

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE

NOVEMBER 15TH

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

TWICE
A MONTH

MAGAZINE



WE DO OUR PART



**MURDER
A LA CARTE**
A CARDIGAN STORY

by **FREDERICK NEBEL**

The JADE JOSS
by **T. T. FLYNN**

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.

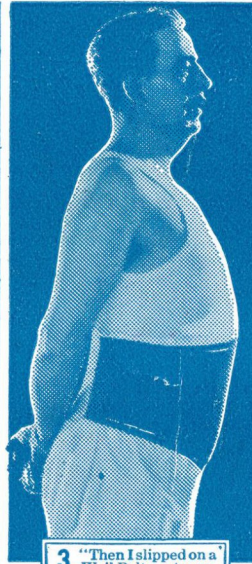
ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWING THE IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT IN APPEARANCE



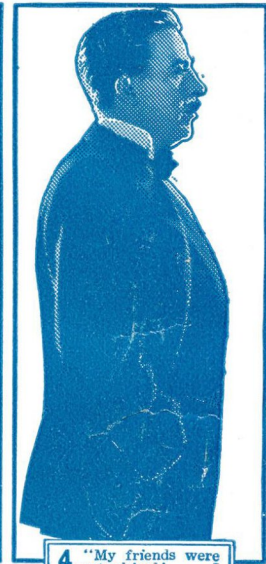
1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach... ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"



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 MESSAGE-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 message-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.

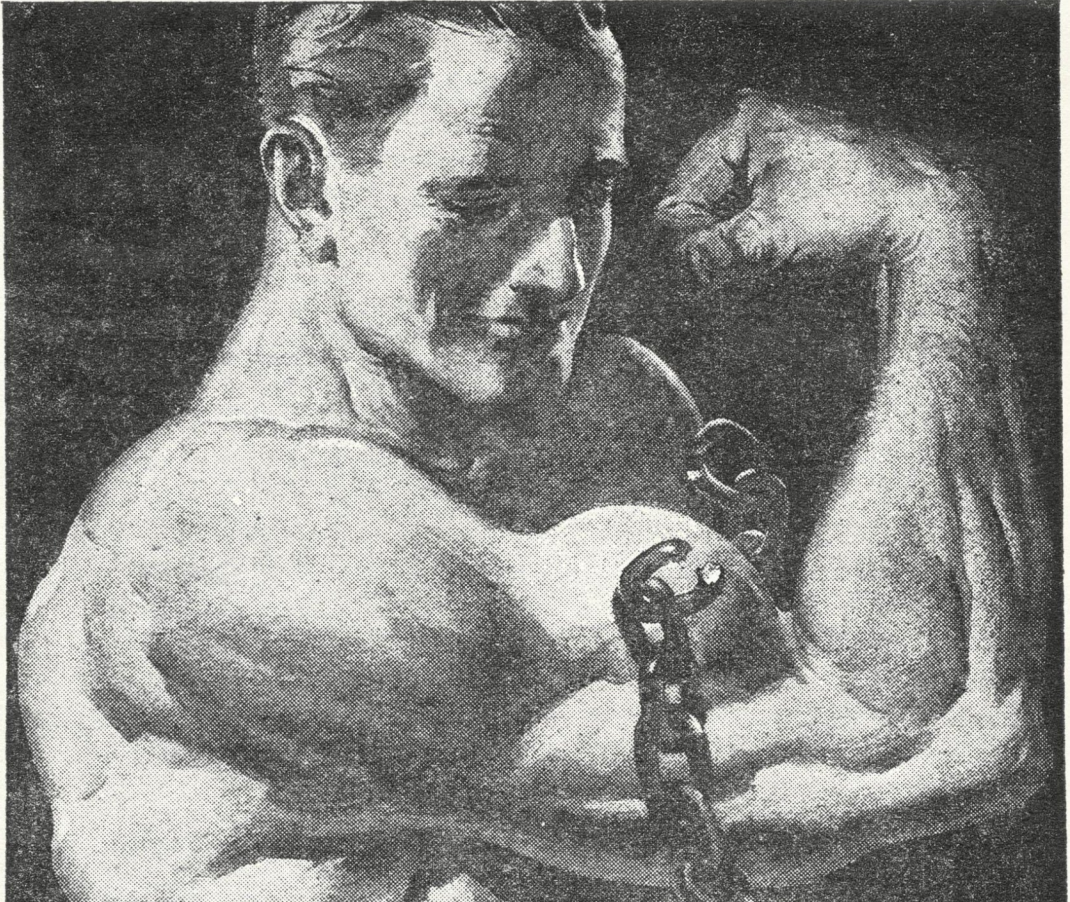
10211 HILL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

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

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



” I will add **2 INCHES TO YOUR BICEPS**
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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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All 6 Books for \$1.00.

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10 DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 9

CONTENTS for November 15th, 1933

GRIPPING NOVEL-LENGTH SECRET-SERVICE MYSTERY

Race after

The Jade Joss..... T. T. Flynn
Along the danger paths of New York's Chinatown as the dread Black Doctor points the way down a ghastly torture trail.

EXCITING MIDNIGHT MURDER TALE

Stumble through the murk that wraps

The Swamp Lake Horrors..... Russ Meservy
In an eerie mystery shroud, blankets double death beneath the phantom fog whisps.

SMASHING CARDIGAN NOVELETTE

Order up a meal of

Murder á La Carte..... Frederick Nebel
And let that big dick from the Cosmos garnish each portion with a little lead from his own blue-kill-kitchen.

BREATH-TAKING ACTION THRILLER

Match wits with

The Cross-Stitch Killer..... Erle Stanley Gardner
As he sews his victims' lips tight only to be skewered on a death needle sharper than his own.

We've had some

Growing Pains..... William Reusswig
The last two years but now we feel DIME DETECTIVE'S reached man's estate. How about it?

Cover—"Hungriily, the rat waited"..... William Reusswig
From The Jade Joss.

Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

Watch for the December 1st Issue

On the Newsstands Now

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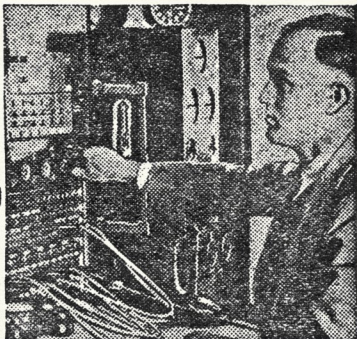
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I am so sure that N. R. I. can train you satisfactorily that I will agree in writing to refund every penny of your tuition if you are not satisfied with my Lesson and Instruction Service upon completion.

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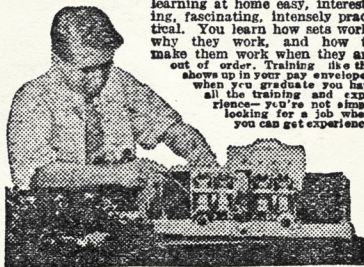
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National Radio Institute, Dept. 3MK7
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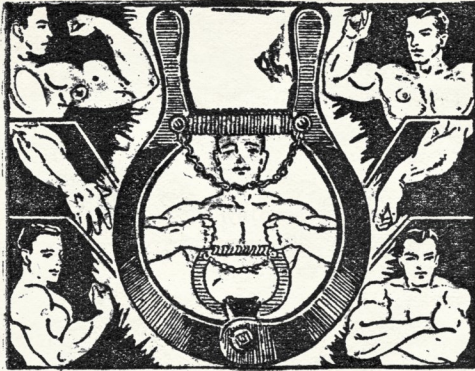
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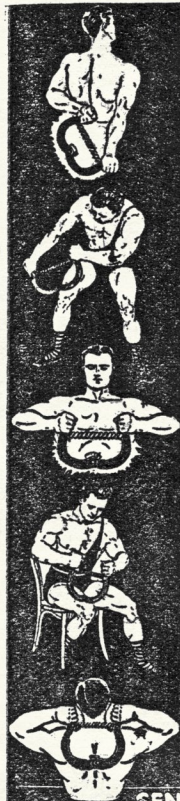
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The German Iron Shoe Muscle Builder . . .

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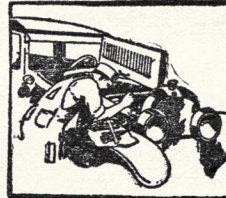
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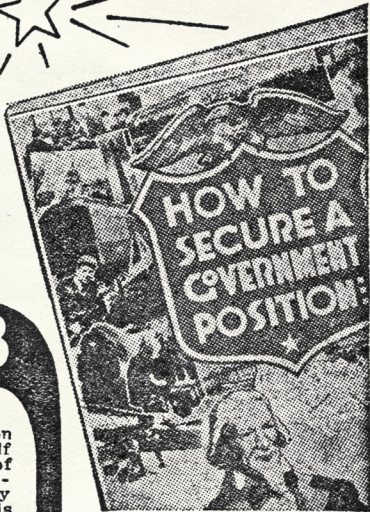
Page by Page

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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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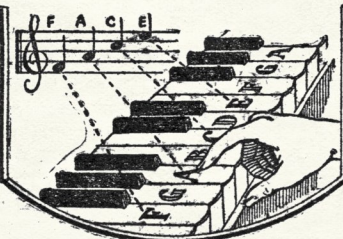
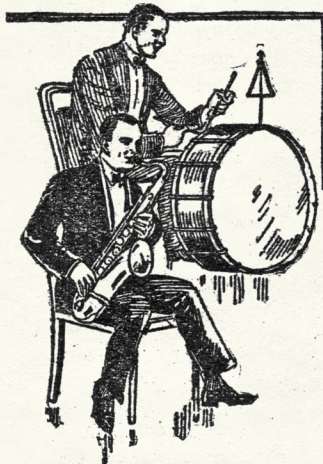
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| Flute | Drums and |
| Harp | Traps |
| Cornet | Mandolin |
| Cello | Sight Singing |
| Guitar | Trombone |
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| Saxophone | Accordion |
| Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor) | |
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| Accordion | |
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note. You simply can't go wrong, for every step, from beginning to end, is right before your eyes in print and picture. First you are told how to do a thing, then a picture shows you how, then you do it yourself and hear it. And almost before you know it, you are playing your favorite pieces—jazz, ballads, classics. No private teacher could make it clearer. Little theory—plenty of accomplishment. That's why students of the U. S. School of Music get ahead twice as fast—three times as fast as those who study old-fashioned, plodding methods.

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..... Instrument?

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The Jade Joss

By
T. T. Flynn

Author of "The Bell-Tower Terror," etc.

It was only a chunk of green tomb jade, but Carl Zaken—the dread Black Doctor—was eager to commit murder for it. And Val Easton—ace Secret Service op—went willingly into the grisly torture chambers of Chinatown to steal it back. For on it depended the success or failure of the Doctor's ghastly plan. Its possession could either kindle or quench a world-wide horror blaze.

CHAPTER ONE

The Woman In Black

THE droning din of predinner traffic was loud in Herald Square, ten stories below, when Val Easton straightened from his traveling bag and said: "That's that, Bradshaw. I'll reserve a berth on the night train before we dine."

His companion, tilted in a chair against the wall, ran a palm over a gray blaze in otherwise black hair, and grunted: "You chaps are always on the move. Might as well be traveling salesmen."

Bradshaw snorted as Easton turned to the telephone. He was faultlessly dressed, without an ounce of spare flesh on his angular frame. His trim mustache was as black as his hair. He looked like a clubman in the middle thirties, without a care in the world. But Bradshaw was



Val leaped up on a chair, shouted, "Keep away from that man!"

forty-eight, a deputy police commissioner, up from the ranks, at home in all the shady corners of the underworld.

Val Easton was harmless looking, seldom hurried, amiable. His slender figure was not one to attract attention. Few people were aware that behind that amiable face was the full power of the American Intelligence Service, sometimes loosely called the Secret Service.

Having reserved a berth on the midnight train to Washington, Easton turned to Bradshaw. "First spare evening I've had to myself in weeks," he commented. "Dinner's on me, and a thousand thanks for the help you've given me."

Bradshaw raised a deprecating hand. "Not at all," he protested. "It's been a pleasure. Fact is, I'm damned envious of your work. I'm looking forward to future contacts with you."

Val Easton chuckled. "Never can tell what's around the corner," he said.

At that moment the phone rang.

"Pardon," Val murmured, and answered it "Yes, this is Easton," he said "Put him on."

HIS face settled into an expressionless mask as a gruff voice came over the wire. It was Gregg, talking from Washington. Gregg, that heavy-set, saturnine man who stood at the right elbow of the State Department, as unknown and overlooked by the public as the actions of that subtle force which he controlled. Gregg—the Chief.

Gregg's voice rasped out: "I was afraid I wouldn't catch you. Got something for you to do: Go to the home of Cartier Beurket on Fifth Avenue. They're having a reception tonight. Formal, I'd say. See Beurket himself. Show him your identification badge. Get from him a sealed envelope—and any personal comments he may make—and bring them here to me in Washington. Want it all

the first thing in the morning. It's important. Got it?"

"Yes," said Val. "Who is he?"

"Cartier Beurket," said Gregg gruffly, "is an antiquarian, a collector. Specializes in Oriental art. He's just back from a six months' collecting trip in China. Been doing some special work for me. I want his report. Come straight to the office from the train."

Val hung up. He was smiling wryly as he turned to Bradshaw. "Sorry," he said. "The dinner's off. Got an evening's work before I make the train."

Bradshaw threw up his hands. "I was afraid of it. Any help I can give?"

"Guess not. Know anything about a Cartier Beurket, on upper Fifth Avenue?"

Bradshaw nodded immediately. "Who doesn't?" he said. "The Beurkets are an old New York family. Filthy with money. He's a bachelor. Used to be rated a great catch, if I remember correctly. Fooled the women. Only interested in his collection, I understand. He's on the board of the Metropolitan museum, and all that.

"I'm familiar with him because his place is one of the danger spots we keep an eye on. He has a collection worth several millions in a private museum built into his house. Beurket's gone half the time; and the place is an open invitation to all the big time crooks who hit town. He takes all the precautions, of course. Special wing built on the house—iron bars, steel shutters, latest in burglar-alarm systems. I've inspected the place."

"Seems to be safe enough," Val agreed.

"More or less," Bradshaw stated. "The house is wired also. Special guards are on duty day and night. It's harder to get into than the Sub-Treasury. But it's a bet that some day some smart crooks will crash through and make a clean-up. And then we'll have Beurket and the in-

urance people on our necks to settle the thing. The department's detailed a couple of plain-clothesmen for the evening. Well—"

Bradshaw shook hands and departed.

THE fall evening was crisp, cool, bracing when Val came out on the street. He shook his head at the carriage starter's lifted hand, and walked over to Fifth Avenue, turned north with long strides. Always, when there was time he walked. His best thinking was done then; and there was much to think about.

Carl Zaken, the Black Doctor, was on his mind now. And Chang Ch'ien, that tall, golden-skinned Oriental. Through the shadowy paths of international espionage tales of Carl Zaken, the Black Doctor, had for years seeped like fantastic nightmares. Master spy, incredibly clever and ruthless, he had been always a menace to those governments he worked against. And Chang Ch'ien, who had come out of the underworld of France a myth of terror, had proved no less dangerous in company with the Black Doctor.

The Black Doctor and Chang Ch'ien were still at large. American Intelligence had no reason to believe that they were not still plotting. So from high quarters had come orders to hunt them down. And it was this hunt that had brought Val Easton to New York, following a slender thread of information which had petered out when fully investigated. In the morning he would be back in Washington, admitting defeat.

He was almost to Forty-sixth Street when the astonishing thing happened.

A taxicab was parked at the curb, motor idling softly. He was abreast of it, paying no heed, when a woman's arm thrust out, beckoning to him. He heard his name called in a clear, vibrant voice.

"Mr. Easton! Mr. Easton!"

Startled, Val stopped, turned. He saw the small black hat, the heavy black

veil swathing her features; and the furred coat, collar turned up around her neck, mantling her figure effectively. Black gloves covered her hands. A woman all in black. And a woman of mystery.

Then her voice metamorphosed into quick, vibrant seriousness. "Mr. Easton—don't go to that house tonight! Go back to your hotel! Go to Washington as you intended!"

There was a haunting familiarity about her voice. Nothing that Val could put his finger on definitely; and yet it was there.

He said: "How do you know who I am, or where I am going? What makes you think I intend to start for Washington tonight? And—pardon me—but how the devil did you know I'd be along here at this time?"

Only one man in New York knew that he was going to Washington tonight. Only one man knew he was going to Cartier Beurket's home.

Only Bradshaw knew that.

But not even Bradshaw knew that Valentine Easton would be walking along here at this time of the evening!

Val himself had not known it twenty minutes before. He had passed through the hotel lobby and come out on the sidewalk, half minded to take a taxi. Not until the bracing night air was on his face had he decided to walk. And now this woman in black was here across his path with full knowledge of his plans!

She laughed again behind the veil, that haunting, vibrant laugh. "It doesn't matter, does it? I know many things about you, Valentine Easton. I know you are going into danger tonight if you go to this house. Turn back. Go to the train. Let someone else carry out this order for you."

Val moved a step nearer, stooped, peered intently at her. But the shadows were thick inside the cab. "You know too much," he said crisply. "You say too little. What house am I going to?"

That was merely to keep her talking while he racked his brains and listened avidly for some slight clue to her identity.

She gave him none. There was no laughter in her voice now. It was sharp, serious. "You know what house. You know I tell the truth. Turn back! One who wishes you well warns you."

THERE was a foreign inflection about her voice. It smacked of Russian, and that baffled him still more. He had met many women in many countries; some Russian women. But of all these he could think of none who might be in New York now; who might know his movements as this woman did; who might be waiting here at the curb, mysteriously uttering her tense warnings.

"I'm interested," Val told her. "What else have you to say?"

"I have said enough. Good-bye."

"Not 'good-bye,'" Val informed her curtly. "We'll go into this further." He reached for the door handle—and suddenly stopped, moved back a step. The small blunt snout of an automatic had slid over the windowsill.

"Don't do that!" she warned.

The motor of the cab speeded suddenly. It lurched out from the curb, swept down the outer traffic lane and left him standing there. The tail-light was dark over the license plate and the curb lights gave too little illumination for him to get the number. The cab swung right on Forty-fifth Street—vanished.

And Val Easton, standing there, swore under his breath. The next moment he was exploding: "Follow that cab that just turned on Forty-fifth!"

A second cab had swerved in to the curb, unnoticed, its driver's hand raised inquiringly. Val wrenched open the door, leaped inside, the machine started with a jerk.

"Ten dollars if you trail it without being discovered!" Val called.

The man threw up a hand in assent, and swung into Forty-fifth Street.

Only one cab was before them. The drawn rear curtain marked it as the machine they wanted. It whirled to the left under the elevated on Sixth Avenue.

Val's driver swung in under the El pillars too. The two machines zig-zagged across town, swung south on Third Avenue.

Through the gray-black shadows they sped downtown. The cross streets fell back in swift succession. Twenty-third—Fourteenth—Cooper Square—and then into the Bowery. Other machines shifted in and out ahead of them as they rolled along the Bowery. And ahead of them, beyond Bayard Street, the cab they followed turned sharply to the right and vanished.

Val knew this district. That cab had turned into Pell Street, into the compact, warrenlike area of Chinatown, lying just off the Bowery.

Val suddenly exclaimed angrily: "What are you doing? Follow that cab!"

The driver had whirled to the right on Bayard in seeming disregard of the machine they followed. He threw over his shoulder now: "Got a hunch, mister. It woulda been too raw, tearin' into Chinatown after them. If they ain't wise yet we're tailin' they'd be plenty quick after we did that."

"Something in that," Val admitted.

