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AUGUST 15TH

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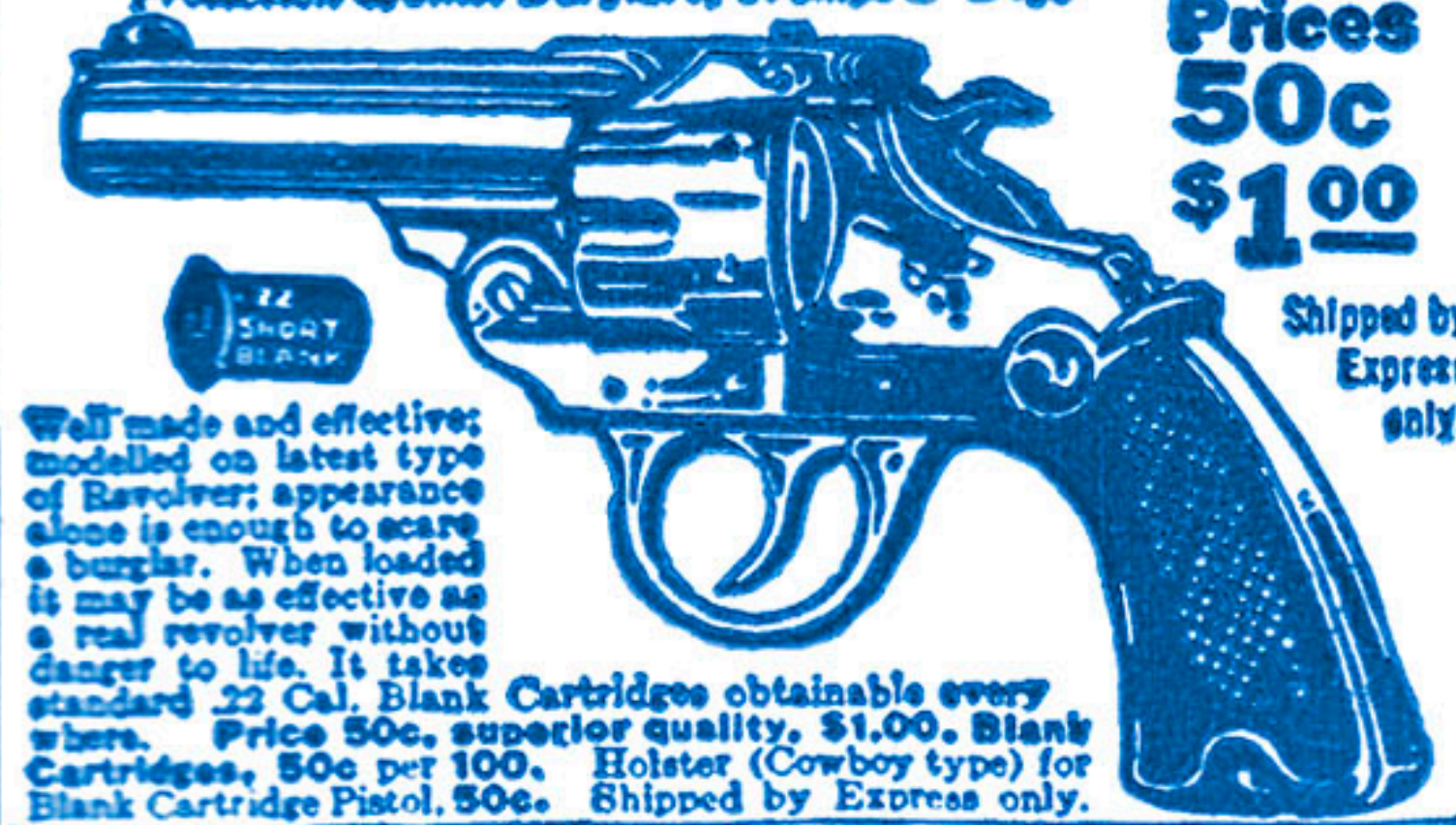
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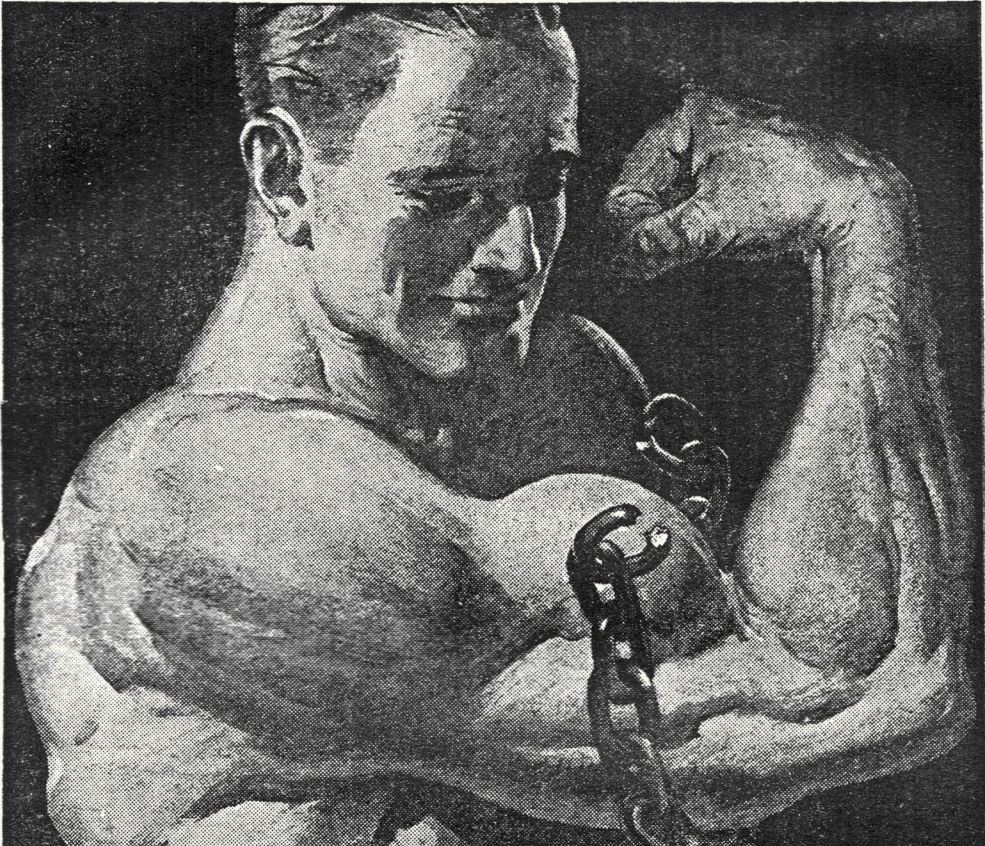
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EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 7

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Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

Watch for the September 1st Issue

On the Newsstands August 15th

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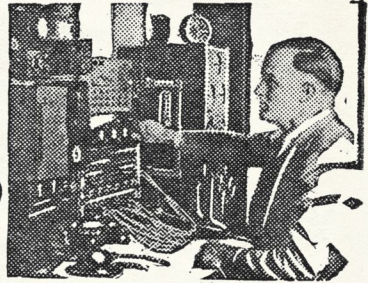
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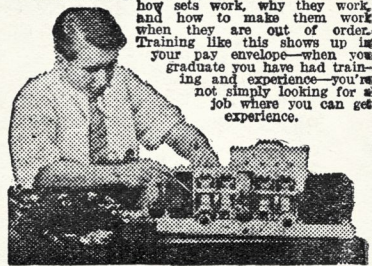
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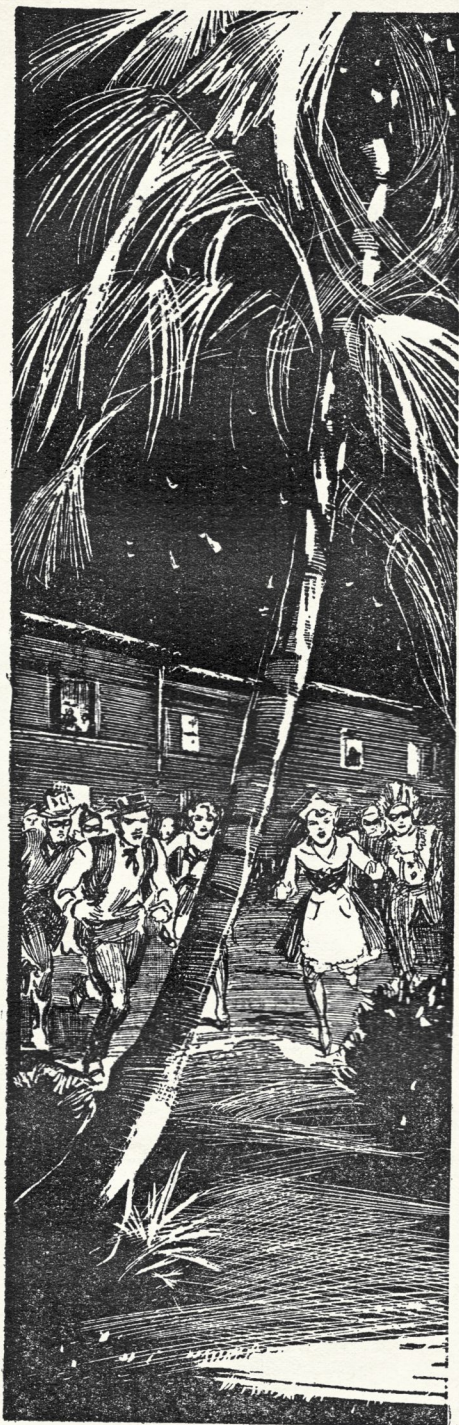
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The Golden Ghost

By
T. T. Flynn

Author of "The Monster of Hangman's Key," etc.

Along a moonlit blood path it stalked—that ghastly golden phantom of the night—gleaming yellow face set in a murder leer. And in its wake death followed death without apparent rhyme or reason. What was the secret of that gruesome monster's quest? Why should even a maniac killer mark a trail straight to his own doom?

CHAPTER ONE

The Kennel Deaths

CAPTAIN William Percy Forde, late officer in the Guatemalan rebel army, surveyed himself long and carefully in the polished looking glass of his apartment bedroom, while the telephone rang shrilly outside in the corridor. An elephantine tread pounded hastily along the hall in the direction of the jangling instrument.

"Mopsy!" Captain Forde called loudly.



—started to untie her corpse as the line broke.

The steps lumbered to a stop, came back two paces to the door. The knob turned; the door opened. A head crowned by a tangled thatch of blinding red hair thrust in at a startling distance above the floor.

The telephone rang loudly, impatiently, once more.

A vast mouth slit an amazingly ugly face under the red hair in an apologetic smile. "I was goin' ta answer the telephone, Bill."

Captain Forde—who also answered to the name of Bill—dismissed such matters as telephones with a flap of an elbow inside a scarlet pajama sleeve. "It's probably only the office," he commented with resignation. "Go get me a piece of beef-steak."

Mopsy shook his head. "Ain't no more, Bill. I used it all up last night."

MOPSY heaved himself ponderously into the room, thereby revealing a body that would easily top head and shoulders over most pedestrians in a sidewalk crowd. Mopsy tipped the scales at slightly over two hundred and fifty pounds, and looked it. His shoulders were broad, square, lumpy with muscle under his coat. His arms were long, powerful. The huge hands that dangled out of his coat sleeves were knobby with broken knuckles. One ear was slightly thickened and curled at the edge. His bony, angular face was almost good-looking in its ugliness; and his smile was that of a good-natured child who took the world as he found it. And, if the truth were told, Mopsy had found the world full of action and excitement.

Captain Bill groaned. "What a head! So you were up when I came in last night?"

Mopsy shoved massive fingers through his blinding red hair; the corners of his grin reached around toward his ears.

"One of us had to stay up, or we'd've both spent the night in the gutter," he confided with a certain amount of relish.

"As bad as that?"

Mopsy flexed his arms and shadow-boxed at a passing fly. "You were in the pink, Bill," he said with honest admiration. "Honest, I never seen you better. That right cross you let go of there at the last came from the heart. If that speakeasy bouncer hadn't ducked under it and soaked you in the eye you'd've murdered him."

Captain Bill surveyed the gorgeous blue-black tints encircling his left eye. "What bouncer?" he questioned vaguely. "Was I there?"

"And how!" exclaimed Mopsy with relish.

"I thought I went to a wedding."

"You carried on with the wedding, Bill. You got the best man drunk and laid him under the table with a vaseful of flowers in his hands. That's when the bouncer started to argue. And did he have a hard head?" Mopsy massaged the knuckles of his right hand reminiscently.

"Where did you come from?" Bill demanded weakly. "You didn't start out to the wedding with me."

"No, sirree, I didn't!" Mopsy agreed. "I'm walkin' up the main stem, see, mindin' my own business, an' you blow by with a car full o' weddin' guests, honkin' the traffic outa the way. I seen right then it was gonna be a night, so I hailed a hack an' followed you, figgerin' mebbe I'll be needed."

Bill Forde tenderly fingered his discolored eye, and winced. "Good old Mopsy!" he murmured. "Always rallying around in a tight spot, eh?"

Mopsy rubbed the side of his under-shot jaw with a calloused palm and looked uncomfortable. "To tell the truth, Bill," he confessed, "I was thinkin' about your uncle. Remember he said you had to

steadily down an' stop scandalizin' his name or he'd fire you." Mopsy massaged his coat over the region of his belt. "Fire us, I mean," he amended. "No more eats!"

"He doesn't mean half what he says, Mopsy."

"Your Uncle Jeremiah has got a bad eye," Mopsy rumbled uncomfortably. "I can't help fidgitin' around him."

The telephone which had lapsed into a hopeless period of silence suddenly burst into sharp insistent ringing once more.

Mopsy jumped. "I better answer that," he muttered, and lumbered out of the room. A moment later he called: "Hey, Bill, take it! It's your uncle!"

"Tell him I'm sick."

Mopsy's ponderous steps pounded back toward the bedroom a moment later. His head shoved in the door lugubriously. "He said," Mopsy declared, "if you wasn't down to the office in thirty minutes we were both fired, an' docked all the salary we got comin'. For God's sake, jump on it! I'm gettin' hungry already."

THE office of Forde & Forde, long-established and famous firm of private investigators, occupied a suite on the fourth floor of the Caledonian Trust Building. The rugs were deep, the furniture expensive, the clients wealthy. And old Jeremiah Forde, sole survivor of the original partners, was a holy Tartar.

The expression was Mopsy's, but there was not an employee in the organization who did not subscribe heartily to similar sentiments.

Jeremiah Forde was short, lean, leathery, and vitriolic. His head was completely bald. His eyes were pouchy, suspicious and snapping, under bushy white eyebrows. Like many small men he had an extraordinarily deep and full voice, which some long-forgotten habit had trained to issue from the corner of his

mouth. He was well past sixty, with all the energy, agility and mental keenness of a man in the prime of life. Indeed, Jeremiah Forde prided himself on being in the prime of life. And he lived, talked, thought nothing but the affairs of the potent detective organization which he controlled alone now.

And this particular morning at twenty-five minutes to ten, he leaned across the top of his big desk, balled a fist energetically, and rasped in a voice that carried well beyond the confines of his private office: "I might have known it! A black eye! You've been up to your scandalous tricks again! Brawling like a—a common crook!" And Jeremiah Forde could have uttered no more withering expletive. His life had been one pursuit and struggle with those people and those forces outside the law. His dislike, scorn and hatred of the underworld was honest, sincere and fervent.

Bill Forde adjusted the black cloth patch over his eye and smiled innocently. "A door, Uncle Jerry," he explained. "The light was out and—er—you know how it is."

"I know how it is!" Jeremiah Forde snorted. "If my secretary, Miss Timmons told me that, I'd believe her. But when a worthless young scut like you hands out a lollygaggin' excuse like that to his poor old uncle I'm not big enough fool to swallow it! You were out looking for trouble again last night, William!" And Jeremiah Forde snorted, removed his rimless eyeglasses, glared and snorted again.

Captain William Forde, late of the Guatemalan rebel army, who had been called *El Diablo Yanqui*, now strove successfully to look meek and injured before the accusing glare of the little man on the other side of the desk.

"Trouble, Uncle William?" he said with virtuous horror. "You know I abhor

anything like that! I'm the most peaceable man in town. My energies are—uh—concentrated on my work here in the office. I told you I was going to settle down and become one of the world's great detectives. I—I'm hurt, Uncle Jerry, that you should suspect me of—of such things."

Jeremiah Forde snorted. "Hah!" He shoved back his chair, bounded to his feet, smashed his desk blotter so hard the inkwells jumped and papers quivered. "You young scamp!" he roared in a voice that deserved a body twice as large. "You sanctimonious young reprobate! You must think your poor old uncle has fallen into senile decay to believe blather like that! Peaceable! Hah! Abhor trouble! Bah! You've loved trouble ever since you were six years old. There's never been a day since you could walk when you weren't looking for trouble! You got through high school by a hair and were thrown out of college for your mad pranks! The United States wasn't big enough to hold you! You had to go to China and blow off steam. And then South America—and Central America—fighting I don't know what. Looking for trouble every minute of the time. Why, at twenty-nine your name's a byword in half a dozen countries as a hellion! With a devil in your heart and fight in both fists!"

Jeremiah Forde puffed out his unwrinkled cheeks like a fighting bantam cock himself, blew hard between his lips, blinked his eyes, and jammed his glasses back on his nose. "And I don't have to be a detective to know all that!" he snapped. "I've read it enough in the newspapers and magazines! Peaceable—abhor trouble—hurt that I suspect you! Great heavenly saints! Does the young idiot think he's smart enough to pull the wool over my eyes that way?" And Jeremiah Forde began to pace agitatedly back

and forth, jerking his head around now and then to glare at the subject of his wrath.

THERE was a twinkle in Captain Bill Forde's one good eye as he surveyed his irate uncle, and deep affection and understanding, too. There was not much resemblance between the two. In contrast to Jeremiah Forde's small, slight, leatheriness, Bill was tall, wiry, broad shouldered and slim-hipped. The tropical tan had not yet faded from his face. There was nothing irascible or sour about that face either. His mouth was broad and humorous, his nose was almost a straight line. His eyes, gray, steady, slightly narrowed, carried at all times a look of snapping eagerness and attention. And coupled with the affection with which he regarded the older man there was a measure of respect. None knew better than Bill Forde what a keen brain, what depth of wisdom lay under that shiny bald head of Jeremiah Forde. Men of the law all over the country paid homage to Jerry Forde.

"To tell the truth," Bill confessed, "I got a little squiffed last night, Uncle Jerry. A friend of mine—Harry Barton—got married, and it seemed to call for a celebration. I'm sorry. I'll give Mopsy orders there's to be no more drinking."

"That O'Keefe fellow is a big lug," said Jeremiah Forde bitterly, and with a touch of slang, of which he was complete master when he chose to be. "Ex-wrestler—ex-pug—ex-soldier of fortune. He's another out of the same mold, William. You're two of a kind, utterly worthless, utterly useless in a well-ordered business world. Furthermore I think he's a bad influence for you. Part of this business is yours—er—subject to my decision and control, as per your father's will. You promised to come back, settle down, dig into things. You're a first-rate

detective when you put your mind to it. But this O'Keefe—bah—he couldn't locate his hat in a restaurant checkroom! I only put him on the payroll because you insisted so hard. I think he'd better be given two weeks' salary and sent on his way. He's a bad influence."

Bill Forde said mildly: "He saved my life twice, Uncle Jerry. Once in China and once in Guatemala. He's like an extra hand to me. He means well, and he's been around enough so that he's smarter than you think. Mopsy just thinks slow."

"Which is what no detective can afford to do!" Uncle Jeremiah Forde snapped. "We may as well have an understanding once and for all this morning, William. You've disappointed me greatly since you've been back this time. You promised finally and irrevocably to settle down, mend your ways and make something of yourself. And you haven't! I'm afraid to give you any extra delicate bit of business. I never know what you're going to do. Tact is the cornerstone on which our reputation is built. Much of our business comes from people who do not want, who can't afford publicity. The various branches of the law are at their disposal, entailing certain publicity. We insure them against that. The most successful detective is the one who is the most unobtrusive, the least known. You run counter to all that with every breath you draw. And it's got to stop. Last night was the final straw. I have made up my mind—"

Just what Jeremiah Forde had made up his mind about was never known. For at that moment the door of the private office opened. A tall, thin, acidulous-looking woman in her late forties, plain and severe in a tailored suit, popped in and said grimly: "There's a Mr. Courtney Connister desiring to see you, Mr. Forde." She consulted a card in her hand. "He lives at Tacona Beach, and he in-

sists the matter is urgent and he can spare only a few moments."

Jeremiah Forde snapped back at once into his role of the master detective. He removed his glasses, fished for a handkerchief. "Send him in, Miss Timmons."

And as Bill Forde rose hastily, with relief he could not entirely conceal, his uncle said acidly: "No, sit down! You may as well listen to this and learn anything you can!"

MR. COURTNEY CONNISTER of Tacona Beach proved to be a tall, well-built, well-dressed man of about forty. He wore blue flannels, a gray shirt, and on his head was a new hat, obviously expensive, with just the correct and most stylish tilt and sweep of brim. His shoes were probably custom-made. His full jaw was closely barbered. He smiled politely and extended a soft white hand in ready greeting as Jeremiah Forde stepped to meet him.

Mr. Courtney Connister, Bill judged after one look, was a man of some considerable means and station in life. He looked it—and the Tacona Beach from which Miss Timmons had said he had come confirmed it. It took generous amounts of money to occupy a house at Tacona Beach.

"I've never dealt with you people before," Connister said with pleasant frankness as he dropped Jeremiah Forde's hand. "But I've heard that you have quite a reputation, and I always like to deal with the best in anything." He chuckled, and looked inquiringly at Bill.

"My nephew, William Forde," Jeremiah introduced.

The name did not seem to mean anything to Connister. "Glad to know you," he said with a genial nod. He smiled faintly as his glance fell on Bill's left eye, and then took the chair toward which

Jeremiah waved him at the other end of the desk.

Slightly mollified that Bill's name had meant nothing to the visitor, Jeremiah said: "My nephew is a member of the firm. You can speak frankly before him, Mr. Connister. Just what is it you wish to take up with us?"

Connister drew a thin, flat cigarette case from an inside pocket of his coat, opened it and put a straw-tipped cigarette between his lips. Jeremiah Forde snapped a desk lighter into flame and held it for him. Connister accepted the courtesy with a nod, leaned back in the chair, crossed one leg over the other, and began to speak with engaging frankness.

"It's probably nothing you'd care to bother with, but I'm offering you the commission for what it's worth to your office in fees. I own a house at Tacona Beach. Rather an exclusive neighborhood, but all the more subject to trouble. Police protection out there, unfortunately, isn't what could be desired. I am a lover of dogs and always keep several around. Some days ago one of my dogs was killed, and last night a second one was shot."

The joviality left Connister's voice. It hardened. "I'm tired of it," he said brusquely. "One dog might be an accident . . . someone passing. But two confirms my suspicion that we have a dog hater in the neighborhood. I'll put up with nothing like that. I want the guilty person caught."

Jeremiah Forde was seated at his desk once more, staring thoughtfully through his nose glasses. He folded his hands carefully on the blotter before him. "You mean, Mr. Connister, you wish to engage our firm to locate the person who is killing your dogs?"

"Exactly," Connister nodded. "It probably seems a small thing and not worth bothering about. Perhaps you won't even care to touch it. But if you're a lover of

dogs as I am, Mr. Forde, you'll understand the way I feel about it. My dogs weren't valuable, and people might even say the Beach is well rid of them. But they were my dogs and I thought a lot of them. Spend whatever money is necessary to locate and bring action against the person or persons who are committing what is to my mind a damnable outrage."

JEREMIAH FORDE pursed his lips. "Have you had any trouble with your neighbors over your dogs?" he questioned.

"None," said Connister. "On the north of me live two old maids whom I don't even know. On the south of me is a chap by the name of Vandervoort, who seems to be a dog-lover himself; at least I see dogs over on his property. I'm sure he wouldn't do anything like that."

"Do your dogs ever fight with his?"

"Not that I know of," Connister denied. "I'm sure Vandervoort has nothing to do with it."

Jeremiah Forde asked shrewdly: "Do you keep valuables in your house?"

"Why, yes, more or less," Connister admitted. "A bit of money on hand at all times. Some silver and jewelry; and now and then papers and securities which are rather valuable."

"Has it occurred to you," Jeremiah Forde suggested, "that someone with theft on his mind might be trying to get watchdogs out of the way before he goes to work?"

Connister straightened, gave Jeremiah Forde a startled look. "No," he admitted. "I wonder if you're right. I hadn't thought of that."

"I merely suggest it," Jeremiah Forde shrugged.

"The more I think of it the more reasonable it seems," Connister said bluntly. "The more reason for having you people look into the matter. I'll leave it all in

your hands. Don't pretend to understand how you go about such things, but I'll foot the bill, whatever it is."

"Our fees are not light, Mr. Connister."

"Doesn't matter. Will a hundred as a retainer do?" Connister drew a small pocket checkbook from inside his coat, and at a nod of assent from Jeremiah Forde opened it, uncapped a fountain pen and wrote swiftly.

He tore the check off, waved it in the air a moment and laid it on the desk.

"I'll feel better knowing you are attending to this matter for me," he stated, standing up. "I suppose you'll have someone to watch tonight?"

"Yes. Our people all carry credentials. I'll have someone out there by tonight," Jeremiah Forde said, standing up also. And he shook hands with Connister and accompanied him to the door.

Jeremiah Forde's eyes had a peculiar glitter in them as he turned back from the door. "Dogs!" he muttered. "Hah! Just the thing!" But before he could say anything more Miss Timmons popped in again, severe and grim as ever.

"Another gentleman to see you, Mr. Forde, a Mr. Vandervoort from Tacona Beach."

"Huh? What's that?" Jeremiah Forde snapped, wheeling around. "Tacona Beach?"

"Yes," said Miss Timmons, and her lips pressed together in a firm line, as if there were something suspicious in two gentlemen from Tacona Beach appearing in such quick succession.

"Send him in," Jeremiah Forde said, and to Bill, who had once more stood up, he growled: "Sit down! Let's see what this is all about. I think this is Jean Vandervoort, the multi-millionaire."

And Bill sat abruptly, with interest. Much as he had been away from his home city during the twenty-nine years of his life, he was perfectly familiar with

the name of Jean Vandervoort. There had been Vandervoorts in the city for five generations or more. They had been shipowners and landed proprietors at first. Later they had owned barge interests and factories, but for the most part their wealth had come from a certain Dutch shrewdness and patience in handling their original large holdings of real estate. Farm lands had been turned into rich subdivisions. Original city lots had been converted into choice business properties. And always the Vandervoorts had invested and reinvested, built, rented and held on, watching, generation by generation, their fortunes grow and multiply. Socially they were without peers. In wealth few families in the state could approach them. They had withdrawn more and more from business until today their chief occupation was to keep intact the money that had been handed down to them. And now a Vandervoort had turned to Jeremiah Forde. Bill's interest grew.

HE WAS a trifle disappointed by the man who trod majestically into the office. Vandervoort was short and pudgy. He was, Bill thought cynically, built somewhat on the lines of a beer keg. His head, over which corn-colored hair was carefully brushed to hide its thinness, was big and bulgy. His forehead was low and broad. His small eyes were sunk in folds of flesh, and other folds of flesh swept down over plump cheeks to noticeable jowls. Vandervoort's nose was small and his mouth pursy. A straw hat was set square and stiffly on his head. His coat was buttoned tightly around his bulging middle. He carried a gold-headed stick and had a stiff, formal, condescending manner, without humor or graciousness. He was over fifty, and yet he had the air of a man who had never been young.

For one of the leading social, business

and family representatives of the city he made a pretty poor impression, Bill thought. For it was the Vandervoort that his uncle had intimidated. The caller made this plain in four words.

"I am Jean Vandervoort," he said heavily, curtly, as if mere mention of the name were all that was needed to give him domination of the scene. Then he sat down without being asked to, without offering to shake hands.

Jeremiah Forde was not impressed. He adjusted his glasses, blinked at his important visitor, interpreted correctly the glance of annoyance Vandervoort cast at Bill.

"My nephew, Mr. Vandervoort, a member of the firm."

"*Hrrmph*," Vandervoort grumped at Bill with the bare civility of a nod. He clamped both hands on the gold head of his stick, leaned forward. "I've got a bit of business for you people. We're in our Tacona Beach house right now. I keep watchdogs out there to keep the public out of the grounds. Someone's been killing them off."

Vandervoort's small eyes glared with indignation. "Killing my dogs!" he repeated heavily as if it were *lèse majesté* for such a thing to happen to Vandervoort property. "I want it stopped, and the criminals dealt with. Send me the bill." Vandervoort raised his short, rotund body with a grunt.

"One moment," Jeremiah Forde requested. "I'd like a little more information. Have you heard any shots?"

Vandervoort looked at him with annoyance. "No," he said gruffly.

"Any trouble with your neighbors? Anyone objecting to the dogs barking or annoying them?"

Vandervoort swelled like a pouter pigeon. "My dogs would not annoy anyone unless they were trespassing. I can't give you any more time. I'll leave the details to you." And Vandervoort plowed

as majestically out of the office as he had entered it.

Jeremiah Forde scowled after him. "Snobbish old ass," he grunted. "Huh, dogs! He must think we're little better than veterinarians."

"The great dog mystery," Bill chuckled. "Or who killed Rover 'neath the hunting moon? Going to send someone out to play nursemaid to the kennels?"

Jeremiah Forde smiled with relish, acidly. His bushy white brows bent up in sour humor. "Silly business, isn't it?" he asked silkily.

"More or less," Bill assented.

"So," said Jeremiah Forde with certain finality in his voice as he stood up, "I'm glad there's something come along that I can send you out on with a free mind. Dogs! Hah! Just the thing for you and O'Keefe. Go out to Tacona Beach and don't come back until you've cleared this matter for Vandervoort and Connister."

CHAPTER TWO

The Body on the Bench

MOPSY swung over and let a big truck rumble past their coupe. "I'll bet that's beer," he guessed. "Truck drivers ain't runnin' around Tacona Beach at night on joy rides." Mopsy smacked his lips wistfully. "If we had a deputy's badge we might get us a few bottles of beer. It wouldn't go bad tonight."

"Keep your eye on the ball," Bill ordered. "Get out of the ditch and stop mooning about your stomach."

"Seems like I'm always hungry," Mopsy rumbled, as his big knobby hands swung the coupe back in the road. "Where are we gonna sleep tonight?"

"We stay up, nursing the dogs."

"I hope your uncle has a nightmare while we're doing it," Mopsy grumbled.

"I've worked my jaw off an' walked my feet flat askin' questions an' nosin' around this afternoon. Hey, look at Vandervoort's place! They must be throwin' a party tonight."

Tacona Beach lay fifteen miles from the city in a bulging outcurve of the coast, with the open sea washing in against the beach. There was a short boat and pleasure pier studded with lights at night. There were narrow winding drives, cottages on the outer fringes, big houses, extensive grounds, trees, shrubs, green grass and flowers along the ocean front. The houses were large, elaborate. For the most part the names of the owners were a blue book of prosperity; and the name of Jean Vandervoort topped the list.

It was a beach party and dance in the large stone house, for young and old. Vandervoort was married and had two grown children. The list of guests was the cream of Tacona Beach. The Puysters, the Morgandons, the Stanblowers, the Carmodys.

Bill had found out all that while he and Mopsy went their separate ways that afternoon, looking for information. Some of it had come from Vandervoort's and Connister's servants; for he had been in both places. Concrete facts that might have pointed suspicion in some definite quarter had been lacking. The dogs had died, and that was all anyone seemed to know. Their bags were at the Tacona Beach Hotel in comfortable rooms. But there seemed no way of escaping an all-night vigil. Jeremiah Forde had meant exactly what he said when he ordered them not to return until the matter was cleared up.

"Stop about a hundred yards beyond the driveway entrance," Bill ordered. "Pull over there in the shadows and douse your lights."

The night was still, quiet. Overhead the long, smooth leaves of tall shade

palms hung motionless as Bill squeezed through a thick hedge on the Vandervoort property. Slow creaming surf murmured on the beach at the front of the grounds. Up between the trees the velvet sky blazed with the crystal glint of stars. And from the Vandervoort house drifted the strains of music and muted laughter.

White flannels would have been in order this night, but Bill still wore his dark lounge suit; flannels would show up too plainly.

Vandervoort kept police dogs, high-priced, intelligent animals. Three had been killed. Two were left. Bill had made friends with them during the afternoon under the auspices of the gardener, who had charge of them.

Connister had had three collies. Only one was left. And Bill had seen that dog, too, during the afternoon, after talking with the butler at Connister's house.

Now as Bill moved across the smooth, close-clipped lawn he was still a trifle indignant at old Jeremiah Forde for dispatching him on an errand like this. These Tacona Beach people needed the town dog catcher, or constable for such a matter.

And thinking that, Bill brushed by a clump of bushes. In the pitch blackness at their base his foot kicked something on the ground, tripping him. And in the space of time it took him to regain balance and whirl back Bill's pulse began to pound. For a groan had come from the ground behind him.

That soft yielding object he had stumbled over could only be a human body!

UP TO this moment Bill Forde had been a casual young man on a casual errand. And now in the space of three breaths he was suddenly tense, wary. Gaiety reigned in the big house by the beach; but here in the sable shadows of

the Vandervoort grounds something was seriously wrong!

Bill had brought a flashlight. He grabbed it out of his pocket. One glinting stab of the silver beam limned a woman there on the ground. She was young, pale, disheveled, wrapped in a thin, dark cloak. No hat was on her head. One small foot was shoeless. Her wavy dark hair was badly mussed. Around ankles, legs, torso and arms a clothesline was wound. It ran around her face too, holding a wadded ball of cloth in her mouth.

Bill got all that in one startled glance. It was unbelievable—a thing like this so near the big house. He always carried a small pocket knife. Snapping out a blade, he hurriedly freed her.

She choked a little as the gag came out of her mouth, said nothing as Bill lifted her upright, and pushed the rope turns down to her ankles.

"All right?" he asked through the blackness which lay like a curtain between them.

He heard her hands brushing at the dark cloak, heard her stepping out of the slashed ropes. Another glint of the light showed her hands going to her hair. She was young, not more than twenty-two or -three. A small mouth and delicately formed nose were framed by smooth cheeks sweeping up past rather high cheekbones into the edges of her unruly dark hair.

She frowned into the light, requested crisply: "Please put that out."

Bill pocketed it mechanically, but her request irritated him. Instead of being grateful for what he had done she was finding fault; and she was far calmer than any girl who had been lying gagged on the ground had a right to be.

"Anything else you don't like?" Bill asked sarcastically.

"Yes. Would you mind leaving me here?"

"Just full of gratitude, aren't you?" Bill suggested. "What happened? Who tied you?"

"I don't know."

Her voice failed to carry conviction. It suggested she knew more than she was admitting, or had any intention of telling him. And that didn't help his irritation.

"Is this a gag?" he questioned shortly.

"Of course. Will you go back to the house? They're looking for me."

She took him for one of the guests, without having glimpsed his face. But they were alone in this part of the grounds. Certainly no one seemed to be looking for her. The whole queer business lacked the ring of truth.

For a moment Bill had a wild idea that she might be the one who was accounting for the dogs. He dropped it as quickly. That couldn't account for her being bound and gagged here on the lawn in the dark.

"I feel playful tonight," Bill told her calmly. "I'll stay here with you and surprise them."

For the second time in almost as many minutes he received a startling surprise. The strange girl wheeled on him, spoke with a rush of asperity, anger. "You idiot! Don't stand there arguing with me! I don't want you with me!"

She turned away. Bill reached out and caught her arm. "Not so fast," he urged. "We'll talk this over. It looks queer. I want to know about it."

She wrenched away. There was a soft swish of cloth. Something hard abruptly poked into his side.

"Now will you go? This is a gun! I meant exactly what I said!"

Bill froze. He had a gun too, resting snugly in a shoulder holster under his left arm; but it wouldn't do him any good now.

"Watch out! That may go off," Bill warned.

"That's right, it might. I don't believe you're one of the guests. Lie down!"

THE gun muzzle struck harder into his side. Bill gave way a step. She moved with him, keeping the gun against him. Bill thought of trying to knock it away with a sweep of his hand. He might be able to do that in the darkness before she realized what was up. But if he didn't make it. . . .

"Hurry up!" she ordered with the faintest quaver of excitement. "On your face!"

It was hard to tell what she really would do. Feeling foolish, angry, Bill took the safest course and obeyed. She knelt beside him, fumbled in his coat pocket and got the flashlight. It blazed against the side of his face for a moment.

"Who are you?" this strange girl asked sharply.

"Take me into Vandervoort's and find out," Bill suggested.

"I don't think that is necessary."

She reached back, got some of the rope Bill had cut away from her. She tied his ankles quickly, crudely.

"Wait here five minutes," she directed breathlessly. And abruptly she was gone.

Bill heard the soft pat of light running steps fading quickly. He whirled over, sat up, groped for his penknife, but it had been in the pocket with the flashlight. She had taken that too. It took him several minutes to find and loosen the knots. When he got to his feet she had vanished.

Vision simply did not exist in the black shadows lying thickly about him, except in silhouette against the gleaming house lights. But she had not gone that way. The last sound that had come to his ears had been in the direction of the Connister place, adjoining to the north.

Bill went that way, blundering into bushes and tree trunks, swearing silently under his breath. His pulse was still over

normal, and this brief mystery into which he had stumbled spawned question after question.

Who was she? Why was she lying there on the ground, bound, gagged? Why hadn't she been willing to tell him anything? And why, in the light of cold common sense, had she pulled a gun and ordered him to leave her? For that matter what was she doing with a gun?

He couldn't get a reasonable answer to anything. And he was suddenly certain the trifling bit of business he had come to investigate was important, sinister, foreboding.

A high hedge, a line of trees, separated the two properties. Bill forced a way through it.

Connister's house lay a hundred and fifty yards ahead of him, was smaller than the big stone house of Jean Vandervoort. The grounds were not so extensive, less elaborate, and not kept up so well, Bill had noticed that afternoon. Connister's place was of frame construction, two low stories in the middle main part with wings on each side. Near it was a frame garage with servants' quarters on the second floor.

Tonight there were no lights in the house. One line of light showed thin in an upper garage window. And as Bill squeezed through the hedge a dog barked sharply over near the house. Barked once with sharp strident canine warning to some stranger.

And the next moment the dog gave utterance to a choked, mournful howl that broke off sharply. No further sound came from there. Bill ran toward the front of the house where the dog apparently was, and cursed the girl who had taken his flashlight, as he went. There was no doubt in his mind that Connister's last dog had just been disposed of.

He drew out his revolver as he ran on his toes.

IF THERE were anyone upstairs in the garage apparently they had not heard the dog. Bill reached the front corner of the house, stopped, listened. Utter silence lay about him. The rhythmic beat of music drifted through the soft night from the Vandervoorts' property. The surf washing in on the sandy beach made an even monotone with it. An automobile horn back on the road paralleling the beach properties honked loudly. Looking that way, Bill could see its headlights rushing along. Cautiously he quartered back and forth over the lawn, moving almost soundlessly on the soft sod. But if a dog had been killed here at the front of the house he could not locate it in the dark.

He struck three matches at once, peering on all sides as the yellow, sputtering flare drove back the night momentarily. There was no sign of a dog.

Bill frowned, as he dropped the matches and night rushed around him once more. He might have been mistaken about the location, but not about the dog's yelp of pain. It might have been on the far side of the house, even back of it, or around the garage. The flaring matches seemed to have attracted no attention. He walked past the front of the house, across the driveway that turned before it, and followed the driveway around to the side of the house.

The garage was some fifty yards away to the north of the house. The upper windows were still lighted, curtains and shades drawn.

A vague spot of light or color in the night caught Bill's eye. He walked half a dozen steps beyond the driveway and found an ornamental garden bench of white concrete with a concrete back. Bill sat down, leaned forward tensely and listened. If there were anyone around they'd have to make a move sooner or later. He stood as much chance of lo-

cating them by waiting in this spot as by blundering around in the night without a flashlight.

For a few moments everything seemed peaceful. It was hard to believe trouble could be abroad in the soft, luxuriant, semi-tropic, Florida night.

And then gradually Bill became aware of a feeling of tenseness in the air. The peace about him was electric, ominous.

The short hairs at the back of his neck began to prickle with a feeling that unseen eyes were staring at him. Nerves, Bill thought irritably. But the feeling would not be banished. He turned finally to look behind.

His right hand reaching around to the back to steady himself struck against cloth and a yielding object behind. For an instant Bill knew that feeling of eery surprise, bordering on terror. Something occupied the end of the bench on which he had been sitting; something limp, lax, dreadfully motionless.

It did not move as his hand ran over it. The cloth felt like a blanket of some kind. He felt the solid bulk of a head at the top, and the hair on it. Below that he felt a shoulder, an arm; below that a fold of the blanket ended, and he felt the smoother fabric of a coat sleeve. And a small hand, lax, limp, lifeless!

And then Bill knew why the electric tension had been in the air, why he had been uneasy. He had been sitting next to a blanketed corpse. Bill was on his feet by then, gun in hand. But the motionless figure sat there beyond all power to do harm.

CHAPTER THREE

The Golden Ghost

DEATH in itself was nothing to fear. Bill reached down to that still hand and felt for the pulse. There was no pulse, but the flesh was still warm. And

the hand was small—like a woman's hand.

It was a grim, ghastly discovery. The peaceful night about mocked him. The utter lack of movement in that sitting figure had an ominous threat. A startling figure thought came to his mind. Was this the body of the girl he had freed such a short time before? Had all her vibrant life, her reckless disregard of fear led her through the brooding night to a violent death?

Bill ripped off half a dozen paper matches, slashed them against the base of the clip. They flared out.

It was like footlights suddenly turned on a tiny stage of horror. The ghostly white concrete bench framed the body slumped on it. The dark woollen blanket swathed it from head to foot. The hand he had touched was plain and pallid out of the fold of the blanket. It was a woman's hand, small, delicate, pale. And to make it more violent and ghastly a trickle of blood writhed across the smooth white skin above the knuckles. The whole thing was the more ghoulish and horrible because what lay under that blanket was hidden.

Bill reached out in the dark with one hand and fumbled the enveloping blanket away from the head and shoulders of the corpse. As he did so he felt the inert body slump slightly toward him. He struck another match and by its brief flame caught an impression of reddish hair, a blood streaked face.

Only that Bill got in the split second the match stayed lit, half blinding him. And then without warning the most ghastly thing of all happened. Back of the bench, where it had evidently been crouching, a huge monstrous figure rose upright and lunged at him.

The absolute unexpectedness of it stunned him into immobility. The match was already flickering out. The glimpse he caught of the face was only fleeting. But that glimpse was enough! It was

golden-yellow through the yellow match light, above a voluminous dark cloak—In the second of vision allowed him Bill would have been almost willing to swear that face could not be human. It was a ghastly golden color, set, fixed, without life or movement. There was a mouth, stiff, unnatural. There were cheekbones, high, protruding. And sparse hair combed back over a high golden forehead. And as the golden horror lunged over the back of the bench at him out of the dark not a muscle in the face changed.

Bill dropped the match as he dodged. The pitch blackness swooped between them, mercifully blanketing the terrible sight.

A heavy shoulder struck him, spinning him half around, knocking his gun from his hand. Bill hooked a savage short-arm blow. His fist sank deep into cloth and flesh, bringing an audible grunt.

So the thing was human after all!

Before he could leap back the full weight of a heavy body was upon him. Powerful hands clawed at his arms. He reeled, staggered away from the spot, trying to free himself. The thing crowded on him, making it impossible.

The struggle lasted only a few seconds. Bill didn't have time to regain his balance and get set after that first rush which knocked him around. He was pitted against prodigious strength. The hands that clutched him clamped with a viselike grip. The muscles that mauled him around were startling in their power. Just what happened in those wild moments of silent struggle Bill was never quite sure. But suddenly an arm clamped around his neck, dragging him closer. Something smashed against his head with terrific force.

In the past Bill had seen blinding lights of pain before his eyes. He saw them again now. The strength drained from his muscles. His mind went dull, slow.

