

ALL STORIES COMPLETE NOVEMBER 1ST

10¢ DIME

DETECTIVE

TWICE A MONTH

MAGAZINE

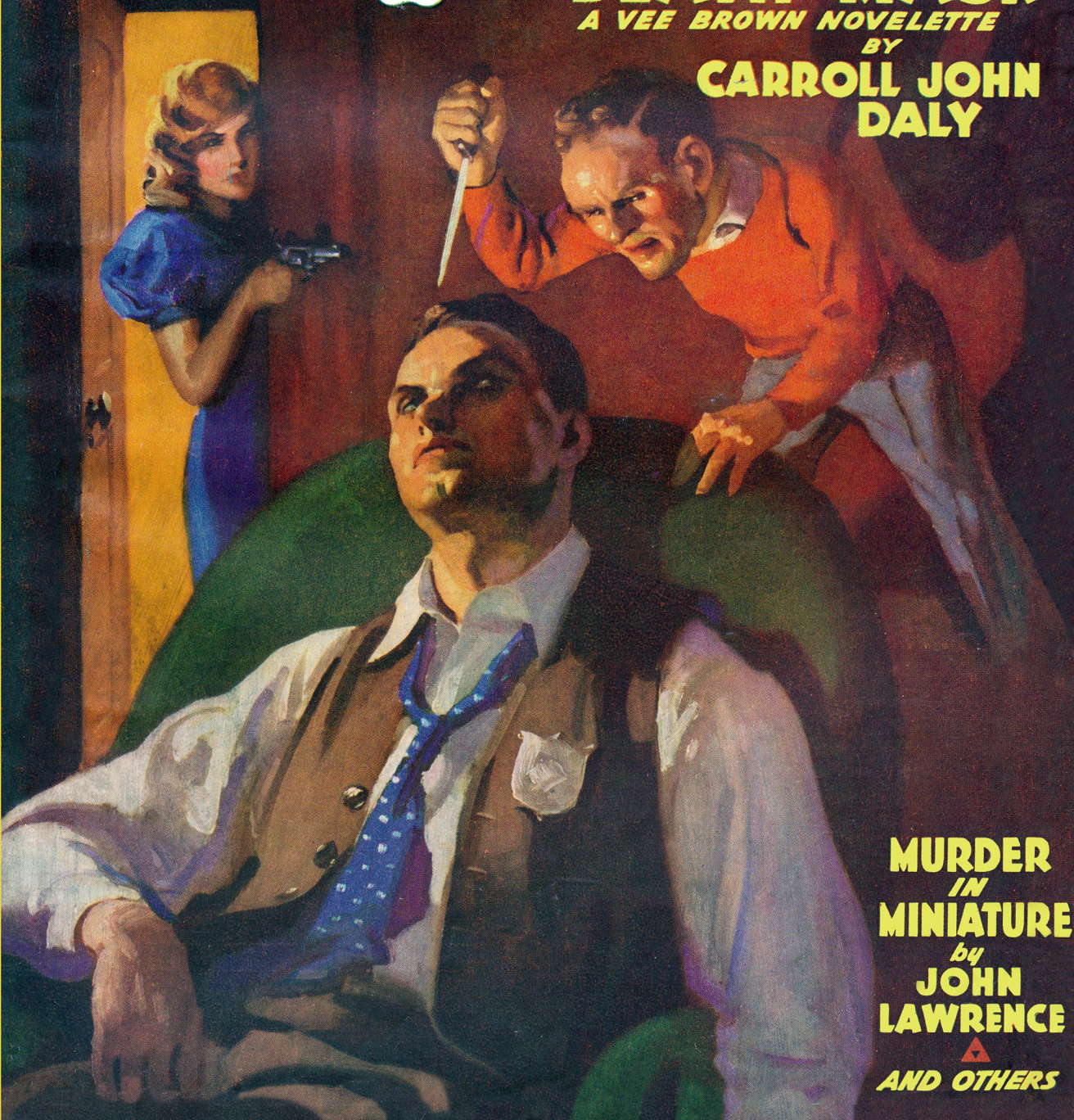


The DEATH MASK

A VEE BROWN NOVELETTE

BY

CARROLL JOHN DALY



MURDER
IN
MINIATURE
by
JOHN
LAWRENCE

AND OTHERS

FROM A FAT MAN... to a HE-MAN... in 10 MINUTES!

"I REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES"

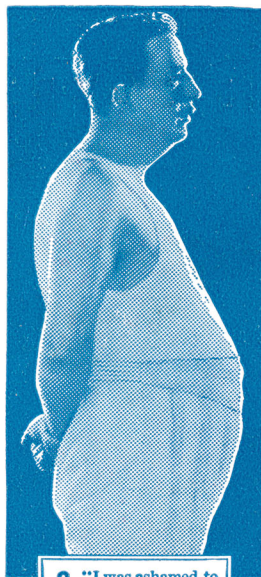
WRITES
GEORGE BAILEY

"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for \$100" writes C. W. Higbee.

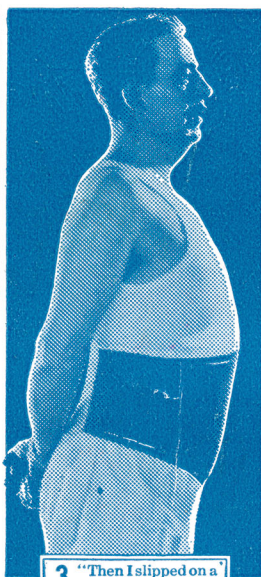
ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWING THE IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT IN APPEARANCE



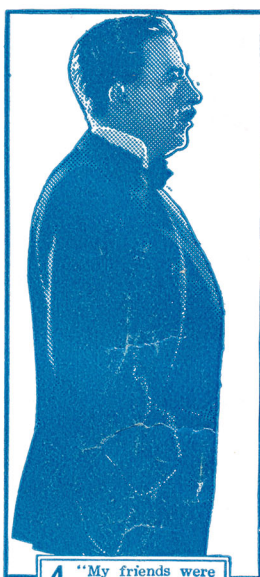
1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach... ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"



2. "I was ashamed to undress in the locker room—my friends poked fun at me and I had no answer!"



3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt... a transformation took place... what a difference—pounds seemed to have fallen away!"



4. "My friends were astonished!... I looked better—my clothes fitted me—and I felt like a million dollars!"

We are so sure that you will reduce your waistline at least three inches that we want you to . . .

TRY THE WEIL BELT FOR 10 DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE!

We GUARANTEE to REDUCE your WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS . . .

. . . or it won't cost you one cent . . . even the postage will be refunded!

YES SIR: I too, promised myself that I would exercise but it was too much like work—and it's darn hard to diet when you like to eat. The Weil Belt was just the answer—no diets, no drugs—I feel like a new man and I lost 8 inches of fat in less than 6 months!

GREATLY IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE!

The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller—three inches of fat gone—or it won't cost you one cent!

It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives an erect, athletic carriage.

Don't be embarrassed any longer with that "corporation" for in a short time, only the admiring comments of your friends will remind you that you once had a bulging waistline.

THE MASSAGE-LIKE ACTION DOES IT!

You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its constant gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit . . . its massage-like action gently but persistently eliminating fat with every move you make.

Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the

digestive organs in place—that they are no longer fatigued—and that it gently increases their endurance and vigor!

DON'T WAIT—FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

Send for our 10 day free trial offer. We repeat—either you take off 3 inches of fat in ten days, or it won't cost you one penny! Even the postage you pay to return [the package will be refunded!]

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, INC.

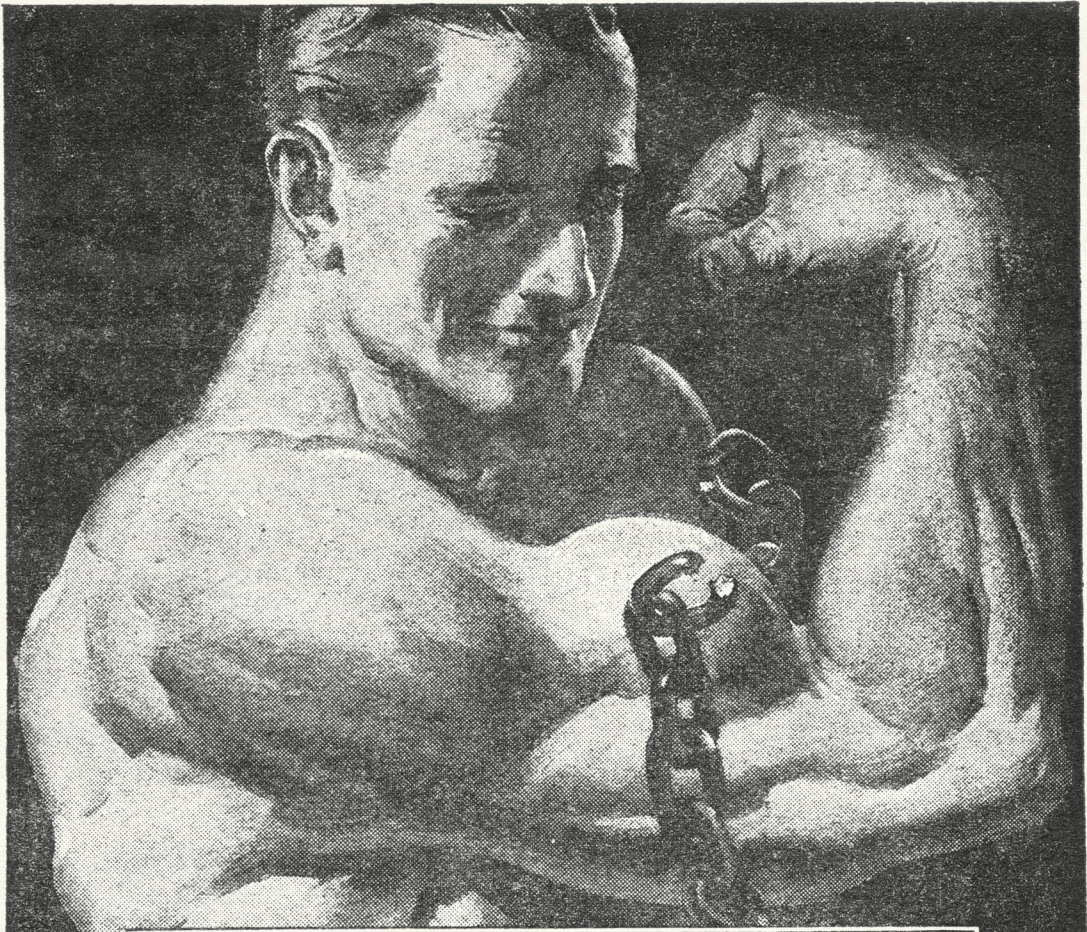
10211 HILL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 day FREE trial offer.

Name _____

Address _____

Use coupon or write your name and address on a penny post card.



» I will add **2 INCHES TO YOUR BICEPS**
 ...or it won't cost you one cent." **GEORGE F. JOWETT**

TWO solid inches of tough, sinuous muscle added to your biceps . . . or it won't cost you one penny! That's my unqualified agreement . . . it means that I'll take you, whether you are big or small, strong or weak, thin or fat, and add two full inches of muscle to **YOUR** biceps! If I hadn't accomplished this for thousands of others . . . if I wasn't absolutely sure that I could do it for you . . . I wouldn't dare make such a startling claim!

You will not only increase your biceps, but every part of your body will be developed proportionately.

Try one of my test courses **NOW** . . . prove to yourself that you, too, can get a sixteen inch bicep!

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It will be a revelation to you. You can't make a mistake. The assurance of the strongest armed man in the world stands behind this course. I give you all the secrets of strength illustrated and explained as you like them. You, too, can get an unbreakable grip of steel and a Herculean arm. Mail your order now while you can still get this course at my introductory price of only 25c.

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



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It is a priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. Full of pictures of marvelous bodied men who tell you decisively how you can build symmetry and strength the equal of theirs. Reach out—Grasp This Special Offer.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> All 6 Books for \$1.00. | |

Name.....
 Address.....

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 8

CONTENTS for NOVEMBER 1st, 1933

No. 4

SMASHING NOVEL-LENGTH VEE BROWN THRILLER

Raise

The Death Mask.....Carroll John Daly 8
Of that hooded terror as he stalks the Crime Machine for a hundred-grand blood fee.

COMPLETE HORROR-ACTION NOVEL

Barge into

Murder in Miniature—A Sam Beckett Story.....John Lawrence 56
With that hard-boiled investigator and watch him clamp down on a half-pint homicide specialist who puts his victims on the speck.

GRIPPING MYSTERY NOVELETTE

Race to where

The Rattler Clue.....Oscar Schisgall 99
Points the way to murder in the room upstairs.

BREATH-TAKING DETECTIVE SHORT STORY

Take a

Slay Ride.....G. H. Coxé 113
With Detective Flagg as he greases the ice of that horror hill with a killer's blood.

We've balanced our

Thrill Rations.....Editor 123
For the coming issues—expect to put on goose-flesh with our danger diet. What do you think?

Cover—"One Hand Upraised, He Held a Gleaming Knife"
.....William Reusswig

Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

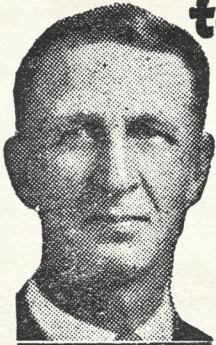
THIS COMPANY HAS ENTHUSIASTICALLY SUBSCRIBED TO THE NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL RECOVERY ACT AND HAS SIGNED THE PRESIDENT'S BLANKET PLEDGE.

Watch for the November 15th Issue

On the Newsstands November 1st

Published twice a month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter Mar. 16, 1933, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted 1933 by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. \$2.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them.

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

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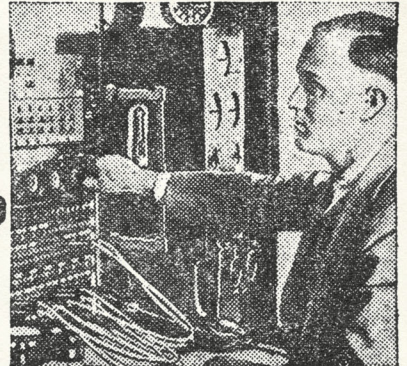
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National Radio Institute, Dept. 3MK7
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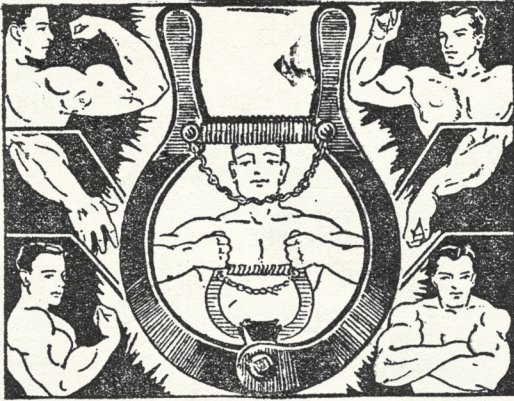
I want to take advantage of your offer. Send me your Free Sample Lesson and your book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." I understand this request does not obligate me.

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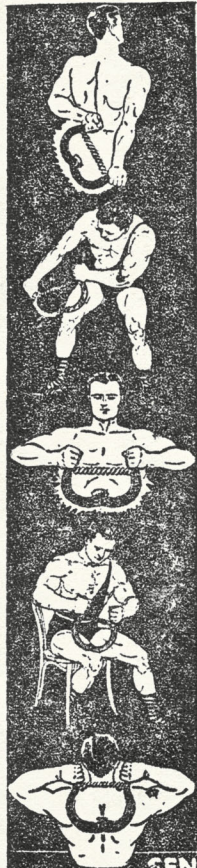
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The German Iron Shoe Muscle Builder . . .

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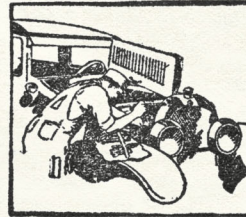
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Page 11—How You Pick Your Job

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Page 20—How I Prepare You

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Page 27—About Raises Every Year

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Page 7—About Vacations with Pay

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Page 12—About Civil Service Pensions

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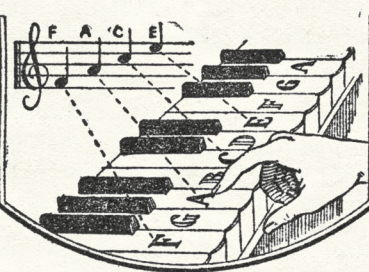
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You, too, Can Learn to Play
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Without a Teacher

Easy as A-B-C

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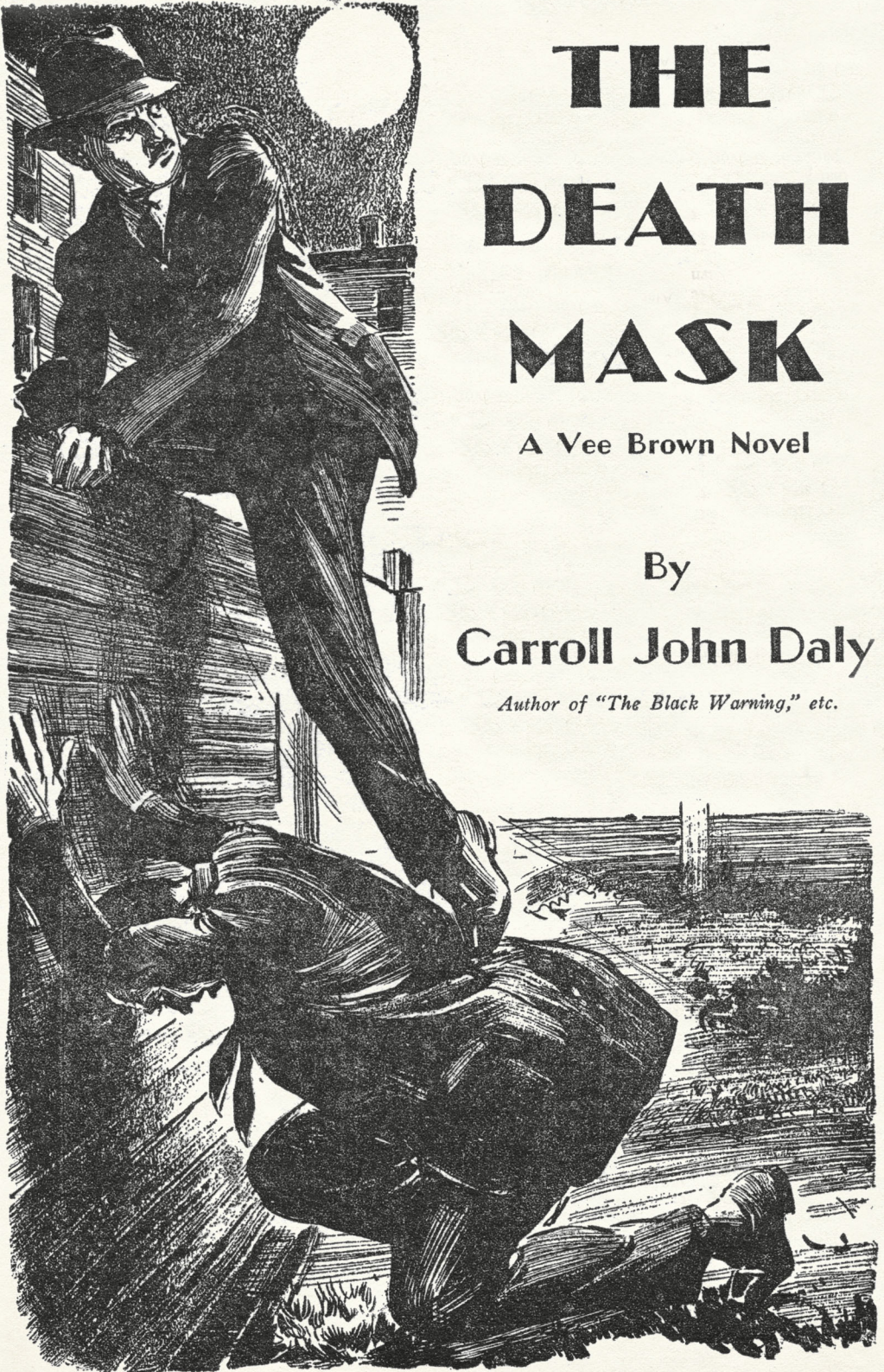
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THE DEATH MASK

A Vee Brown Novel

By
Carroll John Daly

Author of "The Black Warning," etc.

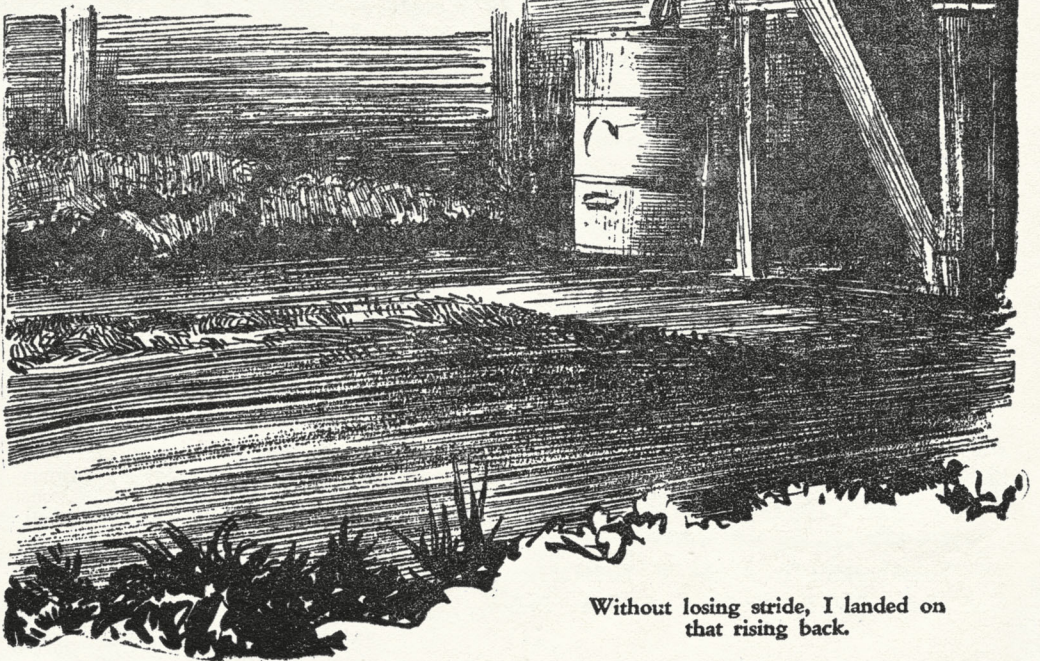
"It's just a matter of timing—this killing job," Brown told Condon. "So I've bought myself a new watch and will go into training as a boxer would before a fight." The only difference was that all the city was the battle ring. And Brown's opponent a black-masked monster who had already collected his share of the gate in advance—a hundred grand for one shot through the back of Vee's head!

CHAPTER ONE

Murder for Cash

VEE BROWN was interesting when he talked about crime, music—and certainly, firearms. He had a small room in the rear of the apartment which I called the gunroom, though Brown always spoke of it as "the morgue."

"You see," he explained, "they're all trophies of the hunt; and most of them taken from the dead." He was sitting



Without losing stride, I landed on that rising back.

on the floor in the living room now with a heavy, long-barreled, ugly-looking automatic, the parts of which were scattered over a large square sheet of white paper; a tiny oil can balanced perilously as he cleaned each part carefully before replacing it.

"A German Luger." He nodded his head. "And oddly enough, taken from the body of a half-breed just over the Mexican border. A deadly weapon. An accurate weapon." He raised it and looked along the barrel. "You mustn't confuse it with the cheap, rebuilt army Lugers or the inferior models that were rushed into the country shortly after the war. A little cumbersome for my work but great stuff in case of a siege in a lonely shack on a Mexican desert. There's a story there, Dean." He shook his head. "At the time I was very young and my life was despaired of."

"Here's a story now!" I cut in. "What about this Vincent Van Houton? You haven't forgotten him, Vee?"

Vee's lips parted in that crooked smile.

"No," he said, "I haven't. And he hasn't forgotten me; and I'm going to see that he doesn't." He paused a minute, looking toward the ceiling humming softly; the tune of the new piece he was working on. "Unless we can make him forget permanently—if the dead actually do forget. But you've got to have your lesson in ballistics. Let me hear you hazard a guess as to the range of this gun."

"I don't know," I told him flatly. "Since your gun-play takes place mostly in a room or a back alley, or along the street, I daresay a few feet or perhaps a few yards would be plenty."

HE LAUGHED up at me squatted there on the floor, his legs folded under him, his figure boyish—even delicate. But this lack of strength—that is, physical strength—was taboo with Brown.

It was one of his very sensitive subjects.

"It's surprising, almost unbelievable; but the range of this gun is slightly over a mile. Think of it. Twenty city blocks! An indispensable sort of a weapon for the man who can handle it. But what a curse to the untrained officer of the law; the criminal who desperately uses it in an attempted escape! Stray bullets with twenty city blocks in which to deal death to helpless, defenseless women and children. The law's a joke. The State forbids firearms, and they come to you by the United States mail. Oh, we'll have it in time. A federal law that—"

Brown stopped. The lock in the hall door had clicked audibly. He smiled too as he twirled the now cleaned gun and jerked a cartridge home.

"It would be funny," he said, "if we were attacked while I sat here on the floor with such a weapon facing the foyer. But, no. Only one person has a key."

"The girl, Maria. After Casserelie so nearly killed you—you still let her carry a key!"

"Certainly. Johnny Casserelie was the only one who knew she brought me information about the Black Death—Vincent Van Houton. He was the only one who knew her real identity, and he's dead. The girl, Maria—" And as feet beat quickly across the hall, "Something stirring, Dean. She's—"

Brown lowered the gun. Maria stood in the dim light of the hall, by the parted curtains that led to the living room. Small? Yes. No taller than Brown, even. Sometimes I thought that was why he liked her; he was so conscious of his own small stature. Her face was set; hard, cruel; a curve to her lips, a narrowness to her eyes so that the green of them were just two slits of brightness. I looked at her then and couldn't see what Brown saw; what Wong, our Chinese servant,

saw back of the hardness of her face—as if, inside, she was good.

She nodded first at me, then at Brown; jerked her little hat tighter down over her left eye and walked straight to the big chair beneath the light. She snapped out the light and sat down. There was nothing in her face or her attitude to make me remember, but I did remember that when last she left us she had flung her arms around Brown in parting.

BROWN peered at her long and earnestly though her face was in the shadows. She spoke quickly, as if she had been running.

“Don’t watch me like that,” she said. “I can read Dean like a book. I can read most men. But you bother me. I don’t know what you’re thinking; at least I hope I don’t—Vivian.”

And the smile that had been on Vee’s face faded, then returned again almost at once. Beside myself, and even including his publisher, no one except this girl knew that Detective Vee Brown, assigned to the district attorney’s office, and Vivian, the season’s greatest success in popular song hits, were one and the same man.

“I was thinking,” Brown said very slowly, “that you are very beautiful, Maria.” And when green eyes widened, “I mean, inside. So different—so—”

“Aren’t we all?” Slim shoulders moved in the vastness of the chair. “We all carry a vincer; a—”

Brown smiled. “A polish, certainly; which differentiates our actions with friends, acquaintances and enemies. But not necessarily cold cream, grease paint, theatrical—”

“Please!” she cut in quickly. “I’m here on business, terrible business. The life of a woman.”

“Vincent Van Houton? Blackmail?”

“Vincent Van Houton, yes.” She looked questioningly toward the door to

the music room, and when Brown assured her we were quite alone, “Worse than blackmail. Of course it starts with that; finishes with that, too, unless a very fine woman risks her own happiness, her husband’s career, her baby’s—” She laughed shrilly, and then, “I never was a sentimentalist and mustn’t kid myself that I’m doing the big squeal for anything but hate.” And she broke into that coarse voice again, that was bred of the underworld; as Brown called it, “of the night.”

“And I can be of use to this ‘fine woman?’” Brown asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know that you can pin it smack on Van Houton, though I think he’s working it himself. You’ve upended his props, have destroyed all but his biggest assistant.” She seemed to think a moment. “No, I can’t lay a finger on that assistant yet. It’s too unbelievable.”

“Maybe not. I’m a sucker for unbelievable things. At least, the district attorney and Inspector Ramsey think I am. Neither one of them believes for an instant that Van Houton is behind this Black Death; murder, suicide, that follows the—his blackmail. So why not let me have it?”

She shook her head; full red lips parted. “Not yet,” she said. “It’s really too fantastic. But I’ve got enough for you. This master blackmailer, Vincent Van Houton; Emperor of Evil,” and she fairly sneered out the words, “has missed the assistants you have eliminated—especially Johnny Casserelie. So he has decided to seek to enlarge his present organization; greatly enlarge it. He has decided to use George T. Moffet, political leader.”

I SMILED as Brown did, for I knew as well as Vee knew that George T. Moffet was through. The district attorney had tipped Brown the information.

His brightest, his best, his straightest man, Assistant District Attorney Edward Bainton, was handling that matter and the skids were under Mr. George T. Moffet; skids that would finally drop him for a twenty-year jolt. The conviction was in the bag.

"Use Moffet!" Vee's black eyes widened. "Why, don't you know? Of course it hasn't been in the papers, but an indictment is certain; a conviction sure to follow. This young Bainton dug all the evidence up himself; I understand, in fact I know it's complete."

"Yes," the girl said in a tired voice, "I know all about that. But, you see, the Black Death has promised Moffet that that evidence will not be produced—if Moffet is a 'reasonable man.'"

"The Black Death; Van Houton will—can destroy that evidence!"

"No, he won't destroy it. He may say he will, but it'll be the whip he'll hold over Moffet's head. Just more blackmail. And, Moffet! What an ally, with all his political powers, his great influence back again; and his feelings toward those who tried to get him."

"But—" I stammered, and Brown looked over and shook his head.

The girl smiled. It was a sad, tired sort of smile that made her face almost gentle. "Dean's right." She bobbed her head up and down in the shadows. "I can't help going in for drama. My life is drama. Like the stage, except perhaps that there can't be a happy ending." And quickly, "But I didn't come here to squawk. Van Houton is in a fair way; more than a fair way of getting all this evidence against Moffet that this Assistant District Attorney Edward Bainton has collected in the last two years, since his marriage."

Brown shook his head. "Bainton's honest. He can't be bought; certainly he can't be intimidated, and even if the skele-

ton rattles some place back in his family closet, he's the kind who'll sink with the ship and not bend even to a blackmail that means disaster."

"You misunderstand the significance of my last words," the girl said slowly. "I said, 'since his marriage.'"

"The wife!" Brown came to his feet and started toward the girl, stopped and dropped into a chair. "It's to come through her, eh?"

"Exactly. You see, the evidence is kept in a safe-deposit box in her name. Nothing strange in that; she helped in collecting it. Indeed, I believe she directed the collecting of it."

"But how—" Brown was puzzled. "Her husband—"

"Her husband believed it was her nose for crime; her instinct; a natural ability to understand things he brought to her and to explain them. At least, something like that. But certainly he never believed, nor those working through him, that hers was knowledge; the knowledge of long experience. That's right!" She nodded her head even before Brown could get out the question on his lips. "Like me, she was of the night."

"Bainton—her husband knows that?"

"Part of it." The girl shrugged. "He knows that she rose above her environment. But his family doesn't; his—" her lips parted—"do you call them his constituents? Well, they don't know it. And her husband doesn't know that, if a certain letter found its way to the police, his wife would do a jolt in the big house. Which all has its moral." She grinned, and this time her face was not beautiful. "The moral is—that crime catches up on you, even if you are living straight."

"What sort of a letter did she write, and who has it?"

"She gay-catted a job a few years back; took a position as maid in a house. Then she made an outline of that house, put it

on paper together with a letter of explanation and mailed it to a certain party. Van Houton has that letter."

"And how bad was the robbery; how influential the people?"

"What difference does it make? Her home, her child, her husband's career, her happiness; her whole house of cards goes tumbling as soon as that letter is produced. So, even if she beat the rap, which she couldn't, for a man was shot to death that night, what good would it do her?"

"I see," said Brown. "You want me to talk to her." His lips curved at the ends. "Convince her that the citizens come first; before herself, her child, her husband. Convince a woman of the underworld, who has risen above her environment."

GREEN eyes looked steadily at him. "I wonder," she said, "if the absence of a heart is just a pose with you. I have given you her name, I have told you the circumstances. You can go and see her."

"And threaten her into handing that evidence over to me." And suddenly, "It will be a jolt to the administration; the people; Mortimer Doran, the D. A. himself, if Moffet doesn't take the ride. Just what do you expect me to do?"

"That," she said, "is up to you. But I expect you to strike at Van Houton and protect this woman."

Brown came to his feet, looking down at her. She curled far back in the chair and although she was in a very dull light pulled her little hat, or tried to pull it, down even further over her face.

"You're a great little partner," he said, "and it's not all built of hate for Van Houton." He paused, and with that whimsical smile, "And you—the grip Van Houton must have on you! When can I strike for you?"

She hesitated a long moment. "What he holds over me is not written on paper, it's stamped in his head. It can't be de-

stroyed or burned. It's brains; his brains."

Vee Brown looked down at the long ugly gun still clutched in his hand. "Brains have been burned before; been destroyed before," he said, only half aloud.

She shook her head. "He never carries a gun, has no weapon in his house. Your methods of extermination would be useless against him."

"Why?" Brown was still smiling.

"It would be murder," she said simply.

Brown's thin lips became a single narrow gash. "Murdered men are just as dead, and have been known to remain just as silent, as those who shoot back. But the woman; this Mrs. Bainton. We'll see her now."

"You. Not me." She shook her head. "I have arranged for her to see you at ten o'clock tonight. Her husband's out attending a dinner."

"I see." Brown grinned boyishly. "If a man answers, hang up." And suddenly, "Don't move. Sit so." He stood looking down at her. "For the moment you had it. Hard, sinister, cruel. A determination that was swept away almost the moment it came. A determination to—" He stopped again, and then, "You thought of killing Van Houton; you've often thought of it." And putting a hand upon her shoulder, "Don't, Maria; don't entertain such thoughts. They are dangerous. Still, you couldn't do it. You lack the—"

She flashed to her feet. Green eyes blazed; lips parted. She said—and if she were acting before; if her heavy make-up was to hide her real identity, she was not acting now—"Guts! Guts is the word." She flung open her bag and held it tilted. Plainly the pearl handle of a revolver showed; a small weapon. "I have thought of it, often thought of it; gripped this firmly when he has used the phone; used

it to send some unfortunate victim to death. I—”

Brown's black eyes blazed too. Not with hatred; not with the lust to kill, but with that sparkle of creative genius he so often displayed.

“Don't move. So!” He began to hum softly. Low; a weird sort of chant. Then his hand tightened upon her wrist and he half led her, half dragged her to the music room. “I've been stumped on it. The inspiration wouldn't come, and now—Listen!”

The girl didn't speak. I saw her draw back slightly from the piano as Brown almost jumped onto the stool. Then the notes; the soft notes that grew louder; his voice above the music.

“The song's for you, Maria. *Girl of the Night!* I—”

The phone rang. I lifted the receiver. Then with my hand over the mouthpiece I called to Brown.

Maybe my voice was hoarse, even strained. But I said: “Vincent Van Houton is on the wire.”

CHAPTER TWO

A Living Dead Man

I THINK the girl had started to sing but I cannot be sure. If she had, her voice died. Brown swung from the stool and stood in the doorway. The girl said, and her voice was a whisper: “He—Van Houton—he—he can't know about me—being here.”

“Of course he can't.” Vee was emphatic. “If he did he would not telephone me like this. If— You acted as if you were running, hurrying, when you came in. You think you were followed?”

“No.” She shook her head. And then more thoughtfully, “Not by Van Houton anyway. But there was a man across the street; he disappeared in a doorway. I'm not sure, but I think it was Inspector

Ramsey.” And after a moment, “I think everyone who follows me now is Ramsey.”

“Sure.” Brown nodded. “He watched me for a bit, until I complained to Mortimer Doran, the district attorney, that it interfered with my work. Ramsey is jealous and suspects that I get information which he doesn't get, and he'd like to know who gives it to me. He didn't know you, of course.”

“Hardly.” She jerked a thumb toward the phone. “Better see what Van Houton wants.”

And Brown did. The conversation was hard to follow. Brown's words were cryptic. “How interesting” and “Really, I appreciate your efforts.” A moment of hesitation, and then, “Very well, I'll come right over. With Dean Condon, of course.”

“He wants,” Brown explained when he hung up the receiver, “me to come over and visit him.”

“You're not going!” the girl said, clutching at his arm. “Don't you see, Vee? Don't go. He's planning your death. I know, Vee.” And when Brown only smiled and jiggled her shoulder, “He's sure this time. If you could see his smile you'd understand.”

“He takes you greatly into his confidence.”

“Yes,” she nodded, “he does. Once, terribly so—and his eyes were so peculiar at the time. I think he killed once, Vee. And I think he would kill again if I—Don't go!”

“Mortimer Doran knows my suspicions of Van Houton; Inspector Ramsey knows my suspicions. And Van Houton knows that I have confided in them; no bones have been made about that. Now—the safest place in the world for me is at Van Houton's house. Nothing could happen to me there. It is quite possible that he may speak out of turn.” And his eyes

narrowing, "You think he killed once? You think—God! Maria, if we could only pin something on him; murder on him. If you could prove that! If —"

"The moment I can prove that I'll let you know." She set her lips very tightly. "I know it will end me; finish me, but I'm willing."

"You are very, very close to him?" Brown looked at her sharply, and she moved from the light.

"Yes," she said. "Very, very close. He—he likes me in my peculiar way."

"I thought," Brown was not looking at her now—"it was Gertrude la Palatin, the actress. That's the rumor around. That she's—the one."

"Yes," she said, "that's the rumor. You may wonder what he can see in me"—her face had gone very white in the shadows—"but he likes cats; almost worships them. He struck me once, for, despite his languid attitude he's very strong, very alert, very— But he likes cats; they have very beautiful, soft bodies."

SHE was walking toward the door now and I watched her, recalling the first time I had seen her and her soft catlike tread that had impressed me then.

She stopped. The door bell rang—the bell of our private entrance. That meant that someone had slipped above in one of the automatic lifts, or that we were having a visit from Mortimer Doran. No one was permitted above who was not first announced; that is, no one who inquired at the desk below. But the apartment itself was too big to prevent visitors entirely though the attendants tried very hard and succeeded in most cases. The girl, Maria, of course, was always admitted—day or night.

"Mortimer Doran." Brown nodded. And at the girl's alarm, "Hop into the music room until he's gone."

Maria, safely in the music room, the

door closed behind her, Brown walked to the hall, and heavy feet followed him back into the room.

Mortimer Doran's huge bulk led the procession. Behind him, just as tall and just as huge, but with a muscular strength the district attorney's flabby body lacked, was Inspector Ramsey; and behind him came a stranger.

"Well," Brown pointed to chairs as he addressed Mortimer Doran, "something important, to bring you and the old sleuth along!" He grinned at Ramsey, who scowled in return.

Mortimer Doran did not smile as he introduced the stocky, shock-haired stranger.

"Detective Tom Haskin, from Chicago. Got an eye for faces."

"He won't have much trouble in remembering Ramsey's," Vee said as he shook hands with the grinning detective from Chicago.

"I don't think," Ramsey dropped easily into a chair and put his eyes straight on Brown, "that he'll have much trouble remembering your face either after you find out what brought us here."

"Really!" said Brown. "Well, put on your show."

It was Mortimer Doran who spoke, and his fat, many-chinned face was very somber.

"The matter is very serious; extremely serious Brown. You've heard about 'Spot' Kelly, the unknown killer from Chicago."

"Sure. Sure!" Brown nodded, and as if thinking aloud. "That is, in a way."

"In a way!" said Detective Haskin. "God! man, he's Chicago's greatest menace; maybe the nation's greatest menace. He's put on a new show; a new racket, and as far as we can make out, works it alone. He's made the crime of murder a business. For a certain sum; an amount according to the importance of the victim, he'll undertake to murder anyone."

And after an emphatic pause, "To date, he hasn't failed once."

"Ah!" said Brown, "you can't be sure of that. You can only know of his successes—not his failures."

"There are no failures. He marks his victims before they die. Lets it be known in criminal circles just who is to die. Of course we of the police have our secret channels for such information. You see, men dying so shortly after he marks them for death helps him to receive future clients. Once he puts up a man's number that man is as good as dead."

"I see." Brown nodded. "And how do people pay for such murders?"

"That, we don't know. But that they pay, and cash on the line in advance, we do know. Who collects for him is something we have never figured out. Most of his victims have been underworld characters, but lately he has gone into—more legitimate business. Less than a month ago Lieutenant Duff, of the police, was murdered by him; shot right through the back of the head."

"Well, well—how distressing!" Brown was facetious and clearly showed it. "And now you're here from Chicago to ask me to come out and hunt him down."

THE good-natured detective scowled for the first time. If he resented Brown's attitude, I think he had good cause to. I had heard of this man, "On-the-spot Kelly," and knew that he was anything but a joke to the Chicago police. Detective Haskin set his lips tightly when he spoke.

"No," he said. "I've come here to warn you." And rather dramatically, "Pack your bags, Mr. Vee Brown, and get a hide-away. Your number's up. You're listed as Spot Kelly's next victim." And when Brown still smiled at him, "Don't you understand? Someone has paid cash for your death."