The driver shot to the second block with his accelerator down on the floor boards, and with a reckless swerve headed south again, turned and doubled into Pell, slowing to an idling pace. And they rolled sedately into the heart of Chinatown.

To right and left the balconied fronts of the grimy old buildings rose five and six stories. Lighted windows gleamed. Leisurously figures padded along the sidewalk. An elevated train thundered past on the Bowery straight ahead of them.

They were approaching the head of Doyers Street.

"Looks like they've turned into Doyers!" he threw over his shoulder; but the next moment broke out. "That's the hack over there, ain't it?"

They rolled past a taxi pulling out from the opposite curb. Its driver glanced at them without interest. Across the sidewalk a woman was just entering a dimly lit door. A slender woman swathed in a fur coat, with a small, perky black hat visible above the upturned collar. The door closed behind her.

A sign on the window at the left of the door said—*Li Fui Shan, Importer.*

"How about it?" the driver asked over his shoulder.

Val relaxed in the seat and reached for a cigarette. "You win the ten," he declared. "Drive me back uptown."

CHAPTER TWO

The Face at the Window

THE HOME of Cartier Beurket was on Fifth Avenue opposite the south-east end of the Park. It was of substantial brick, three stories high, imposing in its disregard of the modern world which had grown up about it.

A new wing, of brick also, had been built on one side, two stories high. The windows of the new wing were set high above the street level, barred on the outside, curtained inside.

It was well after nine o'clock when Val Easton settled with his driver, and sauntered across the sidewalk. Two machines had just pulled away as they drove up.

A man loitered beside the steps, hands in his topcoat pockets. His glance slid over Val unobtrusively, went on to a machine at the curb. Val grinned to himself as he crossed the small portico to metal-grilled gates standing open. That

plainclothesman had paid little attention to this arriving guest.

The door swung open and Val entered a spacious hall, octagonal in shape, floored in ebony parquet. At the back a sweeping staircase curved up to the second floor. In the next room a string orchestra was playing. He glimpsed couples dancing. Guests in evening clothes were eddying through the hall. Through an undertone of laughter, animated conversation, a black-clad manservant said blandly: "Your name, sir?"

He was all of six feet tall, this manservant. His shoulders were broad, his face lean, hard. His firm, bald politeness held no trace of servility, and his eyes were direct as he waited.

A small table beside the man held a sheet of typed names.

Beurket, Val thought fleetingly, was amply protected here. This man was a guard, probably a detective, sifting the guests carefully.

"I'm not on your list," Val told him. "I'd like a word with Mr. Beurket, please. I'm Valentine Easton."

A tall man, with a snowy mop of white hair, talking with some guests a few feet away, turned. A murmured word to the others and he stepped across.

"I am Cartier Beurket," he said.

For an instant Val's palm held a small gold badge so that only Beurket's eyes could see it. The other nodded. "I've been expecting you, Mr. Easton. The men's cloak room is at the front of the hall upstairs. I will join you there in a few moments."

Val left his topcoat and hat in the upstairs room, lighted a cigarette and strolled out. Cartier Beurket met him at the head of the stairs. Beurket was half a head taller, thirty or forty pounds heavier. His face was tanned mahogany color, bespeaking long periods spent outdoors in all kinds of weather. He had a

hard, fit look, with his aquiline nose, high forehead and steady blue eyes.

Unspoken liking leaped between the two, hinted at only by mutual smiles.

Val said: "I'm a bit foggy about all this. I was ready to push off to Washington tonight when Gregg called me."

Beurket nodded. "I was to go down there myself, but I find I can't make it for a few days. Gregg doesn't care to wait. The papers I am sending to Gregg aren't quite ready. I'll slip up to my study shortly and finish them. Can you spare an hour or so?"

"With pleasure," Val assured him. "Just so I make the night train." "No trouble about that," Beurket replied. "While you're waiting, join the guests. I am going to open the gallery shortly. You may find it interesting."

AS THEY turned to the stairs Val said: "Have you any reason to anticipate trouble tonight, Mr. Beurket? I was warned not to come here."

Beurket glanced at him from eyes suddenly frosty, alert. "Who warned you?" he asked.

"I don't know. A veiled woman. I can't place her. I understand you're just back from the Orient. You've evidently been doing some intelligence work for the department. Did you bring back any enemies that might come to a head here tonight?"

"No," Beurket said positively. "I'm certain of that. In China I kept my eyes open for certain things Gregg was interested in. But no one over there had any reason to suspect such was the case. You weren't told what trouble to expect?"

Val shrugged. "Sorry—no. But the circumstances were so unusual I have no reason to believe the warning was not given in good faith."

They were halfway down the staircase now. Beurket's laugh was that of a man without nerves.

"I doubt if there's any cause for alarm, Mr. Easton. The place is well guarded. This is not an elaborate evening. There are no jewels or valuables among the guests worth stealing, I'm certain. My collection has never been bothered. The most valuable pieces are kept in a special vault to which my sister and I alone have the combination. It would take at least twenty-four hours for the best equipped cracksmen to penetrate it. It is impossible to short circuit the alarm system or circumvent it."

Beurket chuckled. "Enjoy yourself while you're waiting. Ah, here's my sister, Adelaide. May I present Mr. Easton, who is going to save me a trip to Washington, Adelaide?"

Swift comprehension flickered in Adelaide Beurket's eyes. She was almost as tanned as her much older brother. Not more than twenty-four or -five, this girl. She was tall, slender in a sheathlike evening gown of wine-colored velvet. Brown tints made her eyes deep and shadowy. Her hair was waved close along her head and caught low in a knot at the base of her neck. A wide, generous mouth, a direct look, and a healthy, alert manner made her as likeable as Cartier Beurket himself.

For all of ten minutes he was with her, strolling about, meeting the guests, chatting briefly. Adelaide Beurket apparently knew who he was, why he was there. She mentioned that she had been to China with her brother, acting as secretary.

Val told her of the warning, watched her reaction. Adelaide Beurket quirked her lips, frowned, shook her head. "It's Greek to me," she stated. "But if Cart says there's no reason to worry, I suppose there isn't. We're rather well guarded here."

She left him presently. Val moved about alone, thinking. He could not rid his mind of that black-veiled woman who

had vanished into the shadowy shop of Li Fui Shan. The name of Li Fui Shan was not familiar. But it sharpened memories, released a flood of conjectures. A vague, disquieting sense of impending disaster was taking possession of him.

CARTIER Beurket had vanished, in his study, probably, finishing his report to Gregg. Now and then Val caught a glimpse of Adelaide Beurket playing the perfect hostess, smiling, animated. The guests had about all arrived. Shortly they would be admitted to the *piece de resistance* of the evening—Cartier Beurket's latest acquisitions.

Then with no more warning than that, Val's premonitions were borne out.

Val was standing at the foot of the staircase in the big octagonal hall when the girl descended rapidly and stopped before him. He had met her—a Miss Elston. She had a dry, dusty, bookish look about her, despite the soft white evening gown she wore. Shell-rimmed glasses seemed to belong on the face.

"Where," she gasped, "is Mr. Beurket?"

Her face was chalk-white. Her eyes wide and frightened. Her fingers were crumpling and uncrumpling a handkerchief, and she gave every indication of an unnerved, terrified woman.

"I can't say exactly," Val told her. "I think he's busy. Is something wrong?"

"I saw a face!" she told him breathlessly. "It was near the window when it appeared. Horrible, ghastly! It looked in, saw me and vanished!"

Val put a reassuring hand on her cold fingers. "What did it look like?"

Miss Elston gulped. "I can't tell you," she replied uncertainly. "It—it was ghastly! He wore black, I saw that. A hat was pulled low over his face. The face was grinning as it looked in. I could

see teeth in the horrible mouth. And the eyes seemed to glitter. When they saw me the face was gone instantly."

Val said to Miss Elston calmly: "What room were you in?"

"The back bedroom on the right side of the hall," she babbled. "I stepped in there to see how it was furnished. The light was on when I entered."

"Quite so," Val said calmly. "I'll attend to this, Miss Elston. I suggest you mingle with the guests and forget it."

She shuddered, forced a smile tinged with relief. "I will," she agreed.

"And don't say anything about it," Val cautioned.

"No," she promised, "not a word."

ADELAIDE Beurket had gone into the next room where they were dancing. Val found her in there, at the back, talking to an elderly man with a Vaadyke and glistening prince nez. She looked up as Val approached, caught his eye, came toward him with a questioning smile.

"Where is your brother?" asked Val.

"In his study. Why?"

"Miss Elston saw a face at one of the back bedroom windows. The room at the right of the hall, I believe."

She became grave instantly. "Impossible! Unless someone had a ladder—"

"Perhaps someone has."

She shook her head. "No—I can't see how. The outside of the house is guarded. It always is at night."

"Queer," Val admitted. "But she seems positive that she saw something outside the window. I say—would you mind showing me the back of the house before you disturb your brother?"

She took him through French doors at the rear of the room, through a big dining room where a white-aproned maid was busy at a sideboard; and on back to a butler's pantry, and a spotless green-

and-white kitchen where other servants were working. She closed the back door behind them.

It took some moments for their eyes to get accustomed to the darkness. She said under her breath: "One of the watchmen should be back here somewhere."

A tiny formal garden lay behind the house, L-shaped. The newer wing built to hold Cartier Beurket's collection did not extend back as far as the house itself. On the right an apartment house towered high; on the left were the higher walls of another great building. Inexorably the city had closed in, until now this old mansion with its tiny walled back yard was an oasis in a wilderness of stone, brick, steel. The traffic out on Fifth Avenue sounded muted, far away.

"I'll look them up while you go back in," Val suggested. "It's a bit cold out here, and you're not wearing a wrap."

"No. I'd better go too," she decided. The men won't know you."

So they went together along a flagstone walk; and as they went Val looked up at the back of the house, rising three stories above them. There was no back porch. Just the house wall, three sheer stories. Windows on the second floor glowed with light. Those on the third floor were dark. Along the whole back of the house was no spot where a man might peer into one of the windows.

They turned the house corner along a fringe of low-trimmed bushes in the shadowy ell behind the annex. Adelaide Beurket walked slightly ahead, confident, unhurried.

But suddenly she wavered, lurched forward. A sharp little cry burst from her.

Val jumped forward, exclaiming: "What is it?"

"Look out! Don't step on it!"

But her warning was too late.

CHAPTER THREE

The Crimson Lotus

VAL'S foot struck something soft, yielding. He recoiled from the feel of it, caught in his pocket for matches.

A man was lying there on the flagstones. Lying face down, arms stretched out limply above his head.

Adelaide Beurket uttered a low exclamation of dismay. "It's one of the guards!" she cried under her breath.

Val held the flaring matches close as he bent, and turned the figure over. It came limply, slack dead weight. Curly black hair lay damp and close to a bare head. A pallid face turned up to them, ghastly in the matchlight. The open eyes gleamed white in a fixed stare.

"He's dead," Val said, straightening.

Val bent again, looked; frowned. "He seems unmarked. It's queer . . . wait."

As the matches died out Val hastily lighted others. He held them close to the coat front, and the yellow glow limned a damp, darker stain against the dark fabric of the coat. In that stain a half inch slit through the woolen threads was barely visible.

"Better not look," Val urged quietly.

He lifted the coat collar and looked beneath. The tiny slit was over the heart. A crimson stain, splotted the shirt. And the shirt was slit too, where a thin, keen blade had driven through to the flesh beneath.

"He was stabbed!" Val told her. "We want the police. Take me in to your brother. Can we go around by the front and notify the detective on duty there?"

She did not question his decision. "This walk leads to the front. But—but there should be another man on duty back here."

"I'll have the man out front look for him. Don't want to waste any time."

They were already skirting the side

of the annex. As they went Val noticed it had no windows in the back or on the side. They walked on cement beside it, and a high brick wall rose at their right. Beyond the wall towered the big apartment house.

They came out through a stout iron gate into the semi-glow of Fifth Avenue, where pedestrians trod the sidewalks, and automobiles and lumbering busses passed.

Automobiles were parked along the curb; chauffeurs idling in some of them. And near his post at the foot of the house steps the detective still loitered unobtrusively.

"There's a dead man at the back of the house," said Val. "One of the guards. May be another back there also. A guest claims she saw a face outside one of the second-story windows."

The transformation in the other was amazing. His lethargy left him like a discarded coat. "My partner went back there a few minutes ago!" he jerked out. "I've been waiting for him. Lord! I'd better telephone the precinct station."

"I'll do that," Val said. "You search the back yard and look for that man who was outside that window."

He spoke more crisply than he should. He knew it at the quick stiffening of the other; but there was no time to explain. He turned to the steps before the detective had time to reply.

THE BIG octagonal hall inside was strangely deserted. The orchestra was playing softly, but the guests were no longer dancing. A faint hum of voices over the music in the next room marked where they were.

Adelaide Beurket said to the guard at the door, "Has Mr. Beurket taken them into the gallery?"

The guard looked down at her alertly. Despite her remarkable control one could see that she was under a strain.

Val spoke: "Where's Mr. Beurket?"

A shrug answered him. "I can't say, sir. I have not left the door here. I heard Jennings, the butler, announcing that Mr. Beurket wished everyone to come into the gallery."

Adelaide Beurket said quickly: "We'll find him in there."

"Watch this front door carefully," Val instructed the guard. "Let no one in or out until you are sure who they are. A man has been killed at the back of the house."

He left the doorman gaping after him, and followed Adelaide Beurket inside. A number of the guests were bunched at one side of the room.

On the wall there, a long, silver-embroidered tapestry curtain had been drawn aside, revealing a low doorway. By standing on tiptoe when he reached the edge of the jostling group Val was able to see the massive steel edging of the door Bradshaw had mentioned.

It was open now, and through the entrance the guests were filing slowly. Soft, shaded light was visible in the annex which housed Cartier Beurket's treasures.

Short of shoving rudely there was no way to get through the jam in the vault doorway. Adelaide Beurket raised her voice. "If Mr. Beurket is in the gallery, will someone please ask him to step out here?" She took Val's arm and drew him back where her words could not be overheard. "I don't believe Cart is in there!" she exclaimed under her breath. "If he had been down here he certainly would not have asked the butler to invite them into the gallery. Cart would have done it himself."

"Probably busy in his study," Val suggested. "He promised to finish the report I came for as soon as possible."

She caught his arm, said with an apprehensive catch in her voice: "I—I'm afraid. It isn't like Cart to do a thing like

this. Will you come up to the study with me?"

"Of course."

SHE LED him to the front hall where the black-clad door man was standing flat-footed at his post, shoulders hunched and one big fist clenched as if expecting trouble momentarily. He spoke to them with suppressed excitement. "D'you need any help, Miss Beurket?"

"None, thank you, Wilkins," she refused.

She tapped swiftly up the stairs ahead of Val. She hurried to the front of the hall, opened a door. The room was pitch black. Val was at her shoulder when she clicked the light switch.

For the space of half a dozen heart beats she stood there staring, while Val moved in beside her. On all four sides shelves of books reached clear to the ceiling. In the opposite wall a fireplace was topped by a carved mantel on which sat three slender, graceful Chinese vases. To the left of the fireplace, before the drawn drapes of a window, was a small, flat-topped desk and a chair. Before the fireplace, was a massive, leather-covered easy chair; and on the other side of the chair was a low mahogany table, stacked with books, periodicals, smoking jar, pipes and an ash tray. Those were the physical details of Cartier Beurket's study—but Cartier Beurket himself was not there.

Then Val saw what she saw; was already starting across the room when she exclaimed: "Those papers on the floor! Cart never left them like that!"

The desk top had been swept clean of all papers. They littered the floor around the chair. Envelopes, typewritten sheets, bills, documents, scattered in confusion.

Adelaide Beurket stopped at the corner of the desk. "These were all in order on the desk two hours ago!" she burst

out. "I saw them! Cart's mail had accumulated. He hadn't had time to go through it yet. And now—and now, look at that!" She pointed.

The desk drawers had been opened and closed carelessly. Val looked in one and found it looted. The aroma of tobacco smoke was still strong on the air. A pipe lay on the green desk blotter with a scattering of ashes at the mouth of the bowl, as if the pipe had been dropped hastily, Val bent, blew the ashes and uncovered two charred spots on the blotter, touched the pipe bowl and found it still warm. He scowled at the jumbled mass of papers on the floor as he lifted the telephone receiver off the cradle and dialed police headquarters.

A few crisp words to headquarters sketched what had happened, and Val turned away from the telephone.

"Your brother was here a few minutes ago," he said. He didn't make this mess, of course. He probably went down to the gallery after all, and someone went through his desk after he left. You go down," Val urged, "and look for him in the gallery. I'll poke around up here before the police come."

"No!" she refused flatly. "I don't think he's down there. I'll stay up here."

Silently Val turned and scanned the room.

TWO WINDOWS were set in the bookcase at their right. They looked down on Fifth Avenue, he saw, when he pulled the drapes. Both windows were locked on the inside. No hiding place in here. Val's eyes dropped to the great blue-and-white rug covering the floor. It was a beautiful lotus-flower design.

Val lifted his head, nodded at a single door set in the wall opposite. "I'll have a look in there," he said casually. "Be out in a minute."

He walked to the door without looking at the rug again. He did not want her to see what he had seen. It was plain enough, and yet the design of the rug masked it from the casual glance. Two tiny dark stains by one of the lotus flowers. Two little stains, red against the white, where there was no red in the design.

There was another drop, and another, and another, widely spaced across the soft background of the rug, drawing a gruesome trail to that single door set in the bookshelves. Adelaide Beurket moved toward the door as Val did. She obviously intended to enter the room also. Val did not try to stop her. She sensed something was wrong; and to tell her might anticipate more than the truth.

The door opened to his touch. The switch clicked. The room was flooded with light; a bedroom masculine, severer with dark, hand rubbed furniture, a few Chinese prints on the walls.

"He's not in there," she said, and there was sudden relief in her voice.

A gruesome trail was on this side of the door also. One drop—another drop—and still another, leading inexorably to a second door across the room.

Val said: "What door is that?"

"The closet."

"I think," said Val, "you'd better go back."

"Why? Why do you think so?"

Their mutual restraint made the growing tension more electric. Val drew and expelled a regretful breath. "I'll tell you in a moment," he replied—and stepped to that closet door, whipping out his handkerchief as he went. He laid the white linen square over the knob and opened the door. At his shoulder Adelaide Beurket whimpered suddenly.

"It's Cart! Oh dear Lord! He too!"

IT WAS there almost as Val had expected to find it. A huddled form on the floor of the closet. A motionless form as lax and still as that lifeless body in the night behind the house. The shining patent-leather shoes, the formal evening clothes, and, dimly, the shock of white hair back in the closet marked Cartier Beurket at first glance.

He used scanty ceremony in dragging Cartier Beurket out of that cramped hide-away into which he had been thrust. Val was red-faced, panting as he lay Beurket face up on the bed and examined him swiftly.

Adelaide Beurket cried fiercely: "He's been murdered!"

"No," Val objected. "No, I don't think so." For when his fingers settled on Beurket's wrist they detected the faintest beat of a pulse.

Val rapped: "Get an ambulance at once!"

She fairly flew into the next room. As he bent over Beurket again, he heard her sharp, imperative tones at the telephone.

Beurket's shirt front and waistcoat were bloody. The same tiny, familiar slit was visible in the cloth. Beurket too had been stabbed over the heart with a long, slender blade. But this stroke had not gone true.

Nothing could be done now. Skilled medical attention was needed. Val went into the next room.

"Is there a gun up here?" he asked Adelaide Beurket.

"No . . . what are you going to do?"

He was already leaving the room, grim-faced, quick-moving. "Keep an eye on him," Val directed from the door. "Better lock yourself in."

He ran to the stairs. Short minutes had elapsed since they had hurried up with foreboding; now, as he ran down two steps at a time, more foreboding

gripped Val. He barked to the big guard at the door: "Has anyone come down since we went up?"

