quincy, he stared after her green-clad figure with unabashed admiration. She was as graceful as a nymph. Lucky chap, this Harvey Anderson, he thought. . . .

"There's the lib'ry, suh," said Quincy.

"Eh? . . . Oh, thanks."

Rubbing the cold out of his hands, Charlie advanced into a low-ceilinged room almost completely walled with books. A merry, crackling fire danced in a tremendous hearth, and toward this he instinctively made his way. His lithe young body still tingled with the rawness of the night.

But Charlie Codwell never reached the fire.

Halfway across the room he abruptly stopped, staring wide-eyed. What he saw brought a shock of horror that stunned his senses. He stood utterly motionless. He felt his muscles freeze. Then, with the breath bursting out of his chest on a husky ejaculation, he started forward—only to halt again and gape.

In a far corner a man lay crumpled in blood!

A man whose throat had been horribly mangled, as if by long, cruel talons, so that rivers of red had spilled down his chest and over the floor.

A man whom Charlie instantly recognized as Jordan McKane!

"Good God!"

The words burst from Charlie Codwell in a choked whisper. As he stared at that hideous thing, he felt cold and hot and cold again. His whole being thundered furiously. For he knew Jordan McKane was dead!

There was death in the very attitude of the body, so crazily huddled on its side. The luxuriant white hair lay dipped in a stream of sticky crimson, and one knee was drawn up as high as the chest.

Charlie found himself fiercely gripping the back of a chair. His cheeks blazed as if the flames of the hearth had leaped up to scorch them. How long he stood there, paralyzed, he did not know. But at last, when his mind broke free from the chaos, he sprang forward. He knelt, trembling, to seek a pulse-beat in McKane's wrist. But the effort was futile. The man's flesh had already begun to grow cold.

Then Charlie began to see things. Two overturned lamps. A few scattered books, fallen out of a case. And—a revolver on the floor, within six inches of Jordan McKane's limp fingers!

CHAPTER TWO

Claws of the Condor

IT WAS strange that in the midst of such confusion he should think wildly of the girl who had just gone upstairs. In a moment she would see this wreck of her father. . . . But the thought was shattered by a hoarse, stifled cry behind him. He whirled around to see Quincy in the door. The gaunt Negro had just entered. He stood with hands raised, eyes bulging in terror. He was shaking so violently that his very teeth chattered.

"G-great Lawd!"

"He's dead!" Charlie rasped. "Come in and shut that door!"

"D-d-dead! Oh, good Lawd, have m-mussy!"

"Come here!" Charlie shot through his teeth. "Do you know anything about this?"

"N-n-no, suh!" Quincy's voice was frantically high-pitched. "I swear 'fore heaven I d-don't! I—" He continued stammering in panic, but Charlie Codwell swung back to glare again at the body.

Those deep, hideous lacerations in the throat had ripped open the jugular vein—so much was sickeningly clear. But who could have clawed so fiendishly at the man? Or what?

It was inevitable, as he looked at those brutal gashes, that visions of the beasts in the menagerie should flash upon Charlie. They left him dumbfounded.

But he had little time to think now. The excitement of the night was just beginning, and it swept him into its fury.

At that instant there tore through the house a scream so piercing that it ripped all conjecture out of his mind. The shriek came from the upper floor. And he knew, with a pang, it was Claire McKane's!

Sheer impulse—and a kind of terror—drove him out of the library and up the stairs. He raced up three steps at each bound, with Quincy following. When he reached the upper floor, his eyes were flaming; his breath issued in wild spurts. He found himself desperately wishing he had stopped to pick up that revolver.

Then he saw Claire McKane.

Still in her green slicker, she was in the corridor, holding a door shut. Holding it as though someone inside were trying to tug it open. Her eyes were flashing in a pallid face.

"What is it?" Charlie gasped.

"The condor!"

"Wha-at?"

"It's free!" she cried. "It's in there! It—it almost clawed my face when I went in!"

When he heard that, lightning blazed in Charlie's mind. It brought a frightful

glimpse of Jordan McKane's throat being slashed by the grasping talons of a condor! Of Jordan McKane trying to shoot the bird as it buried its claws in his neck! Was that the background of the gruesome tableau in the library?

Somehow, Charlie could not blurt immediately the news of the tragedy to the girl. It was one moment when he found his courage definitely lacking.

With crazy throbbings in his chest, he turned to the door she held. He was vaguely aware of two men running down the corridor—one young and blond and hard-muscled, like a Viking; the other elderly and very badly frightened. Harvey Anderson and Dr. William Todd, he guessed. But he granted them little attention. He wanted to see the condor's claws. If they were bloody, he realized, the death downstairs would be explained.

As he put his hand on the door knob, Claire McKane gasped. "Don't!"

"I've got to look at that bird."

"You can't! He'll fly at you! He'll—"

"Don't worry about that!" he flung out, almost harshly, and thrust her back. "I've got to do this!"

He pushed the door open—little by little, an inch at a time, until it was wide enough to afford him a glimpse of the room. The light from the corridor poured into the place. Behind him the two men and Claire stood suddenly hushed, watching.

Then Charlie saw the bird; and the sight left him rigid with awe.

THE condor had perched itself on the back of a bed. Its great black wings, measuring fully ten feet from tip to tip, were spread across the room. Whenever they moved, monstrous shadows swayed on the wall. Its evil head, as naked as a buzzard's, was thrust forward so that the eyes glared viciously at the door. The whole scene was like something out of a

terrified dream, something only a crazed imagination could conceive.

Charlie held his breath. His stupefied gaze dropped slowly from the condor's head over its fat body to the claws. The long talons grasped the bedstead. Black and cruel, they looked capable of tearing a man's whole body apart. Charlie gaped in amazement. The room was shadowy, and he could not discern details clearly. Yet, though he strained his eyes, he was quite sure of one thing.

He could see no blood on those talons!

Had the bird pecked its claws clean? Had the blood been wiped off by whatever objects the macabre creature had seized? Or was it possible that—

Of a sudden the room was filled with terrific flappings. The condor leaped from its perch to fling itself forward—and Charlie, with a wild start of his own, pulled the door shut with a bang. He could distinctly hear the thud of its heavy body against the wood, the pecking of the huge beak, the savage, frustrated scratching of talons.

When he turned, shaken and pale, those behind him were talking in a kind of panic. He heard the blond young man rasp: "It can't get out of there! The windows are shuttered!" Then, swinging to Quincy, he demanded: "Where the devil is Milo?"

"I d-dunno, suh! I—"

"Don't stand there yammering! Find him! He's the only one who can handle that damned bird!"

"In j-just a minute, Mistuh Anderson," the old Negro pleaded in misery. He was gesticulating ineffectually toward the stairs. "I—I got to tell Miss Claire—"

Charlie cut in: "All right, Quincy, I'll tell her. You'd better find Milo."

The servant still hesitated, but meeting Charlie's reassuring eyes, he gulped wretchedly, nodded, and turned away. Clearly, he did not desire the task of in-

forming Claire McKane of her father's death. And as Quincy moved off to seek Milo Sabatéo, the keeper of the McKane menagerie, Charlie grimly faced the girl. Much as he hated this duty, it could be neither avoided nor delayed. He told her, as gently as he could, of the tragedy in the library.

At his first words her features went deathly white. Her hand leaped to her lips as if to crush a scream. But no sound, not even a whisper, escaped her. For a second, as she swayed against the bulky body of Harvey Anderson, Charlie feared she was going to faint. The next moment, however, she was flying wildly, in reckless horror, down the stairs; and the big Anderson was racing after her with hoarse imprecations to be careful, to hang on to herself, to wait. . . .

Charlie Codwell did not stir.

He stood colorless, breathing hard. His first inclination was to follow the girl, as Anderson had followed. He was restrained only by the thought that, at so dreadful a time, she might better be left to the solace of her fiancé. So he drew a deep, quivering breath, wiped a film of perspiration from his forehead, and looked at the dazed Dr. Todd.

One question pounded madly in his mind.

Had the condor really killed Jordan McKane? Or were its bloodless claws evidence that the man had been murdered by some other assailant?

He turned and looked grimly at the closed door, and remembered again that today Jordan McKane had desperately called for the advice of a criminal lawyer. . . .

DR. WILLIAM TODD was very slight and small and round-shouldered. He had a pale, scholarly countenance above which gleamed the yellow baldness of an extraordinarily high skull. A timid man,

one would have guessed at a glance—and gentle. His attire was dark and conservative, the only hint of adornment being the black ribbon on his pince-nez. And these glasses, precariously perched on his nose, magnified his eyes enormously. Just now he stood at the head of the stairs, hesitating painfully in the matter of going down to view the gruesome corpse.

"This is frightful!" he kept whispering in hushed horror. "It's positively frightful!"

"It's hell," Charlie bluntly agreed.

Dr. Todd turned to gape at him. "I—I take it you're the attorney Mr. McKane was expecting?"

"Yes."

The elderly man appeared to consider this awhile, then he shook his bald head wretchedly. "I shouldn't have thought it possible!" he said.

"You shouldn't have thought what possible?"

"That the condor could escape from its cage! We ought to—to shoot the bird before it attacks somebody else!"

"Shooting it may be all right," Charlie snapped with a frown. "But we're only guessing—we don't really know—it was the condor that attacked Jordan McKane."

Dr. Todd, visibly trembling, widened his eyes in bewilderment. He seemed to forget that he had been about to go downstairs, and returning a step or two, he protested: "But really, now! You can't believe—I mean—you said yourself the throat had been horribly mangled by claws! Surely, with that—that awful bird free in the house—"

Charlie grunted. He was in no humor for debate. Besides, his mind was several strides ahead of Dr. Todd's. He swung a quick glance down the stairs, then looked back at the timorous scientist.

"Listen, Doctor," he asked softly, "were you in the house all evening?"

"Yes, of course!"

"What part of the house?"

"In my room on the floor above."

"Door open?"

"Well, now, let me see." Dr. Todd plucked nervously at his lip, then suddenly lowered his hand to rub the side of his trousers. "It must have been, I imagine. Why do you ask?"

"Didn't you hear some sort of disturbance downstairs?"

"Why, no—"

"Nothing unusual at all?"

"Not a thing!" Dr. Todd stammered, his eyes blinking rapidly. "Harvey Anderson was with me. He was telling me the story of his expedition to Brazil with Mr. McKane. I'm sure if there had been any—er—commotion, we'd have heard it!"

"You mean Anderson was with you all evening?"

"Er—no. Oh, no. He came up—let me see—about half an hour ago, I should say. Or it may have been a little more. I'm not sure."

Charlie Codwell scowled at the floor. His mind was racing now, racing nearer and nearer the conviction that it was not the condor which had killed Jordan McKane.

He muttered, more to himself than to Dr. Todd: "It's illogical. You say you heard nothing. Yet McKane wouldn't have fought the bird without letting out a scream for help."

"He—he might have been clawed before he had time to make an outcry! When a condor attacks—"

"No," Charlie said emphatically. "He had time, all right."

"How can you know?"

"Because he had time to get a revolver; there's one lying beside his body downstairs. That means he certainly had time enough to yell!"

Dr. William Todd did not enjoy mys-

tery. He rubbed his palms together nervously, rapidly, and his teeth chewed at his lips. Once he looked down the stairs, as though thinking a view of the body might be more pleasant than a discussion of this sort.

"Good heavens, sir!" he complained, a little harshly. "You're making things seem even more appalling than they are!"

"I couldn't," Charlie assured him. Then he reached an abrupt decision. "Look here, Doctor. Will you go down and phone the police? They'll have to be notified of this at once, whatever the explanation may be."

"Yes. Yes, certainly."

"I want to have a look at the condor's cage, meanwhile. One of the things we'll have to learn is how the bird got out. How do I get to the menagerie?"

In an unsteady voice Dr. Todd instructed him to go down the back steps, the animal collection being quartered directly behind the house. Charlie nodded and left. As he hurried down those narrow stairs it scarcely occurred to him that he was assuming the rôle of detective. His face was pale; his eyes were abnormally bright. But his mind was swiftly recovering from the shocks of the past quarter hour, and its ideas became vivid. Terrifying, too. He was seeing too many possibilities. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Body By the Cage

THE menagerie—a long, concrete building like a tremendous barn—was brilliantly illuminated, every electric bulb in the place blazing. When Charlie Codwell darted through the rain and entered the structure, he found himself alone; alone, that is, with a bewildering collection of jungle beasts.

Of Milo Sabatéo, the keeper, there was no sign.

Charlie stood still a moment, staring in wonder. There was in this building an overpowering animal smell that all but made him wince. Steel cages of varying sizes lined the walls, most of them now occupied. At his left two jaguars paced back and forth, back and forth, tirelessly, sometimes raising their ferocious heads to snarl. Beyond these great jungle cats a couple of fat, piggish peccaries shared a cage. Then came dozens of howler monkeys leaping in mad revel; and further on, a puma. One tremendous cage, finely meshed, was kaleidoscopic with birds whose plumage was incredibly brilliant—macaws, parrakeets, egrets, and even two tall jabiru storks. Besides bush deer and strange red squirrels, the collection comprised a variety of species Charlie could not identify. And at the far end of this amazing building he saw the glass cases which he knew must contain the reptiles.

But he could not discover the cage that must have confined the condor!

True, several of those iron-barred prisons were empty. When he approached them, frowning intently, they did not appear to have been used recently. They were too clean, showing not even signs of fallen feathers.

He did, however, find an unoccupied space where, apparently, a cage had stood. And this discovery surprised him with a new possibility.

Glancing to his left, he saw that one end of the building had two big portals, like garage doors, through which any of these cages might be wheeled easily. He was just contemplating this startling new idea when he heard quick steps behind him.

Charlie spun around—and faced old Quincy. Quincy in a voluminous raincoat that hung loosely around his gaunt figure. The servant looked more terrified than

ever, and at the sight of Charlie he gasped hoarsely: "Mistuh Co'well!"

"What's the matter?" Charlie asked sharply.

"F'—f' Lawd's sake, suh, will you come out here?" The eyes in that wet black face bulged like eggs. "It—it's Milo! Milo Sabatéo! I—I think he's dead!"

For a second Charlie Codwell could not speak. His whole body stiffened. Then, in a husky whisper, he managed to force out: "Where?"

"Out b-b-back there, under the trees!"

Charlie asked no more questions. Uttering a little gasp, he ran out into the rain. He had imagined his nerves had passed the climax of their agitation, but they were quivering now as violently as ever. His face was gray, hard as rock. With Quincy guiding, they hurried into dense, blinding darkness. The old Negro seemed to find his way by instinct, his eyes shining like a cat's. He was breathing audibly; and suddenly he warned: "Watch out fo' that cage!"

He spoke just in time; for Charlie all but collided with steel bars. He stopped within a yard of the large cage, and a curious thrill raced through him. The thing was mounted on wheels. It could easily have been drawn out of that concrete building, he saw. And the condor might have been released— But this was no time for theorizing.

"Where's Milo?" he rapped out.

"The—the other side o' the cage," hoarsely whispered Quincy. "Watch yo' step!"

THEY found the small Brazilian sprawling on his back in the mud. Charlie's heart thudded stormily as he knelt beside that figure. He remembered matches in his pocket, and lit one with unsteady fingers under the shelter of Quincy's greatcoat. He cupped the tiny flame, protecting it from the rain as best

he could, and by its pale glow tensely examined Milo Sabatéo.

"He's not dead!" he instantly discovered. "He's breathing!"

He bent over the Brazilian eagerly. A half-breed, Milo had skin the color of coffee. His countenance was thin, aquiline, and finely molded. But it was marred now by two vicious bruises that explained his unconsciousness. One was a gash in the forehead, between the eyes; the other was a hideous welt half hidden under the glossy black Indian hair.

"Something mighty hard must have hit him," Charlie muttered grimly.

"There it is!" Quincy ejaculated. "Look, Mistuh Co'well—the fire prongs! That's what hit him, all right—they fire prongs there!"

Charlie jerked his head around to peer at the thing the old servant indicated. It lay near one of Milo Sabatéo's outflung arms, glinting in the feeble light—a long steel fork with three prongs modeled after Neptune's trident.

"Where does that come from, Quincy?" he exclaimed.

"The fireplace—"

"In the library?"

"Y-yes, suh!"

Charlie straightened with a peculiar sound in his throat, his eyes flashing. He picked up the fork, eyed it a second as the match flickered out, then thrust it under his arm. It was some thirty inches long and surprisingly heavy, a very serviceable weapon.

"All right, Quincy," he said quickly. "Let's get Milo inside. You'd better phone for a doctor, unless Doctor Todd can look after these wounds."

"Doctuh Todd ain't a medical man, suh," Quincy panted as he raised the Brazilian's legs. "I'll get the—the fam'ly doctuh."

They bore the limp figure of Milo Sabatéo through the rain and darkness to

the back door. As they entered with their burden, Quincy called for Sarah, his wife, who was the McKane cook and housekeeper. Sarah, however, must have deserted the kitchen to be of help to Claire, in the library; and so they carried Milo to his room in the servants' quarters. When they placed him on his bed, Charlie asked how Quincy had chanced to find him.

"Why, I—I was huntin' for Milo, suh, to come and fetch that there condor," the gaunt Negro excitedly explained. "He wasn't in the house and he wasn't in the menagerie. I turned up all the lights there to see. Then I went out and 'most fell over him alongside that cage. Lawd, it sure gave me the shivers! I saw you through the windows of the menagerie, then, and I went for you."

Charlie nodded. "All right, Quincy. I'll take care of his head while you phone the doctor. Make it quick."

He found an antiseptic and a clean towel in the servants' bathroom. While he worked with these over the Brazilian's wounds, a hundred thoughts swarmed through his mind. The most stirring of them was this: that when Milo Sabatéo regained his senses, he might be able to clarify a great part of this mystery. He would be able to tell who had attacked him. He might know how the condor had got into the house. He might even know how Jordan McKane had died! Yes. It suddenly became manifest that much, very much, depended on this comatose man. Charlie ministered to his wounds earnestly. But the brown-skinned face gave no hint, not even a flicker, of returning consciousness.

WHEN Quincy hurried back, he was accompanied by the tremulous Dr. William Todd. "Doc Pemberton'll be over soon as he can make it, suh," the old Negro reported.

"And the police chief is on his way out from Parthenon!" added Dr. Todd, breathless with excitement. "Heavens, this is frightful, Mr. Codwell, frightful!"

Charlie said nothing. He straightened, his frown fastened on Milo's immobile face. Several seconds of silence passed before he finally turned to ask Dr. Todd: "Is Miss McKane still in the library?"

"Oh, no," the doctor whispered. "She almost collapsed when—when she saw her father like that. Lord, isn't it horrible?" Todd actually shuddered. "Anderson made her go up to her room. Sarah, the cook, is with her, I think."

"And who's with the body now?"

"Why—Mr. Anderson—I guess."

"Is he—"

Charlie Codwell did not finish the question. He could not. For at that instant a new sound echoed through this house of horrors; a sound that made them all whirl around, staring.

It came explosively from the upper corridor . . . a hoarse warning in Harvey Anderson's voice: "No! No! Go back, Claire!" followed by running footsteps and the slamming of a door.

Charlie ran for the stairs, took them two at a time, still gripping the trident-shaped fire prong in his hand. He found Claire McKane standing outside the closed door of the room in which the condor was imprisoned. Horror was written on her face and her hands were trembling. At Codwell's appearance she pointed at the door. "Harvey—he's in there with—" Her words were shattered by the sudden, sharp crack of a revolver shot!

Charlie Codwell lunged for the door knob, wrenched the door open motioning Claire to one side. Harvey Anderson, a grim young Viking, his hair disheveled, was crouched just inside the room, a smoking revolver still levelled in his hand. A lightning glance revealed to Codwell that the condor was wounded, shrilling

strident cries of pain and beginning to thresh its wings in the throes of death from its perch on the foot of the bed. Before Charlie could bring the pronged trident down across Anderson's gun wrist another shot barked out, and the great bird toppled to the floor, flapped its giant wings in a final, convulsive effort—and lay still.

"What the devil are you doing?" Codwell burst out.

"That bird was a killer and had to go!" the blond man retorted furiously. "You can't keep them once they've tasted—blood!"

A shiver of revulsion went through Codwell when he saw the condor dead on the floor. It lay in a cradle of its own black wings, with two vermilion daubs on its breast. Its terrible talons seemed even now to be clutching at something.

Then he stared down at the weapon in Harvey Anderson's hand and demanded: "Where did you get that gun?"

"It was on the library floor."

"Is it McKane's?"

"It was McKane's, yes."

CHARLIE crushed a harsh reproof behind tight lips. For the moment he said nothing more. Then he motioned to Sarah, who had appeared in the hall, to take the frightened Claire to her own room. The aged Negress led the girl away unprotesting and Charlie shut the door after permitting Dr. Todd to enter. He switched on the lights and the sudden radiance made him blink. He went straight to the condor's uplifted claws, bent over them, and subjected them, as well as the rapacious beak, to an intent scrutiny. Then he said decisively: "Not a sign of blood. Not even on the feathers. Except where the shots got him.

"Meaning—" demanded Harvey Anderson.

"That the condor probably never touched McKane."

"Oh, now listen, Codwell—"

"Wait. There's something else," Charlie insisted. "I'm no naturalist, but I know that condors—like vultures and buzzards—feed on the dead. It isn't a pleasant thing to talk about right now. Still, we've got to face it. If this bird had killed Jordan McKane, it would have torn him apart. It wouldn't have flown off to another part of the house."

"Unless," timidly ventured Dr. Todd, "it was—er—frightened away. I mean, if somebody came—"

"Whoever came would have seen the bird."

Anderson savagely interrupted: "Codwell, you can't convince me that anything except this condor ripped up McKane's throat so terribly! Why, its unthinkable!"

"If I can't convince you," said Charlie, quietly, "It's pretty pointless to argue . . . Still, Anderson, whatever you may have thought, you shouldn't have picked up that revolver. You know you're not permitted to disturb anything around a body before the police arrive. Especially a weapon."

Anderson looked down at the gun rather sheepishly, frowned, and grunted. "Well, maybe you're right," he conceded dourly. "Oh, hell, I'm sorry! I just lost my head. Seeing McKane ripped up like that, and Claire on the verge of collapse, and knowing that bird was still in the house, ready to kill again . . . I don't know what happened to me. I just grabbed the gun and ran up here and blazed away at the thing!"

There was much to be criticized in such a course, Charlie perceived. As a criminal lawyer, he might have given Anderson an effective lecture on the proceeding. Yet he saw no reason to attempt a reprimand which would more fittingly come from the police. And so, saying nothing,

he merely urged the two men out of the room and closed the door behind him.

AS they moved toward the stairs, his hopes returned to the unconscious Milo Sabatéo. If only the Brazilian would open his eyes and talk! If only he could explain things! . . . But Milo, it was evident, had not yet regained his senses. For Quincy, who was tending him, had been given explicit instructions to bring word immediately of so much as a stirring; and Quincy had brought no news at all.

So Charlie Codwell's hopes, temporarily blocked in this avenue, sped off to seek new channels.

The result was stimulating. Within two minutes he had a fresh idea. Goaded by it, he hurried into the library and crossed the room to the telephone. The sight of the hideously mangled corpse in the corner caused him a slight shudder. Yet he kept his eyes on it when he called long distance and gave the New York number of his partner, Stacy Trent.

It seemed hours instead of minutes before he secured the connection—only to encounter disappointment. For Trent was not at home. Nor did his housekeeper know at what time he would return.

"Take a message for him, will you, please?" Charlie asked. "Write it down."

"Just a second. . . . Yes, sir. Go ahead."

Charlie dictated: "Jordan McKane murdered. If you have any information that may help establish a motive for the killing or the identity of the killer, phone me at once. Number is Parthenon, two-three. Or else rush up here yourself. He's your client. I'm staying to see the thing through."

When Charlie replaced the telephone, Harvey Anderson, who had been watching him with a frown, demanded: "What's the idea of sending for him? How the devil do you expect your partner to know

anything about this? If we, who were right on the scene, know nothing—”

“You’d be surprised how much more clearly I can see sometimes,” softly said Charlie, “through my partner’s eyes.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Fifty Fatal Minutes

BY THE time Police Chief Guthrie of Parthenon arrived, Charlie Codwell felt as though he had been in this home of terror for days. It seemed inconceivable that so much had happened in the hour and a half since Claire McKane had met him at the station.

Chief Guthrie, whom he appraised without much encouragement, was a long-boned Yankee with a gray mustache, a nasal twang, and an irritating habit of sniffing. Himself in uniform, he came accompanied by Parthenon’s entire police force of two men. His frowning unease as he approached the body, supplemented by that nervous sniffing, indicated that he had little taste for a duty of this kind.

He was followed within a few minutes by Dr. Pemberton, the family physician who, it appeared, also served the community as medical examiner. The doctor—large, pompous, and somewhat overbearing—swept into the library with all the gusto of an actor making a heroic entrance. As he threw his hat and coat on a chair, he glowered obliquely at the body and muttered: “Well, this is bad!” Then, crossing the room, he wiped his hands on a handkerchief as though preparing to operate.

Charlie, a little sickened, walked out of the library. He had no desire to witness the gruesome examination. For himself, he had seen enough of that mangled throat. Too much! He sought out Quincy, asked to be shown his own chamber, and retired to it to marshal his wits and engage in some calm thinking.

When he switched on the light, a glimpse of himself in a mirror caused a veritable shock. His hair was crazily disheveled, sprawling over his head like a wig. His face looked drawn, tense, pale. Moreover, his suit had been so thoroughly drenched that it hung about him like burlap.

“Well!” he mumbled grimly. “Greetings to a stranger.”

He made whatever hasty adjustments he could with a comb and towel, then lit a cigarette and sank into a chair. The rain still thrashed the windows savagely. But he scarcely heard it now. He was thinking—thinking about a dozen things at once. And he remained there, lost in speculations, in theories, in hopes, until at last a knock at the door roused him.

It was Quincy.

“Chief Guthrie wants you to come down to the drawin’ room, please, Mr. Co’well,” he said, still shaky in voice. “He’s questioned just about everybody ’cept you, suh.”

Charlie rose, crushed his cigarette. “All right, Quincy. How’s Milo doing?”

“We-ell, he’s been groanin’ a little and sort o’ tossing around,” the old servant reported hesitantly. “Doctor Pemberton’s with him now. He sure was hit hard, suh!”

“Yes,” grunted Charlie. “Twice.”

He went down to the drawing room—instantly to be enveloped by its atmosphere of strain and tension. The entire household was there; even Claire McKane. She sat rigid as a wax figure, her deathly pallor accentuated by a dark frock. Her eyes, filled with tragedy, were unswervingly fastened on the police chief. Charlie looked at her a moment, swallowed a pang, and turned slowly to Guthrie.

“You wanted to see me, Chief?”

“Ye-es, I did.” The official was frowning worriedly. He stood with his back to the empty fireplace; and after sniffing

once or twice, he launched a series of questions which Charlie answered quietly, patiently. They all led, however, to the chief's principal challenge. "From what these folks have been telling me, Mr. Codwell, you seem to have some pretty set—uh—opinions about this business. Doctor Todd says you told him—that condor-bird had nothing to do with the death of Jordan McKane."

"The doctor misunderstood me," Charlie corrected. "I said I didn't think the condor had killed Mr. McKane."

"I reckon you've got reasons for saying that?"

"Why—naturally." But Charlie Codwell sent a hesitant glance at Claire McKane. This seemed a heartless matter to discuss in her presence. The girl must have perceived his reluctance, however, for she stiffened and urged huskily: "Go on, Mr. Codwell! I—I can stand it. I want to know what happened!"

CHARLIE eyed her uncertainly, until he decided the greater cruelty might lie in keeping her mystified. Then he swung back to the attentive chief.

"I've already mentioned my reasons to Doctor Todd," he said. "I feel, first, that if McKane had been attacked by the condor, he would have shouted; and he didn't. Second, there were no blood-stains on the bird. Third, it habitually devours what it kills and would have stayed with the body, feeding on it, if it had actually caused the death."

Guthrie tugged thoughtfully at his ear. "All that," he finally admitted, "sounds reasonable enough. But considering the marks on McKane's throat, how do you figure he was killed?"

"With the fire prongs."

A gasp broke from Claire McKane. She leaned forward, her eyes horrified.

"I'm sorry—" Charlie began.

"No, no!" she said hoarsely. "Go on!"

The girl's hand seized the arm of her chair. "It's dreadful," she cried in a low, anguished voice. "But I—think you're right!"

"The prongs," Charlie pointed out, "could have produced the same effect as the clawing of talons. That is, if they ripped downward or upward."

Chief Guthrie demanded: "Was there any blood on those prongs when you found 'em?"

"No. But the rain had had time to wash them clean, you know."

"That's so," snapped Guthrie, and scowled. "Reckon it would have wiped out fingerprints too, eh?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"That's tough luck all around. All around." The chief sniffed impatiently, then consulted a paper on which he had scribbled notes during the inquiry. He rubbed his chin in silence while he scanned a few jottings. And suddenly he straightened with the air of one who intends to be very practical.

"Before we go on guessing," he said, "let's see just what we've got here! The facts I wrote down are these. If I left out anything, tell me." He quoted from his paper: "Miss McKane left the house at about eight-thirty to drive to the station. At that time her father was in the library. He was feeling feverish and generally upset. She got back—bringing you, Mr. Codwell—about nine-twenty. Right?"

Charlie nodded corroboration.

"So," Chief Guthrie announced, "Mr. McKane was killed between eight-thirty and nine-twenty—there's the fifty minutes we've got to account for! According to your testimony here, not one of you people went into the library during that time. Right?"

No one replied.

Guthrie sniffed audibly and went on: "Let's see just where you all were. . . . Mr. Anderson, you say you went into

the menagerie at about eight-twenty, just before Miss McKane left. You stayed there talking to Milo Sabatéo about ways of feeding snakes. Around nine o'clock you came back to the house—"

"By the rear door," Harvey Anderson sharply specified. "I didn't pass the library. Mr. McKane might already have been dead when I entered!"

Charlie glanced curiously at the blond man, thought the fellow looked inwardly shaken.

"All right," Guthrie was conceding, talking to his paper. "You went in the back way, Mr. Anderson, and went straight up to Doctor Todd's room. You found Doctor Todd packing his grips."

"Yes."

"Er—one second—" Hastily the bald scientist lifted a finger, as if begging for attention. "Perhaps I ought to explain I was—er—planning to leave tomorrow—"

"You explained that before," said Guthrie drily. "You also claimed you'd gone up to your room to pack right after supper, and you stayed there. When Mr. Anderson came in, you got to talking about hunting in Brazil, and you talked till you heard Miss McKane scream."

THERE the chief paused. Charlie was leaning back against the door jamb, and from that detached position he shot swift, searching glances from one face to another. So far, he realized, the movements between 8:30 and 9:20 of Dr. Todd, Anderson, and Claire McKane had been accounted for—if all the alibis were true.

"As for Quincy and Sarah," added Guthrie, "they were in the kitchen, eating a late supper and doing dishes."

"Th-that's right, suh!" whispered Quincy. "I was helping Sarah clean up!"

"You didn't hear any excitement in the library?"

"No, suh, Mr. Guthrie, no, suh!" The

servant's big eyes bulged as he emphatically shook his gray head. "Lawd, was I to hear anything, I'd sure look to see what it was, suh!"

"When did you finally come out of the kitchen?"

"Wh-when Miss Claire rung the bell. Then I went out to open the door."

Suddenly, in a low, quick voice, Charlie Codwell ventured a question of his own. He had no desire to supercede the chief; it was merely that the words sprang to his lips.

"Quincy, did anybody else—any visitor—ring the bell while Miss McKane was away?"

"No, suh!"

There was a moment of stillness then. Tense stillness. Dr. Todd cleared his throat. Charlie's mouth tightened in queer lines, and he sent an oblique look at Chief Guthrie. For this much was very clear: if Quincy could be believed, if there had been no outsider in the library, then the murder must, quite evidently, have been committed by somebody in the house!

Who?

Anderson? Dr. Todd? Quincy himself? . . . Or conceivably Milo Sabatéo?

Chief Guthrie abruptly sniffed and made a great to-do of stuffing the paper into his pocket. Frowning, he tugged at his ear for a moment, then unexpectedly reverted to another aspect of the mystery.

"That bird," he rapped out, his tones dissatisfied. "If it didn't kill Mr. McKane I'd like to know what in blazes it was doing in the house. How did it get here?"

"Why," Harvey Anderson began, "the cage was pulled out—"

"Sure, I know that!" snapped Guthrie. "Somebody hauled it out of the menagerie. He had luck, too, because his footprints are pretty much washed out by the rain. Still—"

"Wasn't—er—the cage locked, how-

ever?" Dr. Todd interrupted nervously. "I mean to say—"

"The keys," Guthrie rasped, "hung right there in the menagerie! Whoever wheeled out the cage could have got 'em easy! The main point is why—"

But he did not finish. Heavy steps in the hall made him jerk his head around. In a second Dr. Pemberton strode into the room—big, breathless, very earnest. He was daubing a handkerchief at his perspiring neck.

"Chief," he announced curtly, "I think you'll find Sabatéo well enough to be questioned!"

At that report Charlie snapped his body erect, eagerly. His eyes flashed. He turned toward the door.

"Queer thing about the fellow," sharply added the medical examiner. "When I told him what had happened to poor McKane, he all but screamed. Then he started jabbering wildly for the police. I think you'll find he has something pretty important to tell about this business!"

There was a general surge toward the hall. It seemed they were all about to race for Milo's bedside. But Dr. Pemberton threw up protesting, almost angry hands.

"Here!" he cried. "Hold on! I can't let you all rush in on the man! Just one or two, Chief! The less excitement he has, the more coherent he'll be, anyhow. Why, even when I stepped out he was prattling crazily about *oro* or *doro* . . . That means gold in Spanish, doesn't it?"

Gold?

Distinctly Charlie Codwell heard a gasp behind him. He swung around. Harvey Anderson's face, he saw, had gone shockingly white. The man's shaking fingers were clutching the back of a chair fiercely, desperately, like—like talons. . . .

"Why?" Charlie asked himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Brazilian Talks

FIVE minutes later, in a small servant's bedchamber behind the kitchen, Milo Sabatéo was answering questions in a feeble voice.

"No, no, *senor*, I—I cannot tell you who—who hit me," he whispered weakly. He lay limp on his bed, eyes closed painfully. "I do not know."

"Good gosh, man!" exclaimed Guthrie. "Do you mean to say you didn't see him?"

"No-o."

"How's that? How did it happen?"

Milo raised weary lids. Having been in Jordan McKane's employ nine years, he spoke a very creditable English. Yet now he seemed to have a hard task finding words.

"I was near the—the door in the menagerie," he forced out huskily, slowly. "It was open. Somebody came in behind me. I heard him, *si*. But he—he struck me down before I could—look around. And everything became black. . . ." The Brazilian drew a shaky breath. "When I came to, the big doors were open. The condor's cage was out. I could hear it rolling outside. I tried to run after him, but, *Deus*, I was blind with pain! I fell in the mud. Then he came running in the darkness. I tried to raise my head, but he—he hit me again. That was all—"

"And you never saw his face!" Guthrie groaned in dismay. "What luck, what rotten luck!"

"Oh, it does not matter now," Milo moaned hopelessly. "If the *Senor* McKane is d-dead, nothing matters. He was a great gentleman, a fine gentleman—"

"Why should anybody have wanted to kill him?"

Surprisingly, Milo grated: "It was for the gold! *Si*, for the gold! I said to him myself that it would bring—trouble! I—I knew it!"

The four people gathered around the bed gaped at him in wonder that was half amazement. Besides the police chief and the doctor, both Claire McKane and Charlie Codwell had entered. Claire because she had an undeniable right to explore the mystery of her father's death; and Charlie because he had walked into the room determinedly, without asking questions. They watched Sabatéo intently. His lean, brown-skinned face was haggard, and he seemed to struggle to keep his eyes open. Yet he insisted on speaking. And perhaps it was well, for speech restored some of his strength.

"The gold," he said thickly, "came with us from Brazil. It was smuggled. But the *Senor* McKane and I did not know about it! I swear it! *Pel' amor de Deus*, we did not know!"

Claire McKane, her features pallid, whispered anxiously: "Milo! What—what on earth are you talking about? What is all this? Who smuggled?"

"Listen, *senorita*! When your father was hunting in Brazil with the *Senor* Anderson, we came one day to an Indian village in the jungles of the Parapiti. Jordan McKane, more deeply interested in wild life than in anthropology, had found nothing of sufficient importance in the ruined settlement to warrant a long delay. So they had pressed on, scarcely thinking of the village again.

Until two weeks ago—two short weeks ago—right here in Parthenon. . . .

MILO suddenly opened his eyes wide, and they were blazing. In spite of the doctor's protests, he propped himself up on one elbow, and his bandaged head was held high.

On an evening two weeks ago, he said, he and *Senor* McKane had returned from a round of the estate to see an unexpected light in the menagerie. Puzzled, they had hurried to peer into the window

nearest that lamp; and there they had discovered—Harvey Anderson. He was on his knees, working with a hammer and a large screw driver; working rapidly; prying apart the two layers of floorboards in a wooden cage. It was the sort of cage used in travelling only; it had served to bring one of the peccaries up from Brazil.