A foot kicked against the back of his

leg, tripping him neatly. He crashed down on the ground helplessly, tried to roll away. Powerful fingers found his shoulder, his throat, jamming his neck into the damp grass.

And the night suddenly went blank as a second blow struck him over the right ear.

IT HAD been said with well-meant admiration that Bill Forde possessed a thick head. The time, for instance, when a big Shensi coolie caught him behind the ear with a Mannlicher rifle butt and kicked his body down the slippery mud bank into the Wei River. Bill had showed up five minutes later full of Wei River water and dispatched a horrified Shensi coolie to his waiting ancestors. His head seemed to be built like that. It didn't crack. He didn't stay out long from blows that would have incapacitated an ordinary man. It was so in this case. When by all signs and portents Bill should have been a near corpse on the ground, his eyes fluttered open and recognized the star-strewn sky above him. Bill groaned, raised a hand weakly to his head, swore silently and sat up.

He had no trouble recalling what had happened. A glance at the illuminated dial of his wrist watch showed that he could have been out only a few minutes. Two good-sized lumps were already swelling under his hair. His exploring fingers found blood oozing from one, but otherwise he seemed to be all right.

Once more the night was silent about him. If there was a presence nearby it did not make itself known. Bill got to a knee, then to his feet, warily. Still nothing happened. He took a step forward and his foot kicked against something metallic. Bill stooped and fumbled for the object. It was his gun. He smiled wryly and stuck it back in the shoulder holster under his arm.

He oriented himself by the light in the upstairs garage window. He was still in the spot where he had gone down. Over there a few feet away was the concrete bench. He could make out its faint ghostly white form resting on the grass. The night breeze, tangy with the smell of the open sea, blew past him; and once more Bill felt the cold eery chill which that seated corpse had brought to him.

He moved toward the bench, wary, grim, hand on his gun butt, ready for any further surprise. But even with that the shock Bill got when he reached the bench was considerable.

The corpse was gone!

Bill blinked, swore softly under his breath. He wondered for a moment if she had really been dead. But only for a moment. There is a certain definite limpness, an aura of death about a corpse. It had been about her.

And if that were not enough there was the enveloping blanket, the crimson streak of blood on the back of her hand, and on her face. And—the fearful presence of that golden ghost which had leaped so savagely at him.

Bill felt his muscles tense, tighten at the memory. It had been like a beast lurking by its kill. And now it had made off with the body of its victim!

He struck more matches. The short clipped damp grass was crushed, torn where they had struggled. It was pressed down behind the bench where the golden thing had crouched.

But that was all. Nothing had been dropped. None of the prints were clear enough to help in any way. A faint trail seemed to lead away from the bench. He followed it for a dozen paces with difficulty. His last match flickered, died out there as he tried to puzzle it out further.

Bill swore, tossed the empty clip away. The marks had pointed away from the bench, the garage and the house, angling

toward the north end of the property where lived the two old maids Connister had been so emphatic in declaring innocent of the death of his dogs.

Dogs!

Bill grinned sourly at thought of the harmless business Jeremiah Forde had sent him to clear up. That all seemed far off. The dogs were a minor item now. Wealthy, exclusive Tacona Beach, Courtney Connister and Jean Vandervoort had something far grimmer to worry about. Death was loose in an unsuspecting and unprotected community. And where death had struck once as it had tonight, mysterious, unexplained, it was apt to strike again with as little reason. Even at that moment it might be reaching out for another victim.

That reminded him of the dog that had howled once and gone silent. And of Connister's dark house and the light over the garage. Where was Connister and his household tonight? If there were anyone in the garage hadn't they been aware that something was wrong out here in the dark? Bill walked toward the garage.

TWO wide sliding doors occupied most of the front. At their left in the corner of the building was a smaller door. He saw a dim hallway inside, steps leading up. A small bulb burned on a narrow landing at the top. Bill climbed the stairs quickly without troubling to hide his steps.

He was overheard, for as he reached the landing at the top the door opposite him opened. Courtney Connister's butler looked out at him, frowning inquiringly at sight of the revolver which Bill now carried in his hand.

Swick was the butler's name. Bill had talked to him that afternoon, and rather liked the fellow. Swick had evidently been born and bred within sound of Bow Bells in London. He was cockney, short,

scrawny, active, with an engaging friendly manner and picturesque idiom. Swick's ears were large, his mouth wide, his eyes glinting and merry, and sandy hair was slicked tight and correct over his forehead. But now as Swick's brow furrowed his mouth dropped open wordlessly also. Then he found speech.

"Lord lumme! Hit's the bobby, ayn't it? You fair gimme a start, sir, seein' you pop up 'ere with that gun. You look like you 'ad a narsty fall. Hi 'ope nothink's wrong, sir?" Swick grinned with a touch of anxiety. His eyes rolled uneasily at the gun.

Bill shoved the weapon in his pocket and looked down at his suit. Two contacts with the ground since he had left Mopsy had plastered him liberally with damp grass stains and bits of debris. He said drily: "I've been on the ground," and started to brush it off with his hands.

"'Ere, Hi'll get a brush," Swick offered quickly. "Come in an' myke yerself to 'ome." He popped back into the apartment before Bill could stop him.

Bill stepped into a sitting room, plain and decently furnished. Through an open door he could see into another plainly furnished bedroom. A calendar hung on the wall. Beside a leather-covered couch a half-consumed cigar smoldered on the edge of a copper ashtray. Bill suspected it was one of Connister's private stock. An open detective magazine was turned down on the couch. The atmosphere was entirely masculine.

Swick bustled out of the bedroom with a whiskbroom and went to work on Bill's suit. "*Tsk-tsk!*" he said sympathetically. "You 'ad a fall, sir, didn't you? I tripped over a bush the other night an' fell fair on my nose meself. A man goes around gropin' blind when there ayn't no moon, don't 'e?"

"What were you doing out the other night?"

"Huntin' the dogs," said Swick. "An' I found one dead, I did." He shook his head dolefully as he brushed busily. "Dead as a slab o' Yorkshire puddin'. It was a cold-blood business, it was. Hi don't wonder the marster lost 'is temper. But then Hi told you abaht it this arfternoon."

And Swick had at great length. "Anyone live up here with you?" Bill questioned. "Are you married?"

Swick stepped back, eyed his handiwork critically, flicked a cuff of Bill's sleeve with the brush, cocked a droll eye.

"Lovaduck, no! Hi ayn't married," he said emphatically. "Women gives me a 'eadache, always wantin' a pint of 'arf an' 'arf or a new bonnet. Not to speak of tykin' a man's wyges afore 'is fingers are fair closed abaht 'em. Hi'm a single man, Hi am, an' Hi mykes out fine 'ere hall alone."

"Been here alone all evening?"

"Yus," said Swick. "The marster's in town to the theater, 'e is. An' Hi come up 'ere to me rooms to wyte fer 'im. Hi'd been readin' a detective story, gettin' cold feet up me back," Swick shuddered realistically. "When the 'ero turns on the light an' found the corp' 'argin' from the chandelier Hi almost lost me bloomin' silly 'ead. Hi'm a man o' peace, Hi am, an' likes me murders mild an' not too sudden."

"No women around the house at all tonight?" Bill questioned.

Swick shook his head. "The 'elp goes 'ome at night, hall but me. Mr. Connister don't like to 'ave 'em underfoot. Me an' 'Arry Stevens, the shofer, is the only ones as live 'ere with Mr. Connister."

"Then he's not married?"

"E's pyein' alimony," said Swick, as if that disposed of the matter.

"Where's the chauffeur tonight?"

"E drove Mr. Connister in to town."

"Where is your dog?"

Swick peered at Bill doubtfully. "Bly-me, you're arskin' a lot o' questions," he commented. "Strikes me wot wiv dashin' up 'ere wiv a gun in yer 'and an' all that, there's somethink wrong."

"Did you hear your dog bark a little while ago?"

SWICK wrinkled his brow, scratched the edge of his sandy hair with a forefinger. "Now you mention hit, sir, seems to me Hi 'eard the dog yip once. But, coo, she's a yippin' beast at that, an' the 'ero in the story was just workin' up 'is nerve to kiss the 'eroeen an' Hi didn't 'ave ears nor heyes to tyke notice of nothink else. Love," said Swick with a sigh, "churns me middle an' tykes me quite out o' meself."

"Ummm," said Bill reflectively. "You haven't heard a thing suspicious outside?"

"Carn't sye as I 'ave," Swick denied emphatically. "'As there been anythink suspicious?"

"A young lady was murdered out there a few minutes ago."

Swick's jaw dropped down again. His eyes seemed to pop forth in their sockets. And then, realizing that Bill meant what he said, Swick gasped: "Me great aunt's bloody soul! 'Eaven 'elp us! Me 'eart's stoppin', an' Hi'm afraid!"

Swick made a dash to a small bookcase against the wall, pulled out an ancient tome, reached back in, plucked forth a pint bottle of whiskey, popped out the cork, tilted the bottle up and gulped long and deep. Choking, he put the bottle back, replaced the book and turned around red-faced.

"Ayn't yer pullin' me leg, sir?" he begged.

"No," said Bill shortly. "Got a flashlight in here?"

"Sorry, sir. There's one in the car,

but 'Arry Stevens 'as it in town wiv the marster. You sye there's a young lady down there dead?"

"She's disappeared. Get a box of matches and a gun if you have one, and help me look for her."

"Hi ayn't goin' ter stir out o' here," Swick declared firmly. "Hi got a weak 'eart, Hi 'ave, an' Hi'll tyke me murders on the printed pyge, if it's hall the syme to you, sir. Murder ayn't a matter for a butler. Hi'll stand on me rights an' st'y right 'ere!"

And nothing Bill could say changed the little cockney's mind. He got a box of kitchen matches and closed the door hurriedly when Bill went out with them. Bill heard the key snap in the lock and had to smile, despite the gravity of the situation. Swick was evidently badly frightened.

Down in the driveway once more Bill changed his mind abruptly, put the matches in his coat pocket and followed the driveway to the street which bounded these ocean-front properties.

"Well, how's the dogs an' cats?" Mopsy O'Keefe asked when Bill appeared beside the car.

"Forget the dogs," Bill said curtly. "I just found a dead woman over on Connister's property."

"Great grief!" Mopsy exploded, tumbling out from behind the wheel of the machine like a startled bull. "Who is she? Who knocked her off?"

Bill sketched what had happened as hastily as possible.

Mopsy rubbed the side of his under-shot jaw with a huge hand, blinked at him and spat at the finish.

"O. K." said Mopsy confidently. "If it's trouble they want we'll give it tuh them! Let's go find this yella ghost an' take 'im apart an' see what he's made of." Mopsy tightened his belt two notches, ducked his head behind a guard-

ing arm and hooked a terrific blow at an invisible enemy. "I always did want to see what a ghost was made of," he said joyously. "Lead on, Bill. I'm gettin' interested. You called the cops yet?"

"Pipe down," Bill ordered. "This is going to take more headwork than muscle and there's not going to be any police just yet. Not until I see Vandervoort at least. We're dodging publicity. Take your gun and flashlight over into Connister's grounds and try to pick up the trail from that concrete bench just beyond the garage. If you can follow it with your light, see what you find at the end of it. If you can't, look all around the grounds. And watch your step!"

"O. K." Mopsy agreed amiably. "No rough stuff unless it's rammed in my teeth?"

"That's right. I'm going to the Vandervoort house now. See you later."

CHAPTER FOUR

Under the Mask

IT seemed to Bill Forde, as once more he made his way toward the great lighted mansion of Jean Vandervoort, that a long time had elapsed since he had made that other start toward it. Actually it was about half an hour. But so much had happened in that time. The situation with which he was confronted had changed so completely that now his mission was entirely new. And it was almost unthinkable there could be so much joy and gaiety there ahead of him with grim tragedy so close.

Bill skirted the side of the big stone house, came out on a great broad front terrace from which the lawn swept down to the sandy beach. Strings of brightly colored Japanese lanterns swayed gently in the breeze over his head. Inside the open windows of the house an or-

chestra was playing dance music. Through the parted draperies of the front windows dancing couples could be seen.

At least two dozen guests were visible on the front porch and terrace. More were down by the beach where other lanterns were strung between poles. In the sweeping driveway to the south of the house cars were parked thickly.

It was a gay, carefree scene, touched by that subtle air of wealth and distinction possible only in circles such as Jean Vandervoort dominated. But that was not what stopped Bill at the side of the terrace, alert, suddenly expectant. He saw now that Vandervoort's merry beach party was a costume affair. Nothing had been said to that effect. It was a surprise and a welcome one.

Looking about Bill saw costumes of every variety. An Indian in gaudy war paint and feathers—a wood nymph—a man in a leopard skin—a long-haired mermaid in sea moss and glittering scales—the usual Pierrot—a tramp. And many other costumes, some elaborate, some obviously gotten up with careless spontaneity. And all of the guests at this time of the evening were masked, some with plain black dominoes, some with more elaborate false faces, ugly, beautiful.

Bill exhaled a soft breath of relief. He knew now where that golden ghost had come from, where to look for it. Unless—and here Bill seized again at the faint straw of hope which gave him no comfort—unless he had been made the victim of a hoax.

He saw nothing like the golden apparition which had attacked him. Recollection sent his hand gingerly to his head. The two sizeable bumps were still there. The pain and soreness too. And in the face of that, the idea that he might have stumbled on a hoax left him completely and finally. No merry party guest participating in a joke would have carried

out the savage merciless attack which had been made on him.

Curious glances were directed at him as he walked up on the wide front porch. He ignored them. Glancing through the open front windows into the big drawing room where they were dancing he failed to see the man he sought. Bill stepped to the front door.

The door was open, as were the windows. A manservant in black stood watchfully inside. He stepped hastily out after one sharp look and confronted Bill.

"You are not a guest here this evening?" he questioned suavely but firmly.

"Will you please get Mr. Vandervoort?" Bill requested politely.

"Mr. Vandervoort is busy. What is your business, please?" The man regarded him suspiciously. They had not met in the afternoon when Bill had visited the house.

"Tell Mr. Vandervoort that Mr. Forde wants to see him."

"There is blood on the side of your head, sir."

"I know it," said Bill wearily. "Will you take my message to Mr. Vandervoort?"

"Wait here, please." But as the man turned to enter the drawing room Bill saw his head swing around in a last suspicious look.

Vandervoort came promptly. He was dressed in an ancient Dutch burgher's costume, with frills, ruffles and soft leather boots. His face was masked by a domino, and he wore a wig and a plumed hat. But Bill would have known him anywhere by his vast, rotund middle and his majestic walk.

Vandervoort questioned ungraciously: "What is it, young man?"

People were standing within earshot. Bill lowered his voice. "Something's happened. Will you step over on the

porch here where we can talk privately?"

Vandervoort snorted, plowed heavily over into the shadows at the end of the long porch without answering. But when he turned stolidly and faced Bill his voice was gruff and annoyed. "What is it? What has happened to you? I see blood on the side of your head."

"A woman has been killed back of your house within the last three quarters of an hour," Bill stated gently.

That jarred Vandervoort noticeably. With a pudgy hand he pushed up his black mask. His big bulging face reddened with emotion. "Who is it?" he demanded harshly.

"I don't know. She was covered with a blanket. The man who killed her knocked me unconscious and carried her body away."

Vandervoort's small eyes, sunk in folds of flesh, stared at him uncomprehendingly. "You talk like a madman!" was all he could think of to say.

Bill shrugged. "Perhaps. It happened. Where do you think I got this blood on the side of my head? There's some queer mystery connected with your place, Mr. Vandervoort. I'm going to get to the bottom of it, but I'll need your help."

"I don't understand you."

"You will," said Bill grimly—and he told Vandervoort what had happened when he entered the grounds, found the girl bound and gagged, and then proceeded over into Connister's place where the blanketed form of a woman rested grotesquely and fearfully in death on the concrete bench.

Vandervoort heaved a sigh of relief at that point. "So it's on the property next door? It's none of our business then, young man. Call the police. Let them settle it."

BILL stared at him in frank amazement. Vandervoort showed no pity for the woman who had died, no interest in the apprehension of her murderer. All that seemed to matter to him was the publicity which had passed him by.

"The man," Bill told him coolly, "who killed her was evidently one of your guests."

"What! What's that? What are you saying?" And Vandervoort was all attention once more.

"One of your guests killed that woman. Do you know any reason, Mr. Vandervoort, why there should be any particular mystery or violence going on around here?"

And the next moment Bill would have taken an oath that fright came into Vandervoort's small fleshy eyes. He raised a hand and rubbed his pursy mouth. His glance wandered from Bill to the terrace and back again. He seemed for a moment at a loss for words.

"No! No, of course not!" he denied testily.

Bill's glance sharpened. He was abruptly certain Vandervoort was suddenly on the defensive, trying to keep something from him. "You'll have to help me," he urged. "Which one of your guests is wearing a dark colored cape over his costume and a gold mask?"

"Why do you ask that?" Vandervoort demanded harshly.

"Because that's the man who killed the girl! The one who jumped at me and smashed me over the head with some blunt instrument! The one, Mr. Vandervoort, who knows where her body is now!"

Since his first glimpse of Vandervoort in Jeremiah Forde's office, Bill had never thought he would see this pompous old Dutch aristocrat so utterly moved and unsettled. That dazed expression which spread over Vandervoort's flabby

face was tinged with horror, unbelief. And up into his jowls and the folds of flesh hanging pendulous from his cheek bones blood rushed in a beet-colored wave. Vandervoort's eyes, which would have been slightly bulgy but for the flesh around them, the eyes of a man with dangerously high blood pressure, seemed fairly to start from their sockets now.

"You can't mean what you're saying!" Vandervoort choked. "You don't know—There's some mistake! You didn't find a dead body! The woman's alive, I tell you! Alive!"

Bill saw what was going to happen in time to leap forward. Vandervoort's eyes glazed. His mouth opened, shut soundlessly. He suddenly went limp, started to fall.

Bill caught him, swung him sideways to the cushions of a cane porch chair.

For the moment he thought Vandervoort had died from shock. But he found the pulse beating steadily but slow. He loosened Vandervoort's collar, grabbed a pillow off another chair and thrust it behind his neck.

The little byplay had not been unobserved. A woman and a man came hurrying over. Another couple followed after them.

"He fainted," Bill told them. "Will someone get a glass of water?"

One of the women hurried off.

And as Bill watched her go, and his gaze ran out over the terrace, he stiffened. Out there, strolling up from the beach, came a man and woman, talking animatedly. The woman was costumed as a Southern belle with a wide flounced skirt. And the man—the man . . .

Jean Vandervoort's eyes were already moving as his daze passed.

"I'll be back in a minute," Bill said briefly to the five people who now surrounded the chair. And as he hurriedly left the front porch and crossed the terrace he slipped a hand inside his coat

and made sure his revolver was secure in the shoulder harness under his arm.

For the man who walked so carelessly beside that Southern belle wore a striking costume of rich red under a long dark cloak. And his face was covered with a horrible golden mask!

BILL met them midway of the terrace, quiet, polite. No watching person would have suspected anything but a friendly meeting.

"You got back in a hurry," Bill said casually. He was thinking of the woman, the need to avert publicity, an embarrassing scene.

But the gold-masked figure he addressed did not seize the opportunity and play up to it. They both stopped when Bill spoke. The mask turned, surveyed him with an expressionless stare. Even now with the soft lantern light about them and people on every hand Bill felt queer as he eyed that mask. Too recently in his mind were other memories.

He could see the gleam of eyes through the eye holes. He noticed that the man was tall, broad-shouldered. He carried himself like a young man, a powerful man.

The woman was young too, slender, erect. The soft curve of her cheeks, the delicate set of her mouth beneath the black eye mask she wore hinted at beauty and breeding. Bill wondered what she would think if aware of what her partner had so recently done. His reply gave her no inkling.

"What the devil do you mean?" the gold-masked figure demanded with asperity. "Who are you?"

"I doubt if this is exactly the place to go into that," Bill said politely. "Will you come with me, please?"

The girl swayed nearer her escort, slipped a hand under his arm. Perfect white teeth caught her lower lip nervously. "What does he mean, Fred?" she

asked in a low voice. "He is not one of the guests, is he?"

"Never saw him before," the masked figure denied angrily. "I don't know what he's talking about. Come to the point! What are you driving at?"

"I am from the Forde Detective Agency," Bill told him curtly. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"Oh—the dogs. Well, don't bring your business to me. Can't you see this is not the time and place for it? I'm busy."

Bill sighed. "If you must have it cold, we're not discussing dogs now. I'm talking about the business next door a little while ago."

The mask hid all expression beneath it. Bill wished they were alone so he could rip it off. Whoever the fellow was, he was a consummate actor. He gave no start of surprise. There was no apprehension in his reply. Continued indignation, bewilderment were all his voice showed.

"Either you've been drinking or your infernal cheek is colossal, my man! For the last time, will you take your detective affairs away from here and bring them up when you're requested to do so?"

He spoke with arrogant authority. He showed some knowledge of the business which had brought Bill to Tacona Beach. He seemed to have no fear of any consequences which might be in the offing. And Bill, with his head still throbbing, his temper frayed, his knowledge that murder had been done, threw politeness overboard.

"You've stalled enough!" he said curtly. "Will you come up on the porch there where Vandervoort is, or shall I have to take you by force?"

The young woman gasped. Her pretty mouth rounded in an O of bewilderment.

The golden-masked figure patted the small hand which lay on his arm. His

fingers were stubby, powerful, Bill noted. Curt anger issued from behind his mask.

"I'm sorry anything like this had to happen, Janice. I'll run up on the porch with him and get to the bottom of this. I'll be back here in a few minutes if you care to wait."

And as he strode toward the porch beside Bill, a distinct oath burst from his lips. "You blundering fool!" he said furiously. "I'll see that you're taken off this matter at once!"

The group of five around the chair where Jean Vandervoort sat had grown to nine when they reached it. Vandervoort had recovered complete consciousness. His face was still red. He was sipping a glass of water as they came up and pushed through to the chair. Vandervoort gave them one hasty look, handed the glass of water to a woman beside him, and said hurriedly to the little group: "Would you mind leaving us alone, please? I want to talk to this man alone."

They drifted away obediently, murmuring among themselves. One or two cast backward glances over their shoulders. Scenes like this were obviously utterly foreign to the Vandervoort household. A wave of comment and gossip would evidently spread swiftly through the party.

Vandervoort ignored them as Bill said coolly: "Here's the man I was telling you about."

Vandervoort rubbed his low, broad forehead. His glare had a hunted quality about it. But his thick reply was no less emphatic.

"You've made some mistake! *This is my son, Frederic.*"

BILL opened his mouth—and closed it again weakly. It was the last thing he had expected to hear. It didn't make sense.

But Frederic Vandervoort was not so affected. With an impatient shrug he lifted the mask over his head. "What's all this about?" he threw at his father. "I was walking up from the beach with Janice Stanblower when this idiot accosted us with a mysterious manner and veiled threats. I had to come here on the porch to get rid of him."

The younger Vandervoort was in his late twenties. His face was beefy but not bad-looking. It was tanned heavily. Vigorous sports had evidently kept superfluous flesh from his frame. Later, as he grew older and more sedate, he would probably take on flesh as his father had. He was that type. Right now his squarish features were dark with sulkiness. His eyes were glittering with the intensity of his displeasure.

Jean Vandervoort straightened in the chair and raised a hand heavily. The look he cast on his son was not kind. Bill, watching them, decided that father and son were not on too cordial terms.

"This man," said Vandervoort thickly, "is a detective."

"He told me that. Out here about that dog business, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Vandervoort shortly. "But he claims to have found the dead body of a young woman on the grounds next door a little while ago. He swears the man he discovered with her and who attacked him is you. His description of the costume fits perfectly the one you're wearing. What is the explanation, Frederic?"

Frederic Vandervoort knit his heavy black brows. One stubby powerful hand clutched at a button of his costume. The anger faded from his face. His eyes went from his father to Bill, narrowing.

"Dead woman?" he said sharply. "He's—he's accusing me of killing a woman? Why, the man's a bald-faced liar—a—blackmailer! I haven't been over in the grounds next door for years!

I don't even know the man who's living there now!"

"You see?" Vandervoort said gruffly to Bill. "I told you there was a mistake, young man. Let's hear no more about this."

"I saw that costume," Bill told him slowly. "I've got a cracked head to keep it fresh in mind. I'm sorry, gentlemen, but we'll hear a lot more about it. Where were you the last hour?" He asked the last question of Frederic Vandervoort.

The young man scowled at him. "I've been with Janice Stanblower for at least half an hour. Before that I danced a bit, and was out on the terrace, and down on the beach with another young woman. I've been with someone or within sight of someone for the last two hours. If this is a publicity stunt or an attempt at blackmail I'll nip it quick! I think I'll call the police, as it is."

The elder Vandervoort raised a forbidding hand. "Nothing like that," he ordered hastily. "That would mean publicity—reporters—the newspapers. I won't have it!"

"I'll not be accused of crime either!"

"You can produce witnesses to swear you've been here at the party for the last two hours?" Bill questioned.

"Yes, I'll round 'em up now."

"Never mind. It's hardly necessary if you were here. Is there another costume like this at the party?"

"Not that I know of," young Vandervoort denied. "It's an old one I've had for a year."

"Where did you get it?"

"Dietwiler Costume Company."

"Do you know exactly who is here tonight?"

"Certainly!" young Vandervoort snapped.

"I'm sorry you were suspected unjustly. You can see the provocation. There evidently is another costume like yours

here. Will you check your guest list, please, and see if everyone is here?"

"A lot of nonsense!" old Jean Vandervoort growled.

"May I remind you," Bill said softly, "that I'm willing to swear a murder has been committed? And since the costume I saw was identical with your son's, it must trace back to this house in some manner. I wouldn't be so rash as to term it nonsense."

The old man heaved himself out of the chair with an effort. "Have a look at the guests, Fred," he directed. "If this man is right, we'll do everything we can to help, of course. My reputation as a law-abiding citizen is too well known to act otherwise."

Bill, listening with an expressionless face, wondered if he were right in detecting a note of insincerity in the old man's voice.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Mysterious Miss Mallory

THE lights were on in the big Connister house when Bill squeezed through the hedge once more. Sweeping the lawn between the point where he stood and the house was the bright beam of a flashlight.

"That you, Mopsy?" Bill called, striding toward it.

"I guess so," Mopsy's muted bellow answered. And when they met, Mopsy asked plaintively, "Sure you didn't have a nightmare, Bill? A cricket couldn't have hid from me the way I've gone over this property. And there ain't a darn thing outside of a dead collie lyin' over back of the house."

"So there was a dead dog?" Bill muttered.

"Dead as fried egg, Bill. Somebody smacked her on the head. I'll bet she

never yipped once after she got it. And is Connister burnt up over it?"

"You saw him?"

"Yeah. He drove up a few minutes ago, while I was lookin' at the mutt. I gave him the dope an' he hit the ceiling. Said he was goin' right in an' call the cops."

"The devil!" said Bill. And then he shrugged in the dark. "Probably as well. This thing couldn't be kept under cover. But when they come, keep your mouth shut."

"I'm a clam," Mopsy stated heartily.

Connister himself answered the front door of his home. He was wearing a dinner coat. The good-natured smile was not visible.

"Hello. Come in," Connister greeted. "I was just wondering how to get you. I've called the police. Your man told me a rather incoherent story of some gruesome business here this evening. I was going to wait and hear it from you, but when my man, Swick, said that you had told him the same thing, I thought it was time to have the police in. And I see my last dog has been killed tonight also." Connister's voice was hard, bitter as he said that.

"It's a gruesome mystery, right enough," Bill agreed. "Do you mind if I use your telephone?"

"Not at all. In the corner there."

Connister stepped into the room off the hall. Bill called Jeremiah Forde's apartment number. No one answered the repeated rings. He tried the office. No one answered there either. Bill hung up regretfully. He would have liked having the benefit of Jeremiah Forde's vast experience. The feeling was growing on him that there was more to this than appeared on the surface; wheels within wheels, and more to come.

The muted whine of a siren rushed up the driveway. Bill went out in front with Connister to meet the police.

There were five of them in the small Ford touring car, three patrolmen, two detectives. And after greeting them Connister referred them to Bill.

No introductions were made. The Tacona Beach Police Department lacked some of the snap and efficiency of the city force. The two detectives seemed to be in charge, for they questioned him; and from the moment they learned he was a private detective from the city their manner showed little cordiality.

Bill explained why he was on the spot, told of hearing the dog's muted howl, his investigation, his discovery of the body, the attack that had been made on him and the disappearance of the body while he was unconscious.

IT was a strange story. Bill hardly blamed the detectives for exchanging startled glances. But their obvious skepticism was irritating. The taller of the two detectives, a flat-faced man with a square jaw and tobacco-filled cheek, rubbed the side of his nose and grinned knowingly.

"You didn't see this woman, hey?" he demanded.

"She was covered with a blanket. I saw her hand. It had blood on it. I couldn't find a pulse. And if I know a corpse when I see it, she was one."

"Anybody that could see what you saw'd be likely to find a corpse 'most anywhere. Ain't that right, Al?"

Al was the other detective, face wizened, with a straw hat cocked on one side of his head. Al grinned too.

"He's no piker when he sees something. And you say this corpse got up and walked away while you were takin' the air on the ground?"

Bill jammed his hands in his pockets, stared at them bleakly. "All right, wise guys. Now you guess the next one."

"He's gettin' hard," said Al. "These

private dicks are touchy when they can't pull a Sherlock Holmes. Sure you didn't run into an open door or something an' dream all this?"

"You're robbing the tax payers," Bill said wearily. "And you can't find that woman's body with your mouth."

"Or with anything else," Al's square-faced companion grunted. "Show us where this bench is."

Bill took them to the spot, watched them scatter out over the lawn, flashlights stabbing crisscross lanes through the darkness.

Connister was speaking over the telephone when Bill returned to the front porch. He came out almost immediately, lighting a cigarette. He was calm, regretful.

"I suppose you've done about all you can do tonight," he said. "Too bad you couldn't save my last dog—but I suppose it couldn't be helped. I'll turn the matter over to the police, now that they're here. Have your office send me a bill tomorrow."

Bill rubbed his jaw. "You're releasing us from the case?"

Connister pushed out a hand regretfully. "I judge it best. I've decided not to keep any more dogs. This other matter is in the hands of the police. They don't seem to take kindly to having a private detective on the same case. And with them on the ground now I see no reason for your remaining out here at the beach. I'll send you both back to town tonight in my car, if you wish."

Bill had said nothing to Connister about Vandervoort retaining him also. He did not mention the matter now.

"Thanks," he refused. "We have a car. Sorry I couldn't save your dog. I hope your local police clear everything up."

"We both hope it," Connister said heartily. "Good night." He lifted his

hand in a farewell salute, turned back into the house as they departed.

"And did we get a break?" Mopsy rumbled with satisfaction as they left the house behind. "I'm just fit to pound my ear all night."

"That's a good idea," said Bill, "for some other night. Who said we were through? Go back and hang around that police car and see what they find. I'm going over to Vandervoort's and ask some more questions."

"You would pick the party," Mopsy said disgustedly. But he turned back.

The Vandervoorts, father and son, talked to Bill on the front porch. There was a new solidarity between them, contrasting the strained air which seemed to color their relations before. Frederic Vandervoort spoke, belligerently.

"I've checked the guests. Every one is here."

Old Jean Vandervoort, wig, hat and costume correctly in place once more, said stiffly: "There seems to be no basis for your fantastic story, young man. I—*hrrmph*—resent your effort to cast such stigma on my son. I would not have consulted your firm in the first place if I had known this would result. I have decided to dispense with your services. Please consider the case closed as far as your office is concerned."

CONNISTER'S decision had been understandable. This was too in a different way. Bill eyed the two men who faced him. His jaw shoved out the barest bit. Little ridges of muscle raised in his cheeks. Mopsy could have told them that when Captain Bill Forde looked like that it was a good rule to stand by for trouble. It meant Bill Forde was getting mad. And when that happened all reasonable bets were off, and the sky was the limit on what might happen.

"So," said Bill softly, "you want to drop the case, do you? You don't want publicity? You don't give a damn what happened to that girl? You'd condone murder—if it kept your precious names off the front pages of the papers?"

Old Vandervoort's barrel-like body swelled. "Watch your tongue, young man!" he blustered. "You're discharged! Get off the property!"

Frederic Vandervoort scowled, said angrily: "I'll have him thrown off."

Bill leaned forward invitingly. "Maybe you'd like to try it yourself?"

Young Vandervoort clenched a fist, glared into Bill's eyes. But whatever he intended to say or do died before what he saw there. He bit his lip, shoved it out pugnaciously. "You're impertinent. I'll lodge a complaint against you at your office. Now get off this property!"

"I don't like to be hurried," Bill told them calmly. "I'm off your payroll—but not off the case. You're not in the clear on this yet, and if you don't watch your step you'll both make full-page headlines in the papers. Your neighbor, Connister, called the police about this business. They're investigating now. I haven't brought you into it yet, but I'm thinking about it."

The threat of publicity was like a club. Old Jean Vandervoort reddened dangerously. His thick, pudgy hand shook slightly as he rubbed his jowls.

"That temper of yours will kill you some day," Bill advised calmly. "Your arteries won't stand it."

"Frederic," said old Jean Vandervoort shakily, "handle this. I—I can't talk to this fellow any more!" The old man stepped ponderously away, his back stiff with dignity he would not surrender.

Young Vandervoort's beefy tanned face was dark with sulky anger. He controlled it. "Consider yourself retained further," he said ungraciously.

"We'll pay a handsome bonus if we are kept out of the papers." His manner indicated he considered a private detective would do anything for a bonus.

"Generous of you," Bill said sarcastically. "You can take your dirty dollars and stick—" He broke off, staring past young Vandervoort.

A girl had just stepped out of the front door, uncostumed, unmasked, slender, graceful, pretty. The last time Bill had seen her she had held a gun in his side.

"Who is that woman without a costume?" Bill snapped.

Young Vandervoort swung around, looked, said shortly: "That is Miss Sara Mallory, my mother's secretary."

Sara Mallory did not look toward their end of the porch. She said something to old Vandervoort, turned and re-entered the house.

"I'll talk to you later," said Bill, and left young Vandervoort staring at his back with a puzzled frown.

OLD Vandervoort had followed the girl into the house. The manservant was still watching the open front door. He eyed Bill with aversion, stepped in front of him as Bill entered too.

"I have no orders to admit you to this house."

"Where is Miss Mallory?"

"She went back toward the kitchen. But you can't go there."

"The hell I can't!" said Bill calmly. "One side, funny face, before I get rough. I've had about enough of you." Bill shouldered past, made for a door at the rear of the hall. The doorman shrugged hopelessly, let him go.

Beyond the door Bill found a hall with a door at the other end. Through the wall on his right, and from a door he passed, throbbed the dance music. The warm air was heavy with the scent of perfume and flowers. A lace-aproned

and capped maid opened the door at the end of the hall and eyed him curiously.

"Where is Miss Mallory?" Bill asked her.

She was short, petite, quick-moving, curious. Her face was thin and homely with a vixenish expression of interest as she cocked her head on one side and surveyed him impudently.

"Sara's in the kitchen," she said. "Can I help you?"

"You have, bright-eyes," said Bill, and opened the door and stepped into the kitchen.

It was white-tiled shoulder-high, large and spotlessly clean. Porcelain-topped tables, white-enameled wall cupboards, racks of gleaming copper and aluminum pans, a long hotel-type range and three white-garbed members of the kitchen staff met his eye. Platters of sandwiches and other ingredients of a buffet lunch rested on the tables. The room was warm.

Sara Mallory was talking to one of the white-garbed figures. She did not see Bill until he was at her side. She looked casually—and suddenly stiffened.

Bill smiled warmly. "Nice to be seeing you again, Sara. You've been on my mind."

The cook eyed him curiously. Sara Mallory slowly raised a hand and pushed a damp lock of her unruly dark hair into place. Her face was a study. She was not afraid, but she was startled. And she looked tired, anxious, apprehensive; looked more so after seeing him.

"Where did you come from?" she said involuntarily.

"I've been around," said Bill. "Around and around and around. We've got a lot to talk about."

Her crisp cool manner was gone. His reply seemed to fluster her. She said to the cook, "Don't forget about the sandwiches, Henry," and turned toward the

end of the room beside Bill. When they were out of earshot she asked fiercely under her breath: "Who are you?"

"The name is Forde," said Bill. "Private detective, at your service. And now be at my service."

He didn't put into words the relief that had come over him at sight of her; at the fact her hands were unscarred; that there were no signs of violence about her. He had thought her dead, and here she was safe and sound. The mystery surrounding that still, blanketed form he had discovered was even greater now; but Sara Mallory, Bill was convinced, was the one person who could help him get to the bottom of it.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a detective?" she burst out.

"Why didn't you ask me?"

Her red underlip looked distraught. "What do you want?"

"You're in trouble," said Bill. "It'll take a lot of talk to get you out of it. Let's have the whole story."

She hesitated, seemed to come to a sudden decision. "We can't talk here. Come upstairs to my office."

SHE led him through another door at the end of the kitchen, through a butler's pantry and up a narrow, winding flight of steps beyond. She brought him into a small room at the back of the house, upstairs. It had file cases and shelves of books, a secretary's desk with typewriter, and an easy chair. A window looked out over the rear grounds.

Sara Mallory closed the door, stood with her back against it, eyeing him.

Bill sat on the edge of the desk and swung a leg. "Let's have it. Who tied you up? What were you doing out there with a gun? Why did you pull it on me and take the air?"

Sara Mallory lifted her little chin. Her eyes were smoldering. "I don't see that that's any of your business."

"You will," Bill promised. "You went toward Connister's place next door when you left me. Did you kill that woman?"

It was a shot in the dark. The effect surprised even Bill. The blood drained from Sara Mallory's face. Grief, horror, unbelief struggled across it.

"Dead?" she said in a small girl's frightened voice. "What are you saying?"

"You heard me."

"A woman was killed on the Connister place? What did she look like?"

"I can't describe her adequately. All I got was an impression of reddish hair before I was knocked out. She was covered with a blanket when I saw her. Who was she?"

"It must be Nancy Porter," Sara Mallory said through stiff lips. "Oh, the poor darling. Why didn't I suspect something like that?"

"Now," Bill assented, "we're getting somewhere. Why didn't you? What do you know about it? Who is Nancy Porter?"

Sara Mallory pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve, began to twist it nervously in her fingers. "Nancy is the second maid," she explained. "I was in back of the house tonight when she came out crying to herself. I tried to get her to tell me what was the matter. She would only repeat over and over that something awful had happened. She wouldn't tell me anything more. She begged me to go back into the house and forget about her, and said she'd return in a little while. She went off in the darkness."

"And you," said Bill promptly, "followed her with a gun." He did not try to hide the skepticism in his voice. "I suppose she tied you up and went weeping and wailing on her way?"

"I wish," she said coldly, "I'd been a little less gentle with you. I was out there with the gun, trying to find who

was killing our dogs. I thought I knew, but when Nancy went miserably off into the darkness I forgot about the dogs. I had a feeling she needed me. I followed her." Sara Mallory drew a deep breath and shuddered at some hidden thought.

"Yes," Bill prompted.

"It was dark. I couldn't see her. I went the same way she did. I wasn't looking for trouble, and out there where you found me a figure jumped from behind a bush and grabbed me."

"And you screamed for help?" Bill said encouragingly.

"A hand was pressed over my mouth before I knew what was happening." Sara Mallory shrugged. "I forgot all about my gun. I tried to beat him off. My finger scraped across a horrible woodenlike face. The surprise and the knowledge I was helpless were too much. I fainted. When I came to I was trussed up so tight I couldn't move, and gagged so I couldn't utter a sound. I must have lain there for five minutes—and you came along."

"So you took it out on me?"

"I thought you were one of the guests at first. I knew Nancy would lose her job if the Vandervoorts ever suspected her of being connected with anything like that, and I was sure she was connected with it. And I was mad by then. All I wanted was to keep down publicity and find Nancy. When I saw you weren't one of the guests I thought you might be a newspaper reporter. They pop up in the most unexpected places. So I left you there and ran away."

"And forgot all about Nancy, I suppose?"

THE secretary looked bewildered. "I couldn't find her, so I came back in the house and waited. You see, I'd realized by then that wooden face I had touched must be a mask one of the guests was wearing. I thought then it might

be a questionable joke of some kind, but I've been worried sick because Nancy hasn't come back."

"You said," Bill recalled, "you had some suspicions about who was killing the dogs?"

"Yes. Johnson, the chauffeur. The dogs never liked him. Behind the garage one morning I saw him kick one of them, and club it back with a stick when it leaped at him. They were all highly trained police dogs, capable of defending themselves. And that isn't all"—Sara Mallory hesitated—"I may as well go on. I stepped in the garage with a message for Johnson the other afternoon. He put something hurriedly in a drawer of his workbench, and grabbed something else off the bench. But I saw. It was two empty cartridge shells, brass, like the ones used in a revolver."

"Now we're getting somewhere. What sort of a chap is this Johnson?"

"He's a big powerful man. He doesn't say much to anyone. In the two months he's been here we haven't spoken more than a dozen times."

Bill thoughtfully eyed Sara Mallory standing over there by the door. "I think I'll see Johnson," he murmured. "How long does the party last?"

She smiled faintly. "It may last until morning. These beach parties often do in the summertime."

"I've got a hunch the answer is here at the party, and I'm going to find it before—"

Bill broke off abruptly, leaped forward, swept the astonished Sara Mallory to one side without a word of explanation and yanked the door open.

"I thought so!" he snapped, and threw himself out into the hall.

Sara Mallory was wide-eyed, speechless when Bill reappeared in the doorway, pulling a struggling young woman who was trying to free her arm.

"Violet!" Sara exclaimed.

Violet was the petite sly little maid who had met Bill in the lower hall. Her white cap was slightly askew now. Her face was red. She was panting with her efforts to break away.

"Let go my arm!" she protested furiously.

Bill shook her, pushed her into the room. He closed the door. "Next time you sneak up to a door for an earful, don't get in front of the keyhole when there's a light behind you," he advised. "It shines through the keyhole when you move away."

Violet tossed her head, adjusted her cap, regained some of her composure. "I wasn't paying any attention to your door!" she flared. "My room is right down the hall and I was going to it!"

Bill grinned. "Funny how quick you forgot about it. You were making a dive down the stairs when I caught you."

"Pretty smart for a bum detective, aren't you?" Violet snapped.

"Who said I was a detective? Miss Mallory didn't even know it until I told her a few minutes ago."

Violet looked crestfallen, lapsed into sullen silence.

"Going stubborn on us," Bill guessed. "Would you talk if I got rough?"

"Try it!" Violet said through her teeth.

Bill opened the door. "Run along. Watch your keyholes next time."

Violet stalked out, giving him a look of concentrated hatred as she passed. Bill watched her down the stairs, closed the door, looked quizzically at Sara Mallory.

"Nice lot of servants Vandervoort employs."

Sara Mallory shook her head. "Violet is queer. She's always turning up when you least expect her. She chatters about everything that goes on around the place. I'm afraid she's quite a little gossip."

"I wonder," said Bill thoughtfully. "In fact I'm wondering about a lot of things. Where are Vandervoort's two remaining dogs tonight?"

"Locked up in the kennels back by the garage until the guests leave. They're never turned out while strangers are about. They're high-strung, nervous, apt to make trouble with strangers they meet." Sara Mallory's eyes clouded. "Is it true about—about Nancy Porter?" she begged uncertainly.

Bill told her what he had found. For some reason he was beginning to trust this girl who had made so much trouble and mystery in the beginning.

Sara Mallory was conscience-stricken. "I should have done something more about her."

"You did well enough," said Bill; and added whimsically, "Nothing makes sense. Where d'you suppose Johnson is right now?"

"In the garage I guess. There's a direct telephone from the house to his quarters."

"Could you get him out of there for ten minutes? Send him on a fake errand?"

She knit her brows, nodded abruptly. "I think so. Mr. Vandervoort often sends him to the post office kate at night to get the last mail. So he'll think nothing of it if I ask him to go now. I'll telephone the garage."

"Wish you would. I'll wait out back of the house until he's gone."

CHAPTER SIX

The Banshee Wail

BILL paced slowly back and forth at the rear of the house. His wrist watch showed the hour to be after eleven. The party was still at its height. He could see the Vandervoort garage, stone like the house, a hundred yards away, among the trees.