"No. What's the matter?"

"Plenty. Beurket has been stabbed. Police and ambulance are on their way. Collar anyone who comes down."

Wilkins' hard face set. He dropped his perfect grammar. "Won't do me a hell of a lot of good to watch these steps. There's a back flight too."

"Damn!" Val exploded. "I didn't know about them. Try to watch both stairs."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Black Doctor

VAL WENT swiftly across the polished floor to the vaultlike door of the treasure gallery. The orchestra was still playing softly behind the palms. Val smiled mirthlessly, stepped into the humming life that filled the gallery.

Two stories high the vaulted roof swept overhead. Great bronze chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and through intricate frillwork backed by colored glass the light dropped in a soft, even glow.

Cartier Beurket's wealth had drained every corner of the Orient. Marvelous old tapestries hid the entire expanse of wall space. Great glass cases held the beauty of long dead dynasties. There was pottery and porcelain, enamel ware and glass, bronze, lacquer ware, and marvelous carvings in wood and ivory and jade. There were textiles of beautiful silks and embroideries.

Val pushed in among the well-dressed guests, grouped about half a dozen big glass cases in a single row.

He glimpsed the contents of one case. Jade. Dozens of pieces, intricately

carved, superbly colored. Mutton-fat jade, milky and opaque; and light-green jade, and lavender jade; bright apple-green jade and white jade spotted with the same green. Bowls, vases, bells, amulets, necklaces . . .

Moving through the crowd Val looked to right and left sharply. He saw a tall, portly butler standing apart, and went to the man. "Are you Jennings?"

"I am, sir?"

"Did you let these people in here?"

"I did, at Mr. Beurket's request, sir," the butler answered with growing frostiness.

"You saw him in his study?"

The butler shook his head. "Mr. Beurket sent word by one of the maids. He was busy and requested me to open the gallery door and admit the guests."

"I see," said Val—and suddenly whirled around as a woman cried out: "What is this man doing?"

Her voice had come from the end of the row of cases. At that spot the people suddenly began to mill in confusion, jostling together. Some were trying to get away from the case, some pressing in toward it.

Standing on tiptoe, Val could see over the heads to where that cry had been uttered. He saw a figure straighten beside the end case, a tall figure dressed in formal black evening clothes. The man stepped from the case, snarling.

For an instant, over the milling heads, he and Val looked at each other. And for the first time that night Valentine Easton felt his blood run cold. In all the world only one man could be that tall, stooped figure with the pale, bony, cadaverous face and blazing eyes. Only one man could have penetrated among two score carefully sifted people within this guarded domain of Cartier Beurket. There had

been some attempt at disguise, a little padding of the cheeks from inside, a few lines carefully changed on the face by clever shading; but Val would have known that face anywhere.

It was Carl Zaken, the Black Doctor!

VAL EASTON was perhaps the only man in that softly lighted gallery who realized the terror among them. Master spy, incredibly clever, cold blooded and ruthless, the Black Doctor killed without the slightest hesitation. Clear now was that dead body of the guard; the savage knife thrust dealt Cartier Beurket. How Carl Zaken had entered, what his purpose was did not matter. It was enough that he was here.

Val was unarmed. He reached for an ebony pedestal on which sat the small bronze figure of some Chinese god. He caught it up, leaped from his perch and started for the crowd of milling guests. The heavy bronze weight was comforting.

He caught a glimpse of the Black Doctor still backing away; grinning now that pale, ghastly grin that could be so terrifying, serving as it did as a window for the soul beneath. Zaken carried something in one hand and with the other was reaching inside his coat.

"Get back from that man!" Val cried out. "He's dangerous!"

But in the confusion ahead of him his words were lost. He passed the end case where the Black Doctor had been standing. A small powerful instrument had ripped the lock and hasp clear out of the wood. On a bed of soft black velvet in the case one single object had been displayed. It was gone now. The confusion was increasing.

"Let me through!" Val shouted, as he pulled and shoved.

And suddenly without warning the lights went out.

An instant later in the pitch blackness

a woman cried out, choking. Men strangled, gasped. Val felt a sudden smarting in his eyes and nostrils.

Tear gas had been loosed. Already he could feel the burning sensation in his eyes, the sudden flood of tears; and he started to gasp and strangle.

Val won past the last staggering figure, careened off a case and went forward three paces before he opened his eyes. The big gallery was still in tomblike blackness. Wild confusion lay behind him as he plunged forward. As he had guessed, there was no gas here back of where the Black Doctor had been standing. The weapon, a small fountain-pen gas gun, had shot the deadly fumes into the crowd of guests; and for some moments it would not drift back of its point of origin.

Zaken apparently had vanished.

Val lost his way. It was some time before he located the door and passed through, leaving behind mad confusion in which women's screams, men's oaths were lost in general strangling helplessness.

Midway of the polished floor he met another figure coming toward him. A brusque voice barked: "Who's it?" A big hand clapped on his shoulder.

"That you, Wilkins?"

"Yeah. Oh—Mr. Easton!"

"Hell's busted loose! Beurket's collection has been raided. Anyone gone out the front door?"

"Nope. But somebody just lammed upstairs in a hell of a hurry. Didn't stop when I asked who it was."

"Let's have your gun, Wilkins! . . . Don't argue! I need it! That was the crook going upstairs! He's a killer!"

"Here you are then." Wilkins thrust his automatic into Val's hand.

WILKINS was swearing with amazement as Val made for the stairs. He was halfway up when he heard a shriek-

ing siren. The police, long overdue, or the ambulance had arrived.

Panting, Val stopped at the head of the stairs and listened. In the dark close by Adelaide Beurket burst out: "Who is it? What is wrong downstairs?"

"Easton. Trouble in the gallery. A thief used tear gas. Did you hear anyone come up these steps?"

"A few moment ago someone ran up, made no answer when I called, and went on to the third floor."

"What's up there?"

"Bedrooms, bath, guest rooms. The servants who live in have their rooms up there too."

A fist hammered loudly on the front door.

"Better go down and take charge!"

Val urged. "If that's the police, tell 'em to surround the house. Have the master light switch investigated. The current must have been cut off there."

The third floor stairs were close. Val took them more slowly, warily. He still had the heavy bronze statue in his left hand, Wilkins' automatic ready in his right.

Zaken must be on that third floor. And it was dark too—still, deserted. The quiet up here was ominous. Val slipped toward the back of the hall, guiding himself by an elbow brushing the wall.

He moved deliberately toward the back room on the right side. The dry, bookish Miss Elston had seen the face just below it. Her description now was understandable and like a guiding signpost.

She had seen the Black Doctor there on the sheer outside wall. How he had gotten there was still a mystery. But Carl Zaken must be leaving by the way he had entered.

The bedroom door was closed, but not locked. It opened to Val's touch. Fresh air blew against his face. Gun ready, he edged into the room.

Something sinuous and snakelike jerked across the window as he looked out.

Val put the bronze statue on the floor and grabbed out the window. His hand closed on a ladder made from thin, strong silk cord and light bamboo cross pieces, not more than six inches wide; a ladder that could be rolled up into a small bundle, carried easily, and yet by which a man could descend and mount a sheer wall like this with no trouble.

He looked up. The ladder was still swaying, jerking. He was in time to see a dark figure clambering over the edge of the roof. Leaning out, Val shot at it—once—twice. . . .

Thundering reverberations crashed on the night and echoed back from the high apartment walls nearby.

He could not tell whether he had hit. The figure disappeared. A moment later the silk and bamboo ladder was jerked up. Val caught it, held on. The drag above ceased instantly. A moment later the ladder fell down about his hands.

Val yanked it in, left it lying across the window sill. From the edge of the roof above a voice spoke.

"That will be you, Valentine Easton."

Without answering, Val shouted from the window: "Anyone in the yard?"

He was not answered.

On the roof Carl Zaken laughed at him. "Good night, Easton. Next time I'll deal with you more thoroughly!"

"You're cornered up there," Val called. "The police are here. The house is surrounded. I'll deal with you myself in a few minutes."

"An incurable optimist," Carl Zaken mocked him. "I was expecting you, Easton. I'm sorry you didn't get in my way. Give my regards to Gregg, in Washington." And the Black Doctor was gone.

Val hauled the ingenious ladder into the room, slammed the window down, locked it, and hurried downstairs.

There was no attic to the house. A man could not leave the roof without a ladder. Zaken's ladder was locked inside. Those were the facts, but Val was not sure of them. That cunning mind on the roof would not walk into a trap.

CANDLES had been lighted on the first floor. The suffering guests had fled from the gallery, were overflowing outside. Val saw them milling on the sidewalk, wiping their eyes, choking.

An ambulance stood at the curb. A police patrol car was parked behind it. Patrolmen were pushing among the guests inside the front door. A white-coated interne, flashlight in one hand and black bag in the other, hurried to the stairs with Adelaide Beurket.

Val said to a uniformed officer: "Watch the outside of the house. The killer's up on the roof! He won't be down this way!"

The stalwart patrolman, ignoring a weeping woman who caught at his arm, said: "If he's on the roof, we'll go up after him, mister."

"You can't. He went up on a rope ladder and then cut it at the top and threw it down."

"Ain't that nice? Then he's up there until we grab him."

"I doubt it," said Val through his teeth. "He had to get up there some way before he could fasten a rope ladder, didn't he? He can come down the same way." Val left the puzzled cop wrestling with that idea and shoved outside.

An arm's length from the open gate at the corner of the annex, he found the detective who had been standing guard at the front steps.

"Why the devil aren't you in the rear?" Val snapped at him. Again, without thinking, he used the wrong tone. The man took quick offense.

"What business is it of yours?" he retorted illnaturally. "I've been back

there! My partner's dead and another one has the back of his head caved in. No one else in the yard. No way to get out of it over that high wall. I'm waiting to collar anyone who tries to come out this way."

Val pocketed the automatic which he had carried in his hand from the third floor. "All right," he said. "Come on back with me."

"Nix!" the detective refused sourly. "I'm watching this gate until things clear up some."

Val went alone. The back yard was as he had left it, quiet, still, isolated from the teeming city. The dead body still lay on the flagstone walk. The brick wall surrounding the yard was all of fifteen feet high. A quick circuit of it showed no way a man could have climbed it. The house remained dark. But the back door was open; he heard low excited voices there; and then the harsher tones of authority. "This the back yard? Anybody come in this way?"

Val went toward the rear steps, made his presence known, said to the patrolman who emerged from the house: "Watch the roof."

The patrolman moved out into the yard, looked up, grunted: "If there's a man up there he's still there. No way he can get down."

"Looks that way," Val agreed. "If he does try it, shoot first and talk later. He'll do the same." Leaving the officer there, Val went out front.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Mask of Kuan Ti

THE sidewalk was jammed with guests and a curious crowd. More police arrived. No man could leave that roof without discovery.

The ambulance drove off with a warning twirl of the siren. A second siren

swept along Fifth Avenue and swerved in to the curb. It was a hook and ladder truck from the fire department. An extension ladder was placed against the front of the annex. A detective and two patrolmen went up the ladder with guns ready in their hands. Flashlight beams glinted, wavered on the annex roof. A fireman took a scaling ladder up. They were on the house roof a few minutes later. Val pushed through the crowd on the sidewalk to the front steps. He was starting into the house when a hand caught his arm.

It was Bradshaw, deputy police commissioner.

Val said, "Come inside. I want to talk to you." And there, Val hastily outlined what had happened.

Candles were still burning in the big octagonal hall. Bradshaw studied Val shrewdly in their wan, flickering light. "You know who the thief was?"

"Yes. Carl Zaken, the man I've been after for the past week."

"Hell!" Bradshaw exclaimed, startled. "He's not a man to make a play like this."

Bradshaw fingered his trim black mustache, frowning. "How the hell did he get up the roof if all he had was a rope ladder?"

"You tell me," Val suggested.

Bradshaw snorted. "We'll sweat it out of him when they get him."

"I doubt," said Val slowly, "if they get him. I've got a hunch he's not up there on the roof now."

The lights flashed on suddenly. A helmeted and rain-coated fireman carrying an electric lantern tramped out of the rear regions of the house. He recognized Bradshaw, lifted the light in greeting and said: "Somebody snatched a fuse out of the fuse box down in the cellar."

Val grinned wryly at Bradshaw. "A little more mystery for you."

A plainclothesman hustled in, saw

Bradshaw, came to him. "No one up on the roof," he stated.

"What!" Bradshaw exploded.

"Nope. The boys have been all over it with their lights. It's clean."

"Search the house!" Bradshaw snapped. "Every part of it!"

SO FAST had the business moved that the confusion had not quieted yet. The guests were still milling around in bewilderment. Through them came Adelaide Beurket. She was wiping her eyes as Val went to meet her, followed by Bradshaw.

"How is your brother?" said Val.

"The doctor says he will probably be all right. The wound isn't as bad as it looked at first sight. Cart evidently fell against something and was knocked unconscious. I thought I had better stay here."

"What did you find in the gallery?"

She made a wry face; she was hard hit, but trying not to show it. "He got one of the most valuable things we have," she said simply.

"What?"

"Cart managed, by a marvelous piece of luck and the expenditure of a staggering sum, to bring out of China this time a thing so valuable, so revered by millions, that it would undoubtedly have been taken from us by the Chinese government had anyone suspected we had it. The jade death mask of the Emperor Kiang Hsi."

She looked at Val and Bradshaw as if expecting some startling reaction; and when they both only looked blank and questioning, she explained patiently.

"Kiang Hsi was the greatest emperor of the T'ang dynasty, the mightiest China has ever known. Under it the Chinese empire reached its highest state of prosperity. Kiang Hsi was the War Emperor, following in the footsteps of Kuan Ti,

the War God. Objects of great value are buried in the tombs of the Chinese emperors. Kiang Hsi, among other things, was buried with a jade mask of Kuan Ti on his face. It has become legendary as a source of mighty deeds and power."

"I suppose," Bradshaw commented politely, "it must be valuable."

"Valuable!" she flashed in indignation. "Priceless!" In the first place, *han yu*, ancient jade or tomb jade, has an appeal all its own to the Chinese. The mask of Kuan Ti was carved from a flawless block of mutton-fat jade, speckled with emerald green, the most precious jade of all. It is darker now, as tomb jade becomes from contact with the body."

Bradshaw asked: "What's it worth today?"

Her eyes looked past them, through them to far things. "Rivers of blood," said Adelaide Beurket slowly. "Thousands of lives. No money could buy the death mask of Kiang Hsi—unless it was purchased from a thief who was also under great obligation, as happened in this case. Kiang Hsi's memory is revered by millions. His jade death mask of the War God, recovered from the tomb long ago, has become a god-thing in itself. The superstition has grown up about it that some day a man will come to fill the shoes of Kiang Hsi and wear the jade mask of the War God, and bring back to China the glory and power of his reign."

"You mean," Val said shrewdly, "that the mask is worshipped as a joss?"

"Joss," she said, "is the name for any of the gods to whom prayer sticks and prayer papers are burned, and prayers are said. The jade mask is like any other statue of Kuan Ti, the War God; only ranking far above mere statues because of its association with the Emperor Kiang Hsi. It was one of the treasures of the Forbidden City. During the looting that

followed the Boxer rebellion it disappeared. It has been lost to the world since, until, Cart, who had been running down rumors of it for years finally got it on this trip."

Bradshaw looked at Val inquiringly. "Will you tell me," he asked with asperity, "what Zaken wants with that mask? It's no good to him. He couldn't dispose of it in this country or on the continent. Besides," queried Bradshaw, "since when has Zaken taken to anything like this? According to you, he's playing for far greater stakes than larceny could bring."

"The mask is associated with the War God," Val said under his breath. "That right, Miss Beurket?"

"Exactly, Mr. Easton. Millions believe the mask carries the power of Kuan Ti."

"And if a leader turned up with the jade mask?"

"It would depend on the man."

"I think," said Val slowly to Bradshaw, "I understand now why Zaken came tonight for the jade mask."

LESS than half an hour had elapsed since that first tragic moment in the back yard. Val looked at his watch, slipped it back, said to Bradshaw: "I'm going up to Beurket's study. The butler let the guests into the gallery under mighty suspicious circumstances. He told me one of the maids brought orders from Beurket to do it. It sounds fishy. How about checking it while I'm upstairs?"

Bradshaw agreed grimly. "I'll see him. If he's holding out, he'll come through to me."

In Cartier Beurket's study Val went at once to the scattered papers on the floor. "Perhaps you'd rather look through these yourself," he suggested to Adelaide Beurket. "I want to see if any of that report is here."

She shook her head. "Go ahead. I'm keen to know. Cart was secretive about

this. I haven't the slightest idea what he was doing."

Val picked up a double handful of the papers and laid them on the desk. "Your brother is just the type of man we need. Most people talk too much."

Val leafed rapidly through the papers. "Don't know myself exactly what he was doing for the government," he admitted. "But it was all to be in his report."

Ten minutes later they looked at one another. Cartier Beurket's papers had yielded no sign of a report.

"Stolen?" she asked helplessly.

Val nodded glumly; then suddenly snapped his fingers. "The wastebasket! Should have thought of it before!"

He lifted the small metal basket to the desk chair. Discarded paper filled it almost to the brim.

Val opened the crumpled sheets, putting them on the desk. Out of the first dozen he put two aside. Numbered three and seven, they were written in bold, heavy strokes.

Page three—

... most of the inland provinces I found a strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction. Different from anything I have encountered in twenty-seven years' contact with the country. Distinctly different from the old hatred of the foreigner. Incoherent in most cases unless one probes carefully and deeply. Distinctly ominous. In the province of Shensi

Page three had been stopped at that point, crumpled, thrown away.

Page seven—

... the same condition existed. Little realization of it among the western population there. They all considered Shanghai guarded and docile, as a standard. But they're a stiff necked lot for the most part, unable, or unwilling, to see much beyond their own corner. From sources in Shanghai I checked further. Much money is available to influence native feeling. Heard again and again of a certain Chang Ch'ien,

whose prestige seems great among those who spoke of him. The man is not now in China, I gather, and could not discover where he is. Secret bases mentioned in the Marshall Islands, now under

Adélaïde Beurket returned the papers. Her tanned, frank face was a study. "I see," she said simply.

Val put them in his pocket. "I wish everyone saw as well," he said briefly. "Shall we go down?"

They were both silent as they left the study and descended to the first floor. The shadow of things apart, beyond the evening's happenings, lay over them.

A DEGREE of order had been restored in the house. Patrolmen and detectives were everywhere, taking names and addresses, searching, standing watchful and ready. A word to one of the officers guided Val to the big dining room. Bradshaw was in there, facing a perspiring and distinctly uncomfortable butler, and a chic little maid, now flushed, defiant, and slightly frightened underneath.

"It's the truth!" the maid was insisting as Val entered. "You can do anything you please, but I didn't know about it! I delivered the message, and that's what I'm paid to do! And I'll go into court with the same story! My references are good and I've never had any trouble before."

"That's right, sir," the butler seconded hastily. "She came here with the best of references."

"Blast her references!" Bradshaw grunted. "Oh—hello, Easton." He turned disgustedly. "This girl admits bringing the message from Beurket. She claims she was at the head of the stairs when Beurket's study door opened and a man, one of the guests she thought, looked out and told her Beurket wished her to tell the butler to open the gallery. The man went back in the study. She delivered the message; Jennings here

opened the gallery—and that's all these two claim to know."

Val eyed the flushed girl thoughtfully. "What did he look like?" he asked her.

"Why—why, tall, and—and stoop-shouldered. He was in evening clothes like all the guests, sir. His face was thin, and—and ugly. I felt queer when he looked at me. But I knew Mr. Beurket was in there, so I took the order to Jennings at once, sir."