"Hell!" said Brown, "someone has been paying cash for my death most of my life." And the annoyed expression leaving his face, "Not that I don't appreciate your—"

"You mean," the detective pushed to the edge of his chair, "you won't hide out and—"

"No!" Brown snapped. And the fire that started into his eyes and the curl to his lips suddenly vanishing, "I suppose it's that fish-face there," he jerked a thumb at Ramsey, "who put such an idea into your head. But let me tell you this, copper—copper from Chicago, and without meaning any offence; when the cops in New York jump, they jump forward and not backward."

"So you mean—"

"I mean that, after all, I'm just a New York cop."

"But, Brown," Mortimer Doran's voice was soft and wheedling, "for the moment, until we can locate this killer. There, —there's no disgrace in being careful. Every one of Spot Kelly's victims has been found dead, with a bullet right through the back of his head."

"Yeah?" said Vee. "When they pick up Kelly they'll find my bullet in the front of his head."

And to Haskin, from Chicago, "Now —why are you here? Surely not just to tell me to skip town!"

"Well—no, Mr. Brown. We've heard of you out our way and we felt you'd stick. I've come to offer my services." And with a grin when Brown would have cut in, "Oh, not in the way of shooting, though I can do a bit of that—but in way of identification. You have my chief's letter." And when Doran nodded, "I'm the only man in the world who has ever seen Spot Kelly's face."

"Only living man," said Vee.

Detective Haskin shook his head. "Living or dead. His murders are all dra-

matic; that helps his business. There are generally several witnesses, so he always wears a mask. The papers have called him 'The Masked Death.' Now—have you any enemy? Oh, I know there are hundreds who would be glad to see you knocked over, but I mean—any particular one, with the jack for such a deal. Spot Kelly charges big rates." He looked at the ceiling. "I wouldn't be surprised if a man like you would rate a hundred grand; at least, that's the rumor."

"You flatter me," said Vee. "And I have such an enemy, with just as appropriate a name as your Masked Death, and with just the same yen for advertising his business. We call him, here, the Black Death. Vincent Van Houton. He gives out little cards and—"

"Bosh!" Inspector Ramsey cut in. "That's one of Brown's pet delusions. You know, Mr. Doran, I've had Van Houton shadowed and have watched him personally for weeks. Why—damn it!—he's even trying to run down this Black Death himself. Naturally being along with the social set; the wealthy set, he has had friends who—"

"The Black Death. Cards, eh?" The detective from Chicago was stroking his chin as he cut in. "Well, this Masked Death, on big occasions, sends out letters. You see, it's mostly in murders of vengeance, to let the victim know directly; make him suffer a hundred deaths before the actual one. Fiendish in its way. The victim knows Kelly has never failed; knows that any moment death may strike; knows—" He shook his head. "If such an enemy wanted you dead there should have been a letter, or—"

"And there was—I think there was." Brown nodded vigorously and going directly to the waste basket started to paw through it. "Did it come yesterday or today?" He seemed to think aloud. "Wong emptied the basket only—Ah!" He

straightened "the very thing. I remember now. There was a threat in it."

I TOOK the letter and read it to the others before I passed it around. A warning of death, a threat of death, a promise of death. In its way, perhaps, it was not as dramatic as the cards the Black Death sent his victims or left on their bodies. Certainly not as melodramatic, if there is such a thing as melodrama in today's criminal reign. For, as Brown says, 'Melodrama has simply become drama and and drama has simply become life.' But the message was perhaps more deadly, certainly more business-like than those sent by the Black Death.

Dear Mr. Brown:—

Your number's up. Straighten out your affairs.

Very truly yours,
Spot Kelly.

"No monkey business about that," said Haskin with a certain pride it seemed. As if Chicago should be credited for breeding such a criminal. "You don't have men like that in New York. You don't know what it is to meet such—" He coughed behind his hand and broke off. "My apologies, gentlemen! But you can see from that document that the Windy City is unjustly accused of laxity. There's nothing missing from that letter."

"Only the return address." Brown smiled crookedly. "Now—just what do you want to do about it; you and the Chicago police?"

"I'll be honest with you." The good-natured smile left Haskin's face. "The D. A., here, or Ramsey, spoke to the chief on long distance. I know this killer and he doesn't know me. That was a break I had. If you will get out of town, when I say—get out. If you won't, let me hang around with you; sort of follow you. Now"—he shook his head—"this lad

shoots them through the back of the head. He's no Robin Hood. It's just business—the business of producing a corpse at a certain price. I see no hope; not one chance in a hundred of saving your life. But I do see a chance of getting Spot Kelly for your murder."

"We could give you a police guard—night and day," Ramsey started, and stopped when Brown turned on him.

Then to the D. A. Brown said, "My God! What has come over all you people? A hood from Chicago walks into town and you all go ga-ga. After all, if there is to be a corpse—I'm that corpse. Why worry?"

"Many men," said Mortimer Doran, "have received many such letters and every one of them is dead. How many more died by this man's hand it is impossible to tell. This Spot Kelly has no criminal record. Twice his fingerprints have been found, but there are no corresponding prints anywhere in the country. You know well, Brown, that when an unknown takes up a life of crime, of murder, and has no former acquaintance or dealings with, or even knowledge of the man he intends to kill, it is impossible to get him—unless you get him right in the act."

"Then that's settled," Brown said. "I'll shoot him to death for you—right in the act, and since Chicago is a little short of funds at present, I'll receive as a reward the key to the city."

"And the gratitude of every cop on the force," said Haskin.

"Sure!" Vee grinned, and suddenly growing serious, "And Dean, here, is—Maybe he'd better take a trip."

I started to cut in when Haskin said: "Your friend is in no danger." His lips parted and his white teeth showed; his colorless eyes even flashed. "This Spot Kelly is a business man." He pointed a

finger at Brown. "He's been paid only to get you."

"And you think he will, eh?"

The man shook his head. "I know he will."

MORTIMER Doran laid a hand on Vee's shoulder. "God! Vee," he said, "take care of yourself. You're such a fool for courage. This man knows the murderer, has actually seen him. Better listen to him."

"Certainly." Brown glanced at the clock. "And now—I'm sorry, Mr. Doran, but I've got some important business, very important business." And to the dick from Chicago, "If you'll tell me the hotel you're stopping at I'll get in touch with you. You're a cop and know how things are. Can't let these little side issues interfere with duty."

"Side issues!" The man's eyes opened wide, and as Brown led the way to the hall, "If I hadn't heard about you, Vee Brown, I'd think you were a—"

And Brown laughed. The others didn't understand, but I did. Brown's pride was almost a fetish with him. "Don't you worry about me. If the letter really means business I'll pop this lad over for you."

"He's bad," said Doran, at the door.

"No, not bad," Brown shook his head. "Just rotten. We'll go along down with you."

Halfway to the elevator Vee turned. "See them below, Dean. I'll join you at the door. Telephone call." And to Haskin, "Don't forget to give Dean your phone number. We'll want you to identify the body."

I tried to carry on a light conversation as the three men remained silent in the elevator. In the hall below I button-holed Mortimer Doran. Their silence, their seriousness! Even the sneering derision was gone from Ramsey's face. It got me.

"Vee always has been able to take care of himself," I told Mortimer Doran. "Now—why this sudden alarm?"

The district attorney shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know. When I was last in Chicago I talked with their chief of police about this very man. And now—God! Dean, how can anyone protect himself from such— Why, if Brown only knew the man or —"

When he broke off I turned to Detective Tom Haskin. "If you knew Brown you wouldn't be so worried and—"

"And you're not worried!" Colorless eyes glared at me. "Listen, buddy. Your pal's number is up, just as that letter said. Look up Tom Haskin, in Chicago. See if there's anyone, even his worst enemy, who'll say he's yellow—has even the thinnest stripe of yellow. Yet—" He picked his teeth with a match. "Oh, hell! can't you see it? A sure killer. On the street, in the theatre, at dinner, in a speak, entering or leaving a building! Just a single shot from a stranger, through the head. I don't know what I'd do. Your friend has guts, but that's the best I can say for him. Many fools—dead fools had guts."

"But if this killer comes out in the open he should be easy to catch."

"Sure! That's what you think. That's what we thought. But you don't know how people act when a man is shot to death; murdered before their eyes. Besides"—his shoulders moved—"if he were caught; if I caught him, what good will that do Brown if he is dead?"

"He's always been able to handle these—"

"Sure. Sure! The strong fingers of Tom Haskin tightened on my shoulder. "And I hope he will this time. Give me a buzz—or I'll give you one later. If Brown's going anywhere that looks to you as if it might be a trap, and that con-

ceit of his drives him into it, ring me up. I might help out." And his head going up, "I don't mind telling you it would make me rate a sergeant out in Chi if I go this Spot Kelly."

"It's not so much the saving of Brown's life then?"

"Hell!" said Haskin. "You don't know this Spot Kelly." His hand left my shoulder and a particularly hard finger pounded against my chest as Ramsey called to him from the D. A.'s car at the curb. "You're walking around with a dead man, Mr. Condon. A living dead man. Night!" And he dashed across the sidewalk and climbed into the car.

CHAPTER THREE

Black Warning

IT WAS nearly fifteen minutes later that Brown and I were speeding in a taxi to Vincent Van Houton's. Brown was talking.

"The girl will stay above," he told me, "until we come back. She likes the new piece, Dean." And he frowned slightly. "I'm glad of that. For the moment I thought that she wouldn't. Not that it isn't good. In its way, I think it's the best thing I've ever done. But women are funny—"

"God! Vee!" I couldn't keep quiet. "What about this killer from Chicago?"

"Well—" Black eyes regarded me coldly—"what about him?"

"Why—" I guess I stammered at first; then I came out with it. "You can talk about music—a song, when the deadliest killer in the country has threatened you with death!"

"Hell," said Vee, "we've buried a few in our day! And perhaps I'll live to dance on Spot Kelly's grave, too." And when, I guess, I shuddered visibly, "Snap out of it, Dean. We're not children, to be

frightened by this bogie man of death. Why, nine tenths of his asset is the fear he inspires."

"But Mortimer Doran said—"

"And that's it!" Brown fairly snapped his words now. "The psychology of the thing. I don't mind the dick from Chicago. He doesn't know me. I don't mind Ramsey—he hates my guts. But I do mind Doran and I do mind you. My friends! Doran knows me. You have seen me in every conceivable danger; you've seen how I handle my guns and—Damn it, if I didn't have any more pride in myself; trust in myself than my two best friends have in me I'd be dead long ago!"

"It isn't that," I tried to tell him. "But what are you going to do?"

"Do!" he said. "Do what I always do. Shoot this Spot Kelly to death, of course. He's invaded New York now, and it's my duty. It's what I'm paid for."

"But how? . . . Vee, you haven't the proper respect for this man."

"But I have." He nodded. "And, like any fighter going into the ring, I'll go into training for Mr. Spot Kelly." And looking suddenly at me as my eyes knitted, "And for God's sake, Dean, don't try to help me out. Don't get meddling in things like this."

I GUESS I stiffened. "Meddling!" And when Brown squeezed my arm and laughed, "I suppose you consider this detective from Chicago a meddler."

"He'd like to cash in on my death, and I don't blame him for that. But we'll leave him out of it. It's my job, my honor. And, by God, I don't think Van Houton can well afford the loss of a hundred grand at this time!"

"You think he—"

"I'm sure of it." Brown straightened against the rear seat. "A hundred grand! I don't know but I'm flattered. But here's

Van Houton's now and—" He jerked out a gun and thrust it into my hand, reached for his other, then took the gun back from me and jammed it into his shoulder holster again. "I'm a fool, Dean," he said quickly. "A sentimental fool."

"But I don't need the gun. I'm armed," I told him. "Besides you said nothing could possibly happen to us at Van Houton's."

"It isn't what could happen to us"—I had never heard his voice quite so serious—"it's what might happen to Van Houton. I didn't tell you, Dean; but another woman committed suicide this afternoon. You see, Van Houton could have spared her but he didn't."

"What's that got to do with giving me your gun?" I was slightly bewildered as we climbed from the taxi.

"Nothing. Only that there are times when I'm afraid of Van Houton, afraid that I may just raise my gun and shoot him to death. A weakness? Certainly. But even that would not explain my bullet in his forehead. Don't you see, Dean? If I thought as you think; Doran thinks; Haskin thinks"—and with a twisted grin—"Ramsey hopes—why, I'd pop off Van Houton just as a friendly gesture; a final gesture."

There was no chance to say more. The taxi pulled to the curb. And I could just look my disapproval of Brown for his loose talk as he pushed the button of Van Houton's residence.

The butler who opened the door was the same as on our first visit some time back. He was just as stiff, just as formal, and just as polite.

"Certainly. To be sure, gentlemen. Mr. Van Houton is expecting you, but I think a bit earlier. However, he'll be down directly. This way, please."

He led us into a dimly lighted room; pushed a button, flooding it in a bright

glare, and stiffened slightly. Three of the big, comfortable chairs were occupied by fluffy balls of fur. One of the cats raised its head and stared at us unblinkingly.

The butler drew back. "I'll take you to the library," he announced in what seemed hurt pride. "Mr. Van Houton, sir, won't have the—the animals disturbed."

"You'd like to hoist one of them, eh?" Brown put that boyish smile on the butler when we were in the library. "I mean—put a toe to them."

For a moment the butler's face cracked, his lips parted, his tongue protruded slightly and moistened his upper lip. If it was a smile it was gone almost at once. He turned toward the door; then I guess he just had to say something. His words were not very heavy but his tone was expressive.

"It would be worth my position, sir," was all he said, but what he left unsaid was—that his position might be worth it.

Five minutes, and Van Houton did not come. Brown walked about the room. Cats! Pictures of cats, photographs, paintings, books on cats. And by the fireplace, close to a steel screen where logs burned despite the heat of the room, a round ball of silver—a huge living cat.

TEN minutes, and Brown consulted his watch. "Ten o'clock," he said. "Really, Dean"—he spotted the bell on the wall and pressed it—"Van Houton is quite a man. His servants, now. I spent weeks tracing every one of them. Not the sort of servants you'd think such a man would hire. Every one of them with an enviable reputation of long service in the best families. Clever villain, this cat-man. Doesn't let the breath of suspicion enter his home."

"But I should think he'd need bodyguards if he mixes with racketeers and—"

"None of them know him except a

very chosen few, and now even a smaller group since I had the pleasure of shooting a few to death." And to the butler who entered the room, "Well, where's Van Houton? Did you tell him we were here?"

"Yes, sir. I did, sir." He looked about the room. "He hasn't been here—isn't here?"

"Hasn't and isn't." Brown's eyes narrowed. "What did he say?"

"Why, he didn't say anything. At least I don't think he did. He—I tapped on his door, sir. The study, upstairs, and announced your arrival. I'll go up again, sir."

It was close to five minutes later that the butler, slightly red of face, informed us that Van Houton must have gone out.

"I can't understand it, and—"

But we were out the door, into the waiting taxi and speeding to the address of the assistant district attorney, Edward Bainton.

"This Spot Kelly—" I started, and stopped.

"God in heaven, Dean," Brown cut in, "are you still harping on that? I'm just a cog in a big police machine and am paid to face death, paid to protect others from death. Now this woman—the one in whose hands lies the destiny of the city's leading political crook! Don't you see? Van Houton has known for some time that there has been a leak to me. But he can't place it. He can't even be sure it isn't luck or downright cleverness on my part. Tonight! Well, perhaps he wanted to be certain where we were for a certain length of time. Why?"

"You think he had her murdered?"

"Without obtaining that evidence? Ridiculous."

And for once Brown made a mistake, if it was a mistake. He seldom, on such delicate business, drove directly to a house. And this time was no exception.

We left the taxi around the corner and walked down the block. Walked down it as a man descended the steps of the very house we sought. As the chauffeur of the big car at the curb held open the door the tall figure turned and looked back along the walk toward us, his face almost directly beneath the light.

"Van Houton!" The words choked in my throat. "Vincent Van Houton."

I almost started to run forward but Brown clutched me by the arm.

"If he wanted to get away we'd be too late," he said. "And if he didn't we'd make fools of ourselves. But he is in a hurry."

The door closed. The chauffeur climbed behind the wheel and the big high-powered black car pulled from the curb.

Brown sighed. "His visit will make it that much harder for us, Dean. We'll have to threaten the woman, of course. We have nearly as much information about Mrs. Bainton as Van Houton, without, of course, the evidence. But he'll have made it harder for us, be assured of that."

THE woman who opened the door was slender and dark, and not as tall as she seemed to appear; that is, measured by my height, which is a good six feet. And she wasn't the type who would appear an easy victim of blackmail. She met us with a straightforward look, an upward shoot of her head, and gray steady eyes that were certainly capable of a direct stare.

"Mr. Brown and Mr. Condon, of course." She closed the door and led us into a side room. "I'm playing servant and—" She shrugged her shoulders, turned and faced us in the better light. "You're rather late, Mr. Brown."

"We were unavoidably delayed," Vee told her. And when she just stared at him, "I'm sorry, very sorry."

"Yes." She nodded then. "You would be; you will be. As for myself, I don't know."

"You don't know?" Brown said, and though there was a question in his voice she did not explain her meaning then. "That was Mr. Van Houton who just left your house. He advises you, I suppose, that to listen to me would be most disastrous to you—tragic to you."

"That was Mr. Van Houton." She repeated his words but not in the monotone of a distracted and confused woman. Her voice was very clear. "And, as you say, he advised me that to listen to you would be both disastrous and tragic. But those were not his exact words."

"I hope, for your sake, that he has not made things harder for me—for the people I represent. I am here to help you, Mrs. Bainton."

"Yes." She nodded. "Just how?"

And for once Brown was stumped. Here was no cringing, frightened, lying woman, looking for a loophole of escape.

"Help you to remember that there are over six million people counting on your husband," Brown said. "That perhaps their fate hangs on your decision to be an honest woman."

Her lips curled slightly at the ends. "Go on," she said.

"You're not a fool, Mrs. Bainton." Brown fairly threw the words at her now. "Moffet is a crook, the most dangerous kind of a criminal—a politician. Grafting, rotten politicians have done more to take the bread out of the mouths of little children than any other single thing. You know that. Blackmail is ruin to a few, perhaps even death to a few. But you are playing with the millions and—"

"What did the millions ever do for me?" Gray eyes were steel now. "I—I—" She stopped suddenly. "I'm talking like a fool, Mr. Brown. But look

at me. I've come from the gutter, the real gutter—not the story-book kind. And I climbed out of it; yes, fought every inch of the way out of it. I didn't ask anyone to give me anything; anyone to help me even. And no one did—except one man, maybe. The man I married. And later—” She stopped again and her eyes raised slightly. “Well, I used to think women who had kids were fools, until I had one.”

I LOOKED at Brown. He didn't like the line and neither did I. It looked bad. Brown said: “I've come for something; something you are to give me. That you are to get out of the safe-deposit box for me”—and his lips narrowing—“or an order from you to open that box.”

“I have nothing for you,” she said. “Maybe I was strong enough—or weak enough, to be willing to go back into that gutter. But I wasn't weak enough to drag Ed and the baby down into it. I have nothing for you.”

“But it isn't as bad as all that, Mrs. Bainton.” Brown grew smooth. “You want to know how I can help you. I have great influence with Mortimer Doran, the district attorney; he will do anything I ask. And he is very close to the governor. You'll have a full pardon, and a clean conscience—a right to live—”

“A right to know that I wrecked my husband's chance in life. A right to know that my baby will grow to a boy who comes home from school because the other children have pointed the finger of shame at him; a boy whose mother was a crook; who declared she was a crook to save the face of a lax administration. And for what? For the law. The law that left me without food or clothes, without air or sunshine; with dirt and filth, and kicked me back in the gutter when I tried to climb out of it.”

“And how,” said Brown, “will you explain to your husband and child the betrayal of the trust that husband placed in you?”

“I'll say I was afraid of the vault; afraid of the influence Moffet might exert, and I took out the document and it was stolen.”

“And he'll believe that?”

She laughed. “He'll believe it,” she told Brown. “You see, when he looks at me he doesn't see the gutter and filth. He loves me.”

“If it is necessary for me to tell him the truth, what then?” Brown's face was very hard.

“So you are the man I was advised to trust; you are the man I decided to turn over that evidence to. You are—” She looked at him a long time. “No, you won't talk. Come!”

Brown and I followed her into the hall and up the stairs. On the landing at the rear of the first floor she took a key which she must have held in her hand and unlocked a door. A dim light burned in the corner of that room.

“I warn you,” Brown said as he looked at the little crib, “that I am not a sentimentalist. You're making a mistake in—”

“Shh!” she cautioned. “The baby doesn't as a rule wake up no matter how many look at him.” And in a lower voice, “He hasn't got the fear of eyes, nor of a heavy hand. He didn't inherit that from his mother.” She preceded us across the room. “You don't have to look at the baby if you're afraid. Just look there!”

Brown and I looked together. There, pinned on the blanket close to a soft chubby hand that hung out and almost gripped its hard surface, was a small oblong card. I guess my breath whistled into my throat. Maybe Brown's did too. Though the light was dim, I read plainly what was printed in black type on that card—

THE BLACK DEATH
No. 3

MRS. BAINTON spoke, though she didn't need to—I understood well enough. "Number Three," she said. "I have had such a card myself, but I didn't care. You know what it means. It's the final warning. The last warning of the Black Death. There is only one card that follows it, Mr. Vee Brown. That reads Number Four." She hesitated; her voice was husky but it did not break. "That final card is found only on the bodies of the dead." And turning and facing Brown, and very low and without emotion—certainly without any hysteria, "I didn't want that card found on the dead body of my baby."

"No, no; of course not." Brown gulped. He was thrown all right. "But a threat; simply a threat, that—"

"I have read the papers and I am not a fool. If you had arrived here on time my baby would be dead."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, "that I was afraid of temptation. I took that evidence from the vault today and brought it here to give you tonight."

"And you have it here now?" Brown barely breathed the words.

"No." She faced Brown, head high. "I gave it to Van Houton; standing by this crib I gave it to him." She leaned down quickly and snatched the card away. "Nothing can harm my baby now—nothing."

"But—" Brown stammered, "your—The letter that he had. You trusted him, and—"

She pointed to a large tray and the burnt ashes upon it. "That is my past," she said. "The woman I used to be lived hard. She died there tonight. Come!"

She preceded us from the room, and this time she did not lock the door be-

hind her. Back in the room below, she faced Brown. "Well, what are you going to do?"

Brown shrugged, and his smile was anything but whimsical. "What can I do? Van Houton, then, was in that room tonight. He—he put that card there?"

"At least," she answered, "he pointed it out to me and told me then that these blackmailers had trusted him with my letter, for that evidence. Otherwise—That was when he pointed to the card."

"And you let him up in the baby's room! You—"

"You forget. Up to that moment Vincent Van Houton was just a friend; rather, an acquaintance. He said that he too had been blackmailed. It wasn't until tonight that he showed his hand. And even now there is nothing to prove—against him. Another woman might not have understood even then. But I have lived a full life. I knew when he looked at the baby. He could have—" She shuddered slightly.

"Van Houton never strikes, himself."

"No? I saw his eyes tonight, and I made a bid for happiness and freedom—and a deal for my baby's life."

Brown just stood and looked at her. Stunned, I think. Then he smiled. "You're sure you got your letter—the right one?" His smile was not a bad one; at least, a bad try—and when she nodded, "Well, you're free as far as I am concerned. That's a nice-looking kid, Mrs. Bainton. And, after all, he's your kid."

"Then you won't talk."

"No. I'm hired by the six million, not you. It's my job. Van Houton—" Suddenly, "He—he let you know he was the Black Death?"

"No, no." She shook her head. "There would be no proof of that; none at all. We were very discreet; both playing a game. We got what we wanted. He let me understand that he was giving me

something he was asked to deliver, and in return was taking a letter from me."

Brown nodded. "It took nerve. He must need Moffet desperately or Moffet must have offered him a fortune and he's badly in need of funds, especially after paying out one hundred thousand dollars for—" He broke off as he walked to the front door. "Don't you worry, Mrs. Bainton. You'll bring up that kid to be a fine young man. But don't tell your husband anything yet. Wait until the Moffet trial is ready or he insists on that evidence."

"Good night!" she said. "My friend was right. You're just a—a regular guy."

CHAPTER FOUR

Girl of the Night

AS WE turned down the street I said to Brown:

"Why in the world did you tell her to wait? What possible good can that—"

"We're going to see Van Houton. I know he won't scare easily, but he may have that evidence still on him. God Dean, but that's a blow to the city!"

"Yes." I knew how badly Brown took it when he felt that he had failed. "It's too bad you were late."

"Too bad? Hell Dean, there's a woman who deserves what she can get out of life. I'm glad I was late."

He was silent for a long time after that, and we were in the taxi before he spoke again. Then he picked up his words from where he had left off.

"Perhaps I mean I am glad I was not too early, and took the evidence from the woman." And then exactly what I was thinking, "But if we had driven straight to the door we'd have caught him coming down the steps, with the evidence in his pocket. But here we are, at Van Houton's again."

This time Van Houton stood behind the butler when the door was opened.

"Detective Vee Brown." His big blue eyes widened and he ran a hand through blond wavy hair. "And your shadow, of course," as he nodded at me. "I'm deuced sorry I wasn't here when you called." He smiled broadly. "But I'm a stickler for punctuality; I just thought you weren't coming."

"You were out, eh?" Brown followed him across the hall.

"Yes. Visiting a friend—a friend in trouble." And looking at the butler and touching his lips with a well-manicured finger as he lowered his voice, "I don't mind telling you that it's this very black-mail business that you still pretend to think I'm connected with."

We were in the library again now. Van Houton indicated chairs as Brown said: "I know. You visited Mrs. Bainton; took a certain envelope from her. Held us here so that—"

"Damn it! Brown, we don't appreciate you," Van Houton interrupted, his blue eyes shining. "I guess it's because you're so small; so frail, and we connect police achievements with strong masculine frames, keen brisk minds. And now you turn out a regular Sherlock Holmes!"

"Then you admit taking an envelope from Mrs. Bainton."

"Admit it? Certainly." Eyebrows raised.

"And got me to come here to be sure I would not interfere."

"To be sure you wouldn't interfere!" Amazement was written on Van Houton's face—blank, theatrical amazement. "What an absurd idea, after asking you to come here."

"Then, just why did you ask me to come here; tell me it was very important?"

"Mrs. Bainton." Van Houton cleared his throat. His thin lips set tightly; his voice was very serious, but he had diffi-

culty in keeping the twinkle out of his eyes. "You see, I had a note to deliver to Mrs. Bainton. In exchange I was to receive an envelope of some sort from her. Blackmail? Yes, I thought of that. I called you to come here and take my place."

"You—you"—Brown fairly stammered—"wanted me to take the note to Mrs. Bainton; receive the one—the envelope in exchange!"

"Certainly. It went against my pride, of course; but after all, you were more experienced." He shrugged his shoulders. "But you didn't come. Your lack of interest was no doubt caused by your pride in not wishing to receive help from me."

"A beautiful lie!" Brown stared straight at him. "And you couldn't wait a few minutes for me. It was a matter of minutes, eh?"

VAN HOUTON grew very dignified.

"It was a matter of seconds. The man who brought me that letter informed me of the time he would come. He came; insisted that I depart with him. What could I do?" And when Brown would have interrupted him, "You being a—well, what you are, you can not understand." He drew himself fully erect. "But a gentleman does not hesitate when a woman's honor is at stake."

"Baloney!" said Vee Brown. And the scowl leaving his face and his lips twisting at the ends, "But damn good baloney, Van Houton. Baloney that might very easily be digested by the police." Vee looked toward the door, saw that it was closed, and looked back at Van Houton. "I wonder," it was as if he thought aloud, "if you've got the thing on you."

"The thing. The thing! Oh, that envelope. I passed my word to drop it in the first mail box." But his eyes sought the safe at the far end of the room, by

the fireplace. I made a mental note of that action; that covert glance.

"So you passed your word." Brown was on his feet now, moving toward Van Houton who stood leaning on the flat desk.

"Exactly. You see, that's why I thought of you. You might give—" And suddenly, his voice rising, "I warn you, Brown. Any gun-play here won't go." A finger bore down heavily on a desk button.

I too was on my feet. The soft glow of the Master of Melody was not in Brown's black eyes, nor was there exactly that burning hatred that made his eyes malignant deadly orbs when he was the Killer of Men. But the light was coming there.

Maybe Brown got hold of himself, maybe my hand upon his arm jarred him back, maybe it was the feet across the hall and the butler opening the door. Anyway his arms dropped to his sides, his hands sort of spread; hopelessly spread. Then that little crooked twist at the corners of his mouth. But he didn't speak until we were out the front door and Van Houton stood on the steps behind us.

"You don't fool me, Van Houton," he said then. "I know everything that happened—everything you did tonight. No one needed to tell me. The card"—and looking back over his shoulder—"the number-three card on the baby's crib; how you tricked me into waiting here. Yes, I understand it all. Good night!"

"Remarkable!" Van Houton rubbed his hands together. "I am glad to see, Mr. Brown, that you are one of those bright young men who understand just how the cards should be played—after the game is won. Not good night, but good-by!"

As we climbed back into the taxi I said to Brown: "That last—the 'good-by.' Did you notice the emphasis on the words;

the—the almost finality? I wonder what he meant.”

“He meant,” said Vee very slowly, “Spot Kelly and the one hundred grand he put on the line for my death.” And after a moment, “He’s clever, Dean—very clever. If— I wonder where that evidence is.”

“I know,” I said quickly. “He looked toward the safe; he couldn’t help it. People always do that. I’ve read—”

“You’ve read!” Brown snapped in. “Have you ever read of anyone paying a hundred thousand dollars cash in advance to have a man shot through the back of the head?”

“It’s a lot of money. Spot Kelly must be pretty sure to—to—” and I bit my lower lip sharply. That was hardly tactful. But if I stopped to spare Vee Brown any nervousness I had wasted my time. He was thinking of something else.

“If I were sure it was in the safe. If—” He rubbed his chin. “I studied that safe, Dean. It’s new—it’s good.” And sharply, “I suppose you’ve read too that any detective worth his salt, in books, can rub sandpaper on his fingers and open the very latest steel model safe in three minutes and ten seconds. Well, I can’t do it with my hands and I’d have damned hard work doing it with a drill—an electric drill. But I could blow hell out of it with some nitro-glycerine.” He laughed gruffly. “It’s a job for an expert box man. Now, our good fence, Mr. Irving Small, would know the one—the very man.” He leaned forward and called to the driver.

The taxi turned toward the river at once and shot downtown.

I DIDN’T go in with Brown but waited a good forty-five minutes before the little pawn shop that hid Irving Small’s real business—the receiving of stolen goods. Brown knew that; could send Small up for twenty years on charges he

had never pressed. And in return for Brown’s silence and also Brown’s pay, which was more than generous when he wanted information, Irving Small sold out friend or enemy, or through the grapevine service of the underworld got information that went to Vee Brown. “Not good ethics,” Brown had said. “But damn good sense. Most of the breaks astute detectives get in criminal cases come first through the tip-off of some favorite stool pigeon. An evil, to be sure—but a necessary evil.”

I saw Irving Small in the doorway when Vee came out. His emaciated, long form; his bent shoulders; his clawlike fingers; the parchment hands which seemed to be continually washing, as if with invisible soap.

“What luck?” I asked Brown.

“None. None at all.” Vee pushed himself back in the seat after giving the driver our Park Avenue address. “I tell you, Dean, I hate this rat, Van Houton but one must admire his shrewdness. Mind you, not a breath of suspicion about him in the entire underworld; not a word that he’s the least bit off color, even to Irving Small, who knows everything. Yet—Well, the fact is that Van Houton’s taboo in the underworld. Once Van Houton’s name was mentioned, Small told me he couldn’t get a first-rate box man to touch the job. Of course we could send out of town. But that’ll take time, too much time.” He shook his head. “We can’t expect that evidence to stay there more than over night—

“Damn it all, Dean, I’ll do the job myself!”

I looked at him there in the darkness of the cab, and I knew that he meant it. “You can’t, Vee,” I told him. “It’s not your line. It’s not— Good God, man! Don’t you know what it means? Not only your job but your freedom. Van Houton would like nothing better than that.” And

when he didn't speak, "Besides, you couldn't."

"No?" Black eyes fairly glared at me from that white face. "I'll get that document, Dean, if I have to blast my way into the safe. No more—no more of it now. I'll think on it."

I thought on it too. Vincent Van Houton was getting under Vee's skin. Van Houton had laughed at him that night. Van Houton had stolen—at least had taken that evidence right from under his nose; even made him lose his temper. Van Houton had fooled him. And Vee Brown! Yes, it was getting him. He was going to sacrifice that cool, calculating daring for—for wild reckless vengeance.

We entered our apartment to the soft notes of a piano and a voice. I stopped dead. The voice was good. The voice was—I looked at Brown. Damn it, the girl had a trained voice; a professional voice. And it stopped; stopped on the final note—the final words. Brown's new song. *Girl of the Night*.

Brown's eyes shone. "It will make her, Dean. Any musical—" He stopped, hummed softly a moment. "I'll change it just a bit there. I didn't realize she'd be so proficient, so professional. And no make-up"—his lips curved in that crooked smile—"that is, no more make-up than she uses now." And suddenly, "Do you like her hair?"

"Why, I don't know. Why?" The question just startled me. I was thinking of other things. I never could get used to Brown's sudden shifts from a detective who shot to kill, to a composer of songs that very often just dripped with sentiment.

"No reason especially." Thin shoulders shrugged. "She's a clever woman. Notice how she avoids the light. I was just wondering if the hair is her own, that was all."

The girl came from the music room.

For a moment she was very young, very eager, very glad, too—and relieved, I thought, to see Vee.

"You saw her—you saw Mrs. Bainton?" And dropping the hands she had placed on his shoulders, "You didn't get the evidence; her promise, even?"

"That's right." Brown nodded. "I didn't get it yet. But I'll get it tonight or make a stab at it. Van Houton has it."

"He's crazy. Plumb loco, Maria." I blurted it out. "He's going to rob Van Houton's safe."

Brown told her then all that had happened. He trusted the girl absolutely—at least, in matters she brought to him. And he had to. She had insisted upon that—insisted that she must know everything, even to the smallest detail. And somehow she left the impression with me that her insistence on being thoroughly posted was not only to keep her informed so that she could help Brown, but that her own safety, maybe her life, depended upon it.

"You can't do it." The girl looked long and steadily at Brown. "The safe is not a big one, but it's a specially constructed one."

Brown grinned. Not a pleasant grin, but a determined one. "I have made my arrangements." He nodded grimly. "Tonight I turn burglar—box man. Within the hour will be delivered to me enough soup to rip open the old can. Soup, Dean," when my eyes opened. "Just the professional box man's term for nitro-glycerine. I described the safe and Irving Small is taking care of the amount to be used."

The girl shook her head. "You can't get away with it—that way."

"Why?" demanded Brown. "He doesn't have strong-arm men around the house. A quick blow, a hand in the safe, a threat with a gun—and a drop from the window."

"Not that safe. You'd be caught, sure. Van Houton has influence. Now, with Moffet behind him—" And suddenly, her green eyes blazing, "It's big, Vee—means a lot to you?"

"It means everything to the city, to the administration, to Mortimer Doran. Not only Moffet being free to rule as he has ruled, but the power it will give the man who by suppressing that evidence lets Moffet rule—Vincent Van Houton. Why, it will give him a power for evil that—"

"Yes, I know," the girl cut in, her green eyes fastened on Brown. "I hate him. But hate isn't as strong as—" She bit her lip; and then, "Never mind Van Houton, the citizens, Mortimer Doran. Just what does it mean to you personally—to you, Vee Brown?"

VEE wasn't looking at her. His thoughts, perhaps, were far away. But if he had talked for five minutes he could not have been more impressive than with the few simple words he spoke. "It means everything—everything to me," was all he said.

I was looking at the girl; looking at those cruel green eyes—eyes that were no longer cruel. They were soft—very soft for a second. And then maybe still soft as the mist obscured them.

The girl nodded her head. Her voice was very low. "Everything to you," she said. "Then I'll give you the combination of the safe."

And Brown was at the flat desk, a pencil and paper in his hand; his black eyes eager, his voice boyish. So for once he missed a trick, for he didn't see what I had seen, nor catch in her voice and her eyes what I caught—though maybe I was wrong and it was not there. But to me it was as if the girl had said, "Very well. For you, Vee Brown, I'll risk my life."

She was leaving after that; leaving while her eyes were still soft, after those small white hands had rested for a moment on the back of Brown's long slender fingers. He did not notice the eyes nor the caress of those hands. He was busy memorizing those figures; the combination of the safe. But he did call to her at the door; to both of us at the door, for I was taking her downstairs.

"Don't worry, Maria. Van Houton will never know how the safe was opened. I'll see that hell is blown out of it after I leave."

"It might—might kill him," she said.

Vee laughed. "We can't hope to have all the luck," he said. And I led her into the hall.

Downstairs, I left her while I examined the court behind the servants' entrance. No one watching; no one there. Her departure was quite safe. As I led her down the steps and through the rear court I thought of her as very young, very much alone, and very far from being hard, cruel, cold—and even vicious.

"Don't mind Brown," I told her; she was so silent. "It's his way. But inside he's grateful, very grateful for what you are doing."

"Grateful!" Green eyes shone in the darkness, accentuated now, rather than dimmed by—by the mist. Or was it a mist—a mist or tiny globules of water? "Good-by!" Her hand was warm. "I don't need Vee's gratitude; I don't want his gratitude. Somehow or other, Dean, I think you and I discovered the same thing at once. You won't tell Vee."

"What—what do you mean?"

"Why," she said simply, "that I love him; love him very, very much."

She was gone. Just a moving shadow in the night; then not even a shadow. Just gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Do My Stuff

BACK in the apartment Brown was humming softly. On the table beside him was a black mask, a tiny flash, a jimmy and a long slender pair of nippers, and rubber gloves.

"I think that's the whole show." He grinned at me. "I've just buzzed Irving Small and he'll fix up some stuff for me and send it along. I'll blow hell out of the safe after I'm finished with it. Cause confusion and fear and leave no clue that someone had the combination. The—Maria need have no worry. It'll certainly be a surprise to Van Houton when he misses the envelope."

"Maria's doing a lot for you, Vee."

"Sure. Sure." He nodded absently. "And she won't be sorry. If she can act a bit, with that singing—singing like we heard tonight, I'll make her a sensation. Why, she'll be an over-night find and—" He looked toward the music room, looked at the clock, hesitated and finally said: "Damn that Spot Kelly, from Chicago. Here I've got a couple of hours to kill, and instead of going on with the song I'll have to think of him."

"How?" I said. "What do you intend to do?"

"Practice up in the gun room."

"Practice! You practice with a gun?"

"Certainly. Why not? There's nothing strange in that. The world's boxing champion practices and calls it 'training.' Besides, this is different. Spot Kelly doesn't fancy shooting it out with a man. He likes to put a bullet in the back of a lad's head."

"But you can draw, turn and shoot in—"

"Yes, if I can turn. But that's why I was so long in Irving Small's. My business about a box man for Van Houton's

safe was over in two minutes, but Irving Small had quite a collection of newspaper clippings which furnished plenty of information on the way Spot Kelly's victims die. Interesting, Dean. Kelly has a system and sticks to it." He grinned at me now. "By the way, in his younger days Irving Small was a jeweler—a real one." He snapped out his watch. "I had him look at my watch while I looked at the clippings."

"And what has your watch to do with Spot Kelly?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe a lot. But we're going to consult that watch always from now on. You'll be surprised. You see, Dean, we'll call it a matter of timing, or at least a matter of a time piece." He left the room quickly and turned into the little hall that led to the Morgue—the gun room—which was steel-lined and sound-proof, and contained everything from tiny targets to birthday-cake candles that Brown could snuff out drawing from the hip or from under his arm. "Call me at once if Irving Small's messenger comes," he shouted back to me before the steel door banged closed.

Several times I walked down the hall to the gun room. It was well built. Just a dull *pop* came to me as I listened close to the door. Now, if he didn't have a real respect for this Spot Kelly, why— And I felt for the moment a certain chill of fear. It was the first time since I had been associated with Brown that he had ever—well, admitted, let alone stated, that he was practicing because of threatened death by a gunman.

IT WAS one o'clock when the package came. Gingerly I placed it on the desk in the living room and went to the gun room. I listened a moment, opened the door a crack and waited. I didn't want to stop a slug.

"Come in—come in," Brown called cheerfully.

I entered and sniffed the irritating aroma of burnt powder. Vee rose from the stiff-backed chair by a small table and stood there, a gun in his hand. "Well," he extended his hand, "let's have it. The package, I mean."

"I didn't bring it here," I told him. "It's on the desk outside."

He started toward the door, then turned back. For a moment I saw his watch, the case open as it lay upon the table. So he had been timing himself, I thought. But he snatched up the watch and followed me from the room.

"One o'clock, eh?" Brown put on his overcoat and began to slip things into various pockets. "I should really carry a satchel. It's a little early for the job, but a good burglar gives himself lots of time, and—Damn my soul, Dean, where do you think you're going? Take off that coat!"

"Why, I'm going with you, Vee! I couldn't let you go alone." And when he shook his head, "We first booked up under that agreement when I contracted to write up your cases for *The Globe* and prove that you didn't kill except when necessary."

"But you don't write for *The Globe* now, and"—with that whimsical smile—"where's your sense of drama, Dean? If you ever did write this up, how much more interesting—dramatic even—for you to be pacing the room here, wondering how—or if—I'll come out."