A light burned upstairs as Swick's light had at Connister's. Bill wondered what sort of a fellow this Johnson was—a man who would kick a dog when no one was looking.

Dogs!

The short hairs at the back of his neck prickled as a loud mournful howl crept through the night from beyond the garage. A second howl chimed in. Neither was cut off short as that single howl of Connister's dog had been.

Again and again the weird howls rose toward the black, star-strewn sky. There was something ghastly familiar about them. Bill shivered. Desolate, meaning, eery, they made him feel the nearness of death, brought back vividly that still corpse he had reached out and touched.

His restless pacing had brought him to the back corner of the house at that moment. Bill suddenly stopped short in the shadows.

A tall, striding figure came from the front of the house, limned against the lantern light and glow from the windows there. Black cloak and stiff unnatural face, ghastly golden, were visible for a moment. The figure stopped short, turned toward him with a startled movement.

"Who's there?" the voice of Frederic Vandervoort exclaimed.

Bill stepped out.

"Oh! it's you!" Vandervoort said unpleasantly. "Still snooping around, eh? Look out you don't startle some of our guests." He strode on, plainly in a hurry.

Bill watched him go, wondering; wondering more as he saw that young Vandervoort was making for the garage. He slid one of the doors open a bit, entered.

The dogs had fallen silent momentarily. They broke into renewed howling once more.

Light abruptly gleamed through small glass panels high in the garage doors as an automobile's headlights were switched

on inside. A door was trundled all the way open, rasping on the night. A figure, not Vandervoort's, showed briefly against the light inside, then entered the machine.

A starter whirred. The motor purred. The machine rolled out, gathering speed as it swung into the drive and sped away. Bill made out two figures in the front seat, vague in the dim dash glow. Twin red tail-lights winked back at him.

Bill made for the garage, puzzled. Why had Vandervoort hurried out and driven away with the chauffeur? It was a queer move, unexplainable. A further layer of the mystery he met on every side.

Bill had taken Mopsy's flashlight. By its light he saw that a big expensive black limousine occupied that other half of the garage. At the back he found the work bench Sara Mallory had spoken of. Tools were hanging on racks behind it. Three drawers in the front of the bench contained other tools, repair accessories. Nowhere around the bench was any sign of the gun Johnson might have used to kill the dogs. It would have to have a silencer, Bill judged, since no shots had been heard.

A door in the left-hand wall opened onto a flight of stairs. Bill went up, found the door of Johnson's quarters unlocked. An overhead bulb was burning in the parlor into which he stepped. These garages seemed to be constructed on about the same plans.

Bill went through that apartment quickly, skillfully, counting the possible minutes he had to work in. There was a small kitchenette at the back, showing signs of little use. There was a bathroom with Johnson's shaving and toilet accessories. He ran to face lotions, powders, unguents.

The bedroom had a chest of drawers filled with apparel. The closet had two suits hanging in it, shoes, a suitcase and

traveling bag on the floor. There was no gun, nothing to cast the slightest suspicion on Johnson.

Bill left the place.

THE party showed no signs of abatement. Vandervoort and his man were still out on their mysterious errand. By now Vandervoort would know that Sara Mallory had telephoned a false order to Johnson. He felt a moment's qualm over that. It had not been his intention to make trouble for her.

The dogs had ceased howling. It struck him their quiet had something to do with Johnson's departure. Bill went toward the kennels back of the garage, intending to let the dogs out, see what they would do when Johnson returned. Savage as the dogs had been reputed to be, they had treated him with a measure of friendliness that afternoon. He hoped they remembered.

The kennels had slatted fronts. The dogs did not growl, bark, yelp when he came up. They whined pathetically, eagerly, pushed against the strong wooden slats, stood up, trying to get as close to him as possible.

They seemed frantically eager to see him, glad that he was there. Not even that afternoon when they had known he was welcome had they exhibited anything like this.

The door was secured by a stout lock. A key, screwdriver or steel bar were the only things that would release it.

"Sorry," said Bill regretfully to them. "I can't make it. You'll have to stay in."

They whined at the sound of his voice. They seemed to be pleading with him. Bill got the queer feeling they were trying to convey some message to him. The idea was startling. He played the light in on them thoughtfully, wishing he could understand canine language.

A familiar off-key whistle coming through the darkness broke in on that.

Bill left the whining dogs and cut over to it. Mopsy answered his greeting.

"Any more murders?" Mopsy queried genially.

"Not yet. What luck over at Connister's?"

"None," said Mopsy. "The cops run around an' bump into themselves. I almost gave 'em the bird. And what they think of you over there ain't fit to print. They figure you sent 'em out on a wild goose chase."

"What are they doing now?"

"They piled in their flivver an' went home. I'm standin' off in the darkness, see, an' keepin' my trap shut. I hear that English butler, or whatever he is, go out to the car with his boss an' give 'em a hot line in his chicken talk. 'Blimee,' says he, 'the bounder seems to 'ave been drinking. If you arsk me,' says he, 'I think the blighter as been giving us a tall yarn to cover up 'is failure to detect the man who killed our dog. 'E was hired for that,' says the little Cockney wart, 'an' 'e wants to earn his pay check 'and-some'."

Mopsy snorted. "Can you tie that? Connister, his boss, stood there an' let him put it over. The dicks asked Connister, what he thought. Connister hemmed an' hawed an' decided there couldn't be much to the story. So they damned you up one side and down the other an' called it a night. Connister passed out the cigars and slipped one of the dicks a bill for their trouble. He's the fair haired-boy with this hick-town police department now. An' you're the smart city dick who didn't make good."

"Fine," said Bill. "And mighty queer. The more I dig into this the more peculiar everything becomes. Connister retains us to find who killed his dogs, and then Vandervoort trails in and does the same. They're both worked up about dead dogs—and yet when a dead woman

turns up they drop it like a hot potato. Connister steps out of his agreement with the agency and Vandervoort tries to do the same. Neither one seems to have much interest any more about their dogs. Vandervoort hears a killer is impersonating his son tonight, and he gets cold chills down his back and shuts up. Vandervoort's maid snoops on me while I'm in the house. Vandervoort's chauffeur seems to be the man who is killing the dogs—God knows why. The dogs howl bloody murder while the chauffeur is around and get jittery when he leaves. Vandervoort's son pops up when I arrange to have the chauffeur sent away for a little while, and goes with him. It doesn't make sense."

MOPSY scratched his chin audibly. "If someone would just start a good free-for-all scrap," he growled hopefully. "This business of women gettin' killed an' bodies doing a vanishing act gives me the cold creeps. It's like duckin' your chin behind your arms an' swinging at shadows."

"There's an answer to it," Bill said slowly. "And the answer's right here under our noses, if we can uncover it. Someone knows more than they're telling. Someone's lying to us. Somebody's started something they're going to have to finish. We're not wanted around here? Why?"

"I'll bite," said Mopsy. "Why?"

"Because," said Bill, "We know too much now. We've run slab-dab into things we weren't supposed to see. Somebody's plans have gone wrong!"

"Whose plans?" Mopsy grumbled.

"If I knew, I'd know what to do," Bill said savagely. "I'm no Sherlock Holmes. There aren't any clues. There isn't any sense to it. Things happen with no reason. I've got a hunch I'm being double-crossed by the very people who could help me—and ought to be doing it.

If I was one of these infallible detectives out of a magazine story I'd run around with the flashlight, grab a clue out of the air, smell my way to the guilty parties and calmly puff away on a cigarette while I gathered everyone around and snootily pointed out the villains, with a copper-riveted explanation for everything that was done behind my back, and every dirty thought they had."

"Hell," said Mopsy admiringly. "I read a book once. That was exactly what happened at the end. Sir Walter Whoo-sis shelled out the facts so smoothly at the end I figured he must have slipped a few off the bottom of the deck. I'm still wondering where he got all the dope he gave them. My bet was he went to a fortune teller."

"I'm no fortune teller," said Bill grimly. "I'm only a poor dumb cluck who can work when I have something to work with. But I know one thing—we'll stay here until hell freezes over and we get to the bottom of this."

"Atta-boy, Bill!" Mopsy applauded heartily. "We can take it an' hand it out too, if they give us time enough. Say—listen to them dogs tune up. It's enough to give a porcelain statue the cold creeps!"

The dogs in the nearby kennels, which had been moving about uneasily and whining softly, suddenly began to howl mournfully once more. Their chilling crescendoes slid off into gurgling moans, pealed higher again.

Mopsy caught Bill's arm in a powerful grip. "Listen!" he said excitedly. "Does that remind you of anything?"

"Yes, but I can't place it," Bill confessed.

"Remember those Chinese pariah dogs howling in the moonlight in that muddy field south of the Wei River? Terry McCloskey said the banshees were walking with the dead that night, wailing for the rest of us who were still alive but were goin' to die before long."

"I remember," Bill muttered.

And in spite of himself a cold chill crept through him at memory of those gruesome hours under the cold white moon as they lay in the mud beside the dead and waited for death.

Mopsy's grip tightened. He was a superstitious Irishman. The banshee's wail had real meaning for him.

"Do you remember," he demanded hoarsely, "how those Chinks under General Wu crept up the river bank an' surprised us? Before dawn eight more of us were dead—after all that wailin'!"

"Yes," said Bill. . . . He did remember indeed.

"That's the death wail!" said Mopsy feverishly. "Those dogs know death! They can feel it!"

And surprisingly, Bill heard himself agreeing soberly: "I believe you're right, Mopsy."

"Sure I'm right!" said Mopsy with utter conviction. "But who's gonna die? You? Me?"

Bill shook off the feeling. "Nonsense! I grant they know someone has died this evening. But no one can tell what is going to happen. Not even a dog."

"Says you!" said Mopsy. "Them dogs can! Lookit—here comes a car!"

NEITHER of them had noticed the automobile rolling smoothly toward the garage. It swept around before the building with dimmed lights.

Bill pulled Mopsy over where the end wall of the garage hid them.

The machine rolled slowly into the garage without stopping. The idling motor died. The car door slammed as someone got out. Steps moved across the concrete floor.

The big door creaked shut—and the dogs lapsed into ominous silence as the steps grated across the graveled drive toward the house.

Bill looked around the corner of the

garage. He could make out a tall striding figure, black cloak flapping as it passed into the reflected glow from the front of the house. He saw the dark costume, the gleam of the yellow horror mask Frederick Vandervoort wore.

Vandervoort was alone.

At their elbows the garage bulked quiet, lifeless. No other steps moved on the concrete floor. No one else had come out with Vandervoort. No one walked up the wooden steps to the second floor.

The dogs howled half heartedly, lapsed into quiet again. Bill said under his breath to Mopsy: "Something queer here. Johnson, the chauffeur, went away with Vandervoort—but Vandervoort came back alone!"

"Sure he went?" Mopsy questioned.

"I saw them both in the front seat by the dashlight glow."

"Maybe he sent the chauffeur on an errand."

"I had a fake order sent to the chauffeur to get him out of the way. And just when I showed some interest in him, Vandervoort rushed out and went with him—and came back alone. It's damn funny," Bill muttered. "I'm going in and have a look at that car."

Bill listened at the front a moment, made sure no one was moving inside, and pushed back the door gently. Mopsy followed him in.

The dogs were silent as they entered. The garage was silent. The slightest movement was audible. Their steps sounded loud. Bill pressed the flash button. The darting beam showed them to be alone.

The big sedan loomed beside them. Bill opened the front door, pushed the light in. Mopsy opened the rear and looked in also. The back seat creaked as his big hand rested heavily on it.

Mopsy suddenly exclaimed: "My God! Let's have that light! It's sticky!"

"What's sticky?" Bill asked, throwing the light into the back.

Mopsy's torso was projecting through the rear door in frozen rigidity. He had snatched his right hand off the seat, was holding it up. A wet crimson smear covered the palm.

"It's blood!" Mopsy choked. "Fresh blood!"

For a moment both of them were silent, staring at the gruesome sight. In the bright light it gleamed with a sinister red tinge. Mopsy's eyes wandered from it to the seat.

"Holy mother!" he burst out. "Look at that! Somebody's been murdered in this car!"

Bill saw it—fresh blood soaking the edge of the seat, smearing the floor of the car! Mopsy snatched out his handkerchief, wiped his hand vigorously. His amazingly ugly face was almost comical with surprise and aversion, and a touch of fear.

"The dogs!" Mopsy choked. "They knew it was going to happen! Didn't I tell? Just like them damn Chink pariah dogs!"

"Rot!" said Bill.

But he was thinking of Frederic Vandervoort and his queer actions. And Sara Mallory. She had been the only other person who had known the chauffeur was under suspicion. Had she warned young Vandervoort that Johnson was under suspicion?

Vandervoort had seen Bill as he went out. Had he been reckless enough to commit murder, knowing suspicion would point directly at him? He had not looked around to see if Bill was still there when he returned to the house.

Mopsy tangled the mystery still further. "I wonder," he speculated, "if them two guys took the body of that woman somewhere?"

"Damn!" said Bill, startled. "I never

thought of that," he added. "If they did, where's the chauffeur now?"

"Mebbe he stayed with the body," Mopsy guessed.

"Can't see him staying with a corpse—or Vandervoort taking him out and killing him either. Vandervoort knew I had seen him."

The keys had been left in the car. Bill took them out, locked all the car doors. "They'll have to tow it away or smash the windows to get at that evidence," he commented.

Mopsy pulled his thickened ear in perplexity. "It's got me dizzy," he rumbled. "If Vandervoort killed that chauffeur, why'd he do it? An' if he bumped off that woman, what'd he do that for?"

"I don't know," Bill said briskly, "but I'm going to find out. I've got something concrete to work on at last. Lay low here in the garage and keep an eye on things. I'm going in the house."

CHAPTER SEVEN

By What Dread Hand?

IT WAS like stepping from darkness into light, that transition from gruesome deeds to light-hearted gaiety. It was hard to believe those carefree guests in their elaborate costumes could be unaware of the horror so close to them. It made the phantoms seem unreal, improbable. But they were not. Tight-lipped, wary, Bill slipped across the terrace, looking for the man he wanted.

Frederic Vandervoort was not in sight. Bill went to the front door of the big stone house, asked the black-clad servant there if young Vandervoort had entered.

"He did," curtly replied the man, "with his father."

"Where are they in the house?" Bill asked.

"I do not know," said the man coldly. "Do you wish me to look for them?"

"No," Bill refused. "I'll look myself."

This time the doorman did not try to stop him, although he looked as if this persistent intruder with the discolored eye was beginning to be one of the major afflictions of the night.

Two Dutch milkmaids were giggling in the hall. At sight of Bill they both became silent, whispered back of their hands. Plainly he was becoming an object of curiosity to some of the guests. Bill grinned at them, stepped into the big room where the dancing was still in full swing.

He found neither of the Vandervoorts in there. Bill turned back to the Dutch milkmaids, asked them if they had seen the elder Vandervoort, who undoubtedly, despite his costume, was known to everyone present.

They had. They said he had gone into the drawing room across the hall with Freddy Vandervoort. They giggled again. One of them asked archly: "You're a detective, aren't you?"

Bill grinned thinly. "No!" he said from the heart. "Not a detective. I forgot my magnifying glass and pipe."

That got him into the drawing room. It was quiet in here in comparison with the opposite side of the house. A small group had gathered on chairs before the fireplace, and were gossiping, sipping cool drinks. Bill heard one of the women say in a warning undertone: "There he is." Their talk ceased, heads were turned toward him.

The Vandervoorts were not in this room. Again Bill asked if they had been seen.

A young man dressed as a Confederate cavalry captain nodded to a door at the back of the room. "They went in the library a few minutes ago, but I'd advise you not to disturb them. They don't seem to want any company."

Bill's eyes narrowed with interest. "Did they say so?"

"No—but we spoke to them and neither

one answered. Old Jean Vandervoort looked queer."

"Thanks," Bill said—and opened the library door and stepped through, closing it after him.

The library was a long, narrow room lined with shelves of books and open panels to the ceiling. Its walls must have been soundproof, for as Bill closed the door behind him the music, the gaiety, the noise of the party died to a subdued murmur. He thought the library was empty, walked to the middle of the room and stopped in perplexity. Vandervoort and his son seemed to be fleeing from company. Queer about the elder Vandervoort acting strangely. Had the grisly secret of that sudden automobile ride been imparted to him?

A familiar voice behind Bill said with a trace of amusement: "You look like a lost soldier."

Bill whirled. Sara Mallory was looking around the corner of a high-backed chair in which she was sitting.

Bill grinned at her spontaneously, and then sobered as he remembered she had been the only one who could have warned Frederic Vandervoort of his interest in the chauffeur. "I'm looking for the two Vandervoorts," he told Sara Mallory.

SHE stood up and moved to him, slim and graceful. Her small mouth puckered in an expression of quizzical interest. "Have you found out anything?" she asked—and Bill wondered if there wasn't a slight trace of amusement or mockery in her voice. He was suddenly on his guard against her, as he had been when they had first met. She was so pretty, so competent and yet so childish with her unruly shock of dark hair, that he never knew quite how to take her. Prim, cool one moment, quizzically mocking the next, curt, dangerous—or shaken by sudden sincere grief, she was all things in

one. And that one pretty, puzzling, perplexing, interesting.

He said casually: "Nothing yet. I want to see Frederic Vandervoort."

"They went through that door," said Sara Mallory, "into the back hall. Old Mr. Vandervoort seemed terribly upset." Sara Mallory laughed softly. "I don't think they knew I was in the chair. I heard him swear for the first time. He said," Sara Mallory repeated, "'Good God, Frederic, you can't be right! It's a damnable lie and I'm going to get to the bottom of it immediately!'"

Bill hunched his shoulders, contemplated her thoughtfully. "That's all?" he asked.

She nodded.

"And where," asked Bill with a trace of sarcasm, "does the back hall lead to? I seem to be following them all over the house."

"It's a big house, my fine detective," Sara Mallory said airily, "but I don't think you can be going far now. The back hall leads into the kitchen at your right, to the lower service quarters to your left; and if you will stop just this side of the bulter's pantry and the kitchen, and turn around behind the stairs which we went up to the second floor, you'll find a door opening on the cellar stairs. They can't be in the cook's bedroom; so they're either downstairs or in the kitchen."

"Thanks," said Bill, and swung about after he had started on to the end of the room. "What's down in the cellar?"

"Oh, rooms and rooms and rooms," Sara Mallory told him. "There's a wine cellar and a coal cellar and a storage cellar; and I don't know what all."

Bill found everything as she had said. He looked into the kitchen first. The Vandervoorts were not in there. He asked if they had been. One of the white-garbed assistants denied it.

Bill found the cellar door, opened it.

A light was burning below. The Vandervoorts had evidently gone down there.

Puzzled, Bill went down the steps. The actions of these two blue-blooded aristocrats were most peculiar.

He found a linoleum-floored billiard room at the bottom, with green-shaded lights glowing over two big billiard tables. Racks of cues were against the wall. Several deep comfortable leather chairs were scattered about. But once more the Vandervoorts were not in sight.

Three doors opened off the billiard room. Bill went to the left-hand door, looked in, found the light off, saw dimly the outline of a furnace. He closed that door, stepped softly to the opposite end of the room and found a store room with cases of canned fruit, shelves of various glassed foods, all the staple ingredients to supply a busy kitchen.

The third door, beyond the billiard table, opened into a general store room containing trunks, boxes, odds and ends of furniture. A ceiling light was burning dimly. And the Vandervoorts were not in there.

Exasperated, Bill looked about. He was under the front of the house now. Overhead to the left he could hear the shuffle of dancing feet; the music throbbed. A door to the left of the room was ajar. Bill strode there, found darkness and a laundry room, long unused by the looks of the stone tubs and the dry cool atmosphere. He turned back.

There was no door to the right of the room, yet by its position and the general plan of the cellar it was logical to expect a further room beyond that shelved wall which faced him. Bill moved quietly to it, listening. By every bit of logic the Vandervoorts should be down here. Without knowing why a sense of oppressiveness, of wary expectation gripped him. He found his mind casting back to that blood-stained cushion in the garage, and slipped his hand under his coat near his gun.

Bill's eyes widened suddenly as he faced the shelves. His guess about them had evidently been right. A middle section of the shelving slanted out an inch or two at one end. Bill grasped it, pulled.

And the section of shelving holding twine-tied cardboard boxes, some old books, dusty yellow bundles of papers and records and even some old hats and shoes, swung out on an oiled pivot at one end. And with it came a false brick backing. Bill stared in astonishment, made use of the flashlight to be sure of what he saw.

BEHIND the false brick backing was a wall of ferro-concrete extending on either side to an unknown distance. And in that wall, directly before him, was set a heavy steel safe door.

It was massive. It was aluminum-painted. And it was locked by a combination.

The ferro-concrete and the steel door would have made a burglar-proof vault for a sizable bank. Installation must have been made at great expense. It had been put there to guard something valuable. It was as mysterious as everything else that had happened this evening.

The vault was locked, Bill found when he tried to open it. He swore softly under his breath, turned away, pushing the shelving back. As mystery piled on mystery, his confusion increased. No man had ever called him timid; and yet Bill knew a moment of dread as he stopped short, bent forward convulsively. His breath sucked into his teeth as the flashlight stabbed at the spot his eyes had noticed.

A pile of trunks was stacked a few feet away, boxes beyond them. The shadows were thick and heavy in the three-foot aisle between them and the shelves. And in that aisle, thrusting out from behind the trunks, lay a single foot, twisted grotesquely to one side!

Bill lunged in, looked behind the

trunks. There was a narrow cul de sac extending back several feet. The flashlight beam glared into it, brought into full relief a terrible sight.

Old Jean Vandervoort was crumpled in there in a sitting posture, one leg drawn up and twisted over, head hanging askew, and his wide staring eyes bulging from the congested folds of his fleshy face!

Bill was stunned, speechless. For a moment he fully expected that short pudgy figure to rise majestically and ungraciously demand what he was doing there. But the expectation lasted only an instant.

Jean Vandervoort's wig and hat were tossed carelessly on his chest. Vandervoort's hands were still clenched convulsively. The set, rigid horror in the purple face, the open, bulging eyes, the cramped, motionless posture could mean only one thing. Death!

To make sure he leaned forward and felt for the pulse in the nearest hand—as he had felt for another pulse on that ghostly white concrete bench by Conister's house. And, like that wrist, there was no pulse. That was not all. Vandervoort's twisted head disclosed the side of his neck, showing a purplish bruise. Bill turned the head, pushed the collar down, and with the light close, found bruises on the other side. Bruises such as mad, savage, clutching fingers might make!

Vandervoort had died in violence here by that steel-and-concrete vault. And the man who had come down with him had been his own son!

Lashed by a sudden thought Bill sprang to search the cellar rooms carefully. But his flash, driving into all places of possible concealment, found no trace of Fred-eric Vandervoort. The young man had come down with his father and vanished, leaving a corpse behind. It was astounding, unbelievable. In other circumstances

he might have disbelieved the evidence of his own eyes. But twice before this evening death had appeared with that striking golden-masked horror. It was not possible to doubt this third one!

And strangely enough in that moment Bill found his mind running to the weird howling of the highly trained police dogs; to Mopsy's fervid declaration that death would soon follow. Death had appeared twice since then. How many more times was it due to strike this night?

Bill plunged back toward the stairs and the billiard room, wondering if young Frederic Vandervoort was a homicidal maniac, moving in the red mists of an uncontrollable urge to kill; or—as Bill pounded up the stairs—was Vandervoort moving coldly, deliberately about some preconceived plan?

And so, once more, shaken, mystified, grim in his quest for the killer, Bill came into the gaiety and thoughtlessness upstairs and made for the library.

Sara Mallory was still there, alone. "You didn't find them?" she said, with a matter-of-factness that brought Bill up short. She knew too much.

"No, I didn't find them," Bill told her. "How did you know?"

"Violet looked in a minute ago and said that Freddy Vandervoort had just gone out to the garage, leaving word with her to find you and tell you to come out there at once. It's very important."

"Did he say what he wanted?" Bill questioned sharply.

"No, but it's evidently very important. Violet was emphatic about that." Sara Mallory knit her finely shaped brows. "What do you suppose it could be?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Bill said harshly. "But I'm going to find out in a blasted hurry!"

HE LEFT her there in the deserted high-ceilinged library, that slim, pretty, honest-faced girl, looking a little

bewildered. And as he strode through the drawing room, the hall, and outside once more, Bill wondered how much of a fool she had made of him. Doubt of her was growing swiftly in his mind. He didn't know the truth. He couldn't put his finger on it—but Sara Mallory had made too many moves which indicated suspicious knowledge.

He left the social flurry, the expensive music, the gay, thoughtless guests behind. He cut around the house on his toes, padding almost soundlessly on the damp, close-cut sod of the lawn. He wondered why Vandervoort had hurried back to the garage, why Vandervoort had sent for him to come out immediately. He wondered many things as he came to the garage and found the door he had left open, closed. No light was burning inside.

Mopsy was not inside. Bill called softly. Mopsy did not answer. He called Vandervoort, and Vandervoort did not answer.

He pushed the garage door back the width of his body, flashed the light through and along the inside of the door to make certain no lurking figure was there.

None was.

Bill stepped in, swinging the light before him. The sedan stood where he had left it. The silence was heavy. Once more the dogs were quiet. And the gasp that wrenched from Bill was loud, harsh on that quiet.

"Mopsy!" Bill exclaimed hoarsely.

Mopsy was lying on the floor there before him, sprawled on his face, one arm doubled under, the other outflung ahead of him. And past the front of Mopsy's thickened ear, down over the side of his cheek a stream of blood was slowly seeping. Mopsy did not move.

For the moment Bill forgot everything else in the shock of that discovery. Mopsy, with his blinding red hair, his vast mouth in his ugly face, his reckless bravery in

the face of all physical danger, there on the floor apparently lifeless!

Bill reached Mopsy's side and started to kneel.

A soft, furtive movement by the sedan stiffened his muscles, swung his light to the spot. And the next instant Bill's hand was streaking inside his coat.

Rising beyond the hood of the sedan where it had been crouching in concealment was the golden horror mask! And this time, full, plain in the glare of the flashlight, the thick unwieldy bulk of a gun equipped with a silencer shoved over the hood at him.

There was no time to cry out, to dodge. It was death. Bill knew it with a flash of certainty. No sound was uttered from behind the mask Vandervoort wore. No threat, no order to throw up his hands; just that silent gun thrusting forward at him without warning—to kill!

Had he had a moment of warning the odds would have been even; had his gun been in his hand he would have had a chance. But as his fingers closed on the automatic in the spring holster under his arm, Bill knew he wasn't going to be quick enough.

He heard the dull, muffled *pop* of the silenced explosion. Heard it as he was spun around, driven staggering back by a sledge hammer blow against the side of his chest.

The whole side of his body went numb, seemed to be caved in. The excruciating pain of broken bones flickered through that numbness. All breath was driven from his battered lungs as he brought up reeling, helpless, half unconscious against the garage wall behind him.

The gun dropped from his nerveless fingers. His knees buckled. Bill knew he was falling and couldn't stop himself. He was aware that the flashlight dropped from his other hand also. He saw it rolling on the cement, still burning, as he

collapsed in a strangling, gasping heap on the floor and lay half doubled up.

In that moment Bill thought death had found him at last. He could not breathe. He could not move. He heard, as if from a great distance, the soft padding steps come to him. The golden masked form of Frederic Vandervoort loomed high over him.

Vandervoort stooped down, picked up the light. It blazed down on him, moved closer as the golden-masked figure bent over.

There was a flicker of movement down through the light; and for the second time that night Bill felt the world explode and grow blank.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fire Trap!

THE first thing Bill heard was Mopsy's voice. "Bill—for God's sake wake up! Snap out of it!" He was coughing when it registered. He tried to raise a hand to his face. The hand wouldn't come. Still coughing, he opened his eyes—and blinked at the light shining into them.

"Thank God, Bill! I thought you was out for good! Do some thinkin' quick or we're both goners!"

There was a note of real fright in Mopsy's voice. Bill blinked at the swirling veils before his eyes; bluish, hazy veils through which he could see Mopsy facing him in a chair a few feet away.

A sharp, acrid bite in his nostrils and throat made him cough again. With a shock he suddenly realized the swirling veils were smoke. And Mopsy sitting there, red-faced, tense, was wearing pajamas! Mopsy in green silk pajamas embroidered with gold, too small, fitting him skin tight! Mopsy was tied in that stout chair until only his head could move!

Bill looked down. He was tied the same way—and the gray suit he last remem-

bered wearing had been replaced by black trousers and a brown smoking jacket.

Mopsy's voice rasped harshly at him. "We gotta get outa here! The dump's on fire! It's gonna be hell quick! Look there by the door!"

They were in a bedroom containing two single beds, a large dresser, cupboard doors, articles of clothing scattered about. No clothing, however, that Bill recalled ever having seen before. But that wasn't what caught his eyes. The bedroom door was open. Hanging directly in the door were two whitish, roundish objects that seemed to be filled with liquid of some kind. The floor beneath was damp where it had slopped down. Strong over the acrid smoke hung the heavy sweet smell of alcohol.

"Where are we?" Bill asked thickly.

Mopsy said harshly: "I don't know. I don't know who changed clothes on us. What the hell! It don't matter! Somebody left us here to burn! Those are animal bladders! They're filled with alcohol. When the fire gets to them—*bang!*—they explode all over the room! I knew," Mopsy gulped, "them damn dogs was wailing for us!"

Bill's mind flashed back to that moment in the garage. His left side was still one mass of pain. Blood was still streaking Mopsy's face.

"What happened to you?" he demanded through dry lips.

"That guy Vandervoort came back in his yellow outfit. I was standin' behind the sedan, tryin' to keep outa his way. He musta heard me an' flashed a light. Before I knew what was what he opened up with a gun. I seen a silencer on it. Hell—I didn't have a chance. Next thing I knew I was sittin' in this chair—an' you was over there. Nobody around. Then the smoke started comin' in a few minutes ago."

The smoke was thicker now. Heat was

noticeably creeping into the room. Bill stared at those still, pendulous bladders of alcohol. He had heard of such things before. They exploded, scattering flaming destruction, consuming all evidence instantly. The use of alcohol instead of gasolene was a further diabolical touch. There would be no smell of oil. Any alcohol fumes would suggest liquor stores that had exploded.

"Have you seen any one?" Bill asked.

"No. I thought I heard a door slam below when I first snapped out of it—but mebbe I was mistaken."

"We've got to get out," said Bill.

"Didn't I say so?" Mopsy groaned. "How?"

Mopsy's legs were tied to the legs of his chair. Mopsy's torso was tied to the chair back. Mopsy's wrists were lashed behind him. He was thoroughly, utterly helpless.

Bill was secured the same way.

MOPSY strained until the muscles stood out in great cords on his thick neck and his face turned the color of a beet. His chair creaked but everything held. Mopsy relaxed.

"I don't get it!" Mopsy panted. "What's the idea of this? Who put these damn pajamas on me?"

"Take it easy," said Bill. He had forced himself to relax. His eyes had searched the room for something that might help them, and found nothing. "We know too much," he guessed. "We're going to be removed. There won't be any evidence left." He nodded meaningly at the smoke swirling through the open doorway, the liquid-filled bladders hanging motionless.

"God, if I could get my hands on the skunk that did it!" Mopsy raged. "He musta known we were still alive!" Mopsy fought his bonds again futilely, subsided panting. His chair slipped an inch

on the rug as his powerful muscles wrenched at the dead weight.

Bill said sharply: "Can you jump your chair over to me?"

Mopsy tried it, made almost an inch again, although the chair tipped dangerously, threatened to carry Mopsy over in a helpless heap.

"Watch it!" Bill warned. "Get over behind me."

And as Mopsy obeyed with grim-lipped intensity Bill hitched his chair to meet him, a fraction of an inch at a time. The smoke was thicker, the heat worse when they were finally back to back. Breathing was getting more difficult. Their eyes were smarting. In Bill at least the feeling that death was very close was growing swiftly.

"These ropes," said Bill carefully over his shoulder, "aren't so thick. It's the windings that have got us helpless. You're the strongest. See if you can get your fingers under one strand and snap it."

Mopsy had to hitch his chair a little closer. His wrists were tied but his fingers were free. He groped for a moment, grunted, "I got it!" and set himself.

Bill felt a strand of cord around his middle tighten, felt his chair tip back as Mopsy began to exert some degree of his tremendous strength. The two chairs back to back prevented either from tipping over, gave the leverage without which nothing could be hoped for.

The chairs creaked, the rope stretched, bit deep. Suddenly the strand snapped. It had not been so thick or strong after all.

Following Bill's directions Mopsy hauled the loose strand around inch by inch until Bill could lean forward, free from the chair back.

Next Mopsy grabbed one side of the back. Bill bent forward, lifted his arms clear behind him, and lunged off the seat. The leverage of his body snapped one of

the front legs, which, taken individually, were none too strong either. It was a simple matter then to snap the other leg, get to his feet with the wreckage still bound to him. Bill stepped to the dresser, raised his foot and drove it into the glistening mirror. Glass showered down on the dresser top. He backed around, fumbled up a piece and carried it to Mopsy.

And then, while Mopsy held that chunk of keen-edged glass, Bill lowered himself and carefully sawed his wrist ropes against it. He was free a moment later.

"Attaboy!" Mopsy howled. "We're gettin' there! God help the skunk who put us in here now! I'll tear—"

Crash!

Just what Mopsy was going to do was drowned in the awful ear-splitting explosion which rocked the building about them.

It came from underneath somewhere. It shattered walls, windows, partitions, seemed to lift the house drunkenly off its very foundations and shake it furiously. Sheets of plaster crashed down. The terrific blast of smoke and hot air that flooded through the open doorway knocked Bill flat on the floor.

As he scrambled to his feet on a lopsided, lurching floor, he saw that window panes, curtains and all had been driven out by the force of that mighty blast. His ears were ringing. He was stone deaf for the moment, dazed, dizzy.

THE two bladders had been hurled to the floor inside the doorway and burst, throwing their contents in a liquid sheet over the rug and half the room, including Mopsy and himself. Strangely enough the ceiling light still burned. But the most horrible thing of all was this sudden savage flare-up of flame in the wreckage they could not see. The red leaping glare of its advance came pouring down the hallway.

They were trapped above a man-made inferno.

Mopsy had been thrown to the floor also, was wrenching helplessly at his bonds. Bill saw Mopsy's mouth opening and closing and sensed he was cursing, but he still could not hear well enough to make out what Mopsy was saying.

Bill snatched the piece of glass off the floor, knelt by Mopsy and desperately hacked at Mopsy's wrist ropes. They parted. Mopsy's hands came free. Bill was already sawing at the other ropes without bothering to set Mopsy's chair upright again. A strand parted, two strands. Mopsy tore at them while Bill freed his legs. And hearing came back as he did that. The sharp sullen roar of licking flames sounded very close. They were almost explosive in the rapidity with which they approached. The flickering light in the hall grew to a glare. Glancing through the door, Bill saw a wall of flame pouring up the hallway, bluish, writhing, licking flame that fed on the very air itself.

In a flash he understood. More bladders filled with inflammable substances had been scattered around the house. Shattered by the explosion, it was a matter of moments before the place would be one seething mass of fire, a matter of seconds before this room—

Bill hurled himself at the door as Mopsy scrambled to his feet. He slammed the door, leaped back toward the window. The smoke-filled room they were in, their very bodies, were saturated with alcohol fumes. He was feeling the effect of them.

He looked out the window into the red glare of flames already leaping skyward. The ground was far below, nothing to break a fall. It would mean broken bones to try it. But at any instant the fire swirling outside in the hall might creep under the door. The room would turn into a furnace, pouring its blasting heat

out the open window, searing bodies, lungs, eyes. . . .

Mopsy had staggered to a door in the side wall, yanked it open. "In here!" Mopsy bawled. "This room's clear of smoke!"

Bill rushed toward it. Anything to gain needed seconds. And out of the corner of his eye as he went he saw varnish softening, bubbling on the hall door—and an ominous little flicker at the bottom of the door.

He tumbled in that next room after Mopsy, slammed the door and jumped aside from it as an ominous *whoosh* shook the walls, the door, with flaming death that had just missed them

The room was dark—another bedroom, Bill had seen as he tumbled in. He jumped for the hall door, found the light switch, and once more for a moment they had light. Bill spun on his heel from that light switch as Mopsy's yelp of startled surprise reached his ears.

"Good God, Bill, lookit that!"

It was a woman's bedroom—at least women's clothes were scattered about. A woman's smart little traveling case sat on the floor. And sitting on top of the bed, propped up by pillows, looking at them with motionless passivity was a pretty young girl. Her reddish hair was down about her shoulders. Her hands were crossed on the pink *négligé* covering her lap. And her face was marble white, her stare sightless.

"She's unconscious!" Mopsy yelled. "We gotta get her out!"

Bill was already at the bedside. He touched the pale, still cheek. It was cool, set in the repellent rigidity of death. He snatched at the right hand. There was no blood on it, but on the wrist, the arm beneath the *négligé* he found deep scratches that could have bled, that must have bled! And on the face, two streaks

of dried blood which had evidently trickled down from a head wound.

FOR an instant Bill saw once more a small, still hand beneath the dark edge of a woolen blanket, streaked with blood. He looked at the soft, fair throat—and found it marked as old Jean Vandervoort's neck had been marked. The ugly purplish bruises of throttling fingers were unmistakable.

"She's dead!" Bill blurted to Mopsy. "She's Vandervoort's missing maid—the one I found sitting on the bench!"

Mopsy was stunned, speechless. His fingers wandered through his tangled shock of hair. Shoulders hunched, he stared at the girl, at Bill, licked his lips.

"I don't get it," Mopsy confessed weakly. "What's she doin' here—like this?"

"More evidence for the bonfire!" Bill rapped out bitterly.

He made for the window where the curtains were belying uneasily. He jerked them aside, looked out. The night was falling back before the awful grandeur of destruction. To the left flames were licking, billowing from the window where he had stood a few minutes before. Overhead another column of fire was leaping high toward the sky, spewing smoke and sparks in a vast mushrooming cloud. The soft sibilant roar of sweeping flame made a steady background for the sharper crackles of dry inflammable boards and falling debris. The glare washed crimson over trees, driveway below, and garage. "We're in Connister's house!" Bill snapped to Mopsy, who had stepped up beside him.

"I knew there was something crooked about that smooth bird!" Mopsy exploded. "What's his game? Where does he tie in with the Vandervoorts? What did they bring us here for, an' set his house off this way? Are we crazy, or is Connister crazy to be doing this?"

"God knows," said Bill. "Get those covers off the bed. Let's see what kind of a rope we can make."

Working together they tied sheets and blankets end to end; and Bill it was, face set, white around the nostrils, who lifted the girl's body to the window and tied one end of that rope under her arms.

"You ain't doin' no good helpin' her," Mopsy warned, after an uneasy look at the hall door.

The varnish on that door was peeling, bubbling also. Little tongues of smoke were spurting through as the thin panels cracked, charred and blazed before the inferno outside in the hall. It was a matter of moments before the fire would be in on them. The floor was quivering, the walls shaking as the whole house trembled, threatened to fall in.

Bill lifted the girl's body over the window sill, and with Mopsy's help lowered it carefully.

"It won't help her," Bill said shortly, "but it's going to be a nasty surprise to someone who never expects to see her again."

It was a long drop to the ground but they had more than enough length to span it. Bill hauled the bed over by the window, used one leg for an anchor.

"Slide down!" he ordered Mopsy.

"Nix!" Mopsy refused, waving a big hand violently. "My weight's liable to break it. You go first."

A panel of the door curled in, a long tongue of flame leaped into the room. The door was starting to disintegrate. Nothing would stop the fire's funnelling sweep to this open window when that door did give way. Bill wasted no time arguing. He slid out over the window sill, started down the crude rope, hand over hand.

He made it.

"Attaboy!" Mopsy bellowed from above. "Get her outa the way! I'm comin'!"

Bill started to untie the girl's body. He hadn't finished as Mopsy started down but he dragged her back away from the wall and it was well he did so. Mopsy's great weight proved too much for that frail cloth line. It parted when he was halfway down.

Mopsy was expecting that. He kicked away from the house, lit crouching on the turf beside Bill and the dead girl. The shock ripped the tight cloth of his pajama coat across the shoulders. Mopsy was half nude as he came up grinning.

"We're off now, Bill! What next?" Mopsy whooped.

UP TO this moment no living soul had been visible. Looking toward the front of the house Bill suddenly stiffened as he saw a gaily costumed Pierrot move into view and stare at them. Bill lifted the body at his feet and lurched toward the man.

Three other costumed figures stepped into view as he went, and came to meet him. They were all young, all unmasked, highly excited.

"Is anyone else in the house?" the pudgy-faced young man dressed as Pierrot called as they met.

"I don't know," Bill snapped, pushing on to the front of the house.

Vandervoort's guests, panting from the run they had made, mustered around him and Mopsy. One of the young men got a good look at Bill's burden, gasped: "She's dead!"

Bill did not answer at the moment. He was staring at an amazing scene. Part of the front and other side of the house had been torn away, demolished into a heap of ruins by that first mighty explosion. Flames must have instantly burst from every part of it. Three-quarters of the house were already afire, from basement to roof. The licking sheets of fire, were sweeping a hundred feet in the air. The heat made them all retreat.

But that was not the strangest sight. Streaming through the crimson glare, from the Vandervoort estate, were all the guests and members of the household, attracted by this holocaust at their very doorstep. It was startling, grotesque, to see them coming through the fire-filled night. A gaudy painted Indian—a man in a leopard skin—the Dutch milkmaids he had spoken to—all the various costumes that the ingenuity of these carefree people could devise. There they were, running, stumbling, calling to one another—death and destruction before them and the carnival spirit drawing them like moths to watch and enjoy. And among all those who came streaming across the smooth turf, there was not one dressed as young Frederic Vandervoort had been.

Bill turned to the Pierrot who had stuck close to his side. "Where is young Vandervoort?" he snapped.

The pudgy-faced young man blinked, shook his head. "Don't know," he confessed. "Seems to me I saw him standing back of his house when we started over here."

The next moment the young man gasped, paled, as Bill thrust the young woman's body in his arms.

"Watch her!" Bill ordered. "Don't let her out of your sight until the police come! She has been murdered!" And to Mopsy Bill rasped: "Come with me!"

It was hard going for Mopsy's bare feet across the driveway. He ran uncomplainingly, his torn pajama coat flapping about his corded shoulders. Many glances of astonishment were cast at them as they plunged through the wave of arriving guests. Bringing up the tail of the procession were the more elderly ones, and then some of the servants. No one apparently had been able to resist the flaming spectacle.

As they came to the boundary hedge Mopsy panted: "What are you gonna do, Bill?"

"Get Vandervoort!" Bill wrenched out. That was all he could say. Breathing was agony for him. A rib or two in his side was broken. He had ripped open the shirt under his smoking jacket as he started, and found how he had been injured. An ugly bruise in almost the exact shape and size of an automatic pistol was imprinted over his heart. His automatic had caught the bullet from that silenced gun. The hammer blow of the impact was what had knocked him down, stunned him, broken his ribs; but it had saved his life.

They tore through the hedge, still without sight of Frederic Vandervoort. The red glare was still with them, driving back the shadows on every side. The parked machines of Vandervoort's guests rested silent and deserted back along the driveway. The dogs were howling once more.

"Somebody else is gonna die!" Mopsy exclaimed.

"Shut up!" said Bill, and dropped to a walk, staring narrow-eyed at the back of the house.

AN automobile was parked there—a big black sedan that was strange to him. And a man was pacing up and down beside it, talking to a woman.

Bill saw them before he and Mopsy were seen. He cut sharp over to the side of the garage, so that the sedan screened them from the couple on the other side.

"Slip around the front end of that car while I go to the back," Bill husked. "I think that man's figure looks familiar."

Mopsy vanished around behind the garage. Bill waited half a minute and then strode to the sedan. He was unexpected. He stepped around and confronted the two before they knew he was there. The woman uttered a startled exclamation and shrank against the side of the car. The man jerked a gun out of his pocket with an oath, and held it on Bill before he spoke.

There was enough light to recognize the pinched face, the wide mouth, the large ears of that face under the down-pulled brim of a cap. It was Swick, Connister's butler. But a different Swick now. No longer engaging, friendly, Swick was hard, cold, almost venomous in his startled surprise.