"Let them go," Val said under his breath. And when Bradshaw dismissed them, and they were out of earshot, Val said: "She's telling the truth. Zaken gave her that order. He came in through that upstairs window, finished with Beurket, and entered the gallery with the guests. Everything planned and carried out methodically. Even to his escape—he knew what he wanted, came for it, and he got away with it. Your men can question the guests and search all night and they won't find much else."

"Zaken is one of the most dangerous men in the world today. He has been a professional spy for years. More than one government has tottered because of state secrets he has stolen."

"The devil!" Bradshaw exclaimed.

"Quite. And now Zaken is starting something so monstrous and incredible that if he is not stopped he'll throw the world into chaos."

Bradshaw's hand poised at his mustache. He stared.

"Asia," Val said, "is a heap of powder waiting for the spark. And Carl Zaken," in grim conclusion, "is that spark!"

BRADSHAW threw up his hands. "I know you people have information the public doesn't get. And I can understand the possibility of an international angle. But the jade mask? Where does it come in? Why is he wasting his time on a small thing like that?"

"Zaken knows what he's up to—and I think I do, too. We've got to get it, Bradshaw. And get those papers stolen off Beurket's desk. Without delay, too."

Bradshaw protested quickly: "You don't want much. You've been looking for some trace of this man for a week, with all the assistance we could give you. And now you say he's got to be found in a few hours. He'll duck for cover."

"Naturally," Val agreed. "We'll have to smoke him out. Suppose you leave orders for fingerprints to be taken off the doors in Beurket's study and bedroom, and come along with me. Zaken's through with this house. And I think I know where he's gone. Where we can pick up his trail anyway. In Chinatown!"

"Then I'll throw men into Chinatown and search every rat hole along Pell, Doyers and Mott Streets!" Bradshaw burst out.

"Then you can't go with me," Val told him flatly. "No more publicity on this, if you please. If Zaken has gone there you'll frighten him away. He won't be expecting me. Come along if you care to, but just we two go."

Bradshaw considered and then shrugged reluctantly. "All right," he assented. "I'm taking it for granted you know what we're doing. But don't forget we have the responsibility of clearing all this up."

"I," said Val Easton grimly, "have something a damn sight bigger to clear up. Got a gun?"

"I'll get one from a dick."

"Get two. I don't want to have to go to the hotel and dig into my bag. And Bradshaw—no publicity about the mask."

"Right," Bradshaw agreed.

Val had a brief word with Adelaide Beurket while Bradshaw was getting the weapons. She looked less grief-stricken; told him that the hospital reported her brother would recover. He had gained

consciousness for a short time and was now sleeping easily.

"That's great!" Val said with relief. Then to her he made the same request he had of Bradshaw. "Don't give out any information about the mask," he begged. "Newspaper reporters are out there already. They'll question the guests, get to you without doubt. Tell them a valuable piece was stolen from the collection. Say it was jade if you must. But nothing about the history of the mask, or the missing report."

"Of course," she agreed, "if it will help you any."

CHAPTER SIX

Fog Night

A THICK fog had descended on Chinatown. It swirled before the headlights in gray opaque waves, poured cold and damp into Bradshaw's car as it raced down the Bowery.

"I haven't the slightest idea what we're running into," Val admitted. "But I know Carl Zaken. I assure you he'd like nothing better than to see me out of the way."

They rolled slowly, carefully into Pell Street through muggy soup that all but blotted out a big banner in Chinese characters swung above the street. The old iron balconies on the dingy building fronts, the few parked machines at the curbs, the lighted windows in the very street before them were barely visible.

They crawled past the shop of Li Fui Shan. A light glowed dimly inside the window. Pedestrians were few.

Bradshaw parked the car half a block beyond the shop and they got out. "Now what?" he demanded.

"I'm hoping a young woman will be in the shop of Li Fui Shan. Where she is, Zaken should be tonight. If he isn't, she'll know where he is."

"Is that all? We've got a man down here who knows every corner of this district. Charlie Gong. Born in Frisco; been on the department here in New York for ten years. He's just the man to help on this. I can call the precinct from the nearest corner box and find out where he is."

"Good idea. Go ahead. But no cordons. Intelligence has to be *sub rosa*. And a whole squad out tonight couldn't escape notice. Carl Zaken isn't worried about the police. He's proven that. He's slippery, and the only way we can nab him is by being just twice as slippery."

"Slippery it is then," Bradshaw agreed as they came into Doyers Street and the police box.

Bradshaw unlocked it with his key, rang in, said into the mouthpiece. "Commissioner Bradshaw talking . . . hello, that you, Garrity? Where is Charlie Gong? . . . Gone to Li Fat's restaurant? . . . Call Li Fat's, Garrity, and tell Charlie Gong to hustle over here to the box . . . no nothing wrong. Just need him, and I want him quick."

Bradshaw hung up, closed the box. "Charlie'll be here in a few minutes," he said. "Nice boy. Smart. And knows how to keep his mouth shut. You can tell him anything and not be afraid it'll leak all over this district."

They waited less than five minutes near the call box. A short, slender figure, with topcoat collar turned up and slouch hat brim turned down, materialized suddenly out of the fog. Grinning, he shook hands with Bradshaw.

"Regret ten thousand times keeping honorable commissioner waiting," Charlie Gong said in smiling apology. "My unworthy head bows low in shame, while pride swells me near to burst at this chance to shake one commissioner's honorable hand."

"Still the little humorist, I see," Brad-

shaw chuckled. "He speaks better English than either of us, Easton. And with a Harvard accent when he forgets. I can never quite forgive him that. Charlie, this is Mr. Easton. We've got a bit of delicate work on tonight. Want your help and all the smart thinking you can give. And it may be dangerous; got your gun?"

"Delighted, Mr. Easton," Charlie Gong said, shaking hands. "I am at your service, gentlemen. And I always go armed at night, commissioner. Too many in this district resent my being a member of the police, and my humble efforts on behalf of the law. My tong had made it plain that they cannot take up quarrels incurred while working at my job. That rather makes an open season for me, you see. I shall probably get a knife in the back one of these days," he finished quite cheerfully.

CHARLIE GONG came only about to Val's shoulder. He had the usual high cheek bones, the slant eyes, the general conformation of his Canton countrymen from the south of China. His lips were full, his nose broad, his eyebrows black and heavy beneath the downturned hat brim; but his eyes, twinkling, direct and shrewd, coupled with a distinct firmness of his mouth and chin, marked him as a man to be depended on.

"There has been robbery and murder uptown, Charlie," Bradshaw stated. "Mr. Easton has reason to believe the man who did it can be found here in Chinatown. Or at least some trace of him. It's vitally important we get him tonight if possible. And there must be no publicity if we can help it. Not a word to anyone."

"I understand," Charlie Gong nodded. "Who is this man, and what reason have you for believing he may be found in Chinatown?"

"The name is Zaken," Val said. "Carl Zaken—sometimes known as the Black Doctor."

No recognition appeared on Charlie Gong's face. "I'm sorry, gentlemen; if he's here I have not heard of him. Will you describe him?"

Val did so.

"No," said Charlie Gong. "I don't believe I've seen him."

"Have you heard of a man called Chang Ch'ien?" Val asked quickly and bluntly. And he watched the other's face closely.

No expression appeared on Charlie Gong's face. He returned Val's gaze unblinkingly, gravely.

"I have heard of Chang Ch'ien, Mr. Easton. Just a word here and there. Those who speak of him do so furtively. He is not a topic of public conversation. What he is or who he is I am unable to tell you. I gather that he has power and wealth; that those who mention him are afraid of him. But if a man by that name is here in Chinatown, I don't know it."

"Do you know anything about a man named Li Fui Shan, who owns the shop back there along Pell Street?" Val asked then.

Charlie Gong's face lighted up. "Li Fui Shan, eh? Can do, Mr. Easton. I know Li well. He's been here in Chinatown for over twenty years. One of our most respected merchants. He is a man who has prospered by hard work and honesty. His gifts to charity are extensive. He sits high in the councils of the On Leong Tong. I cannot speak too highly of him."

"Is he married? Does he have any daughters?"

"His family is in Kwangtung Province in China," Charlie Gong smiled. "His sons are being educated in Canton, I believe. Like many Chinese in this country he does not see his family for years at a time."

"No women at all?" Val insisted.

"There is, I believe, a niece, Mr.

Easton. She does not live with Li Fui Shan, but she has been there frequently of late. I have seen her one or twice entering or leaving; and I have heard her mentioned. Things like that get around. A very beautiful girl, as I recall her."

"I thought so. I want her. She entered Li Fui Shan's shop several hours ago. If she knows she's wanted she'll escape or hide. Have you any way of gaining access to Li Fui Shan's living quarters?"

"I'm afraid not," Charlie Gong said. "Without a search warrant I couldn't go back. And if Li Fui Shan is hiding someone, he would not be apt to invite me into the rear."

"All right," said Val. "We'll go in. You watch the rear of the house. Collar anyone who tries to leave. And watch out you don't get a knife or a bullet in your ribs."

As the three of them talked they had moved over in the shelter of the nearest doorway. Now, as they stood there, one of the infrequent pedestrians came along the sidewalk, materializing out of the fog. His head turned, staring, as he came abreast. Val saw a man of about his own size, stooped, thin-chested, with a head too big for his body. There was something about that head that caught the eye. It seemed to move, hunched forward, like a disembodied member, detached from the slighter body beneath. It had a prognathous jaw, a wide, cruel slit of a mouth, a great hooked nose and staring, burning eyes. Certainly one would not be apt to forget it in a long time.

Recognition glistened in those burning eyes. A dry, harsh voice threw out, "Hello, Gong," and the furtive figure went on without slackening its pace, vanishing in the swirling fog as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Sweet-looking customer," Bradshaw commented. "Who is he, Charlie?"

Charlie Gong, who had not answered

the other's greeting, said impassively: "That is Emile."

"The devil! I heard of him."

"The honorable devil would be ashamed of his company," said Charlie Gong blandly. "Emile is a dangerous man. I've had my qualms about crossing him."

"Creepy fellow," said Val. "Who is he? What's his last name?"

"Just Emile. That is all anyone knows him by. We are certain he is a leader in one of the biggest dope rings, with ramifications in England and on the Continent; but so far none of his activities here in Chinatown has given us proof of that. He lived," said Charlie Gong, "in China for some time, and all over the East, I believe. He speaks the Mandarin dialect of the north, and has a fair smattering of Cantonese. Ostensibly he is an importer, and I've never been able to prove anything else.

"Queer," continued Charlie Gong reflectively, "that he should be walking on a night like this. He has a ten-thousand-dollar car if he chooses to ride in it."

"Look into that some other time," Bradshaw suggested. "Right now we have other business."

"Give me ten minutes to get behind Li Fui Shan's building, commissioner, and then deal with the venerable Li as you see fit."

PELL STREET was oddly quiet, deserted. But in the shop of Li Fui Shan there was still a light. The door was locked.

"Hell!" said Bradshaw. "But we're going in!" He knocked.

Curtains parted at the back of the shop and an elderly man shuffled to the door as Bradshaw knocked again. He peered through the glass at them, and then unlocked the door with obvious reluctance as Bradshaw gestured.

Looking out, he said severely: "My

shop closed till tomorrow, gentlemen. You come back then."

"We're in a hurry," said Bradshaw. "We won't be here tomorrow. Are you Li Fui Shan?" And Bradshaw pushed inside as he asked that.

His abrupt entrance was met with composure. "I am Li Fui Shan," the old man said with dignity. "What you want, gentlemen?"

With Charlie Gong's words still fresh in his mind, and Li Fui Shan, the man, there before him, Val found it hard to believe that there could be anything wrong in this modest shop. Li was indeed a venerable man. His scanty hair was snow white. Whatever garb he wore during the business day had been set aside for the dignified comfort of a long black silk coat, swathing silk trousers and thick-soled felt slippers. An old man, but not wrinkled, emaciated, as so many of his countrymen became. Li Fui Shan's face was plump, kindly, dignified. One could visualize him smiling often, always courteous.

He was courteous now as he bent his head after Bradshaw said: "We'd like to look at some pottery."

"You catchee," said Li Fui Shan, dropping into pidgin English. "I give you light." He gave them the freedom of his shop with a gesture and padded leisurely three steps to a light cord hanging from the ceiling.

The shop was filled with a heterogeneous collection of Chinese craftsmanship. Pottery, bronzes, rugs, silks, porcelain ware, statuary, and trinkets of all kinds. Some of the stuff was good and some obviously bad, for the tourist trade. Li shuffled behind one of the cases and began to take down samples of pottery from the wall shelves. He ranged half a dozen on the case and looked at them inquiringly.

Bradshaw examined them with a show of interest.

Val looked about, listening.

The smell of the Orient was strong in here—musk, sandalwood, incense. The shop was very quiet. The faint roar of the Elevated over on the Bowery sounded, died away. Then, fainter still, far off, a fog whistle on the river moaned rhythmically. Beyond the heavy tapestry curtains at the back of the shop no sound was audible. If anyone was in there they were keeping very quiet.

Li Fui Shan waited behind the counter like an impassive Buddha.

"Show me some more," Bradshaw requested. "I'm afraid these aren't suitable."

Li inclined his head and turned back to the shelves. "You wanchee numbah-one vase, eh?" he inquired over his shoulder.

"I suppose so," Bradshaw grunted. Then he turned his head and shot a look of inquiry at Val; a slightly baffled look as if he were beginning to be convinced that this was wasted time.

Val himself was wondering. If he had not so plainly seen that veiled woman in the black fur coat enter here, he would have given this Li Fui Shan a clean bill of health. But she had come in here. She was known to Charlie Gong, if only by heresy. Li Fui Shan, for all his kindly venerable appearance traced directly to Carl Zaken, the Black Doctor.

And where Carl Zaken's influence reached there was danger.

Thinking so, Val swung about suddenly—and caught the barest flutter of the tapestry curtains at the back of the room.

Someone was standing behind them looking into the shop!

And suddenly the quiet and peace took on the ominous look of watchful waiting. Li Fui Shan's kindly Buddha-like face became a mask, hiding breathless tension. Val went to the counter, picked up one of the vases and examined it. He caught

the old man behind the counter sliding an imperceptible glance toward the back. Old Li knew there was someone back there.

"It's up to you, Bradshaw," Val said casually. "Maybe I can find something else back here that will do." He idled slowly back along the counter, inspecting the contents within.

Li watched him for a moment and then hurried back. "You likee see nice silk?" he questioned. "You come up front; I show."

The curtains had not moved again.

"All right. Get out your silk," Val said—and as Li started back toward the front Val turned away from the counter—and made a quick jump for the curtains.

He was certain that he heard a quick scurry of movement beyond, and the soft click of a latch. But when he jerked the curtains back he found only a small alcove, backed by a door, closed now.

Li Fui Shan's indignant cry filled the shop. "What you do? You come away!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tai Shan

VAL tried the door. It did not open, bolted inside apparently. He drew back two steps and lunged at it. The bolt was not strong, nor the door either; it shivered, cracked, gave. Val drew back and struck it again.

Li Fui Shan's rising crescendo of indignant cries broke off suddenly. Bradshaw's cold voice said: "Steady, old-timer. We're from police headquarters. Get violent and I'll call the wagon!"

And Val struck the door a third time, driving it in with a rending of screws from wood. He staggered through the open doorway, peering intently. There was a hall beyond; a dark hall, seemingly deserted. But no—

The light striking past him through the doorway showed a thick-set, black-shirted Chinese crouched against the wall. He sprang out as Val saw him, crouched in the middle of the hall, a short knife glinting in his hand. Still crouching, he moved a step forward, holding the knife ready for a slashing up-stroke. And somewhere in the darkness at the back feet pattered hastily; a door closed furtively.

In the shop Li Fui Shan expostulated shrilly: "What for you bleak in my house this way?"

And Bradshaw said gruffly: "Shut up or I'll crown you! What is it, Easton?"

Val dragged his automatic from his coat pocket. And, as if realizing quick action was the only thing to meet a gun, the crouching figure before uncoiled in a swift rush, slashing up with the knife.

Val stepped back, whirling aside before the silent savagery of that rush. The gleaming blade struck a button on his coat, slid off, and ripped through the cloth, slashing deep, at an angle. He felt the cold slither of it clear through to the skin as he struck the wall. And then, as the knife flashed out from under his upraised arm for another stroke, Val chopped down hard with the gun barrel.

The crunch of steel against bone was the loudest thing about that brief, silent scuffle. The stocky Chinese lurched over against the side of the passage, sank to his knees, crumpled in a limp little heap.

Val witnessed this with relief. He wanted no gunfire, no killing if it could possibly be avoided. For the plain facts were, he and Bradshaw were in this building without a search warrant. A shooting might make it awkward.

Bradshaw yanked the curtains clear back and snapped through the alcove: "Everything all right?"

"So far," said Val shortly. "I had to slug this fellow, but he'll come out of it."

Nasty beggar. He slid that knife along my ribs. Would have put it in my stomach if I hadn't jumped quick. Watch him and the old man, Bradshaw. I think someone we want it back here. We were being watched from behind the curtain when I made a jump for it."

"Go ahead," said Bradshaw. "I'll back you up. When they start drawing knives, rough 'em."

Val went back along the hall into thickening blackness. Doors opened to right and left. It was a squalid, grimy hall.

The worn floor squeaked miserably under foot. A staircase, starting from the back of the hall, slanted to black silent regions above. A door on the left showed light underneath and through the keyhole.

Val opened it, blinked with amazement.

He looked from the sordid hall into beauty, richness and excellent taste. The furniture was carved hardwood, dark, polished, intricately inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Heavy silk covered the windows. Gold-embroidered tapestries hung on the walls. Several beautifully carved and painted screens cut off corners of the room.

It was empty now; but it had been occupied short moments before. Blue hazy smoke drifted before a silk-shaded floor lamp. A hammered brass ash tray on a small red-lacquered table held several cigarette ends and one still sent up a faint curl of smoke.

VAL stepped in swiftly, gun ready in his hand. He made a circuit of the room, looking behind the screens. They hid no one. There was a door in each end of the room, but before he could try either a commotion in the hall drew him quickly. There was enough light in the hall now to see a strange and welcome sight.

Charlie Gong, short and placid, was shepherding two figures in from the back. A man and a woman. Charlie saw him, and panted: "Here's two who came flying out. I don't think there were any more."

The man was Emile, that grotesque-faced figure who had passed furtively in the fog.

And the woman—in all the world there could be only one such pale, soft, beautiful face framed in jet-black hair, like an alabaster cameo. Her mouth was a vivid red; red as the color of an East Indian flame tree, and her strange, striking beauty had all the lure of a lotus flower in full bloom.

Bradshaw had come into the hall, bringing the now uneasy Li Fui Shan. He whistled softly between his teeth. "Some catch, Charlie. What have we here?"

Emile hunched there, his wide-slit mouth snarling. His big head swayed about as he looked at them. "I'll make somebody sweat for this!" he threatened furiously. "When a citizen can't call on friends without a bunch of cops surrounding the house and crashing in this way, it's time to go high up about it! I'll have Gong's shield before I'm through! Who are you two?" he barked at Val and Bradshaw.

Charlie Gong clucked regretfully, and succeeded in looking very much like a mischievous youngster. "Honorable Emile makee run fion doah, likee dragon chop-chop his pants seat; so me catch'm and ask how come."

"Lay off that pidgin talk!" Emile snarled malevolently. "I know you can speak as well as I can!"

Charlie Gong chuckled. "Better, old chap," he agreed. "But I'll wager five to one I can't get out of a house half as fast as you left this one. You went down those steps as if you had greased shoes."