When I still insisted Vee grew serious. "Nonsense, Dean Condon. I want you with me, but it's a one-man job. Just the opening of a window and the spinning of a dial. Amateurish, almost childish even." And as he reached the door and pushed me back into the apartment, "Besides, I'll need you here. An alibi in case of trouble later. Van Houton will sus-

pect, of course." And with a twist of his mouth, "I may need you to pick me up some place, a hunted, slinking criminal in the night. No, no, Dean. Van Houton's strength is his weakness tonight. No firearms, no bodyguard that might convince Mortimer Doran and Ramsey that I was right about his being the Black Death. Why, damn it! Dean, I might even stick a gun in his stomach and press the trigger, and sleep with the easy conscience of a new-born babe. Night!"

The door closed. I was alone. Vee Brown had gone to rob the house of his enemy—the city's enemy. Vincent Van Houton—the Black Death—Emperor of Evil.

There you are! Those are the thoughts Brown left with me. And he was right. It would be much easier to be with him, sharing his danger. In a way, I was with him. Mentally I stepped from that taxi, walked along the sidewalk across the street, spotted the dismal aristocratic brown-stone front, slipped to the block behind and through the alley of a house there, over a high fence, and hanging close in the shadows reached a basement window. A basement window! Barred certainly. Then the ash barrel up-ended, the uneasy balancing of it and Vee Brown cutting a round hole close to the window lock or jimmying the window from the bottom. In the house then, across the library, and—the flash of light—the roar of a gun—the laugh of the killer and Vee's slim body—

I SNUFFED out my cigarette in the ash tray and immediately lit another. What nonsense! In the first place, Vee was hardly more than in the taxi now. In the second place, Vincent Van Houton would have no guards. And besides, he hardly would suspect that Brown was going to rob his safe.

Then the phone rang.

I jerked up the receiver. It was Maria; I knew that. Not that she gave her name, not that I recognized her voice—but from the message that she whispered, breathed over the wire.

“Dean, tell Vee it will be suicide for him to come to Van Houton’s tonight. There, don’t question me! I’m risking my freedom, my life—even for these few seconds. The house is watched. Van Houton is expecting him. His glance at the safe was a trick to make you—But don’t let him come.”

Question her. Talk. Damn it! I couldn’t talk! I was stunned, thrown completely. And then I could talk—did talk, I must have cried out the words. I said: “He’s gone. Vee’s gone. God, Maria! Vee’s there!”

Did the click of the receiver across that wire reach me before I spoke, while I was speaking, or after I had finished—or did it even reach me at all? I didn’t know. Just one thought, one thing clearly as I dropped the phone back into its cradle. Van Houton had fooled Brown again; fooled me with that glance toward the safe. Yes, the Black Death had set his trap and Brown had walked into it.

What should I do—what could I do? And even while I asked myself such questions I was putting on my coat, getting a gun, jamming a flashlight into my pocket. No thoughts! I’ll admit that. At least, constructive thoughts. But I’m big and strong and can shoot if I have a gun in my hand and the distance isn’t too great. And then I did have one thought. If it was a trap; if that house was watched, it was watched by ruthless desperate gunmen; the kind that would kill in a moment. And Vee! Well, I didn’t know how he’d plan it if I were in the same position, but I did know what he’d do. He’d come for me. My duty, my desire, my one driving force was plain enough.

I was going to Vincent Van Houton’s house. I was going to Vee Brown.

I was in the hall, near the door when Wong suddenly appeared from the rear of the penthouse. He had an uncanny way of sensing trouble, or maybe after he saw my face it was not exactly uncanny.

“Trouble, Mr. Dean! You go out? Much trouble?”

I hesitated, and then, “Much trouble, Wong. Real trouble.”

“Mr. Vee?” There was no expression in that yellow face; those slanting eyes. But there was emotion. Not in his voice, but in his fingers that opened and shut.

“Yes. Mr. Vee.” I nodded quickly. Stay awake, Wong,” I said, needlessly of course. He’d give his life for Brown. “We—Mr. Vee may need you, though God knows what—”

“And the phone, Mr. Dean? If others call I am to say what?”

“Others! But who else will call?”

“It is the instrument of trouble.” His head bobbed up and down solemnly. “Always it brings first the bad news as well as the good. Where will I say you are—Mr. Vee—”

“Say—” And two things struck me at once. That I didn’t know what message Wong was to give and that time was passing. “Say anything,” I finished lamely and dashed out the door.

A TAXI sped me to the block behind Van Houton’s. I guess I scraped my feet impatiently until it drove away. Then I was in the narrow alley that ran along one side of the house. I ran across the rear yard to the high wooden fence. Ugly and black, over that fence loomed the dull outline of the Van Houton residence. No light showed; just inky blackness.

I reached for the fence with my left hand. Then, shoving the gun into my pocket, I grasped it with both hands, bent my body slightly for the spring—and

froze where I was. My hands dropped from the fence, my breath sucked far back in my throat and held there. A voice had spoken on the other side of that fence; a voice that was so close that— But the voice said clearly enough, gruffly enough: "Certainly the man has gone into the house or we wouldn't be here. The flash in the window was our signal. You better get moving. There's only the alley on the left for you to cover; better go well down it. I'll stick here close to the fence. If he tries to escape from the back—well, that's my job."

The answering voice was eager; the voice of a younger man, I thought. "And the orders. To shoot to kill!"

"Sure. Now get to your post before the big crash. There will be real things happening in a minute, when the boys show up."

The soft tread of feet as one man left the other; feet that died out almost the minute they started. The house was evidently surrounded. They had let Brown enter, trapped him in the house, and when he tried to escape would—would—

My gun was in my hand again, my heart in my mouth—and Brown was in the trap, unless—unless— And I remember the words of the man—"Real things happening when the boys show up."

A man guarded the back of the house, another the side alley. There would be others at the front. The watchers, now, were in case of an emergency only; they were waiting for the arrival of more. Men who would enter by the front door, shoot Brown down or drive him out into the yard for— And there was only one man between me and a warning to Brown; one man between minutes—maybe seconds—and Brown's death. One man—

And I did it. Moved down a couple of feet, gripped the top of the fence, held my breath as the gun in my right hand

caught for a moment and I thought I'd lost it. Then I raised myself slowly. My hat reached the top of the fence. A split second of agony, then the top of my head. I wondered if it was going to be shot off. Then my eyes were above the fence and I saw the man. Almost directly below me was a soft black hat; at least it seemed black in the darkness.

Now what? Brown, perhaps, with his precision and calmness might have leaned down and struck with his gun; struck the man directly behind the ear and jumped from the fence in time to ease his unconscious body to the hard stone. Brown might have—but I was not Brown.

But I had to strike. Just once; viciously once. A single cry would be disastrous. Hard? Yes. I realized in that moment the courage it takes to strike a defenseless man. He was far below me. I hoisted myself further up on the fence, my stomach on the hard boards, my knees desperately trying to find a resting place, my gun in my right hand, held out—ready. Ready! And then came trouble.

THE man raised his head and turned it. A white blotch in the blackness; that was his face. A sudden start on my part, a slip, and I lost my balance.

I knew it then. All my plans were gone; gone in that single split second that I hurtled from that fence. And they weren't gone. The man's head shot far back, a white throat showed. The gun fell from my fingers and I was on him, my hands upon that throat.

I'm a heavy man; a strong man. I've kept myself fit. As my fingers closed about that neck the man's knees gave and we crashed to the hard stone. A single thud; a dull thud, and I was on top of him, fingers biting into that throat to choke off his cry. And there was no cry.

My fingers loosened, my hands dropped from that throat. He was lying there

very quiet, his left hand by his side, his right hand beneath his body. I understood. The single thud above the fall of our bodies had been his head striking the flagstones.

For a moment panic struck me. I had killed a man! I had— But he wasn't dead. His breathing was regular enough but for little gasps in it. Should I leave him there? Would he be unconscious long enough for me to reach the house and warn Brown? Should I tie him? And I picked up my gun and was running toward the rear of Van Houton's house. How much better Vee would have planned things! I had nothing to tie the man with.

My entrance to the house was simple. It was all there as I had pictured it. The up-ended ash barrel with a box upon it, the window above it, now wide open; the window through which Brown must have entered.

Courage? No, I don't think it was courage. I may have been reckless, foolish, even downright stupid. But Brown had saved my life many times, and now I wanted to be with him; wanted to warn him that his death was planned; wanted to—

And I was in that window, my foot upon the porcelain sink as I slid noiselessly to the kitchen floor.

The library—the safe? Where would they be from the kitchen? It was dark, deadly quiet too in that house. I remembered my flash, wondered if I had lost it in the dive from the fence and breathed with relief when I drew it from my pocket and it still worked.

Just a single flash and I found the door—a swing door. I chanced the light again. I was in the butler's pantry. The dining room must be beyond then, to the left of it the hall and across that hall the library.

Cautiously I moved to the dining-room door—another swing door. Carefully,

and I hoped noiselessly, I opened it. I say 'hoped noiselessly' because my breathing seemed so loud that I could not tell if the door squeaked or not.

Did I hear something? Did a man breath loudly in that dining room or was it just my own breathing? So, with that door held open by my left foot, I stood waiting, undecided; and any minute, any second even, the man in the back yard might come to life and shout his warning. Shout it? I nodded at that thought. Perhaps Van Houton's men had no more desire for noise than I had. But the man had said, "Shoot to kill!" out there in the back.

I THOUGHT of calling out Brown's name but saw the folly of that almost at once. He wouldn't be in the dining room anyway. He— And I started forward and stopped. It would be foolhardy to try and cross that room quickly without a light. Chairs, table, sideboard! Why, I would have to feel my way every inch to the hall. I'd chance it—one stab of light and the furniture would be stamped in my mind for the few quick steps to the hall.

The door shielded my body when I pressed the button of the flash. A single pencil of light splashed upon a round table, the legs of that table and then— Yes, on the low tan shoes of feet; human feet.

Maybe it took several seconds, maybe it took only a split second. But before I could even release my paralyzed finger from the switch of the torch, a voice cried out. A shot crashed in the somber stillness of that room. There was a tingling in my hand; the stab of light disappeared; the flash left my numbed fingers, the metal cylinder ringing as it struck hard polished wood.

Men were calling from some place in the front of the house. Someone pounded

on the front door, or at least on wood. But I don't know for sure. I only know that panic gripped me. I turned, jumped across that length of pantry, crashed against the other swing door and was in the kitchen again.

Luck, that, in the darkness? Sure! I'm not denying that. But after I reached the kitchen it was just speed. The white of the sink stood out vividly, and above it the open window. I don't know if I crawled through that window or jumped through it, but I do know that I was through it and that I missed completely the up-turned barrel with the box on it in my hurtle to the ground. And I do know that I landed with my knees beneath me, that I toppled forward, caught my balance and was away across that open court like a sprinter with a clean start.

Guns blazed from behind me, at least window.

A man shouted from the alley behind the house. Someone called, "Get him!" And when I thought I had a chance of making that fence a dark object loomed up before me close to the fence, moving like a huge dog in the darkness.

Then I understood. The dark object was a man coming to his feet—the man I had fallen upon a few short minutes before. I raised my right hand with the gun to strike him down—and didn't. For he was on his hands and knees, struggling to come erect. What did I do? Well, I did as well as Brown could ever do. Better maybe, because I was quite an athlete in my day. Without even losing my stride I landed on that rising back, gripped at the fence and in a single leap landed in the yard beyond.

Close? Maybe I have been closer to death before but I don't think so. I heard the shot and I think I heard too the splint of wood between my fingers. Vee smiles

at that story, but I did have a splinter in my finger to prove it.

CHAPTER SIX

The Locked Door

FOR men who, I thought, wanted silence, they certainly were making one hell of a racket. Somewhere, out on the street before Van Houton's house, a whistle blew shrilly; then another and another. Far distant came the sudden screech of a siren. And I was on the street behind, running along it. For the first time I thought of Brown, my mission there and the mess I had made of it. Vee was dead now—or perhaps I had saved him. Those sirens, the whistles, meant only one thing. The police. Brown saved? I shook my head. The thing would drive him out of the city, if it didn't actually put him in jail. Why had he gone? Why—

I jerked erect. A car had come along the block, pulled silently to the curb beside me. A big expensive Rolls, like Vee's car. And a voice spoke. "Please, Mr. Dean, put away the lethal weapon and step into the car. You are expected at Mr. Van Houton's."

And it was Vee's car, with Wong, placid as usual, behind the wheel. I looked down at my right hand and for the first time realized that I still clutched a gun in it. I smiled, too. Then I thought of Vee and the smile went. I asked anxiously as I climbed into the car: "Vee! Mr. Vee, Wong? He's all right? He's at Van Houton's?"

"No can tell." Wong slipped silently into gear and moved down the block. "Police make much disturbance. Mr. Mortimer Doran, he call up and want Mr. Vee and you to go to Mr. Van Houton's house. He is very much from dignity, and I tell him that I tell you right away. So I drive here, for where big trouble is you and Mr. Vee must be."

"There is big trouble, Wong," I told him as we went down five blocks and turned right. "I think Mr. Vee is there, where the shooting was. I got away. But I'm afraid for him."

There was nothing of sarcasm or even depreciation in Wong's words or his voice when he spoke again. It was as if he uttered a great universal truth. "Where you get away Mr. Vee get away. In trouble I am alibi for you. You could not be at house of trouble, for I went from phone to your room and you got dressed and drive here. Mr. Vee sends you, and if needed he come later. It is good?"

I shook my head. Things did not seem as simple as that. I had great faith in Vee, but not the simple absolute faith Wong had. There had been nothing clever about my escape. Besides, I was not expected and came after the trap was sprung. But the police! How would Van Houton explain to them the gunmen who guarded his house? How—

A small police car that must have picked us up a block or two before was edging us to the curb. But it didn't matter. We were almost at Van Houton's. Another car sped by and drew up with a grinding of brakes before Van Houton's door. Wong brought us to a stop just behind it.

I was out of the car and moving toward Van Houton's residence, for I had seen Mortimer Doran step from the big car and I had seen, too, the policeman who hopped quickly from the other car that had followed us.

"Hey there!" The cop had me by the arm with his left hand, his right was under his coat close to his belt. "Where did you come from?"

Mortimer Doran saw me and turned. "What's this? What's this?" he said irritably.

"This man may have something to do

with the racket," the cop said. "His car came along just—"

"Nonsense, Sergeant!" Doran snapped. "That is Mr. Condon. I telephoned him to come." And to me, "Where's Vee?" He took me by the arm and led me toward the house.

"Why—why—" I guess I stammered a little. "He— Well, when I got to the phone you had hung up, and Wong wasn't sure of your voice, and I thought—" and in sudden inspiration, "I thought it was that Spot Kelly, laying a trap for him, and I didn't tell Vee."

A sneering voice spoke from above me. "But you walked into the trap, eh?"

I LOOKED up surprised. Inspector Ramsey was standing by the door looking down at us.

"There was no danger for me," I said quietly. "Beside, once I saw the cars here and heard the police sirens I knew it was all right."

"So you heard the sirens and—"

"My God enough of this wrangling!" When Doran was in a bad temper, which I must say was seldom, he was in a very bad one. "Come, come, Inspector. I telephoned Condon and he came at once. Surely you don't suspect that Dean was here robbing the house!"

Ramsey showed his teeth. "No, I guess not. Condon wouldn't have the stomach for it. But Brown, now. He—"

"Yes, yes," Mortimer Doran cut in. "You hinted as much as that over the phone, and I came right down. Now—let me have it. You said Van Houton called you, for police protection; had an anonymous note he would be robbed tonight."

"That's right—only more." Ramsey nodded. "He told me he thought Brown wanted to get a look into his safe. You know, Mr. Doran, how Brown's been annoying Van Houton and telling us that

he's this master blackmailer but offering no proof. Now"—he leaned forward—"what would you do if Brown did go as far as entering Van Houton's house for the purpose of robbery?"

"I'd break him, of course." Doran looked straight at Ramsey. "You'd see to that, Inspector—you hate him enough. But, God! What a scandal for the—the administration at this time."

"That's right," said Ramsey. "What a scandal! If Brown did do it—it might be better if he got himself shot to death."

Doran's eyebrows raised. "You left orders that men were to shoot—shoot to kill—shoot, suspecting that—"

Ramsey straightened. "Vincent Van Houton is spending money to discover this blackmailer, the Black Death. I know that. His suspicion that Brown would rob his house may be, and certainly should be, as unfounded as I believe Brown's suspicions of Van Houton are. As an inspector of police I can not believe that a detective of the force—a first-grade detective—even one assigned to your office, would commit a felony. It was only a hint from Van Houton. I can not jeopardize the lives of my men on such a hint and perhaps have them shot down by a desperate killer." Ramsey leaned forward and spoke very low. "And you won't deny that even Brown can at times, and has been, a desperate killer."

"Enough of this nonsense." Mortimer Doran pushed through the vestibule and into the now lighted hall. "Now—just what has happened? We're having too much guess work." Ramsey shrugged his shoulders. "Something has happened. I stuck her in the front. There was a shooting in the rear; a shooting in the dining room by the man I planted there. He said he saw a light and saw a man jump from the kitchen window." And with a smile, "I don't think our man can escape. He's

probably a prisoner now, or dead there in the yard."

Van Houton suddenly appeared.

"Where have you been while all this racket was going on?" Mortimer Doran demanded. His temper had not improved.

Vincent Van Houton ran a hand through his wavy blond hair, stroked the cat he held in his arms, spoke to it softly. "It's poor little body is trembling and—"

"Never mind that damn cat!" Doran snapped, and I saw Van Houton's lips tighten, his soft eyes blaze; he was touchy about his pets. "What did you do? What did you hear? What did you see?"

"Me?" Van Houton's blue eyes widened. "Why, I went to my room shortly after Mr. Brown visited me this evening—say, eleven o'clock. I locked my door after advising the servants to do the same."

"Why?"

Vincent Van Houton looked at Inspector Ramsey. "On the inspector's advice; almost command. It seems he thought it best to let this burglar enter the house, then catch him red-handed. I—I—well, I didn't like it. I'm afraid I'm rather timid, Mr. Doran. But it seemed a duty, and my door has a strong lock."

"That's right," said Ramsey. "The arrangements were mine. Ah—Sergeant Twait! What now?"

I WON'T go into the details of what happened as told by individual policemen and detectives. In the questioning by Ramsey and Doran it came out as a whole.

Ramsey had instructed Van Houton and the servants to lock themselves in their rooms. Van Houton, it appears, had an alarm in his own room that gave him silent warning if any of the windows were forced. There was also such an alarm placed under the rug close to the

safe. As soon as anyone entered that house Van Houton was to flash a light from his window. Then Ramsey's men would close in and prevent the burglar's escape. Everything until that alarm was given was done to make the entrance of the burglar easy and assured. Not a policeman or detective was watching the outside of that house. But two men were inside the house; one on the front stairs and one in the coat closet in the hall.

The man who had been in the hall said: "I had no way of knowing when the signal for the boys to close in would come. But when the time came to strike I would open the front door and let the inspector and the men in. As much as I know I have told to the inspector."

"Tell it again," said Doran.

"Well, I never heard a sound and it appears now from what happened later that this man had entered the house a good—well, maybe ten minutes before I knew it. I first discovered him when I started to move around, saw the flash in the dining room and fired at it. The flash is there on the table."

He pointed to the table—we were all in the library now—and there was my flash.

"And the prowler made a run for it," the detective went on. "I followed him to the kitchen, took another shot, missed him, hit the glass and fired twice more as he crossed the yard. I guess I hit him then all right, and—"

"We'll soon find that out, if there's blood in the yard. What next?"

"That's all. He jumped on Hannigan's back by the fence. Then—I don't know. It was too dark."

"And Hannigan! Hannigan got him—shot him? He's—" Ramsey gripped the man by the arm. He didn't know of my escape then! "Where's Hannigan?" he finished.

Hannigan was brought in. Two men

were supporting him; a plainclothesman and one in harness. I felt sorry for Hannigan and I felt alarmed too. This was the big moment. Would Hannigan recognize me? I looked straight at him. Fear left me. I grinned. I didn't recognize him—how could he recognize me? But his story would give the show away. They hadn't found Brown. He must still be in the house. Once they learned that Hannigan was attacked from behind after the warning that the man was in the house had been given, they'd know the truth. A search of that house would begin and Brown would be found.

Hannigan told his story. It was straightforward enough and told without flourishes, by a man who'd been long on the force and knew how to make his report.

"The warning was given," he said, "and young Dillon and myself went to the back of the house. I gave him his instructions as ordered and he went into the alley. I don't know just where he stood for I couldn't see him." Hannigan hesitated a long moment there.

"You fired and missed, eh?" Ramsey sneered. "With the man right on top of you!"

Hannigan caught the tone of the inspector's voice and recognized the danger in it. The danger to himself.

"No—" he said slowly. "I pressed the trigger and the gun jammed; then the running figure struck me down." And in sudden defense, "I complained about that gun before." And at Ramsey's deepening scowl, "My complaint's in black and white down at headquarters, for anyone to read—and nothing was done about it."

I SMILED inside. Hannigan was not a young man. He knew the ropes. He had lied, to his own advantage. At least, he had lied about that gun. About my dropping on him from the fence—I don't

know. Later I was to learn that Hannigan lied in self-protection. He had not seen me drop on him from the fence. He couldn't explain anything that had happened. He had heard shots in a distant sort of way—men shouting, too. But he didn't know how or when he was struck down; he simply told the best story he could.

Mortimer Doran, if not exactly pleased, was relieved. Two men, at least, had seen the fleeing figure cross the rear yard, and both were convinced that the man was of powerful build. Mortimer Doran had them repeat that description several times. And Ramsey, try as he might, had to admit the truth of it. Both the men knew Vee Brown and laughed when Ramsey tried to get them to say that "the fleeing figure might be about the build of—say, Vee Brown."

Vincent Van Houton looked at Ramsey. "Much thanks for your protection tonight." His lips curled at one end. "And for the good—the very good advice. I suppose my servants and myself are fortunate in not being murdered in our beds."

"You didn't lose anything, did you?" Ramsey turned to the safe. "Better open it and have a look."

"I have had a look," said Vincent Van Houton. "There is nothing missing. Absolutely nothing."

"And I presume," said Doran, "the whole house has been carefully searched."

"Thoroughly searched," nodded Van Houton. "Inspector Ramsey attended to that while the burglar escaped."

"Sure!" said Ramsey. "Gone over with a fine-tooth comb."

"All but that one room that's locked," said a young detective.

"How's that?" Mortimer Doran swung quickly as he was moving toward the door. "What room?"

Van Houton glared at the young

detective. He said to the D.A.: "A room on the third floor. In fact, a suite of rooms. But the door is always locked, and since there is no ladder on the outside the searching of it was quite unnecessary. I explained it to Ramsey."

"Well!" Doran turned on Ramsey.

"What he says is true." Ramsey nodded, and when Mortimer Doran eyed him steadily Van Houton cut in.

"It's a suite that on occasion is occupied by a very dear friend; a friend who would not like it gone over."

"Well, we'll have a look in it," Doran said, and I thought he half looked at me. Was it possible that after all he did take some stock in Vee Brown's continued accusation that Vincent Van Houton was really the blackmailer—the Black Death? And did he now see the opportunity of discovering some hidden secret?

"Hell!" said Ramsey, before Van Houton could speak, "you might as well have it. A dame—a lady uses it."

"Humph!" said Doran.

"On occasions—on occasions. Properly chaperoned, of course." Van Houton spoke behind his hand. "A friendship. Mutual artistic understandings. Entirely platonic."

"She's there now—there tonight, when you knew—"

"No, no. The rooms are quite empty. I simply thought that, under the circumstances, the fact that the door is locked and—"

"Of course," I cut in with a laugh, "if the door is locked and—" I stopped.

CHAPTER SEVEN

For a Price

ALL three men turned and looked at me. Why had I spoken? What business was it of mine? And why did I bite my words off before they were finished? Oh, I knew what I was thinking all right.

I was thinking how easily Vee Brown could open that locked door and slip inside; I was thinking—But were the others thinking the same thing? Van Houton—Ramsey! And Ramsey said abruptly and sharply to Van Houton: "Well, the thing's out now. We're all gentlemen here, and it'll go no further. Come on! We better have a look in that room."

Van Houton's eyebrows went up. "But the man escaped; the burglar fled out the back and—"

"There might have been two; a little man as well as a big man." And when Doran looked at him, Ramsey added: "That's the way crooks work, often. At least, that's the way eye witnesses always describe them."

"If that's true," said Van Houton, "if there was another—if he was able to pick that lock, then he's in the room now. He couldn't have—"

"Couldn't have—" Ramsey turned quickly and gave sharp orders to his men to get outside the house. "Damn it! He may have escaped while we talked here. Every man, nearly, has been inside and—"

"It's too big a drop," Van Houton said, and he seemed excited. "By God, Inspector, we may catch one of them yet! My hunch may be right."

"Hunches are dangerous things, Mr. Van Houton," Doran said. "If you have any direct accusations to make against anyone, why—"

"Or," Van Houton straightened, "if anyone has direct accusations to make against me."

And that was all. The police scattered quickly. The front door slammed, the kitchen one too. And I—Well, if Brown was in that room, or those rooms, he was caught. And this time it wasn't Van Houton who had trapped him, but I. My words—the words I should never have spoken. Yes, I couldn't tell myself differently. I had read the suspicion in Ram-

sey's eyes almost before the words were out of my mouth.

Six of us went up those stairs. At the second floor Ramsey paused. "You stay here, Jenks," he said to the young detective. "Maybe you spoke out of turn at the right time."

"And me?" said Hannigan, who was rubbing his head.

"You!" sneered Ramsey. "You go to the kitchen and soak your head in the sink, or get someone to do it for you."

Doran, Van Houton, Ramsey and myself mounted those stairs to the third floor. There was one floor above that; shadows moved back on the stairs.

"The servants!" Van Houton explained, and to the butler who stepped forward and held his ground, "There's no further cause for alarm. I told you there would be some excitement tonight and to stay in your rooms."

"Yes, sir. You did, sir. But the police insisted on searching each room. Quite unnecessarily, since we did that most carefully before locking our doors." And suddenly, gripping Van Houton's arm, "I have something to tell you, sir."

"Well," said Van Houton, shaking off his arm, "out with it!"

"With all these men present and—" The butler jerked his head and rolled his eyes at a door down the hall close to the servants' stairs.

"Yes, yes." Van Houton nodded. "This is police business. We must not interfere with the law. They know. Now, what is it?"

"Well—" the butler straightened. "Did Miss—did—is she—you didn't say she'd be here tonight."

"And she's not here. Come! Out with it, man."

"There's someone in her rooms," said the butler dramatically. "I heard the feet and I saw the—the light."

"So—" Ramsey nodded grimly. He

turned, a triumphant smile; a sneering smile. "How long ago?"

"Not five minutes ago," the butler whispered as he followed us down the hall. "The light's there now. You can see it through the keyhole."

RAMSEY bent to the keyhole. We were all silent, listening. Just dead silence and then feet; soft, careful feet; nervous feet. As if someone paced up and down.

"A light, all right." Ramsey came to his feet. "And it looks like we have our bird cornered. It may be a shock to you, Mr. Doran," and he held out his hand to Van Houton as he asked for the key.

"I haven't any key," Van Houton said. "I assure you, gentlemen, that—" He stopped. Ramsey grinned, turned the knob slowly, then quickly jumped back clutching for his gun.

Someone inside had jerked the door open; a small figure was framed in the light; a small bag was in her hand; her face was almost buried in an ermine wrap. Just that flash of a white face as she spoke in a high-pitched, half-hysterical voice.

"I've been scared to death. Guns—shots—men! What's happened?" And for the first time realizing that several figures stood in the hall she rushed forward, buried her blond head against Van Houton's chest and cried: "Vince—Vince! You're all right? What happened? These men—these men!"

And I heard Mortimer Doran, who hardly ever missed a first night and was quite an admirer of stage celebrities, say: "The actress, Gertrude la Palatin."

I nodded my head in understanding. Brown had known she was very friendly with Van Houton—if this 'friendly, I didn't know. I had seen her once or twice on the stage, but before she had become so famous as an impersonator and mimic.

Van Houton said, over the girl's shoulder: "There'll be no need to search the rooms now. She's been here all evening."

Ramsey half looked into the room then looked at Mortimer Doran. Then he said: "Well—as long as we're here. A guy might have slipped in while she was in the bedroom or otherwise disposed."

Mortimer Doran entered the room at once, discreetly missing the little scene between Van Houton and the actress. Ramsey stared at the man and the woman for some time; heard part of their conversation as did I. For I just stood there gaping at the back of that blond head.

Van Houton said to her: "I didn't know you were coming; didn't know you were here."

And the woman answered: "I never left my rooms. I didn't play tonight. I have a new piece; these rooms create the atmosphere and—What happened? I was so frightened!"

There was more, of course. But I didn't get it, for Van Houton led the woman down the hall. Ramsey chewed on a match, watched them start down the front ~~steps~~, then with a shrug turned into the room.

I FOLLOWED Ramsey about those beautiful rooms. They must have been done by Durio, of Fifth Avenue. And the pictures! Rare works of art. I even recognized a— But Ramsey! I had sucked in my breath each time he opened a closet.

The search was completed, and no Brown. Maybe all my fears were groundless. I might have stayed at home and gone to bed. No doubt Brown had discovered the trap and avoided it. When I got home I'd find him there.

Downstairs, Ramsey's mouth hung open, and so did mine. The woman, Gertrude la Palatin, had gone. But that wasn't what caused Ramsey's mouth to hang

open. A little figure stood by the open front door.

"You should know me," the slim figure was saying to the policeman who blocked his entrance. "I'm Vee Brown—Detective Vee Brown." And suddenly pushing by the policeman and stepping into the hall, "Why, there's Inspector Ramsey."

"You! You, eh?" Ramsey gasped. "Where did you come from?"

"From home." And turning to me Vee said somewhat sternly, though I saw the slightest twist at the corners of his mouth: "I've got a bone to pick with you, Dean. Why didn't you tell me that Mr. Doran telephoned for me?" And when I just looked blankly at him, "There, there! We won't wash our dirty linen before the inspector. I—"

"How did you happen to come here?" Ramsey snapped.

"Why," Vee fairly gasped, "Dean sent Wong back in the car for me."

And when Ramsey and Doran looked at me, "Why, yes," I said, "I did—when I saw you were here and things were on the up-and-up."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Ramsey grabbed at my arm.

Brown stepped forward, knocked Ramsey's hand from my arm. It was not a hard blow; not exactly a friendly gesture either. He said sharply: "I'm not responsible for my actions to you, Ramsey—and certainly Dean is not for his."

VEE BROWN moved quickly into the library; looked at the safe. "So this was the drawing card." He spoke to Vincent Van Houton, who was leaning against the mantel piece smoking a cigarette. "Nothing valuable gone, I trust. At least, not that precious document you were discussing with me this evening."

"No, no." Vincent Van Houton turned and put those mild blue eyes on Brown. "Nothing missing. The document was

taken care of and the safe was not even opened."

"Good!" Brown nodded as the others entered the room. And to Mortimer Doran, "This seems a simple police matter, complicated perhaps by the elaborate methods of—of—" He stroked his chin, grinned at Ramsey and winked at me. "Really, Mr. Doran, I don't know why you sent for me."

"Nor do I," said Doran sharply, but he wasn't looking at Brown. He was looking at Ramsey.

And Ramsey said nothing. His eyes narrowed. He was looking at Van Houton. For the first time, was suspicion that things were not right there entering Ramsey's head?

We moved into the hall. Van Houton still stayed in the library, still leaning against the mantel above the fireplace. He called to Ramsey: "I will have the police guard for the rest of the night, of course." And I didn't think there was sarcasm in his voice when he said: "You might even stay yourself, Inspector."

"I might," said Ramsey. And, again, I was unable to discover sarcasm in Ramsey's return.

Ramsey followed us down the stone steps to Mortimer Doran's car. Twice he would have spoken and twice he changed his mind. Then just before Doran drove away he did say, and I thought in a sort of defense: "I'm sorry I got you out of bed, Mr. Doran, but things aren't hopeless yet. There's the flashlight metal. Might be some fingerprints on it."

"Sure!" Brown cut in. "Maybe mine."

"Maybe," said Ramsey very seriously and very slowly.

"Or maybe Dean's," Brown suggested with a smile.

"Yes," said Ramsey very seriously. "Or maybe Dean's."

I guess I turned red at that; at least, I felt the blood rush into my face. But

Doran said just before the car left the curb: "You're worse than a couple of children, Vee—you and Ramsey. Funny at times"—he laughed mirthlessly—"but not quite so funny at this time of the morning. Good night!"

RAMSEY stood on the curb watching us as Wong moved the big car silently down the street. I said to Brown: "That crack about the flashlight may not prove so humorous. You might have familiarized yourself with what had happened before—"

"Now, now, Dean. There's been enough goat-getting for one evening. Here!" He ducked his hand quickly into his coat pocket and out again, leaving a long cylinder of cold metal in my hand. "I recognized your flash of course, and removed it from the library table. As for being familiar with the situation—well, I heard enough from the cops and guessed the rest. You rather—" And slamming his hand down upon my knee, "I wouldn't have you any other way, Dean. Your blundering methods saved, if not my life, at least my face tonight—and surely the life and career of Miss Gertrude la Palatin."

"You were there then—in the house?"

"Yes." Brown nodded. "I was a stupid, blundering idiot. Imagine Van Houton notifying the police! Of course the evidence was not in the safe."

"You opened it?"

"No. But if I were caught red-handed I'd make a statement that might force the opening of the safe. But you did it, Dean. Your escape; your dash through the window convinced the police that the burglar had left the house. I think you were all in the library when I slid down the rope and got away."

"Slid down what rope—from where?"

"Why"—he nodded—"from Gertrude la Palatin's rooms. We must see that

Wong gets rid of the rope and also the flashlight."

"She—she didn't know you were there?"

"Now, now, Dean. I couldn't very well slide down the rope and drag it after me. She dropped it to me. You see, she found me in the kitchen. She came down the back stairs. I was lying close to the house a long time before going in. I was very careful of a trap." And with a grin, "At least I thought I was."

"You see, Dean, I lingered a long time in the kitchen too, listening and watching—watching out into the back yard. And I saw Hannigan come and young Jenkins. How many more I don't know. So I never reached the library. And then the woman!"

"She was willing to save you?"

"Yes, at a price. By God, Dean, I was in a blue funk for the first time in my life! Not that I feared death, though all of us do, of course. But I didn't think of death, nor did I think so much of the public disgrace and the sneering lips of Ramsey, nor the hurt eyes of Doran, nor even the triumphant ones of Van Houton. You know! After all I'm somewhat like Van Houton. God, Dean, I feared most being made ridiculous!"

"And the woman! What do you mean—'a price'?"

"Just that—a price. She led me up the servants' stairs and through the darkened hall to her rooms—kept me there in the darkness, then produced the rope. Where did she get it? I don't know. Why did she have it? I can only guess at that. Maybe she kept it in case she had to leave suddenly without disturbing Van Houton. But she did have it. And I dropped to the ground, picked up Wong cruising a few blocks away, and went back there in style."

"And the price?" I demanded again.

"Oh"—and Brown grew serious—

"she's a great actress, of course. But somehow I don't think she's exactly happy in Van Houton's love. She made me promise that, in return for 'my life' as she called it, I would, if necessary, some day later chance that life for her."

"You think she knew you were coming, to rob that safe?"

Brown shrugged. "I'm rather practical. It's hard for me to believe that blind chance led her to the kitchen; that blind chance kept her from telling Van Houton that she was in her rooms; that blind chance made her think of naming such a price—an unknown price. No, Dean, she's a clever woman. Maybe she loves Van Houton and the price has nothing to do with him. Maybe she fears him and hopes I will help her. But she knew—knew of the trap. Waited for me to walk into it, then got my promise."

"And you'd keep such a promise—such a blind promise?"

He held his chin in his hand a long time, and then, "I think so, Dean, I think so. It was a close squeeze tonight."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Five Grand a Minute

BACK in our apartment Brown paced the room. His easy talk was gone, his smiling lips were set grimly and his black eyes were narrow—uneasy.

"I've failed, Dean—failed again," he said. "This man beats me at every trick; yet I pride myself, pat myself on the back tonight because of—what? Because through blind luck, the help of Gertrude la Palatin, and your mad episode I'm a free man. Nothing but a free man. It wouldn't be failure if I had obtained that evidence, for if a man reaches his objective; obtains his goal, it doesn't matter how he accomplished it. Call it 'the breaks' if you wish. But life is full of good and bad breaks. It's the persistent

lad who gets the good breaks. If you're not plugging; not on the job, you won't be around when what we call 'the breaks' come." He smiled somewhat grimly. "I guess I'm trying too much to be a master mind, but certainly I've managed to be around; around when the bad breaks were handed out by fate."

Of course I had to tell him of my experience; of Maria's telephone warning and of my going at once to Van Houton's.

Then we went to bed and to sleep. Or at least I went to sleep. For twice when my dreams, with the spitting lead in them, snapped me awake I knew that Brown was up and around.

It was close to five o'clock when the phone rang. I lifted the receiver from a phone by the bed and got quick sharp words. It was Maria.

"Vee! He's all right?"

"Yes, and you? I'll call him. Where—"

"No. No time. Take this address." I picked up a pencil and scribbled down a street and number far downtown, on the East side. "Now—the name is Cordinia—Carlo Cordinia—C-O-R—"

"I got it," I cut in quickly.

"Good. Have Vee there at two o'clock tonight, tomorrow night, every night—or rather, every morning until I come. It's a lunch room. Just ask for Carlo and—Got it?"

"But—"

"Every night."

"Here's Vee now," I cut in quickly as I saw Brown enter the room.

But the receiver clicked and she was gone.

"It's a queer message." Vee shook his head. "I wonder what she wants to see me about. Another case, no doubt." His shoulders moved up and down. "The Moffet case is dead now. I wonder how long it will take Mortimer Doran to dis-

cover that. Tomorrow maybe. A discreet word to 'drop it all,' then an investigation and young Bainton discovering his loss. It's a nasty blow, Dean."

"But Mortimer Doran—others, they won't know the part you played in it."

"But I know the part I played." Brown's eyes flashed; he fairly snapped the words, and turning went to his own room.

WE HAD dinner out that day and we were well through our meal before I noticed the watch Brown had laid upon the table, open, by his coffee cup, the back of the case toward me. I didn't mention it at first. Certainly he was not expecting to go any place in a hurry, for he lingered over his food.

I talked of inconsequential things, then of music. But it was hard to interest him. Mortimer Doran had called on us and talked for an hour about the case Bainton was building up against Moffet.

"It'll knock Moffet clean off his feet. Oh, he suspects it, I guess, but the papers don't. This young Bainton's a marvel and is going to go far." And with a broad grin, "I wouldn't be surprised—that is, if they don't shove me up to the governor's mansion too soon—if Edward Bainton gets my job." And although his tone conveyed that the gubernatorial nomination was referred to jokingly, his glance at both of us was speculative.

"A great chap, Bainton," he went on. "Modest and all that. Says his wife had a lot to do with it. Well, drop into the club and have dinner with me, Vee—and Dean, of course. Bainton tells me the evidence is now quite complete and safe, if this master blackmailer of yours—Van Houton—" he shoved his stick against Brown's chest and laughed—"doesn't bust into the bank's vault where he keeps it."

Now—in the restaurant, Brown saw

me looking at the watch at which he continually glanced. "The matter of timing I told you about," he explained. "And always remind me of it, Dean. Seriously"—he tapped the open watch with a finger—"it's a matter of life and death."

And I didn't know if he meant that or was joking. Joking? Hardly. All day he had been very serious.

THAT evening after we returned home, along about eight o'clock we had a visitor at our apartment. Brown repeated the name that was sent up and knitted his brows.

"Theodore Lessinger, Dean—of the law firm, Lessinger, Levy and Bryant. A few years ago we'd call them shysters. Today they are big names in the legal profession. And the reason? Politics; crime; money, which three words combined mean—power."

A few minutes later Wong bowed in Theodore Lessinger. He was a tall man who bent slightly, and although smooth, low and cultured of tone he had never gotten over the ingratiating manner of his younger days:

Now he shook his head at Wong, placed his hat on the floor beside him, laid his brief case upon his knees, neatly folded his yellow gloves and held them tightly with both hands on the silver top of his dark cane. So—he assumed a position slightly forward and said: "Nice place, Mr. Brown—delightful place. You have taste, my boy—real taste."

He let his eyes drift back and forth; bulging eyes they seemed through the heavy thickness of his black-rimmed nose glasses. And suddenly bobbing his head at me, "My talk is quite confidential. Mr. Condon is to stay?"

"Yes," said Brown. "He always stays. I have a bad memory."

"Ah! A bad memory. A liability that

very often becomes an asset. You are very busy with your police duties, Mr. Brown?"

"Why?" Vee grinned. "You wish to hire me?"

"Quite correct." Lessinger did not smile in return. "That is, I have a client who desires your services; a very little of your time, Mr. Brown. Say—five minutes." He seemed to bend further forward then. "Say—twenty-five thousand dollars for that five minutes. Five thousand dollars a minute! What do you say to that?"

"Your client," said Vee, "is very generous." And although Vee's voice was even, there was the slightest, almost imperceptible movement of his eyelashes, a sign that he was surprised.

"And how," questioned Vee, after a silence, "would I spend those five minutes?"

"You would spend them," said Lessinger very slowly, "looking for a certain envelope—a rather bulky envelope."

"And just what is in this envelope, and where would I look?" Brown's eyes flashed.

"My dear Mr. Brown"—Lessinger never changed his voice—"a man worth such a price for so short a period of time should know what to look for and what to find. My client believes you are that man."

"And your client's name?"