Startled, yet not alarmed—for there was no reason to distrust Anderson—they had watched a moment in wonder. They had seen him separate the upper level of boards from the lower. Then, from between the two, he drew four yellow disks. Yellow? Ah, no, gold! *Si*, gold! . . . Those disks were flat, as big as dinner plates. Every one of them glittered in a strange way, as if it were studded with a hundred pin-points of flashing light. McKane, though amazed, had not immediately realized what the things were. But as for Milo Sabatéo—

"I knew!" he cried hoarsely, excitement bringing strength to his voice. He glared from the three men to Claire McKane. The girl stood speechless, one hand at her throat. It was as if she foresaw a new blow.

"My people were Indians!" Milo forced out with horse vehemence. "They have told me many things; Those disks were gold, *senores*, gold brought from the hills of the Andes into the jungle! And do you know what shone in them like that? You may stare, but *pel' Deus*, I tell the truth! You will see! The things that shone were diamonds of Brazil! *Si*, Brazilian diamonds—hundreds of them inlaid in designs in each disk! The Indians called the disk the *mazurata*—'the eye of the Sun God' . . . The *mazurata* is put on top of the temple, so it will catch all the light of the sun, and—and shine brighter than stars or moon! To you Americans, *senores*, such *mazuratas* are worth fortunes. *Si*, fortunes! More than

a hundred diamonds set in heavy gold—and *Senor* Anderson had four like that! Four! . . .”

Milo Sabatéo fell back on his pillow, trembling. While he gasped for breath, there was silence in the room. A choking hush all the more intense because of the savage thrash of rain on the window. Charlie Codwell, listening to this fantastic background of crime, became infected with Milo's excitement. It throbbed within him. It enfevered his mind. His thoughts strained to connect the astonishing *mazuratas* with the death of Jordan McKane. Yet he did not speak.

“Where,” Chief Guthrie at last ejaculated, “did Anderson get the things?”

“In—in the Parapiti village,” whispered Milo, breathless. “He found them in the broken walls of the temple. But he did not tell us of them in Brazil. Oh, no! He wanted to keep the *mazuratas* for himself. So he hid them in his extra clothes. And many weeks later, when we came to Manaioi, he put them between the floor-boards of the peccary cage. That was how he smuggled them into this country. But he had no opportunity to take them until that night, two weeks ago, when he tried to get them in the menagerie—”

“Oh!” The gasp, low and agonized, broke from Claire McKane. Her hands suddenly covered her face, and she swung away from the bed. Charlie, gaping at the girl in consternation, knew she was sobbing. And he felt wretched himself. In one night, he realized, she had seen her father dead and her fiancé accused of smuggling. He scarcely knew what to say to her. What could one say?

Guthrie, however, proved more callous to the girl's misery. He was already demanding: “Sabatéo, how do you know all this?”

Milo's explanation, though halting, was impressively vivid. On that night two

weeks ago he and McKane had rushed into the menagerie to confront Anderson with the golden disks. The blond man had sprung back like one trapped. At first he had attempted to bluster some lies, but they had sounded so futile and ridiculous that he had collapsed and confessed the truth.

Jordan McKane had stared. On him the situation exercised a chaotic effect. The idea of smuggling being connected with his expedition outraged him. He had rasped, “And you're the man I'm supposed to regard as my future son-in-law!”

At that Charlie heard another stifled sob in Claire McKane's throat. Impulsively he caught her arm, squeezed it with a kind of reassurance, though his eyes remained on Milo.

MCKANE—the Brazilian continued—had been baffled. What was to be done with the golden disks? Dispose of them? No. He realized they could be neither sold nor given away without betraying the fact that his expedition had smuggled them into the country—thus ruining a reputation he had given a lifetime to build. Keep the things? No—there Harvey Anderson vehemently objected. They belonged, after all, to him. Anderson insisted on dislodging the diamonds and selling them individually. He offered to share the money, but such a plan McKane discarded with a snarl; he wanted none of it.

“However you try to dispose of these things,” he had warned bitterly, “they're bound to cause questions. And questions will bring out the truth. They'll ruin both of us!”

In the end they had compromised on a postponement of action until the matter could be considered calmly. The *mazuratas* had been taken into the house, though where they had been placed Milo could

not say. And yesterday, after two weeks of nervous indecision, McKane had made a resolution.

"He—he came into the menagerie," whispered Milo Sabatéo. "He told *Senor* Anderson he would telephone for a New York lawyer—a friend he could trust—and he would tell the lawyer everything and ask his advice. He said—"

But that was as far as the Brazilian could go. As far as he would ever go. . . .

What happened at that instant was nightmarish. For sheer horror it became the most appalling moment of the night. It caught them all utterly unprepared, dazed.

There was a single sharp *crack*.

A shot! It came from outside the window, and the pane burst into a hundred flying fragments that clattered on the floor.

Even while the glass tinkled, Milo Sabatéo screamed. His body heaved up crazily, turned, and collapsed. Once he writhed and gasped, "*Deus!*" Then he lay limp—with blood streaming from a black bullet hole in his heart. . . .

There was chaos then.

Charlie Codwell, his whole being ablaze with horror, scarcely realized what he did. He sprang to the shattered window, jerked up the pane. Glaring out into the downpour, he had the merest glimpse of a black figure—hardly more than a shadow—vanishing under the trees.

He shouted hoarsely to the chief. Then he was outside, plunging through mud and rain and darkness in pursuit of the killer. He ran desperately. Somehow he forgot that he was unarmed, that he was chasing a man with a gun—one who had already shown utter ruthlessness. It did not matter now. The only thought pounding in his mind was a mad determination to seize that fugitive!

He lunged among the trees, banging against them. For perhaps twenty yards

he raced on blindly—only to halt, panting, in dismay. He could see no one here! The darkness was almost impenetrable. In frantic tension he listened for running steps to guide him. But the rain thrashed so violently that it overwhelmed all other sounds.

Charlie stood groaning with all the vehemence of an outraged, baffled soul.

Why Milo Sabatéo had been shot to death he could not pause to consider now. He wanted to act, to dash after the murderer, to do something! But which way was he to turn in this Stygian maze? His clenched fists shook in an agony of frustration.

WHEN Chief Guthrie reached him, there was still no sound. They stood together, breathing hard and glaring among the trees. Their faces were colorless masks, and neither uttered a word—until suddenly, somewhere at their right, they heard the slosh of racing feet!

"Come on!" blurted Guthrie.

With the suddenness of startled rabbits they darted off. They ran hard, drawing nearer and nearer to the sounds—and almost crashed into the charging figure of Harvey Anderson!

"What's happened?" Anderson gasped.

Guthrie flung back: "What are you doing here?"

"I—I heard a shot! I came out to see—"

The big man looked so dumbstruck, so shaken, that it was almost impossible to doubt him. Yet Charlie did doubt what he said. He could not help it, after the story he had heard from Milo Sabatéo. But he crushed all questions now, though a score of them surged to his lips. He whirled around, listened again—and heard no other steps.

Within a few moments they were joined by the chief's two uniformed men. Guthrie

became grim, decisive. He ordered an immediate search of the grounds.

But it proved futile.

Fifteen minutes later, when they all returned, drenched, to meet on the porch of the house, their defeated faces told a story of hopeless failure. Sabatéo's murderer had vanished completely.

Chief Guthrie, shaking the rain from his clothes, rasped: "I can't figure this out! Why was Milo killed, anyhow? He'd already told us what he knew about the—the golden disks. It would be different if he hadn't spoken up yet; then maybe I could understand his being silenced!"

With the last phrase he glared significantly at Harvey Anderson. And the big man caught his breath as if a weapon had been jammed against his chest. He stood there, in the darkness of the porch, rigid and colorless. His light hair was soaked and disarrayed. He darted quick glances from the chief to Charlie Codwell; then at the two policemen, as though measuring his chances to leap away from this group.

"Well?" Guthrie demanded harshly. "Haven't you got anything to say about it, Mr. Anderson?"

"To say?" The words came softly, as if he were struggling to suppress his voice. He spoke with a tremor. "What can I say? It seems Milo has already told you everything."

"You bet he did!" came furiously from the chief.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Anderson asked after a tense pause. "Arrest me for smuggling?"

"No, not for smuggling!" Guthrie said with quivering menace in every syllable. "Not for smuggling, Mr. Anderson!"

And then Charlie spoke. His voice came like a shock because of its very quietness. "Let me remind you," he said to the blond man, "that you're quite safe on the smuggling charge. The only two

witnesses who could have testified against you are dead."

Anderson swung upon him wrathfully. "Thanks for the reassurance!" he grated. "I suppose that's your delicate way of saying I killed them—just to protect myself in case of arrest!"

"I had considered the point," Charlie granted, "yes."

"Well, I didn't kill them! Understand? I didn't! I don't know any more about this damned business than you do!"

"You have no idea why either Jordan McKane or Milo Sabatéo was murdered?"

"No!"

"No idea as to why the condor was freed in the house?"

"No! If I knew, I'd tell you—"

The last words were all but jolted out of Harvey Anderson's mouth, for the porch door, suddenly opening, struck his back and threw him off balance. He turned angrily to glare at the thin, timorous figure on the threshold—Dr. William Todd. The scientist was gaping about in apprehension, one hand at his lips, his eyes grotesquely magnified by the glasses. He looked from face to face, finally letting a disappointed gaze fall on Chief Guthrie.

"So you—er—didn't catch him!" he whispered wretchedly. "Good heavens, that's frightful, Chief, frightful!"

CHAPTER SIX

Menagerie of Death

A HALF hour later Chief Guthrie was constrained to hold a second post-mortem inquiry in the drawing room; this time, however, without Claire McKane. The girl was in her own chamber upstairs, attended by Sarah and Dr. Pemberton, and fighting against hysteria. As Charlie had feared, her endurance had attained the breaking point. Seeing Milo murdered had been the last straw.

Charlie himself now stood beside a window in the drawing room, intently watching both Harvey Anderson and Dr. Todd. As a lawyer, he could have conducted an efficient interrogation of his own; one perhaps more thorough than Guthrie's, since, under the guidance of Stacy Trent, he had developed a shrewd skill in cross-examination. But, though a hundred questions and suspicions crammed his mind, he preferred not to trespass on the police chief's duty.

Guthrie began with Dr. Todd. "We've got to find out," he declared harshly, "just where everybody was at the time the shot was fired. You first, Doctor. How about it?"

"Why—er—" Dr. Todd, his face as yellow as his bald head, sat rapidly rubbing the arms of his chair. "I was right here, Mr. Guthrie! Right in this room all the time."

"Doing what?"

"Waiting for coffee."

"Wha-at?"

"Waiting for coffee!" the doctor emphatically maintained. "I had—er—felt the need of it, after all that had happened. I was positively shaken. So I asked Quincy if he couldn't get me a cup—hot and black."

The chief turned a frowning, unspoken question upon the old servant. Quincy hastily nodded his gray head.

"That's right, suh!" he assented. "Th-that's absolutely right, Mistuh Guthrie!"

"And where were you, Quincy?"

"I was in the kitchen with Sarah! She was fixin' the coffee, and I was waiting to take it in to Doctuh Todd. That's the truth, suh, the Gawd's truth!"

"Did you see or hear anybody outside the kitchen windows? Or anywhere outside?"

"No, suh, I s-sure didn't!"

Guthrie darted a glance back at Dr.

Todd. "How about you? Hear anybody outside?"

"No-o, but I was at the front of the house, of course."

The chief sniffed loudly. Apparently he was disposed to accept these assertions without immediate challenge. Or else he was merely eager to swing his inquisition to Harvey Anderson. Charlie could think of a dozen other questions he might put to Dr. Todd and Quincy. Yet he was not sorry to see the official turn to the blond Viking. A new tension instantly seized the room.

"Well, Mr. Anderson," Guthrie began, "now let's have your side of it. Where were you when Sabatéo was shot?"

The big man, standing with his hands jammed in his pockets, said stiffly: "I don't remember, exactly."

"Don't remember! . . . How the devil could you forget?"

"Because I wasn't any place in particular," said Anderson. "I was nervous, and I just kept—kept walking around from room to room."

"Nervous, eh? About what?"

At that Anderson smiled bitterly, even sardonically. "Don't you think there's plenty to be nervous about in this house?" he asked. "With a corpse in the library and—well, I won't deny it—with the *mazuratas* to think about."

"I see. So you just kept walking around and around like a mouse in a cage, eh?"

"Something like that, yes."

"When you heard the shot, what happened?"

Anderson frowned resentfully. "You know what happened," he snapped. "I heard the screams from Milo's room, and ran to it. You and Mr. Codwell had just jumped out to hunt the killer; and I followed you. That's all there was to it."

"Did you see anybody outside?"

"Not a soul."

Chief Guthrie paused, sniffing. Uncertain of just how to proceed, he rubbed his chin, glanced uneasily at Charlie. And it was then that Charlie Codwell, lithe and grim, stepped away from the window. He was fingering a cigarette he had neglected to light. Now he tossed it into the fireplace.

"Mr. Anderson—" he began.

The big man whirled around angrily. "Do I have to answer your questions, too?"

"It would be wise," Charlie assured him quietly, but he paled a little at the other's tone. He wasn't accustomed to having men snarl at him like that. He said: "I want to talk about those *mazuratas*."

"What about them?" Anderson demanded bluntly.

"Do you know where Jordan McKane put the things?"

"Of course I do! Under the papers in the drawer of the library desk. To be frank, I'd have got them out if you didn't have a policeman posted in the room."

Charlie nodded, looking obliquely at the chief. "I think we ought to get them," he suggested.

With Guthrie acquiescing, the whole tense group at once moved into the library. McKane's body now lay on a settee, under a white sheet. They passed it, with shudders, to reach the flat walnut desk. There the anticipation of seeing the amazing jungle treasures put a strain upon them all.

But when they searched the drawer—Anderson groping through it with sudden horror, even frenzy—they found the golden disks gone!—stolen!

AS THE hours sped by that night, Charlie realized he was letting the confusion of the house seep into his brain. His thoughts whirled dizzily. Even when at last he threw himself on his bed, at

three o'clock in the morning he could find no real composure. He lay awake, half dressed; seeing again in the darkness above him the horribly mangled throat of Jordan McKane; seeing that last convulsive heave of Milo Sabatéo—hearing the Brazilian's terrible shriek. And sudden shivers ran through him.

Sometimes, too, he could hear Claire McKane's sobs in the next room. Whenever that happened, he frowned and tossed fitfully and felt unutterably wretched. But always, when she fell silent, his thoughts reverted to the shocking mystery itself.

Who had committed these murders? Who had stolen the diamond-studded golden disks?

Harvey Anderson had estimated their value at about \$300,000! Could he himself, despite his protestations of innocence, have slain Jordan McKane in order to acquire sole possession of the treasures? For it seemed that only he and Milo Sabatéo had shared McKane's knowledge of the *mazuratas*. Even Claire had been ignorant of their existence.

And what about Quincy?

Charlie scowled. Surely it was conceivable that the old servant had chanced upon those brilliant disks; or he might have overheard a discussion concerning them. Still, they seemed to constitute a treasure too grand, too awesome, for one in Quincy's position. The man would have been afraid, Charlie suspected, to commit so monstrous a crime. And yet one could not be certain.

Dr. Todd?

Charlie could not forget that the scientist had been planning to leave this house in the morning. As he visioned the timorous man, his face hardened. Oh, he had not neglected Dr. Todd! At midnight, indeed, he had done an impulsive, perhaps a reprehensible thing. He had slipped up to the top floor to search the

doctor's luggage. The grips had not been locked, but they had yielded no *mazuratas*.

With these problems thudding in his head, Charlie Codwell scarcely slept that night. Toward dawn the rain stopped, and with its cessation the stillness became heavy, strained.

He rose impetuously and lit a cigarette. Frowning, he stood at his window, smoked, and glowered into the trees. As the gray dawn light illumined the wet scene, he could see the empty cage of the condor down there where Quincy had found it. The sight elicited a grim little grunt.

"One thing is certain," he promised himself. "I'm not going home till this thing is cleared up!"

He found himself wishing rather bitterly that Stacy Trent were here. Trent had a clear, logical brain quite capable of overcoming the confusion of others. A sane discussion with his senior, Charlie believed, would assuredly clarify his own thoughts. Might even result in a perception of the mystery's solution! Well, he had sent a message to Trent. He had only to wait.

Charlie loitered until eleven o'clock that morning; and then his partner's blue sedan, spattered with mud, came whizzing up the gravelled driveway. He spied it from the library window and promptly abandoned Dr. Todd to hasten outside. As he saw Trent's tall, silver-haired figure emerge from the car, he felt, with inestimable relief, that a new stage in the mystery—a more lucid phase of it, surely—had arrived.

AFTER Stacy Trent had heard Charlie's account of the affair he said: "Well, you have had quite a night." They were in the library, from which McKane's body had already been removed. And Dr. Todd, apparently absorbed in staring

through a window, stood behind them, listening.

"I didn't find your message until this morning," Trent explained. "Then I raced up. . . . Where's Chief Guthrie?"

"Searching the grounds for footprints, I believe," answered Charlie, keeping a puzzled eye on the scientist. "Not much hope, though," he added. "The rain last night either obliterated or disfigured marks of that sort."

Trent nodded agreement. "You're probably right. Tell me, how's Miss McKane bearing up?"

"Pretty much under the weather, I'm afraid," Charlie mumbled dourly. "She's up in her room."

"In bed?"

"Oh, no. I've seen her twice today."

"Then I'd better go up and pay my respects before we do anything else," Trent decided, rising. "Later we can have a talk and a look around. Ask Quincy to show me up, will you?"

Charlie noticed, as his partner followed Quincy up the stairs, that the man was taking this tragedy in his client's home with profound anxiety. His face looked worn. He must have travelled fast and steadily to reach Parthenon by eleven o'clock, and the strain was visible on him. His clothes, too, were disarrayed, badly in need of a valet. Yet he retained the look of competence, of self-possession which invariably heartened his junior partner.

Trent spent more than half an hour with Claire McKane. He spoke not only as her father's attorney but as a friend. And he learned, to his astonishment—when he asked about her plans for the future—that she had determined to break her engagement to young Harvey Anderson!

"I—I could never marry him now," she whispered in a deep, exhausted voice. "I'd always feel it was his—his smuggling

of the gold disks that brought on all this horrible tragedy. I don't think father would have w-wanted me to marry him now."

Trent understood. He leaned forward and gently squeezed her hand. "You know best," he said. When at last he left the girl, he looked exceedingly grave.

"Where's Mr. Codwell?" he asked Quincy in the lower hall.

"I saw him near the menagerie, suh, just a few minutes ago. Will I call him for you?"

"Never mind. I'll find him."

Stacy Trent went out into the gray, sunless morning and thoughtfully circled the house to the menagerie. When he entered the concrete building, he did not see Charlie. But the sight of the caged animals along the walls held him there in fascination. He winced at the overwhelming smell of the place; but he could not help watching one of the jaguars roar for food. The peccaries began to squeal, and even the monkeys set up a clamorous chatter.

Trent, grunting, was about to turn away when Charlie Codwell ran into the building.

A changed Charlie. . . .

He was pallid with excitement. His eyes were afire in a face hard as rock. Disheveled hair hung over his forehead, and even his tie was askew. Breathless, he sent a swift, searching glance along the length of the menagerie; and seeing nobody there but Trent, he slammed the door shut.

THE older man gaped at him in bewilderment. "What on earth— Don't tell me something else has happened in this insane—"

"Something *has* happened!" Charlie panted hoarsely. "Something I couldn't have thought—possible! I—I want to talk

to you about it alone, Trent. I understand everything now!"

Stacy Trent's mouth opened. "Eh?"

"Everything! Even the condor's being in the house!"

"What in heaven's name—"

"Listen!" Charlie stood rigid, his back against the door. His tones sank to quivering tension. "When the murderer killed McKane, his first impulse was to shield himself. That's nearly always the case. He saw the frightful wounds in McKane's neck; saw that they looked exactly like clawings. That gave him his crazy idea—that and the nearness of the menagerie. He overpowered Milo and freed the condor. Opened the cage against a window of the house, probably. In that way he prevented the bird from flying off into the night; forced him indoors. He hoped to make it seem McKane had been killed by the condor! But the bird went upstairs instead of into the library, and nobody saw him until—"

"Good Lord, wait a minute!" Stacy Trent rapped out. "You're rushing along at fine speed, but what's it all about?"

Charlie sucked in a swift breath. His eyes flashed. "Trent," he whispered, "I know who killed McKane and Sabatéo!"

Trent gaped incredulously.

And Charlie flung out: "You!"

"I—"

A hush. . . . A dreadful moment, with Trent choking on his outcry, losing color. He had to wrench his figure erect to maintain his poise.

"Are—are you crazy?" he finally forced out, huskily.

"I wish to heaven I could think so!" Charlie groaned. "Trent, I—I feel rotten about this! It's hell. But what can I do? I've learned the truth!"

Trent's face was ghastly. He swayed slightly, choked on his words. "I don't—get you!"

"Look at your suit!"

"Wha-at?"

"Your suit. Look at it! Wrinkled, shapeless. Anybody can see it's had a drenching! If you'd come from New York this morning, you'd be wearing one that was decently pressed. And it hasn't been raining here since dawn, so that you couldn't have been drenched like that on the way up from town."

Charlie drove desperate fingers through his hair.

"When I saw your suit like that," he rushed on, "I couldn't help remembering the killer last night was running around in the rain! He must have been soaked! Then it flashed on me, Trent. I realized McKane might have told you about the gold disks over the phone; that you might have been the one who came up here and stole them—sending me as a sort of blind! You could have driven up by car, while I was coming by train. You'd have made better time, too, because I had to wait for connections."

"You're losing your head, man!" Trent cried harshly. "Do—do you realize what you're saying?"

Charlie felt miserable. He hated to do this to Stacy Trent. But there was no choice. He had to gulp down his anguish before he could plunge on.

"Then—then I remembered you weren't home last night, when I phoned! But I prayed you'd got in—I give you my word, Trent, I actually prayed to be wrong! But I had to know! So, while you were talking to Claire McKane just now, I phoned your house again."

"What!" Trent all but screamed.

"Your housekeeper told me you hadn't been in all night. But she had a phone call from you at about midnight. That was when she gave you my message. When I heard that, Trent, I went hot and cold all over. I knew you'd been lying to me—you said you got my message only this morning. And suddenly I could see

everything—why you killed Sabatéo, too! You feared that when you came here, to your client's home, Milo might recognize you as the man who'd struck him down!"

STACY TRENT, his distinguished face as white as his collar, took two impulsive steps forward and seized Charlie's arms in a trembling grip.

"Charlie," he rasped hoarsely, "with— with theories like that you stand ready to accuse me of murder?"

"I haven't said anything yet to the police. I—couldn't. You don't know what hell I'm going through."

"It's all insane!"

But Charlie shook his head and pushed on heavily. "Look. I figured it out this way. You could have come up on the porch last night, seen McKane in the library through a window, and knocked at the pane. He'd have let you in himself, without Quincy's even knowing it. When he told you about the *mazuratas*, you must have asked to see them. And as he took them out of the drawer, you drove the fire prongs into his throat—before he could so much as cry out. There was a revolver in the drawer—Claire McKane told me that this morning. It probably fell to the floor when you seized the gold disks and got out of the house. Then you thought of the condor trick—"

"You're crazy!" gasped Trent wildly. "Absolutely crazy, I tell you!"

They glared into each other's flaming eyes. Each trying to beat down the other's stare. Even the beasts in the cages seemed hushed, watching in horror.

"At the beginning," Charlie said huskily, "I thought myself I must be crazy to have such ideas about you. I had to convince myself one way or the other. So I—I wondered what you could have done with the disks, if you'd taken them. I knew you hadn't gone to New York. You'd probably been around here all

night, in your car. That's why, when I finished talking to the housekeeper, I searched the sedan. . . . Trent, under the back seat—under those tools and papers—I found the *mazuratas!*"

As he delivered this final coup, Charlie saw panic sweep over his partner. The man was trembling violently. He jerked terrified eyes from right to left; he seemed terrified even by the animals; terrified by the very silence. Then, desperately, he began to shake Charlie.

"For God's sake!" he whispered. "All right, all right! Don't spoil it!"

"Spoil what?"

"This chance! Those disks are worth a—a fortune! We can share it, Charlie! We can—"

"No!"

"Don't be a fool!"

"No, Trent! I can't! Nothing like that—"

"I tell you it's the chance of a lifetime, you idiot! They're ours! Nobody will ever know!"

"You don't understand—I couldn't—"

And then, suddenly, the menagerie door opened—opened to admit Chief Guthrie.

He began: "Oh, there you are! I've been hunting—"

But he stopped in amazement. For at his appearance an odd thing had happened. Stacy Trent, as if caught in a guilty act, released his partner and stumbled back four steps to crash against the bars of a cage. He stood there colorless, gulping, staring at the police chief in a kind of trance.

"What the devil—" blankly exclaimed Guthrie. "What—"

But before he could finish, Charlie Cod-

well, with a wild, horrified cry, leaped across the menagerie. He roared: "Look out, Trent! Look out!"

The building echoed his shout. The animals heard it and responded with a deafening cacophony of howls and squeals and snarls. All too late to warn Stacy Trent.

A brown, hairy leg—the foreleg of a jaguar—came through the bars of the cage behind him! A huge paw with claws like nails encircled his throat, dragged him back against the bars!

He shrieked.

Charlie reached him in a frenzy. He seized the jaguar's leg in an insane grip, tugged at it with all the power of his body. The beast itself must have been shocked by the sudden clamor, for it released the man and ran to the back of its cage.

But as it withdrew its paw, those terrible claws ripped across the front of Stacy Trent's throat!

Blood spurted. It spurted in a sickening flood from a lacerated vein. The man dropped to the floor and writhed as convulsively as a dying snake. Charlie came to his knees beside him.

"Trent!" he gasped. "For God's sake, Trent—"

He saw a frightful, demonic grin contort Stacy Trent's lips.

And then the man on the floor rasped out: "It's all right—Charlie! It—it was coming—to me! I was—a fool—ever to try—"

The words ached off into silence and Charlie Codwell knew that the killer was dead.

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FRAMED IN GUILT

A Dane Skarle Story

by

Erle Stanley Gardner

Author of "Marked Money," etc.



"The hell I can't," said the chief. "I'm doin' it, ain't I?"

"\$7,500 reward and no questions asked," would sound good to any man. But for Dane Skarle the offer had a double meaning. It spelled 'money in his pocket—plus a chance to give the bird to a couple of hick cops who didn't know how easy it is to turn a shakedown into a handout.

CHAPTER ONE

No Questions Asked

DANE SKARLE stood in the office of the district attorney, his feet planted widely apart, and said: "It's none of your damned business."

Arthur Dwyer, the chief trial deputy, said: "I'm making it my business."

Dane Skarle thrust forward his jaw and squared his shoulders. There was about the man something of the poise of a panther. He was small-boned, wiry, yet gave the impression of limitless energy being held in leash.

"O. K.," he said. "If you're going to look at it that way, I came here for my health. How do you like that?"

"I don't like it," said Arthur Dwyer.

Skarle's lips curled slightly. "All right," he said. "Then I'll ask the next question. What are you going to do about it?"

Dwyer avoided Skarle's eyes. He was a thin man with a fringe of hair growing around the bald spot on the top of his head. He wore tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles, behind which two small round eyes blinked solemnly. His face was expressionless, but there was an air of quiet obstinacy about the man.

His hands moved aimlessly through a stack of documents which were on his desk. He raised a telegram from the pile, read it, and looked over the top of it at Dane Skarle.

"A wire from the chief of police at Centerburg. He says that you were employed in a carnival there as a sleight-of-hand expert. You were advertised as the 'King of the Magicians.' You had a female assistant named Vera Colma. You had some trouble there and left the carnival."

Skarle laughed and said: "I've left a dozen carnivals in the last dozen years."

Dwyer wet his lips with the tip of his

tongue. "This wire says further," he went on, "that you and your female companion were accused of the theft of some very valuable jewelry."

Skarle said hotly: "And we went ahead and cleared up that crime."

"Exactly. Found the guilty people and collected a reward."

"Sure," said Skarle.

The deputy district attorney laid the telegram down on his desk with a certain air of finality, moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue once more, and reached for another telegram in the pile of papers.

"As nearly as can be ascertained," he said, "since that time you and this assistant of yours have decided there's more money to be made from sharpshooting crimes, and getting rewards, than there is in working sleight-of-hand games in carnivals."

"The thing I'm listening for," said Dane Skarle sarcastically, "is how the hell you figure it's any of your business."

Dwyer continued patiently, as though unaware of the explosive interruption. "You move about from place to place. Whenever you read of a crime in a newspaper where there's a reward for the return of property, you drift in, attempt to solve the crime and collect the reward."

He paused and looked at Dane Skarle expectantly.

"Listen," Skarle said. "I come to this town just like any other man. I pay my fare on the railroad, get off the train, go to a hotel, and there's a hick cop banging on the door and asking questions before I've got my face washed. I send him about his business and an hour later a guy comes down and tells me that you want a talk with me, and will I come up and answer some questions voluntarily, or would I prefer to be taken up.

"Where I made my mistake was in

coming up here in the first place, but I had my belly full of the cops in this town, and when the bird said I was going to talk with the district attorney, I figured I would talk with somebody that had some sense."

Arthur Dwyer said sarcastically: "I'm sorry that you were disappointed."

"You ain't half as sorry as I am."

DWYER said: "It happens that the home of Harrison Ripley has been burglarized, and original paintings valued in excess of one hundred thousand dollars have been taken. Telegraphic demands have been made on him from various parts of the country from a person who signs himself under various aliases. These telegraphic demands have all been for money, and have been sent in Western Union code. They threaten that the pictures will be destroyed unless a substantial reward is forthcoming.

"These demands," continued Dwyer, in the stilted tone of voice which one would use in summing up a case for a magistrate, "all insist that the payment of the reward shall be based upon the return of the paintings alone, and that no questions shall be asked."

"Well, what's wrong with that? A man's got a right to put a reward offer in the paper with no questions asked if he wants to. All you've got to do is pick up the 'Lost and Found Department' of any newspaper and you will find such ads by the hundreds."

Dwyer said dryly: "Yes, as far as a man is concerned who has sustained a loss, he can put such an ad in the paper if he desires."

"Well, what's all that got to do with me?"

Dwyer said: "It is, of course, possible that your arrival in this city is connected with the robbery of Harrison Ripley's residence."

"Yes," said Skarle, "and it's possible I came here to open a drugstore."

"Your attitude," said Dwyer, "is not to be commended."

Skarle laughed. "I presume," he said, "that this is all a part of the reception arranged for by the chamber of commerce. Whenever a man comes to this town you drag him before the district attorney to find out what he came here for. Probably there aren't enough strangers come here to let you get accustomed to them. What makes you think I'm interested in Ripley's paintings? I'd like to know. I must have my necktie on backwards or something, the way the officers started flocking around me as soon as I got off the train."

"Would you say," said Dwyer, "that you were not interested in the recovery of the Ripley paintings?"

"If I were interrogated by anyone who thought he had a right to know," retorted Dane Skarle, "I'd tell him to go to hell."

Dwyer's face flushed. He scowled and said tartly: "This attitude isn't getting you anywhere, Skarle."

"All right. Where's your attitude getting you?"

Dwyer reached in a drawer of his desk and took out a photograph. It was printed on eight-by-ten glossy paper, and was a photographic copy of a telegram. He read aloud from the copy.

"HARRISON RIPLEY
419 ELYSIAN DRIVE
RIVERDALE MICH

NEWSPAPERS REPORT YOU
HAVE BEEN ROBBED ORIGINAL
PAINTINGS VALUED IN EXCESS
HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS
STOP PAPERS ALSO REPORT CRIM-
INALS HAVE MADE DEMANDS ON
YOU FOR TWENTY-FIVE THOU-
SAND DOLLARS FOR RETURN OF
PAINTINGS WITH NO QUESTIONS
ASKED STOP IF I CAN RECOVER
AND RESTORE PAINTINGS WILL
YOU PAY REWARD SEVEN THOU-

SAND FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS
WIRE ME CARE WESTERN UNION
HERE

(SIGNED) DANE SKARLE"

Dwyer laid down the telegram and glared accusingly at Skarle.

Skarle said: "So that's what's caused all the commotion, is it?"

Dwyer nodded. "You've got it. Ripley wires you that he will pay such a reward under certain conditions, and you wire that you will arrive in town on a certain train, go directly to the Palace Hotel, and wait for his instructions."

Skarle said sarcastically: "And I presume that you and the officers here don't want to see the paintings returned. You'd rather see the crooks hold him up for twenty-five thousand dollars than to see an honest man make a seven-thousand-dollar reward."

Arthur Dwyer drummed with the tips of his fingers upon the surface of the desk.

"The concern of this office," he said formally, "is to see that the criminals, having demanded twenty-five thousand dollars for the return of the paintings with no questions asked, do not lower their demands to seven thousand five hundred dollars under the guise of pretending it is reward, and send an ambassador of crime to conclude the negotiations."

"By that I presume you mean that I'm the ambassador of crime."

"Exactly."

Skarle's reply was savage. "All right. I've met your type before. You're part of a hick-town political ring. You birds think that anyone who comes in from the outside has got to be chiseled. What burns you up is the idea of a fellow making some honest money that you haven't got sense enough to make. You birds know that there is going to be a reward for the return of those pictures, and you're running around in circles figuring that some

lucky break is going to let you trap the crooks, get the paintings, and pick up the reward. When you see somebody coming in from the outside, you figure that you have got to gang up against him so as to keep the money at home."

Dwyer said: "You know that that's not right, Skarle. My interest in the matter is official, as an officer of the law in this community."

"Boloney."

Dwyer got to his feet. "I don't like your attitude, Skarle."

Skarle said: "Hell! If we're talking about things about each other that we don't like; I don't like your attitude, I don't like the color of your necktie, I don't like the way you wear your clothes, and you've got halitosis."

"I am warning you," the deputy D. A. continued, "that you will not be permitted to collect a reward for the return of those pictures until you have satisfied the local authorities that you are not in league with the criminals."

Skarle laughed. "I've heard that song before, too. The only conclusive proof that you folks will accept that I ain't in league with the criminals, is to have me split the reward with you, giving you about ninety per cent, and leaving ten per cent for me."

"I'm not interested in the reward, Mr. Skarle. I am interested in enforcing the law."

"All right. I've been in this game long enough to know what I'm up against, and also to know what my rights are. As far as I'm concerned you can go to hell."

He turned on his heel, jerked open the door, walked out into the reception room and slammed the door behind him.

Arthur Dwyer made no move to follow or to detain him. He stared at the door that had been slammed, with a face that was void of expression. His round eyes blinked slowly.

He stood in that attitude for several seconds, then turned and walked to his desk, picked up the telephone, said: "Get me the chief of police."

VERA COLMA opened the connecting door between the two rooms and walked into Dane Skarle's room. "What did he want?" she said.

"A shakedown."

"How did he know what we came here for, Dane?"

"He got wise from the telegram I sent Ripley."

"What right did the telegraph office have to give him that wire?" she asked.

"I don't think he got it from the telegraph office," he said. "He had a photograph of the wire, and I got a glimpse of the photograph. It showed that the telegram had been folded before the picture was taken."

"What did you tell him, Dane?"

"I told him to go to hell. These birds give me a pain. They figure that they've got to be cut in on everything or it's a sign of crooked work."

As Vera Colma had been selected originally by Dane Skarle as an assistant for a sleight-of-hand act, she had a form which could cause the attention of an audience to become greatly distracted. She would have been a sure prize winner in any bathing-beauty contest. And, despite the fact that she had worked in carnivals and on the stage for years, there was nothing hard-boiled in her appearance or manner.

"Dane," she said, "isn't there some way you can work this game without always fighting the local officers?"

"I don't know of any," he said. "If you don't take them into your confidence, they pull that line about you probably being the crook who is trying to get a shakedown for restoring the stolen property. If you do take them into your confidence,

they listen to your ideas about how the job was done, and then go out and beat you to it when it comes to the pinch."

"But," said Vera, "how can they beat you to the pinch if you've got an even start with them?"

"Because" he said, "they've got the organization. We're simply two people trying to nose out an organization of paid officers. They've got authority back of them and we haven't. They've got organization and we haven't. We're just free lances. We've got to get the inside track or we can't win."

Vera stood beside him and dropped her hand to his head. Idly she ran her fingers through his thick, black hair. "Dane," she said, "things didn't use to be this way in the carnival business."

He got to his feet and pushed her hand away. Turning, he stared at her with his peculiar eyes. Jet-black eyes that glittered as though they had been lacquered, and gave an impression of inner force which was being held in leash, yet was tugging at the leash.

"In the carnival business," he said, "we were amusing people. Now we're fighting them. People used to pay twenty-five cents to see the King of the Magicians pull a rabbit out of a hat. They came there because they wanted to be entertained. We were their servants and were entertaining them. That's the reason they didn't fight with us. Now we're out making a living by matching our wits against theirs and we're fighting for big stakes. It makes a difference."

She said: "I guess it does all right."

The telephone rang. Dane Skarle scooped the receiver to his ear and said: "Hello."

The receiver made squawking noises for a minute and Skarle said: "All right. We'll be right down," and hung up the telephone.

He turned to Vera. "That's Ripley."

He's down in the lobby and wants to take us out to his house. I told him we'd be right down. Better get your nose powdered."

"Will you want me out there with you, Dane?"

"Sure," he said. "I don't know what's going to come up."

"Give me two minutes."

"O. K. Make it snappy. I'll be at the elevator. Lock your door when you go out."

Skarle waited at the elevator, and in precisely two minutes and five seconds Vera joined him. They went down to the lobby.