Val faced the girl. She was furious, scornful. But even in anger her voice was oddly musical, vibrant. "You—you do this to me, Val Easton! After—after" She broke off, bit her lip.

Bradshaw stared. "You know her?" he asked Val in astonishment.

"This," said Val, "is the lovely Tai Shan, sister of Chang Ch'ien. Tai Shan, may I present Deputy Commissioner Bradshaw?"

She ignored Bradshaw. "I am not interested in the police," she said indifferently, and again her voice was clear and musical in that dim, dark hall.

"I haven't thanked you for that warning tonight, Tai Shan. You had me fooled for a time. That Russian accent—I'm still wondering how you knew where to find me on Fifth Avenue."

"I would not lift a finger to save you from anything!" said Tai Shan scornfully. "You are not worth it. But if I wanted to know where to find you, I would have someone sit in a hotel room next to yours and listen to your talk."

"We live and learn," Val sighed. "I should have been watching for that."

"What do you want with me?" Tai Shan demanded.

"Where is Carl Zaken?"

"Ah—so?" Her anger left suddenly. She smiled faintly. And in that dim, sordid hall she was like a figure in some lovely old Chinese print. Her exotic beauty was a flame, heightened if anything by the grotesque ugliness of the snarling Emile.

"You want Carl Zaken?" Tai Shan mocked. "Why come to me, Val Easton?"

"We might search the place," Val mused, watching her.

Tai Shan shrugged indifferently.

Li Fui Shan had been standing beside Bradshaw in dignified silence. He burst into shrill protests. "This my place!

You no search without paper!"

"Don't waste your breath," Bradshaw counseled the old man curtly. "We're in now and we'll do what we blasted please! And if you're hiding this Zaken, you're in for a rough time."

TAI SHAN melted suddenly. "He can tell you nothing," she said to Bradshaw. "No one you want is in this house. I know. I've been here all evening. I pledge you my word. Li Fui Shan is merely an old friend who has been repaying an obligation two centuries old by giving me a roof when I need it. Don't bother him. His hospitality has been abused enough tonight. Let me get my coat and hat. Take me out of here. I will talk to you some other place."

Li Fui Shan's face softened. He made a slight graceful bow. "My daughter," he said, "this humble house is yours."

Charlie Gong spoke to him in Chinese. Li Fui Shan answered. Charlie said to Val and Bradshaw: "This is not his niece. There is a blood debt between the families dating back eight generations. She is more than a niece to him; she is his blood, his daughter. Such things are done among my people. He assures me there is no one else in the house. I believe him."

"Take us out of here," Tai Shan insisted. "To the police station if you will. I will talk to you there. You see," and her smile at Val was suddenly dazzling, "I am a tractable prisoner."

Val studied her a moment, and smiled thinly. "Too tractable, Tai Shan; too very tractable. You're beautiful, you're lovely—and you've got the heart of a tiger back of it. But there is no hurry. Let us first speak about this Emile, who, I understand, is in the dope game. What business has he with you, Tai Shan? I've thought hard things about you, and I've

fought you—but I always supposed you were clean. I've admired you. I never thought you were mixed up with dope."

A slow red flush crept up to her high cheek bones. "Dope!" Tai Shan repeated, and her musical voice was suddenly off key, harsh. "This man a seller of drugs?"

"Yes."

Emile raised a hand whose fingers were short, thick, and rubbed his bulging jaw. He was in no wise disturbed. His wide slit of a mouth grinned at them. "Prove it," said Emile comfortably. "Just try to prove it." He acted like a man who had been accused often before and rested secure in the knowledge that he could not be reached.

Tai Shan's dark eyes rested on him inscrutably. "Then it is true?" she said in a dull, metallic voice.

Emile shrugged. "I told him to prove it. My private life has nothing to do with this. I didn't come talking dope to you, young woman. Forget it."

And Val was suddenly sure that this lovely Tai Shan had had no inkling of her visitor's profession. Yet that was no help to the mystery of Emile's presence here with her. Emile had come alone, afoot when he might have ridden in his expensive car; he had come late and clandestinely; and both of them, at knowledge that the police were in the front shop, had thought of nothing but escape.

"It might be better," Val said to her, "to tell what his business is here."

She bent her head thoughtfully, looked disturbed, seemed to weaken. "I—I will," she nodded. "Take me to the police station, Val Easton. I'll get my coat." She wore a black dress, tight-fitting, sheathing her slender figure closely. She was lovely, exotic, touching in her surrender.

But Val said to her cynically: "You should be an actress, Tai Shan. Before we leave here I'm going to find out why you're so anxious to go to the police station, to get away."

And the words had hardly left his mouth when a telephone rang sharply in the room behind him.

TAI SHAN started; her head came up. It struck Val then that she had been listening for something ever since Charlie Gong had brought her back into the hall. He grinned as the telephone rang again and Tai Shan offered hastily: "I'll answer it."

"You'll stay right here," Val told her gently. "Charlie Gong will answer it. It may be someone who speaks Chinese."

Her meek submission vanished in a breath. "You have no right to take that telephone call!" she burst out angrily. "We are entitled to some privacy!"

"You're getting all you're entitled to, Tai Shan. And if it's an important message you shall hear all about it."

Charlie Gong was already in the room. They could hear him answering the call in English—which shifted to Chinese a moment later. Tai Shan was pale, tense. Her little fist clenched at her side. She was straining to hear. The grotesque Emile was standing taut also, listening. In contrast Li Fui Shan seemed little interested in who answered the telephone.

Charlie Gong spoke in the sing-song cadences of his native tongue—listened—spoke again; and a few seconds later hung up and returned to the hall. He glanced at a wrist watch.

"It is now seventeen minutes after eleven," Charlie Gong said. "At five minutes to twelve an automobile will call for Tai Shan and her friend. Everything, I am informed over the telephone, is all right. And she is not to fail to bring the foreign devil."

Tai Shan bit her lip; her eyes were blazing, but she said nothing. Emile looked uneasy. His burning eyes went from Charlie Gong to Bradshaw, to Val as if trying to read their minds.

"Who was it?" Val asked the little Chinese detective.

Charlie Gong shrugged. "I don't know. I was afraid to ask questions. I merely said that the high born lady was busy. It was evidently taken for granted that since I was here in the venerable Li Fui Shan's home I spoke with authority. I should not be surprised," said Charlie Gong, "if I was not mistaken for that pig lying on the floor inside the door; who is stirring now by the way. I will get him."

Bradshaw smoothed the end of his small black mustache and smiled with satisfaction. "If there's a car coming for these two, we'll grab it, Easton. It should give us something to work on."

Val had been standing, frowning to himself. The frown passed as suddenly as it had come. He grinned. "The car was going to take them somewhere. I'll slip into Emile's coat and hat and take his place."

"But the woman?" Bradshaw objected. "You can't get by with it with this girl."

"No," Val agreed. "But I know one who can take her place—if she is still in town. I haven't seen her for a couple of days. Just a minute—while I telephone."

The telephone was on a lacquered stand in the corner of the big room he had searched. The directory was underneath. He leafed through it, found a number, gave it. It was answered almost at once. He spoke rapidly, finished: "Hurry up! There's no time to lose!"

And back in the hall to Bradshaw, Val said: "She's coming. Nancy Fraser who's worked with me a lot. She's the one woman in the country who could go

through with this. I hate to drag her into it—but I can't pass up this chance."

TAI SHAN looked suddenly like an enraged cat; a beautiful cat, but dangerous. Her hand flicked out without warning inside the bodice of her dress, came out with a tiny gleaming blade. Val's hand shot to her wrist. He had the knife, had her subdued a moment later.

"I was looking for something like this," he said reproachfully. "It's no use. We're going. Take it sporting."

"Go then!" said Tai Shan breathlessly. "Go with my blessings, Val Easton. And remember—my blessings." She began to laugh.

"Over-wrought," said Val to Bradshaw. "She'll have to be handled carefully. I suggest you get several plainclothesmen here to watch these people. No use taking them to the station house. I'm sure Li Fui Shan would rather have it that way."

The old man nodded in silent agreement.

"I'll do that," said Bradshaw briskly. "And Charlie and I will tail you in another car."

"Good. But you'll have to work fast."

Bradshaw used the telephone hurriedly. And in an incredibly short time three plainclothesmen entered the shop. Bradshaw gave them directions; they took Tai Shan, the grotesque Emile and the brown native who had stood guard in the hall; took them into the big lighted room, handcuffed the man, put Tai Shan in a chair firmly despite her indignation.

Then Nancy Fraser came into the shop, breathlessly, her cheeks pink from cold and haste. Nancy Fraser, whose daring and ingenuity was known all through the Intelligence. In spite of that she stood there inside the door, softly feminine, a little beauty with fine, clean cut features, sun-tanned, chin firm, and

mouth wide and quirked humorously at the corners.

Val thought again with admiration that she had the deepest and bluest eyes he had ever seen; and her platinum hair cut short and waved close to her head was as beautiful as ever when she stripped off her little felt hat and smiled at him.

"Here I am, Val. What's the bad news?"

Swiftly as they went back into the hall he gave it to her.

"Exciting," said Nancy gaily. "I've been famishing for something like this." She met Bradshaw and Charlie Gong composedly.

"Are you sure it's all right to take her, Easton?" Bradshaw queried doubtfully.

"Have to," said Val. "She understands. It's part of the game. I'd rather have her than most men. I'll get Tai Shan's coat and hat, Nancy. They'll be a little big, but I guess you can manage them."

In a few moments more they were both ready, Val in Emile's coat and hat; Nancy in Tai Shan's.

"Got your gun?" Val asked.

"Never go out without it at night," said Nancy airily. "We girls are fragile, you know."

Bradshaw and Charlie Gong left the shop for the police car parked down the street. Val and Nancy waited in the front. The hands of Val's watch crept toward twelve—and suddenly there was a soft purring motor outside, headlights gleaming dimly through the fog. A horn blew once.

"Here we go," said Val. "Chin up and keep your hand on your gun."

Coat collars turned up, hats shading their faces as much as possible, they left the shop of Li Fui Shan and walked out into the damp swirling fog.

CHAPTER EIGHT

House of Hooded Men

A LIMOUSINE stood at the curb, big, black, powerful, fast. Two figures were in the front seat, and as Val and Nancy came out of the shop of Li Fui Shan one of the men leaped out, opened the rear door and stood stiffly at attention. He was a short, slender Oriental, wearing a chauffeur's uniform. As Nancy came abreast of him he said something to her in rapid singsong Chinese, finishing his speech with a rising interrogation.

Val stiffened; his hand in his coat pocket clutched tight on the automatic. Was their masquerade to be penetrated at the very start of this mysterious journey?

But Nancy acted quickly, as she always did in moments of stress. Her little gloved hand came up in a careless gesture of assent. She stepped into the limousine without speaking.

It was evidently enough. When Val sank into the deep luxurious seat beside her the door closed, the fellow entered the front, and the driver pulled away from the curb at once.

Val reached out and touched Nancy's hand. He had to grope to find it; for the rear inside windows were curtained, and there was even a curtain lowered behind the two men in the front seat. They were in complete blackness, unable to see where they were going.

"Emile was slated for a blind ride," Nancy said under her breath.

"But I am not Emile—and you are not Tai Shan to keep an eye on him. We'll cheat a little."

Val lifted the curtain at his side and looked out. They were rolling swiftly out of the fog-filled tangle of Chinatown. They passed under the forest of Elevated pillars, crisscrossing Chatham

Square, rolled along Division Street under the Elevated and turned north with it. In a few minutes they were on First Avenue, speeding north. They crossed the Harlem River on the Willis Avenue bridge, turned on the Westchester road.

The fog thinned out but as they neared Westchester it began to thicken again. The limousine rolled faster toward its mysterious destination. Nancy peered out for some moments. "I wonder where we're going," she whispered.

Val had sketched to her the evening's happenings in a low tone; he said now, "I wish I knew. I don't like it. I had no idea we were going so far out." He lifted the rear curtain, looked behind. The headlights of several cars were visible. Back there somewhere were Bradshaw and Charlie Gong.

"At least," said Val, "Bradshaw and Charlie Gong are an ace in the hole."

"Makes me feel better," Nancy confessed. "I'm not afraid—but Carl Zaken is a horrible person. I can't forget him as he was in Washington."

They turned off the Avenue. Val lost track of the streets and directions there. He was in unfamiliar territory, and the still thickening fog was no help.

Nancy lifted the rear curtain, looked back. "I don't see anyone following us, Val."

In the swirling mist behind, no car was in evidence.

Val tapped a cigarette on the back of his hand and lit it. "We're in for it now," he said slowly. "We're on our own."

"I've been that way before," Nancy said philosophically. But her voice had a slight tremble.

And suddenly they were there . . .

FOR some minutes there had been no street lights, no sign of houses, and the wheels had left the pavement. The limousine made a sharp turn. Looking

out they could see bare, ghostlike tree trunks looming eerily through the fog. The car stopped; the motor died. The man who had let them into the car opened the door and the cold night air swept into their faces as they got out. Fresh air, tangy with the salt and fish smell of the open sea. The hoarse blast of a fog whistle vibrated through the night at no great distance away.

The car door closed. The little Chinaman spoke again in his native tongue to Nancy. And again she did not reply. There was not even light now to gesture. They stood in blackness, complete and abysmal, except for the dim cowl lights, fog-smothered before their glow reached the front bumper.

But again luck saved them. A powerful flashlight in the hands of the saffron-skinned footman glowed out before them and swept ahead, piercing the fog. It shone on steps of stone, and piercing on beyond brought up against a house wall covered thickly with ivy. It picked out a shuttered window, stark, forbidding. And then the footman walked up the stone steps, keeping the light down so they could see as they followed.

There was nothing else to do but follow. Where they were, what this place was, what was expected of them, was mystery, dark, sinister. They mounted five steps—Val counted them—and crossed the porch to a boarded door. The flashlight showed it clearly, dark, weathered boards, guarding a deserted house against intruders.

And the house seemed deserted. Their steps scraped loud, harsh; there were no sounds, no lights, no signs of life. And yet, when, stopping before those weathered boards, their guide said in a voice that sounded startling loud:

"*Hola!*" The weathered storm door swung out silently on oiled hinges.

A second door of heavy bolted planks

stoop open inside it, and beyond, in a high-ceilinged reception hall, a faint red glow streamed out to meet them.

Their guide stepped back as a second figure materialized in that dim ghastly glow, bowing welcome. This was another Chinese, bland, inscrutable, wearing black trousers and silk jacket. He bowed a second time as they entered.

The dim red light came from an inverted globe high up against the ceiling. It was so faint that what small part of their faces was visible could hardly be seen.

The doors were closed behind them. This second man bowed a third time and padded ahead of them on noiseless felt soles. He stopped at a table against the side wall, picked up a piece of black cloth, and said something to Nancy in Chinese, at the same time moving behind her for her coat. Val watched, slit eyed, his hand on the gun in his pocket. Nancy shook her head.

Her wish seemed to carry weight. Muttering a singsong something, the fellow lifted his hands and brought the black cloth down over her head.

Nancy's hand was in her coat pocket also. And for a moment Val thought she was going to step from under the cloth and bring her gun out. Then he saw, with a foolish surge of relief, that a black mask with eyeholes and a place to breathe had been placed over Nancy's head.

A second mask was handed him from the table. Val slipped it on, pushing his hat off as it went on, so that at no moment was his face entirely visible. He too refused the offer to take off his coat.

The hood felt close and warm about his face. Through the eyeholes he could see Nancy, grotesque and rather horrible in the ghastly red glow. But for all the eeriness of this little bit of stage play there was relief too. Their faces were hidden.

THEIR yellow-skinned attendant bowed, walked noiselessly to the rear of the hall and opened a door, going through ahead of them. They were taken to the left along a second hall, through profound quiet. They came to a door. Their guide knocked. It was opened. Incense, thick, heavy, cloying, rolled out to meet them. And behind his mask Val almost uttered an exclamation.

A great hall-like room opened before them.

Here was Asia, mysterious, inscrutable, beautiful. The high ceiling was vaulted, braced by great carved timbers. And from those timbers, hung silken lanterns, their gay colors dimly visible.

A dais at the far end of the room was backed by a marvelous tapestry covering half the wall. One single throne-like chair rested on the dais. And in each corner of the dais a bundle of joss sticks in brass containers sent up thin wavering spirals of smoke. Nancy's fingers dug into Val's arm again as the scene burst on them; and it was not the room but the two score figures in it that were so startling. Figures masked like themselves in black, some seated on the chairs against the wall, some standing and moving slowly about. A very few were engaged in conversation. The most of them were sitting silently.

It was a strange, uncanny scene. The eyeholes in those loose enveloping hoods gave the impression of life without emotion through the eery red glow of the lanterns. Such voices as were speaking were low, muffled. They were all men, all but Nancy. Further than that one could see nothing. What manner of men they were, what nationality, what they were doing here, was all a mystery.

Their guide had closed the door behind them, leaving them on their own. Nancy spoke from behind her mask in a muffled whisper. "Val, what is this?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Val husked back.

Black-shrouded heads turned, stared at them as they entered. Some turned away after a moment, others continued watching them. The thick cloying atmosphere, of the room, for all its silence, was electric with an undercurrent of tension.

No one came forward to greet them, no one spoke to them. And after a moment, Val sensed that the gathered company had no cohesion. Each man was apart from the others. No man could tell what lay behind the shrouding hood next to him. Val Easton had been many places in a somewhat hectic career, but never had he been a part of anything like this. He kept in mind that he was Emile, a power in the big dope rings, and that besides him should be the lovely Tai Shan. It still did not make sense.

And the next moment his pulses leaped; he went tense and watchful. The crashing notes of a great gong vibrated through the room. The seated figures came to their feet abruptly, turning toward the dais behind which the gong was booming. And before the last vibrant note died away, the great gold and silver tapestry curtain parted in the middle—and Carl Zaken, the Black Doctor, stepped out on the dais

THERE was no applause or greeting. The Black Doctor was not masked. He still wore the evening clothes in which he had appeared at Cartier Beurket's.

The notes of the gong seemed to echo and re-echo, farther and fainter into the distance, until finally they were vibrant no more. And in those long seconds the tall stooped figure on the dais was imperceptibly bathed in a brighter red glow, while the rest of the room grew dimmer, darker. The pale, ghastly, cadaverous face of the Black Doctor stood out in blood-red relief until it and only it, was

a focal point for all eyes. The emanations of that silent figure reached out and dominated the room. And then:

"*Voila*, you are here!" His dry grating voice reached into every corner of the room.

"You are here," the Black Doctor repeated, looking slowly about. "From Europe, from China, from India, from this country. You have been called here for your reports, and they are pleasing. No man among you knows his neighbor. Your identities are safe tonight. But all of you know toward what you have been working. Your rewards will be magnificent, your power unlimited. Once in a thousand years the current of history is reversed and one part of the world rises to master the other. That time is here. Asia, so long eclipsed by the white man, is ready for the spark"

Carl Zaken paused; and his flaming malevolent eyes stared through the blood red halo about him. He smiled; and to Val Easton who knew the man, it was the smile of a monster, indescribably vicious and dangerous.

"You will be the spark," Carl Zaken's dry grating voice told those standing hooded figures. "Tonight you will see that which will put the power into your hands. Gentlemen"

Carl Zaken lifted a hand, half turned to the great silver and gold tapestry curtain at the back of the dais.

Crash

The hidden gong thundered its blood chilling reverberations through the silence of the room.

The curtains parted—and a gasp ran through the room. Standing there, stiff, erect, was a great tall figure clad in a magnificent dragon robe of Imperial yellow; an Oriental, a member of the Celestial Kingdom unmistakably. A round silk hat with a yellow button on the crown topped the giant figure's head. But not

that brought the gasp, not that sent Val Easton's pulses hammering and brought Nancy Fraser closer to his side. For covering the face of the figure was a life size dull amber mask of jade.