Theodore Lessinger hesitated a moment, and then, "That same man who is worth twenty-five thousand dollars for five minutes is clever enough to guess the name. Let us be done with talk, Mr. Brown." He removed his hands from the cane for the first time, balanced it between his knees, and opening the brief case took out a thick package of bills, held it in his hand a moment, looked at Brown and said: "This package contains five thousand dollars. It—" He stopped,

and without taking his eyes off Brown again dug his hand into the brief case and drew out another bundle of bills of similar size. "I'll not quibble, Mr. Brown. I am authorized to pay you ten thousand dollars on your promise to start looking"—and his lips parting slightly—"and, of course, your assurance of a successful search."

BBROWN reached out his hand, took the money, ran his slender fingers through the bills. Then he wiped the grin that was beginning to form on Lessinger's face clean off it when he handed back the money and said: "No dice, Lessinger. I just wanted to see if it was real. A lot of money in these times!"

"You mean it's not enough. You mean—"

"I mean there's nothing doing." Brown shook his head. "There, there! Don't raise your price. You're breaking my heart now." And with great assurance, "I mean that that envelope, full of evidence, will go to the district attorney."

"Will go—" The words just slipped out of Lessinger's mouth when he came to his feet. "Despite all this luxury—" He caught himself up quickly. "I understand you are not a rich man, Mr. Brown; that Mr. Condon is the one who has the golden touch of Midas. Now—" and stiffly as Brown yawned—"I can offer you any sum within reason—or out of reason for that matter. I—"

"Nothing doing!" Brown was on his feet. "You'll show Mr. Lessinger to the door, Dean, and watch his departure, giving a careful eye to any umbrellas that may be in the hall stand."

Lessinger didn't speak as he gathered up his brief case, hat, gloves and stick and passed out of the living room, across the wide foyer and into the narrow hall beyond the turn. But when I held open the door for him, he set those fishlike eyes

on me and said: "Perhaps later you and I can do business, Dean Condon—later."

"Later?" I said inanely. I was greatly puzzled.

"Yes, later. Mr. Brown looks delicate—quite delicate, I should say. He looks like a man who won't live long. So, then—I will see you later."

He was gone. I watched him down the hall to the elevators. His steps were slow, measured and pompous. He looked just what he was—just what he was to the rest of the city—a successful, clever and dignified lawyer.

Vee Brown was pacing the floor and humming when I returned to the living room. His chin was up, his black eyes alive—vividly bright.

"Why"—I burst out—"Why did you let Lessinger believe you had that evidence? He can find out from Van Houton that —"

"Don't you see?" Brown gripped me tightly by the shoulder. "He's already found out from Van Houton; found out that the evidence is missing. And Van Houton— Well, he thinks I have it, Dean; is convinced that I have it."

"But who stole the evidence?"

"Maria." Vee nodded emphatically, and reading the question forming on my lips cut in before I could ask it. "Don't ask me how. It's not how you do things in this life of crime, Dean—it's what you do; what results you get."

"But you don't know that she—"

"She wants to see me—see me badly. And she doesn't know if she can make it or when she can make it. So—two o'clock each morning until she arrives. It may be tonight. I'd—damn it! I'd give my next song to get that evidence and be even with Van Houton."

"But there's Spot Kelly," I said. Then I told Brown what Lessinger had said about his dying.

Brown frowned. "Just his little legal

joke; neither very funny nor very alarming. I let Lessinger believe that I had it because—he might be fishing. He watched me closely, Dean. I hope I didn't give the show away—and I hope you didn't. He was watching you too. It wouldn't do for him to suspect Maria." His lips set very gravely. "We mustn't fall into any more traps."

"No," I said. "Be careful."

"Careful!" Vee laughed. He was humming, boyish, different, since Lessinger had come and he saw a chance to get that evidence again. "That's great advice to give a cop. But the breaks have been against us, Dean. That can't last; our turn will have to come." He looked toward the ceiling. "Through Maria, tonight—tomorrow night—the night after. But it must come—soon."

AGAIN Vee wouldn't let me go with him when he left the house that night shortly before one o'clock. He explained his not taking me. "It isn't as if I were going into danger. It's simply a waiting game. Two of us might complicate matters. Again, conditions are such that you should be here at night. Her plans may change; she might chance a visit here."

"But why so early? She said 'two'." I looked at the clock.

"I might be followed and it would take time to throw a shadow off my trail. Besides— Hell, Dean, to my shame I must confess that tonight I'm as nervous and excited as a young school girl at graduation. It's like my first case. I've got to be moving." And just before the door closed, "To be fair and honest I'm very much afraid that this Van Houton gets in my hair."

Waiting hours are long hours. I tried to read, tried to keep from pacing the floor. Just one thing that wasn't difficult.

It wasn't hard to stay awake. Thoughts attended to that.

It was ten minutes after five when Brown rolled in and threw himself into a chair. There was no need to ask him if the girl, Maria, had showed up. I knew that she hadn't.

"She'd come if she could," he said after he asked about a telephone call. "It would be terrible if Van Houton found out about Maria. He hates me, Dean; he'd kill her horribly."

"I waited until close to five. I expect, if she can come, she'll be very close to the hour of two." He took the drink I handed him and smiled up at me. "You look white and drawn. Long hours, eh? Or painting horrible pictures of my demise? What could happen to me through Maria?"

"I wasn't thinking of Maria or Van Houton," I told him. "I was thinking of you alone on the streets—the deserted East Side—and of Spot Kelly."

"Hell!" Vee gulped his drink. "I wasn't even followed, and lucky I wasn't; at least, on my way home. I was in a particularly vicious mood."

I listened to his description of the place. "It's an all-night lunch room, Dean—a respectable one. Carlo Cordinia is a fat, greasy gentleman, to whom the name of Maria is magic. He asks no questions and expects no confidences. He has given me a key to the little room above and to the back of the restaurant. It's a small room that might have been used for cards and perhaps drinks, but free for me now that Maria has spoken. Free for you too, Dean, if I ever should send for you—need you. And I may Dean—I may."

CHAPTER NINE

Dead Before Breakfast

THREE consecutive mornings after that Brown returned and dropped into

the chair. Maria had not yet come. They were quiet days. Always, when we ate out, Brown's watch—a new one now, with a much larger case—was on the table hidden by his coffee cup or his glass. Once or twice I asked him about it. He grinned and smiled.

"The watch is to kill, Dean." And when my eyes opened wide, "I've told you it was a question of time; killing time—maybe, killing by time."

Twice in those days we had a call from Detective Tom Haskin of Chicago. He was not encouraging—at least, to me. Each time when he came, Brown was in the gun room and each time when I went for him there, he lifted the huge, cumbersome timepiece from the table and shoved it into his pocket. Funny that! I never really got a good look at it, and somehow I began to connect it up with a superstition—like a rabbit's foot.

The last time Detective Haskin called, Brown came from the gun room, said, spreading out his hands. "Here I am in the flesh. You've always seemed surprised; disappointed, maybe. The hometown boy, Spot Kelly, has not made good in the big city!"

Detective Haskin did not smile in return. He shook his head, tapped a letter he held in his hand. "From my buddy in Chicago," he said seriously. "You can expect it any time now. God, Brown, I'm a good shot! I know this guy, Kelly's, map. Why not let me tag along with you? Especially on these early-morning excursions."

"No." Brown shook his head. "And I saw you at five this morning, when I came in. Don't you ever sleep?"

"You make it hard." Haskin shook his head. "I didn't try especially to hide from you. Park Avenue's a lonely street, and five in the morning would be the time for it. There's no use in trying to tail you. I'm working alone, and you know the

ropes." He put a hand across his mouth. "As for watching this apartment all night! Hell, I've got to sleep some time and Kelly's just as apt to go after you in broad daylight, right on Broadway."

"Forget it!" Vee told him. "I'd as soon pal around with an undertaker as you." But he grinned when he said: "Good-by, Sunshine."

And that last visit of the detective was on Friday night, rather early in the evening. As for myself—Well, Haskin was certainly a somber bird. But he knew Spot Kelly, and seemed sincere in his efforts to see that Brown did not discount Kelly's ability, almost genius for carrying through a murder.

But Brown said: "He's an old woman, Dean. Imagine his being sent to guard a banker or a broker or even a clergyman! Why, he'd have the poor men dead of fright long before Spot Kelly even got a chance to draw a gun on them."

THAT night—or rather, early that Saturday morning—I was more nervous than usual as I waited for Brown. It was just two o'clock—two o'clock to the minute—when the phone rang.

I grasped the instrument. Brown sending for me? Or Maria with a message? And it was neither of them. I recognized that gruff voice over the phone even before I got the name.

"Brown there? Damned important. Haskin speaking—Detective Haskin."

"He's—he's out." I guess I stammered. The man's voice seemed even more ominous than usual.

"Well, get in touch with him; give him a buzz. Tell him either to lock himself in the apartment and send for help or hide out all night."

"Why?"

"Why!" he said. "I just got a phone call from Chicago. They are betting three to one in the right circles that Brown will be dead before breakfast. Now listen,

Condon. You've got sense—sense that isn't overshadowed by a false idea of Brown's charmed life. Spot Kelly has taken Brown's past performances into consideration. I understand he's imported a load of gunmen, and they're to blast Brown out."

"But—" I stammered. "I thought Spot Kelly always worked alone."

"Have it your own way—if you know more than I do," he cut in gruffly. "There's no use trying to help or advise you New York guys; you're too wise."

"But they won't be able to find Vee, and—"

"No?" he said. "I found him the other morning—could have popped him off too."

"Oh, he saw you and—"

"All right, all right. Tell me the same thing at his funeral. We'll have lots of time then to talk it over. Good night!"

The phone banged up. I was mad. Then—I didn't know. After all, we had not treated this detective over well. Brown, I guess, resented his assurance that Kelly would get him. And Haskin! He made no bones about his mission in the city. It was to get Spot Kelly—not to save Brown. Still, he had called up and—

I went to the phone, and remembered that Vee had given me no number to call. I grabbed the telephone book and started to wade through it for Carlo Cordinia. But I only started. Suppose he had a phone. Who would answer it? Would Brown want to be called to the phone? Where would the phone be, and—I was into my hat and coat and shoving the button for the automatic lift! I must warn Brown, of course. A speeding car along Park Avenue; spitting lead from machine guns, and he'd— But enough of such thoughts.

I HAD no difficulty in finding the little lunch room with its dingy, smoke-covered window and its faded, gilded sign

which bore the letters *Carlo Cordinia*.

I didn't enter the lunch room itself. I turned to the little door a few feet down the block that led to the hall, the stairs and the room at the top, to the left, where Brown waited. He had described it to me well enough. I'd have little difficulty if the door—the heavy outside door, that led to the dingy unlighted vestibule, was open. I passed in, paused, saw the dirty glass of the inside door and the dull light that burned behind it. My hand turned upon the knob. Would the inside door be locked; would—I pushed forward and the door gave.

So this was the place Brown waited, I thought; waited for the coming of Maria. Anyone might enter; anyone might sneak in and—I was in the hall. Dirty, damp, sticky! An ill-smelling place. My feet made no sound on heavy carpet. The dull light came from a rear hall. Dimly I made out a flight of steps; at least the first two or three steps. The room at the top of those steps, to the left—and Brown!

Cautiously my foot went out, silently it landed on that carpeted step. Why, anyone could—

I stopped dead and fell back a step. A broad figure had risen from the darkness; something hard was pounded against my stomach. A voice said: "What you do here? What you want here? Come! Speak fast, or this gun blow a great hole in your middle."

"Brown. Vee. I'm—" The man was backing me toward the rear, nearer the light. Was he going to shoot? This man must be Carlo Cordinia, from Vee's description. Quickly I said: "Maria—Maria. I'm her friend. Brown's friend."

"Oh!" the man said, but the gun did not lower. "Maria." He had a way of stretching out the name. "You are lucky I'm a careful, slow man. You are the other one then." And when I would have

put my hands down, which had mechanically jarred above my head when the gun bore into my stomach, "Maybe you lie, eh? Maybe not. Turn! Go above! We have the identification for sure—certain. Carlo is no fool. Maria tell you that."

My appearance before Brown was not the strong, silent one I had expected. Instead, I was marched up those stairs with a gun; the muzzle of a sawed-off gun stuck in my back.

Narrow stairs, the turn to the left, the room at the back, and Carlo's tap on the door. Then Brown's smile when he opened that door and saw me.

"All right, Carlo." He laughed. "You're a good guard." He turned back to the table with the red-and-black-checked cloth upon it and sat down. "Close the door, Dean. Carlo can find his way in the dark."

I CLOSED the door, started to say something about locking it, then didn't. My mouth just hung open in amazement. Seated at that table, facing the door, was the girl, Maria. There was a veil covering most of her face, but I thought I caught the green of her eyes.

"Sit down." Brown directed me to a chair so that my back was directly to the window. "A fire escape," he explained. "I like to face it. Spot Kelly is making me a careful man, even here. There's a door behind me, of course, but you found out how well the stairs to it are guarded."

"I did," I said, and looking at the papers scattered about the table that Brown was placing in an envelope, "Maria had it then. That's the evidence?"

Vee nodded. "All of it. Not a thing missing, Dean." And with a quizzical look in his eyes as he shoved the envelope into his inside coat pocket, "Not even you."

"Not even the watch," I said as I saw it on the table, close to a glass of red wine.

He laughed. "No need for it here in this hideaway. But I must make it a habit." His thin shoulders shrugged as his hand came down and moved the watch slightly. He looked at it, moved it again and nodded, took a drink from the glass of red liquid. "Bah!" he said. "Bitter. But it would offend our good host, Carlo, and there's no place to throw it. Now—why your visit, Dean? Nerves, or—"

I told him.

"Nonsense!" He smiled over at the girl as he leaned forward, his chin in his hands, his elbows on the table. "A car load of guns are easier to spot than a single man with a single purpose. No, that has been tried before and—What's the matter, Dean?"

And there was something the matter. The door directly behind Brown; the door by which I had entered had silently opened. A man stood there. There was a slouch hat far down on his forehead. A black mask covered his eyes and nose and part of his chin. But his hands! Both his hands were extended; one moving slightly between the girl and myself, the other trained smack on the back of Brown's head; and both of those hands held guns, menacing black guns. I recognized the make—the long barrel, the fine dull steel. They were German Lugers.

"Never mind getting advice from your buddy, Brown." The masked figure spoke. "Keep your elbows on the table—just as they are. I like to talk, brother. But one movement of your arms will interrupt the conversation. As for the dame! She better leave that hand bag lay. Yep, it's Spot Kelly talking. Try and laugh that off, Mr. Vee Brown—Killer of Men."

"So," Brown spoke, "you've come at last. How did you work it?"

"You'd like to know, eh? Well, I'd like you to know. Just keep them little white fingers of yours on the table, Condon. If you're a good boy and she's a

good girl you're in no danger, if I don't get nervous. I kill for cash, and cash only. How did I get here? Well, I found I couldn't trail you, Brown, so I trailed your friend, Condon. Followed him and the grease ball up the stairs, waited in the dark and knocked the grease ball on the head and let him fall easy. Then—just walked in."

I LOOKED at Brown. Would I see reproach in his eyes? I had led the killer directly to him. But I saw nothing in Brown's eyes. He was looking down on the table; looking—yes, staring, almost fascinated, straight at that watch; at the open, peculiarly slanted case of that watch. He never took his eyes from it as he spoke.

"So that's how it was." Vee's head seemed to move slightly, but his eyes never raised. Mine did. They raised from the watch on the table to Brown's face—well, not quite to his face. They stopped. I saw Vee's right hand; his right hand that was coming slowly out from under his coat, crawling out with but a movement of the wrist, so that his elbow never moved upon the table. A gun—a snub-nosed automatic—was appearing from under his left armpit. And his body and his arm were rigid. Just his hand and wrist were moving—moving so stealthily that the masked figure behind him could not know.

What did he expect to do? What did he hope to do? Spin and fire? Fire before that man could close a finger on a gun; a gun that could shoot twenty city blocks; a gun in the hand of a paid murderer; a man who had killed over and over again?

"Well!" said Kelly. "Ready to take it?"

"Are you ready to give it?" Brown's voice was very calm. "Oh, you've got me clean enough. But how about your get-away?"

"Out the window—down the fire escape." The masked figure shrugged broad shoulders.

Fascinated, I watched Brown. His eyes—black, pointed balls; glaring balls—never left that watch. And I saw his hand. The gun was turned now and creeping up his left side, to his shoulder, moving steadily, close—very close to his chin, unseen of course by the masked figure.

But he didn't have a chance. Spot Kelly had extended his right hand, closer to Brown's head. Six feet away, no more. He couldn't miss, no matter—And I saw his fingers tightening. Spot Kelly was going to—And Brown spoke; to gain time, I thought.

"You don't know who the girl is then? You're not going to—"

"The girl?" The words just came from behind that mask. Metallic, plainly without any attempt to appear natural. And in sudden determination, "But you take it first."

Brown's eyes narrowed. His lips set to a thin red gash, then curled cruelly at the right corner. I saw that in the split second and recognized what it meant. But it couldn't be. It was impossible. For that look always meant that Vee was on the kill.

CHAPTER TEN

Behind the Mask

OF JUST what happened for that split second I can never be sure. I saw Brown's right hand dart like a striking snake up over his shoulder as his slender body fell forward and he crashed upon the table.

I heard the shot. Two shots? Yes, it seemed like two shots. And I heard the glass in the window behind me crack just as orange-blue flame darted from that German Luger.

Then I saw things. I was looking di-

rectly at Spot Kelly; that black mask. Plainly, high up on that mask, almost in the center of the man's forehead was a white hole in the black. Then it wasn't white. It was purple.

Spot Kelly straightened, half bent backward. Both his hands dropped to his sides. Then his left hand came up, very slowly; dropped again lifelessly. His whole body spun and he crashed to the floor.

Through it all Maria hadn't moved. I knew that. She sat there as if paralyzed. Now, as Brown came to his feet, spun around, his gun ready, she sank slowly onto the table.

Brown spoke—and his voice was eager, his words quick. Pride in them? Yes, there was that all right. "Now, that's shooting. Oh, I couldn't very well have missed him—I had practice enough. But a bull's eye!"

"It was a close call, Vee; a split second— If he had shot a split second sooner! You were pretty lucky. The breaks came at—"

"The breaks!" He cut in on me. "No breaks in that. He saw my gun—that's what caused him to shoot. I couldn't see his face, behind the mask, but I knew what was there. Fear, terror, horror. Rats are all the same, if they come from Chicago or Philly, or right from our own town. He just didn't have the guts for it when the time came. I counted partly on that, though I'd have shot him to death before he ever could close a finger on the trigger if he hadn't seen my gun. That's why I kept him talking. The breaks!" He scoffed in that childish, hurt way of his. "If there were any breaks in this shooting, Spot Kelly got them. But we'll have a look behind that mask."

"How did you do it, Vee? Somehow—"

He was half on his knee by the still body when he turned his head and came quickly to the table. Maria was leaning

on her hands; queer sounds were deep down in her chest.

Vee went to her, slipped an arm under her shoulder, lifted up her head. Her cheeks were wet below the veil. Maria; hard, sinister and—

“Maria!” was all Brown said, but there was something in his voice that was new.

“I’m all right.” She came to her feet, staggered slightly, clutched at the table as Brown gripped her arm.

“Don’t look at him if—” I started, as I got between her and the dead man on the floor.

“It isn’t that. It isn’t that,” she said. “It’s new—something new. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to cry again.” And suddenly clutching at Vee, holding tight to him, “I—my eyes closed for a moment. I thought”—she looked down at the silent figure—“I thought it was you, Vee.”

POUNDING feet on the stairs outside that door, a commanding voice. Then the voice of Carlo Cordinia, whom I found out later had recovered and staggered erect. Then plainly, the first voice again—a voice I knew, recognized.

“Is that the door? Damn it! I heard the shots. Out of the way.”

The girl jerked from Brown, leaped across the room. “Ramsey—Inspector Ramsey,” she gasped the words, ran to the window and all but her legs disappeared behind the shade. I heard the window go up as the door flew open and Ramsey was in the room. Behind him I saw Cordinia, his eyes wide.

“Hell!” said Brown. “A little late, as usual, Ramsey.” And to me, “The window, Dean.”

I was too late or Ramsey was too strong. His great hand shot out, smacking me back against the wall. He was across the room, lunging forward, tripping suddenly over Vee’s foot and stretching himself full length on the floor.

He was on his feet at once. Anger blazed in his eyes. He half stepped toward the window, saw Brown’s grinning face and turned toward him, his hands raised, his face red, his lip bleeding where his teeth had bit into it. The girl was gone.

Ramsey’s left hand held a gun. It dropped to his side. Two steps he took forward, and stretching out his right hand hammered it down on Brown’s shoulder.

Vee’s face paled, his lips twisted. Ramsey was a strong man. I knew his fingers were biting into Brown’s shoulder; the pain was plainly stamped on his face. In that moment of triumph—Brown’s success, I saw tragedy. I cried out: “Don’t Ramsey! Take your hand off Vee!”

I knew how Brown hated, almost to an obsession, anyone placing a hand on him; an unfriendly hand, especially a violent hand; one that gave physical pain. I wasn’t thinking of Brown, afraid for Brown when I shouted. My fear was for Ramsey—Inspector Ramsey.

“So the little man doesn’t like some of his own medicine,” Ramsey started—and stopped. His eyes bulged. Vee had whipped out a gun and thrust it against his stomach so violently that Ramsey finished his sentence with a gasp.

“Drop your hand, Ramsey, or—”

Inspector Ramsey’s hand dropped to his side as if it had been struck from Brown’s shoulder. He stepped back a pace. His eyes were fastened on those glaring black ones of Brown. His tongue came out and licked at his lips. He said: “By God, Brown! I believe you meant—meant to kill me.”

“By God!” said Vee very slowly, “I did.”

For a full minute they faced each other. Neither man spoke. Then Ramsey said: “You tripped me on purpose. You’re not denying that.”

“I saved your life,” lied Brown. “A

girl with a gun was on that fire escape. Spot Kelly had a girl with him. But no matter. Kelly's dead and the girl got away. Now—how did you find your way here?"

"I got a tip," said Ramsey. "Like you get tips. And I don't believe that one about the girl. The tip was that you were to be shot to death here tonight."

"Well, I wasn't," said Brown. He walked to the window, carefully raised the shade and peered out into the night. "Others heard you and beat in when the girl went through the window. You certainly throw the fear of the law into the criminal, Ramsey. We'd better have a look at the stiff."

VEE walked across the room and again he dropped to one knee by the body of the dead gunman; the man who made a business of murder. I was looking down at the squat figure when Brown jerked off the mask, and I was the one who gasped the words.

"Tom Haskin. Detective Tom Haskin, from Chicago."

Brown looked long and steadily at the dead face, with the round hole in the center of his forehead. Then he turned to Ramsey with a sneer. "You made a fine job of investigating his credentials. Not surprised, eh?"

"I know." Ramsey seemed really contrite for a moment. And then, "Doran and I both were careless. But he had Haskin's papers. And I'm not surprised, because the body of Tom Haskin was identified by a dentist—his dentist in Chicago—tonight. I got a wire that told that this Haskin was a fake. The Chicago police thought he was here."

"Oh!" Brown nodded. "So he wasn't just a cop, gone wrong."

"No," said Ramsey. "Tom Haskin was sent on to New York, but he never got started. We were advised of his coming.

This man, Spot Kelly, murdered him and left his body on the railroad tracks. It was horribly mutilated when found a week ago. The identification by the police was just good detective work. It finally came through his teeth. That's why I came here tonight. To find you—warn you." Ramsey gulped. "It's hardly believable, but I came to protect you."

"Yeah—it is hardly believable. How did you find your way here?"

"Well," said Ramsey. "I've had you shadowed, clever as you are. I knew you'd been coming here for the last three mornings at least."

"So—" Vee Brown stroked his chin. "Then you know I haven't had much sleep. The corpse is yours. Good night!"

"But"—Ramsey followed us to the door—"how did this man die?"

Brown's eyes opened wide. "I'll ring up the D. A. and make a full report, of course. But for your own enlightenment—he was shot with a gun, straight between the eyes."

And to me when we had walked nearly a half dozen blocks before finding a cab, "Ramsey hates me, Dean. I don't believe that story of his that he came to protect me. I'd rather believe that he was downstairs and waited until he heard the shots. But then, he doesn't believe my story about the girl, so we're even." He leaned back and lighted a cigarette. "Imagine a man on the force as long as he's been wanting to know how Spot Kelly died."

"Well—" I couldn't wait until Brown explained it himself. "How did he; how did you, over your shoulder, you know? It was some shot; some—"

"Don't say it," Vee cut in. "Don't say 'some break.' If there was a break, it was your bringing Spot Kelly to me tonight. Simple, that, though. He telephoned you to warn me, then followed you there, entered the front door and was almost on

your heels when you and Carlo Cordinia went up the stairs. After that— He simply waited in the dark and struck Cordinia down.

"No, I didn't have any break. I knew that Spot Kelly always shot his man through the back of his head, and some time he would try to get me that way. Therefore, I also knew that Spot Kelly wasn't used to facing a gun. He wasn't used to seeing threatening death from another man's hand. That would be in my favor; and it was, for his hand trembled when the big moment came. Hell, Dean, you're too good to be true! Didn't you guess how I did it; planned his death just as he planned mine? I've often shot at targets back over my shoulder while looking in a mirror; you've seen me do that. But I couldn't carry a mirror around with me. I thought of the watch. It took practice, of course, but with the small case of my own watch it was too uncertain. So I bought the new one and took it in to Irving Small." He lifted the large time-piece from his pocket and slapped it into the palm of his hand. "That turned the

trick. In the gun room I made a bull's eye every time, from all angles, all positions. Difficult at first? Well—yes. For as 'Alice' might say: 'In Looking Glass Land everything is backward!'"

I WAS looking at the watch, striking a match the better to see the highly polished mirror that Irving Small had placed in the back of the now open case.

Brown was saying: "There's just one thing I don't believe, and can't understand. Ramsey never tailed me or had me tailed."

"But I was followed—" I started.

"Bah!" Vee sat up stiff on the edge of the seat. "You and I are two different people, Dean." And then he burst out laughing.

"I don't see anything so funny in—"

"I'm not laughing at you." He threw himself far back in the corner of the cab. "I'm laughing at Van Houton. A hundred grand smack on the line! He can't afford it, Dean—not after losing that evidence. A hundred grand. And Spot Kelly missed me by a good foot."

FEATURED IN THE NOVEMBER 15th ISSUE

THE JADE JOSS

by

T. T. FLYNN

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NOVEMBER 1st

MURDER IN



A Sam Beckett Novelette

By John Lawrence

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The Agency hadn't had a case in weeks and Beckett was damn well fed up with twiddling his thumbs. But it took a thunderstorm to lead him to murder lying in a puddle—bring him two clients in one fell swoop and rocket him into the most ghastly horror set-up of his career. Murder in miniature with a half-pint killer who had his victims on a speck!

MINIATURE



As he held them there he took in the incredible scene.

CHAPTER ONE

Blood in the Rain

RAIN rattled down on Horatio Street—a driving, choking cascade. The single street lamp on the block threw light no more than a few feet through the lashing downpour. Sam

Beckett came out into this from a friend's house around nine o'clock. He was in such low spirits that even the complete absence of taxis on the block drew no more than a grunt from him. He turned the collar of his coat up, pulled the battered hat low on his hard head. Big hands in the worn pockets of his coat, he hunched out into the wet, tracking sod-

denly toward West Street, a dull, despondent look on his hard face.

The despondency was beginning to seem permanent. The Beckett Inquiry Agency had, inexplicably, hit a run of disastrous bad luck. And the big agent had been so long without a case that his nerves were beginning to turn ragged on him. Bullets—collected in the breaking of a case that had made headlines for months—had put him in the hospital for six weeks. He had been out now just four.

The former case had brought him advertising, publicity, reputation. He had come back to work, ready for plenty of action, and—not a dime's worth of acceptable business had appeared yet. The financial end—a carefully watched item in the Beckett Agency—had become a headache. And now Sam was at the point where inactivity was making him fretful, sour.

That was his mood, just before the thing erupted.

He was drenched by the time he reached West Street, and the discomfort roused him a little. He dripped a minute on the corner.

At first glance, West seemed deserted too. He ranged disgusted blue eyes south, squinting to see through the rain, then north—and started off abruptly, as he discovered a cab after all, parked facing north, a block above him at the southeast corner of the Gansevoort Wharves. He trotted out to the middle of the road to get shelter as he ran, under the trestled ribbon of the elevated motor speedway, then whistled a blast through wet fingers.

He had slopped through fifty yards, when the taxi's motor became audible, just warming into life. Beckett ducked hastily out into the uncovered part of the street to make sure the hackman saw him, waved an arm, and—the taxi's horn

squawked three times, its motor speeded up. Beckett's face furrowed in sudden anger as the cab rocked forward. He sprinted, shouted, "Hey, fathead. . . !"

Water geysered from the rear wheels. The cab lurched out heavily into the street, skidding, wheels spinning. It slued around to face squarely north, and the wheels got tread. The cab roared, leaped ahead, and shot away out of sight around the corner of the buildings. Beckett foundered to a profane stop against a ramp pillar.

He straightened himself up, his hard face crimson, flapping water from his hands, and. . .

The long-sought case blew open, tossed him into the center of more murderous, ruthless action than he knew what to do with.

THE hoarse, agony-stricken, man's scream, just audible over the storm, whipped out from deep in the cluster of warehouses. Beckett came erect, jerked round, his head out, eyes suddenly alive.

It came again, just as the storm took a sudden lull—a tortured, frantic shriek that sent the hair crawling on the agent's nape.

Then he had it located, was automatically in a hard run, one big hand diving under his coat for a gun butt, eyes alight, concentrated on the blackness of the wharves.

Those wharves are a group of thirty, small, sturdy buildings, each a miniature block. Paved alleys criss-cross between them. The whole group is a large square, with water on one side and West Street on the other. The screams had come from way up, over toward the water. Beckett raced for the center alley.

He was almost at its mouth when a car—unmistakably the same taxi—started blowing shrill blasts on its horn from the street side. And he was barely

inside the black maw of the alley when the roar came.

A gun thundered—once, twice, three times, four—far ahead.

Beckett's own gun jumped into his hand. He swerved to one side, pounded ahead, crouched over, eyes straining.

Feet suddenly clattered, eighty yards before him, crossing his alley. He fired hastily, twice, at the invisible quarry, cursed in his throat as the feet clattered on, faded. He made one last desperate spurt, guessed at the alley they had taken, but as he reached it and swung wildly round, the exhaust of the car outside was again accelerating in high-pitched roar. By the time he had sprinted the alley's length and burst out into the street, the taxi was a good half-block north, its motor racing wide-open, half screened by the sub-structure of the ramp. Beckett's first shot rang metal; the second shattered glass—and then they were at the corner, whirled round—and were away.

Tight-lipped, Beckett swung round, fumbled out his pencil flash, trotted back down the alley. After a bit, he began swinging the beam of the flash from side to side, hard eyes raking the shadows under the overhanging roofs of the warehouses.

HE WAS almost out to the piers, was within two buildings of the end, before the sound of hiccoughing reached him. He slid to a stop, darted the beam around—and fastened on a huddled figure, jackknifed against a wall, under a roof shed. The agent's lips formed a soundless whistle. He shot quickly over, dropped to one side beside the man.

He was an Italian, about forty years old, distinguished in a way—slender, with gray patches of hair around his temples. He was sitting in a pool of blood, with his back to the wall, knees angled, utterly

spent, his head drooping on one shoulder. Blood was streaming from a hole in his jaw, and from three places in his neck. His hands were manacled together in front of him, and were close against his stomach. His eyes were closed, but he still breathed.

Beckett rapped hastily: "Who did it, Jack—who got you?"

The man hiccoughed through pain-racked lips. His head lolled over, painfully, slowly, to the opposite shoulder. He did not open his eyes, but his lips twitched. Beckett bent close.

It came huskily, tortured, gasping. "Who's that? You—chief?"

"Yes, it's me. Fast now—who got you?"

"G'rillas — jumped me—taxi — went back—for baggage. But stuff's—mailed—special-d'l'v'ry — Barb'ra Seddon — take care her—"

"Sure, sure. What stuff was mailed?"

"Why—stuff — Francesco Lab'r'ys — miniature—you know. . . ."

"I've forgotten. Tell me—fast! And call me by my name—do you remember my name?"

"Remember? Sure I" And it came—the final hiccough—a frightful retching gulp that seemed to jerk the life-blood out of the man. Blood came up from his throat in a sudden thick stream, showered down over his hands. Beckett jerked back. The Italian tried to speak on through, seemed unaware of the ghastly eruption. The blood seemed endless.

Then it ended—in one faint gulp. The Italian seemed suddenly to deflate—like a toy balloon. He slipped—and before Beckett could act, had slid over sideways, and flopped, still jackknifed, on his side, his face slapping into the pool of his own blood. And as his legs slowly straightened out, his hands came in sight, and Beckett's flash happened to light on the left one.

Three fingers were dangling backward—broken. The others slowly stiffened, as life went out of the Italian.

UP TO this point, Beckett had no idea that he was facing anything more than an ordinary gunman's killing. It was not till after he'd searched the body that the sensational trail opened up. And it was two full minutes before he could make up his mind definitely to begin the search.

When he finished that ugly job, white-faced, he had absolutely nothing of the slightest consequence, save a passport, and indications that the man had landed that night from the *Madriatic*. But when he opened the passport and turned the beam on the photograph contained, it was enough. It brought him up off his knees, eyes wide. The Italian's face had been twisted in pain, his eyes shut, and Beckett's memory had failed to place him, in the flesh. But the photograph registered instantly—its twin was in the rogues gallery at Center Street. The dead man was Joseph D'Amata, practically the king-pin of the international criminals, as dangerous a man as was on the books, and—one who refused to touch anything under hundreds of thousands.

Thoughts were suddenly riot in the big agent's head. A glow came into his eyes. To crash a D'Amata job was the dream of every private investigator in the country—crooked or honest. Either way, somewhere along the line, money was bound to be made—big money. If he could only get some line on what the Italian had been doing. If it were big enough for murder—

A warm feeling came over him, as the names D'Amata had gasped out clicked back into his head. Barbara Seddon—Francesco Laboratories. They had a vaguely familiar sound. His encyclopedic office girl would probably—

He turned and hurried out into the alley, suddenly conscious that minutes had slipped by, peered out toward the street, frowning. The police were overdue. If he tried to slip out now, he'd probably run smack—

It suddenly dawned on him that the chances were that no alarm had been turned in. Though the nearest household-er was within a block, the sound of the shots and screams might well have been blanketed by the storm.

He stood a minute in quick debate, went back and dropped the passport by the dead man, swung his light in quick, thorough circles, made sure he had missed nothing. Then he clicked out the light, put his hands in his pockets and deliberately stood there for two more minutes, eyes squinted up, his brain carefully indexing every item of information he had.

Then he swung quickly out into the alley, strode for the street.

He found a phone booth four blocks east, in an elaborate dining-car lunch wagon.

THALIA MORTON said: "I'm not illiterate. Of course I've heard of her. Who hasn't? She's in the Social Register because her family's been there since the *Mayflower*, and because she's now the sole owner of the Seddon fortune. She ought to be in a pathological institute. It's a miracle she hasn't gotten into trouble before. Is she retaining you?"

"No—and forget the wisecracks. Just give me all you can on her."

"If you'd tell me what it's all about, I could be more helpful."

"I got to a murdered crook just in time to hear him buzz her name."

"*Whew!* Well, she's beautiful enough, if you like blondes, and plenty rich. She lives by herself in that house on Park Avenue—you know—the queer one. She's run plenty wild since her parents died

two years ago. Of course there's plenty of gossip. Winchell had her running around with a Broadway gambler last winter, and a night-club head waiter recently. Barton Black knows her."

"What's he say about her?"

"He says she's an evil-minded little tramp—only she doesn't get her fingers burned, if you follow me. She seems to be fascinated with the rats around Broadway—any kind of a greaseball. Barton claims that only her money's kept her out of the worst kind of trouble, and even that's going to collapse on her one of these days."

"Any names connected with her right now?"

"None that I know of—but that doesn't mean there aren't any. According to the papers, she's a patroness of this society circus they're giving out in Newport next month. Probably she's all wrapped up in a lion tamer or something. And—oh, yes—she's supposed to be engaged to a young blood named Philip Jewett, but it must be a queer sort of engagement."

"All right. Here's another. The Francesco Laboratories."

"Wait, I'll look it up." Then, after a minute, "Sure. They're a commercial chemical manufacturing company. Rated AAA—that means first-class and big. Up on the East River." She gave him the address. "What's all this? Have you found a case?"

"A case, yes—a client, no. I'll call you later. You're not going out, are you?"

"In this rain?"

Beckett hung up, took a slip of paper and went over to the rack of phone books. He was back in less than a half minute, dialed again.

A thin, girl's voice answered: "Miss Seddon's residence."

"Is this Miss Seddon?"

"N-no. This is the maid. Miss Seddon

won't be in till tomorrow morning. If you care to leave—"

"No. You'll do. Now listen carefully. Has a special-delivery package or letter arrived any time tonight for Miss Seddon?"

"No, sir."

"This is Beckett, the detective, speaking. Either a package or a letter is due to arrive there tonight—special. The minute it arrives, I want you personally to put it in the safe—or some safe place. Then call this number"—he gave her Thalia Morton's number—"and leave word for me. Under no conditions hand that package to anyone—not even Miss Seddon. I'll see that you don't get into trouble with her. Is all that clear?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Remember—this is police business, and very important. If anything goes wrong, it may mean serious trouble for you. Understand?"

"Yes—yes, sir."

He pulled down the receiver with a big forefinger, let it up again after a second, dialed a second number. A man answered here, with a deep-pitched, "Hello."

"Mr. Francesco, please."

"Which one?"

"Either one," Becket said blandly.

"I am sorry, both Mr. Francesco, Junior and Senior are at the factory in conference. Who is calling, please."

"Can I call them at the factory?"

"You cannot, sir," with asperity. "When they come in, I will be glad to—"

Beckett hung up, sat there a minute, a deep frown on his forehead. He pushed open the booth door, leaned out to look at the clock. It was eleven minutes to ten. He got up slowly, shrugged up his top-coat and strode for the door.

To the cab driver he flagged, he gave the address of the Francesco Laboratories, and a demand for no wastage of time.

The journey ate up about thirty-five minutes.

CHAPTER TWO

Beckett Gets a Client

THE factory was on East End Avenue, up in the Eighties. It was set back from the street, fronted by a patch of lawn. The banner signboard—illuminated—was visible atop the long, six-story glass and brick structure when they turned up East End, blocks below. Beckett left the cab half a block from the factory, walked through the now thinning rain, through, around, and over puddles.

One side of the narrow street was bordered by a high board fence. The other side held heterogeneous, shabby, one-story shack structures that lapped on the sidewalk right up to—and starting in again beyond—the wide square lawn of the Francesco factory, which was open to the street. Beckett sauntered to a stop, just around the corner of the last shack, stood for the space of thirty seconds running probing eyes over the factory. He saw that he was standing at the edge of a graveled driveway that ran in from the street, past the right side of the factory, and following it with his glance, spotted the red glow of a parked tail-light.

For four minutes, he stood in indecision, groping for a plan of campaign.

Finally, he walked on in toward the factory, keeping to the grass beside the driveway—sure of himself, of his next move.

The parked car, when he reached it, turned out to be a big roadster, empty, its curtains up, parked a few yards beyond a dark arch in the brick wall of the factory. A quick stab of his pencil flash showed Beckett steps under the arch, leading up to a plate-glass door. The door was dark; all the windows on this side of the place were dark. Beckett

came to a halt at the foot of the steps, his forehead furrowed, peering and—

He was suddenly alert as the sound of a motor came from down the street, from the direction of his taxi, but farther along. The agent blinked. If the car were headed for here—

He swung the flash quickly round again—behind him—and located a row of barrels standing out a foot or two from the fence that bordered the grounds. He stepped quickly over, rolled one barrel out of the row, stood waiting there, eyes on the road. And the car on the road came abreast; its headlights started to swing in.

Beckett slipped in behind the row of barrels, kept his eyes on the rocking headlamps, as they rolled on toward him through the drizzle.

His attention flashed back to the building, just in time. Bolts were being shot back. He ducked quickly down to a squatting position, found a crack between two barrels, and stared across. From here he could see up under the arch. Light now streamed through the plate-glass door, and as Beckett looked, a white-haired, bulky man in formal morning clothes was quickly opening the door. He wore no hat or overcoat, was obviously going to meet the car, as he came down the steps.

The bobbing beam of the headlights grew suddenly stronger, and with a screeching of brakes, the car slid to a swishing stop across Beckett's line of sight. The ignition was cut; a door banged open hastily, and words burst out—a young man's voice. "Father—Zabriski's been killed—poisoned! An ivory miniature he was wearing around his neck was ripped off and stolen!"

"What? What? Good God! Then—"

"Somebody must have found out—and beaten us to it. I'm certain if he had it written down it was on that miniature. I searched his stateroom myself!" Other

feet clattered out of the car. A small milling group streamed from car to arch.

A hoarse voice said: "The police think they know who did it. They wouldn't tell us, but they say they have evidence." The men started shuffling up the steps.

The old man said bitterly: "If we had only had the sense to do as he asked us. What good will it do us if the police do catch the criminal! He won't give it up—not if he knows what it is!"

Beckett eased up, circled his head round, counted four men, as they disappeared in the arch.

The hoarse voice said, "Perhaps if we were to cable—" and the door closed.