"Blimey—so it's you!" Swick chattered. "How did yer get out o' that bloomin' 'ouse this way?"

The woman was Violet, Vandervoort's maid. She was shocked even worse than Swick. "Do something to him!" she begged Swick hysterically. "He'll spoil everything!"

Legs planted firmly, gun steady, Swick recovered from his surprise almost instantly. "Shut yer mouth!" he said to Violet without looking around at her. "I'll tyke care of 'im proper. Hif 'e winks 'is bloody heye, Hi'll myke a kipper out o' 'im!" And Swick meant it plainly.

The little cockney was dangerous, deadly.

Bill had no gun. He saw a crouching shadow slip around the front of the machine. He raised his voice, sparring for time, covering Mopsy's approach. "What's going on here? What's the meaning of all this? How did I get in Connister's house?"

"Ow did you get out?" Swick snarled at him.

"Did you know I was in there?"

"Never mind wot Hi know, guv-nor. Put yer 'ands up. Vi, run in the 'ouse an'—"

Swick didn't get a chance to finish. A crouching shadow swooped at his back, sweeping Violet down on the running board of the car as it passed. A big arm snapped around Swick's neck. Swick was jerked back off his feet, his gun wrist seized before he quite knew what was happening.

Mopsy plucked the revolver from

Swick's fingers, slammed the little man down on the ground. "All right, boss," Mopsy rumbled. "What do I do with the little wart?"

Violet staggered to her feet and started to run toward the rear of the house. Bill reached her before she had taken a half dozen steps, and dragged her back. Violet fought like a little cat. Bill slapped her into submission. He was in the grip of cold, unreasoning anger now, oblivious to the usual amenities.

"What's happening?" he said to the two prisoners. "Where's Connister? Where's young Vandervoort?"

Both maintained sullen silence.

"Mopsy," said Bill, "stay here and watch these two while I get in the house."

"Nix!" Mopsy refused flatly. "Take this gun. I'll bring 'em along, an' if either one opens their mouth it'll be just too bad!" Suiting his actions to his words, Mopsy clamped a huge hand on the neck of each prisoner.

Bill thought to look in the car, found the ignition keys in the lock. He threw them away and stepped ahead of Mopsy and the others. Before them, in the house, was the answer to this whole evening of wild, grim mystery. With luck they'd have it soon.

The dogs were still howling. Bill wondered fleetingly if Mopsy were right about them. Was someone else destined to die before this business was ended?

CHAPTER NINE

Behind the Mask

THE Vandervoort house seemed to be completely deserted as Bill led the way through the back door into the kitchen. The white-garbed cooks were gone. The sudden desertion of this big house was uncanny, foreboding.

Violet, the maid, was whimpering softly in Mopsy's grasp. Swick's short,

scrawny figure looked gnomelike, evil. Mopsy, padding in bare feet with his half-naked, muscular torso, lacked only a cutlass and bandanna around his head to be the perfect buccaneer. Mopsy was beginning to enjoy himself once more. He grinned at Bill as they paused in the kitchen, listening.

Bill thought of the cellar first, where he had left the body of old Jean Vandervoort. He slipped through the butler's pantry to the cellar door from which he had emerged not a great while before. It seemed long ago.

The door was closed. But when Bill opened it he knew he had guessed right. A sharp, sibilant, hissing sound floated up from those rooms under the house where there had been only flat quiet.

Gun ready, Bill slipped down the steps. Mopsy padded after with his captives. Three steps from the bottom Bill stopped short. The linoleum-floored billiard room had seemed deserted at first sight—until a stir of movement on top of one of the billiard tables drew his eye.

A woman was lying there on the green baize, bound, gagged. Bill saw with a shock as he made for the table that it was Sara Mallory. And he felt an instinctive rush of relief. It had been hard to believe she had deliberately sent him into that trap at the garage. This was evidence that she had not.

Sara Mallory's eyes were wide, frightened as he swiftly freed her, helped her over the edge of the table. She whispered: "Get the police quick!"

"What is it?" Bill questioned swiftly.

"In the other room—"

The soft intermittent hissing sound had continued, louder down here. Whatever Sara Mallory had been going to say died on her lips. Her head turned toward the door in the front wall of the billiard room. Her hand caught Bill's arm compulsively.

"They're coming!" she gasped, with every sign of apprehension.

The door was standing ajar an inch or so. Beyond it steps were clumping boldly across the concrete floor.

Bill left Sara Mallory, Mopsy and his captives there by the billiard table, and swung toward that door on tiptoe, dragging the revolver from his coat pocket as he went.

He barely succeeded in sliding against the wall beside the door when it was pushed open. A man stepped into the room, a stranger he had never seen before, stocky, powerful. He came unsuspecting, this stranger, and was in the billiard room before he realized anything was wrong. His first intimation was Bill's revolver punching into his side, Bill's hand clapping noisily over his mouth.

The revolver and sheer surprise cut off any sign of fight in the stranger. Bill swung him around against the wall, ran a hand over him in search of weapons. And lucky he did so. There was an automatic in each coat pocket. Bill took them.

The hissing sound in the next room ceased as Bill got the guns. A voice jubilant with satisfaction called out: "Hey, Jim, come back here! We've got it!"

Jim, standing face against the wall, gurgled in his throat, fell silent again as Bill jabbed him with the revolver. There was a stir of movement in the next room, and for the moment Jim seemed to be forgotten. Voices murmured excitedly.

The others were back of Bill by then. He gave one gun to Sara Mallory, one to Mopsy. "Watch this fellow too," he husked to Mopsy. "I'm going in there."

"Not without me you ain't, Bill," said Mopsy with hoarse finality. "This lady here can watch these three. I'm goin' in with you."

SARA MALLORY'S little face was firm and unafraid now. She handled the automatic confidently, nodded vigor-

ously. "I won't let them get away," she whispered stoutly.

"Don't," said Bill. "They're wanted for murder. Shoot to kill if any of them try to get away." And he left them there with Sara Mallory as he swung to the door with Mopsy at his shoulder.

He was halfway through the doorway when the shrill voice of Violet, the maid, screamed: "Help! Police!"

Mopsy's oath of anger was drowned out by the roar of Sara Mallory's automatic. By that time it was too late to go back. Bill kept on, not knowing what was happening behind him. For, coming through the door, the big dim-lit store room opened before his eyes. To the right were the piles of boxes and trunks behind which he had found Jean Vandervoort. And to the right also was the steel entrance to that mysterious vault of ferro-concrete.

As Bill came through the doorway the picture etched vividly, unforgettably on his mind. The vault door was open. Two tall metal cylinders and the metal hoses of an acetylene-torch outfit stood before it. A half a dozen leather bags were resting on the concrete floor before the vault. A man was standing over them. Someone else was back in the vault, flashing a torch. But the figure that riveted Bill's eyes and kept him going was the tall, golden-masked figure silhouetted in the open doorway of the vault. The golden ghost he had met at every turn this night.

The man standing over his bags grabbed under his coat as Violet screamed. And Bill knew he had to see it through now. The ones who moved slowest would stay here with old Jean Vandervoort, lifeless. The echoes of Sara Mallory's shot were still reverberating as his revolver roared. He shot to kill.

The man before him jerked upright with a look of surprise on his face. He took a staggering step forward, trying to

lift the gun he had drawn. And, still trying, he pitched forward to the floor and lay there.

"Right behind you, boy!" Mopsy roared.

Bill heard him vaguely as he threw himself forward. For the tall golden-masked figure which was springing from the vault door to meet him, shouted: "Stop this!"

For one heartbreaking instant Bill wondered if he hadn't made a mistake, if he had shot an innocent man, if there were not some logical explanation. . . .

And that hesitation almost cost him his life. The golden ghost of death whipped out an automatic and fired point-blank at him. The report of the shot was drowned by a thundering crash at Bill's ear.

The golden ghost reeled and fell back to the doorway of the vault.

"I got him!" Mopsy yelled.

How near to death he was Bill never quite knew. It was enough that Mopsy's shot had ruined the other's aim, made him miss entirely.

The flashlight had snapped off inside the vault. Steps stumbled in there. A groan came forth, harsh breathing, as Bill crouched at the corner of the stack of trunks.

Mopsy at Bill's shoulder sniffed the powder smoke, said loudly: "Lemme empty the clip in there at 'em!"

Before Bill could reply a voice said sharply: "Don't bother! We'll surrender!"

"Throw your guns out," Bill ordered.

Two automatics were tossed out.

"Come out with your hands in the air."

It was Connister who came out, pale-faced, cool, supporting the costumed figure, minus its gold mask now. And on Connister's face fear, chagrin, fury passed in swift paling waves as Bill and Mopsy confronted them.

"How—how—" Connister choked.

"You mean why aren't we burning up?" Bill said through his teeth.

"I—I thought you were the police," Connister wrenched out, and stood there biting at his lower lip. His suave, easy manner was gone. He was pale, drawn, haggard.

A voice at their right quavered: "Thank God you've come! Untie me!"

"For the love of Moses!" Mopsy burst out. "Look at this!"

YOUNG Frederic Vandervoort was lying in the narrow space between the trunks and the vault wall, tied hand and foot. His costume and mask were gone, his face was covered with dried blood. He was weak, faint, still marked by terror which had struck deep. After freeing him, Mopsy had to help him up and to hold him.

Connister was still supporting his companion, a muscular fellow of about the same height and build as young Vandervoort. A strange man who was breathing painfully, holding his side.

"What happened to you?" Bill demanded of Vandervoort with scant politeness.

"One of our maids brought me a message that Johnson there, the chauffeur, wished to see me in the garage on important business," Vandervoort said weakly. "When I got there Johnson attacked me, beat me unconscious, carried me away somewhere. When I came to he and other men stood over me and tried to make me divulge the combination of the safe door."

Vandervoort drew a shaky breath. "I couldn't tell them. My father was the only one who had it. They wouldn't believe me. They—they tortured me, and after a time they tied and gagged me and brought me here and tried again to make me tell them. They showed me my father's body there, and told me I could ex-

pect the same if I didn't tell them. But I couldn't!" Vandervoort almost sobbed. "I didn't know it! They must have believed me by then, for they had that torch ready and went to work on the door with it. I—I was certain they were going to kill me anyway before they left."

From the next room Sara Mallory's voice called shakily: "Is everything all right in there?"

"Lord, I forgot about them!" Bill said. "Mopsy, run in there!"

Mopsy propped young Vandervoort against the trunks and padded off. Bill said to the young man: "What's in the vault?"

Connister, with a cold faint smile on his lean face, spoke for him.

"They don't want it known. It won't look well in the papers. The stainless reputation of the Vandervoorts will be pretty tarnished when it gets out. Great patriots. Fine citizens. The leaders of civic righteousness." Connister sneered. "There's half a million dollars in gold in that vault. Good, hard, yellow gold. They've been hoarding in defiance of government orders and popular sentiment. The old man has been using his position as head of the big Vandervoort trust to get his hands on all the gold he could. He's been slipping it in here and hoarding it up for months, getting ready if necessary to put it on his yacht and take it out of the country. The yellow-bellied rat!"

And Connister, murderer and thief, had honest contempt in his voice as he said it.

A great light broke over Bill. Many things became clear. Missing parts of the puzzle began to slip into place. He understood Vandervoort's repugnance for publicity, police, reporters, anything that might call public attention to himself and what he had been doing. And with half a million dollars in gold at stake, murder, violence and everything else that had happened became clearly understandable.

"So you were after that gold all the time?" he said to Connister.

Connister shrugged with his old self-possession. "Obvious, isn't it?"

The costumed figure he supported suddenly raised a hand as if to catch support out of the empty air. "It's black!" he cried in a choking exclamation of terror. "I can't—I can't. . . ." The words trailed away and his knees buckled.

Connister let him down on the floor, felt his pulse, turned up an eyelid and said with a sigh, as he straightened up: "You won't have to worry about losing that gold anyway."

Mopsy returned with Sara Mallory, a sniffing maid and a cowed little cockney.

"What a gal!" Mopsy said admiringly as he hitched a strip of cloth over one bare shoulder. "The little wart made a run for it and she bounced a bullet off his heel an' stopped him."

SARA MALLORY stared wide-eyed and a little fearfully at the scene she came upon, and then asked Bill anxiously: "Did you find out who killed Nancy Porter?"

"Yeah," said Mopsy, trying to cover his other bare shoulder as he scowled. "And who took my clothes an' slipped me into this fancy outfit?"

"We brought the maid's body out with us, Connister," Bill said shortly.

Connister scowled, looked worried. "I didn't kill her," he said quickly. "John-son there did. It was the fool trick that balled everything up this evening. He had a costume like Vandervoort's. He knew Vandervoort was going to be dressed like that this evening and was going to use it to move freely about the house. He wanted to get down here and look over the lay of things. He had been flirting with that girl. She followed him down here in the cellar, thinking he was young Vandervoort, and caught him with

his mask off, fiddling around the safe door. She was a smart girl. She knew he was crooked. It wrecked all her air castles. Johnson saw how things were going and knew she'd put the finger on him as soon as we made a move. He told her to meet him outside in a few minutes and he'd explain everything. He decoyed her over by my house and killed her. And then you stumbled along and discovered her. Johnson got panic-stricken then, started to carry her down to the beach and then rushed her in my house. He and Swick didn't know what to do with her body."

"I see," said Bill slowly. "That explains a lot too. But I can't understand what brought you in about your dogs in the first place."

Pride forced another smile to Connister's full lips. "I only had one dog," he said. "The rest were invented under pressure. Johnson was disposing of Vandervoort's dogs for us. We didn't want to be bothered with them when we went to work. We knew Vandervoort was hoarding the gold. I had two of my people planted at his house. We were waiting until he got all he could. The more the merrier. Violet overheard the old man say he was going to hire detectives to find out who was killing his dogs. He mentioned he was going to your firm. She telephoned us at once and I merely dropped in ahead of him and left my little story. Without that, as his nearest neighbor, I might have been suspected."

"I made my mistake there. When Johnson lost his head, things began to happen. The Vandervoorts got cold feet about their gold, decided to move it from the house to the bank vaults in the morning. Violet overheard them talking about it. It forced my hand—tonight or never. Johnson had destroyed his costume after hiding the girl's body. Violet tipped him off that you were going to search his

quarters at the garage. He got young Vandervoort out of the way, came back in his costume and tried to get the combination of the safe from the old man, and failed when a heart attack killed the old fellow. You almost caught him down here. He heard you coming and slipped out through the end room there. He left a message for you to come out to the garage. You know the rest."

"I know," said Bill curtly, "you left us to burn alive."

Connister raised a hand deprecatingly.

"Not entirely," he disclaimed. "This party threatened to last until daybreak. I had had an idea we might eventually cover up our work here by a little fire. I decided a fire over at my house would bring Vandervoort's party over to look at it. Er—you just happened to be there."

"And," said Bill, "you took our clothes away, put others on us so if anything was discovered it might look as if you had burnt up in your own house with some friends."

"One guess is as good as another," Connister parried.

"Oh," said Sara Mallory faintly, "I never heard of anything so ghastly!"

"Wait until you hear what they do to Connister and this other pair at court," Bill told her. "Mopsy, run upstairs and telephone the local police. Tell those high-powered investigators that the city detectives have a little prize here for them. Then call Jeremiah Forde's apartment after you do that. Break the news gently to him. Tell him I'm sorry there's going to be a little publicity about this case, and that we did our best to avoid trouble. If he doubts you, hang up."

"Not me," said Mopsy firmly as he started out again. "I'm goin' to keep talkin' to the old gentleman until he promises to send me out a pair of pants and a shirt."

Death After Murder

A Cardigan Story

By

Frederick Nebel

Author of "Scrambled Murder," etc.

That big dick from Cosmos knew as well as anyone the fingerprints on that smoking murder gun weren't forged. But that didn't keep him from smelling a whiff of rat along with the cordite. Though the Law said those loops and whorls didn't lie Cardigan had proof they did. Suicide proof to send a killer to the chair.

CHAPTER ONE

Right Overcoat—Wrong Corpse

PAT SEAWARD opened the connecting door leading to the inner sanctum of the Cosmos Agency. She looked cool, chic, in a black-and-white silk blouse, a trim black skirt. Closing the door, she left her hands behind her back and on the knob, and she said quietly: "The mountain's come to Mohammed."

Cardigan looked up over the rim of a newspaper. "So it's Egyptology you're going in for now."

She said: "Phooey on you," with a



He went down like a felled tree.

wry half-smile; and then matter-of-factly: "Kincaid's outside."

"Case Kincaid?"

"Marvelous!"

He was laconic. "You riding me?"

"Should I send him in? He wants to see George, but I thought the help might do."

He folded the paper and laid it down while keeping a sardonic eye on Pat Seaward. "O. K., smarty: send him in."

She made a mock courtesy, opened the door, left it open and disappeared into the outer office.

CASE KINCAID carried his six feet smartly into the inner sanctum, walked directly to the desk, laid hat, stick and gloves upon it.

"I understand Hammerhorn's in the mountains."

Cardigan nodded, made an idle gesture with his forefinger. "Sit down, Kincaid."

Kincaid was a tall, narrow man, well-groomed, with a taste in linen and neckwear. He was past fifty, but only bright sunlight or the harsh glare of an incandescent gave him away. Streaks of gray ran through his hair. He sat down. Wrinkles creased his forehead, worry clouded his direct blue eyes.

"Durango," he said, "comes out of stir today." He followed this statement with a steady blue look, and two fingers of his right hand began drumming on the desk.

Cardigan lounged in his swivel chair, unmoved, his shaggy mop of hair bunched thickly over his forehead. "You helped send him up, didn't you?"

Still drumming with his fingers, Kincaid said: "And that's why I'm here."

"Why?"

Kincaid moved, edged nearer the desk. His voice was tight, serious in tone. "Durango made me a promise when he went up." He paused, moistened his lips.

"You know the kind of promise Durango would make."

"Since you helped send him up, I've got an idea."

Kincaid nodded. "So that's why I'm here."

Cardigan gave him a brief, sharp look; rose, went to the iced cooler and drew a glass of water. He drank, still eying Kincaid, and then came back to the desk, sat down.

"Try a heel," he said.

Kincaid shook his head. "You don't get me. I don't want Durango out of the way. And I don't want to meet him. I want you to go to him, talk to him, and make him an offer."

"What kind of an offer?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"What do I get out of it?"

"Five hundred."

Cardigan leaned on his elbows. "You're sure chucking dough away, in these times."

"There's a catch. If he refuses the offer—"

"I'm to field the lead for you."

Kincaid nodded. "That's the general idea."

"I catch on," Cardigan said, and looked at the ceiling.

Kincaid leaned forward eagerly. "Is it a go?"

Cardigan brought his eyes down on Kincaid. "For five hundred?" He chuckled roughly, good-humoredly. "In advance, of course."

Kincaid thrust a hand in his inside coat pocket, withdrew a wallet, peeled off five one-hundred-dollar bills. "Life's a precious thing, Cardigan, when you come to think of it."

"I suppose that's what Durango thinks . . . with three years of his checked up in the debit column."

Kincaid looked up sharply, then looked away.

Cardigan, counting the bills, was casual. "Why'd you send him up, Kincaid?"

Kincaid was cold. "He didn't know enough to stay on his own side of the fence."

"You gamblers," said Cardigan waggishly, "are touchy as ham actors—only ham actors take it out in tears."

Kincaid stood up, very tall, very elegant, but aged about the eyes. "When will you see him?"

"Sometime tomorrow."

"Good," Kincaid said, and walked to the door, turned with his hand on the knob. "Urge him to take it."

"By the way," Cardigan said, smiling drily, "who's the blond little armful I saw you with at Romanov's?"

Kincaid smiled, but not drily. "You've always had a weakness for blondes, haven't you?"

"Blondes, brunettes, red-heads—anything with an ankle and a face and a sense of humor."

Kincaid shrugged, went out, closed the connecting door quietly. It opened a moment later and Pat Seaward leaned there.

She said: "So the mountain brought forth—what?"

He held up the five bills. "We pay our rent this month, chicken, and if there's enough left over, you get your salary."

"You're an idiot," she said, "taking on that notorious card sharp!"

"It's legal, flower, it's legal."

THE night was cool, crisp. The tall man in the belted yellow coat turned off Lexington Avenue, walked down Thirty-seventh Street. He wore a tan fedora with the brim yanked down all around. One hand was in his pocket, the other slapped gloves against the pocket of his coat. The street was dark here, and long stone stoops rose to darkened or dimly lit vestibules. The man did not hurry, but he had a long, ground-covering stride. Presently the hand came out of

his pocket, keys jangled. He turned left and climbed a stone stoop, opened the vestibule door, and was for a moment in sharp silhouette against the light inside.

The two shots barked in rapid succession, their echoes snapped and banged up and down the dark street. The man in the belted yellow coat arched his back, gripped the vestibule door with one hand, held on and began turning around. A third shot exploded and caught him as he was half turned; it caught him in the left side, high, and he stooped turning. His grip on the door slipped. His legs gave way at the knees and he fell outward. He flip-flopped down the stone steps, stopped on the lowest step, with one leg on the step, the other on the sidewalk. His hat was crushed down half over his face, and he lay on his back, quite still now, with no sound issuing from his lips.

Up on Lexington Avenue a taxicab's brakes squealed. Here in the dark street, a window grated open and a head popped out. A door banged. An elevated train whanged down Third Avenue. Hard heels drummed on the pavement and a cop came running down from Lexington. He had his nightstick in his hand and his head darted from side to side, he yelled a question toward a head craning from a window. He stopped and started again, and walked fast and then broke into a run, and by this time several persons had come into the street and a second cop was on his way up from Third Avenue.

From the areaway of the house in front of which the man lay, a shape appeared—a man in a blue shirt and low-hanging trousers came up the areaway steps, stood on the sidewalk. His eyes widened, and someone from a raised window in the same house shouted down: "What's the matter?"

The cop from Lexington stopped running, grabbed the blue-shirted man

roughly by the arm and snapped: "What d'you know about this?"

"I—ah—uh—"

"Oh, so you won't talk, eh!"

"I'm the janitor. I just heard—came up—"

The second cop arrived. "Hello, Pete—what happened?"

"You're asking me?" the first cop said; he added: "Take a look at him, Hen."

Hen bent down over the man on the sidewalk, said without looking up: "Hit plenty."

"Dead?"

"Offhand, I'd say yes."

"Ring in."

Brakes of a long black sedan squealed gently. The sedan edged up to the curb; it was on the wrong side of the street, but it was a police car. The tonneau door opened and a bony man in a gray suit and a gray slouch hat, stepped to the sidewalk, put his hands on his hips, looked up and down the street. He stood easily back on his heels and said in an unhurried baritone: "Fireworks, huh?"

The two cops were standing now, and Hen, the fatter, nodded and said: "It sounded like—and it was."

The man in the wrinkled gray suit said: "On his own doorstep, huh? That's thoughtful. Know him?"

"Nah?"

"D you ring in?"

"No."

"Better. . . . Hello, Pete," he said to the other cop. "See they dumped you back in harness?"

"For pinchin' a magistrate's dame for rollin' dice in Times Square on a Sunday."

The man in gray turned to the crowd that had gathered. "Anybody see this show?"

Nobody had seen the show.

He knelt down beside the body, took his time about opening the coat, the vest,

shirt. "Ring around the rosy," he commented. "Back, side, front." He stood up, nodded to the man in the blue shirt, said to Pete: "Who's he?"

"Janitor?"

The man in gray said: "Know him, janitor?"

"He—he's Mr. Kincaid's chauffeur."

"Kincaid's chauf— Kincaid!" he said in a quiet exclamatory voice. He sighed. "Ah, well." He seemed a lazy, unhurried, laconic man. "So Kincaid lives here."

"F-first," stammered the janitor, "I thought it was Mr. Kincaid. Account of," he added, pointing, "the yellow coat."

"M-m-m," mused the man in gray, "so Kincaid got another break. Is Mr. Kincaid home?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"This chauffeur lived here, huh?"

"He had a room in back, first floor—on the floor Mr. Kincaid has an apartment."

"Open the doors and we'll take him in."

The man in gray turned, made his way across the street. He found an alleyway directly opposite the vestibule in which the man had met his death. He took a small flashlight from his pocket, sprayed its light on the ground. The alleyway, like the sidewalk, was paved. He followed the alley between two buildings, came to the street beyond. Bending, he picked up something. He grunted to himself, retraced his steps, elbowed his way patiently through the crowd.

"O. K., Pete," he said to the cop. "We'll lug the stiff in."

HIS name was Arnold Snowdon. He lay on a divan in Case Kincaid's large and sumptuous living room. He looked young, handsome even in death, with curly brown hair, clipped short, and a fine set of features. His torso was

bared, the chest marred by wounds. Riley the assistant medical examiner, shrugged and rose and put things back into his little black bag.

"Instantly," he said, "or within a few seconds—a very few."

"What I thought," the man in gray said.

Cardigan appeared in the doorway, his battered fedora in his hand, his dark eyes taking in the room and its occupants in one quick glance. He entered, sailing his hat into a large leather armchair.

"Hello, McCabe," he said.

The man in gray put a slab of gum between his teeth and said: "Hello, Cardigan. See what I see?"

"Sure."

Kincaid patted his lips with a square of linen, patted his forehead. He had not removed his overcoat; he still held his hat in his hand. Cardigan met his troubled glance, made a slight shrug of the shoulders, crossed the room and stood for a moment looking down at the man on the divan.

"Who is he?"

McCabe told him.

Cardigan turned and looked at Kincaid, and Kincaid said: "You see? . . ." and patted his forehead again.

Cardigan's dark, searching stare moved to McCabe. "Where'd he get it?"

McCabe jerked his jaw. "Outside, on the steps. Three times. From across the street, I guess. There's an alley across the street. I guess it was from the alley. I guess," he added, taking a few slow chews on his gum, "the heel thought it was Kincaid?"

"Why?"

"Chauffeur was wearing Kincaid's overcoat."

Kincaid said: "I let him have it a couple of months ago. I've got another just like it. If I'd come in half an hour before I did, I would have been—" He paused, nodded to the corpse. "I guess

I would be lying there now instead of Arnold."

McCabe wagged his head. "You guys and your fancy coats!" He drew his hand from his pocket, opened a handkerchief and revealed a small automatic. "I got the gun, Cardigan. In the alley."

"What I want to know is, why am I here."

"Oh, Kincaid said he hired you."

"Sure. So what?"

"He said he hired you to make peace between him and Joe Durango."

"So then what?"

McCabe was unhurried. "Oh, I thought maybe you might know where Durango is."

"Not the slightest idea."

McCabe warped his mouth, stared at the floor. "Pretty bad, Cardigan, you acting as go-between for two well-known gamblers."

"It's on the up-and-up, isn't it."

"You going to bodyguard Kincaid now?"

"Sure. If Durango was steamed up enough to go after him on his first day out of stir, Kincaid needs protection."

"You stick by your clients, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Well, listen, Cardigan. I don't want you to high-tail off after Durango with a hot gun. Protect Kincaid if you want, but watch your rod. Remember," he added, "it's just a guess that Durango pulled this job and before you—" He paused, looked toward the doorway.

The girl who stood there wore an evening wrap, no hat. Her hair was blond, almost gold, and fitted her head in tight, burnished waves. She was tall, slender, with a good chin, large eyes.

"Claire," said Kincaid's low, quiet voice, "you'd better not come in."

"Why, what—" she began, then stopped, looking around at the uniformed cops, at Cardigan, McCabe.

It seemed that Kincaid had decency

enough to move and put himself in front of the dead man on the divan, so that the girl, standing in the doorway, could not see the red and mutilated chest.

McCabe was laconic. "Who's this?"

"Miss Derwent," Kincaid said, his breath held back; and to the girl. "Claire, you'd better go. Go to your apartment. I'll see you later."

Her lips closed, tightened, and her chin shook a bit; blue clouds came into her wide, lovely eyes. She took a step backward, and her voice was scarce above a whisper when she said: "All right . . . I'll wait for you."

She turned and went away, and Kincaid relaxed, patted his forehead, sighed. He said: "It wouldn't be pleasant—for the girl—to see this." The color had left his face, and he looked peculiarly old, worn, but elegant still.

Cardigan was eyeing him sharply.

CHAPTER TWO

Prints Don't Lie

IT WAS a walk-up in Waverly Place, near Sheridan Square. Outside, the four-storied house looked drab, dingy; but the lower hall was clean, if a bit shabby, and the walls were newly papered; there was a new, dark red runner on the narrow stairway.

Cardigan climbed the stairway at ten past ten that night. He reached the first landing, walked to the front of the corridor, bent to read the name on a white card tacked to the door, and knocked. He heard quick footsteps, the snap of a lock. The door opened swiftly, and a dark-haired girl, smiling with a bright light in her eyes, appeared before him. But instantly the smile, the light, faded, vanished.

"Oh . . ." she said in a tiny, voice.

"Rose Cardoni?"

"Yes, b-but—"

He pushed into the room, past her. His hands were idle in his pockets. One button, the lowest, of his top-coat was fastened, and his tie hung outside its lapels. He walked through the small sitting room, walked into a bedroom, looked in the bathroom, came back into the sitting room and stood in the center of it on wide-spread legs.

Rose Cardoni had closed the door silently, and now she stood with her back against it, her dark eyes wide, a little terrified, and her lips parted in an unworded exclamation.

Cardigan looked at her from beneath the battered brim of his lop-eared fedora. "Where's Tony Durango?"

She gulped: "Tony Dur—" Her lips closed, warped; and then suddenly her face was grave, the features taut. "He's not here."

Cardigan muttered "Oh" half under his breath, looked at the small table, set for two, at the neat white kitchenette. He took off his hat, twirled it on a forefinger.

"Where's he, Rose?"

"He hasn't come home yet?"

"All ready for him, huh?"

She came toward him suddenly, stopped, her eyes staring. "Who are you?"

"Private dick."

"What do you want?"

"I want to see Tony."

"Why?"

"I'll tell that to Tony."

She gripped Cardigan's arm. "My God, what's the matter?"

She was shaking. He could feel her hand shaking on his arm, and looking down into her face, he saw her lips quivering. Her dark eyes searched his face hungrily.

"You're not going to bother Tony—just now when—when he's coming back to me. He's been—for three years he's been—"

"I know, sister. Has he been in at all?"

She shook her head. "No—no."

"Phoned you?"

"No. I—I was expecting him for a late supper. Look—look, I've got everything ready. I've been worried—but he must have got tied up somewhere. He's—Listen, what's the matter? Tell me what's the matter!"

"How long ago was he to be here?"

"At eight, but—"

"It's after ten now, sister."

SHE gulped, closed her mouth. She turned away and went slowly across the room, sat down on a chair with her back to Cardigan. He looked at her back and saw that it was motionless, rigid. He crossed to her, laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Know him a long time, don't you?"

"Since two years before he went up."

"Kind of like him, huh?"

"I love him."

"Three years in stir often changes a guy."

"It wouldn't change Tony?"

He looked up, asked the wall: "How do these guys rate these one-man women anyhow?"

She turned and gripped his hand. "Please tell me why you want him! You can't want him for anything! He's done his time. He's a free man now. My God, you can't persecute him now!"

He patted her hand absently. "You're a swell girl, Rose. But it looks as if Tony gave you the go-by. Did you ever hear him say anything about back-firing on a guy named Case Kincaid?"

"Case—" She stopped short, her eyes round and shining into space. She grimaced, and then suddenly sprang to her feet and gripped both of Cardigan's arms. "He didn't kill Kincaid! Do you mean he killed Kincaid?"

"He meant to, Rose. Maybe he got the wrong guy."

She dropped back to the chair with a short, choking sob. Her shoulders fell, her head dropped and her arms hung limply toward the floor.

Cardigan gave her a little pat, turned and ran his eyes over the set table, the clean linen, the white plates, the shining silver. He made a hardly perceptible movement of his shoulders, ran his hand through his tangled mop of hair and went slowly to the door. Opening it, he stepped into the hallway, closed the door quietly. Listening, he heard Rose Cardoni sobbing bitterly.

He went down the stairway—slowly, drawing in his lower lip and popping it out; he did this several times, his foot-falls heavy and a surly, ruminative look beneath his bent, shaggy brows. The room, the set table, the air of waiting, the bright and shining look with which Rose Cardoni had opened the door—these stuck in his mind like a driven wedge. He reached the lower hall, lit a cigarette, pumped smoke through his nostrils and let it slither out of one corner of his mouth.

Stepping into the street, he almost collided with a man. The light was good—a street lamp dangled in front of the house—and in an instant he recognized Tony Durango. But Tony went past him, hardly noticing him, and had one foot on the doorstep when Cardigan made an easy pass at his arm, stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Durango."

Durango stopped, on his toes instantly. His head turned sharply, dark leaped into his eyes and his mouth tightened in his swart, handsome face. His clothes were new, brand-new—his collar crisp and neat, his face smoothly shaven; and he carried a dark blue overcoat over his arm.

His voice was low, clipped. "What's the occasion—and why the strong arm?"

"Don't know me, huh?"

"You smell copper, but I don't know."

"Cardigan, the maestro from the old Cosmos Agency; it came over in the May-flower, or maybe it was ferryboat Bronx."

"Thanks. Come around sometime when I'm not home."

"I think McCabe's looking in the social register for you."

Durango's lip curled: "Tell McCabe to hold his hand on his neck—and you let go the arm."

"I wouldn't try to compete in the wise-cracks, Durango. You're not bad for a Dago, but I'm trying to tell you that you're wanted at H. Q. Be wise and a good guy and save me the trouble of messing up the nice store clothes—"

He heard a bit of a muffled cry. He ducked, but not soon enough. The flower pot, dropping from the second-floor window, grazed his head, broke against his shoulder. He went down like a felled tree, stunned, darkness rushing over him; but he retained a picture of Rose Cardoni leaning out of the window, until complete darkness engulfed him.

HALF an hour later he walked into a speakeasy in Grove Street and said: "Double Scotch, straight." He walked on into the dressing room, took off his hat and looked at his head. There was a lump there, but no blood, and his shoulder ached a bit. He soaked a paper towel in cold water, padded it and held it against the bump. The cold water felt very good, and he wet several more paper towels. Then he put on his hat without bothering to comb his hair, and returned to the bar.

"Nice night out," said the barman. "I see the Phillies won. I see we're gonna get a raise in taxes. I see they had a earthquake in China. I see—"

"Did you ever have flowers tossed at you, Mickey?"

"Only once. When I was a kid I was

King of the May, and the old ladies tossed flowers at me. It was nice, now I think of it."

"You should have them tossed at you in flower pots once."

"Well, to be frank now, I don't think I'd like that, account of the flower pots. I see there was a pen break out in—"

"Do the Scotch again, so I can fly."

He downed the second Scotch, paid up and went out into Grove Street. He walked to Sheridan Square, climbed into a taxicab and said: "Police headquarters." Sitting back, he took off his hat, felt tenderly of the bump on his head. It hurt and he cursed and put the hat back on again.

McCabe was in an office upstairs at police headquarters. He was sitting on a desk, slipping a bar of gum between his teeth, when Cardigan walked in.

Cardigan said: "Durango's in town all right."

"Yeah, Where?"

"Try a Ouija board. I was talking to him outside a house in Waverly Place when a flower pot fell down and conked me."

"That's funny."

"Not when you consider that a dame tossed it. I had Durango by the arm when it happened. He was coming home to his girl. I'd been up to see her and he hadn't turned up yet. Then I met him outside the casa." He took off his hat. "Look at it."

"That?"

"Ouch, you dumb ape!"

"So then what did you do?"

"It seems I fell down the areaway, so nobody came along to give me succor. When I came to, I was sore. I went back up to the flat, but it was empty. Flown. Vamoosed. Bureau drawers emptied in a hurry and only a few rags left."

McCabe chuckled, reached across the desk and picked up a piece of paper.

"Well, I've got a squad out looking for Durango."

"You're that sure, huh?"

"Why not? His fingerprints are on the rod I picked up in the alley."

"Hot stuff!"

"Red-hot, baby!"

"Listen, McCabe—no crap now—were his prints really on the gun?"

"Lousy with prints. He wiped off the butt and the trigger but overlooked the front of the gun." He got up, stretched, said through a yawn: "Well, take a guy spends three years in stir, he has a lot of spare time to work up a grudge. He comes out hot, primed, and—bingo!" And then under his breath, familiarly, "You were dumb, fella, dumb as hell to tie up with Kincaid."

"Why? His nose is clean."

"It's clean enough—but the guys that don't like him are legion or something, and their noses aren't, and I notice that Kincaid never gets hit. The guy's charmed. And a charmed guy is no guy for a big mutt like you to go around body-guarding. You naturally draw lead like a wet tree draws lightning."

"Oh, so I should leave Kincaid in the lurch, huh?"

"We'll get this Durango, Cardigan."

"Like you got ninety-eight other guys during the past five years. . . . Listen, flatfoot! Kincaid walked in my office, planked down five hundred bucks and said, 'Here, Cardigan; look after me.' Durango faded out. O. K. He missed Kincaid and got this poor guy Arnold Snowdon. You're looking for Durango, and he probably figures you'll get him. So what? So he may as well burn for two killings as well as one. So the naturally simple thing is—bump off Kincaid and call it a day. I'm not nuts about Kincaid, but five hundred bucks is five hundred bucks, his nose is clean, and it's legal."

McCabe was laconic. "Have it your way, know-it-all."

Cardigan shrugged. "Hell, Mac, I know you're a good guy, but I hate to be wet-nursed."

"I like you, Cardigan—and I'm damned if I know why."

CHAPTER THREE

Cardigan Prowls

KINCAID opened the door of his apartment in Thirty-seventh Street, and Cardigan walked in past him, took off his hat and bowed his head, but not his body, toward Claire Derwent. Kincaid closed the door, rubbed hands together and said in a constrained voice: "Have a drink, Cardigan?"

Cardigan made a slight, negative movement of his head. "I've been guzzling all day. I never get anywhere." His tie-knot was a little awry, the knot not quite meeting the inverted V of his wrinkled white collar. His shaggy hair crowded his ears.

He said: "I've just been over to H. Q. They found Durango's prints on the rod McCabe picked up in the alley."

"Have they got Durango?"

"No."

Talking to Kincaid, he kept looking at the girl. She sat on a low settee, straight, her arms straight against her sides with the hands resting on the settee. Her dress was ivory-white, tight, and she had, Cardigan saw, an exquisite neck, a way of holding her head. But her face was very white, drained-looking, and her eyes were red-rimmed, wide and staring at him.

Kincaid's voice came— "Hope you don't mind if I have one myself." He crossed the room to a console, poured himself an amber drink from a decanter, downed it and polished it off with a small glass of Perrier. Half in the shadows, he looked very tall, very elegant; but when he walked into the light, bent to

lift a cigarette from a humidor, age was revealed sharply in his face.

Suddenly the girl rose. "I'm going home . . ."

"I'll take you," Kincaid said gently, affectionately.

Cardigan said "Uh-uh," and shook his head. "Durango's on the loose tonight. You stay in. Keep the shades drawn and the doors locked." He added, after a moment: "I'll take her home."

She was on her way to another room, and half turned to say: "I'll go alone."

"I'll take you," Cardigan said simply, flatly.

She reappeared with a wrap thrown about her shoulders. Kincaid stood like a man in the grip of indecision. Coming into Cardigan's office, he had been brisk and matter-of-fact. Now he seemed a little vague, a little uncertain. But gentle with her, saying: "Mr. Cardigan will see you home."

On her way to the door, she laid a hand on Kincaid's arm, said quietly, soberly: "Be careful."

He pressed her hand. "I'll be careful, Claire."

In the street, Cardigan took her arm and walked her to Lexington Avenue. He liked the feel of her slim arm beneath his hand. A cab came along, stopped at his signal, and he handed her in, dropped down heavily beside her and said: "What's the casa?"

She gave a number in the East Seventies and he passed it on to the driver. The cab crossed to Park Avenue, went over the ramp past Grand Central. He tossed a coin in the dark, caught it.

"What are you all broken up about? Kincaid came off lucky."

She turned her white face to him, said nothing, and then turned it away again. He got a glimpse of her profile against the lights they passed, and liked it.

He said: "A guy would think you'd lost your best pal."

She made no comment, and lapsed into silence. The cab stopped before a narrow apartment house in a quiet side street, and Cardigan got out, caught hold of the girl's hand and held it while she stepped to the sidewalk. He noticed the hand shook.

"Thanks," she said in a quick, breathless voice. "Thanks very much for seeing me home."

He thought he saw a startled look in her eyes. Absent-mindedly, he held on to her hand.

"Please," she said.

"Listen. Why are you scared of me? Hell, I wouldn't harm a mouse."

"Please!" she cried in a husky whisper.

He held on, and his voice got a little hard. "I want to talk to you—in your apartment."

"No."

"Yes."

"Do you want to create a scene?"

He said: "It wouldn't hurt my reputation. Think fast." Over his shoulder he said to the cab driver: "Hang around."

"I've thought," the girl said. "If you care to start a scene, start it."

Still holding her arm, he looked down into her eyes. They regarded him levelly, though curious lights moved in their depths, and he thought he saw growing moisture. But her chin was up, quietly determined. He judged she could be not more than twenty-two or -three; a rough-neck himself, he still could see that breeding gave her the poise of a woman of thirty.

"O. K.," he said huskily, "you win—this time."

He turned toward the cab, found the driver grinning. He snapped: "What are you laughing at?" and climbed in, banged the door.

THE office was crowded now. With uniformed cops, detectives, among them McCabe; and there were two newspapermen. And there was Tony Durango, lean and swart and handsome—and sullen, defiant. His tie was yanked around to one side of his collar and a slab of hair lopped down over one eyebrow. Rose Cardoni, small and frightened, biting her lip, sat apart. A handkerchief she held was torn to shreds. Durango's dark, rapier-like eyes shot upward and nailed Cardigan in the doorway.

McCabe said laconically: "Told you we'd get him, Cardigan."

"Better engrave it in bronze, Mac. It's unique."

"Just a pal!"

Cardigan said toward Rose Cardoni: "Thanks for the flowers, Rose. I always did like geraniums. . . . So what, Mac?"

"So Tony says he was in eight other places when the killing of Arnold Snowdon took place."

Durango snarled: "Funny! All you guys! Like a crutch!"

Bockman, the strong-arm man, picked Durango up by the back of the neck and slammed him down again. "Gotta teach you, I guess."

"Oh . . . don't," moaned Rose.

Bockman spun on her. "Keep your trap shut, tramp, or I'll shut it for you!"

"Don't be so comical, Bockman," Cardigan said.

"Who asked you for any—"

"Cut it," McCabe chimed in. He dragged a chair from the wall, set it down in front of Durango, planted one foot on it and leaned with both elbows on his knee. "Come on, Tony—why give us the run around? Everybody knows you swore to get Kincaid when you came out. This guy Snowdon is Kincaid's size and he was wearing a coat like you was used to see Kincaid wearing. We find a rod with the number filed off and it's lousy

with your prints. You can't name one guy you were with at the time of the shooting. Still you act like we're stepping on your toes for fun. It ain't fun, Dago. Fingerprints can't be manufactured."

"You heard me, McCabe. I told you where I was at the time of the shooting. I went uptown to get some dough my lawyer Tom Cardiff was holding for me. He wasn't home. I rang the bell and waited, and then I walked up and down the street for an hour, waiting for him to come home. Finally he come home. I got the dough, bought me some glad rags and went right down to Rose's."

"That's a nice, simple story, Tony, but it don't hold water. It don't get by."

Rose jumped up. "He told me he didn't do it! He didn't do it, Mr. McCabe!"

"Then why'd you toss a flower pot at Cardigan here?"

She grimaced. "I didn't mean to! I was—just crazy kind of! I didn't mean to!"

"And why'd you and Tony scam?"

"It was my fault! I was afraid! I made him! Please believe me, Mr. McCabe—it was my fault!"

McCabe laughed softly.

"It's true!" Rose Cardoni cried.

"Save your breath, angel," Durango said. "These mugs want to hang something on me and they're going to hang it. It's over my head, high over. But I didn't knock off that guy," he said to McCabe. "I did three years on a fluke. I had the guts to muscle in on Kincaid's games and he didn't like it. I knocked out a magistrate's teeth because he made a pass at my playing I didn't like. Kincaid said I hit him uncalled-for. O. K. I got three years for what somebody called felonious assault, but it wasn't—but what chance has a cheap Dago got against a magistrate?"