A man in the late fifties, with a white mustache, was peering intently at the people who emerged from the elevator.

Skarle walked directly to him. "Mr. Ripley?" he asked.

The man reached forward an eager hand and his face broke into smiles. "Mr. Skarle," he said. "I'm so glad to meet you."

Dane Skarle shook hands, presented Ripley to Vera Colma.

"My car's outside," said Ripley. "We'd better run out to the house. I think you'll want to look the place over."

Skarle said: "O. K. On the way out you can tell me about what happened."

CHAPTER TWO

The Missing Secretary

RIPLEY led the way through the lobby of the hotel. A large sedan was parked at the curb with a liveried chauffeur at the wheel. The chauffeur jumped out and opened the door. The three people got in the back seat, Vera Colma in the middle between the two men.

As the car lurched into motion Skarle asked: "Now, Mr. Ripley, what are the facts?"

Ripley's voice was mechanical, as

though he had become accustomed to a repetition of those facts.

"I made my money in Riverdale. That is, I laid the foundation for my fortune here. I always felt grateful toward the place and toward the people who lived in it. When I decided to retire from active business, I decided also that I would settle down here in Riverdale.

"Looking at it now, I see that that was a mistake. I had been away from the city for some little time, returning only on visits to meet the old crowd and swap reminiscences with them. My real friends were made in the larger cities, where I had more of an opportunity to select people who had things in common with me.

"Riverdale, you know, is a small community, and while it's a prosperous little city, it's rural in its outlook. The friendships which I had formed here were largely friendships of location. That is, I knew my banker, my doctor, the newspaper man, a few more along that order. Then there was the old crowd who had known me when I first started in my business here. Naturally, it was always pleasant to renew old associations on my return to the town. But the point I'm getting at is that they weren't the type of people I would have selected as friends had I been living in a larger city.

"When I came here and settled down, I found that the companionship of these men left something lacking. I began to miss the more congenial friendships which had been made during the last few years in the larger cities.

"However, my home was here. I had built a very comfortable little mansion, furnished it the way I wanted it, and planned to stay here the rest of my life.

"As a result I tried to temporize. I kept my home here in Riverdale, but more and more I started going to the bigger

cities for visits. During these visits I lived at clubs or rented apartments.

"I'm mentioning this to you in detail because it accounts for rather an unusual situation. Undoubtedly it amounted to negligence on my part, and this is the explanation and the only explanation I can make.

"When I had furnished my house here, it contained several treasures of art which I had been some time collecting. There were half a dozen original paintings by famous old masters which I had purchased from time to time during the past ten or fifteen years.

"Understand that the paintings have a commercial value because they are old, undoubtedly genuine, and painted by men who have become famous. To me, however, they were valuable merely because I loved them. They had touches of color, an interpretation of light, which meant something to me.

"I had these pictures in my residence here, and, as I have explained to you, my absences were at times quite prolonged. In fact, I returned from this last absence about ten days ago, and it was the first time in months that I had been in my house.

"The first evening I didn't notice anything wrong. It was the next day when I was sitting in my easy chair smoking that I raised my eyes to a picture which had always filled me with a certain contentment. It was a picture by an old Flemish master, of a countryside with a road winding along through it and disappearing over a little hill on the right horizon.

"Somehow or other the picture seemed to lack appeal. I thought that the light was wrong on it, and got up to adjust it. Then I saw right away that the picture was a copy, a very good copy, but a copy nevertheless. It was flat, and lacked the master touch of genius. If I had never

seen the original, I doubtless would have thought that the copy was a very creditable piece of work, but compared with the original it was flat and insipid."

Vera Colma said: "Yes, I understand. I used to do a little painting."

Ripley flashed her an appreciative glance.

Skarle said, more or less impatiently: "Well, how about the crime? How had it been done?"

RIPLEY, however, refused to change his manner of telling exactly what had happened in a leisurely narrative fashion.

"So then, of course," he continued, "I made a hurried tour of the house and looked at the other pictures. The story in each case was the same. The valuable old master had been copied and the copy inserted in the frame in place of the original.

"I called in my housekeeper, Ella Crane, an efficient soul but a little near-sighted, and asked her what had happened. She insisted that I was mistaken and that the pictures which were in the frames were the same ones which had always been there.

"Poor soul! I think she still feels that I have taken leave of my senses. She insists that I must have forgotten what the pictures were like while I was gone, or that perhaps my eyes have changed. According to her view, the pictures are the same.

"Her husband, Pete Crane, acts as general utility man around the house. He seems to side with his wife, but I think he really knows that the pictures aren't the same. He swears that he can't tell any difference in them, but his manner isn't quite as positive as that of his wife, and I think he is siding with her merely as a matter of domestic routine."

Ripley turned and smiled beamingly at

Vera Colma, and then at Dane Skarle.

"Go on," said Skarle.

"Well, that's really all there is to it. The pictures were gone and no one seems to have any idea when or how they went."

"How about the other servants?" said Skarle.

"How do you mean? In regard to their views about the substitution of the pictures?"

"No," said Skarle. "I was wondering whether or not they were above suspicion."

Ripley said: "Perhaps, Mr. Skarle, dealing with my fellow men over a period of years has made me unduly cynical. There are very few people whom I would put above suspicion. However, I think that this affair was handled in far too adroit a manner to be connected in any way with the servants. However, there is a man named Ed Jones who acts as gardener, and my chauffeur, Fred Lorton, who is driving us.

"Lorton has much more native ability than any of the others, and has, in addition, had some of the broadening influence of travel. I keep him with me much of the time when I'm in the city, but he does, nevertheless, have access to the residence when I'm not there, and occasionally spends a week or two there during my absences."

"That's all the servants?" asked Skarle.

"That's all of them."

"How about the demands for money?"

"There have been three telegrams," said Ripley. "They were filed from widely different points of the country and demanded various sums for the return of the paintings.

"The first telegram was received the afternoon of the day that I discovered the substitution of the paintings, and demanded thirty-five thousand dollars. Subsequent telegrams have indicated that

the price is reduced to twenty-five thousand."

"Have you refused to pay it?"

Ripley nodded his head. "Tom Diggs, the local chief of police, is very insistent that I refuse to pay," he said. "Diggs points out that there is virtually no market for the pictures, unless the thief could find some art collector who sufficiently admired the pictures to be willing to pay a high price to keep them in a room where no one could ever see them. Those paintings are all by artists who are sufficiently well-known so that they could never be sold on the market.

"On the other hand, it is hardly conceivable that the thief would deliberately destroy the paintings as he threatened to."

"Oh, he's made that threat, has he?" asked Skarle.

"Yes. They have given me a time limit of ten days within which to make the payment, or the pictures will be destroyed."

"How do they want the payment made?" asked Skarle.

"They say that I am to announce my willingness to pay the sum as demanded in a personal ad to be inserted in *The Riverdale Daily Chronicle*, and that they will then get in touch with me and give me detailed instructions for payment."

SKARLE laughed. "I can imagine nothing," he said, "that would be a more useless expenditure of money than to pay for the insertion of such an ad in the paper. Doubtless it would be seized upon as a news story, and every man, woman, and child in the state would know what you had done."

Ripley nodded. "I am instructed to have the sum, twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, ready to pay over upon the return of the pictures with no questions asked. The thief seems quite confident of his ability to avoid the police."

"Have you any clues?" asked Vera Colma.

"Diggs, the chief of police," said Ripley, speaking carefully, "thinks that he has a clue. My wife died about a year ago. During her lifetime she occupied the house much more than I did. She had a social secretary working for her, a girl named Ethel May, and this girl was interested in painting. It was, in fact, quite a hobby of hers, and I understand she was quite clever at it.

"Apparently she gave us satisfactory service up to the time my wife died. Diggs, however, in looking over the references that she gave, has discovered the fact that they were false, and that some of the letters were forged."

"What happened to this girl after that?" said Skarle. "You should be able to trace her."

"No," said Ripley. "That is the significant part of it. She disappeared completely on the day that the theft of the paintings was announced in the press. She had been working for a blind woman, a position which she obtained, by the way, on the strength of the recommendation which I gave her. Then she mysteriously disappeared, and no one has been able to find her."

The chauffeur swung the car up a gravelled drive, and Skarle caught a glimpse of a white stucco house on the very top of a sloping knoll which had been artistically landscaped.

"We are now approaching the house," said Ripley, with some measure of pride in his face.

The chauffeur maneuvered the car through a portico, stopped the machine, opened the door, and handed the occupants out. Ripley led the way into the house.

A woman about fifty-two years old, with broad shoulders, thick arms, and heavy hips, strode into the room, then

paused, and blinkingly surveyed the two visitors.

"My housekeeper, Mrs. Crane," said Ripley.

She said, in rather a shrill voice: "Is this the detective who was going to recover the paintings for you, Mr. Ripley?"

Ripley nodded, turned to Skarle, and said in a low voice: "Of course you understand that in a country community like this there is a certain informality in our treatment of the servants. It is more like a family affair. The servants are all local people, and wouldn't understand it otherwise."

Mrs. Crane went on in her shrill voice: "Well, if this detective knows anything about paintings, I'd like to have him take a look at the pictures that are in the frames. It does seem to me that the first thing that should have been done is to call in some art expert, and find out whether or not anything had been taken. Land sakes, there ain't any use trying to recover anything that hasn't been taken."

Ripley said: "That will do, Mrs. Crane. I have explained to Mr. Skarle your theory about the case. But, after all, I am the one who is concerned in the matter."

She said: "Yes, sir," flashed an appraising glance at the two visitors, turned and left the room.

"This way," directed Ripley. "I'll show you the pictures. Then you can meet all of the servants and talk with them."

RIPLEY led them into a well-furnished room the walls of which were hung with many oil canvases in gilt frames. Skarle glanced at them casually, said: "I'd like to know more about this Ethel May. Where was she working in her last position?"

"San Francisco."

"Were any of the telegrams sent you about the payment of money filed in San Francisco?"

"Yes," responded Ripley, slowly. "The first telegram came from San Francisco."

"That was the one that came on the day you discovered the loss?"

"Yes, the afternoon of that day."

"And was sent just before Ethel May disappeared. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

Skarle said: "I presume that Diggs is getting in touch with the San Francisco police?"

"Oh, yes. They're working on some other hot clues, and expect to have her in custody within forty-eight hours."

"They always do," said Skarle.

"I beg your pardon?" said Ripley.

"Always expect to have them in custody within forty-eight hours. That's one of the stock police expressions."

Ripley said: "That may be, but it would be strange if they couldn't apprehend her, because they have excellent descriptions and, I believe some photographs. She left San Francisco, and probably hasn't gone far."

"Where were the other telegrams received from?"

"Denver, Colorado, and Salt Lake City, Utah," said Ripley.

"Can the telegraph company tell you anything about how they were filed?"

"Yes," said Ripley. "In every instance they were filed by a well-dressed, blond young woman who wore gloves and seemed very business like and efficient. The telegrams were partially in code. She used the Western Union Travellers' Cable Code."

"What's the description of Ethel May?" asked Vera Colma.

"Apparently," said Ripley, "the description of the young woman who sent the telegrams fits that of Ethel May. The case against her seems rather black from a standpoint of circumstantial evidence. I dislike very much to think she would do

anything like that, but the evidence points to her unmistakably.

"However, you will understand that I am interested in the pictures, not in the culprit. If Miss May did this, she undoubtedly had some accomplice who made the actual substitution. Miss May, apparently, only prepared the copies during her leisure, and is attending to the sending of telegrams. There must be some accomplice on the ground who made the actual substitution of the pictures, and this accomplice would now have the original paintings. Those are what I want. The police, on the other hand, are concerning themselves solely with making an arrest."

Dane Skarle said: "You'd sort of like to get the pictures before the police pick up Ethel May. Is that right?"

"I am most anxious to," said Ripley. "Which is the reason I replied to your telegram in the manner in which I did. I feel that if the police arrest Ethel May, she will be almost certain to name her accomplice here when she makes a confession, and I feel certain she will make a confession."

"Put yourself in the position of that accomplice. He will undoubtedly seek to destroy the evidence as soon as he hears of Miss May's arrest. That will mean that the paintings will be destroyed regardless of whether or not the police are ever able to convict the accomplice."

Skarle nodded. "That sounds reasonable," he said.

Vera Colma said: "And of course you haven't any idea who that accomplice is?"

"Well, Miss May was a very attractive young woman, and she kept company at various times with two young men here in the city. Those young men come from very prominent families, and I would rather not mention their names. If you want to get any information along that line, you will have to get it from Mr. Diggs, the chief of police."

Skarle grinned. "The police don't cooperate with us very well when we're working on these cases," he said.

Ripley shrugged his shoulders. "In that event," he said, "you can probably secure the names of the young people in question by talking with some of the newspaper reporters. Personally, I have adopted a policy of keeping my lips sealed upon the matter. All that I know is that I have lost the paintings and I want them back. I am willing to pay you the price which you stipulated for the return of the paintings."

"And no questions asked, eh?" said Skarle.

Ripley turned on him sharply. "No questions asked?" he inquired.

"Exactly," said Skarle. "If I deliver those paintings, I want to deliver them and pick up the money and get out of town. I don't want to be where the local police will try to work a shakedown on me."

Ripley said: "You bring those paintings in, and you won't have any trouble about the money."

CHAPTER THREE

Prop's From a Pawnshop

DANE SKARLE sat in the overstuffed chair with his slippered feet propped on the edge of the bed, smoking. Vera Colma sat crosslegged on the bed, her elbows on her knees, her chin resting on her cupped palms.

"Do you suppose there's any way we can find Ethel May?" asked Vera.

Skarle shook his head. "No chance. She's on the dodge. That's a cinch. And the police are after her. We'd stand no chance of picking her up where they can't find her. They've got the organization and we've got nothing. We can't even get any cooperation from the police."

"Well," said Vera Colma, "I'm not so satisfied that either of the two young men Diggs is questioning is implicated in it in any way. I got hold of Harriet Mills, who runs the social column in *The Daily Chronicle*, and who seems to be the official town gossip. She spilled everything to me. There's Stacy Vixel, whose father is the banker here and a very prominent man. Then there's Sam Boorman, who's in the real-estate business and who seems to have a very nice reputation."

Skarle studied his cigarette smoke. "And both of them were stuck on this Ethel May?"

"And how!" grinned Vera Colma. "That girl must have had 'it.' Both of those fellows simply lost their heads over her. And I guess there were several others waiting on the side line. But these two men kept all of her time occupied."

"Was she a nice kid?" asked Skarle.

Vera Colma shrugged her shoulders. "How do I know? Right now everybody is going around making little sniffing noises when her name is mentioned, and saying that the young men would do a lot better to pay some attention to the local girls, instead of picking up with every good-looking adventuress that comes in from the outside."

Skarle grinned. "Gosh," he said, "these small towns certainly do get clanny, don't they?"

Vera Colma nodded. "It sounds logical about the pictures being here," she continued, "but I don't think that either Stacy Vixel or Sam Boorman is mixed up in it. They seem like nice young men. I made it a point to see both of them."

"Talk with them?" asked Skarle.

"Yes," she said. "I said I was going in the millinery business when I talked with Boorman, and asked him about a location, and I told Stacy Vixel the same thing, and asked about a bank. He's working in his father's bank, you know."

Skarle laughed. "Get any more gossip?" he asked.

"Tons of it. That woman, Harriet Mills, certainly has a tongue that's hinged in the middle and clacks on both ends. I think I know more about this town now than if we'd lived in it for two years."

Dane Skarle grinned reminiscently. "Remember when we used to put on that Hindu Mystic act, Vera? You'd go to town two or three days in advance, and get in touch with all the gossips and make notes on what they said; then when I'd put on the turban that had the wireless receiving outfit in it, and go down among the audience asking questions, you'd sit back in the wings and tip me off when the people who raised their hands were those you had something on?"

"Uh huh," she said. "You know, Dane, I was a lot happier when we were doing that than I am now."

"You'll get used to this after a while."

"But, Dane, we were good at that. It was our business and we were headliners at it. This thing isn't our business at all. We don't know anything about it."

SKARLE said: "We're making it a business, and we're learning about it, ain't we? Shucks, the only way I learned the sleight-of-hand business was just by going in and starting to play around. I used to pick up a few passes and make them when I was pulling a ballyhoo in the side-show for the tattooed-man-and-woman act. Then they took me in as part of the show and I put on a little magic performance in the hick towns."

"That's it," she said. "You were willing to work up in that business, but you want to begin at the top in this."

"Well," he said, "the top is the place to begin. We've picked up more money out of rewards in the last three months than we would have made in three years working the carnival racket."

"And we've just escaped going to jail for about fifteen years when these local cops framed up on us."

"That," he said, "is what makes the game interesting."

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I don't want to get shut in a cell for the next fifteen years of my life."

"We haven't had any breaks, that's all. We've run into tough going every time we've tried this business, but we've always come out all right, at that."

"I know," she said, "but we're bound to run into trouble. You admit yourself that when you get to playing for big stakes you antagonize the local men."

Dane Skarle shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "Hell, these hicks haven't got sense enough to come in out of the rain. Don't you remember how we used to fool them on the stage. My God, girl, there was the time that I made the substitution trick right in front of their faces, and the only thing that kept them from seeing it was the fact that you came walking in on the other side of the stage, with a dress cut about four inches above your knees and a little white apron with a lot of frills around it. Every hick in the house took a recess to look at your legs, and I made the substitution."

"They're not looking at my legs now, Dane."

"That's because you don't show 'em," he said, grinning.

There sounded an imperative knock on the door of the room.

Dane Skarle got to his feet. "I'm betting you five dollars," he said, "against the kind of a cigarette that I don't smoke, that'll be Tom Diggs, the chief of police."

He walked to the door, flung it open, bowed, and said: "Come in, Mr. Diggs."

The man who stood on the threshold was some six feet tall, broad of shoulder, thick of neck, and slightly inclined to flesh. A cigar was clamped in one cor-

ner of his mouth, and his eyes had a glassy appearance as though they were covered with cellophane. His jaw thrust forward aggressively and he stared steadily.

"How'd you know who I was?" he asked.

Skarle said: "I thought you were about due, Chief. Come on in and join the party."

The man strode into the room and stared curiously at Vera Colma.

"My assistant," said Skarle.

"Yeah," said the visitor.

SKARLE said: "You'd better sit in a chair, Vera. He thinks you look unconventional on the bed." Vera grinned and continued to sit on the bed.

Tom Diggs said: "Listen, you folks are messing things up."

"Yes?" asked Skarle.

"Yeah," said the chief. "Now, I don't blame you for wanting to slide in and cop a reward if you get a chance at it, but we can't have you messing around here and making trouble for the officers. I don't look at the thing like Dwyer, the deputy district attorney, does. He figures that you may be representing the crooks. I tell him there ain't nothing to that, and as long as you folks don't get to messing around in the case and ball things up, I'm in favor of giving you a chance to do anything you can."

"Well," said Skarle, "that's nice of you, Chief. What do you mean by 'messing things up'?"

The chief waved a big hand in a circular, inclusive gesture. "Startin' investigations of your own," he said. "Goin' out and talkin' with people, and all that sort of stuff."

Skarle said: "Chief, you didn't think we were going to recover any stolen paintings by sitting here in the room in

the hotel and playing tiddly-winks, did you?"

Diggs said: "That's just the point. You've got to have a license in order to be a private detective in this town, and you folks ain't got a license. As far as Dwyer is concerned, he wants to give you twelve hours to get out of town, and if you don't get out at the end of that time he wants to vag you. I tell him to be broad-minded, and live and let live. But we can't have you interfering with the police."

"I didn't know we were interfering with the police," said Skarle.

Chief Diggs jerked his thumb toward Vera Colma. "She was doin' some gumshoe work this afternoon with a coupla suspects, running around and handing a line to Sam Boorman and Stacy Vixel. Now, I didn't want those two fellows to know that they were suspected. I wanted to put a shadow on them and see what they did. This broad comes along and gums the game for me."

Skarle stood with his feet wide apart and his eyes snapping. "She ain't a broad," he said, "and she didn't gum the works."

Diggs smiled. "My apologies," he said. "I didn't mean any disrespect. You understand that I was just talking with you the way I'd talk with another officer."

"That's fine, except when you talk about Vera Colma."

"Well, it doesn't make any difference. I don't want her hanging around these two fellows."

Skarle said: "Listen! You and I might as well understand each other right now. You're going about it in a little different way from what most of 'em do, but you're trying to keep us from getting a look-in at that reward. You want the credit and you want the money."

"Nonsense!"

Skarle said: "You can stand there and

talk from now until midnight, but I know what's in your mind and you can't talk me out of it. Now, as far as your license for being a private detective is concerned, I'm not a private detective and I'm not acting as one. I'm working just as a plain, ordinary, every-day citizen who's out to grab a reward which a man puts up for property that he's lost or had stolen.

"If you could make that license for a private detective stick, you could keep anybody from looking for a lost dog where a reward was offered."

Diggs said: "Listen, young fellow. I wanted to get along with you, and I was willing to meet you halfway, but if you want to get nasty we'll play the game on that basis."

"O. K.! Let's play it on that basis."

Diggs stared at him with a face that was slowly purpling. "If that's your attitude," he said, "you're likely to find yourself in jail tomorrow night at this time."

"Tomorrow night at this time," said Skarle, "we'll be on our way out of this town with a nice bunch of money in our pockets."

"So glad you're optimistic," said Diggs. "You've shot off your face, and now I'm going to tell you something. You mess around in this case and I'm going to have you arrested on suspicion. You produce those original paintings and take any money for them, and I'll put you in front of the grand jury as the accomplices of Ethel May."

Skarle took a step forward. Against the huge bulk of the chief of police he seemed a slight, insignificant man, but there was about him an impression of high-voltage hostility which would blast through all opposition.

"If you or Arthur Dwyer start anything with me," he said, "you'll face a suit for false imprisonment and malicious prosecution within twenty-four

hours of the time you start doing things."

Diggs laughed mirthlessly. "Go ahead," he said. "Try filing suit against local men in our courts and see how far you get. We have to deal with loud-mouthed outsiders like you every so often."

"All right," said Skarle. "You've never dealt with me before."

"That's O. K.," said Diggs. "I'm telling you, that's all."

"I'm telling you," said Skarle. He walked over to the door, turned the knob, and held it open.

DIGGS stared at him uncordially for a moment and then turned and flat-footed out of the room. Skarle slammed the door shut and locked it.

Vera Colma said: "Why did you have to do that, Dane?"

"Do what?"

"Fight with him."

"Hell! You don't think I'm going to let him pull any stunt like that, do you?"

"Like what? He seemed nice enough."

"Yes, he did! He came in here to tell us we could sit right here in our room in the hotel and play tiddly-winks—that if we ever went outside to try and do anything in the case, we'd be violating the law. There's only one way to handle a fellow like that and that's to let him know that he doesn't bluff you for a minute."

Vera Colma shrugged her shoulders. "O. K.," she said. "You're the boss. The only thing is, I hope we aren't in jail in this town tomorrow night. I'd hate to be in jail here. I don't like the officers."

Dane Skarle grinned at her. "Here's where I show you how to deal with that bird," he said.

He walked to the telephone, took down the directory, and started running his finger down the names.

"Here it is," he said at length. "A. C. Vixel, banker."

He lifted the receiver and called the number. After a moment he said: "Hello. Mr. A. C. Vixel, please. Hello, Mr. Vixel? You probably won't know me. My name is Skarle, and I'm at the Palace Hotel. I'm trying to do some work for Mr. Ripley in connection with the return of his paintings."

There was a moment of silence while the receiver made sounds, and then Skarle said: "Yes, Mr. Vixel, I know. However, I thought you'd better understand the situation. I just had a talk with Chief of Police Diggs. He resents my being here and is trying to interfere with my activities. He's trying to frame this crime on your son, and I'm trying to prove that your son's innocent. The chief of police doesn't like it."

Dane Skarle grinned while the receiver exploded into a raucous succession of metallic noises.

"Well," said Skarle, "we can't talk it over by telephone. I'll get in touch with you some time this evening or tomorrow morning. But I thought you'd like to know just what you're up against and just what Diggs is trying to pin on your boy. I don't know whether I'm going to have any trouble with him or not, but, in the event I do, I want to be able to count on your cooperation."

Another interval during which the receiver made noises, and Skarle, grinning more broadly, said: "Well, that's very nice of you, Mr. Vixel. Thanks very much. I'll get in touch with you later on. Good-bye."

He put the receiver back on the telephone and turned to grin at Vera Colma. "That," he said, "will give that chief of police something to think about. After all, he's got a political job and Vixel is a banker."

She said: "Dane, that wasn't a very nice thing to do, was it?"

"Of course it wasn't. I'm not being nice; I'm being nasty."

"Tell you what you do, Vera. Dust out of here and take a look around for some pawnshops. Find some paintings and buy up three or four of them. Never mind the frames; just get the pictures out of the frames. You'd better be sure that nobody shadows you."

"What do you want the pictures for, Dane?"

"Just for a blind. We're going to work a little sleight-of-hand on these birds."

"Does it make any difference what they're of?"

"No," he said. "Just get some big ones—of various sizes. Get some pretty big ones and some that are smaller—better get about half a dozen altogether."

"How are we going to work it?"

"We'll work it all right. We'll do it the way we used to do the stuff on the stage when there was a smart aleck in the audience and we gave him something to fall for. Remember how those birds used to come galloping up on the stage to strut their stuff, and the audiences used to give them the horse laugh?"

She grinned reminiscently. "Do I!"

"O. K., then," said Dane. "Scram out and get 'em. I'm going out and have a talk with that banker."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bogus Set-up

HARRISON RIPLEY stepped in the study of his palatial residence and stared at Dane Skarle with a puzzled frown. "I don't understand," he said.

"You don't have to," said Skarle. "All I want is to deliver some pictures, have you go into raptures of delight over them. Then you give me a check for the reward money and lock the pictures in a

safe some place where nobody can get at 'em."

"They won't be the real pictures?"

"No," said Skarle, "but nobody's going to know that."

"But why should I give you a check, then?"

"Don't get me wrong about the check. All I want is something that looks like a check. You can take a regular check and write all over the front of it that it's a check for seven thousand five hundred dollars, and then you can ring up the bank and tell them to stop payment on the check."

"I wouldn't like to do that," said Ripley.

"Well, give me a check on a bank where you haven't got an account. Or, give me a check without signing it. I'm not trying to take advantage of you on the check. I simply want to try an experiment here."

Ripley frowned and said: "Of course, Mr. Skarle, you are a stranger to me."

"Sure I am," said Skarle. "I'm not trying to work any confidence game on you. I want to try an experiment. I think maybe I can get your pictures back. But if I'm going to do it I've got to get the jump on everybody. Your local chief of police called on me early this evening and told me that I was going to get thrown in the jug if I didn't spend my time here sitting around in a room in the hotel."

"Well, of course I'll do anything to get my pictures back."

"That's the idea," said Skarle. "I'm going to drive back to town, and I'll call you up in about half an hour and tell you that I've recovered the pictures and for you to have the reward ready. You tell me over the telephone that you'll give me a check for the amount of the reward if I have the pictures."

"Then I'll come right out with the pic-

tures, and you pretend to be sceptical until you've taken a look at 'em, and then jump around and shake my hand and pat me on the back and all that sort of stuff."

"But," said Ripley, "I don't see what good it's going to do. I don't understand."

"Do you want your pictures back?"

"Of course."

"O. K., then. You do as I tell you and that'll give me an opportunity to get some of these fellows coming to me. I'm an outsider, and in a strange town, and they stack the cards against me. What I want is to get them coming to me."

"Very well, Mr. Skarle. We'll try it."

Skarle sighed, grinned, shook hands, lit a cigarette, and left the building. He got into the car he had rented, drove furiously down the gravelled driveway, to the highway, and back to town. When he reached the city he took fifteen or twenty minutes to make certain that no one was shadowing him, and then went into a telephone booth and called Ripley's residence.

"I've got the pictures," he said.

Ripley's exclamation of delight sounded perfectly genuine.

"I'm coming on out," said Skarle. "You have the check for the reward ready."

"That'll be fine," said Ripley. "Of course, I'll want to look at the pictures, but if you've got the genuine pictures I'll have the reward all ready by the time you get here."

"O. K.," said Skarle, and hung up.

He put through a call to the Palace Hotel and rang Vera Colma's room. "Get the pictures, kid?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "I've got them here."

"Fine," he said. "Roll them up in a bundle so that you can carry them under your arm without attracting too much attention, and sneak out of the hotel. I'm

down at a drugstore four or five blocks away, but I'll come driving by the lobby of the hotel in about ten minutes. You be there and I'll pick you up."

She said: "Somebody tried to shadow me when I left the hotel, but I gave him the slip."

"That's fine. If they try to shadow you when you go out, don't try to give them the slip. Let them see that you've got something under your arm, and be grinning all over your face."

"O. K., Dane. Ten minutes and I'll be there."

"Fine," he told her, and hung up.

HE WAITED ten minutes, then drove around to the front of the Palace Hotel. Vera Colma was waiting for him. She had a cylindrical package under her arm. Back of her in the lobby of the hotel, stood a man who was staring at her with purposeful eyes, his attention for the most part riveted on the package she had under her arm.

Vera Colma climbed into the machine and Dane Skarle pushed it through the gears and into speed.

"There was a dick in the lobby," she said.

"I spotted him," he told her.

"What's the lay?"

"Pulling a stunt to make him act as though we'd brought the pictures back. I want to see what some people do."

"Who, for instance?" she wanted to know.

"Well, our esteemed contemporary, Tom Diggs, for one."

"And the others?"

"The servants in the house. Listen, Vera. You've got to play this pretty foxy. I'm going to have him make a lot of whoopee over the return of the pictures. It's going to make quite a commotion, and I figure somebody's going to get pretty much excited about it."

"Who?" she asked.

"Whoever's handling the inside end of the job there at the house."

"How do you mean?"

"This way," he said, driving the car at high speed through traffic and talking without taking his eyes from the road. "Personally, I think they're all wet, trying to pin this thing on Ethel May. All she did, if she did what they suspect, was to paint the pictures. That isn't so much of a job. Any good painter could have done that."

"But if Ethel May did the job, then she had it planned when she was there and painted the pictures surreptitiously, which wouldn't have been so easy to do. Remember that while she was there, Ripley's wife was in the house and Ripley was there a good deal of the time. If this Ethel May was guilty of planning the crime, she had to wait for months before she could get an opportunity to put it across, and then, of course, she had to have an accomplice who was in the house. She's been in San Francisco working steadily and, regardless of when the pictures were painted, the substitution was made while Ripley was on this last trip."

"You notice that they sent him the wire demanding a reward for the return of the paintings just as soon as he had made the discovery that the paintings were gone. That telegram was dated from San Francisco. Now, no one in San Francisco would have known of the exact moment he made the discovery, unless they had had a confederate in the house."

"What's more, they couldn't have made the substitution while Ripley was away unless they had had a confederate in the house."

"Now, if we are going to figure that somebody in the house is mixed up in the thing, I don't see any reason why that somebody had to be tied up with

Ethel May, simply because the girl used to paint. It seems to me it would have been just as easy for that somebody to have had a painter come in while Ripley was away and copy the pictures."

"That sounds reasonable," said Vera, "but why did Ethel May disappear and why were her references forged? Why was the first telegram demanding a reward sent from San Francisco?"

"That's just the point," said Skarle. "She probably disappeared because her references were forged, and she knew that she'd be under a cloud of suspicion. She may have forged her references for a dozen different reasons. As far as the telegram being sent from San Francisco is concerned, I'm satisfied that whoever planned this job did it with the idea in mind of casting suspicion on Ethel May.

"Anyhow, that doesn't make the slightest difference. She's only the one who did the painting of the pictures, if she's mixed up in it, and we're not concerned with that. It's the present location of the pictures that we want to ascertain.

"Regardless of how you figure it, there has got to be some confederate right here on the ground, and I'm not inclined to believe it was someone who was friendly with this May girl. I believe it's one of the servants there in the house."

"They're awfully dumb, Dane," said Vera.

"That's the reason I figure it. They're just too dumb to be natural.

"Now here's the house. I'm going to drop you off just before I stop the car. You make a jump for it and swing around the house somewhere where you can look through one of the windows. If you can't do anything else, slip in through the door. When I go in, I'll shoot the night-latch on the door so that you can walk in. But whatever happens, remember that I want to know what's going on here."

"O. K.," she said. "Let's give it a try."

Dane slowed the car. "Scram, kid!" he said.

SHE jumped to the gravelled driveway, and the car crawled on under the portico where it stopped. Skarle grabbed the cylindrical package and ran to the door. He pressed his finger against the bell and kept it there.

He heard hurried steps from the interior of the house, and then the door was opened.

Harrison Ripley stared at him with a face that was twisted with emotion. "Did you get them?" he yelled. "Did you get them?"

Skarle said: "Sure, I got them. Take a look at these."

He stepped inside the door, and, as he did so, managed to press the spring button which controlled the night-latch. He kicked the door shut, ripped the paper covering off the cylindrical roll, and disclosed a set of oil paintings.

"Take a look at these," he said.

Ripley's voice simulated enthusiasm. "By George, those look like the pictures!"

"Of course they're the pictures," said Skarle. "Come on into your study where I can spread them out on a table and show them to you."

Ripley clutched at the pictures and held them close.

"Did you get me the check?" asked Skarle.

"Yes," said Ripley. "I have the check here. I just want to make sure that the pictures are the ones."

Ripley led the way into his study. Once the door had closed, his face fell and he moodily surveyed the assorted mess of paintings which Vera Colma had picked up in the pawn shop.

"What junk!" he said.

Skarle warned him in a whisper.

"Never mind that stuff! Raise your voice. Holler! Let out a shout or two. Appear to be delighted. Dance around a bit. But keep those pictures rolled up so no one can see them, and put them in the safe and close the door of the safe."

Ripley took a deep breath, got up and jumped three or four times in a heavy, unenthusiastic way, like a man taking exercise before breakfast.

"Snap into it," said Skarle, "and let out a wild warwhoop."

Ripley tried to imitate Skarle's joyous yell.

"I think that's good enough" said Skarle. "Now let's go put the pictures in the safe, and you give me the check."

Ripley opened the door of the study. "Well, well!" he exclaimed. "That certainly is wonderful work. Here's your check, Skarle, and I certainly owe you a lot of thanks into the bargain."

He handed Skarle a printed oblong of paper, and said in an undertone: "It's on a bank where I haven't any account."

"That's fine," said Skarle. "I certainly am glad to have been of assistance to you, Mr. Ripley. Now you'd better put those paintings where they'll be safe. There's a chance that someone may try to steal them again."

Ripley said: "They're going into the safe this very moment." He shook hands with Skarle after he had finished thrusting the paintings into the safe, and said: "Really, Mr. Skarle, you've no idea how happy this has made me."

"That's quite all right. It's a matter of business all around, and I feel pretty happy myself."

"Will you wait a little while and see if we can find a bottle of something with which we can celebrate?" asked Ripley.

"No," said Skarle. "I think I'd better be on my way. You've got your paintings, back, and that's all you can ask, while I've got the reward, and that's all

I can ask. I don't want to be hanging around town and answering a lot of questions from your police force."

Ripley escorted Skarle to the door, shook hands with him cordially, said: "I really must notify the police that I've recovered the paintings."

"Don't be in too big a hurry," said Skarle. "Give me about half an hour for a head start. I want to be on my way before they know anything about it. Good night," he said.

Ripley, standing in the door, waved a farewell.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Step On It!"

THE door slammed, and Dane Skarle got into his car. He drove down to the place where the driveway intersected the boulevard, then switched out the lights of his car, parked it, got out and started walking back in the shadows along the hedge.

He walked cautiously, almost to the house, before his eyes detected a flicker of motion in the darkness.

He gave a low whistle.

The whistle was answered.

Vera Colma came up out of the shadows and went across to him. She put a hand on his arm. He could feel it trembling. "You're right, Dane," she said. "It was the housekeeper—the fat woman with the spectacles."

"I sort of thought so," said Skarle. "What did she do?"

"I couldn't find a window that looked good, so I followed you in," said Vera Colma. "I slipped through the door and into the corridor. I hid behind some hangings and saw that she was out in the hallway listening. When you went into the study, she moved up and bent down so that she could listen through the keyhole. She listened for a minute, and

then came away with her eyes as big as teacups. She almost ran down the corridor, then up the stairs to the upper floor. I slipped off my shoes and followed her in my stocking feet.

"She didn't seem to think of the possibility of anyone following her. She went right down the corridor and turned into a room without even closing the door behind her.

"I followed along behind, and saw that she had opened a little secret cupboard that had been built into the wall. It had been done very cleverly, and had evidently been designed for the purpose of putting those pictures in. The pictures were all there. She looked at them for a few minutes, and then commenced to laugh. Then she pushed the pictures back into place, closed up the space in the wall, and started out."

"What did you do?" he asked her.

"What do you suppose?" she said. "I ducked into the corridor and hid myself in the doorway of another room. When she had gone by, I went back and fooled around until I found how to open the place in the wall, took out the pictures, and carried them out with me."

"What did you do with them?"

"Hid them in the shadows there by the hedge," she said. "Come on and we'll get them."

Dane Skarle was chuckling. "The nice thing about this," he said, "is going to be what happens when the chief of police figures how simple it was."

"It wouldn't have been simple to him, Dane," she said softly.

"Well, there's something to that, kid."

She led him back along the hedge for a few feet, then stooped and reached into the bushes, pulling out a roll of canvas. "Here you are," she said.

Dane said: "You wait right here, Vera. I'm going to do this without any notoriety. It's going to be good."