BECKETT came out, taut, yellow light in his eyes. A minute he stood beside the barrels, staring at the arch. Then he circled the car, stepped into the arch.

The lights went out inside.

Beckett deliberately fished out a cigarette, lit it, eyed the luminous dial of his watch—and waited. He let three minutes go by, then dropped the cigarette, stamped it out, went up the steps and fished around till he found a night bell at the side of the door. He put a big finger on it, held it there, staring into the now dark hall beyond the glass, till a door suddenly swung open at the right of the hall and light streamed out. The white-haired man emerged, frowning, came toward Beckett. A clean-cut, dark youngster of twenty-two or -three in a belted black topcoat followed through the door, stood watching.

Beside the door the old man pressed a light switch, as he undid bolts once more, then opened up. The agent swung his hat off, and out behind him, swished the water from it. "Sorry to trouble you here, Mr. Francesco—I tried to get you at home unsuccessfully. I'm a private investigator, and I've run across something that may or may not be important to you. Can you spare me a minute?"

"Why—uh—what is it?"

Beckett hesitated, frowned. "Just a rumor, and a very vague one. In short, I heard that certain people had laid plans to rob you tonight."

The old man's brown eyes jumped open. "Who? What people?"

"I don't know—but if I move fast, I may have a way of finding out." He hesitated, eyed the old man's ruddy face shrewdly. "Or if you have already been robbed, I might have a chance of catching the thief—and the goods."

"What!" The old man fairly shouted. He swung round, looked at the young man, then back to Beckett. "Who are you, did you say?"

"Beckett's the name." He slipped a folder of credentials from his inside pocket, held them out. The old man snatched them, ran through them, compared Beckett's face with the photograph on a license, and stuffed them back in his hand, grabbed his sleeve and urged him toward the open door at the right of the hall. "Come in here, and tell these gentlemen that!"

Beckett went into the room. It was a conventional office.

"This is Mr. Beckett—a detective," the old man announced. "Mr. Giannini and Mr. Larch—my directors—and my son."

Beckett nodded shortly, mumbled. Larch was a short, round, bald-headed man with watery blue eyes, deep lines from nostrils to mouth; Giannini, an Italian, slightly hatchet-faced, tall; a wound or accident seemed to have slued the lower part of his face off center.

"Tell them!"

Beckett repeated.

Giannini's eyes were suspicious. "Where do you expect to get this information, Mr. Beckett?"

Beckett said shortly: "That's my business, Mr. Giannini. I'm not even sure I can get it."

"Well, what evidence can you give us that we can depend on what you say?"

Beckett shrugged. "I've got enough reputation for that, I hope."

Young Francesco put in: "If he's Sam Beckett, you can depend on him. He's the man shot that lawyer—Grauss."

Beckett said: "Gentlemen, you'll have to make up your minds one way or another quickly—if you expect me to get any results. I'll step out into the hall for three minutes, and you can discuss the matter." He turned and went out.

It ran to four minutes, but the agent waited. Young Francesco opened the door. "Please come in. We've decided to retain you. We'll tell you as quickly as possible what's happened."

THE old man was sitting at the desk, hunched forward, his hands clasped in front of him. He looked up from under shaggy white brows. "Mr. Beckett, we have already been robbed—of something whose worth is problematical, but might run into millions. I'll try and explain the whole business."

Beckett nodded quickly. Francesco went on: "This has to do with a color process—the secret of making imperishable colors—colors that won't fade. You follow me?"

"Yes."

"If a firm can put them on the market—the real thing—it means millions. We heard of a man in Italy who had discovered such a process. His name was Zabriski. Naturally we were sceptical, but we communicated with him, offering him adequate return if his ideas were sound. He refused to divulge anything unless we brought him over here. We argued back and forth. Finally, he did send us the names of the ingredients, but apparently the formula for mixing them was too involved. We could do nothing with them ourselves—which, of course, he knew, or he wouldn't have given them to us. He would not tell us the formula.

"We finally decided to take a chance, and furnished funds for Zabriski to come over. Tonight, when my son went to meet him at the boat, with these gentlemen, they found him dead in his cabin—poisoned. He was in the habit of wearing an ivory miniature around his neck on a chain. That chain was snapped off, and the miniature gone." He hesitated, tight-lipped. "Whether or not the formula was marked down on that miniature, we have no idea, but it looks very possible."

"What do the cops say?"

The old man looked at his son. Young Francesco said: "We—we didn't tell the police much. Just that we were interested in the return of the miniature, and of course, the capture of the person that—"

"I meant did they have any leads? Any—uh—clues?"

Francesco nodded quickly. "They say they are almost sure who did it, but that they doubt if they can prove it. They found out that there was a notorious criminal on board, with a cabin right near Zabriski's. When the boat docked, this criminal was one of the first off, went to the Customs and had a search made of his person, and walked off, leaving his luggage all behind. So far, he hasn't come for it. They've identified him through things in the suitcases. They think that, now that so much time has elapsed, he'll hardly be back for them, though."

Beckett looked up sharply. "Time? What time has elapsed? How long have you been at the boat?"

"Oh, we went down about nine thirty. We weren't supposed to meet him till ten."

"Well, it's only ten fifty-five now."

"Yes, but as I told you, this criminal was one of the first off—he got off almost the minute she docked."

Beckett was suddenly tense. "Am I going crazy or what? That doesn't make sense."

"Oh—I forgot to mention that we had made arrangements for Zabriski not to get off the boat when she first docked—to stay in his cabin till ten o'clock. You see, if this formula of his is real, other people might be after it—unscrupulous people. So we thought, everything considered, it would be better if he didn't get off when the crowd did, but waited so we could—"

"My God!" Beckett suddenly whipped. "What time did that boat dock?"

"Why, six o'clock—at a little before six"

Beckett galvanized as though he'd touched a wire. He groaned, "Buncoed, by God!" as he dived for his hat, jammed it on, and whirled for the door. He hesitated long enough to toss at them: "Mail my retainer to the agency. It's in the phone book. I'm working on your case now!" and shot out the door. He fumbled the plate-glass door open and plunged down the steps, raced for the street, cursing wildly. He roared, "Hey—get going!" at his taxi when he was a half block away; the driver jammed a startled foot down.

Beckett tore through puddles, slid to a stop, yanked open the door of the tonneau, thrust his head into the driver's compartment. He barked: "The Seddon house—on the corner of Park and one of the Sixties—I forget which. Forget there's such a thing as traffic lights. I square everything. For Pete's sake—move!"

THE driver was an expert. He jammed the accelerator to the floor, had the car bouncing. Wind screamed in the open window. Beckett clung grimly to the strap to keep his teeth from shaking loose, as they pounded south.

Brakes went on, as they neared Seventieth. The cab suddenly teetered up on two wheels. They took the corner in a skidding scream of tires, rocked, settled, shot toward Park.

And the moment they sped around the corner of Park, Beckett knew he was too late.

Three blocks below him, the corner was jammed black with crowds. Red headlamps of police cars gleamed importantly at the curb. Bug cars of reporters were parked up and down the block. The Seddon house was in the hands of the police. And from the numbers of them, it could be only one thing—murder!

Beckett's cab whirled him down, skidded to a stop opposite the house, and he jumped out, paid off. He was running across the corner, when a passing truck held him up long enough to drop off an enterprising newsboy, whose shouts started the moment he hit pavement. "Extra! Extra! All about the Park Avenue moirder!"

Beckett grabbed one, ran to get under a street light. Now he realized for the first time it had stopped raining.

It was all under headlines—in the stoppress box of the still wet paper.

The famous Park Avenue home of the Seddon family was invaded tonight at a few minutes past nine by two masked robbers. The intruders somehow managed to elude the alarm system on the fence surrounding the walls, walked boldly to the front door and rang the bell. John Greed, the butler, opened the door and faced a revolver in the hands of the taller of two thugs. They forced their way in, and demanded the whereabouts of Miss Barbara Seddon, owner of the house. As they did so, Daisy Hough, one of the mulatto maids, emerged from the dining room. The butler attempted to cry a warning to Miss Seddon on the floor above, but before he could do so, one of the men struck him in the head with a gun butt, knocking him backwards to the marble staircase, where he fell, striking his head against the steps and fracturing his skull.

Other servants, hearing the disturbance, rushed out, to be in turn covered by the guns of the two. And as Miss Seddon, also attracted by the uproar, rushed to the top

of the stairs, the smaller of the thugs sprinted to the top of the staircase to intercept her, held a gun to her body, and, according to the servants, attempted to make her drink from what appeared to be a bottle or vessel of some kind that he took from his pocket. On her refusal, he seized her, and forced her into an upstairs chamber, where, apparently, he succeeded in forcing her to comply with his demands. The servants below heard her scream once, then subside, and the small man, a moment later, came downstairs, pocketing the container.

The two men then bound and gagged the servants, locking them into a cupboard under the stairs. The procedure was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. They forced one of the maids—Lita Hough, sister of Daisy Hough—to answer it and carry on a conversation, the smaller man listening in and directing her replies, after which she was again forced to join the others in the closet. The thugs then made good their escape.

The crime was discovered by Philip Jewett, Miss Seddon's fiancé, accompanied by an interviewer from this paper, who reached the scene some half hour later, in pursuance of an appointment with Miss Seddon. The gate was standing open, as was the door of the house. The butler, Greed, was lying dead in a pool of blood by the staircase, and Miss Seddon lay unconscious on a bed in an upper bedroom. The servants had been unable to free themselves. The police were hastily summoned, and an ambulance for Miss Seddon. She was rushed to Cowper Memorial Hospital, where at the time of going to press, she is still unconscious.

Acting-Detective-Sergeant Whitely, in charge of the police investigation, stated that absolutely nothing was stolen, and that the motives behind the intrusion are utterly incomprehensible. He states, however, that he expects developments within a few hours. While the details of the telephone call have not been divulged, it is understood that the police have secured important information from Lita Hough, in reference to the call, and that investigation is being carried on along this angle.

Alarms have been broadcast for the two thugs, whose descriptions were furnished by the servants. The smaller man was about five feet three inches tall, dark, evidently an

Italian, with a bulging forehead, and a jagged scar crossing the left temple. The heavier man, also Italian and dark, was about six feet in height, with a flattened right ear. Both wore soft hats and cheap gray, waterproof coats.

Beckett finished the story, his brain rocking.

One minute he hesitated on the curb, eyes afire, his stocky frame taut. Then he jammed his hands grimly in his pockets once more, slogged quickly across the street, and started ploughing his way through the crowd, toward the Seddon gates.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder on Park

THE Seddon house was an anomaly on the luxurious street. The immense corner plot, priceless in land value, was two thirds flat, barbered lawn. A high spiked-iron fence—hedged by shrubbery—railed the property from the sidewalk, both on Park and along the side street. The house—an unlovely square block of gray stone—squatted blackly, set back from both streets, its high, narrow windows faintly orange. Beckett finally threaded the crowd, hit the police lines, waving his police card. He went through the lines, the gates, and slogged up the ribbon of cement.

Over the lawn a dozen flashlights winked and darted, as a searching squad covered the grounds. The slicker and visored cap of a uniformed man in the shadows outside the door gleamed as Beckett came up. A flash beam hit the agent's face, settled down on his police card. The copper said, "Oh! Beckett, eh?" stepped back, opened the door and the agent went in.

One huge crystal chandelier lit the immense, circular marble hall. Curving marble steps swung up, at the left of the hall,

vanished above. Five men stood at the foot of the steps in a huddle around a canvas-covered mound, and as Beckett came in, faces turned. Whitely, tall, sal-low-faced, with bulging gray eyes and a perpetually jaundiced look, exclaimed, "Beckett as I live and breathe," and extricated himself from the group, rocked over, sliding hands in trouser pockets. "Well, the party can begin now. Where do we start, good-lookin'?"

"Go on." Beckett eyed him level-lidded. "What's the gag?"

Whitely turned, nodded at the two plainclothesmen and the two coppers. "Right there, isn't he? With the wise-cracks, I mean." He turned back to Beckett, hitched his trousers, and the smile left his face. "All right, Beckett—start talking. And never mind the twenty-question game, see? What's the story on the special-delivery package?"

Beckett looked blank, eyed the headquarters man curiously. "I'm not looking for trouble, Whitely, but I'm damned if I'll answer riddles. If you want to tell me what it is I'm supposed to know—all right. Otherwise, I'll be about my business."

"Your business is to get yourself out of the hot grease, right now—if you can. You want to play games—all right, we'll make out you were in a trance or something, so I'll tell you what you did. You called up this house around nine thirty and told a maid a very important special-delivery package was due here tonight and to glom onto it and hold it. It just happened that you called while the mugs that did that"—he jerked a thumb at the ob-long canvass mound—"were still here. One of them listened in and after they heard what you had to say, got the idea of looking around for the damn package."

"They find it?"

"We dunno yet. They locked the maid back in the cupboard right away. If it

did arrive, the butler there's the one'd take it in. We dunno if he took it in or not—and nobody else seems to know either. We're working out the post-office angle, but till we hear from them we dunno whether—well, as a matter of fact, we don't know hardly anything about that package. That's why I sent for you, see? To tell us a couple of items, like for instance, what was supposed to be in it, where it came from and why, and like that."

"What makes you think I called up, for crying out loud?"

"Forget that. You told the girl who you were."

"You mean somebody told the girl he was me, calls up here and uses my name—that doesn't mean it was me, understand? I been busy all evening, working, and I got an alibi if I need it—which I won't. And where do you get that crack about sending for me? I came here on my own idea—my own business, see? Not because I heard anybody was sending for me. Before you run off on that cockeyed line, just stop a second and think what it is that you're putting all this confidence in—a voice over a phone. Why, it's ridiculous."

"Why, you—"

"We'll take all that up some other time. Take a tumble to yourself and realize that you're way out of line. I don't have to—and don't intend to—stand here answering questions that don't make sense. If you want to put the shoulder on me because somebody used by name over the phone—let's get it done right now, and get down to Center Street. If not, then don't expect to hold me up any longer. As I said, I've got work to do. I came here to see young Jewett, if he's—"

"Jewett!" Whitely suddenly stiffened. "You're working for Jewett?"

"In a way, yes. How's for seeing him—now?"

Whitely eyed Beckett in dull fury. "By God, the nerve! No, you don't see him now or any other—"

"Is he under arrest?"

"No. We're—"

"Am I?"

"I'm not just sure what you—"

Beckett's eyes were cloudy. "Listen, copper—I'm going to see my client. Or you're going to make a couple of pinches. You can't stop me if you don't. Now make up your mind. About this package, I know nothing, but—I have got a faint breath of another lead. You apparently haven't any, yet you're blocking me.

"It happens I'm working for a man that amounts to plenty. It might not be healthy for any copper that hamstring me without being pretty sure of himself. On the other hand, if you want to play a sensible game with me and forget this pipe dream for the minute—you can always come back to it, if you want to—we might be able to toss a few breaks back and forth. As it happens, I can earn my fee without having to absolutely make the pinch myself—when it comes—if you follow me."

Whitely licked his lips, opened his mouth, closed it. Finally, "Well, if you've got something, I'm not anxious to hold you up, naturally, as long as you're willing to work with us, but—"

Beckett patted his shoulder. "Be reasonable, now. Remember, I'm working for a client. Now where is this young Jewett?"

Whitely half turned, irresolutely, toward a door at the left of the hall, then swung back, frowning, to check Beckett in mid-stride. "Now wait a sec, Beckett. I don't know at that. Maybe you—"

Beckett stepped around him, patted air. "Be your age, copper. This is probably the one smart move you'll ever make. Don't spoil it." He walked across to the door at the left, but a plainclothesman hastily slid himself in front of it.

Whitely said, "Oh, hell—let him in," and Beckett walked on past, into a large ornate sitting room, done in Louis XIV style, and closed the door behind him. A small fire was burning in the grate under the white mantel.

AS Beckett came in a young man looked up from a seat before the fire. He had chestnut hair, blue eyes, now containing a wild look, a fine, sensitive mouth. His face was white, and a muscle at the corner of his mouth was quivering. His double-breasted gray suit was rumpled. He put the heels of his hands together and pressed them as the door closed.

Beckett said abruptly, and not too loudly: "My name's Beckett, Mr. Jewett. I'm a private detective. I bluffed my way past the police by telling them you'd retained me on this case. I happen to have a hunch as to how to catch the rats that poisoned your fiancée, if I can get in line fast enough. You mind answering me some questions?"

"No—no. What have you—you think you know who—"

"We'll take that up later. I've got to get things straight first. You're engaged to Miss Seddon, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"We can't afford to mince words now, Mr. Jewett. Ordinarily, this is none of my business, but—this is a murder case, and unless I'm very much wrong, there's more to come. Don't interrupt. Bluntly, I hear that Miss Seddon has been running around Broadway, kind of making a monkey out of you. Don't get mad, for Pete's sake, but give me the straight of it, as quickly as you can."

The boy stood up, his face white and twisted. "I'm not getting mad. It's—true, I think. I don't spy on her. I love her, and I don't care who knows it, and whatever she does is all right with me. I know that sounds like I was a pup, but I

can't help it. That's how it is. I don't think she's done anything—wrong. Just foolish. She won't listen—"

"All right," Beckett said hastily. "I hate to ask you this, but here's another tough question. What man or men has she been running around with in the last few weeks—or last couple of months?"

The boy's face was crimson, his eyes tortured. "None. For the last month she's been doing nothing but working to get together a circus they're giving for charity out in Newport. I've been helping her with it, and I've been with her almost all the time. Don't you understand, Mr. Beckett? She has no personal interest in any of these people; it's just a sort of queer hypnotic vanity—"

"Sure. Sure." Beckett stopped him again. "All right—now about tonight. What were you doing tonight?"

"I dined with Miss Seddon at the Algonquin. Then she came home. I went to see an agent named Chamberlain on Forty-eighth Street. I met this newspaperman there and he came back with me, here. He promised us some publicity for the circus if Miss—"

"You saw this agent after dinner?"

"Yes. He does various kinds of business—pageants, carnivals, and also supplies private entertainment for people's parties. That's why he keeps open during the evening—in case of a hurry-up call for some party—"

"Why didn't Miss Seddon go with you? Do you know what she was going to do in the meantime?"

Jewett's eyes dropped. "She—wasn't going to do anything." He hesitated, tight-lipped. "The fact of it is, I don't like to have her go to this agent's office. There—there are always some queer people around there—performers—you know—and—well, I persuaded her not to come."

BECKETT was silent a minute, eyes squinted up in thought, then he nodded slowly. "All right. Now, I suppose you know the police are suspicious of you."

The youth ran a hand wildly through his hair. "They—they seem to be."

"Mr. Jewett—I'll be frank with you. I've run across a faint whisper which, if I run it down, might lead to the rats that did this thing. Unfortunately, the way things are, a private investigator has little or no standing unless he has a client behind him. And there are expenses—information to be bought, and—"

"My God—don't let expense stand in the way—I'll take care of any expenses!"

Beckett coughed gently. "Well, I wouldn't like to appear to be urging you to retain me, you know—"

"God, if you think there's a chance of getting these rotten devils that did this, money doesn't mean anything! I'll pay anything you say."

"Well! That's splendid," Beckett said. "We'll call that settled then. Now, listen to me—when the police let you go—go straight home, and I'll call you there, sooner or later."

"Home! But Miss Seddon—"

"I'm going from here to the hospital. I'll see Miss Seddon. You're in no condition to be any help to her. If you can do anything, I'll let you know. But go home from here, understand?"

Jewett blinked, anxiety in his eyes. "All—all right—but you'll get in touch—"

"Absolutely. Just sit tight. I may need your help. I'm going after this thing hard—right now." He turned, and went to the door. "Remember, now—go straight home."

When he came out again into the marble hall, Whitely was standing, feet planted wide, hands behind his back, a dubious frown on his forehead. He started: "Oh, Beckett—listen. Inasmuch as I'm pretty

well playing your game, it seems to me that you should open up a little . . . hey!"

Beckett had his hand on the knob of the outside door, was jamming on his battered hat. He nodded solemnly. "Just sit tight a little, pal, and I'll do that thing."

"Where the hell are you going?"

"Hospital."

"But—"

"I'll call you later."

He went out, ranged on back down the walk, worked through the crowd, again and got a lot of unwelcome attention before he located a cab on the block above.

As they rolled north he dug out a cigarette, lit it absently. His hard face was set in lines of concentration, and there was a sharp light in his cold blue eyes. The case was in. The client was in—two clients were in.

There was a pleasant tingling in the big agent's veins.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stomach-Pump Stuff

THE cab turned east, a few blocks up, sped across toward the waterfront once more. They left traffic behind as they neared the end of the street, and as they turned into the narrow avenue it was deserted, silent. On the right, the towering white buildings of the hospital loomed high, ghostly. The little park across the street was utterly still, and as they started for the far end, where the visitor's entrance sent out faint warm light, the moon suddenly came out from hiding, and the water on the foliage in the park sparkled. The street was bathed in blue radiance, a quiet, peaceful canyon.

The driver cut his engine, sixty yards away, in deference to the hospital signs, and they coasted. Then, for the first time, Beckett heard the motor of a car behind them. He swung round, looked out, just in time to see a yellow taxi spurt forward,

swinging out to pass them. The agent's eyes widened a little as he saw that the curtains were down in the tonneau, and he eased a hand mechanically to his shoulder, but the yellow shot on ahead.

Then, in the same instant that Beckett's driver eased on brakes to bring his cab to a halt opposite the glowing hospital entrance, the brakes on the yellow squealed. It went into a sluing spin on the wet pavement, rattled around, and finally thumped to a stop thirty yards ahead, front wheels against the curb, rear out at a forty-five-degree angle. The door flopped open, a little chunky man sprang out, slipped, and fell to his knees. He was up again, trotting back toward Beckett in an instant.

Beckett was getting out of his cab, handing a bill to the driver. He snapped, "All right you can go," and kept thin eyes on the man coming toward him. Beckett's cab purred away. The agent's hand was on a gun butt. The little chunky man, running swiftly, held up a hand ten yards away, called breathlessly: "Mr. Beckett? That Mr. Beckett?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Thank God!" The little man came up, tried to skid to a stop, evidently forgot he had rubber heels, and almost catapulted himself to the sidewalk again. He grabbed at Beckett, as he was flung past him. The agent jerked back, swung round, snarled, "Keep your hands off me!" and had his gun out.

The other recovered himself, dropped anxious eyes to the gun. "What—what—my God—put that thing away—please—"

"What the hell do you want?" Beckett clipped irritably.

"I—I've got some information," the other said hastily. "I just missed you at the Seddon house, Mr. Beckett. I want to—I've got to—talk to you about that special-delivery package you got from the Seddon house!"

"I got? Are you crazy?"

The little man tilted his head up sharply; moonlight hit his face. "That may do for the police, Beckett—but you don't have to pretend with me, see?" He stepped closer, dropped his voice. "I can get you a price—"

Beckett's gun thumped against his middle. "Ease back a little," he snarled. "Wherever you—"

Then, in a flash it happened.

The man in front of him suddenly lifted his eyes over Beckett's head. He squealed, "No!—Don't!—Wait! . . .", tried to fling himself wildly aside from the gun's muzzle, and it caught in the opening of his coat, spun Beckett around with it.

The big agent, whirling, snapped his head aside, tried to duck, tried to jerk free the cloth-clamped gun, as he saw the falling arm of the man behind him.

THE blackjack slammed a thundering bar of white-hot agony across his ear. The world exploded in Beckett's head; every nerve in his body jerked with the pain, and—he went utterly fire-blind. Then thunder boomed—again—again—

His wrist was being jerked—jerked; something was exploding each time. The red flame blanketed his eyes; he could not pierce it. Screams suddenly were in his very face, above the sound of buzzing in his head, and—

The blackjack whacked him again—on the side of the head. He was vaguely aware of being thrown wildly across ground, his feet skittering, tripping, and—he crashed to the turf, square into a pool of icy water. He lay there. The world revolved like a pinwheel; he was ill at his stomach. The icy water soaked down his neck, the back of his head. Then the world slowed down. Something was singing in his head, intermittently.

Then the haze dropped away. The night came back suddenly into focus. He was lying on the lawn of the hospital. The

moon was overhead; a gun was banging down the street. He struggled frantically, his teeth clenched, got himself sitting erect. Then he reached out blindly, caught a smooth upright, and clawed his way to his feet. His own gun was still clutched in his hand. He brought it up swiftly, shakily, stared stupidly—and gasped as his sight cleared.

Ten yards from him the little chunky man was writhing, screaming, on the sidewalk, arms clutching his stomach, heels beating a devil's tattoo on the cement. Down the street, the cab was roaring away, and racing after it, firing as he went was a man in the uniform of a special cop. Even as Beckett looked, his hand spurted fire—and then from the cab, half-way down the block, a cluster of four crashing reports flamed. The uniformed man stumbled, and fell on his face. The taxi's exhaust snorted; there was a screech of brakes—and the sound faded as the cab shot behind buildings, hummed away into the night.

The chunky little man's screams suddenly rose to a crescendo. Beckett's gaze jerked back to him. He was arched, strained, till it seemed his neck must break. His face was a terrible mask of pain, his eyes closed; he bayed shrilly, twice, then, with what seemed to be a terrific, conscious effort, hurled himself into the air, turned completely over, and crashed again to the pavement, his breath blowing out of him in a queer bleat, and—he lay still, his face buried against the sidewalk.

A crowd of internes reached him, dropped down. Others surrounded Beckett. A dozen shrill voices, held to low pitch hurled questions at him. Beckett snapped, "Ask the hospital cop. He must have seen it all," and forced his way, rocking a little, to the side of the chubby little man, elbowed an interne away, with a curt, "The Law," and felt the pulse.

Then he searched the body. The man was clean.

Strength was coming back to Beckett, though his head was splitting. He got to his feet, his jaw hard, eyes narrowed, and—a siren shrilled, blocks south. Beckett's lips clamped. He swung on an interne. "Is Doctor Montgomery in the hospital?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Take me to him—right away."

The interne looked hesitant, finally said, "All right," and led the way. They went back to the hospital entrance, and inside; took an elevator, to the fourth floor. The interne walked to a door a few yards down the hall, opened it, gestured. "Park in there."

MONTGOMERY was habitually cheerful-faced, big, ruddy—but he was harassed now. His granite-blue eyes were anxious, his lips dry, as he swept in. "Lord God, Sam, was that you? You've damn near put this hospital on the rocks. We've a dozen cases of hysterics. Why in the name of fury can't you stage your—"

"I was jumped," Beckett cut him off. "Close the door—and listen. I'm under pressure. I've got to get out of here fast—as soon as I get some information. I was coming up to see you, when they tried to crown me. What's the verdict on that Barbara Seddon that was poisoned?"

"What! Has that anything to do with—"

"Be a pal, and let me ask the questions."

"Why, she's all right now—she's just coming out of a little morphine daze. We got the stuff out of her."

"What was in her?"

"What wasn't?" He walked to the door, threw it open, sent a passing nurse for a paper in his office.

When she hurried back, he closed the door again and read. "Contents stomach pump—Miss Barbara Seddon—sugar, nettle seeds, morphine, animal tissue, pow-

dered animal bone, hemp, verbena, maiden-hair fern, cantharides—imagine giving *that* girl cantharides, quicksilver, ginseng root, and"—he thrust the list at Beckett—"here, look at these. Of all the filthy, insane stuff to—"

Beckett blinked over the rest of the list. Wrinkles formed over his eyes as he read. He handed it back; his lips tightened. "That's one thing I *didn't* think of."

"You know what it's supposed to be, of course."

"Hell, yes. I've seen the muck before."

"I don't see how anybody simple enough to believe in this stuff can be a very desperate criminal, Sam."

"The ones that gave this dose were willing to murder to do it—and on Park Avenue. Also, they made a hell of a stab at either grabbing me or killing me, outside here. I don't see how I can laugh that off. There's some simple-minded gee in the picture somewhere, but you can write it on your cuff that this sort of mess is the dirtiest in the catalogue. I've handled them before." He shrugged the shabby coat higher on his shoulders. "Well, at any rate, anybody sap enough to hand out this dose isn't going to run away. They've got to stick around to see how she reacts. I'm much obliged, Doc. Now—to get me out of here."

"Wait a minute. You've heard only half of it."

"Oh?"

"About twenty minutes before the girl was brought here, a police cruiser saw a man lying unconscious about ten blocks from the Seddon house—in the areaway of a brown-stone house. They brought him here, too—it's the nearest hospital—and we pumped him out also. Believe it or not, he had some of the identical stuff in him the girl had! He'd been dirnking it out of a blue flask—"

"Wait! Wait! You mean you've got the blue flask? He had it on him?"

"Why, yes, certain—"

Beckett's big hand fastened on the doctor's sleeve. "Jerusalem! I've got to have it, Doc—that flask. Have you told the coppers yet?"

"Well, no, Sam, but—"

"I can do ten times as much with it as a copper can. No kidding. They'll gaze at it for days, and try to trace it through routine machinery. If it's like what I think it is, I can cut corners on it—plenty. I happen to know just where to go. If anybody says anything tell them you showed it to me, put it away, and I must have glommed it."

"Well—"

"This gives me a flying start! Have they identified him?"

"Why, yes. He's just a bum. He was discharged yesterday from the Island after doing ten days for panhandling."

"That makes it perfect. Listen—don't waste a second, Doc—I've got a grind ahead of me, and I'll have to do it fast. While you're getting the flask, I'll talk myself clear with the coppers below. Also, can I use a phone? I've got to see a bird, and he may leave his office."

"Right there." The doctor nodded toward an instrument on the bureau. "Plug it in at the head of the bed. The girl'll get your number."

Beckett reached for the instrument, plugged it in quickly, and—there was a knock on the door. A tired-faced, trim, red-headed nurse came in, and announced: "Twelve-o-seven is up and changing her clothes, Doctor. Is it all right to let the police in now? They've been waiting for some time to see her. And she was asking about a Mr. Beckett. Is this—"

Montgomery eyed Beckett. "That's Miss Seddon."

"How did she know I was here?"

"An interne told her."

Beckett, the phone to his ear, said: "All right, I'll go right . . . Hello, will you get me a theatrical agent named Cham-

berlain on Forty-eighth Street, please? . . . All right, miss, I'll go up with you, if you don't mind waiting a second. Doc, maybe you'd get that piece of goods and meet me up there—"

"Sam, dammit, if I get into trouble, now—"

"I'll bring you cigarettes to the can."

The doctor went out, shaking his gray mane.

MONTGOMERY was waiting on the twelfth floor, as Beckett followed the red-headed nurse from the elevator. He handed the agent a tissue-paper-wrapped object, compressed his lips and said, "Good luck," gruffly, turned and went round a corner. The red-head had gone ahead, was waiting before a door, dubiously.

"There were some officers here," she said. "I guess they've gone inside."

Beckett said, "We handle that as follows," and putting the tissue-paper bundle in his pocket with one big hand, reached the other out for the doorknob. He turned it, took four paces quickly, and was inside the room. As he let the door swing to after him, he stopped as if in surprise, looking at the three plainclothesmen gathered about the head of the bed, and the stenographer at the table.

"Oh—sorry. Didn't know you were here."

Prince, Whitely's working partner on the homicide squad, swung round scowling. He was a thin, sharp-featured man with a lick of sandy hair coming down over one eyebrow giving him the expression of being very crafty. "Oh, it's you, eh? Well, get the hell out. You can come in when we've finished."

Beckett lifted eyebrows, cocked his head in a sardonic half-bow, turned and went out. But not before he had registered a full and complete picture of the ravishing loveliness of the girl reclining on the bed,

looking very small, and naive—and loving it. Her honey-colored hair was done in smooth waves, her cheeks soft, curving. Her skin was so transparent and fresh that it gave almost the appearance of moistness. Deep, flecked blue eyes looked up at Beckett for a second, startled, but appraising, even so. She wore satin pajamas. The trousers were ivory-white; the jacket was white with two triangular inserts of purple, stretched tight over her full, perfect breasts. Between jacket and trousers were three inches or more of warm, smooth flesh. One high-arched, tiny foot, was hanging over the side of the bed.

Beckett backed into the hall, closing the door behind him. The red-head was eyeing him in friendly amusement. Beckett said, "I just wanted a look at the pretty lady," and turned and started down the hall. The door of the room opened, and a second nurse came out. Beckett turned back, coughed, asked her: "Miss—did you happen to hear them ask about a special-delivery package?"

The second nurse looked at the first, who nodded, made a little puckering of her mouth.

"Yes. They asked her if one had been delivered, or something, and she said she knew nothing about it."

"Thanks—thanks very much."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Blue Bottle

RIDING south in a cab, Beckett examined his treasure for the first time. It was of heavy black glass, a flask, but with a curving, beveled neck. It was roughly pear-shaped, and Beckett's exploring finger felt irregularly shaped projections down the sides. He fumbled for the cab's overhead light, discovered that they were cunningly molded little fantastic figures and faces, mostly of evil appearance. The

flask was heavy, its general appearance ornate. Beckett judged it would hold about half a pint. Very carefully, he rolled it in its tissue-paper wrapping, dropped it in the side pocket of his coat, as the speeding cab swung south onto Broadway.

The Rice Building was less than half a block west of the corner where he left the cab—an ancient, dirty-white, five- or six-story building. The single creaky elevator in the dingy lobby was opening, just as Beckett strode in. There was no directory. The blank-eyed elevator operator evidently performed that function. To Beckett's "Chamberlain Agency?" he nodded wearily, sent the car caterpillaring upward, let him off at the second floor and jerked a dirty thumb to the right. "End of the hall."

Beckett walked toward double doors, whose gold lettering read, "Chamberlain Agency—Carnival, Circus, Sideshow, Tent Shows. Also Private Entertainments." He tried the knob tentatively, found it open and walked in.

Practically the entire space had been partitioned off to make one large private office. It left an L-shaped passage that ran around the office. The arm of it that Beckett was in was covered with shabby green carpet. A round globe in the ceiling at the juncture of the arms furnished dull glow, and brighter light was coming through the ground-glass of a door to the private office. There was an imitation mahogany waiting bench directly at Beckett's left.

He let the door close noisily. Almost at once, a chair scraped, creaked, in the inner office. Feet sounded across the floor, and the door came half open. A stubby, bald-headed man with a haggard face and a pendulous, sad, lower lip came out in shirt sleeves, keeping the door half closed as he did. "Yeah?"

"I'm Beckett. I called you a little while back."

"Oh, yeah. Have a seat a minute, will you? I got a client inside."

Beckett nodded, and the stubby man ducked back inside.

The wait stretched out to considerably more than a minute. Beckett wandered to the end of his little alley, looked down the other. A wooden railing fenced it off. There were pictures hanging on the walls of the shorter alley, and there was evidently a second door to the private office.

It was uncomfortably warm. Beckett slipped out of his topcoat and hat, laid them on the bench, wandered restlessly around. Finally, he pushed through the gate in the wooden railing and with a start of surprise, examined the pictures on the wall. Like every theatrical manager's office, the walls were covered with signed photographs of performers. But what performers!

There were wild men of Borneo, Siamese twins, armless and legless people, dwarfs, pinheads, bearded women, human skeletons, fat women, and one of a coy, buxom miss draped with rattlesnakes. There was even a wedding picture, in which the bride was a normal girl and the groom about three and a half feet high. There were, too, pictures of less flamboyant type—trapeze artists and strong men.

He had exhausted all the pictures and most of his patience, was back on the bench fidgeting restlessly, smoking, when finally a shadow came across the private-office door and Chamberlain opened it again. Simultaneously, Beckett heard the other door, out of sight around the corner of the corridor, open softly, and close.

"Come right in, won't you?"

THE agent got up, stamped out his butt, picked up his hat and coat, and started to follow him in. There was a sudden bump on the floor behind him. He had the coat the wrong way, and the paper-

wrapped package had spilled out. It rolled along the carpet, the paper coming off as it did. Beckett dived after it, finally got his hands on it, just opposite the wooden gate in the railing of the shorter alley. As he straightened he shot a quick glance at the person who had just emerged, was standing there perfectly still outside the other office door. She was a tall, hawk-faced woman, with large brown eyes, white hair swept back over ears tightly. Rings dangled in her ears. She wore a black, sweeping gown, black gloves, and black hat. She was staring curiously at the flask in the agent's hand.

Feeling a little foolish, Beckett mumbled nothing under his breath, dropped the flask back into his pocket, followed the now scowling theatrical agent into the private office.

Chamberlain went round and stood with his hands on his hips, clearly inimical. "You didn't say what you wanted to see me about, Mr. Beckett."

"One of your customers, Barbara Seddon, was poisoned tonight by a couple of thugs that broke into the house and killed her butler. I have reason to think an unsuccessful admirer had something—"

Chamberlain's mouth hung open. He sat down suddenly. "God Almighty! You mean Miss Seddon's dead?"

"No. The poison wasn't very bad and they fixed her up. What I want to know from you is this: I'm told she's been spending practically all her time working up this circus. That means she's been spending it with you, more or less, doesn't it?"

"Why—yes, but for God's sake, don't get the idea that I— Hell, she wanted to fix up a midway. I was just getting the artists for her. Listen, I'm a married man—and I been in show business all my life. If you think I—"

"I'm not saying you. I'm asking if you know of anybody else that might have lost

their head about her—somebody kind of goofy.”

Chamberlain ran a handkerchief over his bald head, licked his lips. “I—well, I’ll be frank with you, Beckett—that dame caused more trouble than enough. She seems like she’s always makin’ a play for everybody within sight. I couldn’t tell you any one person that went for her—these tough mugs that I been hirin’ for her all look like they had yens on when she’s around—but that’s her own damn fault. And all carnival people are kind of goofy, you ask me.”

Beckett grunted. “All right,” he said grimly, “get me the whole list—everybody that came in contact with her through you. If I have to weed ’em out myself, I have to. That’s all.”

“God—there must be fifty or sixty, including roustabouts and—”

“Write ’em down, then, and quit wasting time. I may possibly have to grind the whole works through the mill, and if I do I’ll have a year’s work to do in a day. How long will it take?”

“Fifteen—twenty minutes, at least.”

“All right. Go to it. I’ll use your phone.”

He called the Seddon house, got Whiteley on the phone, said: “I may be talking through my hat, but I’ve got a hunch that the Seddon girl is still in danger. If you’re a smart cop, you’ll hide her out for a day or so, and not tell anybody where she is.”

“I’ll be damned,” Whiteley said curiously. “She just called up from the hospital. She had the same idea, and Prince told her she’d have to get my permission. What the hell is all this about?”

Beckett’s eyes were narrowed. “Ask her. She seems to know a lot more than I thought. Are you going to have her do it? If you are, for Pete’s sake, don’t let anybody know where she’s going—that is, except me.”

“She wants to take a maid, and I’m

going to have her under guard. She’s picked out a good spot. I wish to hell you’d open up.”

“Maybe *she* will. Listen—write me a note and mail it, and tell me where she’s gone. Don’t say it over the phone, see?”

“O. K.,” Whiteley said after a second.

Beckett hung up, smoked, paced around, till Chamberlain had finished his list. Then Beckett looked it over.

“All these people were hired for the circus?”

“Oh, no—no. Some of them were tried out and didn’t get across. Some of them were just interviewed. I thought you wanted everybody that contacted—”

“I did.” Beckett pocketed the list. “You’re in touch with all these people, are you?”

“Sure.”

“I may want to get them all together— if everything else falls down on me. I’ll count on you to be able to do it.”

“All—all right.”

BECKETT went out the way he had come in. Riding down on the slow elevator, his eyes were clouded with worry, and he fidgeted, fingering the glass flask in his pocket.

It had begun to rain again, gently. He stood in the lobby entrance, cursing, and then he turned out, plodded on toward Broadway again. If the blue flask fell down on him he was up against his pet bugbear—slow, monotonous grind, in the hopes of picking up an angle

But the monotony didn’t even get started.

Beckett was ten yards along toward Broadway, when the shadows of a building front vomited two black streaks, and only the slipperiness of the pavement gave the big agent a chance. He swallowed breath as he tried to check himself; one foot missed fire, and he slipped, fell to one knee, and—two bodies collided vio-

lently, almost on top of him, cursing, as they, too, missed foothold. A flashing gun muzzle swung viciously at the agent's head, and as he ducked, throwing up an arm, whacked him in the funnybone. He yelled, and still on his knees, swung furious fists upward, as he struggled, treadmill. A ham of a fist, gloved, smashed into his eye, showing him stars, and sending him over backward, sliding toward the curb. But the effort sent the owner spinning also, off balance, out to the edge of the walk, where he crashed into a parked car, went down.

Beckett was flat on his back. The second man dived for him; the pistol glinted again in the light. Beckett suddenly flopped back, jerked his knees up, and lashed out—as the man tried to drop on top of him. One heel struck bone, the other stomach. The man retched out a scream, and the pistol exploded, shattered glass in a window overhead. The thug went staggering backward, slipping, bent over belching. Beckett's hand went to his armpit as he made desperate efforts to get up—and from Broadway a police whistle shrilled. The man who had crashed into the car at the curb was half-way back toward Beckett now. The whistle halted him in his tracks. Beckett was on one knee. His gun roared, but he was unsteady, missed. Flame spat from the gun in the thug's hand, as the two of them swung off, ran across the street. Then again—and again—and white fire burned into Beckett's shoulder just as he was on his feet, spun him round, staggered him back.

He cursed, caught himself, dived wildly between two parked cars, climbed a bumper and was racing after them. A second line of cars on the other side of the street cut off vision. He leaped through an opening in these, spurted toward Broadway, just as the second man vanished round the corner and—Broadway swal-

lowed them. When Beckett dashed out onto Broadway, twenty yards behind them, the crowd absorbed them utterly.