"Quit yammering," Bockman droned.

"Dry up, fat boy," Durango said.

Bockman hit him on the side of the face. Rose jumped across the room and fell on Bockman's arm, and Bockman heaved and flung her back across the room. Durango struck Bockman and Bockman drew a blackjack. But McCabe caught his arm.

"Quit it, Gus," he said.

Rose Cardoni was sitting on the floor, crying. Durango, held by two cops, looked murderous. Cardigan went across the room, leaned down and lifted up Rose Cardoni.

"Say," demanded Bockman of McCabe, "whose side is this guy Cardigan on?"

"My own," said Cardigan.

McCabe sighed. "We'll book Tony. Take him downstairs." He said to Rose: "You can go home, but we'll be seeing you."

She choked: "Please—he didn't do it—he didn't!"

"Sister," said McCabe, putting a slab of gum between his teeth, "you can't argue with fingerprints."

She put a hand to her forehead, broke into fresh sobs.

Durango said: "Don't cry, baby. I'll get out of this."

"I'm afraid," said McCabe, "you won't, Tony."

CARDIGAN carried her bags back into the flat in Waverly Place, went through the rooms turning on lights. She sat down on a straight-backed chair, let her hands lie limply in her lap. Her hat was a little crooked, strands of hair escaped from beneath. There was a dead, hopeless look in her eyes.

"Three years I waited," she said dully. "Three years—they seemed like centuries. And I was so happy when the day came. I had plans. Tony had plans. He had a thousand dollars saved and we were going west and start a filling-station and hot-dog stand—or something like that.

I spoke to Father Bombroso only the other day. Tony wrote me to. About getting married right away. Father Bombroso was so glad, too. And now it's all over—everything's dead, done. Just because Kincaid hated Tony—just because Kincaid has big politicians on his side. Oh, Mr. Cardigan, what'll I do?"

He looked down at his shoes, bending way over. "I was hired to act as go-between for Kincaid and Tony. If Tony'd held his head, he would have been ten thousand to the good. Kincaid was offering that, to square things."

She was grim, her voice shaking. "Tony never killed that man. He never killed that man."

"Sure, you love him. It's easy for you to believe that. I've been around, sister. You can fix anything but a fingerprint."

She stood up wearily. "Will you go now?"

"Sure." He moved and laid his hand on her shoulder. "Rose, you're a swell kid."

"Please go."

He walked down to Sheridan Square, stood on the curb tapping his foot, ruminating. Then he went down into the subway, caught a northbound train and got off at Times Square. He made a telephone call to Claire Derwent, but received no answer. Leaving the subway station, he walked east to Park Avenue, boarded a taxi and drove north.

He entered the building where Claire Derwent had an apartment. An elevator lifted him upward noiselessly, and he said to the operator: "Miss Derwent."

"Ten."

The car stopped at the tenth floor, and as he got out Cardigan said: "Which way?"

"Left—around the corner. Ten-fifteen."

He walked down the corridor, turned left and came to a door marked 1015. He

used a bronze knocker several times, listened, and when no reply came, he drew a small ring of keys from his pocket. It took him three minutes to get the door open. Only one light, a bridge lamp, was burning in the living room. He locked the door from the inside.

Moving swiftly, silently, he crossed the living room to a secretary, sat down before it. He emptied drawers and pigeon-holes, found nothing, and replaced everything as he had found it. Going into the bedroom, he turned on the lights there. His eyes jumped, darted about the room. He crossed to a dressing table, sat down, opened the drawers, rifled them. In one of the drawers he found a flat paper box. Opening it, he discovered several letters held together by an elastic band. He took off the band, read the letters. His face fell into hard lines. He put the letters together again, replaced them in the box, replaced the box in the drawer.

Going to the door, he listened for a moment, then opened it and stepped into the corridor. He locked the door from the outside and walked toward the elevator. The car took him down to the lobby, and he walked on into the street, made his way to Park Avenue. Walking south, he had his hands jammed deep in his pockets. Finally a cab came along and he hailed it. He rode as far as Lexington Avenue and Thirty-seventh Street; got out and made his way down Thirty-seventh.

When he knocked on Kincaid's door, it was a moment before Kincaid answered, saying: "Who's there?"

"Cardigan."

A key grated. The door opened and Kincaid stood there, still dressed. "You'll wear yourself out, Cardigan, running around this way, all night."

"Yeah," said Cardigan absently, and entered.

CHAPTER FOUR

Say It With Flowers

KINCAID closed and locked the door, crossed the room and took a cigarette from a humidor. Lighting up, he looked through the smoke and flame at Cardigan. Cardigan was eying him steadily from beneath bent, shaggy brows.

Kincaid lowered the match and cigarette, keened his eyes. "What's the matter?"

Cardigan said: "Sit down. I want to talk to you."

Kincaid, seated, inhaled slowly.

Cardigan said: "It's about that woman—Claire Derwent."

Kincaid's "Yes?" sounded faint and far away.

Cardigan rubbed thumb against forefinger slowly, kept his dark eyes fastened on Kincaid's narrow, pale face. "She's broken up. She looked a ghost tonight, Kincaid, and I thought maybe the fact that you'd missed being knocked off—just the fact that you might have been knocked off, frightened her. I thought of that, and it sounded reasonable, but still I wasn't satisfied. I've been thinking a lot, Kincaid—especially since the cops nailed Durango and tossed him in the jug. And I've come to a decision. I know why Claire Derwent is all busted up. Do you want me to tell you?"

Kincaid raised his cigarette to his lips, but did not puff; he lowered the cigarette and carefully rubbed off half an inch of white ash into a brass tray. "Naturally—I thought she felt that way because of me."

Cardigan shook his head slowly. "You're screwy. She loved your chauffeur."

Kincaid rose, crossed the room and rearranged a few books on a table, turned and leaned against the table.

Cardigan was saying: "He wasn't a

bad-looking guy, and from what I learned he came of a pretty decent family; he went to college, had a hard time getting a job, and took a job as chauffeur to make both ends meet. The family is poor-rich."

Kincaid said quietly: "This is interesting. Naturally I don't feel flattered." He made a weak attempt at a laugh. "Of course, you may be wrong."

"I'm not wrong. I crashed her apartment and found some letters he'd written her. The letters showed it wasn't all on his side."

Kincaid snapped: "You had your nerve, crashing her apartment!"

"I live on nerve, sweetheart. She wasn't in, so I crashed it."

Kincaid started. "She wasn't in!"

"I said she wasn't."

Kincaid tossed his cigarette into the brass tray, poured himself a tot of brandy. Raising the glass, his hand shook. But he shrugged, set the empty glass down, frowned.

His voice shook. "It's not pleasant news, Cardigan. I always thought—I thought Claire was— Well, I'd hoped to make her my wife. I—I still do." He raised his chin. He looked very handsome, though aged and drawn; his voice came hardly above a whisper. "It—it wasn't exactly the sporting thing—you springing this on me. I don't appreciate it."

"I didn't think you would. . . . Kincaid, there's something nutty somewhere. I don't know where it is. I got an idea—"

The phone rang. Kincaid started, then crossed the room, picked up the instrument. "Hello," he said. "Yes. Just a moment." He turned, said to Cardigan: "For you."

Cardigan took the telephone. "Yeah. . . . Oh, hello, McCabe. . . . When? . . . Where? . . . O. K., I'll be right over." He hung up, his dark eyes fixed on

space. He set the telephone down slowly. "That was McCabe," he said.

"What's wrong? You look as if—"

"Put your hat on."

"But what's the matter?"

Cardigan said dully: "Put your hat on."

"Is this something—"

"Your hat," Cardigan chopped in. "Get it!"

Kincaid went to a closet, returned with his hat on, his overcoat slung over his arm. Cardigan was waiting at the door. He opened it and stepped into the corridor, and Kincaid, following, locked the door. His eyes were narrowed, curious, and there was a gray pallor in his cheeks. But he kept his chin up.

He sighed: "If you must be mysterious . . ." and then shrugged.

THEY sat in a taxicab. The cab sped through a wide, deserted canyon of a street. Its meter made a continuous clicking sound and a little red wedge went round and round in the illuminated dial. A uniformed policeman stood in an oasis of light, looking upward, his hands on his hips and his nightstick hanging from one wrist.

The cab turned right, slipped down a narrower street; crossed a square past lighted stores; turned left, then right. A large building loomed on the right-hand side of the street; on either side of its front door was a frosted white bulb of light. The cab stopped on the corner, and Cardigan knocked open the door, swung out.

Kincaid followed, looked the building over. "Has the air of a hospital."

"It is. Come on."

Kincaid stopped, looked wide-eyed at Cardigan.

Cardigan grabbed his arm. "Come on."

He walked Kincaid up the broad cement steps, pushed open a swing door and

entered a large, circular room. At the far end was a desk at which sat a woman in white. A uniformed policeman stood beside the desk.

Cardigan said: "I'm Cardigan. McCabe phoned me."

"Upstairs," the cop said. "Three."

Kincaid walked dumbly into an open elevator, and Cardigan followed. The elevator rose to the third floor, stopped. The door opened and Cardigan motioned Kincaid out. McCabe was in the hallway, near the floor desk. A uniformed sergeant and two cops were there.

"I came right over," Cardigan said.

"So I see," McCabe said. "I thought you'd be at Kincaid's. Brought Kincaid with you, eh?"

Cardigan nodded. He was very grim and lowering. "Well?" he said, his hands folded in his palms.

"Well, a guy saw her jump. He couldn't swim, but he yelled for help, but it was almost five minutes before help came. A cop showed up, kicked off his pants and dived in. It wasn't very deep right there, about ten feet maybe, and he got hold of her and brought her up. He swam to a dock and there was a float there and he got her on that, and then he carried her up the ladder. He worked on her while the guy that'd yelled scooted off for an ambulance. The ambulance came and the doctors worked on her while they brought her here. I think she's done for. We'll know pretty soon."

"You're sure she jumped."

"Oh, she jumped all right. Usually they write notes. This one didn't."

Kincaid whispered breathlessly. "Who—who—"

"That girl was at your place," McCabe said, slipping a bar of gum between his teeth. "Claire Derwent."

Kincaid's lips closed, his eyes opened wide and a look of horror spread over his face. He swayed backward as though a

blow had been struck, and his hands clenched. McCabe chewed on his gum, looked at his hands. Cardigan had a violent dark look fixed on Kincaid.

Down the hall, a door opened, there were voices. Nurses and a couple of men came out. McCabe and the cops went toward them.

"How goes it?" McCabe said.

"It don't," said one of the men. "Too late. We got her too late."

"Dead, huh?" McCabe said laconically.

"Dead and done for."

Kincaid spun, dived for the stairway. Cardigan heard the sound of his feet, spun too—sprang after him and collided with a nurse carrying a tray. Nurse, tray and Cardigan slammed to the floor. But Cardigan was up in an instant, and he leaped for the stairway, lunged down.

HE COULD hear the sound of Kincaid's feet pounding down below, and as he reached the basement floor, he saw Kincaid going out a side entrance. He yelled, but Kincaid did not stop. He reached the alley driveway, saw Kincaid heading for the street behind, and broke into a long-legged run.

The street that ran back of the hospital was dark, deserted, and though Cardigan heard the sound of running feet, he did not instantly catch sight of Kincaid. But a street light, east, showed Kincaid momentarily; he was in swift flight, fast for a man who was not young. He let go of his overcoat, then his hat, and kept running eastward. Reaching a main drag, Cardigan was almost knocked down by a truck. Jumping, he slipped, missed the truck but fell hard. It took him a minute to get under way again, and by this time Kincaid was far ahead.

Cardigan did not draw his gun. He was certain that he could overtake Kincaid, certain that his wind was better than Kincaid's. He gained slowly, steadily, crossed

another main drag, heard a boat whistle and knew he was near the river front. He saw lights moving on the river a moment later. And he saw that now he was less than a block behind Kincaid.

He caught a glimpse of the river, of bright gleams moving liquidly on the dark water. Kincaid did not change his course. He ran straight on, and Cardigan, closing in on him, shouted: "Pull up, Kincaid!"

But Kincaid did not stop. He did not stop when he reached the bulkheads. He threw up his arms, dived over. Cardigan heard the splash, reached the river's edge and saw Kincaid's white face below, a pale blur in the darkness. He saw Kincaid lift his arms, sink. The man was not trying to swim.

"Kincaid!" Cardigan shouted.

Instantly his coat was off. He ripped away his shoe-laces, yanked off his shoes, dived. He cut the dark water neatly, groped in the wet depths, rose and looked around and saw Kincaid's head float above the water, then sink again. He kicked out his legs, went beneath the surface, caught Kincaid and dragged him to the surface.

Blindly Kincaid struck at him, cried: "Let—go!"

"You're drowning, dope!"

"I want to, damn you!"

"You won't!"

Kincaid clawed frantically with his hands, got one hand about Cardigan's throat. Cardigan ripped it away, spat water from his mouth.

"My God," Kincaid cried, "let me drown!"

"Not yet, sweetheart. Not yet. I ought to, I suppose—but not yet. I've got a reason, and maybe you know what it is—"

"If you don't let me, I'll take you down with me!"

"Yeah?"

Cardigan kicked himself half out of water, raised his fist, chopped it down

into Kincaid's face. He felt the man go limp, felt the tug of his weight in the water. He turned on his back, caught Kincaid beneath the chin and swam backward with him. He saw no wharf, no ladder, in the darkness, but he kept swimming backward. The water was cold, and chilled him. He raised his voice, calling for help.

Presently he heard voices, and then he saw the dim shapes of men appear above the line of the shore.

"That you, Cardigan?" It was McCabe's voice, loud, anxious.

"Yeah. See me?"

"Yeah. Can you hang on? We're getting a line."

"O. K. Get it—sometime tonight."

He swam in circles, slowly, and soon McCabe shouted. "Here it comes. Can you see?"

"Drop it. I'll find it."

He heard the heavy line splash in the water, found it, passed it beneath Kincaid's arm and called up: "Go ahead, pull. Then let it down for me."

He watched Kincaid's body rise out of the water, dripping. He swam around lazily, and when the line came down again, he grasped it, made a loop around his wrist, shouted:

"O. K. Haul me up."

Soaked, shivering, he stood on solid ground again, saw several cops bending over Kincaid, saw McCabe holding an overcoat.

McCabe said: "I guess it's Kincaid's. I picked it up. Better put it on."

"Put it on Kincaid. This guy is valuable."

"You sure look after your clients, don't you?"

"I see a thing through, Mac—even if it hurts."

IT WAS late when Rose Cardoni opened the door. She was dressed, for she

had not gone to bed. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and she looked sapped; her face was drained of all color and there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

"I thought you'd be up," Cardigan said. "The clothes look lousy, but they were dried in a steam room."

"What do you want?"

He carried a package in his hand, and entering the room, he went to the table, set the package down, tore off the paper. It was a geranium in a pot. He grinned, but Rose was in no condition to grin and only looked dumbly at the geranium.

"It was just an idea," Cardigan said. He sat down, planted his feet wide apart and said: "Tony'll be home in the morning."

She cried: "Tony'll be home!" But she stared as though she did not believe it.

He nodded, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor. "Kincaid killed the chauffeur. I hauled him out of the river, and he talked. It's a horse on me, and my face is red, no kidding. There was a girl he was crazy about, but she was crazy about his chauffeur—and Kincaid was not a young man and he was jealous. He knew what was going on.

"He laid a neat plan. He was afraid of Tony coming out, and he started out to kill two birds with one stone. He had it planned out weeks ahead. He knew the exact day Tony was coming out, and that was the day the chauffeur was to get the works. To strengthen the impression that he was afraid of Tony, he hired me. I fell for it—but who wouldn't? His plan worked neat as hell, Rose, but he didn't take into consideration the girl. She committed suicide over the death of her boy friend—and that sent Kincaid

nuts. He tried suicide himself. The fingerprints lied.

"No," he added, "not exactly. Several weeks before Tony slammed that magistrate he was in Kincaid's apartment, and Kincaid showed him a gun. Tony looked it over, handled it. Kincaid was a farsighted man, and even then he was planning to get Tony out of the way. He took the gun—by that time it had Tony's prints on it—and put it away in a box. He sealed the box with wax, made it airtight, so that neither air nor dust could get in it. Then he locked it away. It was that gun that killed the chauffeur—but Kincaid fired it. He used gloves. Tony's prints were still on it."

Rose put her hands to her cheeks and cried: "Oh!"

Cardigan stood up. "I might have been nasty to you and Tony, Rose, but—"

"If you hadn't pulled Kincaid out of the river, no one would have known—and Tony—would have died—in the chair. Oh, God!" She stood with her hands still pressed to her cheeks, her eyes gaping, her small body quivering. Then suddenly she threw herself against Cardigan, gripped the lapels of his coat, pressed her forehead against his chest and sobbed hysterically. "Oh, God bless you, Cardigan—God bless you!"

He let his long arm hang at his sides, let her tug at the lapels of his coat. And he smiled ruefully down at her dark hair. He looked bulky and shaggy and unshorn. Presently he raised his head, saw his reflection in a mirror. He chuckled, rubbed his chin.

He said: "A beard now—say if I had a white beard, a long one, I guess I could pass for Santa Claus. . . . Bawl on, Rose—bawl on; I need a clean shirt anyhow."

DEATH UNDER GLASS

Is the horror mystery by OSCAR SCHISGALL featured in the SEPT. 1st issue
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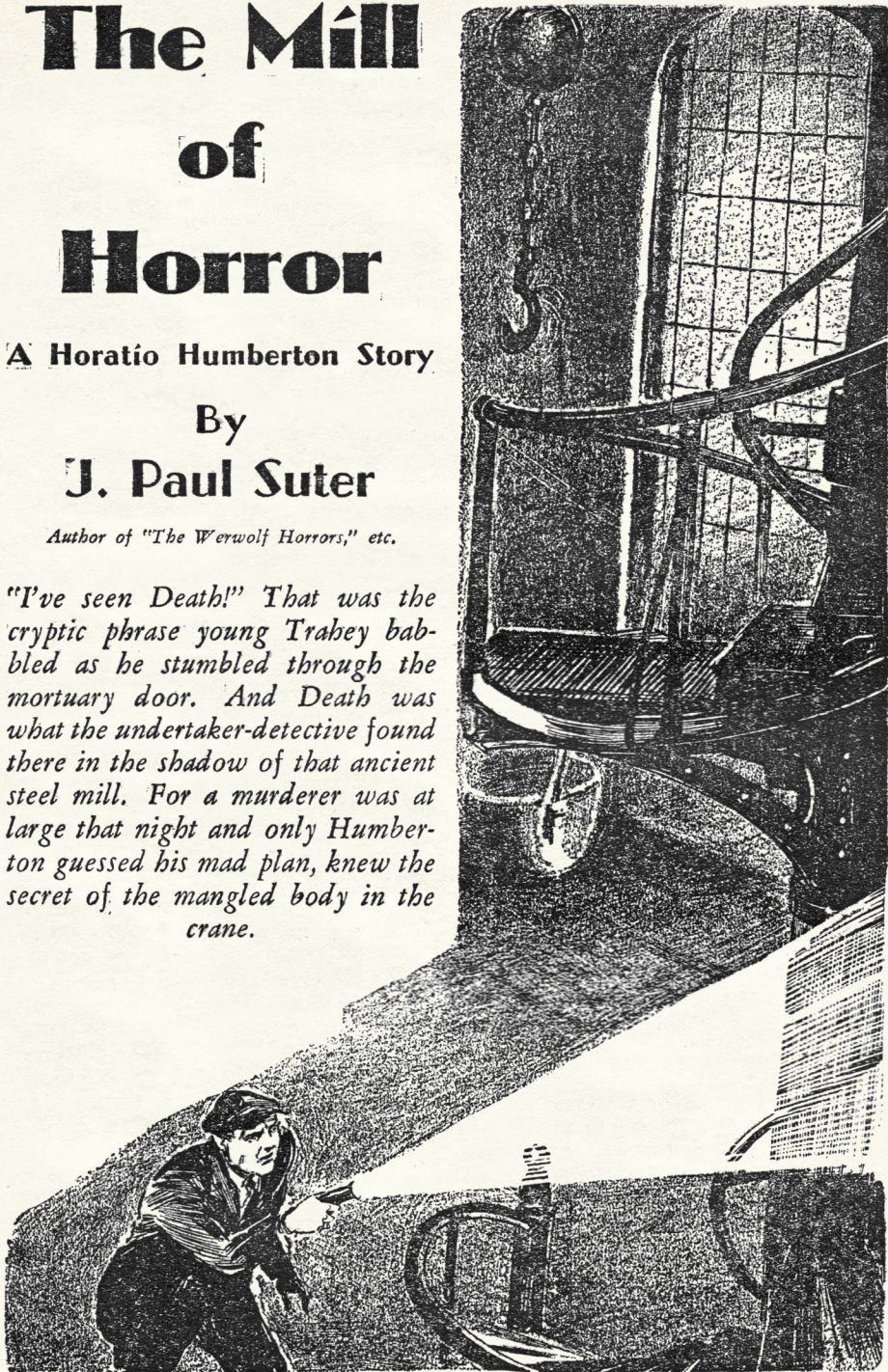
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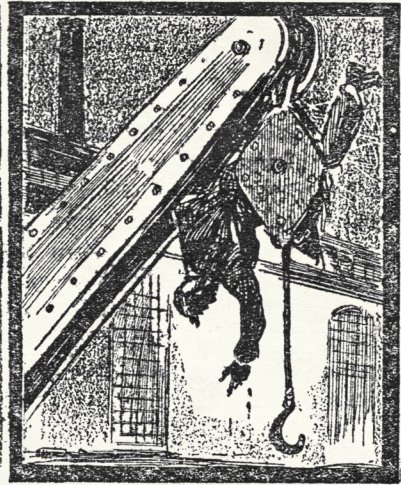
A Horatio Humberton Story

By
J. Paul Suter

Author of "The Werwolf Horrors," etc.

"I've seen Death!" That was the cryptic phrase young Trahey babbled as he stumbled through the mortuary door. And Death was what the undertaker-detective found there in the shadow of that ancient steel mill. For a murderer was at large that night and only Humberton guessed his mad plan, knew the secret of the mangled body in the crane.





He let his long legs
down till he was
dangling outside the
stairs.

CHAPTER ONE

Death in the Crane

POLICE Detective James Clyde growled, "Check!" and Horatio Humberton, smiling grimly, slid his queen across the chess board with a long, curving forefinger. He in turn said, "Check!" Then he leaned over the board to blow from it some of the droppings of Clyde's pipe, which were in the way of his next move. The ashes swirled a moment in the barely perceptible breeze. It was a stifling August night. Humberton had opened both the study door and the big front door of the funeral parlors, to make the game more comfortable.

Before the ashes settled again—before Clyde could make his next move—there was a sudden shuffle of feet in the narrow hall. There was a voice, too—high-pitched and agonizing. It screamed: "Death! Death!"

Clyde jumped to his feet, but he was not quick enough. A figure hurtled into

the study, struck the table a glancing blow which slid the chess board to the floor, and with a low, moaning cry gripped Horatio Humberton by the throat. He went down, the intruder atop of him.

The detective nearly overturned the heavy table in his effort to round it without delay. He reached down into the shadows where the two were grappling, hooked two powerful hands under the jaw of the one on top, and with the same motion which wrenched him loose hurled him against a book case.

Humberton's assailant tottered. His eyes turned glassy. He slowly sagged to the floor.

Clyde did not wait to see what became of him. He sank to his knees beside his friend, and his hoarse voice revealed an amazingly gentle note. "Are you hurt, Ho?" he muttered, anxiously.

HORATIO HUMBERTON sat up, with a minimum of help from the detective. That brought his long face into the glow of the single electric bulb above the table. His thick spectacles had been bent somewhat out of shape, but he was calm.

"Did you think he was throttling me, Clyde?" he inquired, coolly.

The tall necrologist shook his head. Meanwhile, he was scrambling to his feet. "He was not attacking me at all, Clyde. His arms were around my neck, and he was sobbing against my collar. Surely you see what is wrong with him?"

Detective James Clyde gazed with new interest at the figure on the floor. What he saw was a slim young man—not much more than a boy, in fact—rather roughly dressed, who was certainly not violent now, whatever he had been. He was obviously unconscious.

Humberton stepped around the table and also looked down at their midnight visitor.

"Crazy?" Clyde suggested.

"I hardly think so. This boy has had an overwhelming nervous shock. When he burst into the room he was wild with fear. Your treatment was not precisely scientific, but perhaps it will quiet his mind as well as anything we could possibly have done. When he comes to himself, I hope he will be much calmer. Suppose you step into the morgue and get a dipper of water, Clyde, while I loosen his collar."

Clyde obeyed reluctantly. He did not enjoy stepping into the morgue. He made the errand as brief as possible, but when he returned with the water the eyelids of the youth on the floor were beginning to flutter. Humberton deftly slipped a book beneath his head to serve as a pillow.

"Never mind the water now, Clyde. We mustn't shock him more than is necessary. Ah, my boy—" He gently stroked the youth's forehead. "You are feeling better? Just lie there and recover."

But their caller's eyes opened abruptly to their full extent. He looked wildly into the faces bending over his. With an inarticulate cry he tried to struggle to his feet.

"What's that he says?" the detective demanded.

"Something about death." Since he seemed determined to rise, the necrologist guided him to a chair—the chair from which he had himself been catapulted.

For the first time, the reviving youth seemed to recognize him. "I'm all right, Mr. Humberton," he said, slowly. "Only you know—you know—I've seen Death."

"Easy, my boy." Humberton knelt in front of him, smiling into the thin, perturbed face. "Is that why you came to me? There is something you want me to do?"

"Yes. I've heard about you. I knew where you lived. I saw—" He shivered, stopped, then went on. "I saw Death—over in the field by the new mill. So I came to you. He's a big shadow. I saw

him, I tell you—in the moonlight. I jumped in my car and came here. I saw—”

“Yes, my boy?”

“The man he killed is there in the field.”

“What’s that?” put in Clyde, sharply.

The youth’s face turned slowly. He blinked up at the red-visaged detective. “It was a big shadow with the dead man under its arm. There’s a crane in it, too.”

“Crazy as a loon!” Clyde muttered.

“A locomotive crane. It’s there in the field by the mill. You think I’m making it up, but I’m not. You can get in my car, and I’ll take you there.”

“Clyde, there is something back of this,” Humberton interrupted. “Suppose we go with this boy. Call Ted from upstairs. No doubt he’s playing solitaire in his room. You and he can go in my car. What’s your name, my lad?”

“Melvin Trahey.”

“I’ll ride with you, Melvin. Mr. Clyde and my assistant will follow. On the way, you can tell me more.”

IN A few minutes the chief of the Humberton Funeral Parlors rather regretted his decision. His visitor’s car evidently was the result of a home remodeling job, through which an aged flivver had been converted into a racing model, with most of the temperament and double the speed of a broncho. But after they had rounded a score of city corners and had settled into the straightaway of a country road, he began to draw out the curious details of the thing the boy had seen—or thought he had seen—which had so shocked his soul.

Melvin lived alone with his father in a cottage near the site of the new mill, now half completed. There was a cemetery beyond the mill, but it seemed not to enter the tale directly. His father was asleep—drunk—and the boy had determined to go out and spear a few bull-

frogs along the creek which ran through both cemetery and mill site.

“You eat them?” the necrologist inquired.

“Their legs,” was the laconic reply.

It was still bright moonlight. The boy did not need to explain that he had been able to see quite a distance. He had speared half a dozen frogs when his attention was caught by a shadow crossing the field from the direction of the mill.

“What kind of shadow?”

“A big, black shadow. Like a man, but bigger. He was carrying something. I wanted to find out what it was, so I crawled on my belly through the grass. That was kind of slow. I sneaked up close to the crane, and—”

The little car lurched violently. Humberton snatched the wheel only in time to keep them out of the ditch. The boy was shivering convulsively, and sobbing.

“I can’t tell you any more! I’ll take you to the field, but you’ll have to go in it and see for yourself! I won’t go with you. You can’t make me go!”

“Very well,” Humberton agreed, soothingly. He still felt a little shaky, and kept a guiding hand on the wheel. “Perhaps you had better run along home to bed when you have showed us the field. No doubt I can find you in the morning, if I need you.”

The new mill loomed up, a giant black silhouette against the background of shimmering moonlight. Opposite the field which separated it from the dirt road, Melvin Trahey pressed down sternly on his brake, and the little car squealed to a stop.

“See that thing out in the middle of the field?” he asked, in a whisper. “That’s the crane. Good-by.”

The Humberton sedan, Ted Spang at the wheel, pulled up just as Melvin Trahey’s domestic racer rolled on. Clyde, who

scrambled out first, walked forward with a swagger.

"You may not know it, Ho, but I'm one of the owners out here," he declared, expansively. "The Polished Iron Company! It's going to turn out iron sheets with a shine like the finest steel. Never been done before. Old Jonathan White invented the process, and croaked two months ago. Now his son, Walter, is carrying on and finishing the job of building. Then there's John Massow—ever hear of him?"

Humberton shook his head. The moonlight was so bright that Clyde could see the movement perfectly. They were coming to the barb-wire fence which shut the wide field from the road, and for a moment the detective was too busy squeezing through it for speech.

"Thought you might have heard of Massow," he went on. "But perhaps he's out of your line. He's a retired steel man—the big noise of Laurel Village, the suburb just beyond here. Has the biggest house in the village and the biggest vault in the cemetery—that little cemetery right over there. Also, the sugar behind this new mill is mostly his. He owns more than half of the stock, I guess, and young White has a quarter, and the rest was peddled out to the public. That's how I got my two shares. Hello! Maybe that's the locomotive crane the kid was raving about."

"It is. He said so before he left."

"Beat it home to recover, eh? Wish I hadn't socked him quite so hard. But he's all right—he could never have driven that way if he wasn't. Looks like fire still in the crane—fire in it at one A. M.! Can you imagine that?"

HUMBERTON did not reply. Though his eyes were weaker than Clyde's, his inner perception was keener. There was something odd about the shape of the crane in the shimmering moonlight—

something grotesque and unnatural. Ted, whose eyes and perceptions were both acute, gasped, and broke into a run. He easily outdistanced the others. But when he had reached the crane and gone on to the farther side of it, where he could see better, he shivered and turned away.

Almost at once he looked again. Ted never showed emotion for long. "It's a mess," he whispered.

His chief and Clyde came up. They looked in silence.

"Caught in the tackle—poor devil!" Clyde exclaimed, at last.

"I hope it got his head first," said the hearse driver, soberly.

"Notice his arms, Ho. Both in up to the elbows. That would look as if maybe his head was caught last—while he was still trying to fight his way out. What was he doing here? Lighting up a locomotive crane and trying to operate it at midnight!"

"You are not forgetting the boy's story?" Humberton prompted.

"About the big shadow that scared him? Don't tell me you believe in shadows that throw people into cranes! This shadow would have had to shovel a little coal first, too, and light up."

But the tall necrologist showed no answering grin. "Check suit—good quality," he commented, pinching between thumb and forefinger a bit of the fabric in which the pitiful, broken body was clad. "Whoever this may be, Clyde, it is surely not the workman who operated the crane. I should like to think this over a bit before we call the coroner. You recall the boy's evident state of terror. What do you think he did when he discovered the body?"

"He beat it," said Clyde, emphatically.

"So I should imagine."

Humberton was fumbling, very gingerly, with various levers about the mechanism. In a moment he found the one he sought, gave it a slight push, and in-

stantly restored it to its former position. Clyde was mechanic enough to catch the meaning of his action.

"The power's shut off!" he exclaimed.

"Precisely. Yet if the boy bolted immediately after finding the body—"

"I get you, Ho! Look how this poor devil is ground up! It's a cinch *he* didn't shut off the power. And it's an equal cinch the boy didn't, I'd say."

The necrologist went on slowly and evenly, like a professor building up a proposition before his class.

"This crane ran long enough for the gears to macerate the body to a terrible extent—but not long enough to attract passers-by on the road by its grinding. I agree with you, Clyde that it was not shut off by the boy. His terror was real. But if not—"

He stopped, abruptly. Ted Spang had tapped him lightly on the arm. Ted was pointing down the field toward the cemetery, where a man running toward them had just vaulted the dividing wall. It was evident in the bright moonlight that he was a big man, but he ran like an athlete.

"Who is it?" he shouted, while still some distance away.

Humberton walked forward to meet him. "Who are you?" he countered.

"I'm John Massow. A boy got me out of bed. Said someone had been killed in the crane. Who is it?"

"Possibly you can tell," the necrologist answered, quietly.

The newcomer strode around the crane, to a spot where the moonlight beat pitilessly on what was in the tackle. So he came upon it rather suddenly. A shiver rippled through his heavy frame. He gazed a moment without speaking, then tottered, as if about to collapse.

Ted, who was watching as keenly as his chief, caught the big man and led him away. But in a moment, Massow recovered himself. Still in silence, he returned to the crane, and studied the body. He

even examined the material of the suit, as Humberton had done. Suddenly he whirled furiously upon the three of them.

"What do you know about this? Why was the crane fired up at this time of night?"

"Maybe you can answer that," Clyde bristled. The detective, nearly as big as Massow, never relished being blustered at.

"How can I answer it? I was home, in bed."

"I think, Mr. Massow, we shall get further if you answer the one question which possibly you can," put in Horatio Humberton, soothingly. "We have driven out from town. The boy who roused you came to me first. I don't believe he knew who this unfortunate man is, and I am sure we do not. Can you tell us that?"

Massow stared from one to the other. "You don't know him?" he muttered. His hard, deeply lined face worked spasmodically. "But why should you? What's he got to do with you? The bottom falls out of the whole damned world for me, but that doesn't mean anything to you. I'll tell you who he is. You see this mill?" He waved an arm toward it. "He was the one man who could have finished it."

"You mean Walter White?" Clyde demanded.

Massow nodded.

"Why, I've got two shares of stock in this company!" the detective said.

John Massow's face ceased to twitch. A grim smile crossed it. "I'm sorry—you're out two hundred dollars," he returned.

CHAPTER TWO

Convict's Cupola

THE day after the discovery of the mangled body in the crane, Horatio Humberton supervised four funerals and an embalming job. He had no time whatever for crime detection. But when lei-

sure was available at about nine o'clock in the evening, he was glad to act as host in his study to a little conference composed of himself, Ted Spang, Clyde and John Massow.

Clyde had been busy all day on the case. He was eager to report results—such as they were.

"It is murder, Ho," he said, solemnly. "You know Sollerby, the coroner. He's a good doctor. Only a good one would have been able to get anywhere, the way the body was. He says Walter White was dead when the tackle crushed him. Killed by a blow on the head."

"You are sure of the identification?"

"I'll take responsibility for that," Massow put in, quietly. His deeply lined face, with sunken eyes beneath gray hair, set grimly as he spoke. "I went over him again this morning—in daylight. We haven't let his mother see him. He had a sweetheart, too—Betty Chanters. Of course we've kept her from him. At my suggestion, Clyde has brought in two other business friends of Walter's—men with strong stomachs who we thought could stand the sight. They agree that there's no mistake."

"Now we come to the queer stuff," the detective volunteered. "It looks as if we know who the killer is, Ho, though we haven't put hands on him yet. It's your yarn, Massow. Tell it the way you did to me, this morning, before we staged our manhunt."

The retired ironmaster smiled, reflectively. "Perhaps you know, Mr. Humberton, that this mill of ours is not entirely new?"

The necrologist shook his head.

"Well, that's the case. We took over an older structure. Part of it, the old cupola, is still standing, a short distance from the newer portion. And I learned from Walter White a week ago that an escaped

convict from the state penitentiary was hiding out in that cupola."

He paused, looked up under his shaggy brows at his attentive listener, and abruptly went on.

"Perhaps I'll be put in jail, before this is over, for keeping that discovery to myself, but I did—at Walter's request. He was a boyhood friend of White's, you see. Mr. White fed him. Walt used to come down at night a good deal, after everyone had gone, to stroll around the mill—said he could think better then than in the daytime. That gave him his chance with the convict, of course. I never saw the man very close, myself. He happened to show himself when I was there one night with Walt, going over things, or I'd never have known."

"And you think he committed this crime?" Humberton inquired.

"I do, for two reasons. Walter told me that this fellow was beginning to go crazy from the strain of hiding out. That's my first reason. My second is the murder itself. Why should anyone in his right mind fire a locomotive crane at midnight in order to grind up a body? It's an outlandish thing to do—not the act of a sane man, at all!"

Humberton looked at the detective. "What do you know of this convict, Clyde?"

"Everything, Ho, up to the time he broke loose. Nothing since, till I heard of this fellow in the cupola. He's Michael Burk. Killed his wife. Sentenced to the hot seat. Escaped a month ago, on his way to the pen—rotten work on the part of the bulls who were chaperoning him, if you ask me. White told Massow what Burk's name was, so that ties up."

The necrologist nodded, silently. He was a good listener.

Clyde leaned forward, to tick his various achievements off on his thick

fingers. "Here's what we've done. We've shot his description and photo all over the state and all through Pennsylvania and West Virginia. That was done a month ago, but we're doing it over again. Mike is going to have plenty trouble making a getaway this time. Then we've gone over the mill—the old one and the new, what there is of it. I'll guarantee you, Ho, we haven't overlooked any place where he can possibly be. We found his hideout—a regular bed, right in the old cupola itself. There's a rope hanging down to the mill floor from the iron cupola platform nearby—left there by workmen who were moving out some of the junk, Massow says. I'll bet it made a slick way for Mike to slide to the ground pronto when he felt like it. But did we find Mike? We did not! He must have flown the coop last night."

"Then he should be caught soon. He will hardly get another hiding-place like that," the ironmaster commented.

"He will be caught—don't worry," Clyde declared, with professional pride.

"Mr. Massow, you said something last night which I should like explained." Humberton bent his thick spectacles questioningly on his visitor. "You hinted that since Clyde has two shares of your stock, he has lost two hundred dollars. That's what he paid for it, I understand. Does it follow that you are ruined by Walter White's death?"

John Massow nodded. "I am!" he said, bitterly.

"Why?"

"I'll tell you why. Our company owns the White patents, of course. They cover the machinery for the new process. But there's another angle—the chemical angle. In this process it means more than machinery—so much more that without it we are absolutely sunk. That secret died with Walter White."

"Surely you have it recorded somewhere?"

Massow grinned, bitterly. "If it were written down, I, being myself a chemist, could take the notes and go ahead. White's death, though a terrible personal blow, would not mean ruin to me. Unfortunately, the secret is not recorded."

"The old man was eccentric as the very devil, Ho," Clyde put in. "On top of that, I'll bet he was the world's greatest stock seller. You can believe it or not, and I consider myself hard-boiled, but I bought my two shares with the understanding that nobody was to know the secret of that plant except old White and his son, until the process was in production. Then you were to be let in on it, too, weren't you, Mr. Massow?"

"Not a minute before," Massow agreed.

HORATIO HUMBERTON, whose knowledge of business was as slight as it was encyclopedic in all that related to crime, or embalming, or the lore of funerals, nodded his acquiescence.

"We'll pass that," he conceded. "For reasons satisfactory to you and Clyde and the other stockholders, you let one man's life stand between you and ruin. He is dead. Our task is not to question your judgment, but to learn who killed him. Did you have another talk with the boy, Clyde?"

"Grilled him like a herring," the detective replied, moodily. "He's not any too bright, if you ask me. But he knows how to stick to a story, I'll say that for him. He saw a tall shadow come out of the mill with a dead man under its arm, and place the dead man on the crane. Then he beat it. From what he says now, I guess the nearest he got to the crane was half the length of the field away. That's his yarn. You couldn't get any more out of him with a stomach pump. After he dropped you last night, he did

get a brain wave and go on to wake up Mr. Massow here, but that was the end."

"You consider him stupid, Clyde?" Humberton inquired, mildly.

"I'd give him ninety-nine and a half out of a possible hundred," the detective answered, with conviction. "He's weak-minded, that's what he is."

"I would hardly rate him much higher, myself. But stupidity and imagination don't go together. We can assume that the boy saw what he described, whether he interpreted it correctly or not. Now, Massow—"

He turned his near-sighted eyes owlishly upon the steel magnate, and it seemed then that he bent them inward upon himself, before speaking again; for he continued to stare silently and thoughtfully, as if John Massow were a specimen placed before him for examination. Massow fidgeted. He even looked slightly indignant. Ted Spang and Clyde, who knew the tall necrologist's odd ways, merely waited. They assumed that he was coming to a decision of some sort. So he was, and the nature of the decision astonished them thoroughly.

It was prefaced by an abrupt question. "You know the old cupola pretty well, Massow?"

"Why, yes—of course," Massow replied.

"That's fine!" Humberton smiled genially upon his guests. "Are you inclined for a little adventure, gentlemen? I have been sitting here, analyzing this strange occurrence in my mind, and I really believe I have the answer to it. You recall the shocking condition of the face and the hands of the unfortunate man in the crane? Well, you are undoubtedly correct, Clyde—it is murder. But I have my own ideas as to the murderer. You are sure you searched the old cupola thoroughly?"

"I am!" Clyde retorted, somewhat beligerently.

"Well—no doubt you did. But you made a mistake."

As his friend paused, Clyde was moved to a sharp rejoinder; but he refrained. He had learned to wait Humberton out.

"You made the capital mistake of searching in the daylight. This crime took place at night. The boy saw a shadow carrying the body—and shadows are things of darkness. With your permission, gentlemen, we will go out to the mill now, and search the cupola again!"

ON THE way out to the plant site Horatio Humberton said not a word. Such remarks as were addressed to him by his three companions were replied to by nods and grunts. But he came out of his silence to request that the car be parked at a spot on the road just opposite the location of the crane in the field, and he led the way with long strides to the scene of the tragedy. Though the moon was not yet up, and despite his near-sightedness, he seemed to find it without difficulty.

He did not turn on a flashlight to examine the crane. Instead, he walked around it several times in the dark, stopping at one point or another to stare at it or at the black bulk of the mill, looming at the farther side of the field.

"Were your construction crews working today?" he asked suddenly of Massow.

"I laid off everyone but the day watchman."

"And the night watchman?"

"He's over in the new mill, beyond the old one you see here. There's nothing of value in this part."

"How many men did you have in today's search, Clyde?"

"An even dozen, Ho," the detective an-

swered. "I'm telling you, we did a good job."

But the tall necrologist shook his head, disapprovingly. "Too many. You could have done as well with four. That is all we shall use tonight. Massow, you know this old part of the plant. I want you to distribute us to the best advantage. But before you do—while we are walking over to the cupola—have you any explanation of the boy's bizarre shadow story? I should have asked you that before."

The iron magnate chuckled. "I know where he got the idea of the shadow, if that's what you mean. He's a Laurel Village boy, remember. I've lived in this village all my life. So did my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather before me. This little community is old, and like most old places has its legends. The Shadow Ghost is one of them."

Clyde and Ted Spang closed in to hear. Massow noticed the fact, and laughed.

"I'm no story teller, boys. You can have this in two or three sentences. All there is to it is the murder of an Indian by a white man in Revolutionary times. This was a border settlement then, and a far more important place than it is today. The Indians came in force, and got their revenge by nearly wiping out the settlement. Some of the bodies in this old cemetery are without their scalps. This murdered Indian, by the way, is said to stalk around without his—the white man took it. He comes as a gigantic shadow, so how anyone can tell whether he has his scalp or not is beyond me. But that's the story."

"Does he kill—according to the story?" Humberton inquired.

"I forgot that. He does. Not often—not often enough for anyone to give a name to his last victim. He comes into the village and walks off with someone under his arm. Then that unlucky devil is never heard of again. There's your

story. I suppose the boy saw this body in our crane, and within two minutes he was sure he'd seen the shadow, too."

"One more question—so far as you know, had the shadow ever before been seen in this field?"

"Now you come to mention it, I don't believe it has. It's a graveyard story—a typical one."

CHAPTER THREE

Stairway to Terror

THEY had reached the high-arched entrance of the old cupola building. In the darkness the top of the arch was invisible. So was most of the building itself, except where a star or two peeped through dirty windows far up near the roof. Humberton drew the others close to him and spoke in low tones, as if the convict they sought might be watching within earshot.