HE TIPTOED up on the porch of the house. The door was still unlocked. He twisted the knob and walked in on silent feet. He retraced his steps through the various rooms to the study where he had had his interview with Harrison Ripley.

Ripley was seated in a chair, his manner dejected, his face haggard and drawn. Skarle slipped into the room and reached for the door knob. Ripley became aware of his presence, gave a convulsive start, and opened his mouth as though to yell, then recognized Skarle and was silent.

Dane Skarle held his finger to his lips, pulled the door closed, and whispered: "Don't make any noise, no matter what happens."

He unrolled the canvases which he had under his arm, and spread them on the table in the study.

Ripley gave one convulsive leap and grabbed at the canvas. "That's it!" he said. "That's it! That's it! That's the one that was stolen from that frame over there!" he pointed to a big gilt-framed landscape over the fireplace. "That's my favorite."

He pulled the canvas aside, looked at the one underneath, and said, with a rising inflection to his voice: "That's another one, that's one of the genuine ones! That's it!"

Skarle put a hand on his shoulder. "Easy does it. Don't make any noise."

"Who was it?" asked Ripley. "Who had them? How did you find them? How did you do it?"

"Never mind how I did it," said Skarle. "That's a professional secret. But you'd better discharge your housekeeper. Personally, I don't think that Ethel May had anything to do with it at all. Your housekeeper was the one. She had a secret hiding place where she kept them. They'd evidently made the substitution while you were away this last trip.

Probably her husband is in on it with her. Give me twenty-four hours start, and then let your friend, the chief of police, give them the third degree. I think you'll find that they'll confess without any trouble, once you show them that you know they're guilty, and once they find that the pictures have been recovered."

"You won't be here?" asked Ripley.

"I won't be here," said Skarle. "I want seventy-five hundred dollars and God-speed, and then I'm on my way."

"You know, I have the money here in cash," said Ripley. "I have, in fact, twenty-five thousand dollars. I would have gone that high if I had had to."

"That's fine," said Skarle. "You're not going to have to. Get me the seventy-five hundred in cash."

Ripley went to his desk in the study, slipped back a section of the top, and disclosed a hidden safe. He spun the dials on the safe, opened the door, reached inside, and pulled out several sheaves of currency. He counted out some large bills, tossed them over to Dane Skarle.

Skarle pocketed the money.

"How about that check I gave you?" said Ripley. "You know, that worries me, giving a check on a bank where I have no funds."

Skarle said: "Now listen. You're absolutely certain that you haven't got any funds in that bank?"

"Of course. It's a bank where I never did any business."

"All right, leave me that check. I'm going to need it later on."

Ripley looked suspicious.

Skarle said: "Don't feel that way about it. If I was a crook I could stick you up right here and take the rest of the money that's in that safe. Or, if I was just plain greedy, I could have held out delivering the pictures until I got the

reward. I'm giving you a square deal and you can trust me."

Ripley said: "That's so," smiled, closed the safe, and extended a grateful hand to Dane Skarle.

Skarle said: "I've got one favor to ask. Let me get out of here without attracting any attention. Then, I don't care what you do. You can ring up the police and tell them that the paintings have been recovered, or anything you want to."

Ripley nodded, opened the door of the study, looked up and down the corridor, said: "All clear, Skarle."

He shook hands with Skarle as Dane glided out into the corridor.

DANE slipped out of the house and into the car. Vera Colma was waiting in the machine. "All right?" she asked.

"All right," he said. "Vera, you've got to ditch this money some where. Put it where it can't be found too easily."

"Let me see it," she said. He handed her the money and she gave a little exclamation. "The way a girl's clothes are made these days," she said, "you couldn't put that much money on her without making her look like she was wearing a life preserver."

"O. K. I tell you what let's do. Raise the seat of the automobile and we'll put it under the seat."

"Do you think it will be safe there?"

"Sure," he said. "That's a place where nobody would think we'd put it. Therefore it'll be safe."

He stopped the car, raised up the seat of the automobile, and they spread the currency under the cushion, then replaced the cushion.

"Do you think we're going to have trouble?" she asked.

Dane Skarle didn't have a chance to answer the question. He was sending the car into speed down the boulevard toward

the city of Riverdale. A car swept around the corner of a side street, and a red spotlight flashed its fiery eye in a ruby glow of dazzling light. The rented car and its occupants were flooded with the crimson illumination.

"Here we are," said Skarle, and slammed on the brake.

The other car came up to them with siren screaming. Two men jumped out of the car and approached the machine in which Skarle sat.

"This is the guy," said Chief of Police Diggs.

"Hello, Chief," said Skarle.

"Say 'Hello, Chief' to me tonight," said Diggs, "but you'll be saying 'Hello, Judge' to the committing magistrate tomorrow morning."

"What's the trouble?"

"You know damned well what the trouble is! You had those pictures cached all the time, and when you got Ripley to come through with the right kind of a reward you went out and returned them."

Skarle said: "Now, listen, Chief. Let's be reasonable about this thing. You know—"

Chief of Police Diggs grabbed him by the shoulder. "Grab that broad," he said to the man who was with him. "I don't trust her a damned inch. They're a couple of slick crooks who have played this kind of confidence game before. It's their particular graft."

"If you'll let me explain," began Skarle. "I could show you—"

Chief of Police Diggs started thrusting his hands in Skarle's pockets. "Shut up!" he said.

"You can't do that," said Skarle indignantly.

"The hell I can't," said the chief. "I'm doin' it, ain't I?" His fingers closed on the oblong of tinted paper which Skarle had received from Ripley. "What's this?" he said, and pulled out the paper.

He held it up to the light, so that the gleam of the spotlight illuminated the check. "Ah ha!" he said. "Seventy-five hundred dollars! I guess this clinches the case against you, young man. It shows a motive, and the consummation of the crime."

SKARLE said: "Listen, Chief. All I did was recover those paintings and get a reward. If I'd offered to split the thing with you, it would have been all right. The only trouble was, I went ahead on my own, and you resented it."

"Of course I resented it. You don't think I'm going to have any bird come in here from the outside and chisel on me, do you? What's more, I gave you an opportunity to play fair, and you gave me the horse laugh."

"Well, look here Chief. There's no reason why we can't talk business now. I'll give you half of the reward."

"Yes, you will! You'd take this check and skip out."

"No, no," said Skarle. "I'll indorse the check over to you, and you can cash it and give me half."

"Not half. The time for that is past."

"How much?" said Skarle.

Diggs thrust forward his bull-dog jaw. "You get exactly two hundred and fifty dollars," he said. "That'll cover expenses. the rest of it goes to me."

Skarle said: "What is this, a hold-up?"

"Of course it's a hold-up. I told you what you were getting up against, trying to come in here and queer my game. You wanted to play smart aleck, and this is what you get. Either you indorse that check over to me here and now, or else you go to jail and wish you had. One or the other."

Skarle said: "Then all I'd be getting out of it would be the experience."

"Plus two hundred and fifty dollars to cover expenses," said Diggs. "And the

experience will be a damn good thing for you. You're too smart the way it is."

Vera Colma put her arm on Dane's shoulder. "Oh, Dane," she said. "Please don't let's have any trouble. Go ahead and indorse the check. We can make money some other way."

Dane sighed. "Well, I seem to be caught between the devil and the deep sea. Give me a fountain pen."

Chief Diggs produced a fountain pen from his pocket. Dane Skarle pulled out a notebook, placed the check on the notebook, and indorsed his name on the back.

Chief Diggs looked at the check and the indorsement and then grinned. "It's Ripley's signature, all right," he said, "and it's good as gold. This'll teach you a lesson, young fellow, not to be so damned smart next time. Come on, Bill."

The chief and the other officer climbed into the police car.

"You two can go back to the hotel, and wait until tomorrow morning. After the bank opens I'll give you your money," said Diggs.

Vera Colma said uncertainly: "Oh, I'm so sick of this whole business! I wish you'd give us the money tonight and let us go now, Chief."

Diggs looked at her, his glassy eyes narrowed in shrewd speculation. "You're right to be afraid," he said. "This fellow pretty nearly got you sent up to the pen for a long term. Tell you what I'll do. I haven't got two hundred and fifty dollars on me but I have got two hundred. If you'll settle for two hundred, you can have the cash, and dust out."

Vera Colma's eyes met those of Dane Skarle for a swift flicker of an eyelash. The brows arched swiftly, then returned

to their normal position. When they had had their act on the stage, that was a secret signal which flashed between them whenever a smart aleck tried to interfere with the show. It meant: "Shall I string him along?"

Dane Skarle gave a peculiar cough, and that cough was all the signal which Vera Colma needed.

"All right," she said. "We'll settle for two hundred dollars."

Chief Diggs opened his coat and pulled out a well-filled purse.

Dane Skarle watched the transfer of the money with sullen eyes. "You've got more than two hundred and fifty dollars there," he said.

Chief of Police Diggs grinned. "It was her own proposition, and I may need some expense money before the evening's over."

Vera Colma took the money.

Chief Diggs thrust his face close to that of Dane Skarle. "Now, " he said, "you scram! Do you get me? Take it on the lam, you two, and don't come back!"

Dane Skarle said meekly: "Yes, sir."

Diggs said: "Let this be a lesson to you."

Dane Skarle started the automobile.

"Turn it around," ordered Chief Diggs. "Don't keep it headed towards Riverdale."

Dane Skarle swung the wheel of the car.

"Step on it!" yelled Chief of Police Diggs.

Dane Skarle grinned and pushed his foot on the throttle. The car roared away into the night.

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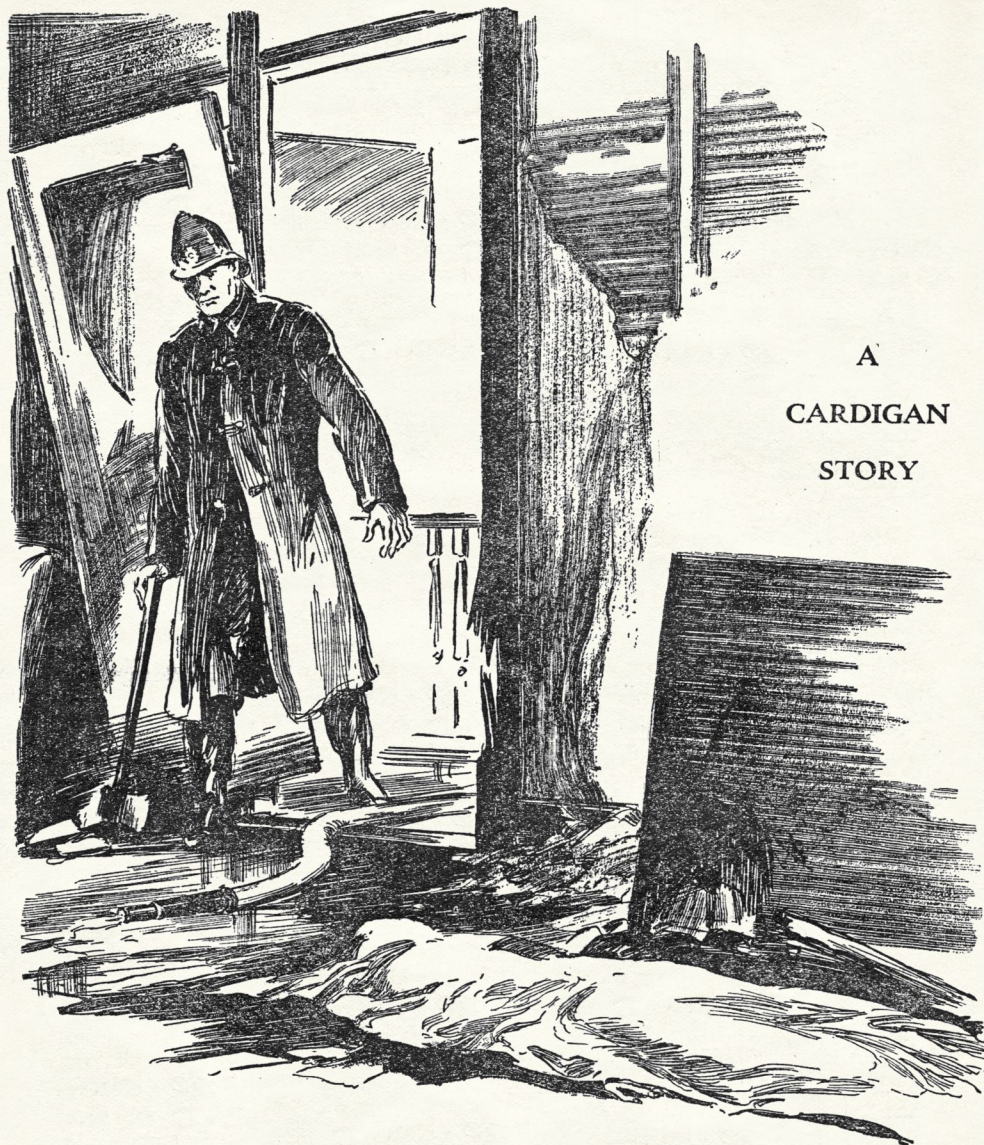
Hagin drew his gun. "This might get rough," he said.

The Murder Cure

by

Frederick Nebel

Author of "A Truck-Load of Diamonds," etc.



A
CARDIGAN
STORY

That big dick from the Cosmos Agency wasn't used to having his own men juggled for murdering a client he'd just been hired to protect. He knew a cure for that kind of trouble. Lead pills from a blued-steel bottle—to be taken internally.

CHAPTER ONE

The Man In 313

HE slapped open the heavy glass swing-door and a gust of rain and winter wind came in with him. He headed up the high, narrow lobby, rain dripping from his battered brown fedora, his old ulster pungent with the smell of damp wool. There was a black directory board before which he paused, lifted his rain-streaked face; then he swiveled and made his way toward the elevator bank.

A man in uniform said: "Sign here, please."

Cardigan put his tongue in his cheek and said: "My signature costs money, major."

"Sign here, please."

"Oh, all right; be superior."

"Also the name of the party you're visiting."

Cardigan wrote as directed, glanced at the clock above the register. It was seven o'clock. An elevator lifted him to the sixth floor. He got off and swung his feet in a long-legged walk. Office doors were darkened; lesser night lights glowed in the corridor. He turned right at an "L," saw, beyond, a lighted square of ground glass.

He opened the door and saw a girl sitting at a desk. She was trying to fit a black leatherette cover over a typewriter. Her face was pretty in a quiet, tired way; and when she looked up, her weary eyes fell blandly on Cardigan, her scimitar-shaped eyebrows rose quizzically. He dipped his head and rain water rolled from the crater in his hat-crown, *plopped* on blocked linoleum.

"Judge Barron," he said.

She paused in her tired, half-hearted struggle with the typewriter cover and her brown eyes seemed to grow rounder

with interest. But her quiet face remained quiet.

He began again: "Judge Barron—"

"Oh, yes. The name?"

He was slapping his hat up and down. "Cardigan."

Rising, she was tall, lissome; her clothes had a nice drape on her long-limbed body as she moved with unhurried grace toward another door, opened it and said: "A Mr. Cardigan calling."

A gruff voice said: "Show him in."

She turned, moved her chin. "All right," she said.

She stepped aside to let him enter. Her brown eyes, darker brown than her smooth lustrous hair, drooped but slid across the lower part of his face as he went past. He nodded from the doorway.

"Judge Barron—"

"Come in— Beth, you'd better go home now. You're tired."

"Yes," her tired voice said.

The inner office was well furnished in dark rich hardwoods and comfortable carpets. Cardigan went toward a broad, littered desk. Behind it sat a man with the gnarled and weatherbeaten look of an old tree; with a craggy saddle-leather face full of wrinkles and a grim jaw rooted between old jowls. His head rode in a cloud of cigar smoke; and strata of smoke weaved like lazy snakes beneath the ceiling.

"You've been to Wheelburgh before, Cardigan."

"Yes. Once I—"

"I know. That kidnap job. Take a seat." The judge knocked open a humidior. "Cigar?"

"No, thanks. I've pumped a pipe all the way from New York." But he sat down, slouched back in the chair, his long arms hanging toward the floor.

"Where are you staying?" the judge asked.

"The Madison."

The outer door clicked shut. The girl had gone.

Barron said: "My secretary. I work hell out of her. She's a good girl." He frowned thoughtfully. "That was fine work you did in that kidnap case. That's why I wired for you."

"Why, exactly, Judge?"

BARRON leaned forward, clasping big, bony hands. "I retired from the bench last year, Cardigan. I severed all political connections and began a weekly newspaper called *The Weekly Truth*." He scowled at his hands. "This town is rotten with crime and corruption. I'm a citizen of this town. I did all I could, as judge, but it was not enough. I'm sixty-eight, and that's pretty old, but my father lived to be eighty-four, and I'm still in the ring. My front porch was blown off two weeks ago. I like life, Cardigan. I like the fight. I hate to die with my work undone."

"Worried about another bombing?"

"Exactly. Last week I received a package. I didn't open it. I turned it over to the police. It contained another bomb."

"Who's after you?"

Judge Barron leaned back. "I wish I knew. Fifteen years ago I sent up a man named Edgar Fitch for manslaughter. He threatened at the time to escape within a year and get me. Well, he never escaped. A month ago he was released. The police searched the city but found no trace of him." He opened a drawer, scaled two photographs across the desk. "The one was taken when he was arrested; the other, just before his release. He's a blond, as you see—a decided blond."

"You think he's still after you?"

"I don't know. You see, Cardigan, I've got this town down on me. Not the citizens, you understand. I mean the political régime, the police; they're down on me. A month ago I caused the chief of police to be dismissed, through my paper. I

hammered him—and I had facts. An inspector got the job, but he's no better. I caused the vice squad to be done away with because it was hand in glove with vice. A man named Maloney rose to be quite a racketeer. I tried to get at him through the local courts, but that didn't work. So I managed to place federal men on his trail and they got him for trafficking in narcotics.

"You see," he went on, dropping his voice, "I have no local help. The police make a show at trying to find out who attempted to kill me. But it's only a show. They're all afraid of their jobs and I dare say they'd breathe easier if I were done away with. I'm not accusing them of trying to do away with me; but I know they're not supporting me. I want to live, Cardigan. I want to carry my fight right to the governor, a good man. I can't die. My work's not finished. I need a man like you and I'm willing to pay for it. And I warn you, you'll get no help from the police."

Cardigan grinned. "Hell, I never expected to."

"I've given you a rough outline of the situation. What I want mainly, of course, is a bodyguard. But I'll also want you to do some secret investigating. I'm busy right now on proofs for the Friday edition of my paper. I'll be here till ten. Tomorrow we'll go into this thoroughly. I'll show you papers, evidence, affidavits; they're in a safety-deposit box right now and I shan't be able to get them until morning."

Cardigan stood up. "I've a man with me. Bogart's his name. I'll send him down in an hour and he'll go home with you and stay at your house overnight. He or I'll be with you at all times. The agency rate will be fifty dollars a day."

"I'll give three hundred in advance."

Barron wrote out a check and Cardigan tucked it into his wallet. "Better keep

your outer door locked. Bogart'll shove his card through the mail slot."

"Good." Barron stood up, and his old face crinkled in a hearty grin. "I'm afraid of death, Cardigan. Maybe you don't understand, but I have work to do—a lot of work—before I die."

They shook.

"Maybe I get you, Judge."

CARDIGAN left the office, waited until he heard Barron lock the door, then strode down the corridor, rang for an elevator. Down in the lobby the man at the register checked him out. It was twenty past seven. Cardigan went out into the rainy, windy street, flagged a taxi and climbed in.

The cab rolled down hill, turned left at a square and pushed through Center Street traffic. It was a narrow thoroughfare, noisy with the clang of streetcar bells, the hoot of auto horns, the blare of radio stores. The misty rain clouded the street lights, hazed the shop windows. Tires hissed wetly. And mixed with the smell of coal dust was the indefinable damp smell of the not distant river. The sooty facade of the Hotel Madison was seen in the intermittent blinking of light bulbs. Its topmost floor was dimmed by the misty rain and the coal smoke that rolled sluggishly from the railroad yards.

Cardigan left the cab, swung through revolving doors beneath the sooty facade and caught a wheezy elevator to the third floor. His room was 313. He pushed open the door and saw Bogart, with his shoes off, lying on the bed and reading a newspaper.

A man sat in a faded armchair; his thumbs were hooked in lower waistcoat pockets and a dark green velours fedora sat sidewise on a lean-cheeked, long-jawed head. He deftly tongued a cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other and said: "Wet out, huh, Cardigan?"

Cardigan said to Bogart: "Who's this?" "Hagin's his name. He wears a badge."

Cardigan looked at the 313 on the door. "I always had a hunch about unlucky numbers." He punched the door shut, heaved out of his ulster, rattled hangers in the closet and reappeared running his hands back over his shaggy mop of hair. He went into the bathroom, mixed rye with ginger ale, dropped in a lump of ice and came back into the bedroom swishing the mixture with a spoon.

"Where's the badge?" he said.

Hagin tossed a badge carelessly in the air, caught it, shoved it back into his waistcoat pocket. "I saw your name downstairs on the register, Cardigan. You're the guy gave one of our men a dirty deal once. Michaels was his name."

"How about the deal he gave me?"

Hagin tilted his cigarette till the red end almost touched his nose. "What brings you west, Cardigan?"

Cardigan went to the window, stared through the grimy pane. Beyond lower housetops, dim lights winked on the nearby river, and he could see the lights on the vehicular bridge, dim where the bridge began, fading away toward the other end. He turned from the window, slapped a hard look on Hagin, took a drink, pursed his lips.

"I'm sorry, Hagin."

Bogart turned pages of the newspaper, said: "I suppose now the farmers will get a square deal. When I was in Indiana a year ago—well, about a year ago—"

Hagin rose. He had a dry, wise leer. "We don't like private cops in this town, Cardigan."

"You're telling me?" Cardigan chuckled roughly.

"Yeah, I'm telling you. Of course, some private cops are all right—"

"I know. They're all right when they play ball with you guys. I didn't expect any help from your outfit. I don't now."

I'm not looking for any help, Hagin, and I think it would be a swell idea if you'd tuck your tail between your legs and get out of here."

"You wouldn't by any chance have a swelled head, would you?"

"I just know my business, Hagin."

Hagin ground out his cigarette in a glass tray, said without looking up: "We're just one big family here, Cardigan. We don't like to have a wisacre clowning around." Then he straightened, regarded Cardigan with lazy mouse-colored eyes. "You may be a big shot back east but out here you're just a name."

"O. K., copper. That suits me." He finished his drink, set the glass down. "Since I'm just a name, I oughtn't interest you. I'm paying four bucks a day for this room and a nosey cop don't go with it."

Hagin sauntered to the door, opened it. He looked lazily at Bogart, then at Cardigan. Then he chuckled drily and strolled out, closed the door softly behind him.

Bogart tossed the paper away, stretched, said: "What kind of a dirty name would you say that guy is, chief."

"I'm stuck, Charley. I can't think that dirty."

CHAPTER TWO

Bombs Don't Walk

THE flat jangle of the telephone bell sounded in the darkened room. Cardigan rolled over in bed, rose to his elbows and stared sleepily about in the darkness. He raised one hand to look at the illuminated dial of his wrist-watch. It was half-past nine. The telephone bell rang again, weakly.

His hand swung out, knocked a glass to the floor. He cursed under his breath, felt around in the darkness, finally got his hand on the instrument.

"Yeah, this is Cardigan—Quit kidding." There was silence in the room, then, faint-

ly punctuated by the scratching sound of a voice in the earphone. "O. K.," Cardigan said. "Ten minutes."

He groped for the bed-table, replaced the phone there, found the little table lamp and switched on the light. He was careful not to step in the shattered glass on the floor. Kicking his pajama trousers off, he left them lie; stepped into trunks, yanked an undershirt over his head. He went into the bathroom and ran the cold shower over his head for a moment, then dried himself and polished off a tot of rye straight. Five minutes later he was fully dressed. He went out.

A taxi with loose tappets rattled him away from the front of the hotel, climbed a steep grade that shone darkly with rain. At the top of the grade twin traffic lights glowed like fuzzy red eyes. A cop wore a white rubber cover over his cap. The lights turned green and the cab made a squealing left turn.

Down in Produce Street there was excitement. Cardigan, sitting on the edge of the cab's seat, saw a flock of searchlights, a crowd of people, a couple of red trucks. Traffic was being diverted.

"You gotta take another street," a cop told the driver.

Cardigan swung out. "This is far enough." He slapped a fifty-cent piece into the driver's hand, jammed his hands into his overcoat pockets and proceeded on foot. The red trucks were fire engines. Firemen were standing around and a squad of cops were rushing pedestrians away from the Central Products Building.

"You can't go in, guy," a cop said.

Cardigan said: "I'm a private dick—"

"That don't cut ice—"

"Sure it does. Sergeant Hagin phoned me to come down."

"O. K. Get in."

Cardigan pushed open the swing-door, headed up the high, narrow lobby. The man in uniform stopped him.

"I'm not," Cardigan said, pointing, "go-

ing to autograph that damn book again."

"But—but—"

"I know. Forget it." He rolled into the elevator. "Six, boy."

There was fire hose straggling down the sixth-floor corridor. It was screwed at one end to a nozzle in the wall. Cardigan followed the hose around the "L," into Barron's outer office. His feet sopped on wet carpet. He saw the connecting door hanging by one hinge. A fireman was leaning in the doorway. There was glass on the floor.

"There he is," Hagin said; then raised his voice. "There you are, Cardigan."

CARDIGAN ignored him. Standing in the doorway, his damp misshapen fedora slanted down over his eyes, his wrinkled ulster up around his neck, Cardigan did not look pleasant. He saw an overturned desk. Papers were strewn around on a carpet flooded with water. A chair was shattered. There were great gaps in the plaster wall, and where there had been two windows, holes now gaped. A shape lay on the floor; a tarpaulin concealed the shape but did not disguise the contours of a human body. There was a smell of charred wood, charred paper, charred cloth. Half a dozen firemen were in the room. Another plainclothesman stood beside Hagin. Bogart leaned against the wall—a squarish, solid-looking man beneath an inconspicuous derby.

"Hello, chief."

"Hello, Bogart. What the hell happened here?"

Hagin drawled: "Got eyes, ain't you?"

"You're just full of bright sayings, aren't you?"

Hagin stepped forward, snapped: "Don't get snotty, Cardigan!"

Cardigan looked past him. "What happened, Charley?"

Bogart said: "The place was bombed. I was sitting here with Judge Barron. It

was about nine-ten when he knocked over bottle of ink. He hunted around but couldn't find any more. He said he had to get some papers written and asked me to go down to a corner drugstore and get him a bottle. I did. That is, I went downstairs, and I was about halfway down the block when I heard the crash."

"That's as good a story as any," Hagin said sarcastically. "Stick to it."

"I intend to," Bogart said. "I can't improve on the truth."

Cardigan walked around the room, his shoes sucking at the wet carpet. He kicked at odds and ends of debris, paused to stare down grimly at the silent shape on the floor.

He said: "See anybody in the halls, Charley?"

"No. Matter of fact, I told the judge to lock the door when I went out."

"Was it locked?"

The fire lieutenant said: "We had to break it down. The elevator boy turned in the alarm. The super has a pass key, but he wasn't in. We had to carry it in with us."

Cardigan spoke to Bogart. "How about that guy at the book downstairs? Did he see anybody come in after you went out?"

Hagin said: "Of course he didn't!" irritably.

"How about the elevator boy?"

"Nobody came in or went out, master mind," Hagin drawled.

"I'm glad there's at least one mind around here anyhow."

Hagin's companion said: "Ain't this guy angling for a bust in the puss?"

"We'll take care of him, Stoper. And his pal—little innocent here." Hagin dipped his head toward Bogart. "You, I mean."

Bogart smiled calmly. "I get you, sarge."

"Well," the fire lieutenant said, "I guess we're through. I'll leave a man on the

job all night, though; the house'll want that, I guess, account of the insurance."

He detailed one man to remain, waved the others out and followed. Hagin took out his shield, tossed it in the air, caught it again and tucked it away. A smile of dry irony played lazily about his mouth, his slitted eyes twinkled with malicious inference.

"Think you two guys can talk yourself out of this jam?" he said to Cardigan.

Cardigan looked up. "Jam?" He laughed harshly, walked around the room. "That's a fast one, Hagin. You wouldn't song-and-dance us like that, would you?"

Hagin was tranquil. "This pal of yours—Bogart here—comes in the building a little before nine. His name's in the book downstairs. At nine-fifteen he goes out. That's in the book too. He goes out to buy a bottle of ink." Hagin chuckled. "That's what he says. Of course, there's no proof. There's no proof that Judge Barron sent him for a bottle. He goes out at nine-fifteen and at nine-twenty—whango!—the fireworks go off. Nobody else is seen in the building, either going in or out. Maybe this bomb had legs. Maybe it walked up to the door, knocked, and Judge Barron let it in. Maybe cows fly, huh?"

"This line of crap," Cardigan said, "is so damned nonsensical that I'm beginning to wonder if maybe you're drunk. Bogart's been with our agency for ten years. He came here to bodyguard Barron. He and I came to this heel's town to bodyguard Barron because the cops here are so crummy he couldn't depend on them."

Hagin's companion said, tight-lipped: "I'd like to sock this guy, sarge."

CARDIGAN pulled out Barron's check, held it before Hagin's face. "Barron paid us for a week in advance. I don't expect you to be bright, Hagin, but you ought to use your head."

Hagin barely looked at the check. "I'm using my head."

Cardigan turned away, sent his keen glance around the room. "What did you find?"

"The bomb blew itself to pieces. We didn't find anything."

Cardigan looked at Bogart. "Did you notice any package on the desk, Charley?"

"I didn't notice. There was a lot of stuff on the desk—papers and books and all that. I didn't notice any box. Only box there was a cigar box, but the judge and I took the last cigars out of it, so it couldn't have been that."

"Were there any windows open?"

"No."

Hagin droned: "Now you're not going to suggest that some guy tossed a bomb up six stories from the street!"

Cardigan went to the window, looked out, then turned back into the room. "No. I guess you're right there, Hagin."

"I guess I am. There's only one way that bomb could have come in this office." He paused, let his eyes rove toward Bogart.

Bogart said: "Hell, chief, this guy is trying to hang something on me."

Cardigan strode across the office, his shoes sopping on the wet carpet. "Now listen, Hagin. There's no use landing on Bogart. I know I gave you guys the run-around the last time I was here, and I know you've got a right to hold a grudge against the agency. But I know where to stop, Hagin. I don't blame you for being sore. I talk my head off sometimes, and maybe I shouldn't. I apologize for anything I've said you didn't like. But for crying out loud don't try to run this job around Bogart's neck."

Hagin grinned. "Oh, so you apologize now?"

Stoper, his companion, laughed.

Hagin joined him and then said: "You don't have to apologize, Cardigan. Your agency has tried to pull the wool over our

eyes before. You don't have to be nice to me, Cardigan. I've got as good a pinch as any here, and things figure out. I'm pinching Bogart."

Bogart came forward. "O. K., copper."

"Stay back, Charley!" Cardigan rapped out. He spun on Hagin and gripped his lapels. "You go through with this, Hagin, and you'll eat mud! I warn you! So help me, if you slap Bogart in jail you'll eat mud!"

Hagin's lips thinned. "Take your hands off me, Irish."

"You hear what I said!" Cardigan yelled, shaking him.

Stoper took a step and laid a fist against Cardigan's jaw. Bogart grabbed Stoper from behind.

"Easy now," he said. "I'll go."

Hagin stepped back, drew his gun. "This might get rough," he told Cardigan somberly.

Bogart let Stoper go and Stoper turned on him with the handcuffs. Bogart grinned at him, held out his hands.

He said: "If this gives you a thrill, buddy, put 'em on."

"I'm sorry about this, Charley," Cardigan said thickly.

"It's O. K., chief. I'm clean as a whistle."

Hagin put away his gun. "Take him away, Stoper. I'll wait for the coroner."

Stoper marched Bogart out of the office and Hagin stuck a cigarette between his lips, lit up. His movements were lazy, self-assured, and his low ironic half-smile persisted.

"Kind of a sock in the jaw, eh, Cardigan?" he drawled.

Cardigan said: "Jaw, hell! I know a blow below the belt when I see it, Hagin."

"You know a lot, don't you?"

Cardigan was lighting a cigarette. "About rats especially," he said, and blew smoke into Hagin's face.

BRIGHT and early the next morning Cardigan made a long distance telephone call to the home office, spent ten minutes talking with George Hammerhorn. He hung up, put on hat and overcoat and went downstairs, grabbed a quick breakfast at the coffee-shop lunchbar and left the hotel.

Giles Harrigan had a suite of offices in the Metals Building. It said "Attorney at Law" on the ground-glass panel. A girl ushered Cardigan into an inner office and Giles Harrigan, looking up from a morning paper, said: "Doings in town last night, eh? Doings!"

"You know my agency, don't you?" Cardigan said.

Harrigan leaned back. "Ever since that kidnap job you solved, Cardigan, the police in this fair city have had itching fingers."

"To get around my neck. I know that, counsellor." He sat down, leaned on one knee. "You read about Bogart. He's an A-One operative these cheap cops are trying to frame. The agency's got dough, and we hate to be framed. Think you can get Bogart out on a quick writ?"

Harrigan said: "Want me to be frank?"

"I guess I can take it."

"Good. It's this: I don't think I can. This may be a good-sized city, but the law has small-town ideas. The powers that be don't like to have outsiders crashing around town. I happen to know, Cardigan, that they hate your agency—ever since you shellacked that dick Michaels in that kidnap case.

"It's open and shut—hell, man, this isn't news—it's open and shut that Barron was tearing things up by the roots. He had them all scared, the cops and politicians as well as the gunmen. Once in a while a pioneer like Barron blazes up. He was honest, sincere—but he tried to beat a system. I'm not saying a political clique murdered him—but deep in their hearts I'll bet they're thankful he's

gone. If there's dirt beneath it, this crowd isn't going to have your agency shoveling it up. Give it up, Cardigan. They've got you by the heels."

"You don't want to take this job, huh?"

Harrigan leaned forward. "To be frank, Cardigan, I don't want to take your money. I couldn't do anything for you. You want me to get a writ for Bogart. I can't do it. They've got the whole town sewed up. I could go through a lot of waste motion and take your money, but I don't do business that way. I can take your case and fight it in the courts, but I'm sure I can't get Bogart out of jail."

Cardigan stood up. "This case will never get into court, counsellor."

He went downstairs, out of the building, and walked to the Central Products Building. Men were already at work removing the débris. The building superintendent was talking with insurance adjusters, and Barron's estate lawyer, an old white-haired man, was tapping a stick against one shoe.

Cardigan said: "Where Judge Barron's secretary?"

"She was here," the superintendent said. "She went home."

"Know her address?"

"I have it here. Number Two Twenty-five Hebron Street—that's on the north side of town. Her name is Beth Tindale."

The estate lawyer said: "You're the—ah—private detective—"

"Cardigan's my name. Yours?"

"Jerris."

Cardigan said: "Judge Barron gave me his check for three hundred dollars and I'm working on the case."

"I dare say that under the circumstances I cannot honor that check, Mr. Cardigan. Reports of the police rather put your agency in a peculiar light. I'm afraid I shall have to order the check stopped."

"Don't bother." Cardigan held the check out. "I intended giving it back.

The agency doesn't take dead men's checks."

CHAPTER THREE

When a Judge Smokes

DOWN in Produce Street Cardigan climbed into a cab, gave Beth Tindale's address and settled back. The rain had stopped and a wan sun was trying to peer through a haze of coal smoke that hung above the hilly city. Judge Barron was dead and Bogart was in jail. It angered Cardigan that Bogart's innocence, so obvious to himself, should be doubted elsewhere.

Hebron Street, on the north side of town, was in a fairly good neighborhood. Number 225 was a four-story brick building with a high stoop out in front, a broad vestibule, polished glass doors. There were eight name plates in the vestibule, and the inner door was open. Cardigan climbed two broad flights of stairs, found a door with Beth Tindale's name beside it, pressed an electric button.

She opened the door and looked at him with her tired brown eyes and he saw immediately that she had been crying.

"You probably remember me," he said. "Yes."

"I'd like to have a talk with you."

"Well—come in."

It was a three-room apartment modestly furnished, and as they entered the living room a girl of about fourteen or fifteen rose from a sofa.

Beth Tindale said: "My daughter."

"Well—I didn't think a young lady like you—"

"Young? I'm thirty-two."

"Congratulations."

She said: "Ann, leave the room please."

The young girl went into another room, closed the door. Beth Tindale sat down on the sofa and looked at her hands thoughtfully.

Cardigan dropped to a straight-backed chair, hung his hat on his knee, regarded the woman from beneath dark wiry eyebrows.

"See the cops yet?" he asked.

"At the office—this morning."

"What did you tell them?"

She shrugged hopelessly. "What could I have told them?"

"Nothing, huh?"

"Nothing."

He flexed his lips. "This is a pretty rotten case, Miss Tindale. They've got an innocent man in jail. It seems to me you ought to know something about this?"

"About what?"

"The bomb."

She raised her wide candid eyes. "How should I know?"

"I don't know. The bomb either got in that office before my associate arrived there, or afterwards. I'm inclined to believe it was before. I'm inclined to believe it came by mail. There was no mail delivery after you left the office last night. It had to be before that. Was it?"

She put her palms together, rubbed them slowly together, looked at the carpet. "The police asked me that. I don't remember any package. The judge warned me against opening any packages. The first one—he must have told you about that—I didn't open. Neither did he."