Life size and lifelike, that jade mask shaped in the perfect lineaments of a man that had never lived. The features of a god, stern, haughty, with a small beard cunningly carved on the chin.

"Is that it?" Nancy whispered.

"That's it," Val said through his teeth.

And though he had never seen a jade mask before he knew it for what it was. The death mask of the great Emperor Kiang Hsi. The mask of Kuan Ti, the War God. Once beautiful mutton fat jade speckled with emerald green, it had darkened to its present colors, in the tomb, where, for centuries, it had covered the face of an emperor who had made his power felt over most of his known world. By the hundred thousands men had died in the name of Kuan Ti. By the millions men would die in the name of that cold jade mask, given life and meaning by the deeds of one man thirteen centuries dead.

Already, tonight, blood had stained that beautiful jade. The future promised rivers of it in the name of hatred, greed and lust for power.

AND now the great golden figure in the Imperial dragon robe paced sedately to the gilded, carved throne chair and seated himself, hands palm down on his knees, erect, stiff, regal.

Carl Zaken's voice rang through the great vaulted room.

"Gentlemen, the death mask of the great Emperor, Kiang Hsi. The god mask of the War God Kuan Ti. A joss that will make its wearer infallible. Gentlemen, Chang Ch'ien, the war leader who will inflame all China, will lead the yellow race as conquerors of the world. With this mask he cannot fail."

The great gong crashed out about them once more. And Chang Ch'ien sat there, stiff, immovable, hands on his knees and the god mask staring at them without expression, as it had stared for thirteen centuries. And the golden robe on that golden figure seemed to take on some of the blood tinge of the ghastly light which drenched it from above.

It was high drama, cunningly staged. And yet Val Easton's palm was damp about the handle of his gun as he witnessed it from among those black-hooded figures. For there was menace here too. Menace, danger and death for Nancy Fraser and himself. And for scores of thousands of unsuspecting people who tonight were sleeping peacefully in well-sheltered homes. Here, all about them, in the great room was something so vicious and threatening to the peace of mankind that it must be stamped out quickly, as one would destroy a venomous snake. And Val realized with a sickening feeling of helplessness that he could do nothing against this mad man who desired to rule a world. His own life, Nancy Fraser's life, hung by threads—the thickness of the threads forming the black cloth over their faces. If they were discovered it meant the end.

Something of that must have been running through Nancy's mind also. For she crept close to Val. He could feel her arm rigid against his. Silently he berated himself for drawing her into a thing like this. And his eyes riveted on that gilded throne chair; for Chang Ch'ien spoke from behind the jade mask. . . .

"Go back and whisper what you have seen. Tell all your people that the spirit of the great Kiang Hsi has returned again. Tell them to make ready. Plans of which you know nothing are maturing. A few more moves, a little patience, and we shall be masters of the world—For he who aims the bow that kills is master!"

The calm, clear voice speaking in perfect English had an uncanny rhythmic purring quality that was half hypnotizing. One felt that the mind behind it was a mighty thing, projecting out, enfolding the will to which it was addressed. One felt that here were depths beneath depths, and a man whose power, ruthlessness, and cunning could sway a multitude, set a world at war. Val felt it. And those motionless black hooded figures about him felt it too. They stood like statues, spellbound.

Chang Ch'ien spoke again. "There is among you one whose beauty is no less than her sagacity. She has guided here tonight a man whose power reaches into strange and vital places. A man unknown by the world. A man who can bring disgrace and fear to those high in government circles in half a dozen countries. By his connections and his knowledge he can help us undermine where other men would fail. A dealer in drugs, gentlemen, whose victims are his slaves. His face you shall not see until his work is done and Asia rules the world. But she who brought him here shall be known to you all."

Val heard the uncanny purring voice with quick horror. Unexpected disaster had fallen on them. He sensed what was coming, even before the great golden Chang Ch'ien said distinctly:

"Tai Shan, my sister, come forward and show yourself. . . ."

NANCY stood breathless and unmoving by Val's side.

A hush of expectancy held the room. The black hooded heads turned toward them. All eyes were on Nancy, waiting, waiting. . . .

Chang Ch'ien spoke again with a sharper note of authority, "Tai Shan, come forward!"

"What shall I do?" Nancy's tight whisper came from beneath her mask.

There was nothing she could do; nothing. If she went forward and removed that black hood she was doomed. If she refused to obey she was lost. The real and lovely Tai Shan would never have refused. The brief fleeting seconds seemed endless. Carl Zaken, on the edge of the dais, bent his head forward and stared through the blood-red glow suspiciously. A queer ripple of tension stirred the hooded figures about them.

Chang Ch'ien's voice cracked like a lash. "Tai Shan!"

"Val!" That was Nancy, whispering her helplessness through the black cloth.

"I'm sorry," Val whispered back.

And even as the words passed his lips Chang Ch'ien came out of the gilded throne chair in one catlike movement. His hand lifted, pointed. His purring voice rang out from behind the mask. "Hold her! Hold that man with her! My sister would never disobey my order like this!"

"We're on our own, Nancy! Do what you can!" Val threw that at her as he jerked the automatic from his coat pocket. They had no hope of escaping. Their lives at this moment were running out as fast and surely as the last grains in an hour glass.

"Stand back!" Val cried out to those black-hooded figures about him.

Carl Zaken's harsh voice cried from the dais, "Stop him!"

They were dangerous, desperate men hand-picked by the Black Doctor and the golden Chang Ch'ien. They closed in from every side. Val pumped the automatic twice savagely, and heard Nancy's gun bark at his side. They both would die—but they would die dearly. . . .

A man staggered, fell; another lurched—but still they came in. Hands caught at him from behind. Val's next shot struck the floor as his arm was knocked down. He heard Nancy cry out. And

then, struggling futilely, he was jerked back and borne to the floor. The black hood was tightened about his face, his neck. Fingers choked. The weight of many bodies crushed him against the floor—and a red haze closed in. Red, blood-red, like that halo bathing Chang Ch'ien and the Black Doctor on the dais.

And then the blackness of death. . . .

LIGHT struck into Val's eyes. Bright light, coming from a floor lamp somewhere to the left of him. His throat was dry, sore, painful. He felt sickish, dizzy. Then memory of all that had happened flashed over him. The Black Doctor—Chang Ch'ien—Nancy Fraser.

He was on his back, looking up at the ceiling as thought of Nancy cleared his head like a dash of cold water. He tried to sit up—and couldn't. He was held rigid by a strap over his throat. His wrists and ankles were strapped down tight. Rolling his eyes, Val saw that he was on some sort of table raised above the floor. He could lift his head an inch or so, turn it from side to side. He was in a small room whose walls were hung with black silk embroidered at intervals with writhing golden dragons. With difficulty he made out, a cabinet, a couch, and over against one wall a bookcase about the height of a man's head.

Under the table on which Val lay suddenly sounded the shrill hungry squeal of a rat, the rapid chattering of tiny, sharp teeth.

Val's heart beat faster at the sound. Alone, rats in the room! His coat was off, shirt sleeves loose. Helpless, defenceless—and rats in the room! The rat squealed again, but remained under the table. And in the minutes that followed Val heard it again and again, always directly beneath him. He puzzled for a little and then ignored it, thinking of Nancy Fraser. Where was she? What had happened to her?

Movement beyond his feet caught his eye. Neck strained against the strap across his throat, he saw a bookcase across the room swing out noiselessly on hinges at one end, revealing an opening behind it. And from that opening a tall, powerful figure wearing a green mandarin coat and a round hat with a yellow button, stepped into the room. He closed the bookcase, came to the table where Val lay and looked down at him. The uncanny purring voice of the man called Chang Ch'ien said:

"I have waited for this, Valentine Easton."

Chang Ch'ien's words were without emotion—and chilling and foreboding for the very lack of it.

Without the ancient jade mask Chang Ch'ien was just as impressive. The shades of that golden dragon robe he had worn on the dais seemed still to linger in his golden-tinted skin. His full-lipped mouth, his stabbing slant eyes, with a small sickle shaped scar at the corner of his right eyes, his smooth black hair sweeping back from his forehead as he lifted the hat for a moment gave him the appearance of a tall yellow god. The scar drew his eye up into the slightest sardonic cast. And then he smiled; and cunning lay behind it, and ruthlessness, and cruelty. And one saw how this man had become a myth, a legend, a terror in the underworld of many lands.

Beneath the table the rat squeaked again and chattered its teeth. Chang Ch'ien smiled broadly, without humor, said:

"Where is my sister, Tai Shan, Valentine Easton?"

"Where is Nancy Fraser?" Val countered huskily. His throat was swollen, tight.

"A beautiful girl, Miss Fraser; and spirited. She's been asking for you."

"Damn you!" said Val thickly.

"Where is Tai Shan? Miss Fraser came here wearing Tai Shan's coat and hat, in the car that should have brought Tai Shan. What have you done with her?"

And a fierce joy burned through Val's veins at the sudden break of anguish he caught in Chang Ch'ien's voice. The man was vulnerable in one spot at least.

Val said bluntly: "She's guarded. You can't help her."

Chang Ch'ien looked down at him without moving a face muscle. "I believe she is, Easton. You found her at Li Fui Shan's. How, I don't know, but I would have heard from her by now if she were free."

"Quite," Val agreed. "Suppose we talk business. Nancy Fraser, myself, Cartier Beurket's jade mask, and, say—Carl Zaken, for your sister."

"You fool!" Chang Ch'ien purred. "You bargain with me!" One hand with long tapering fingers came out of a coat sleeve and caught the front of Val's shirt. Calmly, methodically, Chang Ch'ien ripped the cloth away until Val lay on the table bare from the waist up.

"You fool!" said Chang Ch'ien again. "Once before you crossed my path and got away. You were a dead man when you entered this house. But before you die, you will tell me where Tai Shan is. You will write the order that will release her."

Val laughed at him. It was all he could do.

"You will scream for the privilege of releasing that girl whose foolish interest in you probably betrayed her this evening," Chang Ch'ien said without emotion.

CHANG Ch'ien stooped, reached under the table, and when he straightened he held a small wire cage in his golden tapering fingers. A wire cage filled with scurrying frantic movements, shrill keening chatters of fright and rage, and a

brown furry body that dashed from side to side in the upper half.

At first Val was puzzled. Two straps dangled from the bottom of the cage. It was partitioned in the middle. In the upper half, bounding about on the partition which formed a floor, was the gaunt hungry body of a great savage rat.

"He has been starved for a week," Chang Ch'ien purred. "He is frightened, angry, desperate for escape." Speaking, Chang Ch'ien set the cage on Val's chest, passed one of the straps beneath Val's bare torso and buckled it on the other side, holding the cage firmly in place. There was no wire in the bottom; nothing but space between his flesh and the partition halfway up in the cage.

"When I pull this slide out," Chang Ch'ien said evenly, "he will drop to your chest. There, for a time, fright will keep him busy. But when he begins to think, he will see that the only way out is through your chest. Food and escape in one." Chang Ch'ien smiled lazily, but his eyes were flaming. "Before he has won free," he said, "you will be a madman, Valentine Easton."

And Val knew that it was so. Only an Oriental could devise such ghastly, terrible torture. He shuddered; cold perspiration broke out on his forehead as he visualized those hours of agony in which sharp rodent teeth gnawed through flesh, nerves, bones on their way to freedom and satiated hunger.

The rat had quieted now, was staring nervously about from little beady, blinking eyes. The tapering fingers of Chang Ch'ien's left hand caught the slide and drew it slowly out. The rat balanced precariously on it, and as the opening into the bottom of the cage widened before him he thrust his head down, staring at the bare expanse of flesh below. Rigid, Val waited for the impact of tiny cold

feet on his chest—and the horror that would quickly follow.

And suddenly that ghastly taut moment was broken into by the swift slide of books in the bookcase. Raising his head, Val saw volumes falling out of the second shelf from the top; volumes thrust aside by a hand that shoved through, holding a large caliber revolver!

CHAPTER NINE

Slashing Blades

CHANG Ch'ien started back from the cage, turned as if to flee. But a crackling command in singsong Chinese from behind the bookcase stopped him rigid. The voice of Charlie Gong said:

"Good. Now unstrap him. The cage first, and perhaps we'll put it on you. Quick, before I shoot, my friend!"

The sickle-shaped scar at the corner of Chang Ch'ien's right eye flamed with silent passion. Silently he turned to the table, fumbled with the straps, and set the wire cage down on the floor again. Still silently he freed Val's neck, arms, ankles. Val swung to the floor, swayed a moment, and turned to the bookcase. The smiling face of Charlie Gong peered through at him.

"Search him," said Charlie Gong. "Quick!"

Val did so, found a long knife tucked in the waistband of Chang Ch'ien's trousers, but no gun.

"Now watch him!" Charlie Gong directed. "I'm coming in. I would have shot him but I was afraid it would bring the house down on our ears."

Charlie Gong withdrew his gun, pushed open the bookcase and stepped into the room. Chang Ch'ien waited, hands in his sleeves, face impassive once more. He had spoken not a word. Charlie Gong closed the bookcase and stepped toward the table. One step he took on a small

Chinese rug lying on the floor—and the rug suddenly dropped beneath his feet and Charlie Gong vanished in a yawning hole in the floor. Vanished silently, his gun flying up above his head, and on his face a look of unutterable amazement.

And as Charlie Gong dropped from sight Chang Ch'ien's hand came out of his sleeve holding a second knife. He whirled on Val like a great golden-skinned cat.

"Now!" Chang Ch'ien said, and the word came like a whip lash as he lunged forward, sweeping the knife up before him.

Val was cornered against the table, hemmed in, unable to dodge. Chang Ch'ien rushed suddenly, his knife upraised. Val did the only possible thing. He countered instantly with the knife he held. His gleaming blade slashed out, down, countering with the skill of one who had fenced much.

The blades clashed metallically. With a quick twist Val threw himself to one side, pivoting his weight on the clashing blades. Chang Ch'ien's knife was deflected, sliding on up past Val's blade at an angle. Its keen point ripped skin and flesh above the elbow of Val's left arm as the blow swept on past into space. The force of Chang Ch'ien's rush brought him hard against the edge of the table, his green mandarin coat brushing against the blood welling from Val's arm. And, cat-like, the big Chinese recovered himself and swung about for another stabbing blow.

Val's right arm was free. He reversed his palm and smashed it toward Chang Ch'ien's head. The solid, heavy end of the knife handle caught the big fellow squarely behind the ear. Chang Ch'ien dropped like a poled ox. Dropped and rolled over on the floor, his knife clutched in nerveless fingers. He never moved. The fresh scarlet blood from Val's arm

stained the front of the green mandarin coat; and close beside it the great gaunt rat bounced in fright from side to side of the small wire cage.

PANTING, suddenly weak from the nervous reaction, Val laid the knife on the table and picked up the torn fragments of his shirt. He mopped the blood off his arm. He had a gash several inches long and a quarter of an inch deep, bleeding freely. Quickly he wrapped the shirt around it, tied a quick rough knot as best he could and stepped to the square yawning hole in the floor.

"Charlie Gong!" he called down cautiously.

From the black well-like hole Charlie Gong's voice came up, surprisingly cheerful. "Astonishing! I thought you would be dead by now, Easton."

"Still kicking. Our friend is out cold."

"You should have killed him," said Charlie Gong cheerfully. "Sorry I can't help you. Better get out of the house as quickly as you can—if you can. Don't know how many men they've got."

"Where is Bradshaw? How did you get in? I thought you'd lost us. I'd given you up."

"We had a puncture," Charlie Gong explained. "Last we saw of you the car was heading into Westchester. We came on, looked around. No sign of you. Bad business. Bradshaw was stumped. And then we suddenly ran into a string of cars leaving some place hurriedly. We found the drive they were coming out of and walked in to investigate. And bless you," said Charlie Gong in his flawless English, "there was the car we had been following, standing in front of the house. The driver was behind the wheel. I surprised him. We took him off in the fog and I talked Cantonese to him. After I had knocked his front teeth out he talked to me as one brother to another. There was trouble inside, he said. His partner had blundered

and would perhaps die for it. Two strangers had been caught in the house."

Charlie Gong's voice floated up out of the darkness, calm and careless, with no hint of the drama and bravery he was recording.

"There was no time to go for help. I doubted if you were alive even then. I slugged the fellow after he had told me all I wanted to know, took his cap and coat and walked to the front door. The man at the door let me in, thinking I was the driver. We Chinese have moments of reason. It wasn't difficult for me to persuade him to bring me upstairs to you. Our friend Chang Ch'ien was talking when I arrived on the other side of the bookcase. I let him finish before I rudely interrupted his modest pleasures. You will find the doorman on the other side of the bookcase on the floor."

"Where is Nancy Fraser?"

"I don't know. I wanted to get you first. Better get out of here quick and send Bradshaw for help. From what Chang Ch'ien said I doubt if she's harmed—yet."

"How about you? Can you get out of there?"

"No," said Charlie Gong casually. "I am underground, I think. The walls are stone, and damp. Leakage from the beach probably. I must be below water level. Besides, my leg is broken." And not until then did Val have the full measure of that little Chinese detective.

VAL looked about. There were no windows in the room. Impossible to try to get Charlie Gong with his broken leg out of the house. He would be safer down there.

"I'm going," said Val. "I'll do the best I can."

"Good luck. And by the way, I understand you're mystified about how that chap got off Beurket's roof. The chauffeur was driving the same car for that

job. He kindly told me before I broke his head that your man swung down from the seventh floor window of an apartment they had rented in the building adjoining. The space between it and the roof edge of Beurket's private gallery was two or three yards. By pushing hard this Zaken crossed the gap, stood on the roof. One of his men followed him and slid on down the rope into the back yard. After disposing of the watchmen there, he entered the back door when no one was looking and slipped down into the cellar.

"After putting the lights out he left without discovery in the darkness, climbed up to the roof again and swung across the space into the third-story window of a second apartment they had rented. This Carl Zaken followed in the same way. They walked out of the door of their apartment house, around the corner to their car and drove away. Everything had been planned, I understand, from the moment word had come from China that the mask of Kuan Ti had been smuggled out of the country. Chang Ch'ien's agent had been looking for it there.

"I tell you all this," Charlie Gong's cheerful voice floated up out of the darkness, "in case I am unable to talk when you find me again. Good luck."

Val left him there, that gallant little fellow. And naked to the waist as he was, with blood-stained arm and side, he opened the bookcase and stepped through. He could have asked Charlie Gong to try to throw his revolver up. Deliberately he left that comfort to Charlie Gong.

The bookcase was double, with books facing out on both sides. Val found himself in a bedroom. He stepped over the inert form of the doorman, crossed the room, opened the door into the hall and was greeted by an exclamation of astonishment. Coming toward him two paces away was a blue-clad, saffron-skinned servant, carrying a big leather

kit bag in one hand. He dropped the kit bag and turned to scurry along the hall.

Val caught him in the first step, succeeded in throttling most of his squall of fright. With a full armed sweep he shoved the fellow against the wall and smashed him in the jaw. The first blow didn't do it—but the second and third did. He left the fellow there on the floor.

The hall turned at both ends. No stairs were visible. It was impossible to tell which way to go. Val went in the direction from which his victim had been coming.

He made the turn to the left, found steps a short distance beyond—narrow steps that turned at right angles as they went down. Blood was dripping from Val's arm, staining his torso. He still carried the knife in his right hand. Hair ruffled, face set, blood-smearred, he was a startling and savage sight. At the bottom of the stairs he found another hall. This big old stone house seemed to be a tangle of rooms and halls.

Fate decided his direction this time. A door slammed to his left. He went to the right. Another door slammed behind him. He heard steps shuffling in his direction, men talking excitedly in Chinese. Val opened the first door he came to; it happened to be on the left. He stepped through—and stood stock still, nerves tense.