"How many entrances are there to this building?" he asked Massow.

"Three. This one, another like it at the far end toward the new mill, and a little side door."

"Do you believe one of us should be stationed at each of those?"

"I suppose so." The iron magnate's voice was rumbling and discontented. "Mind you, I don't like this business, at all. That fellow's a desperate character. If he is still hiding out here—which I doubt very much—he might easily cut one of us off. There's plenty of junk lying around this place that would make weapons for him. You're the doctor, Humberton—we're doing what you say—but I'm not taking any responsibility for it."

"I will take the responsibility," the necrologist replied, evenly. "There are four of us. Where shall the fourth be posted?"

"There are flights of iron steps going up to the cupola—over a hundred of them. Someone should climb those. They lead

directly to Burk's hideout which we found today. If he happened to be lying in wait, partway up, I wouldn't give much for the chances of the man who did the climbing. Suppose I take that assignment."

"I will take it," Humberton said, quietly.

"Why not give it to me?" Ted suggested.

No, Ted, with my nearsightedness I shall be safer where I have stair rails to guide me in the dark. Now, Massow, where will you have the others?"

The big man seemed to have accepted the inevitable. His voice became brisk. "Clyde, you're armed, and you were over this place in daylight. Besides, I guess you are more or less used to hand-to-hand fighting. Are you willing to climb up to the mouth of the cupola at the left of the other main door? You'll have to do some ticklish work over the girders, but I don't know a better chance of catching anyone who may be hiding up there."

"O. K.," Clyde agreed, curtly.

"You have a gun, too, Spang? Well, take the door straight ahead—the other main entrance. Cover all the ground around there. Keep your gun handy. Remember—he's a killer."

"Right," said the driver.

"I will run over to the little side door, to make sure it is locked. It was today—no doubt it still is. Then I'll come back here, and stand guard. I'm armed. Are you, Mr. Humberton?"

"I never carry a gun," the necrologist answered. "Shall we go to our posts?"

THE four of them dispersed into the blackness of the old mill. But at the last moment Humberton put out a sinewy arm and imprisoned Ted's hand.

"Come with me, Ted," he whispered.

A moment later, he amplified the unexpected command.

"You will remain at the foot of the

stairs, Ted," he said. "Don't bother about the other door. Keep your ears open for the least sound from above. Do you understand—the least sound?"

"I get you, sir," the driver concurred, also in a whisper.

"When you hear it, call to me. Call softly. At the same time, dodge to one side, so as to be under cover of the stairs."

"What kind of a sound will it be?" inquired the puzzled driver.

"I have no idea. Possibly there won't be any sound."

"But if there is, I yip," Ted concurred. "O. K., sir. Yip and duck. I've got it straight."

"One minute, before I go. Let me have your flashlight."

Ted's employer shot the thin white beam up the circularly winding flight of iron stairs. In another instant, he had shut it off again. It had been on so brief a time that anyone standing in the darkness and not expecting to see the light would hardly have noticed it at all.

"Ted!" Humberton's whisper was sharp and insistent. "What did you see when I turned the light on?"

"I saw the iron stairs, sir."

"There was no one—or nothing—on the stairs?"

"Not that I saw, sir. I had my eyes pretty well peeled."

"Remember, I am nearsighted. I must rely on you. Is there a hand rail on both sides, all the way up?"

"Yes, sir. I'm positive of that."

"That's all. Remain here."

He slipped the flashlight back into his driver's hand and at once started up. The darkness was thick. It pressed upon him, like some black, suffocating drapery. As he set his foot, silently but squarely, on one step after another, he seemed to be pushing the night aside—slowly forcing his way upward.

After half a dozen steps, he stopped

and listened. There was the sighing of a breeze, far up among the ironwork traceries of the old mill; nothing else. He strained his myopic eyes downward toward where he knew Ted was waiting. Nothing was visible. Of course that was to be expected. Then he listened once more, intently. His ears were not like his eyes—they were keen. Finally, he continued his upward progress, but now he stopped at each step and again listened, his body taut, both sinewy hands gripping the stair rail.

At about the height of the twentieth step, he paused for a long while. He had been climbing so cautiously that no one on the ground or at the top of the iron staircase could have heard even the slight shuffle of his footsteps. But now he deliberately kicked the metal step, and uttered a deep imprecation, as if he had snagged his foot against it. His voice was subdued, but in the dead silence it was quite distinct.

He listened again, pressed closely against the hand rail. At last he heard a noise, from above. It was a very slight noise—hardly more than a ghost of a sound. Instantly, Ted's voice called softly from below. Humberton promptly slid his feet through under the rail, and let his long legs down until he was dangling on the outside of the iron stairs.

HIS arms had barely straightened to their full length when there was a crash from far up toward the head of the stairs. It descended, gathering volume as it came—the mighty clangor of iron smiting iron. As he hung there, waiting, something huge and swift pounded its way down the stairs with irresistible momentum; iron death for him had he been in its path. It had hardly gone past when he was on the stairs again, rapidly descending.

Ted Spang met him, partway up. "You're not hurt, sir?"

"No, Ted. I forgot to tell you not to call. Get to the door you were assigned to guard. Begin running this way when you hear the others coming. Don't turn on your flashlight."

Massow's voice came from somewhere in the darkness. "Humberton! Humberton!"

The necrologist did not reply; nor did he when Clyde's powerful bellow demanded: "Ho! Are you all right, Ho?"

Humberton, having reached the foot of the stairs at his leisure, deliberately picked out a spot in the dirt floor of the mill, and lay down. When running footsteps and a flashlight approached within easy hearing distance, he sat up and managed a rather convincing moan.

It was Clyde, almost incoherent with concern. Behind him came Massow, and still farther behind, Ted Spang.

"Are you hurt, Ho?"

"The breath was knocked out of me," returned the necrologist, weakly. "I shall be quite recovered in a moment or two. What was it? It whirled down the stairs and very nearly struck me."

Massow's light picked up the details of a heavy fly-wheel, now lying still and harmless. It had buried itself in the soft dirt, with the force of its impact.

"I guess he's up there," he declared, grimly. "He very nearly made us pay for going after him in the dark!"

"The dirty murderer!" Clyde let out a growl of honest indignation. "He's not going to get away with it! I'm starting after him right now with a gun in my hand, and I'm coming back with his body!"

But Horatio Humberton's voice recovered unexpected strength, for a man who had just been prostrated by the shadow of death passing by.

"You are going home, Clyde," he corrected with cold determination. "None of

us must risk our lives any further tonight. We have demonstrated the important point—our man is hiding in the mill. If you missed him in the daylight, that was because you didn't search well enough. Come back tomorrow and do a better job. He has too big an advantage at night."

Clyde was reluctant. "What do you think, Massow?"

"I want to get him now. He killed my friend," replied the big ironmaster, curtly.

"Come, Ted. You and I will sit in the machine and wait till they join us," was Humberton's conclusion.

No amount of argument could move him—none ever could, when he had made up his mind. The result was that the search was abandoned for that night. They returned across the field, past the gaunt and silent bulk of the locomotive crane.

A little beyond it, Humberton contrived to fall behind the others, and to link his arm into that of his mystified driver.

"Do you understand what happened, Ted?" he inquired, softly.

"Not any more than I understand Astronomy," was the emphatic reply.

"I am glad. You reassure me. Just at present, I don't want it understood too well."

"Tell me one thing, sir—just this one. I won't ask you any more. Was the murderer of young Walter White trying to kill you, too?"

The necrologist chuckled, under his breath. "Your question is not in quite the right form, Ted," he said. "I really can't answer it by 'Yes' or 'No.' I can tell you this much: that fly-wheel undoubtedly was meant for me!"

CHAPTER FOUR

From the Grave

CLYDE dropped the necrologist and his senior driver at the Humberton Fu-

neral Parlors, and sped on to get such sleep as he could in what was left of the night. Massow, he had already taken to his Laurel Village home. The front door of the parlors was ajar. Possibly they had left it so on their hasty exit. Ted, who was in advance, stopped at the threshold to ask a question.

"Was it an accident, sir?" he demanded. "That's what's eating me up right now."

"You mean the rather sudden descent of the fly-wheel?" his employer returned. "Far from its being accidental, Ted, I should say that it was partly planned by me—to the extent, at least, that I hoped for something of the sort if I was careful to lay myself open to it. Heavy chunks of iron are likely to be lying handy in old steel mills. I know now where we stand. All that is left is to find the motive."

"Does a crazy man need a motive?"

Humberton laughed. He, too, had delayed before entering the hallway, as if to have this colloquy out of the way first.

"No. Oh, no!" he assented. "But aren't you taking too much for granted, Ted?"

"Then he isn't crazy?" The driver whistled, softly. "This gets better and better! I should say that heaving that fly-wheel at you, when all he had to do was to stay hid, was more the act of a lunatic than of somebody in his senses—but you know best. Maybe White threatened to give him away. That would be motive enough for a desperate man, wouldn't it, sir?"

"I see a little coupe parked half a block up the street," Humberton said.

"Why, so do I," Ted stared, and darted a lively and interested glance at the half-opened door of the parlors.

"Everything's dark except our place," he whispered. "Someone parked up there, not being quite sure of our loca-

tion, then walked back and went in. I'll bet he's in the study right now!"

"We will see," his employer returned, composedly.

"Let me go first," Ted said. He blocked the way, gave the door a quick push, then stepped behind the doorjamb until he could see what was ahead. And at once, with a laugh, he gave way to his chief.

A girl stood in the light streaming from the study, at the far end of the hall.

"Mr. Humberton?" she inquired, a little nervously.

Horatio Humberton returned an affirmative and stepped into the hallway. The girl ran forward. She was tall and lithe. Her voice, quiet and restrained, had in it a suggestion of emotion which she was controlling with an effort.

"I am Elizabeth Chanters," she said. "You know? I mean—you know who I am?"

The necrologist took her gently by the arm, to impel her back to the study. "I believe so," he replied, gravely. "You are—the fiancée—"

"Yes." She shot the word out, and went on rapidly, with a barely perceptible catch of the breath. "I didn't want to wait out in the car. I saw the door open, and came in. There was a light back here, so that was where I waited. It's all right?"

"Perfectly." He led her to a chair—his own chair behind the work table, which was the best place to sit in the cluttered study. "Come in, Ted. No doubt you have something to tell me, Miss Chanters. My associate, Mr. Spang, should hear it at the same time."

"I didn't come to tell you anything. I came to ask something. Do you know who killed him?"

"I expect to know, soon."

"I'm glad of that. You see, I expect to get news, too. Then we can check up together, and make sure the right man is punished."

HUMBERTON had remained standing, listening courteously, but also studying her face through his thick lenses. It was a softly contoured face, with large blue eyes, and crowned with naturally curling blond hair. The hair just missed being golden; the face just missed being shallow and a trifle silly in its expression. It was saved from both by what was probably a lately developed self-control in the presence of tragedy. She was a little girl grown up overnight.

The necrologist waited, still looking at her thoughtfully and sympathetically. Ted fidgeted behind him.

"It's hard for me to take things the way I should," she went on, with an oddly misplaced laugh. "I suppose that's because I'm only human, after all. Walter and I are Spiritualists. That's what I mean. We don't believe in death. So I oughtn't to grieve—especially after tonight. Only a short time before I started here, Mr. Humberton, a medium called me up and gave me a message from him. That's why I came here. I haven't the least idea who called—he said his name was unknown to me, and that it would make no difference, anyway—and I'm not quite sure whether the message is genuine or not. I want your opinion."

Humberton started. As a sort of side line to his studies in the wisdom of the Egyptians, he had gone rather deeply into psychic research. He never wilfully missed an opportunity to investigate the subject. With a smile—much more engaging and human than the look of professional sympathy he had been wearing—he mechanically gathered a dozen large volumes into a pile from the number untidily scattered about the floor of the study, sat down upon the seat thus erected, and asked, cordially: "What was the message, Miss Chanters?"

"I was sitting by myself in my room tonight, Mr. Humberton. I wanted a message from him. Somehow I felt some-

thing might come through. I sat there with a pad on my knee and a pencil, hoping perhaps for automatic writing. You know what I mean?"

He nodded. Ted Spang, also sitting upon some books, listened with no less interest than his chief. Ted was sceptical by nature, but he had learned in the course of his years with Horatio Humberton that anything the tall necrologist regarded with close attention was likely to be worth the effort.

"There wasn't anything, though I waited a long time. But at last this telephone call came. It was from a man. He said he was a medium. He said Walter had been trying and trying to get through to me, and had finally done it by him. The message is—" She broke off. "You know the cemetery, near the field where he was found?"

Again Humberton nodded.

"That's the message. I'm to go out to that cemetery tonight — alone — before morning. He'll come through to me there."

"To the cemetery!" Horatio Humberton's nod was nearly one of satisfaction. "This is really very interesting, Miss Chanters. No doubt you would be afraid to undertake any adventure of the sort?"

"I'm afraid—of course." Once more the soft face tightened into almost unnatural firmness. "But if you think the call came from Walter, I'll do it."

Humberton glanced at his watch. "It is after two o'clock. You are willing to go out there tonight, by yourself?"

SHE nodded, silently. He continued to stare at his quaint old timepiece as if it held the key to something far more important than the hour of night.

"What time did this call come through to you, Miss Chanters?"

"I can tell you that exactly. We live near St. John's Church, and just as I hung up the receiver, I heard the quarter

strike. It was a quarter after one."

"And you came over here at once?"

"Almost at once. Father and mother had retired. I often sit up reading, long after they go to bed. I thought you could advise me better than they could, and it seemed to me, too, that I shouldn't alarm them. So, I just came."

Humberton smiled. "Will the telephone wake one of them, if it rings?" he asked.

"I suppose so—since I'm not there to answer it."

"Then I fear their rest is about to be disturbed. I will go into the office and call up your home."

Horatio Humberton had not been a funeral director for thirty years without learning how to soothe and convince other human beings. He returned rather soon to the book-cluttered study, and his lean face wore an expression of contented benevolence.

"I have had a pleasant talk with your father," he told his nervous visitor. "Without going into gruesome details, I have managed to set his mind at rest as to your absence from the house. He was very obliging. You may not be aware, Miss Chanters, that your father and I are members of the same lodge. I was able to supply a few points which satisfied him as to my identity, and he is willing to accept my pledge for your safety."

She rose. "Then I might as well start."

"Yes. You know the way?"

"Walter—" she choked a moment, but straightened her shoulders and went on—"often took me out to the mill. I've seen the cemetery. I'm to walk along beside the south wall until—until he comes to me."

"Very well."

They walked in silence to the front door of the parlors, the girl a little in advance. Then she asked: "Are you following me out there, Mr. Humberton?"

"I think not," the necrologist returned. "From what I know of psychic manifestations, the conditions laid down have to be

observed very closely. Of course, I took the responsibility for your safety, but that was largely to satisfy your father. If you aren't willing to incur the risk, by far the best thing you can do is to call this off and go home."

"No doubt you're right." Her voice shook a little. "You haven't said so, but I gather you think this may be a genuine message from Walter, so of course I'm doing as he asks. Thank you—"

She hesitated a moment, then almost ran down the deserted sidewalk to her little car. But she had not yet reached it when Humberton shot a command at his faithful associate.

"Quick, Ted! Get out the car!"

"You're following her, sir?"

"Of course!"

Ted sighed, and disappeared.

HUMBERTON placed a restraining hand on Spang's arm. "Keep her car in sight, Ted, but don't let her suspect she is being followed."

"O. K., sir," Ted agreed, cheerfully. "That's not hard to do when I know where she's heading for." He slowed down to a steady pace, several blocks behind the rapidly moving tail-light ahead. "You had me going for a minute," he went on. "I couldn't figure how you'd ever let her go out there by herself. I suppose the idea is that if she knew we were close by she wouldn't act natural?"

"Precisely."

"Then that means you don't look for any real ghost? A real one ought to be able to sense for himself if anybody's around, I should think."

Humberton grinned at his inquisitive driver. They were now clear of the city and on the road to Laurel Village.

"I can't follow you in your analysis of ghosts, Ted," he said. "To me they have always proved an elusive subject. But I think you are right in wanting such information as I can give you. It isn't much.

Let me ask you a question. Why was the body mangled so terribly in the locomotive crane?"

"Because the fellow that did it was crazy," the driver answered, promptly.

"Suppose, for the sake of argument that he was not crazy. Suppose that he was exceptionally keen. You saw the body. The face and the hands in particular were mutilated beyond all recognition. I doubt whether even Scotland Yard could get fingerprints from those hands. Now, what reason would a keen man have for doing that?"

Ted was an impulsive soul. When an idea struck him with force, he was likely to register the fact physically. He registered is now by suddenly treading the accelerator to the floor boards, so that the sedan jumped like a kangaroo, and Humberton's forehead just missed a collision with the wind-shield.

"Sorry, sir." Ted got his foot under control again. "That rather hit me between the eyes. But if the body in the crane was not Walter White, but somebody in White's clothes, where is White hiding out?"

"I don't know. I can't even be sure that the body is not White's."

"People have done that sort of thing to collect insurance," Ted persisted; but his employer's emphatic headshake was visible in the moonlight.

"White apparently carried no life insurance. Clyde checked up on that in the course of his investigation. It seems that his family and that of Miss Chanters are both spiritualists. They go further than most members of the cult in holding that life insurance is not necessary, since the spiritual powers watch over man's welfare."

Ted whistled. "I'm glad my old man didn't feel that way," he said. "What with seven of us kids, my mother had her troubles as it was. But that leaves us where we started, shadow and all, don't it, sir?"

"Not quite, Ted, not quite. As for the shadow, I think we can safely assume that a body was carried from the mill. In the deceptive moonlight the man who was doing the carrying—a big man, by the way—became to the boy the giant shadow of the ghost legend." Humberton blinked about through his thick lenses. "Aren't we nearly there?"

"About a mile to go. The road bends around a clump of trees just this side of the graveyard."

"We'll park near the bend. Now Ted, follow me closely. We are dealing with a desperate man. It is quite on the cards that he may win. If he thinks he can safely kill me, he'll do it—for he knows that I suspect him!"

TED nearly stepped on the accelerator again, but restrained himself in time. "Who?" he demanded.

"Massow!"

"You're not kidding me, sir?"

"This isn't the time for that." Humberton turned his mouth squarely toward Ted's nearer ear, so as to be heard more easily. "When I was a young man, Ted, I had quite a flair for amateur theatricals. They told me I was good. I was better, however, as a critic. I had the faculty—and not every critic has it—of instantly distinguishing natural acting from the forced, artificial kind. Massow's acting at the locomotive crane last night was artificial. He tried to impress us with the idea that the finding of his partner's body was a tremendous shock to him. It was not a shock, at all. He knew perfectly what he would find there. I saw through him almost instantly. But—" the necrologist chuckled—"he, also, saw through me!"

"Saw through you?" Ted echoed.

"Saw that I suspected him. Perhaps I wasn't so careful as I might have been to keep him from seeing it. But in one thing I was careful, Ted—not to let him know that I realized suspicion of me."

"Sounds a little complicated, sir."

"More than a little, Ted. The whole business is weird and incredible. Perhaps the most incredible part of it to you will be the fact that I deliberately set the stage and gave him the chance to get rid of me, if he could—at the old cupola. I thought that a man capable of the atrocity at the crane might be capable of trying that. And he was! After we left him, he must have reached the top of the iron stairs by a route known to him but not to us. He's a strong man. No doubt he found it easy to dislodge that fly-wheel and set it at the top of the stairs. Then, of course, he returned to the mill floor by way of the dangling rope, in good time to come running up in the darkness to inquire about my welfare. He proved my reasoning for me, Ted. With me out of the way he would have been safe—and he knew it. . . . Here's the bend in the road."

"O. K., sir!" Ted neatly ditched the sedan among the trees, and sprang out. The moon was not quite so bright as it had been, but it served. They could see the coupe, parked some distance ahead, opposite the cemetery.

Humberton also jumped out of the machine—a little more gingerly. "Can you see anything of her, Ted?" he inquired, anxiously.

"She's starting into the graveyard now. That stone wall is on the far side of it," the driver replied.

"We must run. If anything should happen to her, I could never forgive myself for exposing her to this. But it was the quickest way to uncover his hand—and speed may mean life or death."

"Shall I run ahead, sir?" Ted suggested.

"Yes, Ted. Cut across the field where the crane is, and hide behind the wall. If anything happens, use your own judgment. I'll join you as soon as I can."

Ted was off. Reaching the boundary of the large field, he cleared the ditch, placed his hands on a post of the barb-wire fence

and vaulted that, then raced like a hare diagonally across the field. The tall necrologist, lumbering after, soon lost sight of him. But Humberton continued at a steady running pace. He eased himself through the fence, and tried to be as noiseless as possible. It was no part of his plan that Miss Chanters should know she was guarded.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Secret of the Cemetery

AS Humberton neared the cemetery line, the moonlight brightened. He could see the girl. To his nearsighted gaze, her figure was vague, but he saw that she was walking very slowly—so slowly that he had time to reach the cover of the wall before she had come to its inner side.

"Don't breathe so hard, sir. She'll hear you," Ted cautioned, as his employer squatted down with him on the outer side of the low wall. Humberton received the suggestion in dignified silence, although several sharp rejoinders occurred to him. He did place one hand over his mouth, but continued to watch the slim figure of the girl as she slowly walked, within a few feet of them, toward the yellow disk of the moon.

The wall behind which they crouched had fallen into ruin in its middle portion, which left the cemetery for a hundred yards or more open to the fields at the side. No cover was possible there. They were able to keep even with the hesitant girl till this open space was reached, when Ted placed his lips close to his chief's ear and whispered again: "Shall I try wriggling along on my stomach so as to keep near her, sir?"

"The moon is too bright. We must wait here," Humberton decided.

"O. K., sir." She had moved beyond them, so Ted was able to speak with safety.

"Notice that clump of trees over where the wall is built up again? She's walking right towards it. Can you spot anything queer about it?"

The necrologist strained his eyes, but at length shook his head. "I see nothing but the trees, Ted. They are very black in the moonlight. You must remember my nearsightedness."

"I can't be dead sure, sir," the driver went on, not whispering now, yet keeping his voice down carefully, "but I think I saw a light there, just a minute ago; a queer kind of a light. It looked pale, like the moon, but it wasn't the moon."

"You don't see it now?"

"That's the funny part of it: I do, and I don't. When I look right at those trees everything is dark, but the moment I glance away I seem to see the light out of the corner of my eye."

"Imagination, doubtless," Humberton commented, coldly.

Ted was silent, while the girl they were watching walked slowly—very slowly—toward the black clump of trees, with the moon behind them. She was sick with fear. That was manifest in each shrinking step. But she faltered on.

Ted quivered, suddenly, like a pointer dog that scents his quarry. He laid a firm hand on his chief's knee, and whispered, just above his breath: "Hear anything, sir?"

"I hear the wind among the grave-stones," his chief returned.

"So do I. But this isn't the wind. I've been sneaking a glance or two behind."

"Something is following us?"

"Yes, sir," the driver answered.

"Our work lies ahead of us, Ted, not behind."

"O. K." Ted said, resignedly; but Humberton was not content to let it go at that. He gripped the young man's muscular arm, and spoke rapidly.

"Listen to me, Ted. I have let Miss Chanters go through with this thing be-

cause I suspect that a life is at stake, and this seems the most likely way to make Massow show his hand in time. I don't believe she is in any real danger. Yet she may be. She is walking very slowly, but in another moment or two she should reach the circle of trees. Then—"

"What then, sir?" Ted interrupted, excitedly.

"I don't know. She has been brought here for some purpose. Whatever it is it may be carried out then. If she seems in no danger, we'll not interfere. We'll merely follow. But there won't be time to talk about it. You'll have to use your own judgment."

TED nodded. She was now so close to the trees that he wasted none of his powers in words. He was entirely concentrated on watching. The moonlight, reflected from the ground and from the shimmering tombstones, seemed a luminous stream through which she walked waist-deep. By contrast the point just ahead where her path plunged into the woods was like some black hole between the stars. She paused a moment before entering the blackness, and looked about her uncertainly.

Then she screamed, twice, and fell forward.

Ted was on his feet, and running, before the anguished tones of her voice had fairly died away. He reached the girl, and knelt beside her.

"She's all right, sir! She's coming round!" he shouted.

Then he leapt to his feet, and shot off between the trees. When Humberton came up to the girl, she was struggling to a sitting position.

"Don't try to stand yet," he cautioned, gently. "You are quite all right, Miss Chanters. We have been near you all the while. Can you control yourself enough to tell me what you saw?"

"I saw—I saw—" She broke off with a sob.

"You've been very brave. Try to hold up just a little longer. What did you see?"

"A dreadful face—all fire!"

"Walter White's face?"

"I don't think so!"

Ted was back. "Can't find anybody, sir."

Humberton gazed thoughtfully at his assistant. In spite of his advice, Miss Chanters was standing. She was even making an attempt to brush herself off.

"You have your gun, Ted?"

"Right here in my hand." Ted held it up for inspection.

"Can you use a revolver, Miss Chanters?"

The unexpected question seemed to have a composing effect upon her. Her voice was firmer as she answered: "I'm really quite good with one. Walter made it a kind of hobby. He taught me how to shoot.

"That's very satisfactory." He calmly took the gun from Ted's hand. "I am going to ask you to do something to help us, Miss Chanters. If you aren't strong enough, please don't hesitate to say so, but if you are it will help greatly—greatly. I am giving you this gun. Do you feel able to return to your car alone, carrying it in your hand for protection, and to drive back to town by yourself? You have been the victim of a brutal trick, but I don't believe it will be attempted a second time, in the full glare of the moonlight."

She stopped, in the act of putting out her hand for the revolver. "A trick."

"There is no time now to explain. Can you do what I ask?"

"Yes," she answered, simply.

"Then here is the gun. Now, one thing more. When you reach home, call up police headquarters. Have them put you in touch with Detective Clyde. He is to drive out here at once. Tell him to bring a squad of men with him, but not to take too much

time gathering them up. Will you do that?"

She hesitated. "Possibly I can find a phone somewhere before I get home. That would save time."

"You are not to stop until you reach home. I am responsible for you to your father, and I want you to promise me that."

She nodded, reluctantly. "Very well."

Humberton watched her until her figure began to blend with the broad sea of moonlight. Then he turned to his associate, and speaking more loudly and far more cheerfully than the circumstances seemed to call for, he remarked: "I fancy, Ted, we are in for an adventure. The gentleman we are hunting will be only too glad to hunt us, if he can do so at all safely. And we have no gun!"

TED SPANG was naturally bright and given to intelligent reflection, yet he had found more than one occasion during his service with Horatio Humberton when the eccentric necrologist had thoroughly mystified him.

He was mystified now. For after they had watched Miss Chanters reach the road in safety and drive off in her little car, Humberton remarked, pleasantly: "I love the moonlight, Ted. There is nothing more soothing than a stroll on such a night as the present. Suppose we walk toward the middle of this beautiful old graveyard. I see quite a large building there, which no doubt is the vault of the Massow family."

He linked his arm in Ted's, and led the puzzled young man out into the moonlight. Once there, his whimsical mood vanished with startling suddenness, and he was serious again.

"Now that we are out of earshot, I can talk to you," he said, abruptly. "We suspect Massow. Very well! Why should Massow entice Walter White's fiancée out to this place. To kill her? I think not. If I had thought so, I never would have consented to her going. She screamed.

Probably that was all he wanted. She had a peculiar, quite distinctive voice. No doubt anyone well acquainted with her would recognize her scream."

"Who'd be out here to recognize it?" demanded Ted, vastly interested. He began to walk faster, but his employer held him to a slower pace.

"I must have time to talk to you, Ted. When we reach the vault, our adventure resumes—unless my reasoning is all wrong. If Massow is hiding someone—someone who will recognize Miss Chanters' scream and be moved by it—what better hiding-place can he find than his own vault? But you asked me a question. You asked who would be hiding here."

"And I think you've made me see the answer, sir," the driver replied. "Walter White is the fellow who'd be hit hardest by the scream. I'll bet the guy in the crane was the convict. Massow killed him—or he died some other way—and dressed his body up in White's clothes. I see what you were getting at about the face and hands being smashed so bad. He did that on purpose, of course, so nobody would find out. But I still don't see—"

"Neither do I, Ted," Humberton interrupted. "I don't see what possible advantage Massow can get out of White's disappearance. But I am certain—almost certain—that White is in that vault. You and I are going to find out about that, right now!"

"Maybe he's laying for us in the vault," the driver suggested.

"Quite likely."

Ted laughed. His odd sense of humor was keenest in moments of danger. "What a mark! You and me standing out there in the moonlight—I hope he's afraid to shoot, because of the noise."

"Hardly," his employer returned, coolly. "The vault will muffle that."

He started around the corner of the stone building.

"Where are you going, sir?" Ted demanded, grasping his arm.

"I shall stand at the side of the door, as nearly out of range as possible, and try to get into conversation with the man inside. I shan't make an unnecessary target of myself. I promise you that."

CHAPTER SIX

The Man In the Vault

TED released the lean, sinewy arm of his chief. Humberton walked to the corner of the vault, his worried associate just behind him. He halted exactly at the corner, where he could not be seen by anyone inside if the door chanced to be open.

"John Massow!" he called.

There was no response.

"Can you see if the door's open?" Ted whispered.

"It is."

"Then he 's inside?"

"He has been inside, at least."

"Listen to me, sir. I've got the eyes of a cat in the dark. Start talking to him again. I'll slip around you and be in there while he's still thinking over what you say."

Ted's employer patted the young man's shoulder, affectionately. "There seems to be no other way, Ted," he agreed.

He raised his voice. "John Massow! You have one other chance, before the police come. I give you my word that if the man you have in there is uninjured—"

Ted's voice interrupted, from the interior of the vault. He had slipped past his chief so adroitly that the latter had actually not been aware of it. "Not a soul in here, sir," he reported.

"You are sure?"

"I felt all around in the dark, then flashed my light about. Half a dozen stone cases, with caskets inside of them,

I guess—and that seems to be about all."

Humberton walked into the vault. Ted was playing the flashlight about, to prove the truth of his words. Stone, cold and damp, was all it showed—stone floor, ceiling, and walls; stone burial cases ranged at the sides; a house of the dead, bare and severe yet large, for the Massows in their day had been a family of importance.

The driver continued to move the ray of his flashlight from side to side. "He can't be in one of those stone cases," he suggested. "Not if he's alive."

Humberton snatched the light from him and directed it on the floor. "Stone!" he said, thoughtfully. "A stone floor. Why is that necessary?" Suddenly he danced half a dozen steps—ponderous, heavy steps. "That's it, Ted!" he cried. In his excitement, he no longer kept his voice down. "You heard the hollow sound? The original vault is underneath this. The later vault was built above it. What better place to hide a crime?"

He swept the flashlight over the stones of the floor. They were ancient, covered with dirt. Dirt stuffed the crannies between them; old, fungus-caked dirt, festering with the growths of moisture and decay.

"There's a queer mark over here at the side," Ted offered. "Something seems to have scraped the floor in a sort of a half-circle."

Humberton looked. His nearsighted eyes had entirely missed the mark. Now they sparkled with interest. "Quick, Ted! Help me!" he exclaimed.

FOR a moment, Ted was mystified. His chief had laid hold of one of the massive stone burial cases at the side of the vault. Then the alert driver understood, and added his own strength. At first, nothing resulted. Soon, very slowly, the heavy receptacle began to move toward them.

"Careful!" Humberton warned; but it

was he who had to be pulled aside by his assistant when the swinging burial case suddenly came faster and completed its arc. Ted took the flashlight, and shot a luminous ray into the yawning cavity. There were no steps, but some four feet below they could see a clay floor. It extended on three sides beyond their line of vision.

For the last time that night, the necrologist delayed so as to take Ted Spang into his confidence. He put one long arm around Ted's neck, and drawing the young man's face close to his own, spoke into his ear.

"You are to remain on guard up here, Ted," he whispered. "I will take the light. Massow is somewhere about, I am sure. He may be standing in the darkness at the door to this vault, this very minute. If he follows me down, as I hope he will, get out into the moonlight and bring Clyde here as soon as he appears. You understand?"

"I don't like it, sir," Ted protested, earnestly. "Let me—"

But his chief brought him up short. "You are taking more risk than I am," he said, curtly. "He is armed, you are not. Don't fight him—simply keep out of his way."

He felt his way to the brink of the opening in the floor, and dropped. He landed on hands and knees. At once he looked up, to test the darkness of the crypt. It was so complete that he could see nothing of the rectangular hole through which he had just come. If Ted was careful, his chances would be good.

He moved cautiously several paces forward until he believed himself out of the line of vision of anyone standing at the brink of the hole and peering down. Not until then did he turn on the flashlight. Its beam struck against the wall at the farther end. Slowly, he swung it about, to make the circuit of the underground

crypt. There were sealed burial cases against the walls, many of them, all rougher and cruder than those in the vault above; nothing else.

He started suddenly as a thought not connected with what he was looking at crossed his mind; and at that moment a barely audible hiss came from the black opening behind. Evidently some change had taken place in the upper vault. Ted was warning him.

BUT Horatio Humberton had a tenacious brain. Once a question had been raised in it, he was likely to press for an answer, in spite of danger. The question was: how could the air be so fresh? Until a minute ago, the underground crypt had been closed by the swinging burial case above it. Yet the air was good.

He began to peer behind the cases, between them and the stone wall. Then he had the answer. There was a wide opening in the wall, perhaps two feet high—an air shaft, connected with the surface, through which a current of air was coming. He shot the flashlight beam into the shaft. It had not traveled a yard when it flashed from the living eyes of a man. He lay bound and gagged, stretched out stiffly like a corpse, with his head toward the shaft entrance.

Humberton laid down the flashlight at the opening of the shaft and whipped out the keen, thin-bladed knife he always carried. The gag was thick and cruel. He had to cut carefully to remove it without injury to the bound man. But he had skilful hands.

"You are Walter White?" he demanded, as the thick gag fell away.

The man's lips opened and shut and his swollen tongue protruded. The pressure of the gag must have been sheer agony. But he managed to whisper: "Yes."

He struggled to say something else.

Humberton's quick instinct caught it.

"Miss Chanters is not harmed in any way. Her scream meant nothing except that she was frightened. She is at home—safe," he volunteered.

"Thank God!" They were hardly more than the hoarse shells of words, but the necrologist understood.

"I'll cut your cords," he said. "We must work fast. Don't try to talk."

"You will have plenty of time to do that," a deep sardonic voice interrupted, from the direction of the opening in the crypt ceiling; and at almost the same moment two things happened: light from a much larger and more powerful electric torch than Humberton's flooded the crypt, and Ted Spang landed lightly on the clay floor. John Massow, holding the torch, was looking down at them through the opening.

"I'm sorry, sir," the driver said, with real regret but no excitement in his voice. "I hadn't the least idea of getting caught this way. But he flashed his light and a gun on me, so what else could I do? I guess he'd been watching us all the time."

An amused laugh from the opening greeted this. "A good guess, Ted," Massow's voice agreed. "While you were looking for me after I frightened Betty with a little phosphorus, I had merely climbed a tree. I heard everything you said. I haven't been far from you since. Didn't know that, did you, Humberton?"

The necrologist straightened, and glanced toward the opening. "Not positively; I merely suspected it," he replied.

"Bluffing, eh? Let me tell you something, Humberton. If you'd known that, you'd never have trapped yourself here. Your only hope is Clyde. I heard you send for him. But it's half an hour's drive each way. That gives me forty minutes. Walk over toward your boss, Ted."

"Do as you are told, Ted," Humberton directed.

"Good." Massow suddenly landed in the crypt. There were six feet between him and Ted, and he kept his revolver carefully leveled from the instant his feet struck the clay floor. He was dressed as they had seen him earlier in the evening, but there the resemblance ended. He had appeared then a rugged, athletic businessman of the typical mill-executive type, though unquestionably larger and stronger than most. Now his lips were a thin line, he seemed to talk through clenched teeth, his eyes were narrowed and merciless. He was an adventurer, making the last, desperate move of a desperate game.

"I'll talk to you, Humberton," he said, setting his electric lantern on the floor so that it shone on the others but not on him. "You know who's there in the shaft?"

Humberton nodded, and Massow went on, speaking rapidly. "I killed the convict, Humberton. I had to. He attacked White and me. That meddling boy saw me carrying the body to the crane, after I'd fired up, but I'd already knocked White out and brought him here, after changing his clothes. What if I did torture him a little? Did he have to be so damned obstinate? If he'd been reasonable, I would never even have thought of telling him I was going to bring Betty out here and torture her, too." He laughed, harshly. "I made her scream, all right, didn't I, White? Humberton—you claim to know so much—you know what I want out of White?"

Humberton looked at him in the shadows behind the electric lantern, and half smiled. "The chemical secret of the process," he said, slowly.

"You're brighter than I thought. Look here, Humberton — I've got a right to that secret. Most of the money in this thing is mine. All I ask is the key. Half a dozen words! I'm chemist enough to recognize if it sounds genuine or not. Get White to tell it to me, here and now—give me your word, all of you, that you won't

proceed against me. I'll let you go. If you don't—"

Humberton glanced toward the prostrate man in the ventilating shaft. He could see the dark, keenly conscious eyes, the cut swollen lips. The lips parted. White's voice was still thick, but intelligible.

"He's a liar," it said, with cold, unemotional contempt. "He means to kill us. You've never fooled me for a moment, Massow. You meant to kill me from the first—as soon as you had my secret. With me gone, you could buy the rest of the stock for a song. Then if you had the secret, you'd pretend to experiment and rediscover it. You're heavily in debt, but that would make you rich again. Am I right, Massow?" The thick voice rose, hysterically.

MASSOW stood in silence, his finger on the trigger of the gun. At last he said: "I'm giving you your chance, White."

"What chance?" the man in the shaft demanded, bitterly.

"Tell me your secret. Promise not to prosecute. I'll take your word for it, and let you all go."

Walter White laughed. It was an unpleasant laugh to hear. "Do you believe that?" he asked Humberton.

"No!" Humberton answered.

"All right!" Massow said, quietly. There was a change in his voice. It was cold and final.

"I've played the game and lost," he went on. "That's over." He shifted his gaze and looked steadily at Horatio Humberton. "If it's any satisfaction to you, Humberton, I'll tell you now that one of these bullets is for me. But none of you three will be watching when I take it."

He had been stepping backward slowly, so as to leave still more room between them and him.

"You first!" he said to Ted, in a sudden dry whisper.

At the word, Ted sprang like a cat.

But a streak of orange-red flame was quicker. The air burst with a roar.

Detective Clyde, his gun still smoking, dropped lightly behind the two of them. Ted had crashed into a man with a shattered wrist—a man who cursed as the weapon fell from his useless hand.

"You drew it rather fine, Clyde," Humberton remarked quietly.

"Sorry, Ho. Had to wait till I could get a bead on his hand. Against regulations to kill a man if you don't have to."

Now Ted Spang looked curiously at his chief. "Did you know all the time that Clyde was there, sir?" he inquired.

"I fear the answer is 'Yes'," Humberton returned. "You know my unfortunate tendency to be theatrical, Ted," he went on. "That must be my excuse for not telling you sooner. When I left the room at the funeral parlors, ostensibly to call Miss Chanters' father, I telephoned Clyde, too. No doubt he was out here in the graveyard some time before we arrived."

Ted looked stupid—suspiciously so. "But you told the girl to telephone Clyde—when she was out here in the cemetery."

"A bluff, Ted," his employer explained, smoothly. "I wanted Massow to overhear me. And evidently he did."

The driver was silent, but Humberton could not resist the temptation to press the topic a little further. "You observed someone following us, near the old wall, Ted," he said. "Remember?"

Ted nodded.

"Well, that was Clyde!"

Ted broke his silence; broke it with a mischievous grin. "Yes, sir!" he agreed. "I'd have told you, only you didn't seem to want to talk about it. You see, he got his mug out in the moonlight—and I'd know Clyde anywhere!"



"Hey!" he shouted. "You can't do that!"

Alias the Corpse

By
Maxwell Hawkins

Author of "Death Tunes In," etc.

They were meek and mild looking little men, those brothers Jones. The last two in the world you'd expect to find mixed up with murder. But tracking down killers was their specialty—and a simple job like doubling for a corpse on a coffin-ride was just another night's work for either of them.

CHAPTER ONE

Jones—Just Jones

ONE NIGHT in Chicago, a lovely girl, clothed only in her night gown, crawled out the window of her room on the seventeenth floor and

started along a narrow ledge. A few seconds later, she crashed into the courtyard below.

There was an account of it in the papers the next day. They called it suicide.

A few days after that, a sugar planter in Cuba found a letter minus its envelope

on his warehouse floor. It smelled faintly of an exotic perfume and hinted at a murder to be committed in Chicago. It mentioned no names—merely the letter “S.”

A New York paper carried a five-line cable dispatch about it.

Only one man in the world would have tied those two events together. He was Leander Jones, senior member of Jones and Jones. And because Leander Jones specialized in knotting slender threads together into the solution of a crime, where no crime was apparent, an Argentine gigolo went to the electric chair for the murder of that girl in Chicago, whose name was Stella.

AND that explains why Leander Jones listened so attentively to the young and attractive woman who was sitting on the opposite side of his desk.

She paused a moment in her recital. Leander removed his mild blue eyes from her face and let his glance drop to the oblong of green paper in his hand.

“Fifty thousand dollars,” he murmured. “A check for fifty thousand dollars.”

“It came in the mail yesterday,” the young woman said.

“And this, Mrs. Minton, is the money on your late husband’s insurance policy?”

Marvella Minton nodded. “I had no idea he carried all that insurance. We lived very modestly. But then, of course, Gerald was close-mouthed about his affairs. He never took me into his confidence at all,” she added with something like a sigh.

“Had you been married long?” Leander asked absently, his eyes still intent upon the check.

“Only three months.”

He looked up at that. He noted her large brown eyes, set wide apart and filled with a wistful trusting expression. Her plain black dress was becoming but inexpensive, he saw.

“A woman,” Leander told himself, “of little worldly experience. Gullible even.

My, my! An attractive widow—and fifty thousand dollars. The devil’s own combination for trouble!”

Mrs. Minton seemed eager to confide in someone and Leander’s kindly, almost benign, appearance was an invitation for her to speak freely. “You see, Mr. Jones,” she continued. “I’m an orphan. And—” she hesitated. “Well, I met Gerald through a matrimonial agency. They called it The Lonely Hearts Bureau.”

She looked to see if he were smiling, but Leander nodded grave encouragement for her to go on.

“I grew up in an orphanage, where I received a good education,” she explained. “But afterwards I went to live with some people on a farm in Ohio. I was really only a hired girl—and lonesome.

“I saw the advertisement in a paper and wrote an answer just for a lark. But Gerald sent me a reply and we began to correspond. Finally, he sent me the money to go to Clarinda. And—well, we were married.”

“Hm!” Leander murmured. “Quite romantic. What was the cause of your husband’s death?” he asked.

“Doctor Barnabas—he was our doctor—said it was heart trouble. Gerald complained of feeling ill, so I called in the doctor. An hour later, he came to me and broke the news that Gerald was dead.”

Leander put his fingertips together and said nothing for a moment. Finally he asked in a kindly tone: “Just exactly why did you come to Jones and Jones? What is it that you are afraid of?”

She made a little gesture of hopelessness. “I can’t say definitely,” she replied in a low tone. “But I have a feeling that something terrible is going to happen. Has happened, perhaps. Don’t laugh at me, please,” she added, her voice an appeal for sympathetic understanding.

Leander’s face was serious. “I am not going to laugh, Mrs. Minton. A woman’s

intuition frequently has been of great importance in my work. But there must have been something—" He looked at her reassuringly.

MRS. MINTON nodded. After a moment's fumbling in her handbag, she produced a worn newspaper clipping. It was an account of the capture of the Argentine gigolo for the murder of the girl in Chicago named Stella. It set forth in glowing terms the part Jones and Jones had played in unraveling that seemingly insoluble crime.

Leander glanced at it with a grimace and handed it back. "Ah, yes," he murmured. "It was unfortunate that this leaked out. As a rule, we manage to keep out of the public prints."

"It was wonderful!" she replied earnestly. "I cut the piece out and saved it. That's why I came to you, when—" She hesitated and bit her lip, then plunged on breathlessly.