"But didn't you receive a package sometime yesterday and take it in to him?"

She shook her head. "No. If I had, he would have turned it over to the police—Please, Mr. Cardigan, I've answered all these questions. Two detectives questioned me this morning. I'm tired. I've been working late for days—and now this. I—I'm afraid I'm upset." She ran a hand over her hair. She was worn and a little haggard, he saw. Suddenly she stood up, shaking. "Can't you understand?"

HE rose. "Naturally, I can." He paused for a moment, eying her keenly. "When I came into the office last night, Miss Tindale, you weren't particularly happy to see me."

"What makes you say that?"

"I'll change that. You were a little frightened. I could tell by the way you kept looking at me."

She stared hard at the floor. "I—I was just tired. Maybe I was a little afraid. That was natural. I didn't recognize you. You were a strange man, and being wet the way you were—well, for a moment you did frighten me."

"Why?"

"I—I lived in constant fear that someone would come in and kill the judge—and perhaps me." Her voice was low, almost a whisper. Her face was very white.

"How long have you been with the judge?"

"Ten years."

He put his hand slowly into the inside pocket of his overcoat. She looked up sharply. He did not remove his hand.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing."

Eying her steadily, he drew a folded wad of brown paper from his pocket. "Last night," he said, "after almost everybody had gone, I picked this out of the waste basket. I found out that at five P. M. a man came through the offices collecting refuse from waste baskets. So this must have been thrown in after five o'clock."

She made no reply. She stood very straight, white-faced, her arms close to her sides, her gaze riveted on his hands.

He unfolded the paper, said: "A package must have come into the office while you were there. This piece of paper at one time contained something. It was opened and this paper was thrown in the basket after five o'clock."

"I don't remember any package. Judge Barron may have brought something in with him."

Cardigan shook his head, "No, Miss Tindale. This package came through parcel post. It was addressed to Judge Barron at his office address."

She clasped her hands together and her lips shook. "I don't remember receiving any package."

"You're sure of that?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes—I—I'm sure."

He folded the paper, said levelly: "Remember, Miss Tindale—or should it be Mrs. Tindale?"

"I've used the 'Miss' for business purposes."

"Remember," he went on, "that a friend of mine is in jail for the bombing to death of Judge Barron."

"I—I'm sorry I can't help."

He said no more. He thrust the wad of paper into his pocket, went to the door, turned to look at her white, harried face and then left the apartment. He walked slowly down the staircase, his face a mask of thought. Reaching the street, he crossed to the opposite sidewalk. Looking up, he saw the woman's white face pressed to the window. But in an instant it was gone.

He walked on. At the next corner he flagged a taxi, climbed in and gave a south-side address.

The woman's white face stayed before his mind's eye.

THE Elmo Cigar Factory was a three-storied building with a lot of large plate-glass windows. Cardigan went in by way of the broad main entrance, spoke with a clerk behind a wooden railing. In a minute he was led past a row of desks and into a private office.

A man of middle years stood behind a

desk. "I'm the manager here, sir. Did I get the name right—Cardigan?"

"That's right." He flipped open a wallet. "My credentials."

"Ah, yes. I read in the paper—"

"I know. You read a lot of somebody's ideas. I hope you'll pardon me if I say you would have found more sense in the comic strip. —By the way, was Judge Barron a client of yours?"

"Indeed he was! For years. Years, sir! Our Elmo Perfecto has been his favorite for years. He was a great cigar smoker."

"What did you do, send him a box regularly?"

The manager nodded. "He's had a standing order for years for two boxes a month, one at the middle of the month, the other at the end. He always preferred them straight from our factory."

"How did you send them?"

"Parcel post."

Cardigan withdrew the folded sheet of brown paper from his pocket, spread it on the desk, said: "Is that yours?"

"Why—er—yes." The manager pointed. "Our address label—"

The address label had been pasted in the center of the sheet of brown paper. The label was pale blue, the firm's name lettered in black boldface. The address of Judge Barron was typewritten.

The manager said: "Decidedly our label!"

"When was the last box of cigars sent?"

The manager looked at a calender. "Today is the sixteenth. Of course—it was sent on the fifteenth—yesterday. I can find out exactly." He used a phone, and when he had finished talking with the stockroom, said: "Yes. At three yesterday afternoon. But what, sir—what is the matter?"

Cardigan was biting his lip. "I'm damned if I know. Show me the man who sent the box out."

He was taken back to the stockroom, and the manager said: "Old Franz Muller has been packing and shipping the judge's cigars for years—Franz, come here!"

A little old man in steel-rimmed spectacles said frankly that he had packed and shipped a box of cigars to Judge Barron on the day before. Cardigan wrote down his name and address, eyed him sharply.

The manager said: "You might have seen an article in the Sunday Standard a few weeks ago. It was all about the judge, and about his habits. His cigar habit was mentioned also. How twice a month, regularly on the fifteenth and the last day, he had our cigars mailed to him."

"No, I didn't see it—You've noticed, haven't you, that quite often on parcel-post packages the post office doesn't stamp the date?"

"I believe I have."

Cardigan folded the sheet of brown paper and pocketed it. He said to Franz: "Have you ever met or seen the judge?"

"No. Only in the papers I see him."

Cardigan, puzzled, let his eyes wander around the stockroom, then said abruptly to the manager: "Thank you very much for the way you've helped me. Now something else. I wish you'd give me a list of local addresses to which you've sent single boxes of cigars during the past month."

"It will take some time. Could I send the list to your hotel?"

"O. K. Do that, will you?"

The taxi had waited for him. He climbed in, lit a cigarette, thought for a moment and then said: "Drive to the Central Products Building."

The late judge's office was pretty thoroughly cleared out by the time Cardigan arrived. The estate lawyer was about to leave.

Cardigan said: "Who took care of mail that arrived this morning for the judge?"

"Why, I dare say his secretary took

care of it. Naturally she handed it over to me, since by law I am entitled—"

"Any parcel post?"

"There were only letters."

"Thank you."

HE went downstairs, passed through the lobby and stood for a few minutes outside, tapping his foot against the curb. Then he began walking downhill. He turned left at Center Street, went past the entrance to the vehicular bridge, made another left turn into a narrow street and entered Police Headquarters.

"Well, I'm glad to see you, Cardigan," the man at the desk said.

"Where's Bogart?"

"Downstairs, I guess."

He found Bogart in a dim, narrow cell.

"How they treating you, Charley?"

"Outside of a couple of socks in the jaw and a swift kick in the pants, I guess I can't complain."

"They've been tough, eh?"

"Kind of. Chicago could take lessons from this town."

"Hagin mostly?"

"Yeah."

Cardigan's eyes glittered but his voice was low. "Sit tight, Charley. I'm either on a hot trail or I'm goofy. I tried to get you out on a writ, pal, but they spell law backwards here; they say, 'wal—' and give it up. They're framing you."

"Don't tell the wife, will you? She'll get scared."

"You're not afraid of these mutts, are you?"

"I can take it, I guess."

"That's the kid. If they lay on to you too hard kick 'em in the belly. I'll get you out of this or pile in here with you trying."

Cardigan went upstairs to the central room and found Hagin and Stoper leaning against the desk. He went straight toward them wearing an ugly brown look.

He said quietly: "You two baboons lay your dirty paws on my pal again and I'll break your lousy necks." He remained in front of them, jabbing his hard malignant gaze from one to the other.

Hagin drawled: "You're in headquarters, baby."

"I can tell by the stink."

A tall bald man walked into the central room and said: "Is that Cardigan?"

Cardigan turned. "You want me?"

"I'd like to talk with you—in my office."

Cardigan followed the bald man into a shabby office and the latter said: "Kone's my name." He flopped down. "Inspector Kone. Take the load off your feet."

"Thanks."

"Smoke?"

"I'm smoking."

Kone leaned back, pawed a few times at his jaw, squinted a hard blue eye across the desk. "You're inclined to be nasty, Cardigan, aren't you?"

"I hate a double cross."

"Words, words man! Nobody's double-crossing you."

"O. K. I'm wrong. Now what?"

"This, Cardigan. I'd like to give you a break and I think I can swing it. If we tried hard enough around here, we might be able to spring your friend."

"What's the swap?"

"Well—look here, Cardigan. You're supposed to be a fancy cop, a go-getter, a hellion. Back east, maybe. Not here. We work different out here. A guy like you can create a lot of trouble just by walking down the street. It's in your blood. We don't like trouble makers. I'd like to see you pack up and go home."

"With Bogart?"

Kone patted his bald head. "Um—I think we could arrange that."

Cardigan stood up, said: "Will you wait a minute?"

He left the office and went downstairs

to Bogart's cell. "Inspector Kone wants to swap, Charley. It's up to you. We bail out of here with our eyes shut—hear nothing, see nothing, say nothing. It's O. K. by me if it's O. K. by you."

"What do you think your chances are of getting this thing in the bag?"

"Pretty good."

"Then suppose you tell the inspector to go spit up a rope."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Rod and a Red-Head

A SPECIAL messenger was sent by the Elmo Cigar Factory.

"Wait a minute, boy," Cardigan said.

He tore open the envelope, scanned a list of names and addresses. Beside each name was the date on which a single box of cigars had been shipped to the consignee.

"Catch," Cardigan said.

A half dollar slapped into the Negro's pale palm. "Yassuh, boss!" He bowed out.

The list contained twenty-five names. Cardigan found nineteen of the names listed in the telephone directory; he jotted down the telephone numbers, but had no real intention of putting through any calls. In another section of the book he found listed a business rating bureau. He put on hat and coat, carried the list with him, and found the bureau located six blocks to the north. He showed his credentials, turned on the Irish personality—the person in charge was a woman—and was permitted access to the bureau's files.

Most of the nineteen were old residents; twelve were past sixty years of age and seven of these were retired from active life—landed gentlemen of the outlying districts. Three were clergymen, one a hospital superintendent, four were doctors. By a process of elimination he cut down his list to six. He did not entirely

discard the nineteen, but pigeon-holed them as second, third and fourth possibilities. He thanked the manageress, said: "That's a swell head of hair you have." And departed.

He bargained with a cab driver for an hourly rate and set out to investigate the six addresses. At the first stop, he found that the addressee had died a week before—aged ninety-one. "Pop died of smoking," his seventy-year-old daughter said.

Cardigan went on. The next address was a small grocery store in a thrifty neighborhood. The cigar-smoker was a blind man with one leg—a relic of the Civil War. Cardigan crossed off his name, drove to the north side of town and found the third addressee to be a high-school teacher; and after a five minutes' talk he crossed off that name.

The next address took him closer to the heart of the city. He entered a five-story frame building and spoke with the janitor. The man whom Cardigan sought was not in. It took Cardigan five minutes and cost him five dollars to wangle a pass key. He climbed to the top floor, found a door numbered "4" at the front of the hall and keyed his way into a bed-sitting-room that was large, old-fashioned, shabby.

The bureau drawers were empty. A single tie hung on the harp-shaped frame of the bureau mirror. He swiveled and crossed to a closet, found inside a single suit of clothes, a suitcase on the floor. The suitcase was open and contained linen, socks, collars, ties, a pair of shoes. No garment contained a label. There were no papers, no letters.

Cardigan sighed and returned to the room. There was a heavy square of glass on the bureau that presumably was intended for a paper weight. Cardigan picked it up carefully between thumb and forefinger and carried it to the window. He studied it for a long moment.

He lit a cigarette, took a few puffs, held

it up and let it burn slowly until a quarter inch of white ash formed. He sprinkled the ash on the square of glass, used a little finger to wipe carefully grains of it away. He set the glass down. From his wallet he took a piece of tape an inch long and half an inch wide and a strip of isinglass of equal dimensions. He placed the strip of tape on the ashed part of the glass, pressed it down firmly. When he removed it, a fingerprint, made legible by the white ash, had been transferred from the glass to the strip of black tape. He replaced the isinglass on the tape, over the print.

He went downstairs, said to the janitor: "You're sure this man has red hair and a red mustache?"

"Yes."

"And his name's George Rawson."

"Yes."

"O. K. Here's your key. Now keep your mouth shut. Forget I was here."

HE made a trip to police headquarters and managed to reach the identification bureau without running into Hagin or Stoper. A half-asleep attendant waved him through to the files, and Cardigan spent twenty minutes thumbing card indexes. He wound up by stealing a record card and a picture, and then took a rear exit out to avoid the possibility of meeting Hagin and getting into another argument.

Feeling the need of a walk, he struck out over the hill, and by this route it took him half an hour to reach the frame house. He found the janitor at the rear of the lower hall and was about to engage him in a conversation when he heard footfalls coming down the staircase. He bided his time.

A man came down and went out the front door and the janitor whispered: "That's him!"

"O. K."

When Cardigan reached the front door

and looked out, the man was halfway down the street. Cardigan let him get a block ahead, then swung out and followed, but on the opposite side of the street. The man walked rapidly, purposefully. He was tall, well-built, a little round-shouldered. Two blocks farther on, he turned left. Fifteen minutes later he turned right into an alley. Cardigan lengthened his stride, slowed down as he neared the mouth of the alley, peered cautiously around the corner of the building. He saw the man passing into a door midway down the alley.

In a minute Cardigan moved, went into the alley, reached the door. Laying his hand on the knob, he listened, then turned the knob and entered a dim hallway. He made his way slowly to the front of the hall, listened, looked up the staircase. There was something vaguely familiar about his surroundings. He went out into the vestibule and looked at the house number. It was number 225 Hebron Street. "I'll be damned!" he muttered.

ENTERING, he went swiftly, silently, up the stairs, paused awhile on the first landing and then took the second staircase up. He bore down on Beth Tindale's door with a hawklike expression, used his right hand to draw his gun, laid his left cautiously on the knob. It turned. He could feel the door give.

The man with the red hair and the red mustache turned as Cardigan entered with his gun held level. Beth Tindale let out a choked little cry.

"Watch those hands, Red!" Cardigan clipped.

He kicked shut the door, went slowly across the living room, stopped, studied the man's face for a long moment.

"George Rawson," he said thoughtfully.

"Of course—"

"I mean—Edgar Fitch alias George Rawson."

The woman drew her lips tightly together.

The man's blue eyes shimmered.

"Despite the red hair," Cardigan said, and added: "It's a nice dye job, Fitch."

"My name's not Fitch."

"No? I happen to know it is. I clouted through your room this afternoon and picked up a fingerprint on a chance. I took the print down to headquarters and the print says it belongs to a man named Edgar Fitch. This Edgar Fitch was once sentenced by Judge Barron for manslaughter."

The man snapped: "That's a lie!"

"A week ago you had a box of cigars sent to your address. The box came from the Elmo cigar factory. The Elmo Cigar Company sent out a box of cigars to Judge Barron yesterday afternoon. I found out that these cigars would not have been delivered until this morning. You received the judge's mail this morning, Mrs. Tindale. What did you do with the box of cigars?"

Her voice was choked: "I didn't—"

Cardigan snapped: "Cut it out! I'm damned sick and tired of this lying!"

"I turned the mail over to the judge's estate lawyer."

"Sure—all except the box of cigars. How come this former convict is paying you a call?"

"My name's George Rawson," the man ground out.

Cardigan moved his eyes from the man to the woman. "O. K., George. Put your hat on. You, Mrs. Tindale, put your hat and coat on and we'll all go down to police headquarters. Where's your daughter?"

"I sent her away."

"Where?"

"To—friends in Ohio."

"O. K. Get your clothes on and we'll go."

She did not move. Her eyes stared very hard at the floor and her hands were clenched at her sides. "No," she breathed hoarsely. "I won't go."

"I hate like hell to get rough," Cardigan said. "But you'll have to go. You've waltzed me around enough and after a time I get sore—Come on, Fitch, get her hat and coat. No—you'd better stay where you are. You, lady, snap on it. This boy friend of yours is heeled and aching to go into action and if you don't start quick there's liable to be trouble."

She breathed deeply. "I am not going." "Fitch—stick up your hands."

The man backed away. "I tell you my name's not Fitch."

"If it isn't, what's the idea of getting scared. Come on, up with those hands!"

The man raised his hands and backed up until his back was against the wall. His blue eyes glinted and his lips were taut, his face pale and dry.

"Where's the rod, Fitch?"

"I tell you—"

"Under your arm, huh? Up, boy!"

He shot his left hand beneath the man's lapel and drew out a black automatic.

"Now—you!" breathed the woman.

Cardigan felt something hard against the small of his back. He tensed and his eyes drooped.

"Put up your hands!" the woman whispered.

"It's always a dame," Cardigan said. "Always a dame."

"If you move I'll kill you!" she said in a low passionate whisper. "I had nothing to do with the murder of Judge Barron. God, I'm innocent! Believe me, Cardigan. I was devoted to the judge. But I had to protect my daughter—my poor daughter. I couldn't let it be known that—"

"I'm blowing," the man with the red hair said.

Cardigan muttered: "You stay here!"

"Nuts! I'm blowing. And you're blowing with me. You know just too much—too much!"

The woman shook. "No—no! Let me explain! Ed—"

Cardigan spun. "So it is Ed!"

She had her gun trained on him. "I warn you—stay back!"

The red-head snatched his gun from Cardigan's hand, snapped: "I'll take care of him. Get moving, Cardigan—and watch your step." He said to the woman: "You stay here and forget you ever saw this." He jammed his gun against Cardigan's back, took away Cardigan's gun. "Get."

The woman choked: "Please, Ed—"

"If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up!" He jabbed Cardigan hard. "Move, you!"

"No! No, Ed!" the woman panted.

Fitch glared at her. "Get back!" he rasped.

Cardigan walked to the door, his hands up.

"Open it," Fitch said.

Cardigan opened it and Fitch shoved him into the hall, said: "Get going and watch yourself!"

They went down to the hall door, into the street. Fitch, by this time, had shoved his gun into his pocket, but his hand remained on the butt.

"Walk naturally, Cardigan—and get funny and I'll let you have it. Turn left here. We'll take the back alleys."

"You got nice ideas in stir, didn't you?"

"I said I'd get that lousy judge. And it seems I have to polish you off to keep the silence."

"Look out for the woman. She may frame you some day the way she framed the judge."

FITCH chuckled drily. "She can't frame me. She used to be my wife. Turn right here. The kid's our kid. She's nuts on the kid."

"I don't believe it."

"As if I care. I nailed her when she was a kid and didn't know any better. She didn't frame the judge, Cardigan. I got around that. I was up to her flat one day last week and I picked up something she clipped from the newspaper. About the judge. It was an article about his habits, and one of them was about how for many years the Elmo Company sent him a box of cigars regularly on the fifteenth and the end of the month. It gave me an idea—turn left here—it gave me an idea and I sent for a box of cigars. I took the wrapper off and used a chemical to remove my address. I steamed off the address sticker and monkeyed around some typewriter stores and wrote in the judge's. I used a chemical, too, to take off the postmark. I burned the cigars out of the box and fitted in the bomb so it would go off when the box cover was pried up.

"Well, it worked, didn't it? Seeing a package from the cigar company arriving around the time one always arrived, the judge was caught napping. Even Beth didn't suspect. Not at first. After the fireworks, she knew. So she went down to the office early this morning and did away with the genuine box that arrived in this morning's mail. Not because she likes me. But she was scared. She's nuts about the kid. She's funny that way. Women are saps, Cardigan."

Cardigan said: "You seem proud of yourself."

"Why not? I did a neat job. I learned a lot of things in the big house, copper. I learned that when a cop gets too wise there's only one thing to do."

"You also talk like a hop-head."

"I learned about that, too, in stir," he laughed. "I know a nice alley down here in a condemned part of town. No cops around and no people. Only cats—and cats don't talk. And the woman will never

talk. Because she loves the kid and the kid don't know her old man's a murderer. Ain't that cute? I can use Beth for a lot of jobs now, Cardigan—because I hold a lot over her. She'd die for the kid."

"You hop-heads always give me a pain."

"In a minute, boy, I'll give you a big one you'll never get over. Here's the alley. Turn into it."

Cardigan growled: "Now look here, Fitch. Don't be a bum. Give me a break—"

"You'll be better dead, buddy."

Cardigan's face was gray, muscles bulged at the corners of his mouth and his tongue, his throat, felt dry. He knew he couldn't talk himself out of this. He saw the man was too far away for any quick trick to be effective. He licked his lips, and then he sneered, snarled: "Go ahead, you yellow heel, cut loose!"

A GUN banged twice and Cardigan closed his eyes but felt no pain, no shock. He opened his eyes and saw he was still standing. But he saw that Fitch was writhing on the ground. He started, looked up the alley. He broke into a fast run and at the mouth of the alley he saw Beth Tindale leaning weakly against the wall, a smoking gun in her hand.

"I—I couldn't let him do it. I—I couldn't—"

He snatched the gun from her hand. "Beat it! Get out of here! Hit that alley across the street and fade." He shook her. "You hear me! Beat it! I'll take care of this! Go on!" He shoved her and she turned and staggered across the street and entered the alley beyond. She turned around. He waved to her and then motioned for her to hasten on.

He hurried back to where Fitch was writhing on the ground. Somewhere a police whistle shrilled.

Cardigan leaned down and said bitterly: "Listen, Fitch! A cop's coming!"

"Save me! Get me to a hospital—"
 "Hate to die, huh? Listen, you rat. When that cop comes I'm going to stand over you and if you don't tell him you killed Judge Barron I'm going to kill you—"

Two cops came running down the alley. Cardigan held up his hands and said: "Here he is, boys!"

"Who?"

"Fitch."

He stood over Fitch with his hand bulging in his pocket. Fitch writhed and screamed. "A doctor! A hospital! Get me—get me to a doctor! I—I killed Barron! I—I can't stand this pain! Go get me a doctor—a doctor! Why are you all waiting around? I told you, didn't I? Didn't I say I killed Judge Barron? A doc—doctor—" He choked, thrashed on the ground.

One of the cops said: "The judge said something about a guy named Fitch."

"You heard what Fitch said, didn't you?" Cardigan asked.

"Sure."

"And you?" he flung at the other cop.

"I ain't deaf."

"Swell. Now get an ambulance."

The cop pointed. "Hell, look—he don't need an ambulance any more. See? Take a look at his eyes now—"

"I'll go phone H. Q. and the morgue," the other cop said.

"Yeah," said Cardigan. "And call Hagin too."

"Hagin?"

"Hagin. Tell him a draper from New York by the name of Cardigan wants to hang something dark on his eye."

COMING NEXT MONTH

ME — CARDIGAN

— by —

FREDERICK NEBEL

That big dick from the Cosmos Agency has plenty to say and more to do when he meets murder than any ten ordinary detectives. And every word packs a punch—every action a wallop!

Crooked Gamblers—A Five-Spot Clue—A Mystery Man From Oklahoma—
 A Deadly Danger Trap

You'll find them all in this great thrill-packed novelette in

DIME DETECTIVE for February

On all the newsstands JANUARY 15th



His finger tensed on the trigger of his gun.

DEATH TUNES IN

by
Maxwell Hawkins

Author of "Pipe Line of Peril," etc.

Detective Fitzgerald was no radio performer, nor did he want to be one. But when KXXY's star crooners began to get themselves murdered he changed his mind. Then it was time to grab a microphone and broadcast a little death melody all his own.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder Melody

WITH short, regular jerks, the red second hand moved round the clock on the wall of Studio D—a thin finger of fate swinging relentlessly toward the moment that divides today from tomorrow.

Midnight! The signal light on the wall flashed red. Then a voice seeming to come from nowhere in particular announced: "This is Station KXXY!"

Dave Parrish, sleek of hair and pale of face, removed his glance from the clock and turned it toward Guy Romano, the orchestra leader. He nodded, and the Italian's hands looped into an emphatic

down-beat. The crash of the orchestra filled the big room. Another program from Station KXXY had started on its way, riding the air waves into the darkness of the night outside.

The music ended; Parrish stepped to the microphone. He bent at the waist in order to bring his cadaverous face level with it. When he spoke, his voice was silky, cultivated.

"Again, ladies and gentlemen, we present to you, Miss Flora Lee, the girl with the honey voice, in another of her popular programs of haunting melody—Memories at Midnight. Miss Lee's first number will be *My Little Gray Home in the West*."

Parrish bowed to Flora Lee and stepped aside. She smiled and took her place, her full lips only a few inches from the "mike," her large dark eyes on the sheet of music in her hand. At a signal from Romano, she began to sing.

Leaning against the wall at the front of the studio, Parrish watched Flora Lee like a man hypnotized. Romano, too, seemed to tear his gaze from her with difficulty, when he found it necessary to give his whole attention to his orchestra.

Even "Slim" Sutton, in the control room, failed to live up to the reputation of control-room operators and listen with bored superiority. He stared through the heavy plate-glass window at Flora Lee with narrow, speculative eyes. From time to time he bit his lip and a bright, hectic flush appeared on his thin cheeks.

But Flora Lee, one hand pressed against her breast as she sang, seemed totally unconscious of what was going on around her. She sang a second number, then the orchestra played a dance tune, and when it was finished Parrish moved in front of the microphone once more.

"... and now for the last selection on her fifteen minutes of melody, Miss Lee will sing for you that ever-popular song *The End of a Perfect Day*."

WHEN the last limpid note had floated away upon the air, Parrish made the closing announcement. The musicians, their work done, lost no time getting out of the studio. Flora Lee, however, lingered behind, talking with Romano and Parrish.

"Tomorrow night," she said, "I'm going to make a few changes."

Parrish shook his blond head dubiously. "Why, monkey with an hour that's the best on the air as it is?"

"Thanks, Dave," she said, laughing lightly. "But I've some new ideas I want to try out."

"You can count on the orchestra, Flora," Romano said softly.

"In the first place—" she began.

The door of the studio was swung abruptly open and Sutton entered. He gave a faintly contemptuous glance at the swarthy Romano and the lean Parrish, then turned to Flora Lee.

"Don't let me bust up a big conference," he said dryly. "But I wanted to tell Flora that she left her music portfolio in Studio A when we had the rehearsal. Thought she might want it when she went home."

"Thanks, Slim," she smiled.

He waved his hand airily. "Keep the change!"

Parrish frowned at him, and Romano, too, looked at him with sullen annoyance. But Sutton merely shrugged and left the studio. A minute later, the lights in the control room went out.

When Flora Lee had finished explaining the changes she contemplated for the next broadcast, Romano touched her lightly on the arm. "No wonder you're the smash hit of the air, Flora! You've got brains—ideas. We'll do just what you say, won't we, Dave?"

"Sure we will," Parrish agreed. Then he added to Flora Lee: "Where are you going now?"

She started to reply, then hesitated, as if she had suddenly changed her mind.

"Why—home, of course."

"Oh!" He managed to put a lot of disappointment into one short word.

"We'll help you get a taxi," Romano suggested eagerly.

She smiled her thanks, and the three of them moved from the studio together, Parrish switching out the lights and closing the door. They strolled down the long corridor, off which the numerous studios opened. All were dark now, the corridor itself only dimly illuminated.

When they reached the big reception room at the end of the corridor, it was deserted. Even the colored page boys had gone. Flora Lee suddenly turned with a little laugh. "Goodness! I almost forgot!"

"What?" Parrish asked quickly.

"My music!"

"I'll get it for you," Romano offered.

But Flora Lee already had started down the corridor. "Don't bother. I know just where it is!" she said.

Parrish made a move to follow her, but she waved him back. "You and Guy wait right there for me. I'll only be a second."

Romano dropped his stocky frame onto a modernistic sofa. Parrish, sitting beside him, held out a pack of cigarettes. They smoked for a while in silence; there seemed to be a tenseness between them, as if each resented the presence of the other.

Finally Parrish scrunched out his cigarette and stood up. He walked across the reception room with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his jacket; a worried frown crossed his white, fleshless forehead. "What do you suppose is keeping Flora?" he muttered.

Romano's reply was a Latin shrug. Parrish moved to the door, through which he could look the length of the corridor. It was empty. He shot a quick glance at Romano. "I'll go and find out," he said.

"Suit yourself," Romano replied indifferently, but he got to his feet.

Parrish had disappeared; the sound of

his hurrying steps on the polished tiles drifted back into the reception room. Romano strolled over to where he could follow Parrish's lank figure with his eyes. The announcer was just opening the door of Studio A.

Romano started to follow him, but the sound of an elevator door slamming caused him to hesitate and glance questioningly over his shoulder. A short rotund man wearing nose glasses was bustling through the archway into the reception room.

"Hello, Romano," he said briskly. "Miss Lee here?"

"She's back in Studio A, Mr. Bamstein. She forgot her music."

"Thought I might catch her. I was just talking with Sutton downstairs and he said he left you three up here. Where's Parrish?" he added.

As if in answer to his question, Dave Parrish stumbled out the door of Studio A. He halted, his lengthy body swaying like a reed, and one hand went back, groping for the wall. Having found it, he took a backward step and leaned against its supporting surface. His other hand shot up to his eyes, the fingers clawing at his face as if to tear out some ghastly vision.

By the time Romano, racing breathlessly down the corridor had reached him, he was lying in a crumpled heap upon the floor.

IN thousands of homes the music of Flora Lee's rich contralto coming from Station KXXY had held her listeners spellbound. But the most attentive of them all was an attractive, slightly freckled young man in a luxurious suite at the Park Vista Hotel.

He stood in front of his radio with his head tilted to one side and his blue eyes squinting thoughtfully. Occasionally he reached out and twisted one of the dials with delicate care.

"What's wrong with Flora," he muttered. "Her voice doesn't seem to have any resonance at all tonight."

He sat down in a deep-cushioned chair to wait, eyes closed in dreamy introspection, for the program to finish. Barry Drake could appreciate the artistry of the singer, even though it didn't seem to measure up to her usual standard. For Barry Drake's popularity as a radio singer at the rival station, WEWV, was equal to that of Flora Lee on KXXY.

She began the last song of her program. With a soft smile, Barry Drake rose from his chair. Before the mirror in his bedroom, he brushed his sandy hair carefully. Then he slipped into a light topcoat, put on his hat and returned to the other room. Standing in front of the radio, he listened to the closing words of the last song: ". . . till we meet again!"

He smiled and snapped off the receiving set. A moment later, he had locked the door of his suite and was heading toward the elevators.

IN his office of the Fourth Precinct Station, Captain Joel Briggs was sitting in front of his midget set, which was tuned in on Station KXXY. Across the desk from him, Detective Sergeant "Fitz" Fitzgerald rested his chin on his palm and listened with half-closed eyes.

"There's a girl who can sing," Fitz said.

Captain Briggs nodded. "And she's singing my favorite song. Listen!"

Out of the little receiving set, Flora Lee's voice drifted into the drab office of the precinct police station. Even Captain Briggs' hard-bitten features seemed to soften under its influence.

". . . till we meet again!"

The song ended. The silky mechanical tones of Parrish's voice broke in, and Captain Briggs snapped off the radio with a grimace of distaste.

Fitzgerald shook his head thoughtfully.

"She's the best on the air, all right. But she didn't seem as good tonight as usual. Kind of metallic."

"Probably got a cold. Got one myself," Briggs grunted.

They sat there smoking and talking for a long time. Finally, Fitz lifted his six feet of toughened muscle out of his chair and stretched. He pulled his watch from the vest of his double-breasted gray suit, which almost matched the color of his eyes. "Quarter of one," he said with a yawn. "I'm going home and hit the hay!"

The jangle of the telephone halted Briggs' reply. He closed his big fist about the receiver and jerked it from the hook. A sudden drooping of the captain's brows, divided by deep vertical wrinkles, caused Fitz to lean forward intently.

"The hell you say!" Briggs snapped. "Sure—we'll get over there right away!"

He replaced the receiver on the hook and banged the phone on the desk in a single motion. Bringing a handkerchief from his pocket, he swabbed it across his forehead.

"Well?" Fitz demanded.

"Get over to Radio Station KXXY as fast as you can travel!" Briggs exploded.

"What's up?"

"A killing—just happened!"

CHAPTER TWO

Find the Weapon

THE only elevator that ran after midnight in the Radio Tower Building carried Fitzgerald swiftly to the twenty-second floor, which was given over entirely to the studios and offices of KXXY.

As Fitz strode from the cage, Bamstein hurried forward to meet him. Bamstein's round body was quivering, and he was wringing his fat hands with agitation.

"Police!" Fitz announced tersely.

Bamstein uttered a deep sigh of relief.

"I've been waiting for you. Oh, this is terrible! Terrible, Mr. —"

"Sergeant Fitzgerald."

"Yes, yes! Sergeant!" Bamstein panted. "My name's Bamstein. Studio director here. We've had a terrible accident."

"Accident?" Fitz's brows lifted. "It was reported to us as a killing."

"I was the one who phoned. I thought at first it was a killing. But I was upset. It looks now like an accident."

"Snap out of it!" Fitz ordered. "Let's have a look!"

With Fitzgerald all but stepping on his heels, Bamstein hustled from the ante-room, across the big reception room and down the corridor. The doors of all the studios had upper panels of opaque glass, but only one of them was lighted. It was at the end of the corridor, and it was the one that Bamstein swung open. Fitz followed him into the brightly illuminated studio.

A quick sweep of Fitz's trained eyes took in the three men who were already in the big room. Then his glance fell on the figure of a woman, lying on her back on the thick carpet. He strode to the spot and looked down.

Flora Lee, her eyes closed and her face waxen, was stretched out with one leg drawn up slightly. Her left arm rested easily on her breast, her right was extended above the disordered mass of her golden-brown hair. She looked almost as if she might be asleep.

But on the top of her head, Fitz noted an ugly wound—a wound from which the blood had spread out on the carpet in a dark gruesome stain.

For a long moment, Fitzgerald stared at the still, small form in silence. He recognized her at once; Flora Lee's face was familiar to millions. It was hard to believe that the glorious voice he had listened to over the radio only a short time before had been brutally stilled forever.

"She's dead. Quite dead," a voice at Fitz's elbow murmured.

Fitz swung a sharp glance at the speaker and saw a man of medium size, his chin and lip adorned with a reddish Vandyke beard.

"Who are you?"

"Doctor Wykoff. House physician at the Marbury Hotel across the street."

Bamstein broke in: "You see, Sergeant, we called Doctor Wykoff. We thought at first maybe Flora was just hurt. Had fallen down. Tripped on the rug, maybe."

Fitz looked questionly at Wykoff.

"Impossible!" Wykoff replied. "The wound's on the upper left side of the skull. Crushed in! It looks like she was struck with a blunt heavy instrument. Death was probably almost instantaneous."

"Murdered?" Fitz asked softly.

Wykoff made a deprecatory gesture. "That's not for me to say. But she couldn't have inflicted the wound herself. And it couldn't have resulted from a fall. Why, even if she'd climbed up on the piano and dove onto her head, the soft carpet would have prevented a wound like the one she has."

Fitz turned to Bamstein. "I want to use your telephone."

He called Briggs, gave him a quick summary of the situation, and asked that a photographer and fingerprint expert be sent right over. Then he returned to the death studio.

"Who found the body?" he asked as the door clicked shut behind him.

"I did."

"What's your name?"

"David Parrish. I'm announcer on Flora—Miss Lee's hour."

FITZ appraised the tall blond announcer quickly. He noted the emaciated face, the pasty complexion. "Looks like he'd just crawled out from under a rotting log," Fitz thought. But he said: "Tell me about it!"

In halting, nervous sentences, Parrish told how he had entered the studio to get Flora Lee and discovered her lifeless body lying where it now was. He related the events that had preceded—the broadcast and conference, how Flora Lee had come back to Studio A for her forgotten music.

"Who's Romano?" Fitz asked.

"I am, sir," Romano said quickly. "I'm Guy Romano, the orchestra leader. Perhaps you've heard—"

"I have," Fitz cut in dryly. "Was the broadcast in this studio?"

"No. This is Studio A. We had our rehearsal here a half an hour before we went on the air. But we broadcast from Studio D—a little ways down the hall," Parrish replied.

"Rehearsal?"

"From eleven to eleven-thirty," Parrish nodded. "Guy here played the piano for Flora, and Sutton, the control-room engineer, had the mikes hooked up, so I could test the balance of her voice."

While the others clustered in a mute, awe-struck group, Fitz made a survey of the studio.

It was a large room. A few feet from the body stood a concert-grand piano. A half-dozen music stands were in a bunch in one corner, and near them a number of folding chairs were stacked against the wall. Those were the only furnishings, except for two big mikes hanging from the ceiling on chains, their black cables snaked up through a series of eyelets and disappearing into the wall above the control-room window.

Although he looked everywhere, Fitz saw nothing that looked like a weapon. "Anything been moved?" he asked.

"No!" Bamstein exclaimed. "I gave strict orders. Nothing was to be touched."

Fitz turned his attention to the two windows in the studio. But he saw that below was a drop of twenty-one stories, and above, the building stretched for four more floors. It seemed unlikely that the

killers had entered or left by that route.

There were only two doors, one of them leading into the hall, and the other, Fitz saw, giving access to the control room. But there was no means of getting into the control room except through the studio itself.

At that moment, a babble of voices fell on his ears, as the studio door opened and four men entered. They were Glover, the fingerprint expert, a photographer and two uniformed policemen. Fitz immediately assigned the patrolmen to search the other parts of the station as a matter of routine.

"Medical examiner's on the way here," Glover told Fitz in a low tone.

Fitz nodded. He turned to the group of silent men who had watched his examination of the studio.

"You may all go home," he said. "But I may have to question you again tomorrow." He touched Bamstein on the arm. "I'd like to speak with you privately. Let's go to your office."