He was in the big vaulted room where he had been throttled unconscious. The dais, the thronelike chair, the great silver and gold tapestry and all the other furnishings were still in place; but the room was empty. His own cautious steps sounded loud.

Val hesitated, stared. He knew now how to get to the front entrance to leave the house. But what would happen while he was gone? Could he get back in the house, find Nancy Fraser. . . .

VAL turned his back on the door which led to the open, free night outside; turned his back and went to the dais. Carl Zaken had disappeared from behind that great tapestry. He might still be found beyond there. Val clutched the knife ready as he stepped nimbly upon the dais and approached the tapestry. The Black Doctor would get short shrift if they met—and Val sought that meeting.

Silently, he slipped through the tapestry and found an open door in the alcove behind it. He went down the steps at the back of the dais, through the door, and found himself in another hall. The great brass gong that had been struck hung from two uprights by the wall. The striker leaned beside it. The hall was empty.

Walking carefully along, Val suddenly heard a muffled voice saying: "It will be too late in a few minutes. Too late. It's your last chance to help him. Who knew you were coming here?"

And Nancy's voice, shaken, desperate, denying, saying bravely: "No one knew. Let me think. I—I can't think. Give me time. Don't do anything to him—yet."

"Where is Tai Shan?"

"I don't know."

And Carl Zaken's harsh voice: "I have a way, Miss Fraser, of stimulating memory. Perhaps this will do."

Nancy cried out with pain.

Val sprang into the room through a red haze of anger. There, opposite the door, sat Nancy tied in a chair. And standing over her was the tall, stooped figure of the Black Doctor, twisting one wrist cold-bloodedly and methodically.

On a table close by them rested the jade mask of the Emperor Kiang Hsi!

Nancy saw Val enter the room. Her eyes widened, her face puckered in astonishment through her pain at sight of his blood-smeared figure. Carl Zaken saw her face and whirled.

One look—and Zaken grabbed under his coat, under his left arm. . . .

Val leaped at him, swinging the knife. The Black Doctor met him with a gun snapped out from a shoulder holster; a gun that roared, caught Val in mid-stride.

Val felt the shock of the bullet striking his shoulder, spinning him off balance, so that he staggered. That saved him from the second hasty shot that roared from Carl Zaken's gun, point blank; for this shot went between Val's arm and side. Val heard Nancy cry out with fear. And then he was on that tall, stooped figure whose pale cadaverous face was snarling like a death mask. Val knocked the gun away as the third shot roared out, slashed across and down with the knife.

The keen edge cut deep to the bone across Carl Zaken's knuckles.

The Black Doctor cried out with the pain of it. His nerveless fingers opened. The gun fell to the floor. Zaken scrambled back away from the menace of that flashing knife. He struck the table, knocked it over. The jade mask fell to the floor with a ringing sound. But such was the quality of that ancient jade that it did not break.

At the moment however Val had no thought for it as he followed that scrambling figure across the room. Carl Zaken caught a chair in passing, swung it around. Val threw up an arm. But the chair struck him heavily, drove him back, stopped him dead for a moment, dizzy with pain.

And in that moment the Black Doctor plunged to the side wall of the room, bolted through a second door, slammed it. When Val reached it the door would not open. A bolt had been shot on the other side. The Black Doctor was gone. His voice, shouting, could be heard receding on the other side.

Val swung quickly, shaking his head to clear it. Quickly he cut Nancy loose from the chair.

"You're wounded! You're bleeding!"

"Never mind!" Val panted. "Come with me quick! We've got a chance to get out! A bare chance! God knows how many of them are in the house here!"

On the way to the door he scooped up the jade mask and the gun Zaken had dropped.

The hall was empty as he burst out into it ahead of Nancy.

But somewhere to the back voices were answering the Black Doctor's shouts.

"This way!" Val threw at her.

He led her to the end of the hall, past the great gong, up the steps to the dais, through the tapestry curtain and down across the big room where they had been trapped. Those three roaring shots, the Black Doctor's shouts had brought life to that ominously quiet house. As they neared the door which they had passed through earlier in the night, it opened and two blue clad Orientals, knives in hands, rushed through.

Val shot the first one without slackening his pace. The second one squealed with fright, doubled back through the door, slamming it—but not locking it. Val jerked it open, rushed through. The clamor behind them grew louder as more men joined in the pursuit.

That run to the front door seemed endless. But they made it without further opposition. The guard was gone. Charlie Gong had taken care of him. Val jerked the door in, kicked open the storm door—and suddenly they were both out in the dank, dark, fog-filled night.

The big ivy-covered stone house loomed

behind them, black, seemingly deserted—but with the rising cacophony of furious pursuit sounding inside like a hive of bees erupting.

They stumbled down the steps. Headlights suddenly glowed through the fog ahead of them. Val raised the gun, shouting:

"Bradshaw! Bradshaw—where are you?"

And where the headlights were the voice of Bradshaw called: "Here!"

Bradshaw was by the car. It was Bradshaw who took in the situation in a flash, slid behind the wheel, stamped on the starter; and as they tumbled in the back started the big limousine with a lurch. They roared off into the fog just as pandemonium burst out of the house.

And the fog which had veiled its mystery earlier, now saved them. It blotted out the trouble and pursuit behind. Bradshaw left his own car where he had parked it and drove swiftly to Westchester Avenue, to the first light, the first telephone.

And it ended that way. The house was deserted when the police squad got there. Charlie Gong, broken leg and cheerful grin, was in the well-like prison into which he had fallen. But Chang Ch'ien and Carl Zaken, the Black Doctor, were gone. There was no trace of Cartier Beurket's report. But Beurket was alive, could write another shortly.

And the mask, the precious jade mask of Emperor Kiang Hsi, was safe. No mad leader would incite yellow-skinned millions to follow the god of war!

In the Next Issue—

RED DOLLARS

Complete Novel-Length Murder-Mystery

By T. T. FLYNN



He came up with the dead woman first.

The Swamp Lake Horrors

By
Russ Meservy

Out of the night death had come twice in one week—sudden and ghastly. And now through the fog phantoms a bag-faced killer crept, waiting to finish the blood task. What was this eery menace that had turned the Grenwald home into a murder trap? Why had those ghouls opened that week-old grave?

CHAPTER ONE

Murder at Swamp Lake

THE raw March wind skidded last year's dried leaves across the road. They eddied up between the slowing car's headlights and the weatherbeaten arrow with its blurred directions—*Swamp Lake 1½ Miles.*

Link Nace spotted the faded words and tromped his foot back on the accelerator; the car lurched ahead. And a spider web with a hole in the center appeared abruptly in the left side of the roadster's non-shatterable windshield. Swerving the car, Nace heard the echoing crack of the rifle shot.

Blinking off his lights, skidding to a stop, he ducked out and slid around the V-shaped radiator, holding a revolver in one hand. The soft murmur of the idl-

ing motor made less sound than the wind-slid leaves. There was no other noise.

Nace waited, crouching, listening, watching the dim ribbon of road and the steep, wooded hills. At the end of five minutes he said, "Hell!" softly and got back into the car.

He drove a quarter mile without lights, then switched them on, and turned into the first private road, between stone pillars, when he saw a small gilt sign—*P. W. GRENWALD*.

Rolling up the long drive, a cold moon suddenly slid chilly silver from a cloud bank upon a large stone house. A shimmer of water glittered briefly through stark trees on the left. There was an odor of fish.

THE drive circled the house, passed a converted garage-barn, and petered out at the front again. Nace drove around it, tapping his horn gently, looking up at windows for lights that did not come on. He parked, walked up onto the fort-like stone porch, and began methodically whanging a brass door clapper up and down.

He was banging it when a heavy voice said behind him: "That won't get you nowhere." A blinding torch, flashing up into his face as he turned, showed his angular, pleasant features, pale eyes, dark gray fedora and tall leanness bundled in a coat.

"I guess not," Nace said. He quit smashing the knocker and came down the stone steps, looking under the beam of light at large feet and thick legs encased in laced, high leather boots.

"Don't put your hands in your pockets," the rough voice ordered.

"If you're Bartmeyer, the Kanoyer Agency man," Nace offered, "you can take that damned light out of my face."

"I ain't him," the man with the boots rasped, and kept the light on Nace. "Who're you?"

"I'm a man called Lincoln Nace," Nace said irritably. "I'm looking for Mr. Grenwald."

"Grenwald's dead," the heavy voice growled. "Murdered."

"You telling me?" Nace turned from the light. "Where's his brother?"

"You must be another private cop." The burly man's voice was more a sneer than a question. "You was askin' for Bartmeyer."

"I thought you might be Bartmeyer." Nace's baritone kept its pleasing resonance. "I'm a private dick, but no Kanoyer man. I'm on my own." Still talking, he swung around on his toe. The movement gave him a flash view of the completely dark house, and the continued swing of his body brought him closer to the torch. He said: "Grenwald's brother phoned me." Completing the body pivot, he ducked, lunged and spun away, gripping the booted man's torch in one hand, his own revolver in the other. With the blinding beam on the burly figure, Nace rasped: "You stall around too long!"

"I could run you in, for that!" In the torchlight the beefy man looked about forty, powerful, over two hundred pounds. "I'm Jake Rye, game warden for Swamp Lake, and I'm a deputy sheriff." But he showed no fight.

"Run me in," Nace invited, "anytime. Where's Arthur Grenwald?"

"Well—he went to Morganport." Jake Rye's voice gradually became less harsh. "His niece Joan, old P. W. Grenwald's daughter, is comin' back from Europe. Arthur Grenwald went to meet her. If you gimme back that flash, Mr. Nace, I'll forget how you got it." His hairy hand extended. "You tricked me, but I ain't sore."

"Sure," Nace said. "You tell me first who is taking pot shots at automobiles on the road a half mile from here."

"Shots?" Rye's eyes shifted, prying Nace's lean face behind the torch. "I only heard one shot."

"One was plenty," Nace grimaced.

Rye nodded and rubbed a grimy hand over his heavy jaw. His eyes slid away from the light. "There's deer in the hills round here. It's out of season, but some people—"

"Deer don't have headlights!" Nace snapped off the torch, handed it to Rye, and went to his roadster. "Nuts! And that was no spent rifle bullet. Where'd Bartmeyer go?"

"For the mail. I wish he'd go to hell!" Rye growled. "He was paying a lot of attention to Mrs. Nielson when Grenwald was shot. The shot came through a window. Old Grenwald was reading a book." He said "book" as though there was only one in the world. "Bartmeyer was with Mrs. Nielson right then, when Grenwald was killed. She and her daughter Mary live back in the woods. Her old man works out on farms around here. He's out working now."

"Why," Nace asked, "should anybody kill P. W. Grenwald?"

"Gold!" Rye spat the word out. "Grenwald was a damned hoarder. He had it in gold and in paper. And then the president, this guy Roosevelt, said in the papers it had to go back in the bank." He rubbed his jaw again. "The county attorney's office told me to keep my eye on things here. I live down on the lower lake."

Feeling in the car, Nace found a bottle and offered it. "Shoot yourself."

"You won't find the money," Rye said persistently. "Grenwald's in his grave three days—" His torch blazed suddenly and sought out the sound of running feet beyond the graveled drive.

NACE, the pint of whiskey still in his hand, heard the short gasping of breath, the thud of a falling body some-

where beyond in the blackness. Ignoring the stab of Rye's torch, he pocketed the bottle, ran for the darkness where the sounds seemed loudest.

A gasping voice, weak, feminine, cried faintly: "Help! Oh—help—"

The voice faded out on Nace's left. Rye's flash jabbed at tree trunks behind him.

"Over here," Nace called, then dodged left and tripped over a softly heaving form on the ground. "Here, Rye!" he said sharply. Turning on his knees, he felt cotton cloth and warm flesh under it. Long hair brushed his fingers.

Rye's torch caught up with him, slid right and left over the prone figure, blazed in the girl's face as Nace turned her and lifted her head. She was not more than sixteen, pretty under the dirt clinging to her cheeks. Her nose was scratched. She stared wildly into the torch beam.

"It's-Mary-Nielson-by-God!" Rye said, making one word of it.

Nace groped in his pocket, brought out the whiskey bottle. He drew the cork, forced the bottle neck into the girl's mouth, tipping it up. She strangled, shut her eyes tight, coughed, swallowed.

Nace corked the bottle and put it down on the ground, raised the girl to a sitting position. "Where's she from?" he asked.

"Daughter of Hank Nielson," Rye said excitedly. "They're tenant farmers—the ones I told you about. They work around. Ma Neilson does the work in Grenwald's house—cooking, cleaning." He picked up the whiskey bottle, uncorked it. "The girl helps her Ma. Hank, he's doin' some plowin' over beyond Lotts Corners. He ain't been comin' home nights. It's too far." He raised the bottle. "I'll take that drink now. I need it."

"Help yourself." Nace looked up. "You'd better talk to her if she knows you. She's not hurt. Scared."

HANDING Nace the bottle, Rye bent down to the girl. She stirred, opened her eyes.

"Take it easy, Mary," Rye said. There was nothing soothing in his voice; it was determined, forceful. "What scared you, kid? You're all right now. It's Jake Rye. What'd you get scared of?"

The girl put a hand to her lips. "Ma!" she said. Her voice still held hysteria. "Ma—she's shot. Dead! Ma—Ma—" Her eyes shut tight, stayed shut.

"Hell!" Nace said softly, looking at Rye. "Is this all part of it?" He stooped, lifting the girl's chin.

"Part of what?" Rye asked.

"Of P. W. Grenwald's murder," Nace said.

"We'll find that out," Rye said and his dark eyes had grimness in them. "What'll we do with her? Take her along? Nielson's place ain't mor'n three-quarter mile from here."

"Put her in Grenwald's house, if we can get inside," Nace said and stood up. "Or in my car. She can't be left alone. You'll have to go over yourself."

Rye nodded, lifted the girl with no effort whatever, carried her to the car. Then, taking the flash from Nace, he crunched across the driveway.

Nace got in the car, sat beside the girl, looking at her. He took a flashlight from the car-door pocket, blinked it once at her, and drew a blanket tighter about her. She was breathing easier.

"You'd better tell me about it," he said.

She shuddered, gave him a staring look, and said: "We—Ma and I—were going to bed. She had her clothes off—"

She shuddered again, and Nace, stroking her hand, urged gently: "Is the bedroom on the ground floor?"

She nodded. "Yes. The—there's no shade on the window. Only a curtain. She—she didn't scream. She sort of—of groaned—and fell down—on the bed.

Then she—she fell off the bed on her back. There was a hole in her side and—blood. Oh—oh—" The girl began sobbing violently.

When she stopped sobbing Nace asked: "You sure she was dead?"

"Yes," the girl said. Her voice had a kind of fatal conviction of tone. "Yes. I—know. It was in the left side right where her heart— It came out the right side almost the same place. I stayed with her a—a long while—trying to do something for her. Once I guess I—fainted."

"How long do you think you were with her?" Nace asked.

"I don't know," she said weakly. "More than a half hour."

"The bullet came from outside," Nace said. "It must have broken the window glass."

"Yes," she said.

The rumble of a motor, not far away, made her jerk.

HEADLIGHTS swerved at them from the end of the driveway. Nace reached for his light switch and began turning his headlights on and off and on. The car, a gray, sedan, slowed and stopped near the porch. The roadster's lights flicked off.

Nace said to the girl soothingly: "Just stay quiet." He slid from the seat and, holding his flash on the sedan, walked over to it.

"Bartmeyer?" an irritated voice growled from the sedan. "You back already? Take that blamed light out of my eyes!"

Nace said quietly, with a touch of disapproval: "I'm not Bartmeyer. I'm looking for Mr. Arthur Grenwald." He turned the flash down on the running board.

"You're talking to Arthur Grenwald now," a pleasant, cultivated feminine voice called from the other side of the

sedan. "Uncle Arthur, perhaps it's Mr. Nace."

"I am Lincoln Nace," Nace said.

A heavy, short man crowded nervously out from behind the wheel. "Well, Mr. Nace! I'm glad you're here. Come on into the house." He reached into the car, then started for the porch carrying a handbag and hatbox. Without pausing he called: "Nace, my niece, Joan Grenwald."

Joan Grenwald held out her hand. "Uncle Arthur is expecting you to help us," she said hopefully.

Nace offered politely: "I'll try not to disappoint him."

She hesitated, looking at him a moment, said quietly: "I rather dread—going in." Turning quickly, she went up the steps.

Arthur Grenwald, fussing with the lock on the front door, called down: "Aren't you coming in, Mr. Nace?" He got the door open. "My phone call was brief, and unless you've seen Bartmeyer—"

"I haven't seen Bartmeyer," Nace said, "but there's a lumberjack of a rural police force wandering round in a pair of high boots. I promised I'd wait for him out here, if you don't mind."

"Ump!" Arthur Griswald grumbled and shut the door.

When a light went on inside the house, Nace stepped quickly over to the roadster. Mary Nielson was sunk in the seat, huddled in the blanket. She was very wide awake, looked up at him.

All he could see was her very young face. The moon slid back behind black clouds as he slipped into the seat beside her. More lights went on in the house, accentuating the bleak darkness round them.

Bending down, almost whispering, Nace said very earnestly: "You said you stayed with your mother a half hour aft-

er she was shot. What were you running from when we found you here?"

"For help," she said simply.

Shaking his head, Nace asked with sympathy: "Help for whom? You said your mother was beyond helping. What scared you?"

She put her hands to her face and from between her fingers her voice quavered. "I heard somebody coming." Her words began tumbling out. "I was afraid it was whoever shot—through the window. I ran outside. There was a man—between me and the lane that comes down here. I ran into the woods. He chased me. I got away and hid, but I was afraid to go back to our house. I ran through the orchard and down here."

Nace frowned. "You didn't get much of a look at him."

"I only heard him."

Heavy footsteps crunched up the gravel drive. Nace slid from the roadster's seat. The crunching came on, louder.

From the stone porch Arthur Grenwald's voice called irritably: "Mr. Nace! Never mind that damned fool, Rye. Come in now, please!"

Nace called: "Just a moment, Mr. Grenwald." He shot his flash along the driveway.

The crunching stopped, came on again quickly. In the shaft of light a man as heavy as Rye but taller came forward. He wore a dark, wrinkled suit, dusty, with mud on the trouser cuffs.

Arthur Grenwald said sharply from the porch: "Oh, there you are, Bartmeyer! I thought perhaps you'd given us up."

"My car broke down," Bartmeyer apologized. "I had to hoof it." He looked distrustfully at Nace. "Who's this?"

Nace went up to him quietly. "I'm Link Nace. Maybe you know the name. I worked for Kanoyer once." Even more quietly he added: "I'm not horning in on

you any more than I can help, but Grenwald wants to have a talk. There's a girl in my car. Keep your eye on her for me until I come out."

Bartmeyer's voice was unexpectedly bitter. "So you're Link Nace. Well, I heard you were coming up."

Nace stepped to the roadster, bent over the girl and whispered: "Don't say anything until I come back. Use the car horn if you have to." As he went toward the porch he slipped the whiskey bottle to Bartmeyer. "Help yourself."

CHAPTER TWO

The Bearded Man

ARTHUR GRENWALD was waiting impatiently in the hallway. The room they went into was chilly, but Joan Grenwald was poking up a grate fire that made long shadows across Victorian furniture.

Arthur Grenwald shut the hall door. "Now, Mr. Nace, let's get at it. Or perhaps you'd prefer a drink first."

Nace shook his head decisively. "Let's get at it now! I know your brother was shot to death six days ago and some money he had in this house disappeared. Let's start from here."