"Last night, for some reason I had difficulty falling asleep. I lay in bed for a long time thinking over all that had happened to me in the last few months. My marriage—my husband's death.

"I must have dozed off at last. But, suddenly, I found myself sitting upright in bed. I was trembling all over, although I had no idea of the reason. Some impulse caused me to go to the window and look out.

"And in the moonlight on the lawn I saw—my husband!"

She paused, wide-eyed. Leander looked at her sharply.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes," she replied firmly. "I recognized the brown coat Gerald always wore so much—and the soft gray hat. He went swiftly toward the hedge and just before he reached it, he turned and looked back toward the house—toward my window. Then he was gone. I saw his face in that fleeting second—" She buried her eyes

in her hands for a moment. "It was ghastly—white—just as it was when he lay in his coffin," she concluded softly.

She looked at him half sadly. "You may think that I was dreaming," she said. "But I know that I wasn't. It was all too vivid—too real. And so I came to you."

He rose from his chair and began to pace back and forth the length of his office with his hands behind his back, his head bowed in thought. She watched him anxiously, hopefully. At last, he stopped before her and held out the check.

"Here is your check," he said. "You can return home with the assurance that we are working in your behalf. But do not mention your visit here to anyone. Do you live alone?" he added suddenly.

She nodded in the affirmative, then quickly corrected herself. "At the moment, my husband's brother, Clarence Minton, is staying at the house. He's been there since the funeral, but he's leaving in a day or two."

"He knows about this insurance?"

"Yes."

Leander frowned. "Know you've got the money?"

"No. I didn't tell anyone it had been paid."

"Don't!" he said briefly. Again he held out the check. She pushed it away from her, as if afraid to touch it.

"Please," she said softly, "keep it here. And whatever the cost for your helping me, I'll be only too glad to—"

He interrupted her with a fatherly pat on the arm. "We'll keep the check in our office safe, if you wish. But as for the cost—there is no fee attached to the services of Jones and Jones."

She looked surprised. "But I want to pay," she protested.

"There is no fee, Mrs. Minton," Leander repeated with quiet dignity.

THERE was nothing about Leander Jones to attract more than a passing

glance. His appearance was nondescript, his manner self-effacing. Only a certain nervous quickness of movement and a disarming twinkle in his pale blue eyes distinguished him from thousands of other middle-aged citizens.

As he climbed down the steps of the day coach on the two o'clock train, which had brought him to the little city of Clarinda, he was carrying a scuffed black grip. His bald head beneath his brown hat was faintly moist. His gray suit was wrinkled from several hours sitting on the cushions of the train.

Leander Jones, indeed, looked as if he might be a none too successful traveling man. And as the elder partner of Jones and Jones, that was more or less the impression he wished to create.

The decrepit taxicab which met all trains conveyed him to the Clarinda House. Having obtained a room, he refreshed himself with a cold bath and clean linen. Then he pulled a small red memorandum book from his pocket and turned the pages slowly. At last, he found what he was looking for and held his finger on the place while he read a name and address several times to fix it in his mind.

Ten minutes later, Leander arrived in front of a white frame house which was set back some distance from the street. On one side of the door was a small brass plate, and as he turned in through the gate in the picket fence and drew nearer, he saw that it bore the name of Doctor Barnabas.

His ring brought an almost immediate response. The door was opened by a maid, young and buxom, with red hair and close-set eyes.

"Doctor Barnabas—is he in?" Leander inquired.

She nodded and stepped aside to let him enter. "First door on your left," she said. "I'll tell Doctor Barnabas you're here."

"Thank you."

Leander had a feeling that she had

given him a thorough, though veiled, appraisal.

He walked into the room she had indicated. It was obviously the waiting room for the doctor's patients. An ugly golden-oak table in the center contained a number of magazines and newspapers. A couple of red-plush chairs and a horse-hair sofa with sagging springs completed the furniture. Several colored prints and a large photograph in a black frame adorned the walls.

Leander's attention was caught momentarily by the photograph. It was a picture of a tall man in full evening dress. Across the bosom of his shirt a ribbon had been drawn diagonally, and he was standing in a dramatic pose with one hand extended in front of him and his eyes staring straight ahead. Before he dropped into one of the red-plush chairs, Leander noticed that the photograph bore the inscription written in ink: "Barnabas the Great."

"You wish to see me?"

Leander turned at the words, which were uttered in a deep resonant voice. He found himself looking at a considerably older version of the tall man in the photograph.

LEANDER rose to his feet and made a quick jerky bow. "You are Doctor Barnabas?"

"Yes."

"My name is Jones, Doctor." Then he repeated with an apologetic smile: "Just Jones."

Doctor Barnabas' dark eyes, crowned by straight bushy brows which were sprinkled with gray, studied the small figure standing so meekly before him. Then he rubbed his hands together with professional unction.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Jones," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Leander hesitated. "It's—it's about Mr. Gerald Minton," he finally murmured. "The late Mr. Gerald Minton."

"Mr. Gerald Minton?" Doctor Barnabas' grizzled eyebrows arched upward. "What about him?"

"You attended him in his last illness, I believe."

"Yes."

"If you don't mind, Doctor, I would like to have you tell me the circumstances attending Mr. Minton's death," Leander said.

Doctor Barnabas frowned and cleared his throat. "My dear Mr. Jones," he said ponderously, "I should be very glad to. But first, perhaps, you will explain who you are—and the reason for your request."

"I beg your pardon, Doctor," Leander replied, apparently overcome with confusion. "I should have mentioned it. I'm employed by the Wide World Life Insurance Company. Mr. Minton carried a large policy with our company. Quite large, indeed. So we're merely verifying the circumstances of his passing. Merely routine, I assure you, but customary with us," he added.

The doctor's manner warmed up immediately. "Sit down, Mr. Jones," he urged. "I'm only too glad to give you the information you wish. I'm sure Mrs. Minton, the widow, is in need of whatever insurance her late husband may have carried."

Leander sat down again on the red-plush chair.

"The cause of Mr. Minton's death," Doctor Barnabas continued, "was a heart attack. That's how I described it on the death certificate. That was a general diagnosis. Specifically, he died from an embolism, which passed through his circulatory system and stopped his heart action." He paused and looked at Leander, who nodded in understanding.

"Ah, yes. An embolism—a blood clot. And what, in your opinion, caused this blood clot to form?" Leander asked.

"It resulted from a severe bruise on

Mr. Minton's leg," Doctor Barnabas said after a second's thought. "He fell from a step-ladder."

Leander turned this information over in his mind, then rose to his feet. "Thank you very much, Doctor," he murmured. "That was exactly what I wished to know. Obviously, Mr. Minton's death was due to unfortunate, but perfectly natural, causes.

Doctor Barnabas made a pompous gesture. "Beyond question, Mr. Jones!"

At the door Leander shook hands with the doctor. "Thanks, Doctor. I'm sorry I had to trouble you," he apologized.

AS a result of consulting again his little red memorandum book, Leander's next stop was on a side street just around the corner from the hotel where he was registered.

He stood for a few seconds before a one-story brick building. The wide plate-glass window, behind which he could see two drooping potted palms, bore in black lettering—"B. Gerkin—Undertaker." Leander's pale eyes twinkled as he opened the door and stepped inside.

At his entrance, a young man with a yellowish complexion and a thin line of a mustache looked up from a desk.

"Are you Mr. Gerkin?" Leander asked.

The young man rose slowly from his seat. "No, I'm Mr. Viles, Mr. Gerkin's assistant. What can I do for you?"

"Well," Leander suggested, "you might tell me where I can find Mr. Gerkin."

Viles darted a quick suspicious glance at him, but Leander's face was bland and smiling. "I'll get Mr. Gerkin," Viles muttered and moved down a short hallway at the rear. He opened a door at the end of it, and Leander caught the unpleasantly suggestive odor of embalming fluid before the catch clicked shut.

Presently the door popped open and a short stout man wearing a Prince Albert coat with shiny elbows came bobbing down

the hallway toward Leander. His mouth was drawn down sadly at the corners in a fixed expression of sympathy. He cocked his head on one side, looked at Leander and said: "I'm Mr. Gerkin. I'm certain that at a time like this, you'll find my services most satisfactory, Mr.—ah—" He broke off with a little cough.

"Jones. Just Jones," Leander murmured.

"Ah, yes, Jones," Gerkin intoned. "Where is the deceased, Mr. Jones?"

Leander's pale eyes blinked rapidly. "I—I'm afraid you've mistaken the purpose of my visit."

"Oh—it's not to arrange a funeral?" Mr. Gerkin looked disappointed.

"I wanted to ask you about a funeral you conducted recently. Mr. Gerald Minton."

"Ah, yes! Mr. Minton," Gerkin said, his eyes resting thoughtfully on Leander. "A most impressive funeral. A lovely corpse. Everyone remarked how lifelike it looked, if you'll excuse my professional pride. But a touch of rouge always—"

Leander interrupted Mr. Gerkin's flow of words. "Maybe I'd better explain," he said. "I'm verifying the details of Mr. Minton's demise for the Wide World Life Insurance Company. He was one of our policy holders."

"Life insurance. Ah, yes," Mr. Gerkin nodded. His tone was that of a man whose business gives him a profound respect for life insurance. "What do you want to know?"

"Where is Mr. Minton buried?"

For a moment, Mr. Gerkin hesitated. But finally, he said: "Well, I can't say he's exactly buried."

"What?"

Mr. Gerkin hurriedly explained. "I mean to say that Mr. Minton isn't underground yet. There's some question in the widow's mind where to have him interred."

"Then you are keeping the body here?" Leander asked.

"Oh, no!" Mr. Gerkin exclaimed with a shake of his head. "The casket containing the remains is in the receiving vault at the Poplar Hills Cemetery."

Leander was silent for a little while. He looked almost dreamily up at the ceiling, then down at the floor, as if debating with himself whether to ask the next question. At last, he smiled blandly at the plump undertaker and said: "Mr. Gerkin, did you notice anything unusual about Mr. Minton's death?"

Mr. Gerkin looked at Leander sharply and then bristled. "Unusual? I'm afraid you'll have to explain."

"I mean, have you any reason to suspect that his death might not have been due to natural causes?"

"My dear sir!" The undertaker's tone was horrified. "If you are insinuating that Mr. Minton was—er—done away with, let me assure you that you're barking up the wrong tree. Why, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Jones. Just Jones."

"Mr. Jones, his death was due to a heart attack. I could tell that from the appearance of the body."

Leander scraped his feet apologetically. "Please excuse me. Of course, you realize that I'm only doing my duty. I'm glad to hear that Mr. Minton's death was natural. I am, indeed." He seized Mr. Gerkin's pudgy hand and shook it vigorously. "Thank you for reassuring me," he said gratefully.

Taking his leave of the plump undertaker, Leander returned hurriedly to the main street of Clarinda. He glanced up and down until he caught sight of the blue sign of a telegraph office.

A few minutes later the wires were carrying a brief message in the secret code of Jones and Jones. It was addressed to Mr. Horatio Jones, Flatiron Building, New York City.

Need you here meet me at Clarinda House before midnight drive and bring big screw-driver—Leander.

CHAPTER TWO

When Graveyards Yawn

THE clock on the front of the First National Bank Building stood at eleven-thirty when the Ford coupe containing Mr. Horatio Jones, younger member of Jones and Jones, pulled up before the Clarinda House. Removing a scuffed black grip from the seat, Horatio climbed from the car. He was wearing a brown hat and a gray suit, which was badly wrinkled from his drive.

As he appeared before the desk, the night clerk looked up from the paper he was reading. He noticed the grip in Horatio's hand and rubbed his eyes.

"Not leaving us so soon, are you, Mr. Jones?" he asked.

Horatio smiled, a self-effacing and disarming smile. "Oh, no. Just arriving." There was a twinkle in his pale blue eyes. He removed his brown hat and rubbed a handkerchief gently over his bald head. Then he swung the register around and ran his eye up the list of guests till he came to Leander Jones, Room 404.

The clerk watched him in bewilderment. "Just—just arriving?" he stammered.

"Yes. That's right," Horatio nodded. "I want a room. On the fourth floor, if possible."

"Why—why—" The clerk hesitated. He looked at Horatio keenly and then sniffed, trying to decide whether he might not be drunk.

"I believe," Horatio said, "that you have mistaken me for my brother, Mr. Leander Jones. He arrived this afternoon and is, I observe, assigned to a room on the fourth floor."

The clerk broke out in a grin. "I—I

beg your pardon," he said. "But you look exactly alike."

"So we've often been told," Horatio murmured.

Still grinning, the clerk pushed a key across the desk and tapped a handbell. From somewhere behind the elevator shaft, a sleepy-eyed colored boy appeared, picked up Horatio's grip and led the way to the elevator.

When he had dismissed the bell-hop with a tip, Horatio opened his grip and removed a large parcel wrapped in brown paper. He slipped quietly out of his room and made his way down the hall to the door of 404, where he gave a light tap. Without waiting for a response, he turned the knob and walked in.

Leander was sitting in a rocking chair with his shoeless feet propped up on the dresser. The room was blue with cigar smoke. He looked at Horatio and waved his hand, in which he held a glowing stogy.

"Hello, Horatio."

"Hello, Leander."

"I see you brought it," Leander said, pointing his stogy at the parcel in his brother's hand.

"The largest screwdriver I could find."

"Good. I didn't like to buy one here in Clarinda—for reasons."

"What do you want it for?"

"Nothing much," Leander replied dryly. "Just to screw the lid off a coffin."

WHEN the night clerk of the Clarinda House had declared that Horatio and Leander Jones looked exactly alike, he was not exaggerating. They were as alike in appearance as the two proverbial peas. And having found in carrying on the work of Jones and Jones that it was often an advantage to be mistaken for each other, they were accustomed to emphasizing their similarity by wearing the same kind of clothes.

Leander, however, had entered the world ten minutes ahead of his identical twin brother, and that fact caused him to refer to himself as the senior partner of Jones and Jones.

Horatio made himself comfortable on the edge of the bed and regarded Leander thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "why do you want to screw the lid off a coffin?"

"A hunch—based on what I learned this afternoon," Leander replied coolly.

"And you intend to open it without a permit?"

"In about an hour."

Horatio puckered his nose. "Do we have to dig it up?"

Leander shook his head. "Fortunately, no. It's in the receiving vault of the local cemetery. Late this afternoon, I visited the place and made a wax impression of the lock. I finished making the key only a little while ago."

He pointed to the dresser on which his feet were resting. A large key, the square bit of which showed indications of having been recently filed, was lying on the dresser cloth.

"Well, what have you found out?" Horatio asked.

"I've talked with a number of residents of this pretty little city," Leander said. He told about his calls on Doctor Barnabas and Gerkin, the undertaker.

"I also spoke to several people who attended Minton's funeral. Also, I called on the editor of the local paper to find out what he knew about Minton."

Horatio fished out a black stogy, a duplicate of the one Leander was smoking, and lit it. "What about him?" he demanded.

"He'd lived here about four years. Was formerly in the show business. But apparently he didn't do anything after he arrived here in Clarinda. He wasn't young. Fifty-three the obituary account in the paper said. Guess he'd just retired," Leander said.

Horatio got up from his place on the

edge of the bed. "Well, suppose we get this coffin open—and find nothing?"

Leander chuckled. He began to pull on his shoes, stamping his stocking feet firmly into them. "My dear brother, if we find nothing, we will certainly have to start finding a lot!"

He walked to his black grip which was resting on a low bench and began to fumble around in it. When his hand finally emerged, it was holding a stubby revolver. He slipped the weapon into one pocket of his gray coat. Next he produced a flashlight, which he tested and put in the other pocket.

"You'd better bring your gun along, too, Horatio," he said.

HORATIO at the wheel, the Ford coupe slid from the curb, moved smoothly down the main street of Clarinda. As the red tail-light grew dimmer and dimmer, a figure slipped out of the shadows beside the hotel and disappeared around the corner. But neither Horatio nor Leander noticed it.

"Which way?" Horatio asked.

"Straight out this street," Leander replied. "It's about two miles from town. Poplar Hills Cemetery."

For a while, the only sound was the smooth purr of the engine, the occasional rattle as the coupe struck an irregularity in the pavement. Overhead the sky was starless, mantled with heavy clouds, although the lack of humidity in the air made rain seem unlikely. They passed beyond the last street light and hit the open country. It was rolling terrain; fields divided by patches of woods and underbrush.

Presently Leander touched Horatio on the arm. "Turn right at the next crossroad."

"That take us to the cemetery?"

"Passes about a quarter of a mile this side of the cemetery wall. But there's a foot path across the fields that will take us

to the cemetery. I looked the ground over this afternoon."

They reached the turn and Horatio swung off the main highway. The side road climbed a gentle slope, dipped down into a heavily wooded ravine and then rose again to an even higher level. Leander pressed his face close to the coupe window.

"Stop here!" he exclaimed suddenly.

The coupe came to a halt. Leander opened the door and stepped down to the road. His flashlight made a white circle on the ground for a few minutes, then went out as he returned to the car.

"You can drive over to the side safely," he said. "Pull up behind that group of bushes ahead."

THE path across the fields toward the cemetery was fairly level and smooth. With Leander leading and flashing his electric torch from time to time, they had little trouble in following it, although the clouds shut off even the starlight and submerged the countryside in utter blackness. Instinctively, they spoke in subdued tones.

"Anybody apt to see us?" Horatio asked.

"No. The few houses anywhere near are on the other side. It's late, anyway," Leander reminded him.

"What time?"

"A bit after midnight."

"When graveyards yawn," Horatio murmured.

Leander's answer was dry. "It's all right for them to yawn, but not for us."

In silence then, they continued forward till Leander finally called a halt. Horatio moved up to his shoulder. Snapping the flash on for a few seconds, Leander swung its beam back and forth in front of them. It played upon a low stone wall, crumbling in spots and blotched in many places with tangled vines.

Beyond in irregular rows, the tombstones stood like white sentinels of death.

Horatio spoke, his voice low and tense, a little breathless. "Where's the receiving vault?" Somehow, this standing on the edge of a city of dead men at midnight, with the prospect of soon gazing upon the still face of one of them, seemed to have disturbed his usual calm.

"About a hundred yards in," Leander replied softly. "Come on!"

They climbed the wall and found themselves standing on yielding turf. Again the light, its ghostly beam setting up dancing shadows as it moved past the headstones and the trunks of the giant poplars that gave the burial ground its name.

Above, a dense canopy of leaves seemed to press down upon them. It made the air heavy, motionless. There was an oppressive odor of damp loam, mold, mingled with the sickening scent of wilted flowers left too long upon some new-made grave.

"This way," Leander whispered, and moved ahead again.

A moment later, they were treading upon cinders, which crunched beneath their feet in spite of all effort to move silently. Leander slowed down and touched Horatio on the arm.

"This path leads directly to the vault. I've found my landmark—that marble angel on the left."

His flashlight went out and they advanced more surely now. No sound broke the ghastly stillness except the *crunch-crunch* of their feet upon the cinders. They seemed to be the only moving things in the world. Beneath lay the dead, around them the air was stilled, and above even the birds in the trees were silent in sleep.

At last Leander halted again. The flashlight's rays cut through the blackness. In its column of white light, a squat stone building took shape. It looked like some hideous crouching animal with the two slits of windows for eyes and the black oblong of the door in the middle, a gaping toothless mouth.

"That's it," Leander whispered.

They approached closer, moved forward step by step until they were standing in front of the iron door. The light glided over it, revealing each bolt-head, the square window with the cross-bars, the massive knob and keyhole.

"The screwdriver?" Leander breathed. "I've got it."

"Good. Take the light, Horatio."

The flashlight passed from hand to hand.

"Fix it on the keyhole," Leander said softly.

Horatio obeyed. There was a moment of intense quiet, while Leander felt in his pocket for the key he had made that evening. From the distance came the faint sound of an automobile, some midnight motorist scurrying for the shelter of home. But the very remoteness of the sound made the stillness of the graveyard even more acute, more ghastly and disturbing.

Then Leander's hand, grasping the key, appeared in the light beam. It threw a weird distorted shadow upon the door. A grating noise, the scrape of metal upon metal, as Leander fumbled to insert the key. A moment later, he succeeded. His hand turned slowly.

With a dull clank, the heavy bolt of the receiving vault slid clear.

CHAPTER THREE

Twice Dead

LEANDER withdrew the key from the vault door and replaced it in his pocket. He turned the knob, at the same time putting his shoulder against the heavy iron portal. Slowly, it swung inward, the rusty hinges giving forth a low creak of protest. A sudden breeze, chill and damp, swept out from the vault, fanned their faces and then dissolved into the graveyard air.

"The light, Horatio." Leander's voice was husky.

Horatio handed him the flashlight and he stepped into the pitch darkness before him. Horatio was close behind. For a moment, they stood just inside the door, while the flashlight swung around the interior of the dank stone vault.

On the walls to the right and left of the entrance were open niches, like shelves, each designed to hold a single coffin. They were empty, the slabs with which they could be sealed standing on end against them. But what gripped the attention of the two men, caused them to breathe faster, was the object on which Leander finally brought the light to rest.

It was a plain black coffin, placed on two low wooden horses, its silver handles and name-plate glittering in the light rays. In the very center of the vault, it stood, with the head toward the door.

Leander walked silently to it, bent over and read the inscription on the silver name-plate.

GERALD LEROY MINTON

Born May 7, 1880

Died June 19, 1933

*"He strutted and fretted his
brief hour upon the
stage and then
was heard
no more."*

At once, Leander's manner became brisk, the uncanny spell of the surroundings conquered by the urgent need for quick action. "The screwdriver," he said. "Hold the light for me."

He began to twist the first of the dozen black-headed screws that held the coffin lid in place. Little by little it began to loosen. The job of removing the screws was not easy, and by the time he was half-way through, Leander's breathing was growing heavy. But he refused Horatio's

offer to relieve him and stuck doggedly at it.

The last screw—Leander was working now with feverish haste. Drops of sweat fell from his face, splattered upon the coffin top. A few more turns and the dead man would lie exposed.

"Wait!"

Horatio's whispered warning was accompanied by utter darkness as he snapped off the flashlight. There in that awful blackness, they stood as motionless as the dead men around them. But their ears were straining, their eyes fixed on the open door of the ghostly place.

Leander reached out and found his brother's arm. With that to guide him, he placed his lips close to Horatio's ear.

"What is it?" he breathed.

"Crunching—on the cinders."

Leander's hand glided into his pocket and came out with his stubby revolver. Once more they waited in tense silence. A minute. Five. Finally, Leander whispered softly: "You must have been mistaken."

"Probably," Horatio agreed, but his voice lacked conviction.

Leander returned his pistol to his pocket. "Let's get this over with," he muttered. "The light!" He laid the screwdriver on the floor and twisted the last screw clear with his fingers. He put it carefully on the floor beside the others he had removed.

"Step back a little," he ordered softly. "I'll open it up."

Bending over the coffin, he hooked his fingers beneath the lid and tugged. With but a slight scraping sound, the lid came loose. He placed it carefully down against the wooden horses. Then he straightened up. Horatio, returning to his side with the flashlight, raised it so that the beams revealed almost the full length of the coffin.

"My God!" Leander gasped out hoarsely, and repeated: "My God!"

Before them lay the body of a man, a man with gray hair and a close-cropped gray mustache. The eyes were closed, and about the corners of the purple lips was a trace of a smile. It was a calm face, like that of a sleeper who is having pleasant dreams.

The dead man was dressed in evening clothes. But the white bosom of his stiff shirt was marred by a hideous dark brown smear—coagulated blood that had gushed from the left breast.

And rising from that spot, directly over the heart, was the short wooden handle of a knife.

FOR a long breathless moment, Leander and Horatio stared with horror-filled eyes at the ghastly thing. A corpse that had been stabbed in its coffin!

Finally, Leander took his handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it about the hilt of the weapon. He was obligated to use both hands and exert all his strength before the blade came out.

"Give me your handkerchief, Horatio," he whispered.

He bound the knife, an ordinary kitchen knife with an eight-inch blade, carefully with the two handkerchiefs and placed it in his pocket.

"One thing's certain," he mused. "This man was alive when he was put in this coffin. Or at least, he had just been stabbed. See—the stain is on the gray lining, too."

"Good lord!" Horatio muttered. "It looks as if they'd held a funeral for a man who was alive."

Leander shrugged. "There was no dagger in Minton's heart when he was lying in his coffin at the funeral. I talked with several people who were there and viewed the body." Leander placed his finger just above the ugly brown smear and added significantly: "A dead man wouldn't bleed."

"Are you certain this is Minton?"

Before answering, Leander studied the face of the corpse long and closely. "Yes," he said, "I believe so. He looks like the picture in the paper, and fits the description I got, too."

"What'd we better do about it?"

"What can we do, Horatio?" Leander murmured. "We're not exactly within the law in this enterprise, so we've got to find our own answers without outside help. Do you know, there's something familiar about this fellow," he added suddenly.

"You mean—"

"I mean he resembles someone I've seen before," Leander said. "But I can't place him." He made a little gesture and said with sudden grimness: "Give me your pocket knife!"

Horatio produced a knife and handed it over. "You're going to look for a bruise?"

"Exactly. The bruise that caused the blood clot that brought about Minton's death. His *first* death," he added dryly. He began to slide the knife swiftly up the material of the trouser legs.

"Perhaps Minton's death was a case of catalepsy — suspended animation. I've heard of such cases," Horatio suggested.

"Perhaps," Leander murmured non-committally.

He snapped the knife shut and handed it back to Horatio. "But if he was buried by mistake while in a state of catalepsy, why should we find him now with a dagger in his heart? Bring the light closer," he said.

Horatio lowered the flashlight nearer to the corpse.

Spreading the slit trousers back from the dead man's legs, Leander started to examine them carefully for signs of a bruise. Horatio watched him closely. Suddenly Leander looked up with a start, and immediately froze into rigidity. Horatio drew in his breath with a quick gasp.

From far off, yet clear on the still night

air, came a woman's scream. Once—twice—three times, her shrill cry of terror quivered on their eardrums. It was followed by a shot. A second shot—then another scream that choked, and ended in a gibbering wail.

LEANDER sprang toward the door of the receiving vault. Before the final agonized sound had ceased, he was outside.

"Put out the light!" he whispered over his shoulder.

Horatio joined him. Guns in hand, they stood listening.

"It seemed to come from the left—from the road where we left the car," Horatio finally whispered.

As if to confirm his words, again that ghastly scream broke out. This time it was farther away. But as Horatio had said, it came from the direction of the road. And once more, it ended in a blood-chilling mournful wail.

Leander seized Horatio fiercely by the arm. "Wait here!" he whispered tensely. "Keep out of sight!"

"Right!"

Horatio glided around the corner of the vault and then halted, pressing himself close to the stone side. Leander disappeared into the darkness. He followed the cinder path, his feet guided by the crunching beneath them.

It was difficult to make haste without a light, and for a second he considered returning and getting the flash from Horatio. Then he realized that it would be wiser not to herald his movements, even if he couldn't make such good speed.

He scrambled over the low stone wall bordering the cemetery and headed out across the open field that lay between him and the road. Out from under the cemetery foliage, the darkness seemed less dense and against the far-off glow from the street lights of Clarinda, he could dis-

cern the trees and shrubbery that lined the road.

Without trying to locate the path, he started cutting over in a beeline. From time to time, he stubbed his feet against outcropping stones, and low bushes scraped his ankles, but he pressed on. His right hand gripped his revolver.

A hundred feet from the far side of the field, Leander stopped to listen. Everything was deathly still. He moved forward again, his eyes straining to pierce the gloom. A moment later, he was stooping to escape low-hanging branches; then he was on the edge of the road.

He waited, every sense alert, nerves taut. Presently from up the road came a dull thud. Someone closed the door of an automobile. Cautiously, he started toward the spot from which the sound had come. He had advanced only a few steps, when the twin headlights of a car cut through the night, and he found himself directly in their glare.

As he leaped for the shadows, the engine started up, gears clattered and the car lurched forward. It roared by the spot where he was hiding; a streak of orange flame stabbed toward him. But the shot was wild. And in that second, Leander caught a flash of the occupants of the machine. A man and a woman, both in the front seat. But he was unable to distinguish their faces.

He jumped into the middle of the road and his pistol came up. Four times he fired. But the car kept on, and in a few seconds the tail-light vanished over the crest of the hill. He could hear the exhaust growing fainter and fainter. And presently, he could hear it no more.

"Now what the devil?" he muttered. Then he suddenly snapped his fingers and burst out fiercely: "Damn! A ruse to get us away from the vault!"

He swung around quickly and plunged into the underbrush along the road. And as he panted back across the fields to-

ward the graveyard, the clouds parted and a silver crescent of a moon shed its cold eerie light over the ground.

SLOWLY and cautiously, Leander approached the receiving vault. He avoided the cinder path, creeping, instead, over the turf of the burial plots, slipping ghostlike from headstone to headstone. Now and then he paused to listen. But only the faint pounding of his own heart fell upon his ears.

Finally, he reached a point from which, in the shelter of a huge granite marker, he could distinguish faintly the outline of the vault. A break in the foliage of the trees allowed the pale moonlight to seep through. It bathed the squat stone building in a weird unearthly glow.

He waited. But there was no sign of life about the vault; no sign of Horatio.

A sudden feeling of disaster assailed him. He began to circle the vault, keeping well back in the deep shadows. Before taking a step, he made sure of his footing, guarded against making the slightest noise. At last, he stopped, crouching behind the trunk of a huge poplar. He was in front of the vault.

He leaned forward, eyes intent upon its grisly facade. With a tightening in his throat, he saw that the massive iron door had been swung shut. And he remembered distinctly that he and Horatio had left it open when they came out.

With his lips set grimly, he moved across the open space to the vault door. In one hand he held his gun; with the other he turned the heavy knob. He pushed and the door moved in a few inches. Another push and it swung wide. His finger caressed the trigger as he stepped into the black interior and slid to one side of the door, where he waited. But there was no sound, nothing to indicate that anyone was concealed in that macabre gloom.

He regretted that he didn't have the

flashlight. After a moment's fumbling in his pocket, he found a paper folder of matches. Putting his revolver away, he struck one of them. It flickered and almost went out, but by cupping his hands about the feeble flame he nursed it into brilliance.

Then, lifting the match high, he peered about the vault. A low cry of amazement and alarm burst from his lips.

"Gone—gone!"

The match spluttered out. He took a short step forward, and struck another. In its gruesome light, which filled the place with wavering shadows, he verified his previous discovery. The two wooden horses were still in the middle of the vault, but there was no sign of the black coffin which had held the corpse of Gerald Minton. The lid, too, was gone.

And then on the floor of the tomb just beneath the coffin niches, he saw something that sent his pulse leaping, made his throat muscles constrict. A dark figure sprawled face downward. He moved toward it quickly, too quickly, for the suddenness of his movement extinguished the match.

But he was beside the figure and he dropped to his knees before lighting another. In those few seconds, Leander passed through a torment of fear and horror. Then he had a light. He reached out and rolled the figure over.

It was the corpse of Minton. As Leander gazed at it with mingled relief and revulsion, the dead face seemed to smile up at him mockingly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder

THE firm of Jones and Jones, consisting of the twin brothers Leander and Horatio, was unique—the only one of its kind in the world.

It could hardly be called a detective

agency, strictly speaking, yet much of the business they carried on was of that nature. They were, to be exact, specialists in criminology. The distinguishing feature of their work was that they undertook to discover crimes which probably would never have come to light had it not been for their shrewd and persistent probing.

And once having unearthed a crime, they took it upon themselves to bring the guilty parties to justice.

In the course of twenty years experience, they had reached an amazing efficiency, had won an almost legendary reputation among those whose business had to do with crime. Their leads were many and varied. An innocent-appearing item in a newspaper, a suspicion transmitted to them by an acquaintance, a bit of overheard conversation—any one of a number of things—might serve to start them on a hunt that sometimes came to nothing, but more often revealed a startling crime.

Having inherited a more than adequate fortune, they weren't interested in profit. They regarded their work as their contribution to the public welfare. And so they accepted no fees except such voluntary offerings as grateful clients, who could afford it, might hand over to them. These, they promptly turned over to one of a number of pet charities.

Because the two brothers had always been so close together in their work, their play, and even their thoughts, it was with a heavy heart that Leander drove Horatio's coupe back toward Clarinda from the Poplar Hills Cemetery.

A careful search of the receiving vault and surrounding area had produced no hint of what had befallen Horatio. Or what had become of the silver-handled coffin which had held the stabbed body of Gerald Minton. Both had vanished completely while Leander was being led on a wild goose chase by the screams and pistol shots.

For half an hour, Leander had hunted for a possible clue to the drama—tragedy—that had been played in his absence. It had been fruitless. The only thing of possible significance was that whoever had removed the coffin and lid also had taken the screwdriver and long black-headed screws he had so laboriously removed only a short time before.

Instinctive caution prompted Leander not to drive the car up in front of the hotel. Instead, he left it at an open-air parking space a block from the main street, where a half dozen other machines were scattered about. He noted from a sign that it was Fred Stacey's Open Air Garage.

He looked at his watch. Almost three o'clock. The business district of Clarinda was completely deserted as he walked to the hotel. He crossed the lobby without disturbing the clerk, dozing in a chair behind the desk. And rather than let the colored elevator operator know the time of his return, he climbed the three flights of stairs to his room.

When he had shut and bolted the door, he selected one of the thin black stogies to which the brothers Jones were addicted, and dropped wearily into a chair. His pale blue eyes had taken on a deeper hue; his rather high forehead was drawn down in a series of furrows; his lips were pressed in a tight thoughtful line.

Leander dropped the self-effacing and embarrassed manner both he and Horatio affected in public. Now he was himself—a grimly determined man whose small wiry figure was in such perfect physical trim it gave the lie to his forty-two years of age. A man with a shrewd analytical mind and the tenacity and courage of a terrier.

Leander began to turn the situation over in his mind.

His main concern was the fate of Horatio. It was possible, he knew, that even at this moment Horatio was trailing the

ghouls who had stolen the coffin. Possible but not probable, he decided with a slow shake of his head.

ON PREVIOUS occasions when Horatio had seen fit to leave an agreed meeting place, he had always left some message, some clue as to what had happened to him. There had been nothing like that at the cemetery.

He was in a tough spot, Leander admitted to himself. He couldn't go to the authorities because that would call for an explanation of what he and Horatio were doing at Poplar Hills Cemetery in the dead of night. Besides, it wasn't the practice of Jones and Jones to call on the police except for routine arrests.

But why, he asked himself again and again, had the mysterious invaders stolen the coffin and left behind the corpse? He could have understood in a way the theft of the body and coffin—or body alone. But why leave behind the cadaver with the gaping hole in its heart, a smear of blood that pointed to a murder while the victim was supposedly lying ready for interment anyway?

Leander squinted. Could it be, he wondered, that there was something hidden in the coffin. Something that was of such great value that it was a temptation to take a reckless chance to get the coffin out of the vault.

He concluded that the grave robbers had probably watched Horatio and himself enter the vault, had figured that they, too, were after whatever the coffin concealed. And so the strategy of screams and shots to draw them away while the coffin was being removed.

What was in Minton's casket. Money, jewels, important or incriminating documents? Leander's mind ran the gamut of possibilities. But in the end, he found himself more puzzled than ever as to the motive for the theft, and growing more

and more alarmed over what had happened to Horatio.

It was after nine o'clock when Leander left his room and descended to the lobby. He had taken a cold shower, and except for a slight puffiness under the eyes, showed no marks of the harrowing night he had been through. Nor was there any outward evidence of the deep anxiety that stirred within him.

In the hotel dining room, he ordered a breakfast of orange juice, dry toast and coffee. But when it came, he found he had little appetite for it.

"Isn't it terrible, sir?" the waitress, who was hovering near, suddenly said in an awed voice.

Leander looked up in surprise, then smiled faintly. "No, I assure you, the food is quite all right," he murmured. "It's just that I'm not hungry."

"Oh, I don't mean the breakfast," she said solemnly.

"I beg your pardon," Leander muttered. "I seem to have misunderstood you."

"Maybe you haven't heard?" she continued.

A resigned expression appeared in Leander's blue eyes. "Heard? Heard what?"

The waitress moved closer to him and lowered her voice in the manner of one who is imparting bad news. "About poor Mr. Gerkin!"

Leander set down his coffee cup with a slow and deliberate movement. He wiped his lips with one corner of his napkin. Then he asked: "Gerkin? Mr. Gerkin?"

"Yes, sir," she nodded. "Mr. Gerkin the undertaker, whose parlors are just around the corner from here."

"What about Mr. Gerkin?" Leander asked with an air of casual curiosity.

"He's been murdered!"

"Murdered! My word!" Leander to all appearance was politely horrified. Actually, this unexpected bit of news had

set his thoughts buzzing like an industrious beehive.

The waitress, having found what she believed to be an appreciative ear, grew more voluble. "It's getting so a person ain't safe anywheres nowadays. That's what I told Joe. To think of poor Mr. Gerkin! Such a nice man. He always ate here Tuesdays with the Rotary, and lots of other times. He was a bachelor and ate out mostly."

"My, my!" Leander clucked softly. "And how did you hear about this terrible crime?" he asked.

"From Joe Cluskey, my—my boy friend. He's a cop—a policeman," she explained. "He always eats breakfast here. He left just before you came in."

"When did this happen?"

"Joe says some time this morning early. Mr. Gerkin had been dead only a few hours when they found him. His skull was mashed in. Just like an eggshell, Joe said."

"Dear me!" Leander murmured, shaking his head. "Where did they find the body?"

"In a Ford car—a coupe with a New York license."

LEANDER raised his glass of orange juice and drained it in a gulp. "Oh! A Ford car—a coupe with a New York license," he repeated.

She nodded. "It was in Stacey's parking lot. Fred Stacey noticed it when he opened up this morning. It'd been left there during the night when no one was working. Fred looked in and saw poor Mr. Gerkin with his head mashed. So he called the police."

"Did they find out who owns the car?" Leander asked slowly.

"They don't know yet. But Joe says they're checking up on the license number. And when they find the owner, Joe says, they'll pinch him like that. I hope they do," she added indignantly.

Leander pushed back from the table. He placed a coin beside his plate and picked up the check. The waitress transferred the tip from the table to the pocket of her apron.

"Thank you very much, sir," she said.

Leander gave her an odd little smile. "Not at all. Thank you!"

As Leander, avoiding the appearance of haste yet moving rapidly, walked out through the revolving door of the hotel, he told himself that this was a pretty kettle of fish. He had no doubt that the Ford coupe in which Gerkin's body had been found was Horatio's. The car in which he, Leander, had driven back from the Poplar Hills Cemetery and left at Stacey's Open Air Garage.

He crossed the street and turned a corner, anxious to get off the main street of Clarinda as fast as possible. Thanks to the talkative waitress, he was forewarned. But it wouldn't be long before the local police learned the ownership of the coupe, and that would be followed quickly by the discovery that the brothers Jones were registered at the Clarinda House.

A worried look lurked in his pale eyes as he made his way along a shaded avenue deep into the residence section of the town. He couldn't afford to be picked up, held perhaps for hours while they were investigating the crime or he was establishing his identity and innocence.

He was satisfied that Gerkin's murder and the theft of the coffin were tied together some way. But try as he would, he couldn't figure out the exact connection or even a likely theory. Why had the coffin been stolen, anyway? Why had the corpse been left behind? Why had Gerkin been killed? And last, and most important, where was Horatio? Alive or dead?

Of one thing, Leander was certain. He's have to keep out of sight, since there were eight or ten persons to whom he'd talked on the previous day, who could

identify him. And at the same time, it was up to him to work faster than he'd ever worked in his life.

It was a tough assignment, he admitted to himself. Keeping out of sight, and yet tracking down his foes. And with virtually no clues to go on.

He continued along the shaded avenue for a considerable distance. A small self-effacing figure in a wrinkled gray suit and a brown hat. To the few passersby, he appeared merely an inconspicuous and rather absent-minded man.

But Leander was far from absent-minded at the moment; he was well aware of everything going on around him; he made certain that those whom he passed didn't know him.

Gradually the houses became farther and farther apart. He was nearing the outskirts of Clarinda. At a street intersection, he paused, drew forth his little red memorandum book and consulted it. Then he looked at the street signs and nodded slowly. He was almost there.

Five minutes later, he turned in from the sidewalk of the street through an opening in a hedge. The shrubbery was unkempt and overgrown, and surrounded a large and weed-filled lawn. Set well back and approached by a winding gravel path was a large, weather-stained house. This drab structure was surmounted by two cupolas at the forecorners; the front and smaller side porches were ornamented with scrollwork and turned wooden posts, popular fifty years ago.

Leander twisted the flat bronze key of a mechanical doorbell and heard it ring just inside. He didn't have long to wait. The door was opened a crack and a face appeared, a face of ghastly pallor with a close-cropped gray mustache and crowned by a disordered thatch of gray hair.

"I wish to see Mrs. Minton," Leander announced.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jail For Jones

FOR a few seconds, the man inside made no reply. His burning, deep-set eyes, in vivid contrast to his pasty complexion, surveyed Leander from head to foot.

Leander didn't believe he had ever seen the fellow before, yet a puzzling sense of resemblance disturbed him.

"Mrs. Minton isn't home." The words were uttered gruffly, slowly.

"Not home? How unfortunate. I'm very anxious to see her. It's important—to her," he murmured.

"She won't be home for a long time. She's gone away," the man in the doorway said.

His thin lips twitched into a faintly mocking smile as he spoke. And in a flash, Leander realized why this man seemed familiar to him. His thin face, close-cropped gray mustache and that peculiar taunting smile bore a striking similarity to the dead man he had gazed down upon the night before.

This, then, was Clarence Minton—the brother of whom Mrs. Minton had spoken.

"Maybe you can tell me where I can reach her," Leander suggested. He was still smiling that retiring apologetic smile of his. But there was a new note in his voice, a sharp authoritative note. It caused the man with the ghastly white face to look at him narrowly, suspiciously.

"Who are you?" The question came abruptly, almost shot out from the blue lips.

"I'm from the insurance company. The Wide World Life Insurance Company."
"Oh!"

There was a moment of tense silence. Gradually the feverish light in the deep-set eyes seemed to fade, and in its place

came an ingratiating, conciliatory expression.

"Why didn't you say so at first. Come in!" The voice was still gruff, but not unfriendly.

The door opened wide and Leander, inwardly alert, entered the house. The hallway in which he found himself was close and stuffy; it was in semi-darkness, the only light filtering in through squares of colored glass which formed a transom above the door. Coming from the glare of outdoors, he was at first unable to see the figure of the man who had admitted him, although the pale face was visible.

"We'll go into the parlor."

Leander followed him through a set of double doors, only one of which was opened, into a big room with a high ceiling. It was shielded from outside observation by old-fashioned wooden blinds, tightly closed, which covered all the windows. Only enough sunshine penetrated to fill the place with a bilious yellowish glow.

Now Leander saw that the man he had decided was Clarence Minton was of medium height, his shoulders slightly stooped. As he walked across the parlor, he moved with a distinct limp.

"Have a seat," he said, pointing to a wicker chair.

Leander sat down. An air of embarrassment masked his face, but his sharp eyes were taking in every detail of the white-faced man. Minton remained standing, supporting himself with one hand on the marble top of an ancient walnut table with bulging legs.

"Mrs. Minton isn't here, as I told you," he said slowly. "But I am her brother-in-law. Clarence Minton."

"Ah, yes," Leander nodded. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Clarence Minton studied Leander for a moment, cleared his throat and then continued: "Marvella—that is, Mrs. Min-

ton—has been in a very nervous condition ever since my brother's death. I've been urging her to take a trip, go away for a rest. A change of scenery, I believed, would benefit her health. Make her forget her great loss."

He stopped and, lifting his hand from the marble-topped table, stroked his chin thoughtfully. Then he went on speaking.

"She finally accepted my advice and left last evening in her car. She planned to be away ten days at least."

"A very sensible idea," Leander murmured.

MINTON nodded. His face was inscrutable, that faintly mocking smile playing about his lips. "However," he said, "I'm looking after my brother's affairs. That's why I've remained here since the funeral. And in going over his papers, I discovered that he was carrying a large amount of insurance with your company."

"Fifty thousand dollars," Leander replied with a touch of awe.