WHEN they were in Bamstein's office, Fitz selected one of the several leather chairs, dropped into it, crossed his legs and lit a cigarette. "Tell me about Miss Lee," he said.

Bamstein blew his cigar smoke through pursed lips. "Well, Sergeant, I don't know so much. Yet maybe I know some things that will help you. Her right name was Martha Simpkins. We gave her that Flora Lee name when she started singing here—got more glamor, see?"

Fitz smiled faintly.

"She came from a little town in Ohio," Bamstein continued. "Oakville, or some such name. One of the boys up here knew her and got her an audition. I heard her the first time she sang. Such a voice—such a voice for radio!" He shook a fat finger in emphasis. "The minute I heard it, I knew she was a find! We put her on at once."

"Who got the audition for her?" Fitz asked.

The studio director knit his brows. "I don't rightly remember now. Maybe it was Parrish. Maybe yet it was Sutton, or one of the other engineers. I don't recall. Anyway, within a month she was on a commercial hour, singing for the Midnight Flowers Perfume Company. In six months, she was the sensation of the air."

"Where was this man Sutton when Miss Lee was killed?" Fitz asked suddenly.

"Why—" Bamstein scratched his head, then his face brightened. "He was downstairs talking to me, I guess. We stood out in front for about five minutes before I came up. Then he drove off in a taxi."

"That sort of lets him out, huh?" Fitz asked.

Bamstein nodded emphatically. "Positive. From the way I figure, Miss Lee must have been killed only a few minutes before I got up here. And I know Sutton was downstairs then."

"She was a good-looking girl," Fitz murmured.

"Good looking? She was beautiful!" the studio director burst out. "Everybody was crazy about her! Even I, Sergeant—I, twenty years married and with three children grown—I felt my heart act up, when she was around."

"Did she—a-go around with any of the men from the studios?"

"Sure. That is, until just recently," he amended. "Parrish, he was wild about her. Sutton, too. And that Guy Romano—he was always looking at her like he wanted to eat her up. She used to go out to dinner often with one or the other of them. Or maybe to dance—all those entertainments of young people."

"You said, 'Until recently.' What'd you mean by that?" Fitz demanded sharply.

Bamstein frowned and began to chew on his lower lip. He turned his eyes appealingly toward the detective, then

dropped his glance. But he made no reply.

"What'd you mean?" Fitz persisted.

"It was confidential—"

Fitz snapped his fingers impatiently. "She's dead now! And I'm trying to find her murderer!" he exclaimed.

Bamstein nodded slowly, sadly. "That's right. I forgot for a minute." He took a deep breath, then said impressively: "Just one week ago, Sergeant, Miss Lee was married. She wanted it kept secret, because we figured it would be better for her public to think she was single."

He caught the question in Fitz's eyes, and explained. "You know married stars sometimes don't have so much appeal. Her husband agreed. It was better for him, too, that nobody know about the wedding."

"Who's her husband?" Fitzgerald was leaning forward in his chair now, his cigarette pressed tightly between his fingers.

"Barry Drake!"

"Drake! The radio singer?"

"At WEWW," Bamstein nodded. "They eloped to New Jersey. I went with them to help fix things up."

FITZGERALD squeezed out the cigarette in the ashtray at his elbow. Then he stood up. There were tiny wrinkles of thought spreading from the corners of his blue eyes. "Where does Drake live?"

"The Park Vista Hotel."

"Have you notified him of what's happened?"

"No. I—I hated to do it," Bamstein stammered apologetically.

"Don't!" Fitz snapped. "I'll take care of that. Where did Miss Lee live. Did she live alone?"

"Alone. Not even a roommate. And after they were married, she and Drake decided to keep up their separate places. So no one would catch on they were married."

"Give me her address," Fitz said.

The studio director drew a small desk file toward him and ran through it rapidly. Writing a few lines on a memo pad, he handed the slip to Fitzgerald. "It's just up here on Sixty-second Street," he said.

"Thanks."

From Bamstein's office, Fitzgerald hurried back to Studio A. The news of Flora Lee's secret marriage had surprised him, but it also had set his mind leaping along a definite line of reasoning. He began to sense what was behind the untimely ending of the beautiful girl's brilliant career.

The police photographer was through with his job. Parrish, Romano and Dr. Wykoff were gone, but a new arrival was bending over the body of Flora Lee. He was Dr. Casper, the assistant medical examiner. Glover, the fingerprint expert, spoke to Fitzgerald.

"This place is full of prints, but I don't believe any of them mean much."

"What'd you find on that?" Fitzgerald asked, pointing to a brown leather portfolio on top of the piano.

"Nothing but the dead woman's."

"O. K. Have a report for me at the Fourth Precinct in the morning. I'll want the pictures then, too," he added.

He walked over to the piano. Opening the portfolio, he drew out the contents, a dozen or so professional copies of songs. On top of them, he saw a sheet of white notepaper covered with handwriting.

From what Fitz could make of it, it was merely some sort of a program, which the dead girl planned to sing or had sung. He read it carefully, studiously.

<i>Perfect Day</i>	(PV)
<i>Sands of the Desert</i>	(PV)
<i>All Alone</i>	(PV)
<i>Till We Meet Again</i>	(62)
<i>Always</i>	(62)
<i>Indian Love Call</i>	(62)

<i>Last Rose</i>	(S)
<i>I Hear You Calling Me</i>	(S)
<i>Oh, Promise Me</i>	(S)

"That doesn't look like much help," Fitz muttered to himself. But he tucked the sheet in his pocket before replacing the music in the portfolio. Then he picked up a small handbag which was lying on the floor near the body. Apparently, she had dropped it there when she was struck down.

The contents were such as most women carry about with them. A handkerchief, a compact, lipstick, a small key-holder with several keys, a check book, a roll of bills and some change. He counted the money—almost a hundred dollars.

"Sort of eliminates robbery as a motive," Fitz told himself. He returned the various articles to the bag, with the exception of the keys, which he slipped into his pocket with the list of songs.

CHAPTER THREE

Ten Minutes Too Late

THE assistant medical examiner attracted Fitzgerald's attention by a slight clearing of his throat. "Death by violence, Sergeant. Result of a compact fracture of the skull."

"On the top," Fitz added.

Dr. Casper smiled dryly. "Exactly—on the left side. Who's giving this verdict, you or me?" he asked with a chuckle. "But I'll beat you to your next question! Whoever struck the blow was a lot taller, or else used a long-handled weapon."

"All right, Doc," Fitz said. "You win. That's what I was going to ask."

"Want the body left here a while?"

"No. Better take it to the morgue till relatives claim it."

On his way from the station to the street, Fitzgerald queried the elevator operator and verified some of the infor-

mation he had received. Sutton had left the studio shortly after the musicians. He had gone down five or ten minutes before Bamstein went up, according to the operator's recollection.

Fitz also learned that the operator checked on the departures of everyone from the place. And all the employes, except Miss Lee, Romano and Parrish were accounted for.

His next stop was at the Park Vista Hotel. As he crossed the almost deserted lobby and approached the clerk's desk, he saw that the clock was pointing to a quarter of two. "I want to see Mr. Barry Drake," Fitz announced.

The clerk shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Drake went out about an hour ago."

"Say when he'd be back, by any chance?"

"Yes, sir, he did. Tomorrow."

Fitz concealed his disappointment with a slow nod. At that moment the voice of the switchboard operator came from behind a low partition. "Mr. Drake? Just a minute, I'll see."

Fitz's hand came out of his pocket like a flash, and in the palm nestled his detective badge. He showed it to the astonished clerk and spoke rapidly. "Quick! Let me take that call for Drake. It's damn important!"

For a fraction of a second, the clerk hesitated. Then he nodded excitedly, and disappeared behind the partition. A moment later, he was back. "Take it in that first booth," he said in a stage whisper.

Fitzgerald slipped the receiver from the hook of the telephone in the booth. "Hello!"

A man's voice came to him over the wire. "That you, Barry?"

"Yes."

"What's that?"

"I said, this is Barry Drake."

There was a pause, then a mocking laugh. "I don't know who you are, fella!

But I know what you are. A damn liar!"

There was a sharp click as the speaker at the other end hung up.

Fitzgerald recrossed the hotel lobby with slow measured steps. The absence of Drake from his quarters was not necessarily significant. He might have gone to spend the night with friends; he might have gone to some all-night club—any one of a dozen places.

But try as he would, Fitzgerald could not dispell the strange premonition of evil the phone call had stirred in him. True, it might have been some friend of Drake, who realized that somebody was attempting to trick him. But Fitz remembered a sinister note in the voice that set his teeth on edge.

He was still deep in thought as he signaled a cab at the curb and climbed in. The next moment, however, he gave a faint shrug and ordered the driver to go to Flora Lee's address on East Sixty-second Street.

"Not quite regular," he murmured to himself. "But neither's murder for that matter."

They shot across town, then north on Fifth Avenue. A few minutes later they were on East Sixty-Second Street. As the driver slowed down in order to peer at the house numbers, Fitz saw the red tail-light of a car draw from the curb ahead of them. It turned at the first corner, and he could see in the glow of the street light that it was another taxicab.

"This is it," the driver said over his shoulder. He had come to a stop at the same spot from which the other car had just pulled away.

FITZ paid his fare and started toward the entry. The building was an old-fashioned brownstone house, but the detective observed that it was in excellent repair, the trim freshly painted, and awnings and flower-boxes adorning the windows.

He found a row of mail slots and push-buttons just inside the outer door, which identified the place as a dwelling remodelled into small apartments. Searching the names in the flickering light of a match, he finally came to "Lee," and pressed the button.

There was no response. Once more he tried; and again no answer. "Nobody here. That's good," he said to himself. He took from his pocket the key holder he had found in the dead girl's hand bag.

One of the keys slid easily into the door of the lower hallway. Up three flights of steps he climbed, scanning the door numbers on each landing carefully. At last he found the one he was seeking. It was at the very top of the house.

"This should be the place," he murmured. "If it isn't—well, that'll be too bad," he added with a grin, slipping the key into the lock.

He stepped into a small foyer, dimly lighted by a table lamp, and closed the door noiselessly behind him. Opposite was an arched doorway, but the room that lay beyond was in total darkness. Instinctively, Fitz's hand glided to his hip and closed on the butt of his gun.

For a few seconds he stood in rigid silence. He could see nothing, hear nothing, except a few faint sounds from outside. And yet a warning tingle shot through his veins. Some sixth sense seemed to tell him that this apartment of the murdered Flora Lee was filled with menace, all the more deadly because vague and intangible.

Slowly, inching his way silently forward, Fitz passed through the archway into the blackness of the other room.

Inwardly, he cursed the luck that had made him forget his flashlight. He edged along the wall, trying in vain to pierce the darkness with his eyes, groping with his hand for the light switch he knew by experience must be somewhere near the door to the room.

AN instant later he paused, his nostrils twitching faintly. Mingled with the close air of the apartment, he detected a tinge of a familiar acrid odor. Burned powder!

Fitz's service pistol was in one hand now, and with feverish energy he renewed his hunt for the light switch. Then, he found it; and immediately the place was flooded with light, which made him blink for a second.

He was in a long room, plainly the living room. But a swift look around disclosed that it was unoccupied. He crossed with quick noiseless strides to the other end, at the front of the house, and pulled aside the thick drapes that hung before the two windows. They hid no one, and the windows, he noted, were both securely locked.

But that strange sense of impending disaster continued to grip him. It was more definite now that the whiff of burned powder had reached his nose.

Aside from the arched doorway between the room he was in and the foyer, there was only one other door. It was at the opposite end from the windows. Every sense alert, every nerve tuned to the highest pitch, Fitzgerald walked toward it. His eyes were narrow slits, his chin was pushed forward slightly.

As he drew nearer, the pungent smell of burned powder seemed to increase. Fitz's hand closed on the doorknob. Then he hesitated, listening closely. Slowly the hand which held his pistol came up. He brought the muzzle of the weapon against the panel of the door in a sharp rap.

"Who's there?" he called out through set jaws.

His only answer was a blank silence. Or had his straining ears caught the sound of a faint movement beyond that portal? Fitz waited for a long moment.

Then, swiftly he moved to the switch of the living-room lights and turned them out. He was going into that other room,

but he was not going to go in framed as a perfect target in a brightly lighted doorway.

Once more, he found the doorknob. Then, raising his pistol, he released the catch and pulled the door slowly toward him. When he had opened it halfway, he dropped to a low crouch and crept around the edge of the door. He caught his breath; a swift icy chill ran up his spine.

The odor of burned powder was strong now. But it was mingled with other smells—perfume, some powerful aroma that Fitz couldn't identify at once, and the nauseating scent of blood.

But what held him immobile, was a mysterious ring of wavering orange-red light. It was about the size of a horseshoe. And even as he watched it glowing in the blackness, it seemed to widen. Fitz pulled himself erect. A short hunt and he found the button for the lights.

His finger tensed on the trigger of his gun, he clicked them on. An involuntary gasp of horror sucked through his lips.

Stretched on his back across the bed was a man. He was dressed in evening clothes. And on the white front of his dress shirt, directly over the heart, was a great crimson blotch. From it the blood had spread down the man's side, until it lay in a gory pool on the white coverlet.

Fitzgerald reached him in a bound. One look at the white face, the glassy eyes, left no doubt that he was dead. And in that second that he stood gazing down at him, Fitz recognized the still figure.

"Barry Drake!" The name came out in a horrified, startled tone.

Not satisfied with brutally crushing Flora Lee to death, the killers had come to her apartment and taken the life of her secret husband. A torrent of icy rage swept over Fitzgerald, and his gray eyes grew dark, dangerous.

He suddenly realized that the odor he had been unable to identify was that of smoke from burning wool. He looked

down. Beneath the lifeless fingers of the dead man, which hung over the edge of the bed, the rug had caught fire. It was smoldering now, the circle slowly widening.

Before he tramped it out, Fitz noticed in the centre of the ring, a round ash about half an inch long. When Barry Drake had been shot to death, he apparently had been lying on the bed smoking. And that, coupled with the calm expression on his face, seemed to show that he either knew his murderer and trusted him, or had been taken by surprise.

Fitz felt the body. It was still warm. The murder had taken place recently, he concluded. Just long enough ago for the dropped cigarette to ignite the rug and burn the small circle. Perhaps ten minutes. Then suddenly, he remembered the taxicab that had driven from in front of the house only a moment before he arrived there.

Fitz searched the apartment and the clothing of the dead man thoroughly. And at the end of fifteen minutes, he had found only one possible clue.

It was a sheet of notepaper in the pocket of Barry Drake's topcoat. And on it, in the same scrawling hand, was a list of songs—identical with the one he had found in Flora Lee's music portfolio.

He walked to the telephone. His long finger whirled the dial, and the number he called was the Fourth Precinct Station.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fitz Gets an Idea

CAPTAIN Briggs squinted through a thick cloud of cigar smoke at Fitzgerald. It was shortly after noon, but Fitz's eyes showed plainly that he hadn't been in bed yet.

"It looks," Briggs said finally, "like a plot to rub out all our best radio singers. Wonder who'll be next."

Fitz made no reply, but his fingernails bit nervously into the palm of his clenched hands.

"The commissioner phoned this morning," Briggs continued. He cocked one eyebrow, and watched for the effect of his words.

"What'd he want?"

"Wanted to put headquarters men on the Lee case. Said he'd already assigned them to the Drake killing. I persuaded him to leave you alone on the studio murder for a while." He wagged an admonishing forefinger. "I swore you had a hot tip. So don't make a liar out of me."

Fitz put his hand in his pocket and pulled out two sheets of paper, which he handed to Briggs. "That's about the only clue I've found so far," he said.

"Look like two lists of songs, written in a woman's hand. Both alike," Briggs grunted.

"They are. One was in the Lee girl's portfolio. The other in Drake's topcoat."

"What do they mean?"

"I don't know—yet."

Briggs grunted and handed the sheets of paper back to Briggs. Then he pulled open the drawer of his desk. "Here are the pictures the boys took in the studio after the murder," he said.

Fitz spread the photographs along the edge of the desk and began to study them intently. Aside from the close-up of the dead girl, they were all pictures of the studio, shot from various angles. It was good work. Every detail of the big sound-proof room was brought out plainly—the grand piano, the music stands, the two microphones, the stack of chairs against the wall.

"How about fingerprints?" Briggs asked.

"Glover found lots, but we couldn't match 'em in the records," Fitz replied.

"Checked up on everybody that was with her in the studio, of course," Briggs murmured.

"Yes. The last three persons to see her alive were Parrish, her announcer who found the body, Romano, her orchestra leader, and Sutton, the control-room engineer. But Sutton left the place five or ten minutes before she was killed—or Bamstein's a liar."

Briggs pulled at his cigar in thoughtful silence, while Fitz continued to study the pictures. Suddenly, with a snap of his fingers, Fitz leaped to his feet.

"What bit you?" Briggs asked.

"An idea!" Fitz called over his shoulder as he dashed through the door.

THE actions of Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald in Studio A at Station KXXY fifteen minutes later would have bewildered any onlooker who was unaware of what was going on in the detective's mind.

First, he stood in one corner and surveyed the large room with narrowed critical eyes, his mouth twisted into a thoughtful grimace. Then, he moved to the door and began to walk slowly toward the grand piano, ending up in the middle of the curved side of that valuable instrument.

He leaned over, as if reaching for something, although the top of the piano was bare. Next, he turned his head slowly, his glance pausing first on one microphone, then on the other. After that, he squinted at the line where the walls and ceiling joined, and having completed the circuit of the room, he suddenly dropped to his hands and knees on the floor.

Carefully he began to pat the carpeting, moving little by little across the studio. Still on his hands and knees, he reached one wall and looked up.

A few inches above his head was the large plate-glass window of the control room, extending to the ceiling. He followed its smooth surface with his eyes to the very top; there his glance stopped

and a satisfied smile creased his cheeks.

"This is more like it," Fitz murmured.

He seized the edge of the carpeting and jerked it up for some distance. When he rose to his feet, he was holding in one hand the ends of two tiny black wires, scarcely larger than heavy linen thread.

Winding up the wires and placing them in his pocket, Fitz dusted off the knees of his trousers. Then he walked into the control room, where he spent considerable time. When he finally emerged, his gray eyes had darkened dangerously.

"The slickest little murder trap I ever ran up against," he said to himself grimly. Now he realized that the killer, or killers he was hunting were not only ruthless and desperate, but also fiendishly clever.

With the trail warming up, Fitz began to feel the excitement of the chase. But outwardly, he appeared merely calm and thoughtful. He walked slowly along the corridor toward the reception room. As he reached a point almost at the door to Studio D, the door swung open suddenly and Parrish stepped out.

Parrish didn't see the detective at first, and Fitz had a chance to observe the sleek, almost foppish announcer in an unguarded moment. His face appeared drawn and haggard, the thin lips colorless, eyes sunk deep beneath the light eyebrows.

Then Parrish glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of Fitzgerald. He gave a little start, but quickly recovered himself.

"Hello, Sergeant!" he exclaimed, waiting for Fitz to come up beside him. He dropped his voice. "Are you—have you found any clue to the murderer?"

Fitz shrugged noncommittally. "I'm working on it," he said. There was something about the other man, possibly his

faintly effeminate manner, that jarred on the detective.

"It's horrible!" Parrish muttered, and then repeated: "Horrible! It makes me shudder every time I think of the way she sang her final number last night. *The End of a Perfect Day!* God! It's ghastly, when you think of it!"

"What's that?" Fitz asked with a puzzled squint of his eyes.

"Why, the idea of that being the last song she ever sang. *The End of a Perfect Day*. And within a short time, she was dead—murdered."

He bit his lips, as if to keep back a sob. Fitz, in spite of himself, was half convinced that the man's emotion was genuine. The detective's voice was sympathetic as he answered. "Yes—it does seem tough."

They separated in the reception room, Parrish with a farewell nod going into the production department. Fitz looked at the doorway through which the announcer had disappeared with a steady narrow gaze.

"Now why the devil do you suppose he lied to me?" he asked himself.

HIS mind turned back to the night before, when he and Briggs had sat in the latter's office and listened to the Lee broadcast. And even now he seemed to hear the end of the song that had closed Flora Lee's program.

"... till we meet again!"

He moved across the reception room with decisive directness and pushed open a door bearing the legend: "Herman Bamstein, Studio Director." As he entered, a pretty girl, sitting at a typewriter in the outer office, looked up at him.

"Bamstein here?" Fitz asked.

The girl shook her head. "No, sir. He hasn't been down today. But I expect him any minute. Is there anything I can do for you? I'm his secretary."

"Why, yes, Miss—" He turned his

most effective smile on her, and the handsome young detective sergeant's smile was always sure of a favorable response where the fair sex was concerned.

"Miss Agnew," the girl smiled back at him.

"Thanks. I'm Fitzgerald. Police detective," he explained. "I'd like first of all to use your telephone."

She handed him the instrument, which was on her desk, and he gave the switchboard operator the number of the Fourth Precinct Station. A moment afterwards, he had Briggs on the wire.

"This is Fitz," he said. "Do you remember what was the last song Miss Lee sang on her hour last night?" He waited a moment. "Yeah? Well, that's what I thought. No, that's all I wanted right now; you'll hear from me later."

He replaced the phone in its cradle and turned to Miss Agnew. "Do you have a record of the programs—that is, something to show what songs are sung on the different hours?"

"Why yes," she nodded. "We have the continuity, which is written for the announcers."

"Good!" Fitz exclaimed. "Let me see the one for the last broadcast of Memories at Midnight."

He looked with a puzzled frown at the sheet of paper which she dug out of a file for him. There it was in plain type-written words: *End of a Perfect Day*. That was what Parrish had said. But his own ears, corroborated by Briggs, had heard Flora Lee's voice singing *Till We Meet Again!*

There was something damned funny about it, Fitz told himself. "Do they ever change these programs after the broadcast starts?" he asked.

Miss Agnew considered. "Not very often. It's against the rules. But once in a while, if there's a real good reason, a number is switched."

"Who could tell me if this program

was carried out exactly as it's written here?" Fitz wanted to know.

"Well, Mr. Parrish, the announcer. Or Mr. Romano, who leads the orchestra. He'd surely know what songs his musicians played."

"Romano here now?"

She consulted a large schedule sheet on the wall behind her desk. Then she turned back to Fitz with a smiling nod. "He's in Studio C having a rehearsal for his afternoon dance program, which goes on in about an hour."

"Thanks," Fitz said. "I'll see you later!"

"I hope so," Miss Agnew replied, and sounded as if she meant it.

FITZGERALD located Studio C without difficulty. It was directly across the corridor from Studio D, where Flora Lee had broadcasted her last earthly program. It was entered from a small foyer, which also gave access through a second door to the control room.

Through the glass panel, the detective could see the musicians playing their various instruments and the long-haired Romano waving his conductor's stick vigorously. The sound of the music, however, was coming from the loudspeaker in the control room. The studio itself was sound-proof.

He shot a swift glance at the man seated before the table which contained the numerous dials and switches that regulated the microphones and controlled the volume of sound. He was of medium height, with thin hunched shoulders. His narrow, long-nosed face was fixed on the instruments before him, and he failed to notice the detective's scrutiny. But Fitz noted the hectic flush on his thin cheeks.

"That's Sutton," Fitz thought. "He looks sick."

The music suddenly stopped. And as he heard Romano's voice raised in impatient criticism of the manner in which

his men had just played the number, Fitz stepped into the studio.

He walked to where the orchestra leader was standing beside the floor microphone, which looked much like an odd floor lamp on its long pipe-stem pedestal. Fitz touched the Italian on the shoulder. The conductor turned angrily, but when he recognized the detective, his expression smoothed into an oily smile.

"Oh, hello, Sergeant," he said effusively.

Fitz made a little gesture with his hand palm down, and dropped his tone so the musicians couldn't hear him. Romano looked at him inquiringly.

"Just want to ask you a little question," Fitz murmured.

"Shoot!" the Italian replied softly, taking his cue from Fitz. "Anything the cops want to know, I'm here to tell them." There was something bland, almost angelic in the way he looked at the detective.

"What was the last number you played on Miss Lee's program last night?"

Romano appeared surprised. He thought a moment, then said: "It was *Perfect Day*. I remember now I wondered why she used that tune. It's been played ragged on the air."

"Sure of that?"

"Absolutely! Ask any of the men here. Or ask Slim Sutton in the control room there."

"Never mind," Fitz said quickly. "Much obliged to you."

A minute later, he was back in Bamstein's office.

"Miss Agnew," he said casually, "I suppose you know pretty well how this radio broadcasting business is handled, don't you?"

She laughed. "Well, I'm not a radio engineer by any means. But I've been working here for three years and I know something about what makes the wheels go round."

"I don't know very much," Fitz con-

fessed. "That is, not as much as I'd like to. Maybe you could teach me a few things—about radio," he added with a grin.

"I could try to teach you—about radio," she agreed, her eyes twinkling.

Fitz's manner suddenly became deadly earnest. He sat down on the edge of her desk and began to talk, emphasizing his words with faint taps of his forefinger on the top of the typewriter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer's Broadcast

THE BROADCAST of Guy Romano's afternoon dance program was half over.

In front of his orchestra, the dark-eyed conductor was flourishing his arms, now raising one palm to soften the brasses, the next moment pointing a warning finger toward the strings. Occasionally, he glanced swiftly over his shoulder toward the control room of Studio C, where Slim Sutton was putting the music on the air.

Parrish, who was doing the announcing, sat on a chair at the front of the studio. His eyes were closed, his mouth drooping dejectedly at the corners. And in the control room at Sutton's elbow, the round flushed face of Bamstein was visible through the glass.

Fitzgerald silently opened the door from the corridor into the foyer of the studio and stepped inside. Under his arm he was carrying a large aluminum disk, about two feet in diameter. The din of the orchestra from the loudspeaker had drowned all sound of his arrival, and as he moved alongside Bamstein, the studio director turned with a start of surprise.

"Well, Sergeant!" he exclaimed. "You gave me a fright."

"Yes?" Fitz said dryly.

"I've been wondering what's become

of you," Bamstein said. "Me—I just got down. Them newspaper reporters have been driving me nearly crazy, so I thought I'd stay home as long as I could. You can keep 'em out of your house, but it's not so easy keeping 'em out of your office in this business."

Sutton raised his head and looked at Fitzgerald, then dropped his glance to the aluminum disk beneath his arm. He stared at it quizzically, gave a shrug and rose from his chair with a stretch.

Bamstein lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "What about—you think maybe you're on the track of the party who killed poor Flora?"

"I'm not only on the track," Fitz replied with narrowing eyes, "I've got my hands on him!"

Bamstein shrank back in alarm. "Wha—what do you—"

He got no further. Fitzgerald suddenly tossed the aluminum disk on the instrument table. "The answer's there—in the record!" he snapped. He whirled in his tracks and his voice rang out like a hammer on steel. "Stand where you are, Sutton!"

The control-room engineer had edged out into the foyer. At Fitz's command, he turned a face livid with rage and hate toward the detective. "The hell you say!"

Sutton's right hand flipped back to his hip; at the same time his left swung open the door into the studio, and he sprang into the big room. Fitz started after him, but Bamstein was standing in the way. By the time he had pushed the terrified director aside and followed his quarry into the studio, Sutton was dashing through the ranks of seated musicians, tumbling them right and left.

The orchestra stopped with a wild outburst of discords and startled exclamations.

"Stop—or I'll drill you!" Fitzgerald shouted from the studio doorway.

Sutton's reply was a flash of flame.

Fitz felt a searing streak through his right arm. His left hand caught the pistol as it fell from his fingers. He brought it up and pressed the trigger.

But the aim was high. Sutton had crouched and the detective had been forced to shoot over the heads of the panic-stricken musicians, who were scampering for corners, or sitting paralyzed with fright in their chairs. Sutton was under no restraint. His gun roared again, and the bullet buried itself in the wall.

Then, Fitz saw the reason for his flight into the studio—a rear door. And at that moment Sutton turned the handle. For an instant, he was framed in the doorway, his eyes wild and venomous. His gun came up. "Here's where you go to hell—copper!" he screamed.

The pistol shot a stream of flame. Behind him, Fitz heard Parrish give a cry of pain. But without glancing back, the detective plunged through the men, across the studio and out into the corridor. It was empty.

A chorus of feminine shrieks in the reception room gave him the trail and he raced at full speed in that direction. A shot greeted him from the doorway to the anteroom, but again Sutton missed. Fitz held his fire and dashed, gun in hand, toward his enemy.

At the far end of the ante-room, a huge steel fire-door was slowly closing. Balked because there had been no elevator at hand, Sutton had started down the stairs.

As he started down after him, Fitz could hear the other man's racing feet pattering on the cement treads. One—two—three floors, the strange, deadly chase continued. Fitz's right arm was warm with blood, and he knew he was leaving a gory trail behind, but he set his teeth and plunged on.

In his mad pursuit he lost count of the floors, until, almost collapsing from loss

of blood, he paused on the last landing. The stairs widened out into a small hallway, and he had a clear view of Sutton tugging at the door which opened into the lobby. Fitz's gun blazed. Too late! Sutton had slipped through the wedge of the door and the bullet nicked the metal behind him.

Smoking pistol in hand, Fitz staggered into the lobby. His gun came up, but he never pressed the trigger.

Sutton, screaming like a maniac, was struggling helplessly in the clutches of two policemen. Two others were visible behind them. And even while Fitz watched, still others came running up till the lobby was swarming with blue-coats.

BRIGGS was beaming as he held out a box of cigars. "Well, my boy," he said, "how did you happen to flush that rat Sutton".

"I got my first tip from the pictures."
"Pictures?"

"Yes. Those big old-fashioned micro-phones, like shells from a three-inch field piece, showed up like sore thumbs. I noticed one hung almost over the piano. Then I got to wondering if it swung on its chain from the ceiling, whether it'd have force enough to crush in a skull.

"It had," he continued significantly. "Sutton had rigged up the sweetest little death trap you ever laid eyes on. He'd fastened a mike to a hook above the control-room window. It wasn't exactly a hook, either. More like a trigger, because it released by an electrical contact."

"A trap, huh? That guy's an electrical engineer, isn't he?" Briggs asked.

"With radio as his specialty," Fitz nodded. "Anyway, right where the side of the piano curved in he planted a switch under the carpet, so anyone stepping on it would release the mike from the ceiling."

"Would it always hit them?"

"Couldn't miss. When the mike was hanging like a plummet from where the chain was fastened to the ceiling, it was dead on the spot. So, when it swung in its arc, it had to cross it.

"Sutton put the girl's leather portfolio on the piano as bait. Then he told her where it was. She naturally took the shortest way to reach it—from the curve in the side of the piano, right where the flat switch was under the carpeting.

"She stepped on it, the trigger released the mike, it swung down and—" He snapped his fingers "—it was all over!"

Briggs clucked his lips against his teeth. "But why go to all that trouble to kill her?"

Fitz smiled quietly. "So he could be out of the studio when she was killed. Have an alibi. With his training, his mind naturally turned to an electrical death trap, I guess. You see, Captain," Fitz added meaningly, "Sutton wanted to get over to Miss Lee's apartment as fast as possible so he could shoot Drake to death!"

"Drake!"

"He's admitted it," Fitz nodded, "and also filled in a few gaps I couldn't figure out. While his trap was killing the Lee girl, he was on his way to her apartment, for which he had a key. When Drake was slow in getting there, he phoned the hotel. I got the call and tried to pass as Drake. But he knew him, and knew his voice."

"What was his reason for killing them?" Briggs asked.

"Crazy jealousy. He'd been going with her for a couple of years. Got her her chance in radio. But when she became famous, she aired him for Drake. Sutton overheard them talking a few days before the murder and learned they were secretly married. Guess that drove him nuts. He decided to rub them both out."

"First, he put her on the spot in the

studio with a death trap. Then, he put Drake on the spot in her apartment by switching radio programs."

DIGGING INTO his pocket, Fitz brought out the two sheets of paper containing the list of songs. He gave Briggs one, and kept the other. The captain studied the sheet with a bewildered air.

Perfect Day(PV)
Sands of the Desert....(PV)
All Alone(PV)
Till We Meet Again.....(62)
Always(62)
Indian Love Call.....(62)
Last Rose(S)
I Hear You Calling Me...(S)
Oh, Promise Me(S)

"What the devil does all this mean?" Briggs demanded impatiently.

"It's a signal code," Fitz explained grimly. "I imagine at first Miss Lee and Drake used it as sort of a lark. After they were married and wanted to keep the fact secret, it came in handy.

"If she sang as the last song on her program any one of the first three on the list, that meant she would go to his place at the Park Vista Hotel to meet him. If her last song was one of the second three, he was to go to her Sixty-second street apartment. If one of the last three, he was to call for her at the studio.

"Sutton got onto it, because he'd done the same sort of thing with her. So he used his knowledge to put Drake where it'd be most convenient to bump him off.

"At the rehearsal before the broadcast, he found that Miss Lee was going to sing *Perfect Day*. The signal she's to go to the Park Vista. That didn't suit Sutton's plans. Too risky to shoot Drake there. He had a key to her apartment and it was a safer place for the killing. So he

put a program on the air that ended with *Till We Meet Again*—and right there's where he made his big mistake."

"How'd he change the programs?"

"Easy enough. He cut off the mike she was singing into, and broadcast an electrical transcription of one of her other programs from the next room."

Briggs shook his head slowly. "Electrical transcription? You mean a phonograph record?"

"That's what it is, really. Except that it's made from metal and plays for fifteen minutes. They're used in lots of small studios all the time, and even in the bigger studios occasionally. Up at KXXY they've got a stack of transcriptions of Lee programs a foot high."

"But that didn't put the finger on Sutton," Briggs suggested shrewdly.

"It did for me. When I found out that the program she sang wasn't the same as you and I heard, I had a hunch there might be a phonograph record mixed up somewhere. I had Miss Agnew, Bamstein's secretary, explain how they worked those things in the studios.

"She took me into the electrical-transcription room. We found the Lee record Sutton had used right on top of the pile—with his fingerprints on it.

"That transcription room is right alongside Studio D, where she was singing. It's handled from the same control room. It wasn't any trick for Sutton to pull the switch in programs—and he was the only person in the world that could have cut her off the air and substituted an electrical transcription!"

Fitz paused for a moment to puff on his cigar. Then he continued: "I decided to pull a surprise play on him. But I'd forgotten when I talked to Romano about the Lee program that we were right beside the mike. I might as well have shouted, because Sutton heard every word of it.

"So he was ready for me, when I walked in with that metal record under my arm. He knew the jig was up and tried to lam out."

"How's Parrish?" Briggs asked.

"He'll pull out all right," Fitz said. Suddenly his mouth fell open. "Say! How the deuce did all those cops happen to be in the Radio Tower Building lobby? I ran Sutton right into their hands."

Briggs chuckled. "That was my contribution. I figured you might need 'em, so I sent a flock of reserves over in a hurry."

"Thought I'd need 'em?" It was Fitz's turn to be puzzled.

"Why, yes. I was sitting here listening to this Romano's orchestra playing and

all of a sudden they got all mixed up. Never heard such a mess. Then I heard you shout, 'Stop—or I'll drill you!' After that—*bang!* And some more *bangs!* It was—"

Fitz let out a loud laugh. "Well, I'll be! I'd completely forgotten that the studio was still on the air when I chased Sutton through it!"

"You bet it was on the air!" Briggs exclaimed. "And that was some crime thriller you and Sutton broadcast. It came in clear as a bell."

Fitz slapped his knee. "Well, well! So this case made a radio performer out of me!"

"It's going to make a detective lieutenant out of you, if you ask me," Briggs replied.

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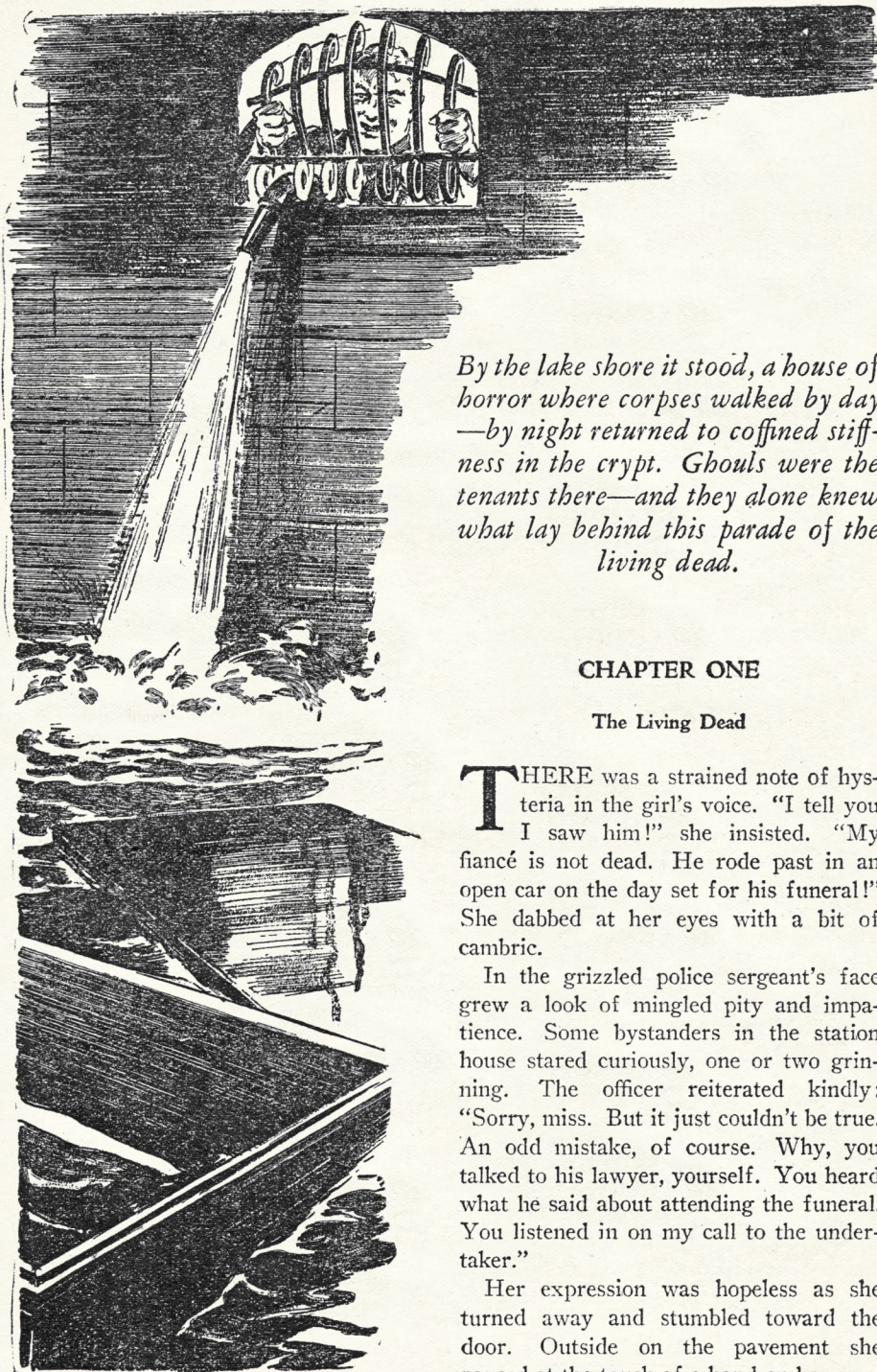
The Body in the Crypt

by

H. M. Appel



He plunged the point of a blade into the pallid cheek.