As he slid to a furious stop, eyes on fire, uniformed cops—six of them that he could see—were racing for the spot of the attack, whistles blowing. Unconsciously, Beckett jammed his gun into his pocket hastily, hesitated a second, half turned back, then, as his heart sank at the prospect of more waste time, he swung north again. In sudden decision he plunged into the crowd himself, ran, then walked, till he had outdistanced attention. He swung over to the curb and got a cab, said to the driver: "All right. Four-hundred block, West Fifteenth Street," sat back, tight-jawed, on the cushions, as they swung out into the stream of cars.

HIS shoulder gave a throb. Beckett hastily put a hand under his shirt, explored, grunted in relief. The bullet had passed through flesh, almost at the edge of his shoulder, was not imbedded. He dug out a handkerchief to stanch the blood, left it in place against the wound held there by the tension of his clothes.

The cab let him off on the darkest part of Fifteenth Street, near the waterfront. The shop he headed for was dark. A broken show window, its break stuffed with newspaper, bore a chipped enamel legend, "M. Dikes," and underneath, "Glassblower." Beckett banged at the shop door, kept on banging at intervals of fifteen seconds, till an old man in a tattered red flannel bathrobe opened the door and started in a high querulous voice: "What in the Sam Hill is the idee—"

"Save it, Morris. Open up. I've something for you to tell me."

The old man's muttering died down. He shot back bolts on the door, then turned and led the way in through the dirty, cluttered shop, switched on a hanging bulb

above the cracked counter. Beckett laid the flask—still miraculously unbroken—before him. "You make that?"

The old man shook his head. "No, but there's only three or four in town that do that stuff. Was it made in New York?"

"I think so. How long would it take you to find out who did make it? There's twenty in it, if you can do it by ten tomorrow morning—or this morning, rather."

"Noon's the best I can do—and that's the truth."

"All right—if you're sure that's the best."

"Absolutely."

HE WENT out, back to the cab, drove to the modest hotel in the Fifties where he lived, had the house physician fix him up, then went to sleep for eight hours, to dream of freaks. When he got up at ten the wound was clean, healing. There was no soreness.

When he reached the office of the Beckett Private Inquiry Agency, at eleven, Thalia Morton said excitedly: "Sam—Philip Jewett has called you a dozen times."

"Damn it, I forgot to ring him last night. Get him for me. Where's my mail? Anything from Whitely?"

"Inside, but there isn't anything from Whitely."

Beckett frowned, then slowly his lips compressed. "The poor fool," he said without malice. "After you get Jewett, call the Seddon house."

To Jewett, Beckett said: "Now just take it easy. Miss Seddon has gone into hiding for a day or two, with a police guard over her day and night."

"But what for? What's she hiding from?"

"The same people that attacked her once might do it again. Who knows?"

"What shall I do?"

Just stay there, so I can get you if I need you."

At the Seddon house they told him what he had already guessed—Whitely had appointed himself guard over Miss Seddon, and they, with a mulatto maid, had vanished.

Beckett went out. It was a cloudy, humid day. The pavements were still wet from the night before.

Morris Dikes laid the blue flask on the counter before Beckett, when he got down there, and said: "Lysander Williams, on Lenox Avenue."

"Does he know you were inquiring about it?"

"No. I got it from a third party."

Beckett taxied, subways, taxied. Lysander Williams owned a little hole in the wall on Lenox, near One Thirty-eighth, fronted by a cordial shop. Beckett sailed into the place, saw the passageway that ran from the back of the shop, behind a curtain. He swung through it, and collided with an ancient, undersized Negro, who started to yammer through a hair lip, till Beckett's fingers cut off his breath. He literally lifted the man from his feet, carried him back into a wide room, evidently his workshop, behind, and threw him into a chair. The Negro, his eyes white, sat there panting. Beckett hooked thumbs in his belt, glared down at him, then hauled out the flask, and plumped it on the table, fingered out his badge and gave the gasping gaffer one flash at it. He jerked a thumb at the flask.

"Who did you make it for, and when did you deliver it?"

The Negro's eyes went wide. "Me? Me? Mifter, not me—I never—"

Beckett whipped a big hand out, open, caught him across the mouth.

Whack!

"Come on—spit it out, or—"

"Mifter, I fwear—"

Whack!

The Negro howled, started to yammer again, trying to escape into the depths of the chair. Beckett's big hand reached down, closed on his collar, jerked him to his feet. His hard eyes glared down. "Listen—in about one minute, I'm going to beat half the life out of you. Then I'll jug you on a murder charge and the boys at the precinct will finish you up pretty. Now, damn you, spit it out!" His free fist closed ominously.

The negro blurted: "Fifter Georgia—"

"Sister Georgia? What's that—her trade name?"

The Negro's head shook tensely.

"Where does she hang out. And what's her real name?"

"At'f her real name. It'f on her do'." The Negro had real terror in his eyes. "Don't tell her I—"

"I won't. What's the address and when did you deliver this thing?"

"Two weekf ago—and 'e live on a Hundred and Twenty-fix Ftreet." He gave a number.

Beckett shook him once, dropped him back in the chair. "God help you if you're lying—and God help you if you tip her off that I was here. Understand?"

"Befo' God, mifter. . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

Half-Pint Highness

ONE TWENTY-SIXTH, between Seventh and Eighth was drear, empty, dirty. Rows of ashcans stood before rows of identical, ancient, brown-stone fronts. Refuse littered the gutters.

Beckett's number was no different from the others. As he passed it his hard eyes darted sharp scrutiny over it, made out the bank of letter boxes in the shabby vestibule. He went on half a block, peered up and down the street from the shadow of a stoop, then sauntered back. There were a few pedestrians in sight, but none

close by. He swung up to the house, hands in coat pockets, went up the stone steps casually, even wearily.

There were no push buttons connected with the mail boxes. The agent's blood started moving a little faster as he made out the ornate scrawl of the woman he sought. There was nothing to indicate the location of her apartment—simply the card in the the letter box. He tried the front door—it was open. He let the door close softly behind him. A curving flight of rubber-treaded steps climbed upward at the left of the hall, into deeper darkness above. Somewhere—a long way up—a dim electric light was burning.

He came to a halt at the foot of the stairs, looking upward, rasped a hand across his chin—and stiffened. A shadow was visible across the ground glass of the front door, and footsteps scuffed. Beckett swung, darted toward the rear of the house, found himself beside the basement stairs and hastily ducked into them, far enough so that he could keep one eye on the front door.

He saw a thin-faced, dark man, evidently an Italian, with his coat collar muffling the lower part of his face, come through the door, close it softly, then move quickly toward the stairs. His feet made little noise going up. Beckett ventured out, followed him with his eyes. The Italian went up one flight—two—was on the third floor when he came to a halt. There was an instant of silence, then, clearly audible, a series of muffled knocks in tempo—two short, one, then two short.

A door creaked open, and a voice said, ". . . sakes! The maniac wants to . . ." and the closing door shut off the rest.

Beckett's eyes were hard, as he slipped silently up the stairs, wary of creaks, and wary lest the door above should reopen. He reached the second floor, hesitated long enough to switch a gun from shoul-

der holster to coat pocket, went on to the third. There could be little doubt as to the door on which the knocks had sounded. There were only three doors opening off the hall. One of them, at the rear, stood ajar. One at the front was covered with sheet tin, and the knock had not been made on tin. The one in the center of the hall was freshly painted black, was wider than the others. Beckett halted before it, half drew the gun from his pocket—and hesitated, eyes narrowed.

No sound came through the door.

His attention went back to the open door down the hall. He estimated with his eyes narrowly. The rear apartment hardly seemed to be adjoining—

HE TIPTOED silently down the hall, peered through the crack in the door, saw only gloomy dust. He listened a minute, pushed it open. There was a warm-smelling, dank room beyond. Beckett dug out his pencil flash, stepped into the room. The room was bare of furniture, obviously unoccupied. Piles of dirt were everywhere and he had to tread carefully on the gritty floor—then his flash picked out the open door at the front end of the apartment, and he realized that there was another room to the apartment he was in. His flash showed that room empty, and—a nailed-up door that had at one time led into the front apartment.

Beckett hesitated a second on the threshold, then went quickly back and closed the hall door, returned. He slipped over to the nailed-up door. Even before he reached it, the blur of voices beyond reached him.

And as he put his ear to the door, moving up and down to find a possible thin spot, the highly excited words were quite audible. A harsh, sonorous voice, indistinguishable as to sex was saying: “. . . enough salted away to make us all rich. If he wants this done, he’ll have

it done—or anything else he wants. He can pay for it. Where do you get such a weak stomach, anyhow?”

A man’s voice said bitterly “. . . driving me nuts. Working for a lunatic—that’s what. Where the hell are we going to end up?”

“What about this private shamus?” A third, complaining voice came in. “And that damned bottle? I’m telling you, that bird’s nobody’s meat. You see what he did last night? Some mugs tried to jump him outside a hospital, and he pumped four slugs into one of their bellies. Who the hell ever heard of a cop like that?”

There was a second’s silence. Then the sonorous voice again. Beckett realized it was a woman. “The bottle’ll do him no good. It’ll take him a week to trace it.” Then she added bitterly: “If you poor fools had of waited another ten blocks before you threw that damned thing out of the car, we wouldn’t have a second’s worry. Then even if a bum *had* of found it, and thought it was booze, they would have taken him to another hospital. Nobody would have ever connected it up then. And as for the pitiful attempt you made to get the bottle away from the dick—hell, I don’t know why you didn’t blow his head off, and be done with it, anyway!”

“Then what would we do with this damned miniature?” the first man said. “Whatever the hell it is, this Beckett knows, and he’ll probably pay for the thing, if everything else fails. If I could only find out just what—”

“Listen! You forget that damned miniature! I read in the paper where some bird named Zabriski was bumped off and a miniature took from him. This is probably it. And that Zabriski didn’t amount to nothing. At the most you might get a hundred smackers for it—and if you get caught with it on you, you’ll burn. I’d throw it into the first sewer I saw. It ain’t worth anything.”

"Maybe the girl would know," the complaining voice said suddenly. "Hey? Maybe the girl would know. It was mailed to her, wasn't it? By God, when we get her, we'll make her tell if—"

Beckett's attention was jerked away. He stiffened, half swung back from his listening post, eyes alert, gun out.

Quick, light heel taps were coming up the stairs!

THE heel taps reached the third floor.

Beckett crouched, gun covering the door—and the heel taps went on past, and halted in front of the next door. Beckett jerked back, was listening again through the nailed door, when the cadenced knock sounded—twice, once, twice. Conversation in the front apartment was cut off as though with a knife. Then, "No! Victor—don't do that. When he comes in, you go out. Then come back in later—you know."

"O. K."

"Open the door."

Desperately, Beckett squinted, weaved around, trying to find a crack in the door—a keyhole—anything to look through. There was not so much as a pin point. He could do no better than listen.

The sonorous woman's voice had become more sonorous. She was saying: "Good afternoon, Your Highness."

A querulous little man's voice with a trace of an accent blurted: "What's this—what's this? They took her to the hospital. It says they took everything out of her stomach! Our time is wasted! Why did you give her something that would make her sick?"

The woman broke in suavely, somberly. "You speak too hastily, Prince Quattrochi. The potion I mixed for her was powerful, overwhelming. You wanted it so. That the medical fools emptied her stomach means nothing. They cannot empty her heart—or her mind. The physical is but a doorway to the mental—

the emotional. We open the doorway by affecting the physical, but once open, and entry gained—who cares if the door is again closed?"

"Hey? You mean—you mean—"

"That nothing can drive the thought forms from her mind—the forms that entered at the moment the potion entered her throat. There remains only the physical contact to be made. She must see you—touch you."

"When?" The words fairly shot from the little man. Beckett's stomach cooled at the hoarse, greedy eagerness in his tone.

"That is in your hands, Your Highness," the woman said softly.

"My h . . . How? I don't understand?"

"I have—I think—made the arrangements that we discussed. It only remains to complete the financial end. I am afraid that I underestimated what these persons would require. In fact, they refuse to touch the deal under double the sum I expected it would—"

"But they will do it? They'll do it—without fail?"

"Your Highness," there was a sickening affection in the woman's voice, "do you think that I would deal with anyone that was not reliable. Do you realize what lengths I have gone to—out of pure friendship for you? Is it likely that I would lead you into anything that might disappoint you?"

"No. No. You have been good to me, Sister Georgia. I—"

The complaining man's voice suddenly coughed, then broke in. "If you folks will excuse me, I've got to go out a minute."

The woman said: "Certainly, Victor."

Beckett jerked erect, turned and started hastily toward the door, thumbing open the safety catch on his gun. If he could jump this man noiselessly. . . .

Then the woman's words struck him—her instructions to this Victor to go out

and *come back later*. Beckett's lips clamped, and hard light came into his eyes. He checked himself on the very threshold of the hall door, ducked down. There were going to be only three people left in that room—the woman, one of her henchmen, and the one she addressed at "Prince Quattrochi." Beckett's forehead furrowed in debate. He knew the trick knock, could probably get the door opened without suspicion, and then—

THE door down the hall was opening, to let out a thin Italian, and Beckett breathed in satisfaction. The fellow was about five feet three, with a bulging forehead and a jagged scar across his left temple. He wore a soft hat, and was carrying a dark topcoat. He was undoubtedly the man Beckett had seen enter, and just as surely—the man mentioned in the newspaper account of the attack on the Seddon house.

The Italian crossed to the stairway, slowly, and the door of the apartment closed; locks clicked. The Italian stopped, waited a second, then turned back, and wandered up the hall to the door at the front—the tin-covered one. Casually, he took a key from his vest, inserted it quietly, stepped inside and closed the door softly behind him.

Beckett's brow knit in sudden worry. And the possibility flashed across his mind of the man having a listening post similar to the one Beckett had just used, but that was a matter of no consequence. If he could once get in, capture the birds within, even if the one outside did escape, it worried him little. The primary fact was that the man in the front would not overhear Beckett's storming of the door, and make an attack before the agent was in.

Even so, for a second, the foolhardiness of the plan—walking straight into the thieves own hideout—rose in Beckett's

mind. But the only alternative—to leave the place and go and secure help—was unthinkable.

He clogged a shell carefully into the chamber of his gun, shrugged the topcoat higher, listened a second. Then he stepped out, paced silently down the hall. He made one futile attempt to listen through the door, then crowded close to it, gun in one big hand, got his weight set, and knocked—twice, once, twice.

For a second, it seemed that he had missed fire—and then bolts started clicking. Beckett's jaw hardened; he braced himself. The door sagged under his weight, and he catapulted himself in. The gun leaped up as he swirled through the door; the door whistled wildly back, crammed the man who had opened it against the wall. Beckett rapped, "Get them up—fast!" and jumped for the door handle once more. He slammed it to, behind him, had his back against it, in one flashing second of action—and three people shot their hands aloft.

"Don't make a move or a sound," Beckett clipped. "Just stand still."

AS HE held them there, he took in the incredible scene. The room was draped completely in black velvet. There were zodiacal signs here and there on the hangings. From one wall jutted a long black cabinet bookcase, completely covered with black velvet, and on top of it rested a whitened human skull. The only light in the room came from a crystal ball resting on a black block in a corner directly opposite Beckett. The light was a warm, rose glow, that seemed to change, iridesce. The thug that had opened the door was a six-foot Italian. Beckett's eyes automatically jumped to his right ear. It was flattened. Heavy, black lines in his big face made him ugly, surly-looking. But the other two, standing a

foot or so from the glowing crystal, were the absorbing items in the room.

One was the white-haired woman Beckett had seen in the offices of Chamberlain the theatrical agent. She wore now a jet-black, hanging gown, with a gold chain around her waist. Her white hair shone against the black room like silver.

The second was a dwarf, of such repellent aspect that Beckett almost gasped. He was no more than three feet high, with the body of a tiny child, except for the head. His head was large, pink, bulging; stiff-curling hair clung close to it. His face was that of a thirty-five year old man—or devil. A long, blue chin held a square gash of a mouth, and his little brown eyes were wild, malevolent. He had huge ears; tiny hands elevated beside them seemed hardly any larger. On the floor between them was a fluttering sheaf of currency that the dwarf had evidently been handing over at the moment the door opened. All this Beckett registered in the split second that he felt for and located the knob of the bolt behind his back, shot it home. He snarled at the thug to his left: "Get over there beside them—and don't get between us, or you'll stop a bullet."

The woman suddenly came out of her trance. "It's Beckett!"

"You're damn right," Beckett said.

The big thug stumbled over, mouth open. The three of them just stood there, still unable to recover from the shock. Beckett stepped toward them, his eyes like flint, on the woman.

"You—Sister Georgia, or whatever you're name is—you talk first—and fast. Where is Barbara Seddon?"

"I don't know who you're talking about." The woman's eyes were hard, thin. "How should I know?"

Beckett hefted the gun, compressed thin lips. "I'll give you to the count of three. Then the fireworks begin. . . . One!" and that was as far as he got.

The muzzle of a gun was jammed suddenly into his right ear, almost knocking him over, and a breathless, furious voice whipped: "Drop that gun! Drop it or I'll blow your head off!"

Beckett dropped it, thunderstruck, unable to see his assailant, and almost unable to believe his own senses. He was certain the room had been empty. . . .

Then he got another shock as the man with the gun stepped up in front of him, jerked his other gun from its holster, and ran an expert hand over him for other weapons. The man was the thin Italian with the scarred forehead who had vanished into the front apartment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tiger by the Tail

OBLIVIOUS to the gun, now in his middle, Beckett's head jerked round—and a sickening wave of self-disgust swept over him.

The oblong projection from the wall that he had identified as a cabinet bookcase was no such thing. The velvet curtain on the near corner of the structure had been thrown back, and light glowed within. It was a miniature room—probably part of the hocus-pocus apparatus—and very obviously led into the front apartment.

The thin man's hand cracked across Beckett's face. "Now watch yourself, damn you!"

The old woman, lowering her hands, said in a relieved voice: "That's wonderful, Victor! Wonderful!"

"A wise guy, eh?" the big thug sneered. "Just a smart boy."

The thin man said pertinently: "Well, what are we going to do with him, now we've got him?"

"Ha!" the big one said suddenly. "By God—we can ask him about the miniature! He knows—"

"Wait a minute," the old woman said hastily. "Somebody better make sure he came alone."

"Hell, he works alone, Sister, always," the big thug started, but she shut him off.

"Go on and take a look out front."

The big man hesitated, shrugged, went over and out the door. His steps were audible going downstairs. The thin man eyed Beckett through thin brown eyes. "Maybe you better crack just what that miniature is, now, Beckett, while we're—uh—alone. And if you're thinking of stalling—don't."

Beckett grunted. "I'd like to oblige you, but I don't know what the hell it is, any more than you do."

"What did you want it for?"

"I didn't."

The thin man's lips compressed. "You're going to need working on, eh?" he said slowly. "Well, I guess we can fix you up."

They waited in silence. The dwarf suddenly crackled: "Listen, when are we going—"

"Not till nightfall, Your Highness," the old woman said quickly, smoothly. "This man is a detective—we've got to dispose of him. He has stumbled onto our plans."

"What are you going to do?" the dwarf's high-pitched voice wanted to know. "Kill him?"

"We don't know," the old woman said.

"Well, I'm going, then," the dwarf said querulously. "I don't want to be around—"

"That's a splendid idea," the old woman decided. "You know where we're to go—for tonight. Why don't you meet us out there? If you go out, and see the maid—Lita her name is—she will let you in and hide you till we arrive. Does that suit you, Your Highness?"

"That's all right," the dwarf said. "I'll do that." He started for the door, but

the rapid footbeats of the big man re-ascending the stairs checked him.

The big man came in panting. "Listen—there's a big green sedan standing down at the corner, with its curtains down. There's somebody inside. I seen a butt glowing."

The old woman's eyes narrowed, turned back to Beckett. "Are those friends of yours?"

"What do you think?"

The woman frowned annoyance. "I must be getting sappy to ask him."

There was a minute of silence. They all eyed her uneasily. Finally she asked the dwarf: "Where's your car? Downstairs?"

"Yes, Sister—right in front."

"You go then—and meet us out on the island. You sure you can find the place?"

"Yes, yes." He hesitated. "You sure everything will be all right?"

"It certainly will. Don't worry for a second about this little trouble."

THE dwarf put his hat on. Victor opened the door for him. He stopped a minute on the threshold unhappily, finally passed out. Victor went out into the hall in his wake. The light heel taps were audible for a long minute, descending, then the door opening below, faintly. Victor was unlocking the door of the front apartment.

A minute passed.

Victor came back in, closing the door behind him, told the woman: "He got in his car, and got away all right. I watched through a front window." His eyes switched to Beckett. "Now let's go to work on this copper rat."

"No. Not here. The country's the place for that." She pulled at her lower lip, tried to probe Beckett's eyes. "I don't like that green sedan. Tie him up, and lock him in the front. If they are his friends, we can fix up a reception for

them, too. Get the rope out of that drawer, Nick."

Nick went over to another imitation bookcase, threw back the false black front, and hunted through three drawers before he found a coil of light silk rope, closely woven—as strong as wire.

"Tie his hands behind him, and his ankles—and don't fool with it. Or wait—take him into the front first."

Victor jammed the gun against Beckett's back. "Outside, you." He opened the door. "One yelp and you get it, no matter what, see?"

"Am I yelping?" Beckett asked mildly.

They went out into the hall—all of them. Nick went ahead, taking Victor's key, and opened the tin-covered door, went on in and switched on the hanging bulb in the ceiling. Beckett stumbled across the threshold as the gun jabbed him.

The other two followed in. The door was closed. The woman held the gun, while the two went quickly about trussing Beckett.

The room was bare, untidy. There was a round wooden table in the center of the floor, a chair beside it. Another chair was in a corner. The disused fireplace was cobweb-hung, the grate filled with dirty cigarette stubs. There were other stubs on the floor. On the table sat a stone jug and two dirty tumblers.

At the point where this apartment adjoined the one behind was a door resembling a low closet door. This was obviously the means of entry the thin thug had used. Newspapers were piled beside it.

The roping came to an end. The cords bit into the agent's wrists and ankles, checking circulation, but he said nothing. The two thugs knotted their respective jobs and stepped back, almost simultaneously. Beckett's eyes were drawn irresistibly to the tumblers on the table, and hope sprang up inside him. If they would leave the tumblers . . .

The woman said casually: "Get those glasses out of here, Nick. You want him cutting himself free or something?" She laughed shortly. "If you feel like a drink, shamus, there's some almost pure wood alcohol in the jug. These chumps think it's whisky."

Activity came to an end. Beckett stood looking level-lidded at Nick and the woman, in front of him. At his back, Nick asked, "All right?" and arced a glowing cigarette into the grate.

The woman nodded—and Beckett just caught the flicker of her eyes in time, had a second to let himself sag, and—

The world exploded, as Victor's gun whacked down on his head; the room went black, and Beckett swayed, groaned, and pitched to his face.

Through the sick blackness, he heard the woman's voice, "That ought to hold him, for a little while anyhow."

A door closed.

HE was not out, but he was sick, dizzy, head spinning. He lay, tears streaming down his face—the crack had landed exactly on the same spot where he had taken the blackjack the night before—and his scalp stung like fury. Minutes danced by.

He struggled grimly to get himself together, cursed the pain that made his eyes dance—and cursed the siege he had put in, in the hospital. For the first time he really felt the effects of the prolonged convalescence. The pit of his stomach was heaving violently, and somewhere inside him the pull, the urge into delicious unconsciousness seemed terribly enticing. His jaws ached, as he desperately held onto himself, refused to let go.

He fought that battle for minutes—long minutes—that seemed like hours.

And when, after eternities, he did force himself to full consciousness, it was to exchange physical racking for galling, searing, mental shame.

Events bloomed back in his memory, and he half started up, sweat dotting his seamed forehead. The ropes held him hamstrung. Desperately, he sorted out the thoughts that were kaleidoscoping within his head. Barbara Seddon—they were going to kidnap her, deliver her to the half-mad dwarf. The mulatto maid—the traitor. He cursed himself for not having investigated the maid before. Circumstances became apparent now that should have warned him—the unlocked gates the night of the attack on the Seddon house—the unlooked-for suggestion of going into hiding, ostensibly from Barbara Seddon herself, now only too obviously the suggestion of the maid which she adopted . . .

He checked that line of thought, jerked himself back to his own unhealthy situation. The miniature! They had it—but they didn't know what it was or what to do with it. And there was little ambiguity in the thin man's promise to extract the information by torture, once they were in the country.

The cold touch of panic almost got into the big agent's veins, as he realized that he was the only hope that stood between the murderous charlatans and whatever their designs were on the Seddon girl. He banished that, hastily, forced his head clear, struggled to get to a sitting position.

The effort cost him plenty. His head throbbed, but he twisted, turned, strained, till he was propped up with his bound hands. Desperately, he sent hard eyes raking the room. His heart sank, as he was again reminded of its bareness. If only they had left the tumblers . . .

The agent's eye suddenly lit on the fireplace, and for a second, he could hardly believe his eyes—or the sudden chance at salvation that stared at him.

A thin wisp of smoke was still rising from the almost burned-down cigarette butt that the thin man had thrown into the fireplace.

IT jerked the agent back into tense, alert consciousness. He snapped his head round, for the nearest wall, lay down and hastily rolled, brought up flat against it. He swung his feet out, thankful for the rubber soles that gave him purchase, twisted, till he wormed finally up to his knees. Then, curling his toes under, his face to the wall, he brought the well-trained muscles of his wiry body into play, heaved himself up to his feet, crouched over, fell against the wall—and then he was steady. He hopped round, till he faced the table, then, careful of noise, began a bouncing progress round the room.

He came up against the table with his back to it, had to hop halfway round, before his bound hands could reach the jug of alleged whisky. It was reassuringly heavy. He dragged it from the table, made for the fireplace. The jug, he left before the fireplace, as he swung over for the pile of newspapers.

Less than a minute later, he had three long, thick paper spills, tightly rolled, and soaked with the alcohol of the jug's contents—whatever it was. He was on his knees, one end of his first spill in his mouth, the other end gradually creeping toward the glowing coal of the almost exhausted butt in the fireplace.

It touched, and he bobbed his head to lay the spill down, then, lying on his side, blew gently on the coal, brought it up into a glow, and—a little lick of blue flame shot up at the end of the spill. Beckett almost gasped in relief.

Hastily, he swung himself back to his knees, grabbed the other spills and laid them on the first. Flame shot up, a sizeable little fire.

Again the agent turned his back, and his jaws clamped together as he waited . . .

Then the flame was where he could reach it with his bound hands, and, half on his side, agonizing cramps beginning to stricture his thighs, he thrust his hands into the flame, his crossed wrists strain-

ing furiously for the first give. His face was as white as flour; blood ran from his bitten lip

The silken strand suddenly gave. A queer sound came from Beckett's throat, and he fell over sideways, as his strained leg muscles shouted for relief. He sat there a split-second, getting his breath, his wrists searing pain, his limbs aching, as the circulation flowed back into his arms, and the pressure on his shoulders was relaxed. He unwound fully fifteen feet of the silken rope from his wrists, then hastily put out his tiny fire. He reached quickly for his ankles—and as his fingers touched the knot, he hesitated, eyes suddenly dubious.

He felt for his shoulder holsters—empty. Quickly he searched himself, but it was only a gesture. He had nothing whatever in the way of a weapon. He swung round, peered at the window. It was boarded up, and at the edges of the boarding he could see traces of several layers of felt.

Tensely, he reviewed his chances of escape—and was not impressed by them. Though the lock mechanism of the door to the hall was housed in a huge copper cylinder inside he could justifiably assume that his captors also had the door covered—in one way or another. Then there was the entrance to the black-draped room—the little closet door in the corner. The idea of ducking into that room, unarmed, was too mad even to consider. And the window—working with bare hands, it was a fifteen minute job at least.

And, even if he did escape, he was still faced with the same ugly problem. If he ran out to summon help, and they discovered his absence, they would run themselves, and—he had not the faintest idea where they would run to—

THERE was only one thing to do. He had the tiger by the tail, and could not let go. Whatever the dangers, he was

forced to play out the game the way they had started it. He had a chance—if he could keep them in their sense of security. Sooner or later, a break was bound to come.

Carefully, painstakingly, he gathered up all the traces of his fire, and burrowing a hole in the mound of cigarette stubs in the grate, inserted them, buried them.

Hopping about was infinitely easier with his hands free. The jug went back on the table. The newspaper pile he squared up nicely. He sniffed the air in concern, but only the very faintest of odors of alcohol remained.

He spent extra minutes—several extra minutes, reexamining everything, before he was satisfied. Then he returned to the spot on the floor where he had fallen.

Mentally, he was blessing the lucky coincidence that had sent the sedan outside to turn their attention to a wild-geese chase. If he could count on one more break as good as that, later—

He made an elaborate job of retying his hands. The burnt ends of the silken rope he now frayed out, pulled off, and buried with the other traces of the fire.

It took him a good five minutes to do the job to his liking, but when he was through, he was satisfied that even a fairly careful inspection would not reveal the truth. And he could—at a second's notice—free himself.

He took one more careful look round, then rolled again to the floor. If they returned soon—he would feign unconsciousness. If not—he would feign whatever seemed the logical thing for the time elapsed.

He settled down to wait, the blood pulsing in his veins.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Little Place in the Country

WHEN finally the locks on the hall door clicked, Beckett was sitting

over, his back propped against the wall. As the thin man came in, his felt hat was damp, coat rain-spattered. At his heels was the big Italian, with the woman, now in the black hat that Beckett had seen her wearing in Chamberlain's office, and a long black cloak.

The thin man laughed shortly. "He can take it, eh? He's alive again."

Beckett looked up. "What happened to my pals?"

The thin man's face darkened. "They ran out on you—if they were your pals. Come on, get up!"

"What the hell do you mean, get up?"

The woman said: "Untie his feet. He can't walk that way."

The thin man said over his shoulder to the one called Nick: "Put a gun on the rat. He's too slippery to fool with."

The thin man cut the ropes at Beckett's ankles, and the agent blessed the care he had taken in fixing up the wrist bonds. The thin man took a quick, sharp look at them, before he hoisted the agent to his feet. The big man said, "I'll go get the car," and went out.

The old woman followed a few seconds later, and Beckett, the thin man's gun in his back, a few seconds after that.

The car was at the curb when they got outdoors. It was raining again, a heavy, sluggish rain. The thin man marched Beckett across the sidewalk, and the woman, already seated in front, opened the door from the inside.

They got in in silence. The doors slammed shut, and the powerful motor pulled the car away from the curb.

Beckett said, "How about a cigarette?" and got only a "Shut up!" from the thin man.

The woman told the driver: "Take the Manhattan Bridge."

They drove on, and on, and on, through the rain. They got through Brooklyn, headed on out Long Island, and as the

roadways opened up, the speed of the big car increased.

The woman in the front seat and the big man carried on desultory conversations. The man at Beckett's side smoked cigarettes in silence. The gun in the agent's side was ever present, ever tight.

It was pitch-dark by the time they reached Jamaica. As they swung down the main street of the town, the woman's voice was audible. "There's a cross-road about a mile beyond the theatre here—just inside the town limits. Take that—to the right."

The rain had become a fine shower out this far. The car rolled sedately through the town, and the lights grew farther apart. They covered a long stretch of highway, then the car slowed. The big man asked, "This it?" and the woman nodded. The car's tires skidded slightly as they went round the bend. The thin man said, rousing out of his silence: "Are we near there? Hell, my wrists gettin' a cramp holding this rod."

"About five miles more—maybe six," the woman said. "We . . ." and the driver's sudden startled curse cut her short.

"God! That same sedan—it's back of us—look!"

Beckett tensed. Was this the break?

THE woman swore, swung, and hastily rolled down her window. The thin man tried profanely to stare out the wind-spattered rear window.

"It is!" The woman said furiously. "It looks like it anyway."

The thin man was working on his window. Beckett gathered himself. If the gun moved from his side an instant—

It didn't. The thin man stuck his head out the window. The car rocked and swayed, as the driver crammed on speed. The thin man came back in, swearing bluely.

"What the hell will we do?" he shouted

at the woman. She waved him to silence. Her head was still outside.

They raced over a mile. Suddenly she pulled in. "The rats are gaining on us! By God, they've got an engine in that car! We're doing sixty-five on wet road. Victor—you'll have to get a tire on them!"

"How can I? I can't hold a rod on this mug, and . . ."

The old woman snapped open her handbag. Light glinted on a dull-blue automatic. "I'll take care of him. You get that car."

The thin man husked a curse, jerked his gun away from Beckett. The agent's heart sank. The woman in front was turned round, and the muzzle of her automatic was square on Beckett's heart. She shouted, "Don't think I can't use it, shamus!" as the thin man reversed on the seat, poked his head and arm through the window.

The roar was like a cannon. It must have been a forty-five calibre at least. Four racking reports flamed from the thin man's gun. He cursed angrily, jerked himself back inside, roared at the driver, "If you'll keep this damned car going one way, maybe I can do something," and eeled himself up to a kneeling position. With one swing of his gun, he shattered the glass in the rear window, aimed, and—the automatic stammered, thundered itself empty. The thin man gave an exclamation of satisfaction as he ducked down again hastily, slipped in a fresh clip. "I got something. They're wobbling!"

He clogged a shell into the cylinder, jumped back up to kneel again. Beckett was aghast. He yelled suddenly: "Listen—those birds in that green sedan are no friends of mine—I give you my word. It's just a coincidence—those two green sedans—on the level—you're murdering innocent people . . ." And the roar of the thin man's automatic drowned him out.

It went off three times—and then something happened.

The thin man suddenly gave a scream of pain, almost fell over backward, the gun dropping from his hand, clapping one hand to his neck, where crimson had suddenly begun to flow. Simultaneously, cracks appeared in the windshield. The thin man gasped in pain: "They hit me—damn them—but they're in the ditch!"

The old woman screamed at Beckett, "Don't move, you!" and to the driver, "All she's got, Nick! We're just in time!" And to Victor, "How bad is it?"

"I don't know. It hurts like hell. I can't move my head."

"We'll be at the house in ten minutes. I can fix it there. Are you all right till then?"

"I guess so."

The car bounced, swayed, roared. Mileage swept by. It seemed almost immediately that the woman said to the driver, "Slow down—we're about there!" and the hurtling speed started to ease.

"There—in that driveway!" The woman shot a quick glance over her shoulder, was back to Beckett again in a flash. "Don't go more than a hundred yards in—then stop. A girl should be waiting there." And the car lifted itself up the driveway, plunged down a dirt road, lined with elm trees that almost touched overhead.

Beckett's head was spinning. Was it possible that the people in the green sedan were police? Or were they strangers that merely happened to have a gun in the car and could shoot? If they were the police—then there was a chance. The alarm would do out. The cruisers would be around the spot in a minute—

The car slowed down, and the driver cut the ignition. They rolled forward, silent save for the crackling of the suction tire treads.

THE old woman said suddenly: "There she is—stop her, Victor!" and the

brakes gave a faint whine. The thin man's muttered cursing now became audible. Feet pattered up the dirt of the road, and the old woman opened the right front door, waited, her eyes still on Beckett.

The face of the mulatto maid came into view. The woman asked over her shoulder: "How are we for time, Lita?"

"A little early," the girl's husky whisper answered, "but thank God you are. That dwarf's driving me mad. I had to lock him in a cupboard. You-all got to protect me—"

"What the hell was he doing?"

"He wanted to kill that policeman. The policeman was playing around with Miss Seddon."

"Did you give the copper what I gave you?"

"Just a few minutes back. You said at exactly ten."

"Sure—O. K. You'd better go back before you're missed. Can we go any further in without being heard?"

"Ye—yes." The maid's eyes were now wide on Beckett. "Who—who you got there?"

"Never mind that. Answer my question."

"Sure. You can go right up beside the house. They won't hear you if you turn out the lights. Listen—as soon as the stuff works, I'll signal you-all. You go to the side of the house. There's a French window opening onto the porch, just beside the door, and there's one of them Venetian blinds on it. As soon as things are ready, I'll roll up that blind. Soon's you see that window get light, you come on in. I'll get her to go to the other side of the house till you-all are ready."

"Good. Get on the running board and we'll drive you in."

The door closed. The motor purred again into life. They eased forward along the densely wooded road. The big thug driving asked the woman: "I suppose we'll

have to give that copper the business, too, huh?"

"Maybe. Not if we can do without, but we're in too deep now to let him do us any harm." Her voice got harsh. "We're in too deep to let anybody do us any harm."

"Sure."

Beckett sat, jaws hard, his mind boiling, seeking some sort of a plan. The three were desperate now—and with rich plunder almost within their grasp, the only reason they would listen to would come out of the end of a gun.

The car rolled out into a clearing. Sixty yards away, the lights of a small, artistically built house shone out.

The mulatto said: "Drive up on the lawn there—at the side, and wait."

She swung off, hurried across the lawn. The car went on a few yards up over the edge of the road, and halted, side-on to the comfortable-looking house.

The woman asked in a low voice: "Did either of you bring the rope you took off this dick's legs?"

Victor said through clenched teeth: "I got it."

"Good. Nick—get out and tie him up again. Until we know how things work out, we'll have to have him dumped somewhere, and not getting away. You can carry him in, when we go."

The big man got out obediently. Victor took the rope from his overcoat pocket, handed it to him. He cursed Beckett as he lashed his ankles again, straining to get the rope taut.

WHEN he was finished he stood silent by the car, waiting. From where they were the side of the house showed a doorway, almost at the rear; and faint cracks of light, evidently through the Venetian blind on the French window of which the maid had spoken. Both door and window apparently opened onto a wide porch.

The woman started to get impatient. She could not take her eyes off Beckett and snapped irritably: "Isn't that damned blind. . ."

Victor exclaimed: "There it goes!"

Beckett ducked to look. Slowly the Venetian blind was rolling up, and as the interior of the room was revealed, he could see the mulatto maid straining to get the heavy drape to the top. The French window stood open.

"Grab the dick," the woman clipped, and Nick swung back, reached in and jerked Beckett half to his feet, then pulled him roughly out, head first, bent his knees, and caught him easily over his mammoth shoulder. Victor followed, a groan dropping from him as he bent. The woman said: "Shut up. We'll have you fixed in a minute now. Come on—I'll go first."

She headed across the lawn. Victor was a few feet behind her, and Beckett, his head hanging down, followed on Nick's shoulder.

Just a second, she hesitated on the porch, then strode boldly through the French window. The others followed quietly. The woman said to Nick, "Dump him in the corner there," and Beckett was poured from the big man's shoulder, crashed to the floor, on his side—and the room became visible.

It was a comfortably furnished living room. The window through which they had come, and the open door beside it, formed one end of the room. At the other end, a door led into rooms beyond. The wall against which Beckett was lying was broken in the middle by a fireplace. The other wall held a staircase, near the French window.

They had dumped Beckett at the end of a couch that sat against the wall between door and fireplace. Oriental rugs were on the floor, two or three easy chairs, bridge lamps—not now in use, the brilliant chandelier overhead supplying the light. Almost exactly in the cen-

ter of the floor was another large easy chair, and behind it was a round table, containing siphon, a bowl of ice cubes, and a whisky bottle.

Seated in the chair, his coat off, his shirt collar open and tie half unknotted, was Detective Whitely. His eyes were closed so that only the whites showed. Snores came from his open mouth. On the floor by his feet was a tumbler, lying on its side on a dark stain on the carpet.

The old woman gave Whitely a quick scrutiny, grunted in satisfaction. "He'll be out for half an hour. Come on, Victor—the bathroom's upstairs. Nick—stay here and watch. If the girl busts in, grab her—and watch him." She jerked her head at Beckett. Victor stumbled toward the stairs. His hand, pressed to his neck was covered with blood. He was weaving on his feet. The old woman hastily put an arm out to steady him—and froze.

A scream came from the rear of the house. A door banged open, and racing footsteps sounded. The old woman whirled—just as Barbara Seddon burst through the doorway, a blue *négligée* flying open, her face white with fear. Behind her came the cursing maid, in neat black-and-white uniform. The Seddon girl never even paused, was racing through the room, when Nick dived for her. His powerful arm swept out and he caught her around the waist.

The girl screamed, stared up into his face in uncomprehending horror, as he knocked the air from her lungs, whipped her right off her feet, and flung her backward. She went back on her feet, stumbling, falling—and the mulatto maid caught her in wiry arms. The girl opened her mouth to scream once more—and suddenly dropped in a dead faint.

THE old woman's face was livid. She rapped at the maid: "Put her back in her room. Nick—carry her. Get that dwarf—fast—wherever you've got him

locked up—The little rat's got the rest of the money with him. Fast—we'll get out of here the minute we get that cash!" She turned, urged the thin man up the stairs.

Nick jumped over, swept the unconscious girl up like a feather. The mulatto maid turned and ran ahead of him. Beckett heard a door open, and then the creak of bed springs. He started up, flexed to rip his bonds apart—and the heavy footbeats of Nick came pounding back. He came in with his eyes glued to Beckett, stopped beside him, reached down and yanked the agent up off the floor with one hand. With the other, he held his gun.

"Now—out with it, rat!" he snarled. "What's that miniature? Why's it worth all the trouble you're taking? Quick—before they. . . ."

There was a startled cry from the far side of the house—the mulatto's. Nick half jerked round, snapped back to Beckett. The gun in his hand swung back. "Quick—what is it? Where can I sell it?"

"In a hock shop, probably. . . ."