"Fifty thousand dollars," Minton repeated, his tongue seeming to caress each word. He leaned forward a little, cocking his head on one side as if to focus his eyes better on Leander. "I regret to say, Mr.— Mr.—"

"Jones. Just Jones," Leander supplied.

"Mr. Jones, I'm sorry to say that's all the estate my poor dead brother left. So, naturally we're anxious to have it paid as soon as possible. When will that be done?" he added abruptly.

Leander coughed impressively and appeared to be considering the question. His thoughts turned back to his meeting with Mrs. Minton in the office of Jones and Jones. She had told the truth. Apparently, no one in Clarinda except herself knew that her fifty-thousand-dollar check had been received.

"You must remember that there was a deep bond of affection between my

brother and myself," Minton said earnestly. "And that is why I am so determined to look after his widow, whom he loved dearly. She is my only living relative now. And I hers."

"About the payment," Leander said. "Our company takes pride in its prompt handling of all business. This matter will be attended to as soon as Mrs. Minton signs a couple of papers. That's why I'm here," he explained. "To get her signature."

A strange look flitted over Minton's face as he drummed nervously on the marble top of the table. "I don't understand. The policy was in good standing, wasn't it? All premiums paid?"

"Oh, yes."

"You received proof of death?"

"Certainly."

"Then what are these papers?"

"A couple of affidavits. Customary in the case of large policies, although really just formalities," Leander lied blandly. "But the beneficiary must sign them."

He smiled apologetically at Minton, but he was watching the other's reaction shrewdly. He was making a play to insure the safety of Mrs. Minton for a while, anyway, he believed. Whether she was still unharmed would be revealed by Minton's answer.

Clarence Minton stood leaning against the table in deep thought for a long time. His brows were lowered till they all but hid his burning eyes. At last he shrugged with an air of resignation and said: "I'll try to get in touch with Marvella—Mrs. Minton. By long-distance telephone. She mentioned some friends where she might stop for a brief visit today." He smiled, but this time the effect was more crafty than mocking.

Leander rose from his chair. "Splendid," he murmured. "You can find me at the Clarinda House."

They started toward the door to the

hallway. When they reached it, Minton bowed courteously and moved aside to let his visitor pass through first. Leander had no sooner set foot in the dim and stuffy hall than he heard a low, maniacal chortle behind him. At the same instant, something round and hard was jabbed into his back between his shoulder blades.

"Put up your hands! And stand still!" Minton snarled in his ear.

EXCEPT for a faint flicker of his eyelids, Leander displayed no emotion at this sudden turn of events. He raised his hands high. Minton, keeping his gun against Leander's back, rapidly went through his pockets.

"Insurance company—hell!" he sneered. "Carrying a gun!"

He transferred Leander's pistol to his own pocket.

"As soon as you got to talking about that insurance policy, I had you spotted," Minton said. "But I thought I'd let you play your string out. See what your game was."

"Spotted?" Leander asked mildly.

"Don't play dumb! You know what I mean. What's your racket? You ain't a cop—they wouldn't put a sappy little guy like you on the cops," Minton said.

"Oh, no, I'm not a cop. I'm in the insurance business," Leander murmured.

"You're a liar!"

"No—no!" Leander insisted. "I came here to speed up the payment of the fifty thousand dollars to Mrs. Minton."

Minton laughed savagely and dug the muzzle of his gun hard against Leander's spine. He stuck his head forward so that when he spoke his hot breath was on the back of Leander's neck.

"Listen, you sap! Mrs. Minton got that check for the dough day before yesterday. She thought I didn't know." Again he uttered a low vicious laugh. "Now you're going to get what's coming to you. Move along!"

Propelled forward by the gun in his back, Leander was forced to walk down the hall. With Minton giving orders, he climbed a flight of stairs. Down another hall and they entered a bedroom. Like the parlor below, its windows were covered with old-fashioned wooden blinds, tightly closed.

Minton removed several neckties from a rack beside the dresser. A few minutes later, he had bound Leander hand and foot, gagged him and stretched him out on the bed. Before going out of the room, Minton paused in the doorway.

"Now, wise guy, you can start getting ready for trouble. I'll show you what happens to people who don't stay on their own side of the street!"

The door slammed shut behind him.

Leander strained at his bonds. It took only a minute for him to decide that he stood no chance of slipping out of them. Whatever this man with the half-mad eyes planned to do to him, he would find his victim still on the bed when he returned.

Things were breaking badly—very badly, for Jones and Jones, Leander decided with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. Horatio mysteriously missing, perhaps dead! He, Leander, a prisoner in this lonely house at the mercy of a man whose mind was clouded.

And yet, even in his despair, Leander had one satisfaction. He knew now why both Gerald and Clarence Minton had looked vaguely familiar. He had identified Clarence Minton—and the identification did nothing to help his peace of mind.

How long he had been lying there, when he finally heard footsteps on the uncarpeted boards of the upper hallway, Leander wasn't sure. Perhaps ten minutes. Perhaps twenty. He recognized the uneven tread of the lame Minton. But someone was with him.

Muffled voices drifted in from the hall

and immediately afterward the door was opened. The neckties were removed from Leander's wrists and ankles, the gag was unfastened, and he was jerked roughly from the bed to his feet. He found himself facing Minton and a burly six-foot policeman.

"Take him to the station, officer," Minton said. "He's a crook. Came here just as I told you, and tried to pass himself off as from the insurance company."

Leander, concealing his surprise behind a meek smile, stared at Clarence Minton. The fellow's pasty face appeared whiter than ever, his deep eyes were bright and about his mouth that mocking smile clung once more. But his voice was steady, marked by the sort of indignation a righteous householder would display upon having caught a burglar red-handed.

"Come on!" the policeman said, thumbing toward the door. "You and me're going down to the lock-up."

A swift picture of the Ford coupe and Gerkin's body lying in it went through Leander's mind. The police station was one place he didn't care much about going to right now.

"Perhaps I can explain, officer," he murmured.

"You can explain to the chief," the policeman growled. He took Leander by the arm. "Don't try to make a break."

Leander gave a resigned shrug. "Oh, no, I won't try that," he said. "I seem to have made one break already." He looked steadily at Minton. "I'll see you again soon, Mr. Minton," he said.

Minton gave him a sharp glance. "Only when I come down to sign a complaint against you," he snapped back.

CHIEF of Police Delos Atwell, head of the Clarinda forces of law and order, was sitting in his office following with a frowning stare the meanderings of a blue-bottle fly on the grimy ceiling. But Chief Atwell was not really thinking

much about the erratic movements of the fly. His thoughts were on quite different matters.

It had been a day unique in Clarinda police history for two atrocious occurrences. In the first place, one of the city's leading citizens—Mr. B. Gerkin—had been discovered brutally murdered in an automobile in a public parking lot. The fact that an arrest had been made in this connection, mitigated only in a slight degree the enormity of the murder.

In the second place, Atwell had received a startling piece of information from the sexton of Poplar Hills Cemetery.

Some time during the night, the receiving vault at the cemetery had been entered. Not only had the coffin been stolen from a recently deceased and highly respected citizen, but the cadaver of that citizen which had been lying therein, had been dumped out on the floor and left behind. And in the dead man's heart was a deep wound, evidently the result of a knife thrust.

The chief of police had just returned from the scene of this atrocity. His visit had served no other purpose than to confirm the facts as the sexton had phoned them. There were no clues. He could figure out no possible motive.

With one hand, Atwell brushed back a damp lock of hair; with the other he mopped a handkerchief over his flid and perspiring face. His coat hung upon a hook on the wall, and he was reclining in his chair in his shirt sleeves, a state of dress which displayed his brilliant green galluses.

A sudden knock upon his office door caused him to turn slightly. "Come in!" he commanded with a touch of annoyance.

The door swung open and a hulking six-foot policeman entered. Before him, he was pushing the unresisting Leander Jones. Leander's face wore its habitual

apologetic smile, which served as an effective mask. His pale blue eyes took in the details of the office and its robust occupant with a meek, but thorough glance.

"Here he is!" the policeman announced with an air of triumph.

Atwell let his glance linger a moment on Leander. Then he looked at the policeman. "Well, what about him?" he demanded.

"This is the guy I brought in from the Minton place."

"The what—from where?" Atwell wrinkled his forehead.

"The guy from Minton's," the policeman persisted. "Mr. Clarence Minton caught him out there about half an hour ago. He's some kind of a crook. Minton'll be down as soon as he gets dressed up to sign a complaint."

For a long moment Atwell stared at the policeman, after which he transferred his puzzled glance to Leander for an equal length of time. Suddenly his face took on an apoplectic hue and he frowned at the policeman.

"Minton's! Half an hour ago!" he exploded. "Listen, Rafferty, you're nuts!"

Policeman Rafferty's mouth dropped open.

"I was talking to this man right here not more than five minutes ago!" Atwell bellowed, glaring at the luckless Rafferty. "We picked him up in the lobby of the Clarinda House."

Rafferty set his heavy jaw stubbornly. "I don't know nothing about that, Chief," he said. "But I do know I been gone from here almost half an hour—and I found this guy all tied up in a bedroom at the Minton house. And that was more than fifteen minutes ago!"

Atwell jumped to his feet. "Listen, you big palooka!" he roared. "Are you trying to make a liar out of me? I'll show you! By God, I'll show you. You stay right here for a minute!"

With that, he jerked open the office door and disappeared into the other room, slamming the door angrily behind him.

CHAPTER SIX

Alias the Corpse

RAFFERTY, the picture of bewilderment, gazed blankly at the closed door. He raised a big hand and scratched his head long and thoughtfully. Then, suddenly remembering Leander, he glowered at him.

"Say, you—" he began.

Leander raised both hand palms outward. "I—I'm afraid I'm not saying anything, officer," he protested. "You understand. Say nothing without advice of counsel, and all that sort of thing."

Rafferty spluttered. "Wait a minute! You know damn well—"

"No, indeed!" Leander cut in promptly. "I don't know anything. I'm quite confused. I am, indeed." A suspicious grin swept across his face and was gone, but his mild eyes continued to hold a hint of a twinkle.

Before Rafferty could say anything more, the door burst open and Atwell came in. His brow was corrugated into ridges of bewilderment and most of his blustering assurance seemed to have vanished into air. One huge hand was closed firmly about the small muscular arm of Mr. Horatio Jones, whom he conducted to the center of the room. Then he walked back and shut the door.

"Hello, Horatio," said Leander.

"Hello, Leander."

"I'm glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you, too, Leander."

Atwell stomped over to Horatio and waved a finger under his nose. "You!" he thundered. "Didn't you and I talk here just about five minutes ago? Before you were locked up?"

Horatio nodded calmly. "You talked.

And I listened," he said with dignity.

"Well, anyway, you admitted the car they found Gerkin in was yours. Even if that's all you'd say," Atwell muttered.

"Yes," Horatio replied. He glanced at Leander and his eyelids flickered faintly.

Atwell rubbed the back of his neck. He stared back and forth from Horatio to Leander. Then he glared at Rafferty; then he stared again at Horatio and again at Leander. He passed his hand over his eyes, mumbled under his breath.

"Listen!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Am I going crazy? Do you two look alike—or am I seeing double?"

Leander answered. "We look alike."

The chief of police exhaled with a heavy sigh of relief. "Didn't you tell me your name was Jones?" he asked Horatio.

"Yes. Jones—just Jones."

"What's your name?" he demanded, looking at Leander.

"Jones. Just—Jones."

"Jones and Jones, huh?"

"Exactly," Leander murmured. "Just Jones and Jones. You may have heard the name before," he added dryly.

Atwell started and fixed his gaze on Leander's pale blue eyes. Slowly and deliberately, Leander closed one eyelid in a movement that could be interpreted only as a wink.

Atwell let out a gasp; then his face broadened into a wide grin. "By God!" he exclaimed, striking his hands together. And as he dropped heavily into his chair, he repeated: "By God! Jones and Jones!"

"Rafferty!" he bellowed. "Get out! And keep your mouth shut!"

Rafferty got out.

When the door had closed, Atwell pulled open the drawer of his desk and drew forth a box of cigars. "Smoke?"

"No thanks. Only this kind," Leander said, producing a couple of the thin black stogies he and Horatio used. "Have one, Horatio?"

"I ought've recognized you sooner," Atwell said, "but I was a little upset the way things have been going here today."

"We weren't sure you'd ever heard of us," Leander murmured.

"What! Never heard of Jones and Jones? Come now, Mr. Jones, Clarinda is a small city but we're up-to-date. And every police chief that's on his toes has heard of you," he replied, shaking his head. "What brings you here?" he added curiously.

Leander made a deprecatory gesture with his stogy. "Nothing much. Merely an attempted fraud, a confidence game, a grave robbery and a couple of murders."

ATWELL looked at Leander incredulously. Then slowly an expression of relief, almost happiness, suffused his ruddy countenance. "You mean—you mean the robbing of the vault at the cemetery? And the killing of Gerkin?" he stammered.

"Those are two of the crimes I mentioned."

"Think you can catch the guilty parties?" Atwell asked.

Leander took a thoughtful puff on his stogy. "Yes," he said with quiet confidence.

"Well, count on me to help you!" Atwell exclaimed heartily. "I'll pinch the mayor, if you say so."

"Good!" Leander said and moved over to the door of the office. He placed his ear close to the panel, meanwhile gesturing with his finger to his lips for silence. Presently, he walked back to Atwell and said softly: "Might as well start now."

"Huh?"

"Mr. Clarence Minton has just arrived—to sign a complaint against me. He hasn't lost his old time nerve, it seems," he added.

"You mean—Gerald Minton's brother?" Atwell gasped.

"Right!" He looked at Horatio. "Don't you recall him? Clarence Minton—alias Louis Miller—alias Louis the Limp?" He turned back to Atwell, "Louis the Limp was one of the trickiest confidence men that ever lived. But he ended in Matteawan Hospital for the Criminal Insane. He must have escaped. Anyway, that's Louis the Limp outside. You'd better grab him, Chief!"

Atwell leaped to his feet and headed for the door. "You bet I will!" he exclaimed excitedly.

When they were alone, Leander chuckled softly. "Remember, Horatio," he said, "I thought the face of Gerald Minton looked familiar last night?"

Horatio nodded.

"That was because he and Louis the Limp are brothers. And it's funny, but when I first saw Louis this afternoon at the Minton house, I thought he looked familiar because he looked like Gerald Minton. And all the time, it was a picture of Louis the Limp, confidence man, that was in the back of my mind. I didn't place him, till it was too late. He already had me tied up," Leander said.

"You think he stabbed his own brother—in the coffin?" Horatio asked.

Leander shook his head dubiously. "I don't know," he said, and then added, "What happened to you?"

"Well, Leander," Horatio said, making a wry face, "I was careless. I apologize."

"Careless?"

"Very careless. After you left me at the vault, I let myself be caught off guard," Horatio explained. "I was overpowered and tied up by two men I couldn't even see. They left me lying on the ground for a little while. But a little later they returned, carried me for some distance and—placed me in a coffin!"

"My word!" Leander exclaimed. "Are you sure it was a coffin you were in?"

"I could tell that. By the feel of the material with which it was lined. And once when I tried to sit up, I bumped my head on the lid. I was pretty worried, Leander. I expected to be smothered."

Leander was looking at him intently. "Go on!" he urged.

"I wasn't smothered, as you can see, although I must have been in the thing at least half an hour," Horatio murmured. "My captors finally must have decided they didn't need me in their plans. They dumped me out behind a hedge near the road. Luckily a farmer found me this morning and brought me into town.

"I went to the hotel looking for you. But no sooner had I put my foot inside the lobby than I was arrested. It seems a dead man had been found in my coupe. Naturally, I wouldn't talk any till I'd seen you and knew what had been taking place."

"You must have been in Minton's coffin," Leander said.

"No doubt about it."

Leander half closed one eye and stared dreamily at one corner of the ceiling. Suddenly his face broke into a smile. He slapped Horatio on the back and exclaimed: "By Gad! I've got it. I've got it, Horatio!"

"What?"

"The reason the coffin was stolen!"

"Why?" Horatio asked eagerly.

"Because," Leander said exuberantly, "it was the only thing that would expose the whole dastardly plot! It was the one flaw—the one damning bit of evidence that could be traced!" He started for the door. "Come on! We haven't a minute to lose!"

As they crossed the outer room, Atwell appeared from the hall that led to the cells. "I got him locked up," he said.

"Hold him till we get back!" Leander called over his shoulder, as he and Horatio hurried to the street.

Back in his hotel room five minutes later, Leander picked up the telephone. "Operator," he said crisply. "I want to put in a long-distance call to New York." He gave her the name of a weekly publication famous for many years as the "bible" of the theatrical profession.

ON THE front of the undertaking establishment of B. Gerkin was pasted a small typewritten notice. Leander read it aloud, while Horatio looked over his shoulder.

Due to the death of
Mr. B. Gerkin,
this funeral parlor
will be closed for
several days.

"Well," Horatio murmured, "that is that."

Leander nodded slowly. "Perhaps," he said, "there might be someone in the back part of the place. If not we'll just have to—"

A voice behind him broke in. "How about this fellow Louis the Limp, Mr. Jones? Can we put a murder charge against him?"

The brothers Jones turned to behold the robust form and florid face of Police Chief Atwell.

"I was up at the corner and noticed you reading this sign down here," Atwell explained. "If you want to take a look at Gerkin's body, it's here all right. But I don't know exactly how we can get in until tonight."

"Why not until tonight?" Leander asked quickly.

"'Cause young Viles has gone away. He had to take care of a funeral over at Valley City. That's sixty miles away so he won't get back till tonight."

Leander clutched Atwell's arm. "How do you know that?"

"He got a permit to take the body on the one o'clock train," Atwell replied,

looking at Leander in surprise. "Things like that can't wait, even if Gerkin is dead. When a person's ready to be buried, he's got to be buried."

"By Gad! By Gad!" Leander muttered. He jerked his watch from his pocket. The hands pointed to three minutes of one. Leander sprang into action. "Hurry up! We've got to make that train!" he called out over his shoulder, as he started running down the street.

Horatio, accustomed to such startling moves, took after him at once. But Atwell, a look of blank amazement covering his face, merely stared after them for a few seconds. Then, coming to life, he, too, broke into a run in the direction of the railroad station.

The train was already moving when, breathless and red, he grabbed the hand-rail and stumbled up the steps. Both Leander and Horatio had disappeared inside. But as soon as he opened the door and stepped inside himself, Atwell caught sight of them in the aisles of the coach ahead. He rushed forward. The passengers, sensing that something out of the way was happening, followed him with curious stares.

Leander had a firm grip on Viles' shoulder, when Atwell panted up. The yellow-skinned undertaker's assistant was cringing back against the cushion, clutching with one hand at his cheek and holding with the other to the arm of a woman beside him. She was the red-headed maid from Doctor Barnabas' house.

The conductor hustled up. "Here! Here! What's this?" he demanded. He saw Atwell. "What's the meaning of this, Chief?"

"These people are under arrest!" Leander snapped.

"Why—that's Mr. and Mrs. Viles," Atwell stammered.

"Well, bring 'em along!" Leander ordered.

"Bring 'em along? Where we going?"
 "Up to the baggage car!"

WHILE the conductor remained behind to reassure the passengers, Atwell and Horatio herded Viles and his wife up the aisle of the coach, then through the smoking car ahead. Leander already had made his way forward. He pushed open the door of the baggage car and held it while the others filed through.

"What the hell! Get out of here!" the baggageman exclaimed. "Passengers ain't allowed here!"

"We're not passengers," Leander said dryly. "We're police."

"What?"

"There's the chief," Leander said, jerking a thumb in Atwell's direction.

The baggageman's mouth and eyes opened simultaneously. "Cops? What's happened?"

Nobody took the trouble to answer him. Leander was striding toward the forward end of the car, toward a big oblong box of new pine. It was the rough box for a coffin. Near the bottom on either side, rows of round holes had been cut in it. On the top rested a funeral wreath.

Leander picked up the wreath and tossed it into a corner. Then he glanced about the car. He seemed about to speak to the baggageman, when his eye lit on a red glass-covered case fastened to the wall. It contained a saw and fire ax—emergency equipment.

Horatio had moved up to Leander's side. Atwell, holding Viles and his wife firmly by the arm, was in the middle of the baggage car. Behind them, the baggageman was watching with an uneasy expression, unable to decide where his duty lay in this strange situation. All eyes were on Leander, but he appeared unconscious of the fact.

He smashed the glass that covered the lock of the emergency tool box, turned

the key and took down the fire ax. Then he stepped to the rough box again. The baggageman, suddenly galvanized into a decision, jumped forward.

"Hey!" he shouted. "My God—you can't do that!"

"Stand back!" Leander ordered. "You'll get hurt!" His usually mild eyes were blazing now, and the commanding note in his voice brought the baggageman up short.

With a rending crash the fire ax came down upon the soft pine. Again Leander swung, and again, the blade biting deep into the wood with each stroke. A couple of minutes later, he tossed the ax on the floor and began yanking the broken boards from the top of the box. Horatio helped him, and presently they had exposed the entire length of a black coffin.

"My word, Leander! Look!" Horatio exclaimed. He pointed to a silver plate on the coffin lid.

GERALD LEROY MINTON

Born May 7, 1880

Died June 19, 1933

*"He strutted and fretted his
 brief hour upon the
 stage and then
 was heard
 no more."*

Leander gave it only a hurried glance. He picked up the ax once more and, forcing the blade under the coffin lid, pressed down with all his weight on the handle. The lid, held only by two screws, snapped loose and toppled to the floor.

Stretched out in the coffin, hands clutching and his face contorted into an expression of wild terror and agony, lay Doctor Barnabas!

With a low exclamation, Leander dropped to his knees. He laid his hand upon the face, pressed his ear close to the breast. After a moment, he rose slow-

ly to his feet and solemnly faced the little group in the baggage car.

"Dead!" Leander announced. "Dead! Smothered in the coffin of his first victim!"

Mrs. Viles covered her face with her hands and began to sob. Viles, who was staring as if fascinated at the body in the box, suddenly began to tremble. His knees seemed to turn to wax, he began to sag. Then he uttered a terrified scream and would have collapsed, had not Atwell yanked him erect.

Leander strode over to Viles. He seized him fiercely by the shoulder.

"By God!" he burst out. "I knew you didn't have any sense, or you never would have committed those two murders. But I didn't think you were this stupid!"

He turned to Horatio. "Horatio, it proves our point again. No criminal has any brains—or he wouldn't be a criminal! This man was helping Barnabas get away—at the same time making his own escape. But his stupidity killed the man he was trying to aid."

Leander pointed to the coffin. "That's a trick coffin," he said. "It has ventilators, so that anyone confined in it can breathe. The air comes in through vents in the bottom, passes up through the hollow sides and into the coffin near the top. But—" Leander paused and looked at the whimpering Viles with a shake of his head. Then he went on.

"This murdering idiot, after carefully cutting holes in the sides of the rough box to admit air, didn't stop to think that if he let the bottom of the coffin rest on the solid bottom of the rough box, he'd plug the air vents. So Doctor Barnabas smothered," he added.

"Why did Barnabas pick this way to try and get out of town?" he suddenly demanded of Viles.

Viles shrank back, gulped, but finally found his voice. "Because—because he thought you were on to him and he was

being watched. He knew all about the coffin. Used it hundreds of times, so he figured it was a safe and smart way to—"

Leander cut him short with a gesture. "Never mind the rest now," he said. "I know all the answers." He reached up and, seizing the signal rope that ran through the car, yanked it down.

Almost immediately the scream of the locomotive whistle broke out and the train began to grind to a stop.

LATE in the afternoon, Leander and Horatio paused before a door on the second floor of the Minton home.

"This must be the room Louis the Limp meant," Horatio said.

"I'll try the key he gave us," Leander replied. He drew a key from his pocket and inserted it in the lock. "Yes, it's the right one."

Leander threw the door open and walked into the room with Horatio close behind him.

"You're all right now, Mrs. Minton!" Leander exclaimed. "You've nothing to fear!"

Marvella Minton was seated in a high-backed chair. Her ankles were bound to the chair legs; her wrists to the chair arms. Around her mouth a handkerchief had been wound to prevent her making any outcry.

At the entrance of Leander and Horatio her eyes widened with terror, then, as she recognized Leander, an expression of relief and joy flooded them. They freed her quickly. She slumped down in the chair and began to weep. Leander hesitated, then put his arm comfortingly about her shoulders.

"Now, now, don't cry," he begged her. "Everything's all right. My word, Horatio, do something! Get a glass of water!"

"He—he threatened to kill me," she sobbed brokenly. "If—if I didn't turn the money over to him."

"Yes, we know all about that," Leander

said soothingly. "He told us all. He came here to your husband's funeral and would have left right afterward, but you unfortunately let him know that Mr. Minton had left a lot of insurance money. So he decided to stay, to swindle you if possible, and if that didn't work he planned to use force. But you don't have to worry any more. He's going back—well, he's going back to a place he won't get out of again soon."

Her sobbing gradually ceased and she looked up at Leander with a look of such gratitude in her large brown eyes that he began to fidget. "I'll never be able to thank you—for saving me."

"Don't try! Please, don't try!" Leander said hurriedly. "We've had a splendid time doing it. Splendid!"

CHIEF of Police Atwell ate dinner that night with Leander and Horatio at the Clarinda House. When they had given their orders, Atwell leaned forward eagerly.

"Now," he said, "I'd like to have you straighten this whole thing out in my mind. I've got to confess, I'm a little bit balled up, what with things happening so fast."

"Louis the Limp," Leander said, "thought his brother had died a natural death. He was playing his own game, trying to pick up fifty thousand dollars." Leander gave a dry chuckle. "He was the cause of Jones and Jones entering this most interesting case. He appropriated Gerald's clothing supply without Mrs. Minton's knowing it. She saw him prowling around one night, while in one of his spells, and thought it was Gerald. So she came to us."

Atwell nodded. "How about the others?"

"A simple plot to start with," Leander replied. "For the last ten years, Barnabas had been a practicing physician in

Clarinda. Above reproach. But in his earlier life, he'd strayed from the fold of ethical medicine and was known as Barnabas the Great."

"Barnabas the Great?"

"A stage name," Leander explained. "He was a hypnotist—had his own show. I saw it once myself years ago. The big ballyhoo for it was to put a man in an hypnotic trance and seal him in a coffin. That's where Minton first came in. He was the man who was hypnotized."

"Barnabas eventually gave up his show," Leander continued, "and came to Clarinda. Four years ago, Minton showed up. One or the other of them conceived the notion of a juicy insurance swindle—using the old coffin trick."

"But they had to have a beneficiary who'd be above suspicion and dumb enough to get the money away from afterwards. Minton solved that by marrying an orphan from out of town. They'd waited four years, Barnabas footing the bills, to quiet all suspicion with the insurance company. The stakes were big—they could afford to play slow and safe."

"I'm beginning to get it," Atwell muttered. "And they needed an undertaker, too. That's where Gerkin got mixed up."

"Exactly," Leander said. "Gerkin—and Viles—and Viles' wife. Barnabas soon developed an almost fiendish control over Viles, who's weak-willed, anyway. Then, when Doctor Barnabas found out what a charming wife Minton had chosen, he had an idea. Briefly, it was to make a real widow and then marry her. Thus getting the money and simplifying the whole thing."

"So when the time came to bring Minton out of his trance and let him slip away, Barnabas influenced Viles to bury a dagger in his heart. By the way, those were Viles' prints on the knife, weren't they?"

"Yes," Atwell said.

"I expected so," Leander murmured.

"Viles didn't bother about gloves, since the coffin was due to go underground pretty soon, anyway. Well, when I came to town and began to ask questions, it threw a scare into the doctor.

"He knew the trick coffin was a give-away—could be traced to him by any first-class detective. It was part of the stuff he had left from his show. So he told Gerkin and Viles it had to be retrieved at any cost. While he and Mrs. Viles drew me away from the vault, Gerkin and Viles got the coffin—and Horatio," Leander added with a grin.

"Why'd Viles kill Gerkin?" Atwell wanted to know.

"He told me Gerkin was going to squeal. Gerkin didn't know Minton had been stabbed. When he saw him there, it scared him stiff. And he figured he could worm out with only a mild sentence as an aid to the fraud."

Horatio spoke up. "And Viles, already steeped in murder, beat his brains out and threw him in my coupe."

"Exactly. But it was an accident that your car was chosen. I'd parked it near the outside of the lot."

Atwell shook his head. "By George! By George!" he said. He suddenly looked at Leander. "What put you on to this?"

Leander considered for a minute. "A picture of Barnabas which I saw in his house," he said finally. "It was inscribed 'Barnabas the Great.' I didn't think anything about it, until Horatio told me he'd been sealed in Minton's coffin and hadn't smothered. Then it all came back to me. To make sure, I phoned New York and got all the data on Barnabas the Great and his show."

Atwell looked at Horatio and gave a chuckle. "How did it feel to ride in a coffin, Mr. Jones?"

Horatio shuddered slightly. "The only time to ride in a coffin is when you can't feel."

There was a twinkle in Leander's eyes. "You see, Chief," he said, "our name is Jones—just Jones. Everybody's heard that name. So occasionally, we travel under an alias of some kind." He turned to Horatio with a dry smile and said: "I believe, Horatio, this was the first time you were ever alias the corpse."

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

BLACK WARNING

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Skeletons In Our Closet

IN CASE you readers may have formed the idea that this department is merely for the purpose of offering space each month for the editors to pat each other and the magazine on the back—in other words, that it's nothing but a sort of glorified mutual-admiration page—we're going to throw back the shutters this time, shoot up the blinds and let the bright sun beat straight in on some of those things which, heretofore, we have kept more or less under cover.

We're not a very ancient household but like any other self-respecting family that gets out and does things DIME DETECTIVE has accumulated a few skeletons in its own closet. And we're frank enough to admit it, to unlock the closet door and let you listen to the bones rattle. Some of the bones we didn't know we had until they were pointed out to us by our readers; others we've unearthed for ourselves. And we're sure there must be a few more that haven't been discovered at all yet.

Here's one that made a particularly dismal noise when its toes got stepped on by a critic who didn't sign his name.

—I like your magazine, but please have Author Oscar Schisgall and your staff of readers learn the difference between a revolver and an automatic! The fact that the pistol in question turned out to be one that shot gas is no excuse for the automatic suddenly becoming a revolver as it does on pages 44 and 45 of the April 15th issue—

We apologize, both for ourselves and Author Schisgall, who, we feel sure, knows as well as we do the difference between those weapons. But it was a silly mistake to let creep into our pages and—Well, it won't happen again.

And then there's this business of Sam Beckett's dress suit. Author John Lawrence insists that he hasn't got one, never owned one, and has no intention whatever of procuring one in the near future. Yet

we, with the connivance of Mr. Gould, our staff artist, put Sam in resplendent black-and-white formal garb in the double-spread picture at the beginning of "Design For Dying" in the last issue. And what makes it worse is the fact that even if Sam had owned such clothes he had no time between murders to go home and change to them. That's one we caught ourselves—so you see we do keep our eyes open—and admit it when we get caught napping.

And of course there's this question of local geography. We've been thoroughly embarrassed, more times than we care to admit, by publishing a story laid in some city with which we're not overly familiar, only to find from some reader who happens to live in that particular town that the author isn't up on his streets and alleys either. It is disconcerting to O. K. in proof a thrilling chapter in which the detective-hero catches a cable car for a half-hour ride from the state capitol to the railway station only to learn from a resident of the city in question that there haven't been any cable cars in use there for twenty years, and that the capitol and station are across the street from each other.

All of which goes to show that grains of sand do get into the wheels and gear box of even the smoothest-running detective-story magazine! Don't hesitate to tell us about them when they grit too much. We won't let them happen more than once! Careful attention to even the smallest details as well as the actual procuring of the fastest-moving mystery fiction we can lay our hands on is what DIME DETECTIVE aims to do. Let us know when we slip on either score.

It's your magazine and we want to know what's what about it! Rattle our skeletons all you can. We like to listen.



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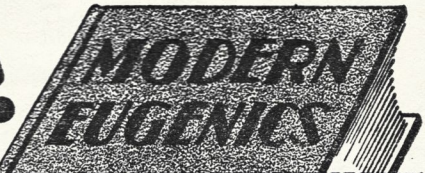
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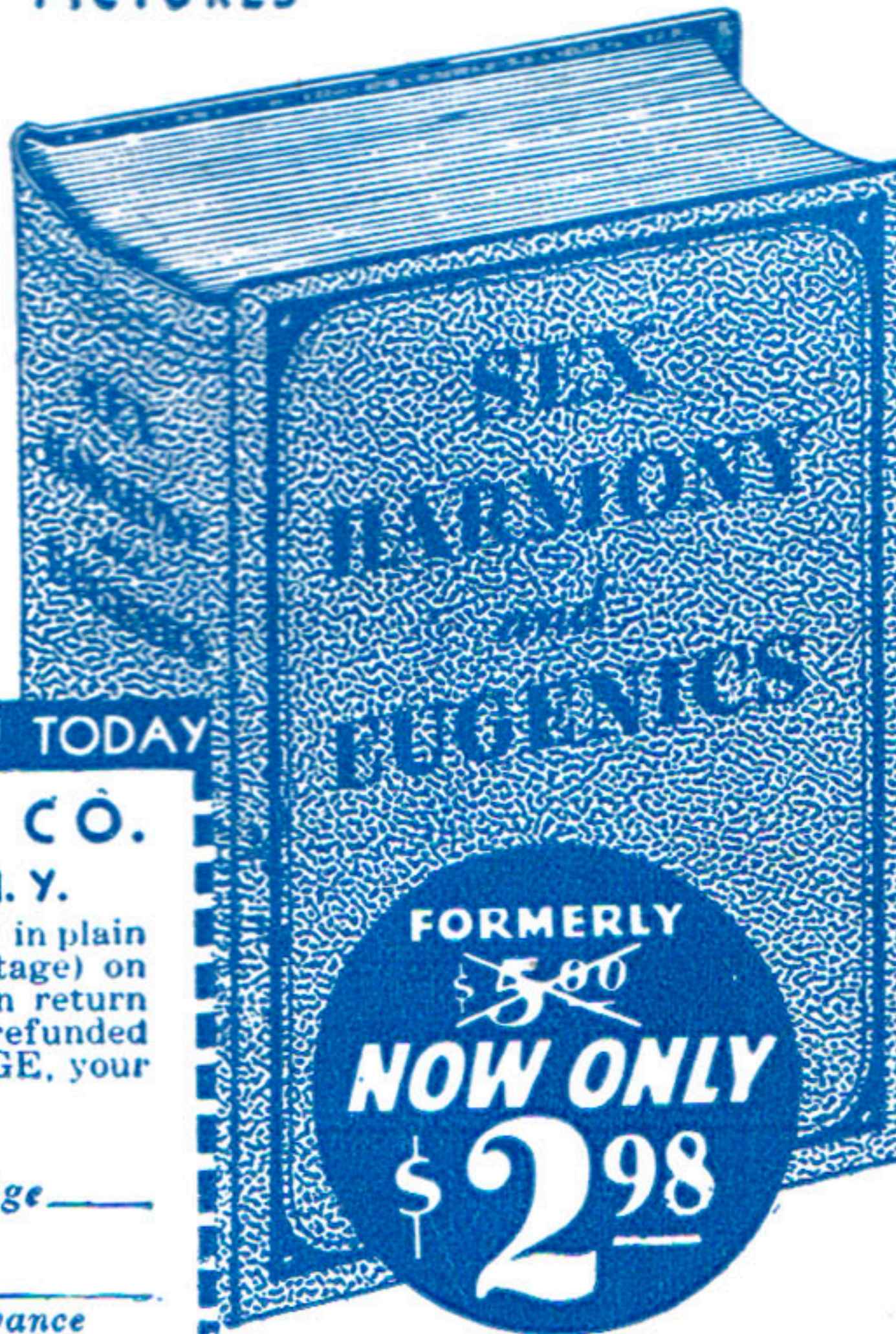
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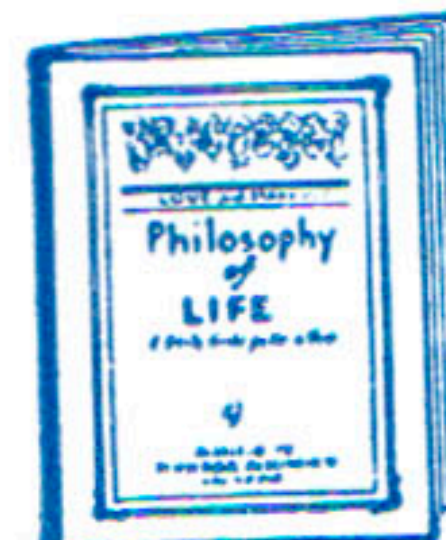
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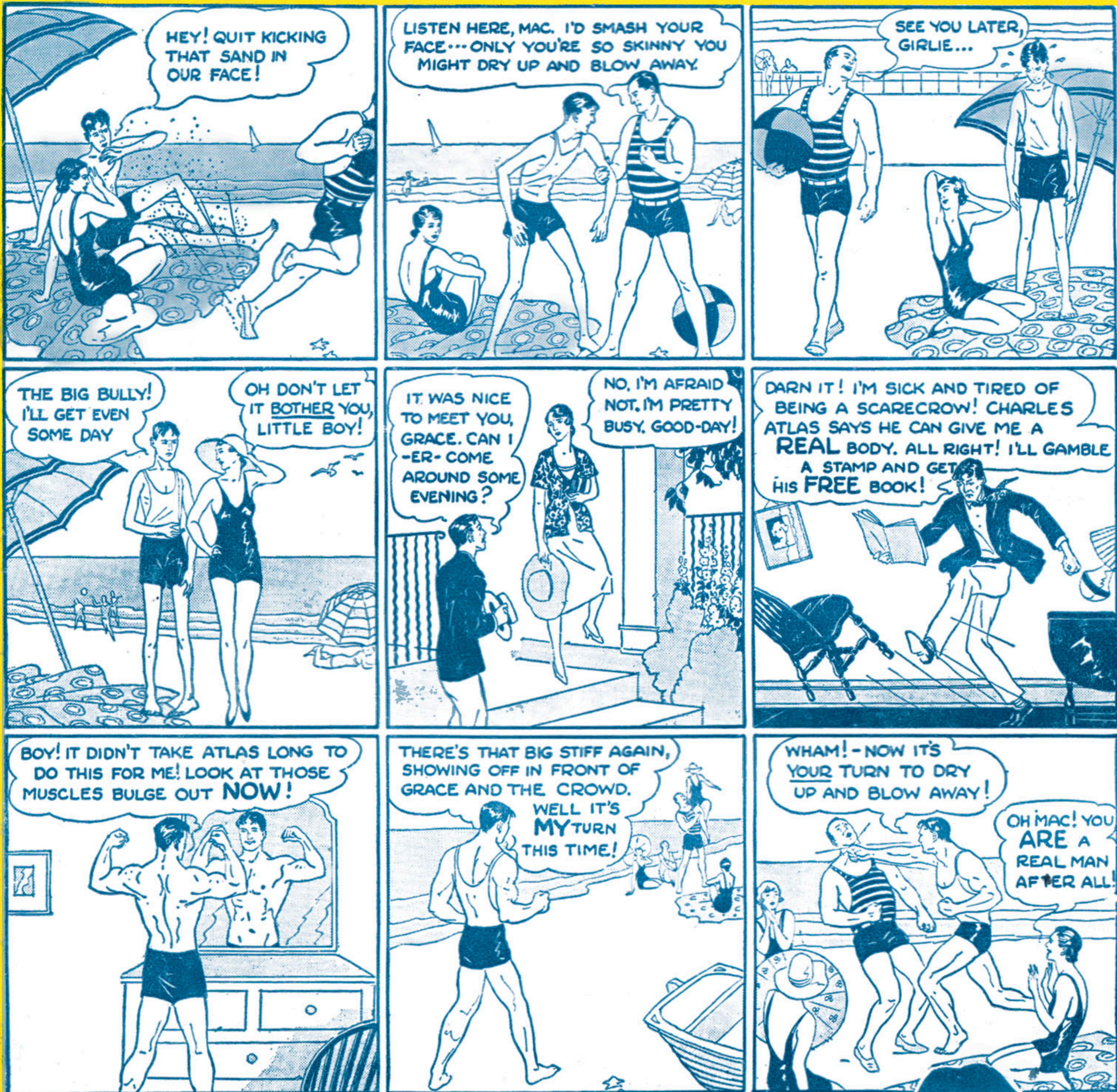
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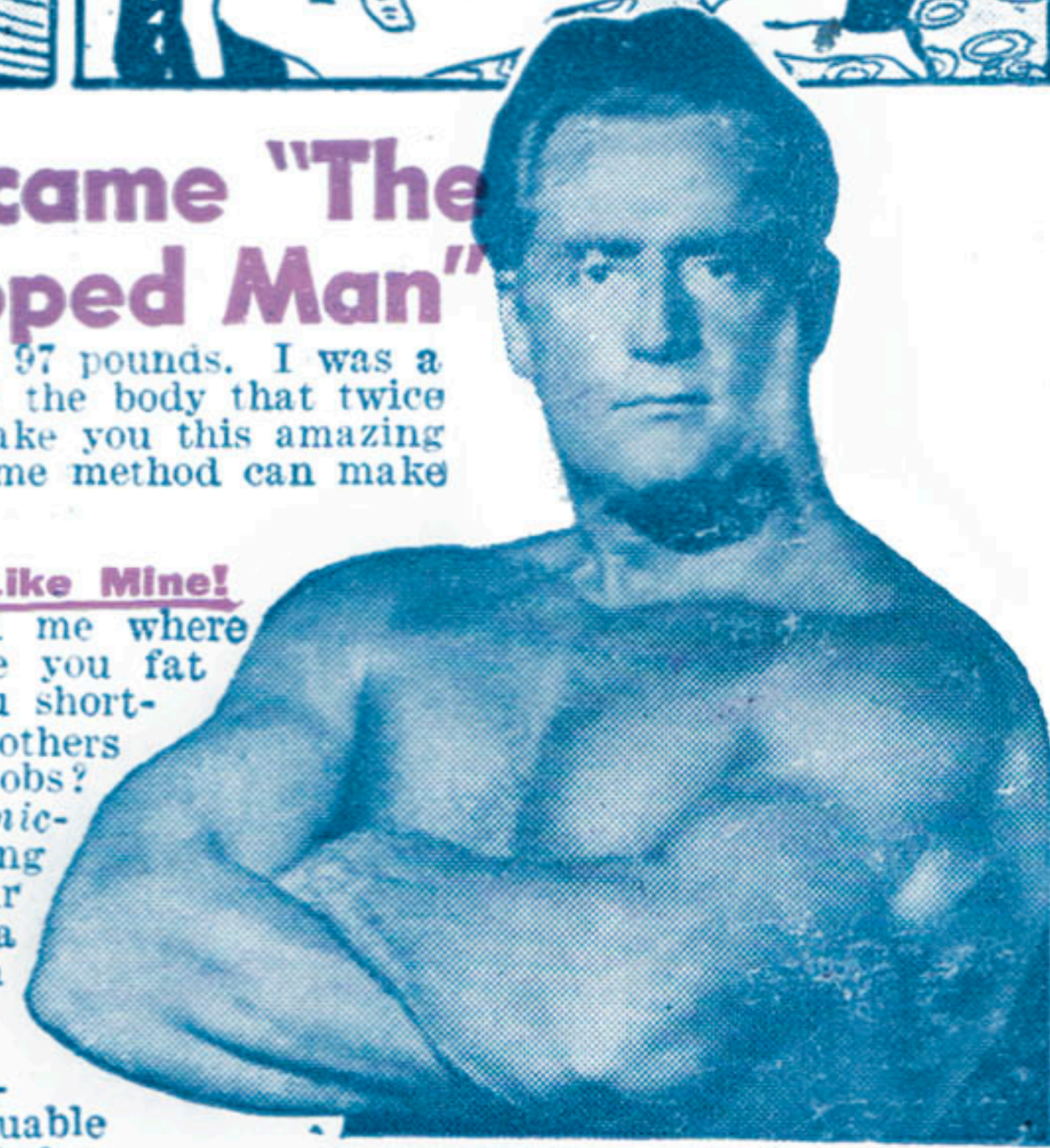
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