By the lake shore it stood, a house of horror where corpses walked by day—by night returned to coffined stiffness in the crypt. Ghouls were the tenants there—and they alone knew what lay behind this parade of the living dead.

CHAPTER ONE

The Living Dead

THERE was a strained note of hysteria in the girl's voice. "I tell you I saw him!" she insisted. "My fiancé is not dead. He rode past in an open car on the day set for his funeral!" She dabbed at her eyes with a bit of cambric.

In the grizzled police sergeant's face grew a look of mingled pity and impatience. Some bystanders in the station house stared curiously, one or two grinning. The officer reiterated kindly: "Sorry, miss. But it just couldn't be true. An odd mistake, of course. Why, you talked to his lawyer, yourself. You heard what he said about attending the funeral. You listened in on my call to the undertaker."

Her expression was hopeless as she turned away and stumbled toward the door. Outside on the pavement she paused at the touch of a hand on her arm,

and looked up into the sympathetic face of an elderly policeman who had overheard her tale.

"There's not one chance in a thousand, miss," he said, "but still, queer things do happen. You go see Murray Blaine." He gave her an address. "Tell him Mike Halligan sent you just on a hunch."

TWENTY minutes later she stopped before a door bearing only a number, high up in a tower above Chicago's "Loop" district. To her hesitant knock a cheerful masculine voice responded: "Come in, you old Siwash! I've just changed my clothes."

Murray Blaine, wealthy young private investigator, awaited the coming of a friend who had proposed an afternoon of golf. He touched a desk button releasing the electric lock and finished pulling a sweater over his head. When the door opened he exclaimed in surprise: "I beg pardon! Expecting a man, you know—"

Swiftly his glance appraised the visitor. She was a slender blade of a girl, with black curls inclined to be unruly and red lips that trembled in mute appeal. He thought her steady gray eyes denoted courage and was concerned when, suddenly, they filled with tears.

"Here, here!" he objected, leading her to a chair. "Don't start crying. Sit down and tell me what's wrong."

"I'll behave," she said bravely, searching in her purse for a handkerchief. "Oh, Mr. Blaine—you are Murray Blaine, aren't you—I'm sure Paul isn't dead!"

"Of course not," he soothed. "Anyway, I hope not. Now tell me who you are and how you happened to come here."

The girl's story poured forth.

"I'm Lynda Gray," she said. "Three days ago—Tuesday—I went out of town hurriedly on a very early train. I was on my way to attend the surprise wedding of a friend. I left no address. I tried to

telephone my fiancé, Doctor Paul Brooks, before I departed but no one answered my long-distance call. Then—" she paused, voice choked with feeling—"then, on the way to the station, an open touring car passed my taxi and in it, riding beside Doctor Gaspard's chauffeur, I saw Paul!"

"Yes," said Blaine, slightly puzzled. "Then what?"

"That was Tuesday! I returned this morning. And, just as I told the police, at my boarding house I found this terrible message." Breaking down completely, she wept.

Murray Blaine read the note which the girl had handed him.

On Tuesday afternoon at four, Doctor Paul Brooks will be buried, without services according to his expressed wishes, at his Lake Geneva home. He died suddenly last Friday night in an Elgin hotel. The body will be placed in the family vault on the estate. I thought you should be told.

André Gaspard.

Sharply Blaine glanced at the sobbing girl. "You say you saw him that Tuesday morning? No wonder you're upset!" Then, "But you went to the police. What did they suggest?"

"They almost laughed at me," she stormed. "They insist that I've experienced an illusion. I can scarcely blame them, though," she added more quietly, "for you see, Paul's lawyer, Elias Ferguson, received a more detailed notice and was present at the burial. I talked to him by telephone. He says there is no doubt that Paul is dead—he even gave the name of an undertaker in Elgin for the police to call. But—I can't believe it! Oh, I know there is some awful mystery behind all this. If Paul died he was murdered! I've always distrusted that man, Gaspard."

Blaine took a turn up and down the

room to hide his feelings. He was sorry for the girl—disappointed, too, because for a moment this had seemed a promising case. But surely if the man's own lawyer vouched for his death—if the police were certain enough of facts to turn her away—her condition must be one of mental aberration resulting from the shock of her lover's demise.

"Tell me just one thing more before my friend arrives," he said kindly. "How did you happen to come to me? Few people know anything about my work."

"A policeman gave me your name. He said to tell you Mike Halligan sent me. That he was playing a hunch. Oh, please Mr. Blaine, help me! I don't know what to do."

"Mike Halligan, eh?" Blaine considered that thoughtfully. "The old Mick makes some uncanny guesses. I promised to play golf this afternoon but I'll play Mike's hunch instead! Certainly I'll help—"

A knock interrupted and he stepped out into the hall. She heard him explain to a friend that an important case required immediate attention. Hurrying back he exclaimed: "You haven't seen the body yourself. Will you drive with me to Lake Geneva right now? That's the quickest way to settle all your doubts."

Lynda Gray assented eagerly. Soon they were bowling along at top speed in Blaine's roadster, discussing the affair in greater detail.

THE girl studied her companion closely while heavy traffic engaged his attention and she found something reassuring in his capable mien. Murray Blaine was in his early thirties, lean-hipped and tall. Sun and wind had tanned his skin darkly. Across the healthy brown ran a thin white scar from eye to ear, proving—had she known it—that a thrown stiletto may not be dodged always, and giving to his face an expression of quizzical good humor.

At a suburban cross road he slowed down, glancing at his wrist watch. "You seem to feel," he said, "that if Paul Brooks is dead this Doctor Gaspard killed him. We have two problems. First to learn whether he is alive or dead. Second, to learn the cause of death and the identity of his slayer should there be evidence of murder. We've time to go round by way of Elgin and interview that undertaker. In any case his testimony will help."

Lynda gave specific reason for her suspicion, saying: "Doctor Gaspard talked Paul into an outrageous agreement. In the event either died before their work together was finished, the other was to inherit everything. Perhaps he had some horrible plot in mind all the while. He knew that Paul had no living relative who might be curious, and —" she smiled wistfully—"I don't suppose he thought I counted."

Blaine turned his eyes to the girl at his side, smiling sympathetically. "You said you were Paul's office nurse, while he was practicing in the city? And you were to be married—"

"This fall." She nodded. "I know you're thinking it queer that he had no thought of me when that agreement was written—but it was a hasty decision made in the heat of argument. I was present. Doctor Gaspard was so anxious to carry through this research work in which they had engaged, that he would consider no collaborator save one rich enough to finance the undertaking and willing to insure its progress in case of death. They equipped a laboratory at the lake estate and Paul gave up his city practice."

Blaine fell into an absorbed silence as he sent the car hurtling forward at high speed. There seemed small doubt concerning the young doctor's death but investigation might well lead to discovery of a crime. He spoke no more until they

swung into the outskirts of Elgin, where he inquired: "You have the undertaker's name correctly? It was Simeon Clotts?"

Lynda nodded.

Soon, after asking directions from a pedestrian, they rolled to a stop before an outlying "Funeral Home." Blaine suggested: "You wait in the car. I'll talk to this fellow."

A FAINT odor of formaldehyde assailed his nostrils as he opened the door, and the somber atmosphere of the gloomy room struck him like a breath from the tomb. But the wholesome-appearing individual he saw sitting at a table seemed not one to be involved in criminal undertakings. The man looked up from a book of pastel-colored fabric samples, his mouth widening in a smile of welcome.

"Pretty, ain't they?" Simeon Clotts fingered the swatches of satin and tulle appreciatively. "Now this lavender piece—you wouldn't mind bein' laid away in that yourself, I'll bet! 'Tain't so awful expensive neither. Can I work up something nifty in caskets for you?"

"Not today," said Blaine wryly. "But you can help me a lot if you'll donate some information. You see," he explained, "a young lady friend of mine, out there in the car, heard that Doctor Paul Brooks died this week and she just couldn't believe it. We learned that you took care of the body and came over to make sure."

"Oh, he died right enough!" said Clotts. "Last Friday night—heat stroke—and they called me up to the hotel next morning. What with the weather like it was he had to be taken care of right away. I fixed him up fine! I'll bet he never looked nicer alive than he did after I rouged him up real pretty. I got a good do on him."

Blaine inwardly shivered at the professional enthusiasm of this amiable man,

inquiring: "You knew him, I suppose? Quite a wealthy, well-known fellow, Brooks."

"Oh, I knew about him, of course, though I'd never seen him before. Here's his card." He reached into a box on the desk, explaining half sheepishly: "I always keep some souvenir of each one of my cases. A doctor, all right, but I didn't suppose he was rich. They certainly didn't go to any extravagance with the coffin."

"Whom do you mean?" Blaine inquired quickly. "Who made the arrangements?"

"Why, it was a funny looking old codger—called himself Gaspard. A Frenchman, I take it. Rushed in here from the hotel and wouldn't listen to any sales talk at all. Just pointed to the first casket in my display back there, and said: 'That one will do!' Cheapest one in the place, too. Plain wood. A nice job, of course—" the undertaker's selling habits caught him up quickly—"and light to carry. Easy on the pall bearers."

A few more questions brought forth assurance that a local doctor had signed the death certificate and the coroner had looked in. Murray Blaine voiced his thanks and turned away.

To Lynda Gray he said soberly: "Since your fiancé really is dead we must ascertain the cause now. An autopsy will be necessary. But first we'll go on to Lake Geneva and interview this Doctor André Gaspard."

CHAPTER TWO

The Incident of the Cat

IT WAS late when they arrived at the Brooks estate. A red sun had dropped behind green wooded hills which encircled the darkening waters of the lake. Driving along the winding road which led half a mile back from the highway

Blaine said to the girl: "We have an unpleasant session ahead of us. You must keep up your courage. I have no idea what may happen."

The road led them out of the woods into a vast expanse of bright green lawn that might have served for a golf course. On the brow of an eminence overlooking the lake stood the replica of an English manor house built of granite, plaster and oak. Through the dusk, lights shone only from a central room and from a round tower, which raised its conical roof to a height of three stories at the extreme northern end of the rambling structure. Pebbles swished beneath the car wheels as they rolled round the curving drive and stopped before the main entrance.

A figure dressed in white linens approached from the direction of the tower and Lynda whispered: "There he is! Coming from the laboratory they equipped on those upper floors." Raising her voice she called: "Doctor Gaspard! It's Lynda Gray and—a friend."

The scientist approached. He seemed a caricature of a man, as tall as a door, and so grotesquely thin that instinctively one listened for a rattling of his bones. But above the pointed black beard, in a chalk-white face, burned magnetic, scintillating eyes which seemed to snap, Blaine thought, with the energy of some terrific inner force. His voice was harsh as a parrot's screech.

"I knew you'd come. Too bad, of course. But that's the risk we take. It may happen to me tomorrow."

The girl murmured introductions. Blaine noted that the doctor's extended hand, in the light from the windows, was bloodless even to the fingernails and it felt like a mummy's claw. He explained: "Lynda only learned of this today—she'd been out of the city—so I brought her. . ."

Doctor Gaspard led them into a paneled library opening off the entrance hall.

"Sit down, he said. Hulda, my cook, is just serving dinner. No doubt you're both hungry."

Lynda Gray leaned against a carved table, her tense fingers pale upon its dark luster where she gripped the edge for support. Controlling the tremor in her voice she said: "I couldn't eat—I wonder, Doctor, if you might let me see him now? In the vault, you said. . ."

"All right!" said Doctor Gaspard briskly, as though peeved at thought of delaying his meal. "In the family vault, yes. A creditable notion these Brookses had—being buried at home instead of in a cemetery. I knew you'd want to see him so the coffin has not been sealed into its niche. Come! Then, afterward, we will eat."

With a comforting hand upon the girl's arm, Blaine led her in the wake of the man, who hurried out at a brisk pace. They followed a path around the house. A few yards beyond the northern tower a square stone building was set into the bluff above the lake so that the sharply falling greensward crossed its side in a long diagonal slant. One might have walked directly onto the roof from the slope above. Drawing a key from his pocket Doctor Gaspard opened the heavy door and turned to light an oil lamp which stood upon a ledge. Stepping over to a black casket which rested upon a raised stone platform in the center of the small mausoleum, he flung up the lid and motioned for them to come forward.

Lynda's shoulders were shaken by dry sobs as she gazed down at her lover's still face. For gone now was the last faint hope she had held. After a time her weeping ceased. Head bowed she stood benumbed with sorrow.

MMURRAY BLAINE studied the corpse. The body was not that of a big man. Its finely chiseled countenance,

lifelike save, perhaps, for the undertaker's rouge, was that of a student, an analyst, a seeker after hidden truths. Brooks had been quite blond and Blaine noted with a sudden start a faint growth of golden beard upon the cheeks. Then he recalled the case of a body disinterred for autopsy which had displayed an astoundingly lush growth of black whiskers. Lightly he touched the immobile flesh with his fingertips. Cold as marble, and as hard. He urged the girl away, saying: "Come. Let me take you to the house. I'm so sorry. . ."

Doctor Gaspard followed them outside. When they entered the library again he said firmly: "You must put this out of your mind, young woman. He's gone. Tears won't bring him back. He gave his life in the cause of Science and it is a worthy end. Now let us be sensible and dine."

But Lynda burst out bitterly, emotion overriding judgment. "There's something wrong! He's dead—but he didn't die Friday night as you said. I saw him in the living flesh at five o'clock last Tuesday morning in Chicago—riding in your car with your chauffeur!"

Doctor Gaspard wheeled around and stared. His face was expressionless save for eyes that seemed to bore into her brain. He spoke with judicial calmness. "An hallucination. Not uncommon in such cases. You must stay here tonight and rest. I shall give you a harmless sedative and you must go straight to bed."

Lynda became slightly hysterical, and the doctor interrupted her frenzied utterance sharply, shouting in a voice that would carry to the rear rooms. "Ivan! Ho, Ivan! Come in here."

To Blaine he whispered: "My chauffeur. Perhaps he can convince her. Her condition," he assured, "is nothing to be alarmed about. Such cases are not at all

unusual. Ah, here is the man now."

Ivan, the chauffeur, was a repellent figure, lumpy with oxlike muscle. Unkempt wisps of yellow hair clung to his broad, receding forehead and, in the whitish blue eyes, lay a light of animal cunning, natural heritage of Volga peasant blood. Lips parted in a vacant smile showed broken teeth. His face was scarred, perhaps by the knout, and in the hideously swollen fingerjoints Blaine saw evidence of stretching in the torture racks of revolutionary prisons. Life had shown Ivan little mercy. One wondered if he in turn might not be as pitiless upon occasion. Huge hands fumbling with the loose skirts of his gray Russian blouse he drawled: "You called for Ivan, Doctor?"

"Yes. Tell this young woman everything you did last Tuesday, starting with the minute you got out of bed."

"Yes, Doctor," the flat voice answered, continuing in an unflinching sing-song. "At five o'clock I get up and turn on water for the grass. At six o'clock I wash the car. At seven o'clock I help Hulda with the breakfast. At eight o'clock I drive you to Elgin. At nine—"

"Enough!" snapped his master. To Lynda the doctor said: "You heard that? How could you have seen Ivan in Chicago at five o'clock that morning? Especially with Paul Brooks who then lay dead in an Elgin morgue—as the undertaker will tell you if you ask him. No, no, my girl! You are suffering from a delusion and we will cure you of it easily enough if you'll do your part."

He turned to the servant. "Go to my bathroom and bring me a blue bottle from the medicine cabinet. She shall take—"

"Don't bother," interposed Blaine quickly. "Here is the very thing." He drew from his coat pocket a small parcel. "A sleeping draught prescribed for my mother," he explained, showing the label to Gaspard.

The doctor nodded impatiently. "That will do very well. But she must also determine for herself to put these disquieting fancies out of her mind."

Blaine mixed a dose for Lynda with his own hands. A housekeeper called from the kitchen led the girl off to a chamber upstairs.

DOCTOR GASPARD loosed a snort of exasperation, exclaiming: "Now we can have dinner. I am annoyed by any interruption of my usual routine." In the dining room he ate voraciously while Blaine only toyed with the food, wondering why the man's ravenous appetite had not put more flesh on his bones, eager for the discussion through which he hoped to extract vital information when the meal was finished.

Finally the scientist pushed back his chair and offered Blaine a cigar from a humidor on the sideboard. Then in the library he sprawled upon a couch to enjoy his perfecto. His eyes glinted with quick interest at the question: "Doctor Gaspard, just how did Paul Brooks die?"

"Hah! A 'heat stroke,' so the village physician said. Of course his diagnosis was ridiculous. But why should I correct him? What difference could it make?" The doctor's cadaverous fingers idly stroked the fur of a huge black cat curled on a cushion beside him—an odd cat with a round white spot between its eyes. He added casually, callously: "As a matter of fact, Paul Brooks died by his own hand, but—" the man's voice sharpened—"not intentionally! Make no mistake about that."

Blaine sat forward in his chair, intently interested. "How do you mean? By his own hand? Please explain a little more."

"Nothing strange about it." Doctor Gaspard continued stroking the somnolent cat. "You see, we have been engaged in

certain research here that will be of epoch-making importance when completed. The issue is so vital that we sought success at any cost. Until recently we have been using animals as subjects in which to record reactions. Last week we approached a stage where nothing less than the testing of our formula on the human body would suffice. Ah, my friend, when I announce this discovery to the world suffering humanity will bow down in thanksgiving!"

Impatiently Murray Blaine interjected: "Surely! I can well appreciate that. But tell me—were you experimenting with your medicines on Paul Brooks? Is that why he died?"

Doctor Gaspard smiled. "In this unfortunate affair you see the outcome of my folly. Not in 'experimenting on Paul Brooks,' as you so baldly put it, but in choosing an assistant equipped with an unstable intellect."

"You speak rather disparagingly, Doctor!"

"Not at all. He lacked the unfaltering stability of purpose necessary to scientific achievement. He was too—well, sentimental! In the end, rather than risk the life of a hired subject, he experimented upon himself. Without my knowledge, of course. I should never have permitted it."

"I see," said Blaine thoughtfully. "Might I ask the nature of these researches—what it is that you are trying to accomplish?"

"My friend," exclaimed the doctor hoarsely, "I have accomplished it! Since Brooks died, you understand? The discovery is mine—all mine! When I disclose it to the world it will ease the pains of untold millions—eliminate the greatest dangers in all surgical operations—and, quite incidentally of course, it will insure for me a name in medical history

that will never die!" The man's eyes burned like green fire.

"Unless," suggested Blaine quietly, "by some mischance you should be convicted of your associate's murder. Do you realize, Doctor Gaspard, that if an autopsy shows evidence of poisoning you will have a difficult time convincing a jury that you did not administer the dose?"

THE gaunt scientist rose from his couch so calmly that the black cat never stirred. He drew his lank figure to its greatest height and cast down upon Blaine a venomous glance from between narrowed eyelids. His discordant voice seemed to explode out of his chest.

"Imbecile! Murder? Why should I kill the man upon whom I depended for technical help? It is only by great good luck that my work has reached a stage where I can finish it unaided. And I assure you," he snarled, "that if I wished to kill, there are ways that would leave no trace!"

So that was it, thought Blaine. Aloud he said: "I meant no offense, Doctor Gaspard. The thought just occurred to me after you mentioned the manner of your collaborator's death. Putting myself in your place, and considering the financial agreement between you two, it seems to me there would have been temptation to put him out of the way and reap both money and fame for yourself alone. Just a theory, of course."

"Putting yourself in my place!" The doctor snorted contemptuously. "Can the flea imagine itself in the place of the elephant? As a matter of fact I rather suspect that you're trying to put yourself in Paul's place! That girl, Lynda, is a pretty piece of baggage." He stamped up and down the floor, wheeling about with a ghastly smile to say: "Eh, well! This is idle talk. I'm going to bed and advise you to do the same. By morning you

will forget your foolish fancies. They are quite groundless."

The man stalked off without further comment and Blaine, relighting his neglected cigar, settled himself in a chair to think.

Gaspard's outburst had sounded genuine enough. He seemed almost a fanatic in his absorption with the research in hand. Doubtless, too, there was truth in the statement that a man of his wide knowledge could kill with chemicals which no skill could trace. Probably an autopsy would only serve to prove his innocence. Yet, Blaine found the belief growing that the doctor had killed young Brooks. With conviction grew an intense desire to match his wits against the scientist's in an effort to find proof of guilt.

He determined that he would invent an excuse for staying over on the morrow, so that he might find opportunity to seek for some clue that would open up an avenue of investigation. Rising he yawned and stretched his arms. The thought of bed seemed inviting. On his way to the door he noted the doctor's black cat still sleeping on the cushion and turned aside to prod it with his toe, saying: "I'll bet you're supposed to sleep outside. Shall I put you out?"

The animal did not stir. He gazed at the somber feline with its odd white marking. How odd that a man of Gaspard's temperament should choose a cat for a pet. Again he stirred the beast—found its flesh hard and unyielding. Half startled he bent down and laid his hand upon the fur. Starting erect he frowned. The cat was dead!

For a long moment he studied it curiously, mind racing with conjecture. Had Gaspard realized his pet's condition while he petted it there by the couch? Blaine thought not. A more sinister possibility occurred to him. Was this drug—this chemical—with which the doctor worked,

so potent that a mere trace of it upon his fingers could bring death to that which he touched?

Shaking his head in complete bewilderment Blaine started off to bed. On sober second thought he surmised that the cat had been subjected to dangerous experiments and only now succumbed. He would check that possibility on the morrow.

CHAPTER THREE

Shipped for Burial

MURRAY BLAINE was astir at an early hour. Upon the spreading lawns and flower beds about the house, he saw numberless sprays of water from an irrigating system augmenting the night's sparse dew. He thought the man who planned the place must have set great store by the gorgeous expanse of color and greenery, and scarcely blamed him.

Intent upon an idea that had come to him while dressing, he turned his footsteps past the tower and approached the burial vault. Near the small building which seemed half buried in the hillside he saw the chauffeur, Ivan, dragging a length of hose to extend the play of water from a pipeline on the crest of the bluff. The grass about the vault matched the lawns above in its vivid green.

He addressed the man. "Here, Ivan. Have you a key to this"—he pointed to the massive door of the crypt—"or can you fetch one from the house? I want to go in there again."

The Russian stared, laid down his hose, and turned away suggesting: "You wait, yes? I go ask the doctor."

"I don't think he's up yet," Blaine called after the fellow but Ivan stolidly continued on his way. Soon he returned and unlocked the door, going then about his task.

Inside the vault a shaft of sunlight cast

its radiance illuminating the bare interior. Blaine raised the coffin lid and looked again upon the features of the man whom he believed now a victim of Gaspard's jealousy and cupidity. The fact was expressionless, strangely lifelike, and the body lay with hands on breast in the conventional posture for burial.

Blaine sighed. "Looks hopeless. I can't do anything for you old man, I guess—except to pin a badge of guilt upon that devil who murdered you!"

Again he noted the phenomenon of growing beard and it raised the eery question—could the man possess a spark of life? He put the idea aside angrily. After embalming? With his own eyes he had seen more remarkable growth of hair after death, and beneath his exploring fingers Brooks' flesh was clammy and cold. But a new line of thought occurred to him. Suppose the death had actually occurred in Chicago—that Lynda Gray had not been misled in her belief that she saw Brooks ride by? What would that signify? That Ivan had served as chauffeur to a corpse! The idea would bear investigation when he returned to the city. It seemed possible that Undertaker Clotts might have been bribed to falsify the date upon which he had attended the body.

Blaine locked the door and gave the key to Ivan, who accompanied him back to the house, advising: "Better you go in to breakfast. The doctor not like waiting"

As they approached the front entrance-way Blaine halted with a sharp exclamation of surprise. "Look there!" He pointed to the stoop. "That cat! Can there be two of them?" Clearly he noted the odd white marking.

"Two cats?" Ivan gazed at him stupidly. "Only one cat."

"I'll swear I saw that one dead last night," said Blaine. "He lay in the li-

brary, stiff and cold, when I went to bed!"

Over the chauffeur's face crept a doubtful expression, quickly followed by a curious smile. "Mebbe you mean old Pete, yes? I carried him out this morning."

"But there he is! What was wrong with him?"

Ivan's broadly accented words explained: "That is not Pete, no. In the lake I threw him. You think you see things, mebbe? Like when men drink the vodka?"

ANGERED at his tendency to leap to conclusions, yet strangely moved for all of that, Blaine opened the door. The cat sprang inside. Doctor Gaspard stood waiting in the hall and his long fingers reached to caress the animal as it arched its back at his feet.

"My constant companion," he said by way of greeting. "Prowls the laboratory at will and seems immune to dangers there. Come, let us eat."

Lynda Gray appeared upon the stairs. There were shadows beneath her lovely eyes but she managed a smile.

"Bravo!" cried the doctor kindly. "You slept. You are better. Soon we'll have you quite well again. Here's a suggestion! Stay on for a day or so and rest. Let Blaine go back to the city if he must."

Lynda hesitated. Blaine suspected the motive behind Gaspard's hospitality but welcomed the opportunity and hastily said: "That's fine! I think she should do just that. And I'll stay, too, if you'll invite me, Doctor. Time means little to me just now."

Gaspard smiled. "You would test last night's theory? You shall have every chance! And now, to breakfast."

"He's supremely confident," thought Blaine. In his place I would be, too. But I'm positive he's guilty!"

When the meal was over Doctor Gasp-

ard said: "Come see the laboratory if you like. I cannot tell its secrets yet, but you'll be interested in viewing the scale on which it is equipped.

Lynda indicated that she wished to go along.

They climbed a winding stair up into the tower, and on the top floor entered a room obviously devoted to science. The place was a maze of apparatus, the air heavy with the odor of drugs. The black cat, prowling along behind, leaped to a place upon a table in the midst of glass test-tubes, graduates and retorts, curling itself for a nap. Gaspard chuckled. "The nonchalance of the beast! Perhaps it really has nine lives. But as for you two—touch nothing! There is danger here."

Lydia caught sight of a familiar object upon a desk by the wall. "His hat!" she exclaimed softly. "Paul worked there sometimes?"

"Yes," said the doctor. They moved toward the table. "Here are some of his last notes not yet filed." He picked up a memorandum book and turned to Blaine, thumbing over the pages. "Listen to this. It might interest you. Paul wrote, 'Reaction of Agent B in tissues of both cats and dogs has produced negative results in all save one instance. Test No. 21 on the monkey was positive. Unquestionably the final venture must be made upon a human body but I cannot agree to subject any man to the risk unless it is myself.' There!" exclaimed Gaspard triumphantly. "You comprehend, my friend?"

Blaine reached for the book. "There is more written on the next page. May I see?"

"It is nothing." Doctor Gaspard placed the pad in a drawer. "Dry figures on our later work. But you understand his state of mind?"

Lynda turned away nervously, saying: "It is close in here. I feel faint."

Blaine steadied her with an arm about

her waist. He noted then that there were no windows in the circular chamber. The skylights were closed. A door in one wall suggested an opening to the outer air and he stepped over to it. As his hand touched the knob a roar broke from the doctor's lips.

"Stop! On your life, don't open that!" Gaspard strode forward and pushed the pair toward the stairs. "Take her outside. That is only a closet. And within it, my friend, lurks death. One false move and—*poof!*"

Blaine paused on the threshold. A strange, fantastic idea crystallized in his mind. His eyes narrowed speculatively.

"And for you also, Doctor," he retorted, "may I suggest that a false step may spell death?"

WALKING with Lynda down to the dock on the lake shore Blaine noted a speed boat swinging at anchor. "Tell you what," he suggested, "let's take that and ride to town. We can talk without danger of being overheard and the fresh air will do you good."

Ripping off the canvas cover he found the gas tank full and soon they were skimming the glistening waves beneath a cloud-banked sky.

"What do you think now?" was the girl's first question. "Oh, I can't get rid of the feeling that Paul was brutally slain. What did Doctor Gaspard mean by his remark about Paul's 'state of mind,' when he read those notes?"

"He insists," said Blaine, "that Paul Brooks died as a result of trying their new formula upon himself. But something in the man's attitude certainly has aroused my suspicions. I believe Paul suffered from the use of whatever drug it is they are working with—but not through administering it to himself. In fact," he muttered uncertainly, "I have another theory about this case."

She said no more, giving herself up to

the physical thrill of their swift ride as surcease to distraught nerves. They skirted the southern shores of the lake, saw the rounded dome of Yerkes Observatory in the distance, zigzagging in and out through fishing boats and sailing craft until they came at last to the village. Here they disembarked and went up to the hotel. Blaine sought a telephone booth.

He talked at length with a doctor friend in the city, and also to his valet. Awaiting a return call from the physician—whom he had asked to check up certain matters—he sat with Lynda on the open veranda watching the cloudpack darken with hint of a coming storm. An hour passed before he was summoned to the telephone again. The information to which he listened served to confirm the theory which he was developing. Then, with noontime approaching, he suggested luncheon and over a salad they discussed the man whom he believed now to be a criminal.

"My friend, Fisher," said Blaine, "reports that Gaspard is a genius in his way. Half his life has been devoted to the development of new surgical technique. But the fellow is accounted unreliable, despite his uncanny skill, because—so Fisher says—he never contents himself with doing the job at hand but is forever attempting the impossible."

"I've heard similar gossip," Lynda agreed. "Too many of his patients died. If called to remove an appendix he might also set to work on some other organ and try any crazy feat of skill to correct difficulties real or assumed."

"That's it. Fisher indicated that Gaspard usually knew what he was trying to accomplish, but that loss of blood and the limitations of anesthesia invariably defeated his more delicate undertakings because of the time required. Once, they say, Gaspard actually killed a man troubled with angina pectoris by transplanting the heart of a dog. It finished

him for active practice in New York."

Lynda gestured in mock dismay. "That's a bit too much, even for a nurse, at mealtime." She pushed away her plate. "Let's talk of something else."

Blaine apologized and turned conversation to the subject of their status at the Brooks estate. "Or perhaps I should say the Gaspard estate," he amended. "The man certainly will be master there unless we find proof of his guilt. We'll have to stay until we get to the bottom of things," he added, "even though we wear our welcome out. I'm expecting trouble—"

"Trouble?" She caught up his word quickly. "You mean—danger? That he may make an attempt upon us? If he suspects—"

BLAINÉ smiled. "I've almost accused him of murder, so he knows how I feel. His attitude this morning was a distinct challenge and I'm accepting it. I called my valet awhile ago, asking him to send out some clothes. I'll see this matter through."

"Why?" she asked curiously. "The risk may be great. He could poison us as easily—and as safely—as I believe he did Paul. Why do you do it? You've said nothing about a fee. I don't believe you follow this business for a living, do you?"

"Oh, Lord no!" Murray Blaine grinned broadly. "Maybe I'm just what folks call 'nosey.' Anyway, I get a kick out of such puzzles as this one. Call it an avocation."

"I think we'd better be going back," said Lynda. "First I must stop at a store—I have only the clothes I came in."

"And I," said Blaine, "would like to go past the railway station and tell them to send over my trunk when it comes."

Together they walked down the village street to the depot. Across the platform to meet them scuttled a hunched and scrawny Negro in a ridiculous coat from

some cast-off lodge regalia. He sidled up grinning, husky voice pleading: "Fotch yo' bags, suh? Ak kin carry 'em. Ah's powerful big fo' mah size!"

"No bags," said Blaine. "But maybe you can look after my trunk. It should arrive from Chicago tomorrow. I want it sent over to the Brooks place. Will you see to it?"

The Negro backed away, glancing from side to side cautiously, whispering: "Ain't handlin' no trunks no mo'. Yo' better git somebody else."

His curiosity piqued, Blaine demanded: "Why not? Did one drop on your toe?"

"One drapped, all right! An' it busted open. Ah only ketched a glimmer o' what was inside, but that was enough fo' me!"

"Tell us about it," coaxed Blaine, amused. "Here's a dollar. Now tell us what you saw."

The Negro edged nearer and his voice was hoarse with awe. "It was like this. Ain't told nobody nothin' yet, 'cause I'se afeered. Ol' Doc Gaspard sent it ovah last Friday, with that mule-faced chauffeur what don't tuck his shirt tail in. Goin' to Elgin, de ol' doc was, an' he wanted his trunk checked through."

Blaine and Lynda exchanged glances of amazement, listening intently.

"We got it off'n de back of de automobile all right an' the Roosian drove off once it was on de platform. Ah done drapped it tryin' to hist it up on a truck an' that's when Ah saw . . . what Ah saw!"

"Speak out!" snapped Blaine. "You saw what?"

"Through a crack where de lid popped open a little Ah saw"—the Negro's voice dropped fearfully—"what looked like a red-headed ha'nt! Ah tell yo' boss, an' Ah ain't foolin', de ol' doc was ashippin' a cawpse."

Lynda loosed a small scream but Blaine quieted her gruffly, muttering:

"This boy's crazy, of course. Come, let's be going." He paused only to press a bill into the Negro's hand, warning: "Not a word about that to anyone till I see you again or I'll have you put in jail!"

With the darky out of earshot he explained: "I don't want to excite him—start him inventing details. We'll need his testimony later. This opens up a new possibility and offers a world of explanation if it's true."

"What do you mean?" Her eyes were wide with interest.

"That Paul never died in Elgin! But the undertaker there prepared a corpse and shipped it back here for burial! The victim—red headed if the Negro is right—was killed sometime during the day and taken to that Elgin hotel so as to be in reach of a strange undertaker. Gaspard planned this whole business ahead of time."

"I know he did," she said bitterly. "It was no illusion when I saw Paul in Chicago Tuesday morning. He was riding with that horrible man, Ivan."

"Which all fits into the puzzle," said Blaine. "Gaspard did his first bloody job while Brooks was away, and arranged for the burial on Tuesday."

Lynda shuddered, murmured brokenly: "The utter heartlessness of it all! Poor Paul was riding back to his own funeral!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Mystery of the Vault

DINNER proved to be no ordeal. Murray Blaine found it unnecessary to devise any special excuse for prolonging his stay for Doctor Gaspard reiterated his invitation to sojourn a little longer. His manner showed no trace of animosity following their sharp words that morning. On the whole it seemed to Blaine and Lynda that he exerted himself to be cordial.

During the course of the meal a storm rolled up from the southwest smudging out the sunset glow and casting a midnight pall over the hills and waters. Thunder rolled intermittently, and forked lightning veined the heavens with fire, but the rain held off. The atmosphere was oppressively close; no wind stirring the trees outside.

In a solemn hush between thunder claps the doctor said: "A good time to be indoors. Perhaps you can amuse yourselves with cards? I must go to the tower for the laboratory skylights are open. A heavy downpour would cause ruinous damage."

He stopped in the hall to call Ivan. The two went out and Blaine led Lynda into an adjoining room. Standing by the window, looking out across the lawns, he voiced his thought. "I've got to get into that laboratory with time enough to search the place. There the secret lies, the solution to this mystery. If only I could find some way to keep the doctor and his precious chauffeur occupied."

"Why not try it tonight after everyone is asleep?"

"Too risky. It's a safe bet that Ivan stands guard—sleeps there probably—or that some alarm system has been rigged. If what I'm beginning to suspect is true, this Gaspard will take no chances."

"Tell me," she requested. "You've got a clue?"

"Can't speak of it yet," he answered hastily. "But I'd stake my life that we'll pin the crime on Gaspard." To himself he admitted that he was staking nothing less than life in challenging the scientist. For Gaspard was plainly aware of danger and confident of his ability to cope with it.

Noticing Lynda's growing nervousness Blaine suggested: "Let's walk down to the dock. The storm will be worth seeing and we can run when it rains."

From the landing above the restless

waters they saw the faint outline of whitecaps racing before the wind. Soon violent gusts were moaning in the trees.