The gun whipped down cruelly, opened a gash in the agent's cheek. Beckett groaned involuntarily. "Like it, eh?" Nick barked. "There's lots more of it. Speak up!" The gun went back again. Beckett blurted, "O. K. I'll tell you—" and the big man suddenly spun toward the rear, let Beckett drop, as the mulatto's voice cried out in quick fright.

"Sister—Nick—the dwarf's gone. He ran away from me." She burst into the room, eyes white-rimmed. "Nick—I think he's gone off his head again. He was mumbling at me. When I opened the door, he jumped out a window. He's got all the money! What—"

Nick's bellow was like a bull's. He roared, "Where? Which way'd he go?" and as the maid flew back toward the far side, he charged after her.

Beckett almost cried in relief. He

pulled frantically at his wrists, and the cord snapped open. He dived for the tumbler on the floor, smashed it against the chair leg, and with a jagged piece slashed the ropes from his feet, sprang up. His legs almost gave under him. He staggered to the wall, then by sheer will power, threw himself back, stumbled toward the unconscious detective in the chair. His hand dug for the shoulder holster where Whitely usually packed a gun, and he cursed frantically. It was empty. He jerked the dick up, plunged a hand for his hip pocket—and his heart sank as that proved empty too. Feet were pounding around in the back part of the house. Beckett flung quick eyes around the room, desperate for a weapon. Nothing! Wild, he backed toward the front door, desperation seizing him—and then his memory snapped into action.

The next minute he was out the door on silent, racing feet, pounding across the lawn toward the car. From the back of the house came excited voices. Beckett hit the car running, dived for the tonneau door and jerked it open, flung himself across the floor, groping.

The automatic that had been shot from Victor's hand by the occupants of that other car was still lying on the floor. And beside it the agent's groping fingers fastened on two cartridge clips—one full, and one empty.

He heaved himself out, started back toward the house, the gun ready.

There was a flash of movement toward the front of the house. The agent froze, dropped down—and a sudden streak of something red darted from the front of the house, up onto the porch. It vanished inside the French windows, and as light struck it, Beckett realized that it was the dwarf, now clad in a red sweater. A second, the agent hesitated, then started again toward the house on a crouching run.

CHAPTER NINE

Murder in Miniature

HE WAS almost to the porch, when, straight through the room before him, he saw the blue *négligée* of the Seddon girl, as she fairly jumped into the doorway at the far end of the room. There suddenly he found out where Whitely's service gun had gone. The girl held it in one small hand, and it was pointed at something that Beckett could not see—and then he was on the porch and could see it. Standing on the table behind Whitely, his horrible face a mask of fury, was the dwarf. In one hand, upraised over his head, every muscle of his twisted little body strained for the downward plunge, he held a long, gleaming butcher knife. And even as Beckett tried to jerk his own gun up, the knife flashed.

The girl's gun roared. It roared again. The dwarf might have been picked up by a gust of wind. He was blown completely off the table, slammed to the floor head first, the knife flying almost out to Beckett's feet. The dwarf made a complete somersault, brought up against the sill of the French window, let out one grisly groan, and lay still, his bulging face streaming blood, from both cheeks.

The girl stood petrified, terror-stricken at what she had done. Beckett stood taut, as sudden shouts echoed from all over the house, pounding feet. From the door behind the girl, Nick suddenly catapulted. He leaped on the girl brutally. They crashed to the ground.

The old woman burst from the stairway, her eyes wild as they fastened on the struggling pair. The big man wrenched the gun from the shrieking girl's hand, held her, barking: "Quiet—you damned little—"

The old woman suddenly saw the dwarf's body. She uttered an exclamation, ran over toward it. The dwarf

groaned as the old harridan dropped to her knees, grabbed at his clothes. Her darting fingers ducked into his pockets, swiftly, silently. She ripped the lining of every pocket she touched inside out. Then, suddenly, she leaped up, a bulging leather wallet in her hand. "I've got it. I've got it!" She fingered it hastily open, riffled a thick wad of bills, flipped it closed, and swung on Nick. "There's no more need to wait! We've got what we wanted. Knock that girl out—and shoot the. . . ." She whirled round, one bony finger outstretched at where Beckett had lain, and she went suddenly hoarse.

"My God—the dick—Beckett—he's gone—Nick. . . ."

"What?" The big man shot to the center of the room, stared at the place stupidly. Beckett leaped onto the porch, his face a grim mask. His finger was tight on the trigger.

The woman must have heard him. She spun, the wallet dropping from her hand, the gun still in her long fingers, pointing—blindly—straight at Beckett. "He's out there—the car—maybe he's taken the car—"

She was running—straight toward the agent before she finished speaking. Beckett's lips curled in a macabre grin. He balanced, shifted his gun from right to left hand, swayed—

The woman burst out the door. Beckett swung.

His fist caught her square on the point of her bony chin. She made a queer surprised noise; her feet shot up, and she went literally sailing back into the room. Beckett was after her in a flash, his gun unwavering on big Nick's face. The big man's thinking power had been exhausted. He stood gaping, the gun hanging down at his side. Beckett roared, "Drop it! Drop the gun—or you're through!" and the big man seemed to start as though out of a dream. The gun thudded to the floor.

"Get over there!" Beckett jerked the muzzle of his gun toward where the mulatto maid stood, also stricken motionless, in front of Barbara Seddon. The big thug backed slowly over, his eyes blank uncomprehending.

"Miss Seddon!" Beckett said sharply. "I'm Beckett. You recognize me?"

"Yes. Yes."

"You two—get those hands higher!" Beckett snapped, then to the girl, "Go through their pockets and take out all the weapons you find. Throw them over to me."

"Oh! Oh! I—I can't."

BECKETT'S voice took on iron. "Listen you damned little tramp—you caused all this. Now get to hell to work and do as I say."

She gasped, met his eye, then with shaking fingers started to explore the two prisoners. The big thug gave up a second gun. The mulatto maid had a short knife. As fast as they lit at Beckett's feet, he tossed them as hard as he could, out the open doorway. When they were disarmed, he backed quickly over to the old woman, where she lay unconscious, and stooping, picked her automatic from where it had fallen. It was, surprisingly, a thirty-eight calibre, his own size. The familiar weight was pleasant. He shot a hasty glance around to make sure the rest of the armory was all outside, then stepped quickly across to the big man.

"I'll take that miniature, now, rat!" he said. "Where is it?"

"I—I dunno. The sister—"

Beckett's gun smacked him square across his mouth, and the big man wailed, spitting blood: "My—my coat—the back—in the lining—"

Beckett said to the girl: "See if it's there."

She felt the coat timidly. "Yes—yes, but I can't get it out."

Beckett rapped, "Turn around, you!"

and the big man almost spun off balance. Beckett put one hand up under the coat, dug his fingernails in—and jerked with all his strength. The lining ripped half out of the coat, and the long-sought miniature dropped to the ground. He snatched it up, his hard eyes gleaming, backed. . . . "Now, you damned rats, you'll fry—every . . . *God!*"

The gun had roared from the staircase. Furious, ice-cold fire ripped the flesh across the agent's side. He staggered, bent sideways at the waist, his gun flashing up.

He did not shoot. Victor, halfway down stairs was weaving, the blood spurting from under a half-arranged bandage on his neck. Even as Beckett's finger touched trigger, the gun dropped from Victor's hand. He stood a moment swaying—his knees suddenly sagged. He flopped to his knees on the step, pitched forward, and rolled to the bottom of the stairs, almost to Beckett's feet. Beckett jerked back toward the door, grunted with the pain in his side. The girl had burst into sobs. Beckett stopped when he had them all on one side of him, save the dwarf. The agent shot him a quick look. The dwarf was twitching there in the open window, his hands making convulsive motions, but he was still out.

Beckett snapped at the girl: "Miss Seddon—come out of it. Close that door behind you and lock it. Throw me the key!" Then when she had **done** this, he hurried on. "Listen—you've got to tell me fast—why was this miniature mailed to you by Joseph D'Amata? You hear me?" Then as she did not answer, "Damn it—I'm trying to keep you out of trouble—not for your own sake but for Jewett's! Answer!"

She nodded. "We—we were friends—that is, I knew him—"

Beckett swore. "You ought to be whipped. How good friends were you? If they investigate him, is anything liable

to come out about you? Don't lie now—" And the blood in the agent's veins seemed suddenly to turn to ice.

A soft voice snarled behind him: "I'll tell you that, Beckett—the truth after you get your hands up!"

BUT the man could have saved his breath. Keyed to a terrific pitch, Beckett could no more give in than fly to the moon. He acted, almost by reflex. He whirled, jerked aside as the gun of the man standing in the open French window exploded. The slug tore into Beckett's gun arm, threw his own shot wild. For one horrible second he faced death, tried to jerk aside again—and like a miracle, it happened.

The dying dwarf's clutching fingers must somehow have fastened on the cord of the Venetian blind and jerked the catch free. Even as the man outside took split-second aim, the heavy wooden blind dropped like a plummet, slammed him across the wrist with the impact of its full weight, and—his bullet roared into the floor. Then Beckett's gun was in his left hand. He held it on the blind, even as he threw himself wildly to the floor. Flame and smoke came through the wooden slats of the blind—and Beckett threw lead back.

From outside there was a sudden racking scream. Beckett stopped firing. Feet were threshing around on the porch—there was a heavy fall—but for a moment racing feet sounded after the fall. Someone was escaping. Beckett whipped to his feet, dived frantically for the door, plunged out headlong. He caught one glimpse of a racing man as he darted through the shaft of light cast from an upper window.

Beckett's gun flamed. The running figure blurted a curse, stumbled, but did not fall. Beckett slid to a stop, fired again, and the man went down in a heap.

Beckett started to dash after him, recalled those within just in time, flung back—and threw lead at the door as the big thug, Nick, came charging out. Nick's scampering back looked ludicrous—

But it wasn't. From the man on the ground out in the dark, a gun blasted. The agent's momentary distraction almost did for him. The high-calibered slug tore into his thigh, and his leg crumpled under him, even as he tried to swing for the flash. He jerked over onto his stomach. The gun in the dark flamed again, smacked into the house—and then Beckett had his line. He jammed the trigger home, sent a vicious stream of flaming lead—now from the thirty-eight that had been the old woman's.

He found his mark. There was a long, coughing scream, the sound of threshing in the darkness, and—the coughing died.

Beckett tried to get up, panic touching him, as he felt the flood of warm liquid down his leg. He got to his feet, staggered, got back to the porch, his flash coming out quickly, to fall on the huddled, dark figure, lying just outside the French window. He urged himself up onto the porch, dived for the sill of the French window, and once again had his gun trained on those in the room. His lips were bleeding, bit through from the pain. He jockeyed around, to where he could keep those inside under his eyes, and yet stare down at the man lying on the porch.

It was little surprise to find that the man was *Giannini*, one of the directors of the Francesco Company to whom he had been introduced at the factory the day before. But it was a surprise to hear, just as he flashed his light into the Italian's eyes, the sudden roar of a starting automobile out in the darkness—and it was not the car in which the old woman had brought him.

The sound of the motor evidently roused *Giannini*. He was shot just over

the heart. He opened his eyes into Beckett's flash.

Beckett said quickly: "Who was that—that drove away. It wasn't the gunman with you—I dropped him."

Giannini sighed. "It was Larch, I guess."

BECKETT gasped. "God, what a swell board of directors old Francesco picked himself. How does Larch come in on this—you're done for. You might as well tell me."

"I know I am. Sure, I'll tell you. Larch knew the materials for the paint formula. I didn't. I was afraid that the formula—when I did get it—or if I got it—would not include the names of the stuff. Larch hired a big-time thief—Joseph D'Amata—to go to Italy and steal the formula from Zabriski. I overheard him on the phone one night and realized what he was doing. I hired two twin brothers—the Feinsteins—to hi-jack the dope from D'Amata. D'Amata knew he was watched, so he mailed the thing—the miniature—before he got off the boat, marked it special-delivery, and addressed it to the one place he knew we wouldn't cover—the Seddon girl's." He hesitated, as his breathing started to become labored. "After my men caught him, they forced him to tell where he had sent it, and they went directly there, but—it was gone. Then we heard your name in connection with things, and the Feinsteins got the idea that you had it. They jumped you outside the hospital, and—you killed one of them.

"Meantime, I went to Larch—that was this morning—and put it up to him baldly, invited him to pool his knowledge with mine—if I got the miniature, and he agreed. Since then, we've been trailing you all day."

Sudden light broke on Beckett. "In a green sedan?"

"Yes."

Beckett jerked back to the room, as sudden movement caught his eyes. The old woman had come around, was trying to get to her feet. Beckett tried to snap at her, but his voice was too weak. He suddenly realized that he had lost an immense quantity of blood. He said: "Sit down, you old hag—or I'll give it to you in the stomach—as long—as I can hold out."

Desperately, he clung to his strength. He called "Miss Seddon! Get—to the—phone. . . ."

And then it was suddenly all over.

From the direction of the roadway, came the startling piercing shrill of police sirens, and a second later, the headlamps of two cycles and one touring car swept in through the wooded road, lit up the house. Then the grounds were swarming with State troopers, guns out. They ran up, surrounded Beckett. A tall, gaunt Scotchman started asking questions, and Beckett dug out his identification folder weakly, handed it to him, said, "Hold—everybody—" and passed out.

HE CAME to with brandy stinging his throat. A doctor was washing his hands in a basin in the corner. Beckett moved, felt bandages all over him. The gaunt Scotchman stood by the couch on which the agent was lying. He held a flash in his hand. "That's better. How do you feel?"

"I feel all right. How am I?"

The doctor said over his shoulder: "You're as sound as a dollar."

The Scotchman said: "My name's Henderson. For God's sake what happened? Everyone out there tells a different story."

"You let anybody go?"

"No. I've been waiting for you. I was on the phone to New York and they told me you were reliable."

"Hasn't Whitely come to yet?"

Henderson shook his head.

Beckett said suddenly: "Did you find a little ivory miniature on me?"

"Yes. We didn't touch it. It's still in your coat."

Beckett grunted relief. "All right," he said, "I can give you the whole story, but you've got to doctor your report if I do. Some of it mustn't come out."

Henderson eyed him curiously. "Well, now—" He hesitated. "Well, you ought to know what's possible and what isn't. Go ahead."

"That miniature contains a formula for some paint. It belonged to man named Zabriski, a chemist. He was hired to bring it over here by the Francesco Chemical Company. One of the directors of that company named Larch—who got away from me, incident—"

"Oh, no, he didn't. We got him just at the entrance to the road."

"That's great. Well, Larch hired Joe D'Amata. You know who he is. However—and here's the point you've got to watch in that report—D'Amata was a boy friend of this Seddon girl."

"Is she really the Seddon girl?"

"She certainly is. Well—" and Beckett told the trooper all he had learned from Giannini before he went out.

Then he hesitated. "Here's where I take you off on another tack. This whole dirty business, frankly, is caused by that damned blonde's mania for queer guys. It seems she was getting a circus together and somehow or other ran into this dwarf. I imagine she played up to him—just for the sheer torture of it—and the poor little devil—was half crazy anyhow—went absolutely bugs. He went to a witch-doctor—that white-haired dame—and she talked him into paying her to put a spell on the girl. This dwarf appears to have plenty of money—inherited probably. Well, in order to convince him that they

were really working for him, they broke into the Seddon house and administered one of these rotten love-potions to the girl.

"It worked out that the two boy friends' affairs—the dwarf's and D'Amata the crook's—worked out on the very same night. The old woman's rats made their play at the same time that the package from D'Amata was due to be delivered. And here's the sad part—

"I found D'Amata, dying. He blurted out enough to me to let me know that Barbara Seddon was concerned and that he had mailed an important special-delivery package to her. I, like a chump, rushed to the phone and called the Seddon girl's house. I got them on the wire while the two thugs were in the house. They forced a maid to stall me over the phone, and then listened in. They heard that there was this red-hot package around, and apparently they located it, in the butler's possession. He couldn't tell anybody that, because he was dead when they left.

"Anyway, I traced the love-potion to these birds out here, broke in on them, and they got the jump on me.

"Meantime, Larch and Giannini had patched up their differences and got together. They figured I knew something, and they were trailing me.

"The mulatto maid that worked for Barbara Seddon, either because she was offered plenty of money or because she was a little scared of the witch-doctor—some darkies are—played their game for them. When the Seddon girl left the hospital, the maid persuaded her that it would be a good move to duck out here into hiding for a while—knowing that it was a lonely spot, where her pals could have things all their own way with the girl. Mind you—this dwarf had plenty of money and apparently he was cagey enough to keep them from getting any big chunks, until he actually had results.

Hence, they actually had to get hold of the girl if they were going to really clip him. That was the plan—to get the girl out here, and hand her over.

"As I say, they jumped me. They had this miniature, but they didn't know what is was. They figured I knew, so they brought me out here to get it out of me. I happened to turn the tables on them—that's all. And when I just had them in nice shape, suddenly these other two—Larch and Giannini and their gunman got the drop on me, and we fought it out. That's the works."

Henderson shook his head in silent astonishment.

Beckett said: "I hope you're not going to make any trouble about my keeping the miniature."

HENDERSON stroked his chin. "As long as you'll sign an agreement to produce it as evidence when required, I guess you're good for it."

"How's for me getting back to New York—and the girl. You see, her fiancé's my client, and I'd like to—you know."

Henderson looked over at the doctor, who nodded. "Sure. He can navigate, but—it's bed for you for about two weeks, Beckett."

"We'll take that up at the next meeting," the agent said, and swung out of bed, knocking over a vase of flowers on the bedside table.

"Easy now," Henderson said. Beckett got up, found he could limp along, and went out to the living room, where the manacled prisoners were lined against a wall.

Whitely still sat in the same sprawled condition, dead to the world. It was a miracle that none of the bullets that had flown there that evening had punctured the detective's skin. Beckett shook his head. Henderson went over, and released Barbara Seddon, who half ran to Beckett. He checked her with, "None of that stuff on me, sister. I work for your boss." He jerked his head toward the door. "Can you drive a car?"

"Ye-es."

"That makes you our chauffeur. Get in touch with you later, Henderson."

"O. K."

They started for the door. Beckett suddenly halted, said, "By God, I forgot something," hobbled back to the bedroom. The spilt flowers were still on the floor. He selected one—a long-stemmed American-beauty rose, hobbled out again, laid it gently in Whitely's hand.

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The Rattler Clue

By

Oscar Schisgall

Author of "They Die
in Flame," etc.



A large bloodstain on the front of her nightgown.

Above the howling of the storm a woman's scream rang out—heralding murder in the room upstairs. For there Kate Gifford lay in a welter of her own blood. And the only killer clue was a five-foot timber rattler—pickled in alcohol.

THE five-foot snake floated like an eel in a large white pan half filled with alcohol. It's ugly head, though severed, remained vicious even in death, its malevolent little eyes still glittering. I stared at the thing in amazement, then looked up at the mayor of Mount Claire.

"You mean to say, Mr. Gifford," I whispered, "you actually found this thing in your bed?"

"In my bed," Charles Henry Gifford repeated emphatically, with a grim nod of his bald head. His lips were tight, his jaws rugged. "It was alive, at the foot of

the bed, under the covers."

"A rattler—"

"A timber rattler," he specified. "The instant I pulled back the blanket, it coiled up like a spring. If I hadn't jumped—"

A WILD crash of thunder overwhelmed his words, and Mayor Gifford winced as if the noise had hurt. Over his shoulder he glared at the window. Out there rain slashed at the panes, wind snarled among the trees, and flashes of lightning luridly dispelled the darkness. The storm had been smashing its way across the Catskills for almost an hour—since I swung off the train at the station, in fact—and Gifford was visibly sickened of its fury.

Yet he was a strong man, physically; blunt, powerfully built, compactly filling his blue suit. It was startling to see him so pale, so shaken. But he was not as badly unnerved as his daughter, the willowy blonde there beside him. Her name, I had learned, was Mrs. Viola Loree, and I was wondering where her husband might be. . . .

Frowning back at the snake, I said to Gifford: "I wish you'd tell me exactly what happened."

"It was just before midnight. My wife was already asleep in the other bed. They're twin beds. I didn't want to disturb her, so I undressed in the dark. I got in under the covers—mind, Mr. Crowell, I actually got into the bed!—and then my feet touched that ghastly thing. It moved. It crawled over my leg. I tell you I almost screamed!"

His pallid daughter shuddered violently.

"I sprang out of bed and jerked back the blanket," Gifford went on heavily. "Moonlight was coming through the window. It showed the snake coiling on the sheets. After that I guess I acted on sheer impulse. There was a lamp on the night table; it had an alabaster base. I

grabbed it and swung it down on the rattler with all my strength. When I finally switched on the lights, the snake lay there with its head half off. Practically dead, though it still squirmed a little. That was when my wife awoke—and almost fainted at the sight."

"And this happened two nights ago?"

"Yes, Friday!"

"Why didn't you notify your local police?"

Mayor Gifford snorted. He thrust his hands into his pockets and glowered into the empty fireplace.

"Listen," he snapped, "do you imagine I immediately considered the thing an attempt to murder me? No. Of course not! We've had a good many timber rattlers up here this year. I've seen them around myself. At first I thought that by some freak of chance this snake had got into the house and had made itself comfortable in my bed. I've read of such things occurring down in the tropics, you know."

"Not rattlers," I assured him.

"Well, maybe not. I don't know much about the habits of snakes. Besides—good Lord, I had no reason to suspect a murder attempt! I accepted the whole thing as an amazing accident and told Voorhees here"—he nodded toward a hawk-eyed, elderly servant who stood round-shouldered in the shadows of the door—"to preserve the snake in alcohol as a sort of souvenir. I thought I'd exhibit it to my friends."

"But that," put in young Mrs. Loree, her tones unsteady, "was before the shot."

"Yes. Before I had definite proof that somebody *is* trying to kill me!" Gifford rapped out.

"Tell Mr. Crowell the details, Dad!" his daughter urged him, tensely.

I didn't have to ask any questions. I merely sat there, while the thunderstorm raged outside, and listened to the grim-featured mayor of Mount Claire.

These people had telephoned to our agency in New York for a private detective, and the boss had sent me rushing to the Catskills on the case. I still couldn't see why I had been summoned in place of the local police. So, hunting explanations, I allowed Mayor Gifford to do the talking in any way he pleased.

"About the shot," Gifford was saying, still scowling into the fireplace. "My wife has been ill for several months. Whenever the weather is nice and I can get away, I drive with her. That's what I did this afternoon. We rode slowly, and we were just going past a point where the woods border the road when we heard the shot. It smashed the back window of the car. The glass splattered all over the floor. I stopped and got out—"

"Unarmed?" I interrupted in surprise.

Mrs. Loree exclaimed: "Dad, didn't you realize how dangerous it was to—"

"Well"—Mayor Gifford shrugged and conceded—"maybe it was a reckless thing to do. But I was too excited to think so then. Anyhow, there were no other shots, and I didn't see a soul under the trees."

"How long did you search?" I asked.

"Only a few moments, really," he admitted. "My wife had a nervous collapse. I think she was on the verge of hysteria. So I rushed her home immediately and put her to bed. She's been there ever since, asleep. When my daughter and her husband came in toward five o'clock, I told them what had happened; and Viola—Mrs. Loree, here—at once insisted on phoning your agency in New York. We're pretty certain now, you see, that the two incidents—the snake and the shot—prove conclusively somebody is doing his level best to murder me. Though Heaven alone knows why anybody should!"

Thoughtfully I lit a cigarette. It struck me there was nothing to show the same person had been responsible for both the rattler and the bullet. Only surmise; as-

sociation of ideas. Moreover, I thought it was rather odd that the same brain should evolve so complicated and fantastic a notion as placing a rattlesnake in a man's bed; and thereafter descend to the commonplace by firing a shot at him.

Of all this, however, I said nothing.

As I tossed the match into the fireplace, I asked: "Mr. Gifford, why did you call on us instead of on your local police? If you want protection—"

"Protection?" he scoffed. "There's more to it than that. It's just two months to election, and I'm running for office again. If I call in the police, the newspapers will get it."

"What of it?"

"Why," he ejaculated, almost angrily, "our opponents will simply laugh at the story! They'll ridicule it—and me! They'll say I'm using cheap, obvious tactics to win publicity and sympathy from the public. A rumor like that, once it's circulated, can make me look pretty silly!"

FRANKLY, I wasn't convinced; but instead of pressing the point I bent again over the pan that contained the dead snake. For a while there was silence in the murky room, save for the thrashing of rain on the windows and the din of the storm outside. Gifford's slim, blond daughter watched me intently, ruining a lacy handkerchief with tugging fingers.

My first task, I knew, was to discover who might have a motive to murder the mayor of Mount Claire.

Twice he had assured me that nobody could have such cause. The idea was absurd. His only enemies were political foes; and these, certainly, had no logical reason to kill him. Their most violent desire was merely to see him defeated at the polls.

"So there's nobody," I murmured now, "who might profit by your death, eh?"

"No!"

"Not even financially?"

"Not even that way," he declared. My quick glance must have told him I knew he was a fairly rich man, for he added: "Whatever property and funds I possess are in my wife's name. It wouldn't do anybody any good to have me die."

I puffed reflectively at my cigarette. No motive? Still, two attempts had indubitably been made against his life. . . . Quite by chance my gaze swung around to the saturnine servant in the door, and I thought he looked as worried as his employer. It was Voorhees who had brought the snake into the living room. Now, presumably, he was waiting for instructions to take it away. I wondered why he didn't evince the tact to withdraw from us during our interview. Was it because he knew the family had no secrets from him?

"Who else," I suddenly inquired of Mayor Gifford, "lives in this house?"

"Well," Gifford said, "there's only my son-in-law, Stephen Loree."

"You'll meet him very soon, Mr. Crowell," hastily promised Viola Loree. "My husband drove down to the village before the storm to have the back window of the car replaced; the one that was shattered! I suppose he's waiting for the rain to let up a little."

I nodded as if the point were inconsequential. Turning again to the mayor, I pressed, "No other servants?"

"None except Voorhees' wife, Clara," said Gifford. "She's our maid and cook. But"—his tone became cynical, almost contemptuous—"I hope you're not suspecting that anybody in my household put the snake in my bed! Such a notion would be ridic—" Abruptly he checked himself.

He stopped because something happened which, in towns like Mount Claire, is probably common enough.

It was nothing, really, save that the lights went out, leaving us in darkness.

For an instant I couldn't see any of them. Then, outside, there was a vivid flash of lightning, and once more they were all luridly revealed. Instantly thunder crashed in our ears like a paean of doom. At the moment I couldn't be sure, but it seemed to me that I heard something more than thunder. I thought—and grew tense with the idea—that somewhere far off in the storm I had detected a sharper sound. A *crack*. Like the explosion of a gun. . . .

WITHIN a few seconds, however, I decided my city-attuned ears must have tricked me. There could hardly have been a shot which nobody but myself had heard. It might have been a deceptive thunder echo. Certainly the others were unaware of it.

Viola Loree was calling impatiently: "Voorhees! Light the candles."

"Yes, ma'am," the servant's deep voice answered in the darkness.

"All of them!" snapped Gifford. "God knows how long these lights will stay out." He must have turned to me, for his voice sounded nearer. "Sorry, Mr. Crowell. This happens pretty often when we have storms."

I didn't speak. I was still wondering about the curious noise I'd heard; or imagined. . . .

Voorhees lit a match over emergency candles that stood on the mantelpiece. The dim yellow light momentarily filled his bony face with black shadows—out of which his eyes glinted abnormally. Then a flickering glow filled the room. He moved about until he had lit four more tapers. The atmosphere of the high-ceilinged room became strangely unreal, almost uncanny. The faces about me seemed to have the color of butter.

"Mr. Crowell," Gifford was saying, "if you're through looking at this rattler, I'll

have Voorhees remove it. The thing gives me the shivers!"

Frankly, I was glad to be rid of the snake. We stood still, frowning, while Voorhees bore the pan out of the living room. He moved as solemnly as though he were performing some ceremonial rite. When he had vanished, I glanced at Viola Loree.

She said, suddenly: "Dad, I'm going to take a candle up to Mother's room."

But she didn't go just then.

For at that moment, with an explosive bang, the front door of the house slammed. We heard running steps in the corridor, and abruptly a slim, white-faced man appeared in the door. He couldn't have been much more than thirty, and he was unquestionably handsome; too handsome, I thought, with that tiny waxed mustache. Rain dripped from the brim of his felt hat, and his clothes were drenched. But it wasn't his attire we noticed. It was his ghastly pallor—a kind of terror that paralyzed his expression and left his eyes blazing wildly.

"Steve!" gasped Viola Loree. "What on earth—"

He glared from her to me; pointed. "Is this the detective?" he demanded.

"Yes! Mr. Crowell. What—"

"Well, we *need* a guard around this place!" he rasped. "There's somebody hanging around the grounds. He just took a pot shot at me out there!"

I caught my breath; stepped forward involuntarily. So it hadn't been merely imagination, the shot I'd heard! I questioned Stephen Loree at once. Indeed, we all questioned him.

As he strode into the room, drawing off his soaked topcoat, he flung out irately: "Don't ask me who he was! How the devil should I know? I was driving up toward the house when a flash of lightning showed him standing there. He was under a tree. Leaning against it. I

stopped the car and called out. The instant he heard me he started running away. That gave me a jolt, and I opened the door to go after him. But he must have seen me coming. He fired once—a sort of warning, maybe. I heard the bullet hit a tree. After that I didn't feel like going farther."

"So you came straight here?" ejaculated Mayor Gifford. He was more pale than ever now; more shaken, too.

Stephen Loree retorted: "Of course I came straight here. You don't expect me to chase an armed man, do you?"

"No. No, no, of course not! But—"

"Look here," I interrupted. "You say you had a glimpse of him in the lightning, Mr. Loree?"

"For about half a second," he snapped, throwing his wet coat over a chair.

"Can you describe him?"

"Hell, no!"

"I mean his size, his clothes."

"Oh, he was pretty big, I'd judge," Loree decided, scowling. "He looked to be well over six feet."

"And how about his clothes?"

"Couldn't make them out."

FOR some vague reason I didn't like Stephen Loree. I was irritated by his truculent manner. He shuddered slightly and rubbed his hands together as Voorhees reappeared and picked up the wet coat. I turned to the window, frowned out into the darkness.

My features must have disclosed my thoughts, for Loree snarled: "No use going out to hunt him now, Mr. Crowell. He'll know we'll be after him the moment I report what happened. By this time he's probably far off in the woods. If you ask me, our best course is just to sit tight and watch the house closely tonight. Guard it, I mean!"

Mentally I had to concede he was right about the futility of attempting a chase.

Nevertheless my hand groped of its own accord toward the automatic in my back pocket. Those behind me went on talking in low, rapid tones. I heard Viola Loree leave to carry a candle to her mother's bedchamber.

And it was in the ensuing stillness that I made a queer discovery. It startled me. A little shocked, I called out to Gifford. He and his son-in-law immediately strode to my side.

"What now?" the mayor muttered.

"See him?" exclaimed Loree, incredulously.

I shook my head. "The lights," I said. "When your lights go out during a storm, doesn't the same usually happen to your neighbors? And the lamps on the road?"

"Generally, yes, of course," Gifford answered. "We're all on the same feed wire."

I pointed out into the night. "Look. The road lights are burning. Your neighbors' windows"—these, though several hundred yards away, were discernible even in the downpour—"are all lit up!"

Both Loree and Mayor Gifford stared. It was the latter who finally whispered in wonder: "By George, that's so. Maybe it's my fuse."

"Or maybe someone cut—"

I couldn't finish. I didn't have to finish. Something occurred that completely banished the thought of lights from our minds. We heard a veritable shriek! . . . It was Viola Loree's, and resounded through the house from upstairs. A scream so full of horror, of terror, of hysterical panic, that it left us all utterly petrified.

I think I was the first to recover my wits. At any rate, I was the first to seize a candle and start for the stairs. My heart pounded crazily as I darted from the living room into the darkness of the hall. How I kept the candle burning I don't

know. But it continued to flame while I dashed up the steps.

Gifford and Loree were behind me, panting, calling out hoarsely to Viola. I was several strides ahead of the others when I reached her.

With her candle trembling in her hand, she stood in the open door of her mother's room. She leaned weakly against the jamb. Never before had I seen such horror, such anguish, stamped on anyone's face. She was white, dumbstruck. . . I came to her side, cast one glance into the room, and went rigid.

Inside the dark chamber a woman sprawled on the bed.

Her graying hair crawled crazily over the edge. She lay motionless. Her legs, tangled in blankets, were stretched out straight. But the most horrible thing about her—luridly revealed by the candlelight—was the large bloodstain on the front of her white nightgown. It had spread hideously over the chest. It had dribbled to the floor. . .

"Mother!"

Viola Loree gasped the single word wildly. But it evoked no reply. There would never be a reply. I could see it, sense it, even before I entered the door.

Mayor Gifford's wife was dead!

And Stephen Loree arrived just in time to catch Viola as she collapsed.

THE next five minutes in that dark room became an interval of nightmarish confusion. Viola Loree fainted. She slid out of her husband's arms to the floor. Though he was on the verge of panic himself, calling her name frantically, Stephen Loree managed, with the assistance of the breathless Voorhees, to carry his wife off to her own room. Then Clara, the ponderous cook, came clamoring up the stairs and halted outside the open door, round-eyed in terror, stammering shrill phrases.

I was scarcely aware of her, however. I had plunged to my knees beside the figure on the floor and found the flesh cold.

It was maddening. To make matters worse, the storm seemed to choose that moment for its climax. Lightning blazed with blinding, greenish brilliance; thunder roared directly above us; the rain seethed and thrashed viciously. And the result of it all was hellish pandemonium.

But my most serious trouble came from Mayor Charles Henry Gifford.

He was, it appeared to me, suddenly crazed. Not that I could blame him. Under the circumstances his behavior was probably natural enough. He dashed into the room with a wild, hoarse cry, arms extended.

"Kate!" he gasped. "Kate! Kate!"

It was almost a shriek. He would have gathered her up in his arms, I knew. In the interest of the law I had to fight his impulses.

So I jumped up from the body and stopped Gifford's onrush. I actually had to hold him back by sheer force, pitting my hundred and sixty-five pounds against his stocky bulk.

"Don't touch her!" I said. "Don't you understand? There's nothing you can do for her now! She's dead—murdered! You've got to let her stay as she is until the police come!"

Whether he understood me or not, I don't know. I had to struggle against his fury for several minutes. I had to pinion him against the wall before he finally gathered the terrible significance of my importunities.

Then, abruptly, Gifford went limp.

"Kate!" he said huskily, in a strange voice. "Murdered! You murdered—"

As I turned away from him at last, I felt thoroughly shaken and sick. I hardly dared look again at the body on the bed. Instead I went to the window. The pane was broken, and wind raced through it—

cold, wet wind which I breathed profoundly. I was unaware of Voorhees' return to the room until he began bringing in more candles. Soon seven of them were burning about the chamber; their light, though weird and unsteady, was sufficient for our needs. It did horrible things to the figure on the bed.

I INSPECTED the broken window closely; found most of its glass on the floor. Outside I saw a sort of balcony on which a man might have stood. Actually it was the roof of the kitchen, which projected from the house itself at the rear.

I thought: "The killer could have climbed to that! He fired at Mrs. Gifford through the closed pane. But why did he do it? Why to her? Could he possibly have mistaken the person in the bed in the darkness?"

"No!" another part of my mind retorted. "Nonsense!" So facile but implausible a theory I refused to tolerate. A single flash of lightning—and there had been plenty of them—would have revealed the truth to the murderer. This couldn't have been a mistake. Somebody had deliberately murdered Mrs. Gifford!

But who? Why?

I turned from the window to encounter the agonized stare of the bony Voorhees. That roused me.

"Will you run down and phone the police?" I snapped. "Ask them to get here quick—with the medical examiner!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Shivering, colorless, Voorhees turned and vanished into the blackness of the hall; his immense wife quickly followed him. I stood still a moment, listening to Stephen Loree's voice in another room, desperately soothing his wife; to the furor of the storm. I tried to steady myself. Somehow I had no desire to meet Mayor Gifford's haggard eyes, and I deliberately avoided them. He was still

standing at the wall, gaping at his wife's body.

I decided that I had better make a thorough inspection of the room and of the corpse at once. But before I could stir, Gifford's voice came, deep and awed and hushed. "Nobody could have had a reason to do this to her!"

"Still it was done," I argued. "If we accept circumstantial evidence, Mr. Gifford, somebody climbed to the roof of the kitchen out there and shot her through the pane. From the temperature of the body I'd judge—though I may be all wrong, of course—that she's been dead about an hour. Maybe less. That means she was killed during the storm. Thunder probably drowned out the sound of the gun and falling glass."

I knelt beside the body; took one of the candles in my hand and held it above the straggling hair. My first look at the corpse had been hurried, panicky, unobservant. But now almost the first thing I saw brought a gasp from me.

Gifford, hearing the sound, blurted: "What—what is it?"

"Look!"

He advanced shakily, fearfully. I pointed to something the dead woman still clutched in her rigid fingers, where it gleamed oddly. It was merely a piece of chain, very thin and no more than four inches in length. For a while I couldn't guess its significance. I glanced around searchingly, however; and then, of a sudden, I understood.

A lamp lay under the second of the twin beds.

It was a small, shaded lamp with a gracefully rounded alabaster base. The same lamp, no doubt, of which Gifford had spoken—the one with which he had decapitated the rattle-snake. In falling it must have landed on the shade, thus preserving its base. And it had rolled

under the bed. What caught my attention was the fact that part of its switch-chain still dangled from it. The rest of the broken chain was in the dead hand!

GIFFORD knelt beside me in trembling wonder. A kind of trance must have seized him. So close to his wife that he might easily have touched her, he became gray of face.

"The lamp!" Gifford actually gulped. "She must have been lighting it when—when—"

"Yes," I agreed grimly. "When she was killed. The convulsive jerk of her hand must have upset the lamp and broken the chain." I considered a moment; studied the lamp intently; then added: "This puts an entirely new aspect on the case!"

"How? Wh-what do you mean?"

"It looks as if your wife knew her murderer, Mr. Gifford. It looks as if she was killed by somebody she had no reason at all to distrust!"

He turned his head, gaped at me incredulously. "Eh?"

"Consider the circumstances," I insisted. "She was obviously awake at the time she was shot. Awake and trying to light the lamp. Lying or sitting in bed, she would have been facing the window squarely. She'd have seen anybody on the balcony outside. If it were a stranger, anybody she feared, she'd have screamed. Certainly she had enough time to yell for help if she found time to reach for the lamp. But the fact that she didn't scream—well, it seems to show she wasn't terrified by what she saw through the window."

"Her screams might have been overwhelmed by thunder!"

"Maybe," I granted. "Still, thunder didn't drown Mrs. Loree's screams a few minutes ago."

We were silent then. Wide-eyed,

Gifford stared from the body to the broken window and back again, as if dazedly attempting to visualize the crime. As for myself, I wondered if any prints, of fingers or feet, might have been left on the tiny porch. Of this, however, I had scant hope. The downpour must have ruined all such traces.

Finally I snatched up the candle and went with it to the bullet-shattered window. Gifford, lumbering along like a trained bear, followed me. I held the light high, out of the draught, and peered through the pane. On the small balcony lay something I had missed before.

Just a window screen. It lay there, battered by the deluge, shining whenever lightning flared. It showed no bullet hole, I noticed. And I mumbled: "Well, now! Does that mean the killer stopped to remove the screen before shooting through the pane?"

"Oh, no!" said Gifford.

"Why do you say that?"

"I know about the screen," he answered. "Just before the storm I came up here to close the window. The screen fell out. But the rain was starting, and I decided to leave the screen for Voorhees to get in the morning."

"Oh. . . What time was that?"

"About eight, I guess."

"Just a few minutes before I arrived. Was your wife awake then?"

"She woke when I came into the room, yes. Then she went back to sleep. It—it was the last time I saw her—" He ended with a miserable gulp.

At that moment Voorhees, pale, gaunt, and feverish of eye, ran into the room. Apparently something had gone wrong. He was profoundly excited.

"I c-couldn't get the police, Mr. Gifford!" he gasped. "I can't get an answer on the telephone!"

"What?"

"The wire seems to be dead!"

Through a few seconds of stunned silence we stood gaping at one another. The lights out. The telephone useless. It became almost inescapably evident that my earlier suspicion had been right: all wires leading from the house had been cut!

Voorhees offered: "I could run over to—to the Williams house and phone from there."

But I remembered the figure Stephen Loree had encountered in the storm; a man who had not hesitated to shoot. Also, I remembered the automatic in my pocket. If anybody were going to meet the unknown man again—though I considered the possibility remote—I wanted to do so myself.

So I said grimly: "Never mind, Voorhees. I'll go and do the phoning. You stay here with Mr. Gifford. Don't touch anything till the police arrive!"

TWO minutes later, buttoned in my topcoat, I strode out of the house into the downpour. The distant lights of the Williams house shone like stars through the storm. Whenever lightning slashed the black skies, I could discern the outlines of the building itself. It was my beacon, and I chose the shortest course toward it. Instead of following the path to the road, I cut across a field bordered by tall trees. My shoes sloshed through wet grass, and pretty soon my feet were as badly soaked as my clothes.

Because the rain pounded down less heavily under the trees, I kept close to them. My eyes were darting about swiftly, yet with no real expectation of seeing Loree's assailant.

And then, all of a sudden, I came to a halt, caught my breath, stared. There had been a flash of sizzling lightning. It illumined everything greenishly. And in the momentary glare I saw a man!"

He hadn't seen me yet.