The girl shuddered, complaining: "I have a feeling that something terrible is soon to happen. It's the storm, of course, and this gloomy place. I'm in deadly fear of Doctor Gaspard."

"Why?" demanded Blaine. "Not much danger if we watch him closely. He feels so safe that it would seem foolish to risk murdering us."

"But he was too civil! That is unlike him," she objected. "He is plotting . . . something."

"For instance?"

"How easily he could poison us—and cover his crime in many ways. He might even inject into our dead bodies the virus of disease and provide unquestionable proof of our natural death."

"Oh, rats!" Blaine exclaimed cheerfully. "I don't size him up as that sort at all. He is an egotist! Unless my psychology is all wet he likes to keep us here—me, especially—to laugh at. I'm sure he laughs up his sleeve over his cleverness in hiding a crime which he knows I suspect. But—" he shrugged—"let him chuckle! I have a plan. . . ."

A LOUDER crash of thunder was followed by a sprinkle of rain. Turning they stumbled up the dark path toward the house, their only light the frequent lightning flashes.

Their way lay past the vault. Ordinarily in the gloom one would have passed without noticing the low structure, but as they came abreast the building a vivid glare lighted the sky for an instant and Lynda Gray loosed a piercing scream of fright. As her pitiful cry rang out she fell back against Blaine, who had also seen, and they stood rooted to the spot. He felt her body crumple and caught her in his arms.

Then the rain came down in torrents. Doctor Gaspard's harsh voice shouted an inquiry out of the night. He came trotting up, white clothes streaming, and sharply demanded: "What are you two doing out in this storm? What's the matter here?"

Blaine looked about for the chauffeur, holding the girl in one arm while he reassured himself with fingers upon the automatic he carried in a shoulder holster. During the next few moments anything might happen. He did not wish to be caught unawares.

To the doctor he said: "You know well enough why she's frightened. What ghoulis business are you up to?"

Ominously Gaspard answered above the roar of the wind. "More accusations? You are laboring under some crazy misapprehension and I'm getting tired of it. Speak up! What happened?"

"Where's that chauffeur of yours?" Blaine moved as though to pass the scientist upon the narrow path but the other did not budge. "Stand aside. I want to get this girl out of the rain."

"The rain won't hurt her. Why did she cry out? I tell you, I want to know what's wrong."

Savagely, then, Blaine exclaimed: "She saw him, of course! And so did I. It scared her half to death."

"Saw whom?" Gaspard's voice crackled with impatience. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Then flash your light over there and see!" Blaine gestured toward the vault. "The door is open. I saw it clearly. And Brooks—or his corpse—is sitting there in a chair!"

A crunching sound of footsteps on the gravel pathway arrested their attention. Doctor Gaspard flicked on his light and grunted: "Ah, Ivan! I wondered where you were." Wheeling about he threw the electric beam upon the front of the vault.

The massive door was tightly closed and nothing seemed amiss. The scientist laughed in harsh disdain.

"More hallucinations! You have the appearance of a steady man but your nerves are as faulty as the girl's. She is coming around now. Let's get out of this rain."

Indeed Lynda Gray had regained her senses and stood erect, trembling in the circle of Blaine's arm. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Then wait for me a moment." He snatched the flashlight from Gaspard's hand and rushed over to the vault. The portal was securely locked, the heavy oaken boards spotted with rain. The others approached. He whirled upon Gaspard.

"I'm going in there! Produce a key or go and fetch one. I'm prepared to use force if you make it necessary."

"Force?" demanded the doctor stiffly, his air that of one gravely offended. The chauffeur sidled nearer, huge hands spread like those of a wrestler.

"Yes, force! Don't talk to me of hallucinations! My nerves are sound—I know what I saw. You'll try no more experiments on the body of Paul Brooks. Open that door!"

"Of course I'll open it. Why not?" Doctor Gaspard drew a key from his pocket and turned the lock. "But I've had enough of these ridiculous accusations. Tomorrow a mason shall come and seal the coffin in its crypt. That will end such talk forever." He shoved open the door and Blaine threw the lightbeam inside.

THE coffin stood in its place, lid closed. Murry Blaine went over and jerked it open. The young doctor's still form lay in its accustomed position. Its cold hands were on the breast, the eyelids shut. He paused uncertainly, staring down at the calm, immobile features. Again he laid his hand upon the flesh,

fingers recoiling from the touch of death.

Doctor Gaspard said quietly: "You see? Perhaps I should not blame you. Your nerves are weak. Let's forget our differences. The man is dead."

Blaine laid hold of the body seeking to move an arm but found it rigid. But his fingers telegraphed a message which stirred him immeasurably. The coat sleeve was damp with spots of rain. Certainly, then, the body had been sitting just inside the doorway where they had seen it. His searching eyes descried a folding camp chair in a gloomy corner of the vault. He made no mention of his discovery but went over to the door and swung it shut, noticing how perfectly it fitted. The room was hermetically sealed save for air vents near the ceiling. No rain could possibly blow in around the tight bottom of the door yet there was a strip of wet cement inside. Since the wind had shifted into the east after the first few curling gusts, he felt quite sure the moisture had not blown in following their entry.

Without comment he took Lynda's arm and started back to the house. Gaspard and his chauffeur brought up the rear. In the library, where they were left alone for a few moments, the girl whispered nervously: "Tell me quickly—what was it? Oh, I saw him! I thought him alive! But he lies there so still. . . ."

"We saw him," Blaine admitted, "and I was quite bowled over when we found him back in the casket. The answer is simple. Ivan! He rearranged things quickly."

"But why—why? What were they going to do?" There was terror in the girl's voice and bewilderment as well.

"That," said Blaine, "is a question not so simple. I don't know what they were doing—but I can guess. I'll tell you about it later. Here comes Gaspard."

The doctor entered, followed by the brutish Ivan who bore a tray. Empty

glasses and a decanter of brandy were offered first to the guests. Blaine eyed the scientist closely, hesitating before accepting a drink. The doctor smiled, his face crinkling like old parchment, and poured a dram for himself.

"You're think of poison? My dear young man, sooner or later you must learn that I am no criminal. Both of you need a stimulant and so do I." He swallowed the beverage.

Lynda choked on the fiery liquid but it relieved the chill in her bones. Blaine raised his glass in wry salute. "Your health, Doctor! While it lasts!"

Gaspard made no retort but advised Lynda to remove her wet clothing and go to bed, promising: "Tomorrow we'll make an end of ghosts. An honest stone mason will see to that."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Red-Headed Man

WHEN the girl had gone Doctor Gaspard produced a box of his excellent cigars and launched upon a discussion of the "malady" which, he said, afflicted Lynda. Diplomatically he refrained from attributing the same weakness to Blaine and confined all of his references to the nervous reactions of women.

"Some think they see spirits; others believe they hold converse with the dead. I have seen a patient stop and stare at a whirling dust cloud, swearing that she saw there the form of some departed one, reciting details of dress and features remembered all too well. We cannot explain these things! Mind pictures, certainly—images which grow upon the screen of the brain clearly—yet no more clearly than the phantasma so commonly observed in nightmares."

"I have heard of such things," Blaine admitted. "But Doctor, you could never

make me believe that while wide awake I was misled by any such false apparition. I saw the body of Paul Brooks sitting in the doorway of that vault! I believe that for some unknown reason it was placed there by—let us say your man, Ivan. What do you know of that fellow's past? Assuming that you had no hand in this affair, what would be his motive either for murder or for body-snatching?"

"Ivan?" exclaimed the doctor. "Ridiculous! Impossible! Why, Ivan—" he lowered his voice a little—"is more animal than human. Brutalized by inhuman treatment he received during the War. He was my servant during a period I spent in Moscow and attached himself to me so firmly that I took pity on his state and brought him back. He is loyal, but quite stupid. I could never believe him capable of stealing or mistreating a dead body."

"So?" Blaine grunted. "I'm not so sure."

"No," said Gaspard expansively, "it is as I say. The girl—yes, even you, young man—you've both been 'seeing things.' The condition will pass."

"Tell me, Doctor," requested Blaine, "do the dead ever come back? I mean, really come to life again? I knew a chap who was pronounced dead after drowning—"

"Ah, my friend, what is death? Tell me that and I'll tell you if they 'come back.'"

"Would you say a man is dead when heart and breathing stop?"

"By no means!" Doctor Gaspard got to his feet, face alight with interest, and began striding up and down the room pushing chairs aside. "It is a matter of time! The heart may be 'dead' before a toe expires, to use an absurd illustration. Let us say that blood corpuscles are given new life as they pass through the heart

—to be equally silly in our explanation—well then! A given corpuscle during the intricate journey it takes through the body must be ‘alive’ until it returns to the heart again. You follow me? So it is then, that in the case of your friend who was submerged too long, when the organs were made to function in time, the life force was blown into flame and took up its usual routine. But you see my point—that the man’s body had not died all over.”

“Then could it not be possible that—well, in the case of Paul Brooks out there—that he is not dead? That there is still a spark—”

Doctor Gaspard threw up his long skinny arms in mock disgust. “My boy! What folly.”

“How about these hypnotists who put their subjects into a trance and bury them under the ground? Are they not actually dead and buried? Yet, they are brought back to life. I’ve seen it done.”

“Bah!” The doctor snorted vehemently. “A spectacle for the eyes of children and fools! Allow me to bury the subject and no hypnotist will restore life!”

“Can you hypnotize people, Doctor Gaspard?” asked Blaine casually.

“Certainly. So can you. It is nothing, this hypnotism. Some fools speak of it as of possible value in place of anesthesia in minor operations. I have tried it—to my sorrow. Always the blood—the blood—and the difficulty of holding a patient under the influence while concentrating upon the delicate work in hand. A calalectic state induced by hypnosis does not simulate death nor even complete anesthesia.”

Blaine decided the time had come to deliver a telling blow to Gaspard’s feeling of safety. He was not sure what might result but took the risk.

“Doctor,” he said, “you mentioned the similarity of these hallucinations to a common nightmare. And last night I ex-

perienced an extremely peculiar dream.”

“Yes?” Gaspard’s thoughts were elsewhere at the moment and he seemed scarcely interested.

“In my nightmare I thought I was on my way to this place. Ahead of me in the lane through the woods I saw two men struggling with a heavy load. I watched them with interest as they pulled and tugged at their burden. Upon coming nearer I saw that it was a large trunk.”

The doctor jerked erect suddenly. “Eh, what? A trunk?”

“Yes. Apparently unable to make much progress with their task,” Blaine continued, “they opened the box and lifted out that which it contained. I crept closer that I might see what it was they sought to hide in the wood. I shudder now at the ghastly sight which met my eyes!” Blaine covered his face with his hand in a convincing gesture.

Doctor Gaspard was upon his feet, eyes blazing. His voice grated like the sound of torn paper. “What was this apparition you saw—that you imagined you saw—in your dream?”

“It was a gruesome thing. A terrifying thing, Doctor! It was a red-headed corpse!”

Doctor Gaspard eyed Blaine fiercely. He repressed the anger which burned in his savage face. Turning upon his heel he stalked to the stairs. There he wheeled about to voice a threat of death.

“Tomorrow you will return to the city,” he exclaimed, “or you may, yourself, become a corpse! I am engaged in experiments of such dangerous nature that it will be quite unsafe for you to stay longer.”

Blaine nodded. “I understand. Thanks for the warning.”

AT BREAKFAST Doctor Gaspard suavely repeated his marching orders in the presence of Lynda Gray. She looked up in some surprise when he said:

"I shall be sorry to have you young folks go today. It has been interesting having you here." For her enlightenment he explained: "It is as I told Blaine last night. My work from this point forward involves the use of such lethal elements that it will be unsafe for you to remain."

Under the cordial tone of the talk Lynda sensed tension between the two men. She was not sure what development had occurred but her quick reply was calculated to aid her companion. "We shall certainly wish to avoid the risk, Doctor. But Mr. Blaine will want to pick up his trunk. He phoned for clothes yesterday. Perhaps we can wait—"

"Ivan shall fetch it from the station," Gaspard assured. "Then you can take it in your car. I would not urge your hasty departure were it not for the best. Meanwhile, I shall drive across the lake to Williams Bay and arrange with a mason for the task which must now be done. Will you come along in the boat?"

Without waiting for their reply he got up and left the room. Hurriedly Blaine whispered to Lynda: "You go with him. I need an hour here alone! Keep him as long as you can. He won't dare harm you."

When they went out into the hall Ivan was just going out through a rear door. Gaspard said: "He must first put gas in the boat and the car. The lazy dog left the tanks empty."

Blaine suggested: "Take Lynda with you and I'll go with Ivan for my trunk."

Gaspard smiled. "Fine! We'll start at once."

When the boat departed Blaine turned to the chauffeur. "You are to bring my trunk from town. Look for a scrawny little Negro at the station—I told him to have it sent over."

"The doctor say to bring it, yes," said Ivan stolidly. "You are not coming along, no?"

"Oh, no," said Blaine indifferently.

"No need of that. I'll smoke and read till you return." He strolled back to the house, listening until he heard a car roll down the drive.

At last he was free to act. If the tower were locked he would need a key. In the doctor's desk? He glanced about cautiously. There would be no one in the house save Hulda, the cook. She seemed an honest sort, doubtless hired from a nearby farm. He ransacked drawers until he found what he was after.

THE door of the tower yielded to the first key he tried and the one above stairs was unlocked. Entering the laboratory he sat down at the desk where Paul Brooks had been wont to work. He found the notebook in which the young doctor's entries had been made. Anxiously he scanned the pages detailing results of the research work. At some of the final notes he gasped. Especially one near the very end.

Doctor Gaspard's mania for making this final test upon a man unaware of its danger is utterly unthinkable. Since negative results with Agent B outnumber positive reactions how can we be sure of success? The discovery, whatever its worth, is mine! I shall destroy the formula and tell that poor red-headed beggar to be on his way.

A closing entry in the form of a string of numerals puzzled Blaine for a moment before he decided it must be the combination of a safe. A glance about the room showed a numbered dial in one wall. Had Brooks deposited the formula there, changing the combination? He went over and twisted the knob and the door opened promptly. Inside the sole object was a small vial of colorless liquid, unlabeled. He stared at it for a long moment before putting it in his pocket. Last product of the secret formula, perhaps? Agent A or Agent B? Blaine broke into profuse perspiration as the tremendous importance of this question dawned upon him.

How could a man be sure? Horrible possibilities assailed him.

The closed door in the opposite wall caught his eye. What mystery did it hide, that the old scientist should have been so alarmed when he sought to open it the day before? A key in the lock was all the invitation needed.

With his hand upon the knob, in the very act of pulling open the door, a slight noise brought his head around with a jerk. He saw nothing but leaped with fright when from the closet, it seemed, a vaguely glimpsed human form sprang upon his back.

Struggling furiously he twisted around and swung a terrific right and left to the body, heaving forward with all his might in an effort to overthrow his assailant. The form went flying across the room and sent a work table full of delicate equipment crashing. There in the broken glass lay the red-headed corpse.

As Blaine stared at the rigid remains of the man to whom, unquestionably, Brooks had referred in his notes, the whole solution of the mystery flashed across his mind. But the thrill of victory was scarcely gained when, out of the tail of his eye, he saw a shadow upon the floor and felt the awful impact of a blow upon his head.

A great roaring filled his ears and his spirit seemed to soar up out of his stricken body. As from a great distance he heard the broad tones of the chauffeur, Ivan, saying: "A good thing, yes, the doctor said to watch him. Better I bury them both."

As the remnants of consciousness faded he felt the huge hands pawing over his breast, searching through his pockets. Then, like a sack of meal, he was flung across the brawny shoulders and his last sensation was that of being carried down the stairs.

CHAPTER SIX

The Floating Corpse

MURRAY BLAINE awakened slowly. A feeling of lassitude enveloped him. It seemed neither possible nor desirable to move. The rush and splash of running water assured him that it was time for rising and that his man, Joseph, was drawing his bath. He wished the fellow had not taken this discreet way of waking him. He wanted to sleep.

The bed felt hard. Where was it he had been the night before? He shut his eyes tightly in the gloom, trying to remember. Then, like a thunder clap, came realization. He was not in his room at home! Not in his bed. It was not the noise of his bath—with an effort he sat up—what was it? Where was he?

His eyes darted about the place in which he was confined. Daylight shown only on the ceiling but soon his vision accustomed itself to the darkness and he sprang from his resting place with a shout of alarm.

He landed with a splash in water knee deep. Stumbling he grasped at a bulky shape in an effort to steady himself. The vault! He had been lying on the coffin. Ivan! The doctor's brutish accomplice had carried him to the crypt. What was it the man had said—"Better bury both?" Blaine wondered how long he had lain unconscious—if Ivan had finished digging his grave for two.

Rapidly he recalled incidents leading up to the surprise attack. Paul's notes, the cadaver in the closet, the bottle in the safe. What had become of that? Feverishly he searched his pockets for the vial. Then he remembered Ivan's pawing hands. Strangely enough the man had left the automatic in its shoulder holster. He cursed the chauffeur, wishing he had him under the muzzle of his gun.

Abruptly the steady sound of running

water forced itself upon his attention. When he moved his feet he found himself immersed to the thighs. The vault floor was deeply flooded and the water rising rapidly. Frantically he splashed over to the door. It was locked. The snug-fitting portal seemed quite watertight. It dawned upon his harrassed mind that the vault was like a cistern—that no appreciable amount of water would leak out—that with no opening to the outer air save through narrow gratings close against the ceiling he was doomed to drown like a rat in a trap. Snatching out his pistol he set it against the lock and fired two slugs into the keyhole. The catch did not yield. He wondered where the water came from and soon discovered the source.

Through one of the gratings high above, the black end of a large hose gushed a heavy flow. The water ran down the wall in a thick glistening sheet. Ivan's cunning! The whole force of the sprinkling system applied to his destruction while the stolid Russian worked at digging a grave. Raw fear laid clammy hands on Blaine's heart. His plight looked hopeless. Without help he saw no chance of escape and there was no reason to expect rescue.

If only he could reach the grating—somehow reach the hose. His harried glance rested on the coffin. The water was now above his waist for the room was small and filling quickly. If he could tilt the black box up against the wall perhaps he could climb to the top. As he watched, it moved. A touch sent it floating away. Vividly he recalled Undertaker Clotts' remarks about the cheap wooden affair—its lightness—and morbidly he commented aloud: "A good raft! Until it hits the roof."

HIS dazed brain seemed, in a twinkling, to regain its powers. All his previous theories concerning the crime

rushed upon him and left him breathless. With frenzied hands he raised the coffin lid and tore loose the flimsy hinges. In the dim light reflected down from above he saw the features of Paul Brooks floating now almost on a level with his eyes.

Madly he shouted: "You're alive! I know you're alive! But now you'll drown along with me!" He slapped the cold, white face until his fingers tingled. He shook the body roughly, screaming frantic words into the waxen ears. "You're alive!" his hoarse voice wailed. "I did see you sitting here in a chair!" In his pocket he found a small penknife. "I'll prove you're alive! You've got to wake up!" He plunged the point of a blade into the pallid cheek. No blood flowed. He gaped disbelievingly. Groaning in his disappointment he seized upon the body. "I must use the coffin. You've got to get out."

Suddenly, as he stooped over the coffin, he heard a strident, chuckling laugh above the noise of the water. He whirled in time to see the evil face of Ivan vanishing from the grated window. The Russian had been watching him, gloating at his predicament—and he hadn't even known. He turned back to the coffin once more.

Struggling in water now up to his armpits he rolled the body free. It was stiff as a log and heavy. He tried to stand it upright in a corner of the death chamber. A certain bouyancy made it sway and topple. He caught up the figure again and endeavored to force it into place. At last, in a floundering effort, he laid hold of the coffin lid and with that jammed up under the rigid chin the earthly remains of Paul Brooks stood in a state of temporary uprightness. Then Blaine attacked the problem of scaling the wall.

By this time the water was up to his neck. The coffin was more bouyant than a boat and try as he would he could not force it on end to serve as a ladder. Exhausted by his enormous efforts at last

he gave up in despair. The body in the corner toppled and lay face downward in the water. With a weird desperate cry he grasped it and managed to roll it back into the bier. Breathless, and with throbbing head he lay floating, clinging to the casket which rose in a steady ascent toward the ceiling. Before long it was bumping against the cement roof and Blaine saw, to his utter dismay, that the narrow gratings were so near the top that even though the water overflowed through them when it reached that outlet, there would be but a scant few inches of clearance in which he might float for a space before he died.

Soon he could reach up and touch the roof with his hand. He flung free of his gruesome raft and swam to the corner. Gripping the iron grating with fast-failing fingers he thrust the end of the hose outward. It moved easily but the wall was thick. At the extreme limit to which he could force his fingers between the bars, the hose still poured its flood into the crypt. He drew his pistol. The barrel was longer than his fingers. With it he poked the hose still farther away but it hung in the aperture by one end and the rush of water continued. With a wild cry of eagerness he drew his head up level with the grating, leveled the pistol and fired. The flow of water stopped. Then his courage returned. He would hang on to the grating and gather strength against the battle to come when Ivan returned.

But his relief was short-lived. He heard a shrill outcry. Looking through the bars he saw Doctor Gaspard and Lynda Gray running up the path from the dock. They had heard the shot. When they stopped nearby Ivan rushed into his field of vision. He could not hear what the man said to Gaspard but Lynda screamed again and the Russian struck her to the ground.

WITH a growl of rage Blaine trained his pistol through the grating. Taking deliberate aim he shot the chauffeur through the heart. Doctor Gaspard leaped in alarm and a bullet intended for him missed by a hair. The gaunt creature ran like a deer, springing away so swiftly that Blaine had no chance to shoot again.

Lynda struggled to her feet, face white with terror. Blaine called to her: "The vault is full of water! We're floating near the roof. Impossible to open the door against the pressure of the water."

"Then what shall I do?" she cried.

Blaine was in a quandry. "If you could find an ax you might do the job. Knock a hole in the door. But I'm afraid it's beyond your strength. You'd better go for help. I can hang on here all right—unless the doctor tries some trick."

Lynda started off running. He shouted a warning: "Watch out for Gaspard! Take my pistol." Apparently she did not hear.

For anxious minutes he waited. Then she reappeared, hurrying down the path accompanied by the muscular Hulda. "We're coming," Lynda called. "We've got an ax. Hulda will help."

A moment later he felt the door shiver under blows wielded with the strength of a man. Soon a falling of the water evidenced the prowess of the woman. Lynda's face appeared at the grating. "She's done it! She made a big hole." As the coffin sank down out of sight below the opening Blaine instructed: "Get the key from Ivan's pocket. The key to the vault."

A few minutes later the door burst open and he staggered forth into the sunshine. The girl wept. Big Hulda, without a word, started back to her kitchen. Blaine, stumbling with weakness, dropped down at the dead chauffeur's side. He heard Lynda's pitiful lament: "If only we could have saved Paul, too!" She

stood staring at the sodden coffin in which her lover lay.

With a terrible feeling of tightness about his heart Blaine got up and went toward the casket, twisting a cork from the bottle in his hand.

Prying the cold lips apart he forced a quantity of liquid between the tight-clenched teeth. With haggard eyes he watched. Seeing no reaction his labored breath grew hoarse in his throat. Yet a little more of the dose he administered and gazed down in pathetic eagerness. Had he hoped in vain? Were his deductions false? Was his belief in the living dead fantastic? Defeat dulled his eyes as death held fast with tenacious talons; but hope was born again when he recalled that on the two occasions when Brooks had been seen in lifelike posture the man had been sitting up. Trembling he bent over the coffin and strove to manipulate the body. It had lost its rigidity.

He shouted like one demented: "Lynda! It works! I tell you he's alive! There—see his eyelids flutter. See the blood flow on his cheek. Come help me!"

THERE was a bit of steel somewhere in the make-up of Lynda Gray. In the face of this emergency her panic vanished. After one startled look her training as a nurse asserted itself. She tore away clothing from the man's arms and legs and helped Blaine in his efforts to restore circulation. Even despite obvious proof of life both were shocked when Paul Brooks spoke.

"What has happened to me?" he asked.

Before their explanations were well begun he interrupted: "I understand perfectly now. Gaspard did it. We went to Chicago on Thursday. I knew he had dosed me with Agent A when I felt myself going out. I must have been there for days. I have a faint recollection of riding somewhere in a car, and a feeling that I was brought into partial conscious-

ness several times. He used me for a prolonged experiment, but it was necessary that he relieve me from complete suspension of animation at regular periods, else I would have died."

"Today he was going to seal you up in the crypt," said Blaine. "Bury you alive!"

"I suppose so. He had proven the efficiency of my discovery in the final test on a human body—mine! Fame and fortune awaited him."

"What was the purpose of the stuff, anyway?"

"Bloodless operations. He was experimenting with hypnotism but I developed an agent that brought almost the rigor of death and stopped the flow of blood. It was a form of catalepsy, chemically induced, in which every evidence of life was suspended. But," said Brooks, "the world shall never have this secret from me. The danger of such knowledge is too great. Men like Doctor Gaspard—"

"Gaspard!" Blaine exclaimed. "Here I stand talking while the monster escapes!" He ran off toward the house.

Big Hulda was standing in the front doorway. He demanded: "The doctor! Have you seen him? Do you know what became of him?"

"The doctor is gone," she answered phlegmatically. "Gone for good."

"Which way?"

"In there." She pointed. "He shot himself."

A note beside the slumped form at the desk made brief confession.

I feel no remorse over what I did and tried to do. Brooks was a sentimental fool. And I could not bear to share a secret so great, that I would have discovered unaided.

Blaine smiled grimly. "An egotist to the end. But—putting myself in his place once more—I believe I'd have taken the same way out."

IT'S UP TO US!

AND we know it! Passing the buck may be the great American pastime—it *is* a swell way out in lots of circumstances—but to engage in it there has to be a buck to pass and someone to pass it to. And that's what we haven't got!

We knew from the very beginning that where DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE was concerned it was up to us to do the job and do it right. That no one was going to do it for us and that if things slipped it was our own chin that was going to take the sock. And that's why we've never let down a minute in our high-pressure campaign to stuff our pages with a month-after-month line-up of the greatest thrill-specials and master-mystery features that our money could buy.

Just as a sample of what DIME DETECTIVE readers may expect during the coming months of 1933—in the next issue you'll find the opening stories of two great new series by Carroll John Daly and Erle Stanley Gardner; Frederick Nebel and Oscar Schisgall are both crashing through with a string of detective thrillers that we promise will leave you gasping from excitement; John Lawrence just telephoned to give us the outline of a horror-project he's had brewing for some time. And—and—and—

So you see buck-passing is certain to

be as unnecessary a diversion with us in the future as it has been in the past. A line-up of writers like that wouldn't know a buck if they saw one!

Here are a couple more members of the DIME DETECTIVE outfit with whom you haven't had a chance to get acquainted yet. Maxwell Hawkins, whose

Death Tunes In you read in this issue, says: "I was born out where the tall corn grows not so long before the Spanish-American War. Didn't follow the example set by the corn, but stopped growing at five feet four, and immediately began to spread out, putting on many pounds and moving up to Chicago.

"Went to school some more there and then was graduated later from a military school in



Maxwell Hawkins

Wisconsin. This made it easy to decide what to do in April 1917—join the navy! Left Harvard College to battle German submarines on an eighty-foot converted yacht and cover myself with glory. No submarines, no battle, no glory!

"After the War decided to try to find a good way to earn a more or less honest living. Am still trying. Worked—I mean worked—in the oil fields and later handled oil leases. Then floundered into the newspaper business, and for ten years stayed there with brief spells as a salesman on the road, and a couple of years ago floundered out of journalism into

fiction writing. Some of my kind friends aver I'm still floundering.

"Have dignified the newspaper business in Tulsa, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Chicago and New York City. Discovered that a good way NOT to be able to write fiction is to spend too much time writing for the daily prints, all opinions to the contrary notwithstanding.

"Am single and have a keen thirst, developed with great care and at no inconsiderable cost. Enjoy writing, but find it difficult to sit still for long stretches. Would probably turn out more and better crime stories with a couple of broken legs.

"Live in New York City, and wish I didn't. Go to the country sometimes in the summer, and wish I was back in New York. Shall probably die at a ripe old age and bequeath my heirs a battered typewriter and a tall pile of rejected manuscripts as a horrible warning against taking up the life of a writer."

AND here is H. M. Appel who writes from Kenosha, Wisconsin, to tell us what kind of life one has to live in order to concoct thrill-specials like *The Body in the Crypt*. He says: "I'm still on the right side of forty. Principal business selling and advertising, but have some farming interests in the South where I spend as much time as I can. Like to live in Wisconsin where fishing is better and you don't have to drive too far to shoot a deer. Nature lovers take

notice that I've been practicing with bow and arrow all summer. Judging from results to date that big buck will be quite safe when the season opens a few weeks hence!

"Other principal hobbies are making movies, sailing small boats, and trying to keep up with three small sons. Spent a couple of years in France with field artillery, as a lieutenant, and believe that army reunions will be bigger and better without prohibition!

"Started writing detective stories several years ago and the business of concocting fiction has become the most interesting of my rather numerous occupations."

And now we've just got room to call

your attention to the big thrill-news contained in the double-spread announcement on Pages Fifty-eight and Fifty-nine of this issue. In case you missed seeing it, turn back there now and take a look. See if we've been bragging out of turn! We said at the beginning of this department that we knew it was "Up To Us." Now tell us if we haven't "gone and done it"

And that's not all. In the February issue you're going to find another piece of information that'll warm the cockles of the hearts of every detective-story fan in the country. We've been going in for surprises in a big way these last few issues but this next one has got 'em all stopped. It's about—but hang on until next month! And don't forget the new publication date.

The FEBRUARY DIME DETECTIVE will arrive on JANUARY 7!



H. M. Appel

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IN THESE days when most of us are trying desperately to make half as much go twice as far, the instant success of Popular Publications' new group of dime magazines is not to be wondered at. There was never any doubt in our minds that there were just as many people who liked to read good red-blooded adventure fiction as there were in the old prosperity days. The problem was to give it to them at a depression price—without sacrificing the high quality which all readers of Popular Publications magazines have learned to expect. We solved that problem. The magazine you now hold in your hands is one proof of that statement. Glance below, and you'll find several other young huskies, each one further testifying to the truth of our claim!

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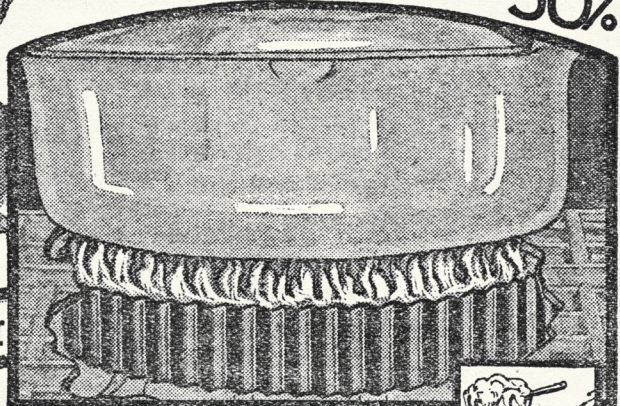
—in the current issue features the gripping saga of one cowman's bitter fight to survive, during the worst winter Wyoming ever had. You'll remember young Wind River and the girl who backed him in his one-sided, seemingly hopeless struggle against zero cold and enemy lead. Don't miss **BLIZZARD RANGE**, by Harry F. Olmsted! In the same issue; **BOOT HILL EPITAPH** by Walt Coburn, **OUTCAST** by Howard E. Morgan, **THE KNIFE SONG** by T. W. Ford, a T. T. Flynn novel and many other stories by feature writers in the Western field!

10c **BATTLE**
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—for January zooms to new heights with an all-star flight of famous war-air fiction authors. Read gripping stories by **STEUART M. EMERY**, **O. B. MEYERS**, **HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK** and other great writers. Also, join our two sizzling, up-to-the-minute air clubs—get the lowdown on other features that make this magazine ace-high among war-flying books!

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| D. T. Maxen writes: "After using one IMP RING 30 days I noticed a reduction of 25% in gas bill compared with several preceding months." | | |
| H. A. Winkler states: "3 months ago my gas bill was \$4.25. Then I put a pair of IMP RINGS on my stove and my next bill was \$3.17." | | |
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Coupon brings more proof. 60 days guarantee to consumer protects agent.



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You may order IMP RINGS for your own use. Send \$1.00 with coupon.



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AGENTS DISTRIBUTORS SALEMEN UP TO \$20⁰⁰ a day

New, mysterious gas burner rings break speed records for cooking and heating. Cooks meals in half the time at half the cost. Easy to attach. Also protects gas flames from overflow. Keeps pots clean. A big boon to every home. Makes gas bills shrink nearly half. Using IMP RINGS is like putting money in your pocket.

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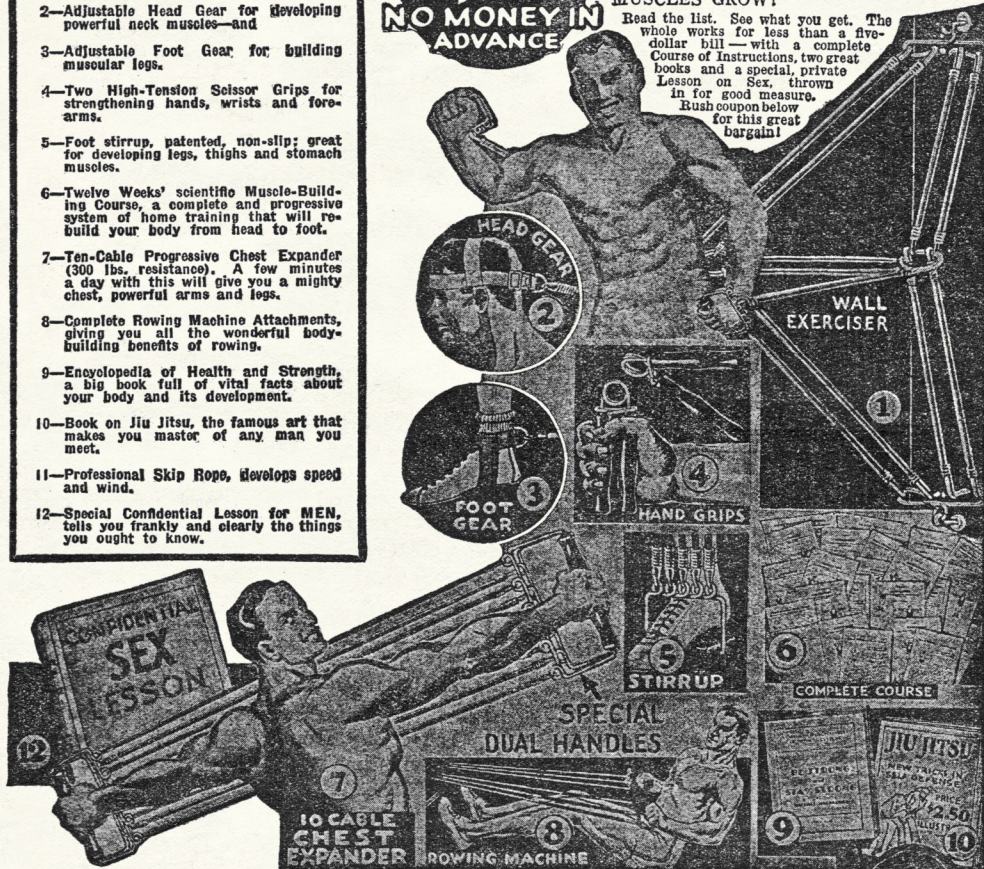
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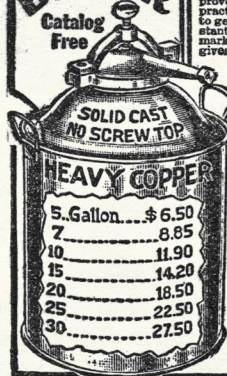
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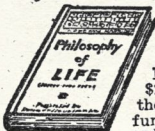
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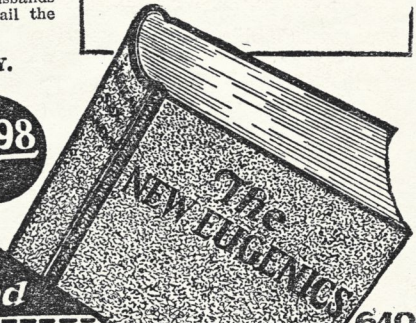
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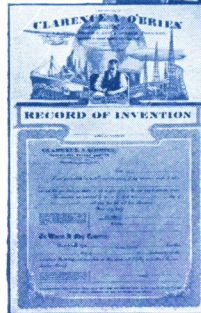
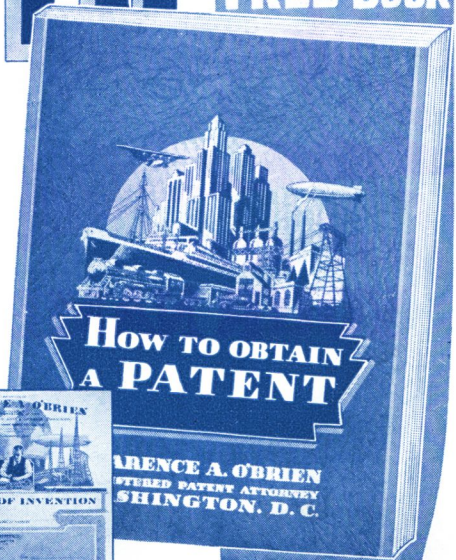
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