He stood beside a tree-trunk, his gaze intently fixed on the Gifford house. When the lightning subsided, I could still vaguely discern his figure. It was large, shadowy, blurred by the downpour. He wore a battered felt hat, and his hands were in his pockets.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, impatiently; shrugged his coat collar higher about his neck.

On impulse I slipped in among the trees. My whole body was throbbing now. Was this the murderer of Mrs. Kate Gifford? Was this the man who had made two attempts on the life of Mount Claire's mayor? Who had cut the house wires? . . . One thing was certain: whoever he might be, I had to seize him now, to question him about his presence here! But I didn't forget he was armed.

As cautiously as I could I moved among the trees, maneuvering for a position behind him. The thunder and the thrash of rain helped me considerably. They obliterated the sounds of my steps. I took the automatic out of my pocket, gripped it tensely.

I managed to get within five feet of him before he heard me. He whirled around with a throaty gasp of amazement and fear. He had been tugging his hat lower over his head. Now his hands fell, obviously to yank a gun from his pocket. So I lashed out: "Stand still! Put the hands up!"

"What the—"

"Put up your hands, I said!"

His arms rose as he slowly obeyed. His huge countenance—muscular, with a jutting forehead that overhung the eyes—went ghastly white.

"What—what's the idea?" he demanded hoarsely.

"You'll find out in a minute," I promised. "Turn around."

MY AUTOMATIC moved menacingly and he turned quickly enough. When his back was to me, I stepped forward, pressed my gun against his spine, and delved into his pocket. His own weapon was there and I took it.

"Now," I said grimly, "we'll talk. Unless you'd rather do your talking at the police station."

He looked around at me again. He was breathing hard, with unconcealed fear.

"Wh—who are you?" he asked. "A dick?"

"Yes, a dick."

"You ain't got nothing on me!" he croaked.

"No?"

"Not a thing!"

"What about cutting those wires? What about taking a shot at Stephen Loree about twenty minutes ago? What about all the other things?"

At that his complexion became deathly. When lightning flashed, his face looked like some grotesque horror-mask. Big as he was, he cringed. He recoiled against a tree, and his lifted arms were unsteady.

"Listen," he said huskily, "this ain't my party! I don't know anything about it—honest!"

"What do you mean?"

"I—I'm being framed!"

In view of the fact that he had shot at Stephen Loree, this seemed absurd; and I said scornfully, "Oh, yes? And who's framing you?"

"I—I ain't so sure who's behind it, besides the Nickerson woman! She's the one that hired me. They ain't going to get away with a frame—not on me!"

That startled me. True, I had never before heard of this Nickerson woman. Still, there was something desperately sincere about my captive. He had to talk in a loud voice against the noise of the

storm, but his words sounded convincing. I peered at him narrowly through the rain. His clothes, I now discovered, were worn-out, patched; and his dilapidated hat was torn across the crown. The wisest thing to do, I decided, was to get his story clear from the beginning. So I demanded: "Who are you?"

"Healy. Bud Healy's the name. I ain't got no connection with this damn town. If you don't believe me—"

"What are you doing here?"

"Just waiting!"

"What for?"

"For somebody to come out and hand me my century note!"

I stared at him in amazement. That he was expecting a hundred dollars sounded neither plausible nor clear. It intimated, moreover, that somebody in the Gifford house was to pay him such a sum. I ordered him to explain what he meant and he groaned miserably: "Listen, I don't want to get anybody in a mess!"

"They're getting you in a mess, aren't they?" I retorted. "You can talk here and now or at the police station. Take your choice fast!"

As if hoping for rescue, Healy looked around desperately. But my automatic and my expression remained uncompromising; and so presently, as we stood there in the downpour under the trees, I was listening to his astonishing story.

HE WAS, it appeared, a tramp. He had left New York without a cent a few weeks ago and he had been bumming his way through farm districts, begging at back doors for work and food. A few days ago he had stopped at the house of a Mrs. Nickerson, a widow who gave him a day's job weeding her vegetable patch.

"Then, when she was giving me supper," Healy said, talking rapidly,

"she asked if I'd like to sleep in the barn and hang around a few days. She could give me plenty of odd jobs. I did it. Gosh, I was glad of the chance! Then yestiddy morning, she made me this hundred-buck proposition!"

"Go on," I urged grimly.

"She came out where I was pitchin' hay," Healy said huskily. "There was a funny kind of expression on her, like if she was looking right through me. She asked if I'd like to earn a hundred dollars. I almost blew up with surprise. Hell, I told her, I'd go over Niagara for a century! So she told me what I had to do for the dough.

"She said she'd give me a gun, and I was to hide out with it this afternoon at a spot she'd show me. It was in the woods, alongside the road. I was to watch for a green Buick sedan with an eagle on its radiator cap. There'd be a man and a woman in the front seat, she said—middle-aged folk. All I had to do was put a slug through the back window of the car. Not hit anybody, see? I drew the line against that. All I was supposed to do was break the window and beat it!"

I was wildly tense by this time. Who was Mrs. Nickerson? How did she fit into the puzzle? . . . I glared at Healy and told him to continue.

"And tonight," he went on, after a hopeless glance at the automatic, "tonight I was supposed to come here and cut the wires to the house. Then I was to hang around till somebody came out and flashed a light five times. Mrs. Nickerson said if I went to the flashes, I'd get a hundred bucks. That was all. Then I was to beat it out of Mount Claire!" He gestured helplessly. "I've just been waiting for my dough, that's all! When that feller came after me a few minutes ago, I fired only to scare him. Hell, I don't want to kill anybody!"

Scowling, I demanded: "Don't you know who was supposed to give you the hundred dollars?"

"No!"

"Didn't Mrs. Nickerson tell you?"

"She never mentioned names!"

After that we stood silent a while, our eyes meeting steadily. The rain thrashed about us, and the thunder, already receding in the east, sent its echoes reverberating through the mountains. Oddly, I believed Healy. I didn't think him capable of inventing so elaborate and complicated a lie which, in its essentials, so neatly fitted the events of the day. Still, there was this curious point about his story: nowhere in it was there any mention of the dead rattlesnake. . . .

That snake bothered me.

I scowled as other queries whirled in my mind. If this fellow were telling the truth, who had murdered Mrs. Gifford? Who was to give him his hundred dollars? I recalled, suddenly, that the mayor had said all his wealth was in his wife's name. Did that mean her daughter, Mrs. Loree, would now be her heiress? . . . And what position did the unknown Mrs. Nickerson occupy in the mystery?

Tormented by these uncertainties, I frowned toward the house. And that was my great mistake.

For Healy, seeing my head turn aside, seized his opportunity with a gasp. I never really saw his fist start. I never had time to dodge. I knew only that something exploded against my jaw—and that I staggered back crazily, eyes bulging, into complete blackness!

BY THE time I regained my senses, the rain had lost much of its fury. Later I learned I couldn't have been unconscious more than ten or fifteen minutes. Apparently I hadn't been seriously hurt, for I felt no great pain and experienced no difficulty in recalling all that

had happened. True, there was a dull ache in my jaw, and I rubbed it ruefully as I got to my feet. For a moment I stood still, to orient myself.

Healy, of course, had vanished. So had his revolver. It rather astonished me to discover he had left my own automatic on the ground; and I picked it up in wonder—deriding myself for my negligence.

"As a detective," I thought, "I'd make a fine librarian."

Then I remembered my contemplated mission to the Williams house for the police. I went on gloomily, drenched.

Mr. Ashley Williams proved to be a large man with curly white hair and a fine white mustache. He was, naturally, dumbfounded by my tragic news, and he himself excitedly telephoned for the police. When I left, he insisted on accompanying me. And that, because of what he told me on the way, was fortunate. . . .

As we trudged through the wet grass, I questioned him about the Nickerson woman.

"Oh," he said quickly, "she's a widow over on the other side of town. I don't know her very well. She moved to Mount Claire only last year."

"Good-looking?"

That startled him, but he answered: "Very."

"Do you happen to know if she's friendly with anybody at the Gifford place?"

"Why—" Williams hesitated. "I can't say, really. Once or twice I've seen her calling, of course. Making sick calls on Mrs. Gifford, I imagined."

After a pause I asked: "How old a woman is she, would you guess? A young widow?"

"Somewhere in her early forties."

"Considerably older than Stephen Loree, eh?"

"Oh, sure! Why?"

I didn't reply. A queer, wild suspicion had suddenly blazed in my mind. It stiffened me with a jolt, and I walked on so swiftly that Williams had almost to run.

PERHAPS I should have deferred the climax until the arrival of the police. I have often thought that would have been far the wisest way. But instead I led the awed Ashley Williams straight upstairs to the chamber where Mrs. Gifford sprawled dead on her bed. They were all in that dreadful room now—Viola Loree sobbing wretchedly, and her husband doing his utmost to offer solace. Mayor Gifford was muttering in a corner to Voorhees and his wife, the big cook, Clara. Nothing, apparently, had been disturbed. Seven candles, distributed about the chamber, still gave it ghostly illumination.

I beckoned to Mayor Gifford at once. No doubt he noticed my inner excitement, for he came out into the corridor with a look of wonder.

"What is it, Crowell?"

"Listen," I whispered quickly. "I've just made a few amazing discoveries. Before I take any action I want to talk things over with you alone. It's mighty important! I caught the fellow who shot at your son-in-law!"

That stunned Gifford. He stepped back, gaped at me. Then he threw a hurried, anxious nod to the stairs.

"Let's go down!" he urged.

One candle had been left burning in the enormous living room, and it was here we sought privacy.

"What happened?" he whispered tensely.

Grimly, tersely, I told him of my experience with Bud Healy; told him all the tramp had said. And when I finished, Mayor Gifford gasped. "Mrs. Nickerson!"

"Yes. You know her, of course?"

He nodded blankly. It seemed to me that Gifford had utterly lost color. He had suddenly become old and wilted, and he lowered himself shakily into a deep chair. The vague candle-light betrayed perspiration on his bald head.

I stepped close to him.

"Mr. Gifford," I said softly, "I may be wrong. But usually when a woman helps a man in crime, especially in murder, it's because of love. Most crimes among women are the passionate kind. I believe Mrs. Nickerson helped in this murder of your wife because of her love—for you!"

He stared at me wide-eyed, as if he hadn't heard clearly. He managed a choked, "Eh?"

"We'll soon know her side of it, at any rate. When we phoned the police from the Williams house, we advised them to arrest Mrs. Nickerson as a material witness. By this time they've probably got her."

At that Gifford half rose with an inarticulate little sound. Then, ghastly yellow, he sank back weakly—collapsed. His lips were parted. His hands fiercely grasped the arms of his chair.

"Are you crazy?" he began thickly. "I—"

"Suppose you let me do the talking first," I quietly suggested.

"As the case appears to me now, you—with your wife an invalid—fell in love with a fascinating widow. Perhaps you wanted to marry her. But you couldn't get a divorce from your sick wife; in fact, as mayor of this town, you didn't care to go through the scandal of divorce. To be really free of her, you had to see your wife dead. Moreover, your money was in her name as long as she remained alive—"

"For God's sake, man!" Gifford croaked. "You—you don't know what you're saying! You—"

"So far, frankly, I've been theorizing," I confessed. "Let's look at facts."

I STOOD very close to him, frowning down into his wet, white face; seeing the unspeakable terror in his eyes; watching his wild squirmings in the chair.

"Mr. Gifford," I whispered, "you made a mistake when you told me you killed the rattler in your bed with a lamp."

"Wh-what—"

"I studied that lamp. Its alabaster base is smoothly rounded. There isn't a sharp edge on the thing; and the snake's head was chopped off by something jagged. A rock, perhaps. . . . My idea is you killed the snake in the woods, by accident. And then you realized you could put it to use. You could pretend with it that somebody had made an attempt on your life. After all, your wife was asleep when you found it. She was not a witness to the actual killing in the bed—as you claimed!"

It was strange to see how the man listened to me. I rather expected him to interrupt with insane shouts, with roars of rage and denial. But he didn't. He sat there paralyzed, gazing up at me, perhaps thinking of Mrs. Nickerson's fate. . . .

"That, as I see it, was your whole purpose in placing the dead snake in your bed—to pretend somebody was trying to kill you," I went on in that same thick whisper. "For the same purpose you and Mrs. Nickerson hired this tramp to shoot at your car, to cut your wires tonight. You wanted to make it appear that some outside menace was attacking you. In that way your wife's murder would be attributed to some mysterious killer outside the house! Never to yourself!"

Gifford raised his hand, started to speak. But I couldn't understand the strange sound he offered, so I resumed.

"Tonight, after your daughter had summoned a private detective to the

house, you must have decided to have done with the whole business before a guard interfered. The thunder storm helped you with its noise. You went out on that balcony—perhaps with the excuse of picking up the screen that had fallen out of place. Your wife didn't suspect you. She turned to light the lamp. Then you shot her through the pane—again making it appear an outsider had done the thing! I—" But I stopped then.

There had been an odd flash of light across the wall. When I turned to the window, I saw the headlights of two cars coming up the driveway.

"The police!" I said. Then I started to glance back at Gifford—and gasped. He was darting across the room to the door! I started after him, yelled to him to stop. But I was too late to do anything.

The man ran out of the house. He crossed the golden path of the headlights and vanished in the blackness under the trees. I went after him with all my speed, of course. But somehow, somewhere, Charles Gifford found superhuman power in those few terrible seconds.

He disappeared.

I shouted in the darkness. The police tumbled out of their cars and yelled to him, too. We started hunting. We scattered everywhere. We. . . . Well, what's the use? Perhaps you recall the headlines of the case.

MAYOR OF MOUNT CLAIRE A SUICIDE

Seizes Live Wires Dangling From
Pole and Electrocutes Self

Yes, he made strange use of the wires which Bud Healy had cut for him. I'll never forget the sight of him, convulsed in the wet grass, with the deadly wires still in his grasp. It wasn't any fun that night, being a private detective. . . . Especially when I had to go upstairs and explain things to Viola Loree!

It only took a little lead and blood mixed with the ice and snow on that hill to turn Detective Flagg's coast into a

Slay Ride

By
G. H. Coxe

TOM FLAGG stepped out of the cigar store on the corner of Tremont and Avery Street and tore open his pack of cigarettes. He lighted one, buttoned his topcoat and stood for a moment, watching the waves of humanity that passed in review.

There were nearly a dozen theatres and movie palaces within a few blocks of where he stood, and something in the very faces of these people who passed him spoke of relaxation, proclaimed that the cares of the day, the serious struggle for existence had been cast aside for these few eagerly awaited hours.

The spirit of the passersby caught Flagg in its grip. His lean, irregularly featured face twisted in a grin. With long, loose-jointed strides, he swung easily down the street and became one of the crowd.

Then the spell snapped with sudden, nerve-tingling finality. A woman's scream, full-throated, terror-stricken, echoed in the street. The crowd checked its course uncertainly.

Flagg slipped through to the curb and raced down the pavement toward the corner of Boylston. Of the scream, he knew no more than the crowd. But instinct, born of long training, had made action synonymous with thought. That cry had come from the vicinity of the Colony Theatre.



"Drop it!" The words froze Flagg to the spot.

He had covered not more than thirty feet when he heard the shot. There was a shout, other half-stifled women's cries. As he ran he saw the signal light on the corner was on orange. Traffic was at a standstill while pedestrians scurried across, or paused in their scurrying to gawk.

The cop in the signal booth jumped to the pavement and struggled with his revolver. There was a grinding of gears, the bark of an open exhaust. Pedestrians scattered wildly. A taxi roared into view and Flagg's hand darted under his left arm.

The picture of the grim-faced driver, the two men in the rear seat, etched itself in his brain. He knew what was coming, was powerless to stop it. One man leaned from the cab, a gun in each hand. The taxi swerved sharply, directly at the cop. There was a sickening thud as the fender clipped the officer, knocked him sprawling. The fellow with the guns leaned farther out as the cab raced on, and fired four shots at the prostrate policeman.

Flagg slid to a stop with his gun up. The man in the rear seat saw him. The ratlike face grinned evilly, the automatic whipped down.

The two fired at the same instant. Something twitched at the sleeve of Flagg's coat as he felt the slap of recoil from his thirty-eight, saw the glass above the man's head dissolve and shower down.

He cursed bitterly as he realized he had missed; cursed the huddled pedestrians on the sidewalk who screened the speeding cab and made another shot impossible.

Slipping the gun in its holster, he spun about and leaped toward the body of the policeman. He dropped to one knee, turned the man on his back. A mounting dread filled him as he saw the blood-streaked head, the stained uniform. He felt fearfully for the pulse. It was still.

FOR a full minute Flagg knelt there beside the slain policeman, silent, mo-

tionless, while the crowd pressed in on him. Until a year ago, when he had set himself up as, what he called, a Special Agent, he had been a member of the Boston police force. And like every man on the force he had the genuine hate of a cop-killer.

The dead officer in front of him had been deliberately murdered. The slug-ridden body had been torn from life as it lay helpless and unconscious on the pavement.

The raucous clanging of an ambulance gong brought Flagg to his feet. There was a bitterness in his blue eyes that gave them the quality of cold steel. The crowd fell back a step from the grim-faced man whose mouth was like a whip scar.

As two internes with a stretcher burrowed their way to the body, a stocky, red-faced man with a shapeless felt hat and worn overcoat pushed in behind them and grabbed Flagg by the arm. Sergeant Brady's deep-set, gray eyes flashed a warning, and for a moment the two men stared at each other silently.

"Speak your piece, Flagg," snapped Brady.

And Flagg told what he knew. He confessed to missing the murderer, showed the torn fabric of his coat sleeve.

"But I don't know yet," he finished, "what it was all about."

"You don't, eh?" Brady's eyes narrowed.

Flagg liked the stocky sergeant. They were rivals now, but they shared a strange friendship founded on mutual respect. They understood each other.

"You don't, eh?" Brady repeated softly. "Well, I'll tell you. That bunch stuck up Marie DeRocca near the Colony Theatre. They got that ninety-thousand-dollar necklace of hers."

"So—" Flagg's lips pursed and he whistled softly. The cold look in his eyes remained, but he cocked one eyebrow and

said: "Well, it looks like you play this one alone, Brady. But if you need me, you know where to look."

He wheeled about and started down the street.

Marie DeRocca's necklace. Flagg knew about it. Publicity had seen to that. If they hadn't played it up in the papers, it wouldn't have been stolen—and that cop would be alive. But he realized the vanity and sentiment of the singer.

Fresh from Europe, she had made her debut in Boston five years ago—had bought the first pearl of that now matchless string in honor of her triumph. She had bought the last pearl three days before and had the necklace made, for sentimental reasons, here in Boston.

Flagg moved slowly toward the theatre. For once he regretted that he wasn't still on the force. He wanted to do something to pay off for that policeman. Now he had no business in the matter, unless—

On impulse he stepped into the crowded lobby, took out one of his business cards and scribbled a brief message on the back. A quick question of the doorman told him the operetta was to go on. He slipped a dollar to an usher.

"See that Madam DeRocca gets this—it's about the necklace."

FIFTY—fifty-one—fifty-two— Flagg sat across the table in Marie DeRocca's suite at the Hotel Barklay two days later, and watched Louis Kresser, her manager, count one-hundred-dollar bills. As the voice droned on with the count, he studied the man.

He was a short fellow with a big head, dead-white jowls and a fatty face. The hands were effeminate, perfectly manicured. Flagg disliked his foppish clothes.

"Ninety-nine—one hundred." Kresser finished and looked up. "There's the ten thousand."

"O. K.," said Flagg. "Now tell me about the pearls."

Kresser went into detail about the string and the clasp. "And," he finished, "there is a sure way to tell. The third pearl from the left of the clasp has a flaw, an off-color streak. You can be sure if you see that—I don't believe it can be duplicated."

He picked up the phone at his elbow. "Send up Mr. Burks."

"Burks, of The Star?" grunted Flagg. "Where does he fit?"

Kresser shrugged and spread his hands, palms up. "He has been following me up. I told him he could have the story first and I want to explain to him just how you are to act."

Flagg's mouth dipped at the corners. "I get it," he growled. "Checkin' up on me, huh?" He grunted disdainfully. "I don't usually solicit business, Kresser. I sent up my card that night on a chance, a chance that something might come up that wouldn't fit with the police. You see—I saw that cop murdered."

"I know." Kresser smiled. "I investigated your record before I called you. But don't forget—our business must have publicity."

"Skip" Burks barged into the room a moment later. He was a blond, green-eyed fellow, with a breezy manner and plenty of crust.

"Hi, Flagg," he greeted.

"Now here is the story," said the manager. "This pearl necklace is worth ninety thousand dollars." Burks grinned at this.

"But the value comes in the matching. The string could not be sold as a unit—too risky. If the pearls are sold separately, they would bring hardly twenty-five thousand to a receiver. That would mean the thieves could scarcely get ten. That was why I advertised ten thousand reward and no questions asked."

"Madame DeRocca is hard pressed to raise that amount—but it is better so than to lose the necklace. I got a reply to my ad this morning." He paused to give the letter to Burks. "Naturally, I could not call the police. They want the thieves—we want the necklace. That is why I called you." He bowed toward Flagg.

"The instructions are simple. These men will pick you up at the corner of Boylston and Fairfield Streets at eight o'clock. You will carry the cash and they will take you to the man who has the necklace. You will get it, after making sure of its authenticity." He looked at Burks and said: "I have described the necklace to Mr. Flagg.

"For this work, we will pay you five hundred dollars."

"And suppose," said Flagg meaningly, "I get the necklace without paying the ten grand. Will you split that with me?"

"But"—Kresser threw up his hands and his voice was excited—"you must take no chances. We want the necklace."

"I know that," rapped Flagg. "But suppose they fall in my lap"—he grinned at Burks—"or something?"

"Then we will give you half the ten thousand," agreed Kresser. "But Mr. Burks is witness to my orders to you. Get the necklace."

"Yeah," drawled Flagg. "And Mr. Burks is witness to a split of the ten grand if I bring back both." He watched Kresser slip the hundred-dollar bills into a heavy envelope and seal it.

"I'll be seeing you around nine o'clock," he said. He picked up his hat, nodded and left the room.

AS soon as he stepped into the hall, he heard another door open. He turned quickly, saw the tall, black-haired woman with her hand on the knob of a door which he placed as the bedroom of the suite. She held a fur-trimmed *négligé*

closely about her statuesque figure. Flagg took off his hat and his eyes fastened on the oval face. He had never seen Marie DeRocca at close range, and he was struck by her genuine beauty.

"You will get my necklace?" The voice was quiet, yet held a throb that seemed to vibrate along his spine.

"Yes, madam."

"Please, do not fail. It was in Boston that I—" She broke off suddenly as emotion gripped her and Flagg said: "I understand."

And he did understand. Pearls were funny. Lots of women didn't like them—they were not flashy, spectacular. One had to have a real love and appreciation of their qualities to feel about them as this woman felt.

"I know you'll get them," she said, and smiled at him. "I'll wait for you at the theatre."

Downstairs in the lobby of the hotel, Flagg went immediately to the bank of phone booths at the rear of the desk. He called Ballard & Co., the jewelers who had fashioned the necklace, to see if there were any other peculiarities in the string that would make identification easier. He was disappointed when he got no answer, then he realized it was after six o'clock. He hung up, looked up another number, and talked for two or three minutes.

When he came back into the lobby, he ran smack into Brady. He could see the scowl on the sergeant's face, almost read the thoughts in his brain.

"Say, Brady," he stalled off the attack, "this officer McCarthy that was killed—has he got a family?"

"Yeah," grunted Brady. "Three kids."

"Any of 'em old enough to help out with expenses?"

"No." Brady grew thoughtful. "I'm afraid it's gonna be pretty tough on 'em." He hesitated, then seemed to remember his original intentions.

"But what the hell're you hangin' around here for?" he rapped.

"I got business here," Flagg grinned.

"Yeah. Monkey business, maybe."

"Maybe."

"And maybe you better watch your step."

"My pal, eh?" snorted Flagg. He wondered how much he could tell Brady.

"I'll let you in on something," he said at last, "that I wouldn't spill to any other cop in town. I'm carrying ten grand—for the necklace."

Brady's eyes widened and he spat out an oath. "I saw that ad in the papers. So DeRocca's comin' across, eh? That guy Kresser swore up and down he hadn't heard from it."

"Well, why not. They want the necklace. You guys keep crowding in on him, scare him to death. You want a pinch—he wants the necklace."

"You talk like a rat." The sergeant's lips curled. "You're the go-between for guys that murdered McCarthy—and you used to be a cop. I got a good notion—"

Flagg checked the angry reply on his lips, kept his temper.

"Be yourself!" he snapped. "I got a job to do—I'm gonna get those pearls. To get 'em I have to go to the guys that got McCarthy, don't I? If I get that far, I'll be a damn sight farther along than you are. I've always given you a break, haven't I?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Then get wise to yourself. Stick close to the phone between eight and nine tonight. I've got a hunch I'm going to run smack into some action. But get this—" Flagg's voice rasped and he thrust his chin forward—"if you put some flattie tailing me—if you gum the works—I'll make a chump out of you before morning."

Brady made noises in his throat as Flagg turned abruptly and left.

AT seven-thirty Flagg was in his apartment getting ready for the evening. As he had told Brady, he intended to get the necklace. It was his job, the job for which he was hired, and he wanted to make good.

Someone had to pay off for Officer McCarthy; someone had to think of his family. If he got the necklace and saved the ten thousand, half of it was his. He needed the money—but not as badly as did Mrs. McCarthy. Five hundred, his own fee, from five grand, left forty-five hundred.

"She ought to get by for quite a while on that," he said, putting his thoughts into half-whispered words.

He took off his coat and got a flat, compact, thirty-two automatic and a length of silken cord from his desk. He cocked one eyebrow at the gun and balanced it lovingly in his palm. Then he tied the cord skillfully around the barrel and butt so that when he let it dangle, it hung with the butt down.

He fashioned a noose, made sure it would hold. This he slipped over his head and twisted it around so that the gun hung flat against the small of his back, just above the hips. He shoved the cord up under his collar, slipped on his coat and walked across the room.

The gun patted against his back, but he knew this movement would be unnoticeable through his overcoat. And he knew the strength of the cord. It was sufficient for an ordinary pull; it would give to a sharp jerk on the gun.

"That ought to do," he said softly, as he put on his overcoat and slipped his thirty-eight in the pocket.

DOWNSTAIRS, outside the apartment-house entrance, Flagg stopped at the sidewalk. Snow had been falling steadily since three in the afternoon and was just beginning to let up.

He hunched his overcoat around his ears to keep the snowflakes from his neck and plodded down the street. The thieves were cagey. Instead of staging this meeting late at night when the streets would be deserted and following them a simple matter, they had picked eight o'clock—and a dead-end street. There would be only two corners to watch, and sufficient traffic to screen their movements.

An electrically lighted advertising clock down on Massachusetts Avenue pointed to five minutes of eight when Flagg reached the corner of Boylston and Fairfield. He stamped the snow from his shoes, lighted a cigarette and his alert eyes were never still.

When he saw the sedan bear down on him he felt of the envelope in his inside pocket, dropped his right hand to the automatic and slipped off the catch.

A rough voice said: "Got the dough?"

"Yeah," said Flagg.

"Get in!"

He glanced at the driver, stopped with his foot on the running board as he ducked his head and looked in on the back seat. Two men, one in each corner, watched him in the reflected rays of the street lights. Their faces were obscure, but he saw one was tall, slender; the other, a heavy-set man, held an automatic.

"Take your hand out of that pocket," lipped the man, "or—"

"Or what?" Flagg's voice purred menacingly. "I've got ten grand in my pocket, and if you think I'm going to let you birds roll me for it, you're crazy. Quit waving that gun around if you want my hand out of my pocket."

He could see the man start to lower the gun and look at his companion. "What the hell," he growled. "We're not gonna tip you off to where we're goin'—we've gotta blindfold you to—"

"That's what you think." Flagg's mouth twisted in a disdainful grimace.

"But I'm going to ride where I can watch you." He got in the sedan and pulled out one of the small seats. "You can pull down all the shades—I'll sit facing you."

With his hand still in his pocket, he sat down, facing the rear. The two men pulled down the curtains, saw that in that position, Flagg could not see where they went. Then the heavy-set man put the gun away.

By careful concentration, Flagg was able to trace their progress to Charles and Beacon Streets. Here the car turned left and a minute later, turned right. The driver shifted gears almost immediately, but even in second the sedan whined a protest.

Flagg knew they were bound for "The Hill," one of Boston's oldest sections. A district honey-combed with narrow, one-way streets. Some were dead-end, nearly all were precipitous in their slopes, where skid-chains were as necessary as the steering wheel to a car in snowy weather. Here, in this relatively small section, was a unique melting pot. On one side the State house, and the bluebloods; on the other, the slums.

THE sedan turned left, turned right and climbed again. For five minutes a succession of turns, climbs and dips, left Flagg completely lost.

Then the sedan stopped. The thin man said: "O. K. Get out—and walk to the entrance opposite this car."

Flagg did as directed because he knew it was his one chance to be taken to the men he wanted to see. He slid from the car, and the two passengers and the driver surrounded him, shoved him toward a darkened entryway.

For one brief moment his alert eyes framed a picture of the street. He saw he was within thirty feet of a corner, but no street sign told him his whereabouts. Darkened, forbidding tenements, built

flush with the sidewalk, crowded in on the curbing.

He caught a momentary glimpse of two small boys trudging through the snow dragging sleds.

Then Flagg was stumbling up steep stairs where a single dim bulb at each landing cast weird shadows over the narrow stairwell. On the third floor, the driver stopped at a door on the left and knocked three times, rapidly; twice slowly. The door opened and Flagg stepped into a lighted room.

It was sparsely furnished with one table and a few odd chairs. The dirty floor was bare. Behind the table sat two men. One was thin; the other big, muscle-bound. The light was behind them so that their hats, pulled low, cast concealing shadows over their faces.

"All right, you two," rapped the bigger one to Flagg's guards. "Go back to your places."

As the door swung shut, Flagg saw the man who had been standing behind it. He stiffened, felt his nerve ends tingle. A leveled automatic, held steady, covered him. But it was the man's face that spread the quick flaring hate through his veins. The pale staring eyes of a killer stared at him out of that thin, rat-like face—the face of the man who had murdered Officer McCarthy.

"Got the money?"

Flagg turned toward the big man behind the table. "Let's see the necklace."

The man reached in his pocket, tossed an exquisitely formed rope of pearls on the table. Flagg's eyes fastened on that soft delicate glow of lustrous pink and he took a step forward.

"Hold it!" The command was a snarl. "Let's see the money."

Flagg hesitated. He glanced at the killer who stood ten feet away to the left of him. He turned back toward the table.

Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out the envelope.

The triumphant curse that rang in his ears told him the story before the big man had scooped up the necklace and thrust it in his pocket. Framed!

"Toss it over!" The command was like the crack of a whip.

Flagg hesitated. He had planned the offensive himself. But he hadn't counted on that killer behind the door. Now—

"Toss it up!" The big man's voice was smooth, cold. "And we'll let you out. If not—if we have to take it from you—" His chuckle was a rattle in his throat. "You know what to do, Leo." He looked at the killer.

FLAGG'S shoulders tensed for action. His eyes flicked to the man with the gun, back to the table. He lifted the envelope and tossed it carelessly forward. The throw was short. The package hit the edge of the table, fell back on the floor. Quickly, he stooped to pick it up, reached for the envelope with his left hand.

His body screened his right arm from the killer who stood at his left. And his right hand was in his coat pocket before the rat-faced man realized what was happening. The man at the table yelled a warning.

Flagg fired across his chest as the automatic belched fire. The two shots sounded as one, but as he felt the slash of hot lead across the back of his neck, just above the collar, he knew his shot was a watch tick ahead.

The killer's face was slack-jawed as the eyes reflected their amazement. Flagg saw him swallow once. He coughed. The gun slipped to the floor. The man swayed, then curled up and fell on top of it.

The envelope was still in Flagg's hand as he straightened and covered the two by the table.

"Keep your hands on the table!" he

rapped. He stepped behind them and took a gun from each man. Then he said: "Now let's have a look at the necklace."

The big man glowered, but he obeyed. Flagg picked up the string, moved over to the light and inspected it. He grunted savagely and tossed it back on the table. He took out a handkerchief and rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel the trickle of blood down his collar.

He said: "One of you call Kresser. Think up a story, get him here."

"Like hell!"

"Maybe, but call him. If you don't, you'll burn for the murder of that cop and Kresser'll go free."

"Call him, Quint," snapped the thin man. "He's in it—he's got to stand the gaff just like us."

The big man grunted. Crafty guile suffused his thick face as he stepped to the telephone by the door. When he hung up two minutes later he had unfolded a reasonable story to Kresser.

"He'll come," he sneered. "We'll have our showdown with him when he gets here. But if you think it's gonna do you any good—"

Flagg laughed and the rasping tones echoed through the room. "That's swell," he said. He leaped to the phone. A moment later he was barking into the mouth-piece.

"Hello—Brady? I told you I'd give you a break, didn't I? Well, here it is. Go to the Colony Theatre in a squad car—and make sure it's full. Watch for Kresser—follow him. He'll bring you to the guys that have the necklace—if he doesn't see you tailing him."

LOUIS KRESSER burst into the room fifteen minutes later. He opened his mouth to speak but the words froze on his lips as he stared into the muzzle of Flagg's gun.

Quint snapped: "Were you followed?"

"Y—yes." Kresser stammered in fright. "A big touring. It turned off Charles right behind me. But it had no chains—got stuck on the hill."

"What a break." Quint's voice was gloating. "They'll never find you now." He whirled on Kresser as a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Did you let your cab go?"

"Yes."

Quint laughed. "Now what, sucker?" Flagg's lip curled. "Sit down, Kresser," he said casually, "while I tell you a bedtime story."

"The original idea was just to snatch the necklace, wasn't it?" Kresser was tight-lipped. "But when I stuck my nose in the set-up, you saw a way to get another ten grand out of it, eh? You called Burks to witness your instructions—so that when they took me for the cash, I'd be the fall guy."

"But Burks didn't come in until after you described the necklace. I wondered about that. I also wondered why, although you said you got the letter in the morning, you didn't call me in until too late to stop in on Ballard and Company. But it didn't matter. I called old Ballard himself."

Flagg snorted disdainfully. "That flaw you so carefully pointed out was in the imitation necklace you mugs had made—after you got the idea of the reward. Ballard told me *there was no flaw in the real necklace.*"

"You played it all ways against the middle didn't you, Kresser? If I'd lost the ten grand and got no necklace—that would've been swell. If I'd been smart enough to hold out the dough, I'd have been slipped the phony string—with your flaw, and I'd still be in the bag. Because you would've denied your description of that off-color pearl."

"Just a sucker, wasn't I, Kresser? You had a sweet idea. But you made one bad mistake. You killed a cop."

Flagg's voice hardened and his eyes flashed menacingly. "I got the guy that killed McCarthy—but that's not enough. You'll all burn for this—you're guilty as hell. Now give me that necklace, the real one."

No one made a move. Kresser seemed petrified with fear. The other two men wore masks of hate. Flagg stepped forward, snatched up the fake necklace, leaned over and slammed the side of his gun against Quint's face.

"Come on. Fork over or I'll take all three of you apart with the butt of this gun. And believe me, it's one job I'd like."

"Give it to him, Quint," groaned Kresser.

Flagg lifted the gun again. Quint cringed. He cursed, finally withdrew another necklace from an inside pocket and threw it on the table. Flagg picked it up.

"That's better," he said and backed toward the door.

"Drop it!"

A hard, round object jabbed at the back of his neck and froze Flagg to the spot. He hesitated, saw the triumphant looks spread over the features of the men he covered. He could get one—but there was business in that voice. He let the gun drop.

Quint said: "Great work, Hymie."

"Yeah," came the voice behind Flagg. "I stayed outside after I brought Kresser up. I heard you cursing—thought I'd better sneak in and have a look."

"O. K." Quint picked Flagg's gun from the floor, took the two belonging to him and the thin man from his pockets. Then he slapped Flagg's hips, felt under his arm.

"How does it look now, sap?" he leered. He gave a gun to the thin man, another to Kresser. "We'll just tie this mug's hands and take him bye-bye."

He disappeared down a hall and returned a minute later with a length of rope. He tossed it to the man behind Flagg. "Tie his hands, Hymie."

"Behind your back, punk!" said Hymie.

FLAGG'S arms hung limply at his side. Yet every nerve, every muscle in his lean body was tense, ready for action. He hesitated, then slowly moved his hands to the small of his back. He felt Hymie's hands touch his, felt the lint of the rope.

Flagg's left hand locked around Hymie's wrist in a grip of steel. He pivoted, twisted his body savagely as the man yelled in surprise. His right hand darted up under his coat. A vicious jerk and the automatic was free. Like a snake striking, his left hand released the wrist and the arm wrapped around Hymie's body.

A tableau of death filled the room. The three guns, held steady, were leveled at him and the luckless man he held as a shield. His own was trained on Quint who stood in the center.

He said: "Drop 'em!" But he knew as he spoke it was useless.

The men stood waiting, recovered now from their amazement, confident they had him. If he shot Quint, the other two would open up, the room would be a slaughter house.

And strangely enough, in that tense moment, it was not his own skin he thought of. He only knew that if he went out there would be no necklace for De-Rocca, no reward for Mrs. McCarthy.

He hugged the struggling, panic-stricken Hymie. Another few seconds and it would be too late. He shifted the gun slightly, gradually until it was trained on the lone light on the wall.

He squeezed the trigger. The room was a well of blackness as he felt the slap of recoil in his hand. He dropped to

the floor as the guns barked, and reached for the doorknob. He found it, jerked it wide and ducked through the opening as wood splintered at his head.

He plunged down the stairs and made the turn before a second volley rang out from above. Footsteps pounded behind him as he gained the lower hall and remembered the men on guard. They were getting out of the car as he reached the entrance.

He fired twice, heard the crash of glass, saw the men duck for cover. As he raced for the corner he muttered: "If Brady's around, that ought to bring him."

He turned the corner, looking for a taxi, a passing car, or shelter. Then his eyes fell on the ragged urchin with a sled. Flagg grunted in satisfaction as the idea struck him. He grabbed the sleigh.

"I'll leave it at the bottom of the hill, kid," he rapped.

He took two long, running steps down the slippery pavement and threw himself flat on his stomach on the sled. Three shots cracked out from behind him. Snow flicked up in his face from one that came close. But he was a tough target now, a flat one, a speeding one.

Below him, down a slope that took his breath away, he saw the thick traffic of Charles Street.

It was a mad, headlong flight now. The sensation of flying gripped him as he flashed by street intersections.

Then he gave his attention to the new menace in the form of onrushing Charles Street. He dug his toes in the snow, knew at once that he could not stop this crazy steed that threatened to carry him to destruction.

Grasping the rope of the sled, he deliberately threw his body over the side. He felt the bite of snow, the shock of impact. The world was upside down as he skidded and rolled over and over. Then

he was flat on his face, sliding headlong.

He got to his feet when it was over and stood uncertainly while he got his breath. Then he laughed. A full-throated, buoyant laugh which was a mixture of delight and relief. His heart still raced, hot blood rushed through his body.

Still chuckling, he brushed himself off. He looked back up the hill and saw the approaching form of the outraged child. He took a five-dollar bill from his pocket, twisted it around the rope of the sled and stepped into Charles Street to flag a taxi.

FIVE minutes later Flagg's cab had circled back around the block and up the hill. Two squad cars now stood in front of the tenement, attracted, as he had hoped, by the gunfire. Three cops and a plainclothesman guarded the entrance.

The plainclothesman was Brady. He walked over to the cab.

"It won't be long now," he said. They're in here—and we got 'em surrounded. We're waiting for more tear bombs." He hesitated. "Where the hell did you call from—where you been?"

"Me?" Flagg laughed again and found it hard to keep the chuckle from his voice. "I've been for a ride—a real, old-fashioned sleigh ride."

"Yeah?" snorted Brady. "Well you talk kinda screwy to me. But it's okay. I'm obliged for the tip—but here's once when you weren't in on the show-down."

"That's what you think." Flagg cocked one eyebrow. "I'm going down to see Marie DeRocca—we got a date."

"DeRocca?" snapped Brady. "What d'ya mean?"

"I've got to return the necklace, haven't I?" Flagg saw the sergeant's eyes pop and he said: "Look me up at my apartment later—I've got a present for Mrs. Mc-Carthy."

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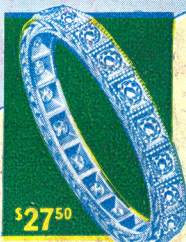
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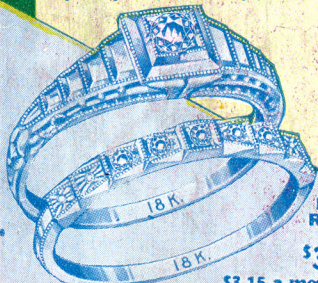
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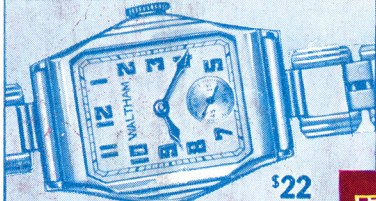
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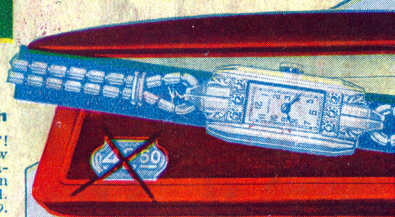
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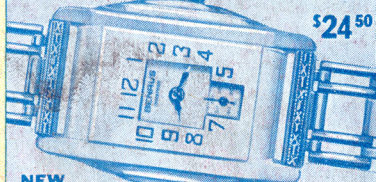
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