"That," Grenwald said and waved Nace into a chair, "is exactly where we're obliged to start from, Mr. Nace. Of course, we tried—that is, the day following the tragedy, when I arrived, I tried—to—ah—keep the circumstance of the money my brother had in the house from becoming public knowledge. I tried to do so because it was disgraceful to have so much money here, and because if it was still here it might further tempt strangers."

Seated, Nace examined the rim of his hat, fingering with sardonic interest the nick in it the rifle bullet had made, coming through his windshield. Sliding pale,

curious eyes at Joan Grenwald, he said: "But it got out—about the money."

"Part of it leaked out," Grenwald admitted. "A hundred thousand dollars. In fact, unfortunately, it's nearer two hundred thousand. I've checked up my brother's various bank withdrawals." He slapped the arms of his chair impatiently. "The authorities haven't produced either a murderer or a trace of the cash. Bartmeyer, this Kanoyer operative, is a plain damned fool. My brother hired him as a guard because the money was here. But Bartmeyer didn't know that. And now the Kanoyer agency won't take him away, Mr. Nace, because they say their client was killed while their man was on the job and their reputation is at stake."

"Kanoyer's reputation has been at stake ever since he opened his agency," Nace said. And then he asked in his smoothly pleasant baritone: "Are you, or is the estate, still paying Kanoyer for Bartmeyer's time here?"

"Not a dime!" Grenwald was emphatic. "Naturally, I represent my brother's estate, and consequently Joan's interest."

Joan Grenwald, slender, dignified, and looking suddenly tired, came to her uncle's chair and put a hand on his shoulder. "Can't we"—she looked appealingly at Nace—"talk about all this tomorrow?"

Nace answered her politely. "We can talk about it from now on, Miss Grenwald, but talk don't get back your money."

She shrugged, crossed back to the fireplace, and began poking the embers.

Grenwald looked with quickened, hardened regard at Nace. "Talking certainly won't bring back poor old P. W." He paused. "But—" The word was pointed.

Turning his hat until the nicked rim came up again, Nace said flatly: "I'm a detective, Mr. Grenwald—not a priest, not a policeman. The local police, if there are any besides Rye, the sheriff's office and the state troopers—"

"Bunglers, all of them!" Grenwald exclaimed with heat.

"Just the same," Nace said, "they'll look for the money and if it goes into circulation they'll track it down, or what's left of it. Their angle is get the money and the murderer will come along. That might happen in a month, in a year, or never. I'm in on a cold trail"—he eyed Grenwald shrewdly—"cold up to the time I got here, anyway. I haven't the facilities or the patience of an entire police organization, so I'll have to work from an easier angle. I'll have to find the murderer."

"Easier?" Grenwald's voice was surprised, suspicious.

"A killer will have more characteristics than any money he kills for," Nace explained patiently. "But that's what you're primarily interested in, isn't it—"

THE horn on Nace's roadster, out in the driveway, made a harsh noise that died almost instantly. Nace sprang across the room.

He was down the dark hall and on the stone porch, holding a revolver in one hand, a flash in the other, when Grenwald and Joan Grenwald crowded through the room door behind him.

The sedan lights were out and there was no light or noise near the roadster. Nace hit the gravel drive in two long-legged jumps and in four more had his torch on the roadster's empty seat. The blanket trailed over the far door. Nobody was visible.

A sound of wood on wood, followed by a rippling splash, floated up on the left from the lake. Nace shot his flash through the trees. The light hit an arbor, flared over a grassy path going downhill beyond. He began running.

The path angled smoothly down a slope toward the upper lake a hundred yards from the drive. Nace was halfway down it when something crashed through un-

derbrush along the shore. He kept running, his flash off. The path narrowed. Trees thickened into a willow tangle.

A gun banged beyond bare branches, showing a jet of orange-yellow, and water splashed again, rippled. Nace tore through tripping branches, skidded on mushy sand, dug heels in, and bowled sideways, whirling.

A blur of staggering bodies collided with him, panting, cursing. The blur went down in a heap, kicking sand, making a smacking sound of bone on flesh. Nace spun away, got his balance. The torch in his left hand came alight, outlined two men.

Jake Rye was on top. In the sudden light, Bartmeyer's legs, feet against Rye's stomach, heaved outward, upward. Rye went over backward, made a complete turn in the air like a huge cat, came down on hands and knees.

Nace said solidly: "That's enough of that act!" He twitched his gun at both of them, took a deep breath. His voice came out flat, hard. "Where's the girl—Mary Nielson?"

Rye, getting up, blinking, growled: "This fellow was running off with—" He stopped, blinked again, concentrated on Bartmeyer. "By God! It's that damned dick, Bartmeyer!" He mumbled curses.

Bartmeyer interrupted sourly: "I was chasing whoever had the girl. I would of got him, too, but this dumb farmer jumped me. I heard a noise round the house and went to investigate, Nace. I came back and heard somebody running down here, heavy-like. The fellow stuck her in a canoe, heard me coming, and took a shot at me." He stood up.

"I took a shot at you," Rye said. "It's too damned bad I missed!" Glaring, he rubbed his hand over his chin and said to Nace: "It must have been me he heard, Mr. Nace, coming back from Nielson's. I came through the orchard. There

was lights in the house, so I figured you was inside. When I heard runnin', I tooted your car horn and chased down here."

Nace sprayed his torch on the lake's black, uninviting surface. "You two birds make a swell comedy team for vaudeville." The light picked up a canoe's vague outline, thirty or forty yards out on the water, floating serenely. Nobody was paddling. "Get a boat," Nace ordered sharply.

Rye jerked his head toward the black beach line. "There's a rowboat along there. One of you better stay. Grenwald'll be down."

"Bartmeyer," Nace directed curtly, "you stay. And don't bungle this time!"

BARTMEYER made a movement toward Nace, grumbling. Nace ignored the detective's muttering and went along the narrow beach. When he was out of earshot he said to Rye: "It took you a long time up at Nielson's."

"You bet," Rye said. "There was some blood on the bed and on the floor. But old lady Nielson ain't there. I followed some tracks, heavy ones like somebody carrying a weight. I traced them to the swamp at the upper end of the lake. Them tracks went in but they didn't come out. If she's in there, she's bogged down by now. Quicksand!" He looked ahead and said: "There's the rowboat."

The anchor made a hollow sound as Rye tossed it into the bow. He shoved off, wading partway into the water.

From the stern, his voice mingling with rattled oarlocks, Nace said with dissatisfaction: "If the Nielson girl's not in the canoe you'll have to drag the lake, Rye." His torch flashed out over the water. "That won't be so nice. But you can't prove murder without a body."

"She'll be in the canoe, I bet," Rye said and continued rowing methodically.

The rowboat swung over, rippling water from its bow. In the torch beam a

limp, bare arm hung over the canoe's side. Mary Nielson, her dress torn, was arched backward across a thwart, her left arm dangling over the gunwale, bent at the elbow, her hand trailing in the water. Her eyes were shut.

Nace called: "Mary! Mary!"

She did not move.

Coming alongside, Rye caught the canoe's gunwale. Stepping carefully, Nace got into the canoe, bent over the girl. She was breathing. There was a bruise, a little blood not yet dry, on her head. Nace started to lift her, but the canoe rocked.

"Here's a rope," Rye offered and tossed a line. "Dead?"

"Knocked out." Nace peered over the gunwale at the deputy. "If her back isn't broken, too." He caught the rope, tied it to a ring in the nose of the canoe. "Better get her up to the house quick."

Oarlocks creaked again. The canoe slid toward shore in long, sweeping lunges. Nace straightened the girl, dipped his hand and shook water on her face. Her eyes stayed shut.

A light flashed on them from the shore. Bartmeyer, waiting, waded out, hauled the canoe up the sand. Behind him Arthur Grenwald and Joan Grenwald watched, saying nothing, staring.

Nace picked up the girl in the canoe, holding her in his long arms gently. "I think we can get along without a doctor. Somebody run ahead to the house. Peroxide and a bandage."

"I'll go," Joan Grenwald said, and started up the slope.

Rye's torch lighted the path through the willows.

SLOWLY, carefully, Nace picked his way along the path, through the arbor, past his roadster, up the stone porch steps. Joan Grenwald met him at the door. She was pale. She motioned him into a room on the right, indicated a davenport. Nace

laid the girl down gently, moved a stand lamp nearer, examined her head again. Rye, Bartmeyer and Grenwald watched him use peroxide and gauze. The girl never moved.

Looking over his shoulder, Nace said: "She got a worse crack than I thought. She won't come round tonight. Call a doctor."

Grenwald nodded gravely, irritably, and went into the hall.

"Somebody should tell her mother," Joan suggested.

Rye began to say, "Her mother's dea—"

"Mrs. Nielson isn't home tonight," Nace said harshly. "Her father's away, too. The girl will have to stay here." He finished bandaging her head, moved the stand lamp away. "Cover her up."

Arthur Grenwald came back into the room. His face was worried, angry, as he announced: "The telephone won't work."

Nace eyed the group slowly, almost insolently. He took up his hat. "Stay here, all of you." He went into the hall, out the front door, down the porch steps. His torch shafted light against the fort-like stone house.

Telephone wire came out of the third story, slid away toward the highway through the trees, was lost in the darkness. His light in the air, Nace followed the line. It went away from the drive, turned parallel with the highway across the orchard, sagging between poles. Beyond the orchard, where a line from the Nielson house joined it, the wire went over a steep, wooded hill, then on down to the highway, making a long right bend.

Three poles from the road, hidden in the trees, the line was down. Using his light, Nace examined the wire end. It was bright, sheer, a clean knife or plier cut. He found the other end forty feet

away. There was fully twenty feet of wire cut out between the two poles. He flashed the torch among the trees, low, on bushes and branches, looking for wire thrown away.

The torch beam went past a tree and hit a man.

"Stand there!" the man ordered in a guttural, unnatural voice.

He had a double-barreled shotgun against his shoulder, aimed at Nace. He was smaller than Nace, not very stocky, and his clothes were worn, torn and patched. He wore a thick beard and a black cap. He held the shotgun on Nace as though he were only flushing quail.

Nace said, "All right," and stood still.

"Turn the light on yourself," the guttural voice said.

Looking away, so the light would not blind him, Nace twisted the torch, playing it up and down himself. Hearing the man with the shotgun coming toward him, circling behind him, Nace asked: "Now what?"

"Just stand there," the man directed.

The shotgun prodded him in the back.

"A lot of people," Nace said, "would hear that gun go off."

"You won't!" The man spoke more thickly than before, but with no distinguishable accent.

The shotgun's pressure eased a trifle. Its double nozzle inched carefully down Nace's spine to his waist. There was a quick, swishing sound. Nace jerked his head sideways, but the blow hit him squarely enough.

He took one step and fell on his face.

CHAPTER THREE

Ten Percent

SHIVERING, Nace rolled over on his side. He spit dirt from his mouth. Wisps of fog misted his vision. His head ached with sharp throbs, keeping time

with his pulse. The ground was damp.

His hands stayed behind him when he sat up; his ankles stuck together. Telephone wire cut his wrists. The wire went around his hips, came down to his knees, binding them, and on down around his ankles. When he doubled his legs there was some slack.

Nace shivered again, moved his shoulders up and down, working his hands, twisting his wrists, keeping his legs doubled.

When he had twisted and hauled for five minutes the slack was up where the wire went around his hips. He worked his hands to the right, behind him, until he could finger into his pants pocket. Holding a pocket knife, he worked his hands back to his spine, opened the knife blade, began sawing at the wire around his hips.

It cut through. He began unwinding the wire, first from his hips, then his wrists, his knees, his ankles. It took ten minutes.

Standing, he struck a match. He felt warm now, but his head still throbbed. The match flare showed his hat and his flashlight.

Methodically, but without lost motion, he took off his coat, went to the nearest telephone pole, shinned up it and unfastened the telephone line from its green glass insulator. The line fell to the ground and he slid down the pole.

Using the light and the pocket knife, he spliced the length of wire he had cut to free himself, spliced its entire length to the two cut ends of the telephone line. Without the pole to which the line had been fastened to hold it up, the spliced wire hung almost to the ground.

Nace put his overcoat back on and walked under the line, following it until it branched off to the two houses. He stood for a minute, his torch off, watching the mist swirl whitely, across the

orchard. He felt under his hat gingerly, touched the cut back of his ear, winced, shook his head.

He started walking again, not toward the Grenwald house, but past the orchard, following the line to the Nielson house. The house came out of the fog, between trees and a squat barn. Circling it cautiously, Nace spotted a door, listened close to it, went inside.

Using the light sparingly, he found the bedroom. His feet crunched broken glass near a window. There was some blood on the enameled iron bed, more on the floor. He sighted from the window across to the opposite wall, found a hole with the light and, using his pocket knife again, dug rifle lead out of the wall board.

He went through the house rapidly, looking in rooms, closets, under furniture, in the shallow basement, in the attic, finding no naked woman's body. The telephone was in the kitchen. He used it, giving a Minneapolis number. A wail like a wolf's sounded very near.

When a sleepy voice answered, Nace said into the instrument: "This is Link. I'm on that Grenwald job at Swamp Lake. I want a nurse. You can get here under three hours by car."

The voice became alive, pleasant. "Coming."

Nace hung up, went out. Again he heard the wail of a wolf.

NACE picked his way back under the telephone line to the branch, turned right, followed it to Grenwald's stone house. The sedan was not in the driveway and the house lights, except in the hall, were on only up on the second floor. Fog swirled through the door with him and the hall clock struck two.

Going up the stairway, Grenwald's harsh, nervous voice called down: "Who's there? Who's there, I say? I'll shoot!"

Grenwald was standing at the stair

head, holding a revolver that wavered and pointed nowhere in particular, but the hammer was back, ready to fire. He asked: "My God, where have you been?" His eyes moved over Nace's muddy clothes and scratched face.

Joan Grenwald came out into the hall. She wore a heavy bathrobe over a dressing gown under which a nightdress dangled, brushing the floor. She stared at Nace with wide, tired, frightened eyes. She had a nicked revolver in one hand.

"What is this, a siege?" Nace glanced sourly at the two guns and brushed past into the room from which she had come.

It was a large bedroom; the bed had four posts and a silk canopy over it. Mary Nielson's bandaged head lay on a white pillow; the contour of her rounded figure made an inviting outline beneath the bed covers.

Following Nace into the room, Grenwald said: "She hasn't come out of it yet, but Bartmeyer went for a doctor in my car."

Nace asked, without looking away from the Nielson girl: "Where's this deputy sheriff, Rye?"

Joan Grenwald came over to the bed, looking curiously at Nace instead of at the girl under the covers. "There was a man came for him—for Rye. They went away together."

"About fifteen minutes after you went out," Grenwald explained. "I went to the door myself. The fellow looked like a tramp. He asked for Jake Rye, but he wouldn't come inside. He said it was about the Jarno property. So Rye went with him."

"What about the Jarno property?" Nace asked irritably.

Grenwald started to sit on the bed.

"Don't sit there, damn it!" Nace said curtly. "And put the hammer of that gun back on the safety. Who's Jarno?" Grenwald stood away from the bed.

"Jarno," he said as though the subject had a bad smell, "has the estate across the road from us. He's a banker in Minneapolis. We—that is, Joan does now—own the upper lake. Jarno owns most of the lower. He's giving it up, dividing it into lots, and plans on selling it for summer resorts. If he does, all the peace and seclusion of Joan's property will be gone. Of course, we can't do anything about it."

"Where's Rye come in?" Nace demanded.

"Rye is clearing off the property," Grenwald said. "He lives over there in a cabin. Jarno gives him free rent for the protection Rye can provide, being a game warden, against trespassers. And Rye does minor repair work on the buildings." Thumbing the revolver hammer, he went on: "The tramp might have wanted some liquor. I think Rye makes corn."

"Sounds like a radio wise-crack," Nace said.

The gun in Grenwald's hand roared. The bed covers jumped.

Nace back-swung his hand, caught Grenwald's wrist, twisted. The revolver fell on the floor. Joan Grenwald screamed.

Arthur Grenwald cried, "Oh, God—" and went to his knees under Nace's wrenching, twisting grip. "You're breaking my arm!"

"Shut up!" Nace said to Joan Grenwald. He released the stock man, picked up the gun, bent over the bed where the bullet had gone in. He looked up. "It didn't hit her. It went into the mattress."

Grenwald got to his feet, shaking with shock. "I was trying to get the hammer down. It went off: I didn't intend—"

The girl in the bed moaned, moved her head. Her eyes opened. She said indistinctly; "Ma—Ma—"

NACE reached past Grenwald to Joan, took the nicked gun from her hand, pocketed in and, holding Grenwald's gun, stood over the bed. "It's all right, Mary," he said to the girl in the bed. "Nobody's going to hurt you. It's all right."

She shut her eyes again, shuddered, sighed.

"Is she dead?" Joan Grenwald asked.

Nace looked at her. Her bathrobe had fallen open and the dressing gown under it also. Her nightdress, cut low, displayed a long, fresh scratch from her throat down.

"She's asleep again," Nace said. Still looking boldly at the scratch, he asked: "Who's been making a pass at you, miss?"

"Believe me," Grenwald said with bitterness, "the shot was an accident, Mr. Nace. It just went off—"

Nace paid no attention to him. Joan Grenwald drew the bathrobe tightly about her throat, flushing at the glitter in Nace's pale eyes.

"You mean—oh!" She stood suddenly straight, and pride, determination came on her oval face. "We carried Mary up here, a few minutes after you went out. I was preparing for bed when I heard her call. The men were downstairs. When I came in here Mary had her eyes open, like you saw her just now. I bent over her. I heard a slight movement, out in the hall. The door was open. When I turned, to see who was coming, somebody threw a knife. It hit the head of the bed—its handle. I think—and bounced upward. The blade scratched me. I didn't see who threw it."

She said the last with excitement, the care and precision of her voice forsaking her. She reached above her head quickly, her hand groping on top of the bed's canopy. "Here's the knife." Her hand came down holding it.

Nace took the knife, a hunting knife with an eight-inch blade that was very

sharp. He asked crisply: "Where did it hit?"

"There!" The girl pointed to a spot on the bed head.

Nace leaned over, examined the dent in the wood. He saw a sharper scratch a few inches from the dent. He put the knife hilt on the scratch, the handle end where the dent was. It was a fit.

"Joan!" Grenwald exclaimed reproachfully. "You didn't tell me about the knife. You didn't even scream!"

Standing back, holding the knife, turning on the two Grenwalds, Nace asked harshly: "What am I here? What the hell am I? A guest or something? You've hired me, Grenwald, to straighten this mess out, to get the money back. You're paying for—" He stopped, eyed Joan Grenwald with shrewd calculation. "It's your money, miss. If I get it back, I want ten percent."

Grenwald became belligerent. "Now, Mr. Nace, we agreed over the telephone what your fee would be."

"Why, that would be almost twenty thousand dollars!" Joan Grenwald exclaimed.

Nace said angrily: "Somebody takes a pot shot at me when I'm within a half mile of this place on my way up here. There's a bullet hole in my windshield, a nick in my hat rim. It was that close. Somebody cuts your telephone line, and when I trace it down I get elevated with a double-barreled shotgun and black-jacked out of the picture for three hours."

"I—" Joan Grenwald put her hand to her forehead—"I didn't know that!"

NACE went on grimly. "You haven't heard anything yet. When I get here there's another murder—Mrs. Nielson, your tenant and cleaning woman. Since then there's been three attempts made to rub out her daughter, Mary here." He turned on Grenwald. "Four attempts, if

I count in the bullet you just slammed into that bed. When the police find out all this, somebody in this house is going to ride on a merry-go-round and it will be a Grenwald!

"And what's more, I don't notice you tearing your hair because the Nielson woman was shot to death." His pale eyes shifted to Joan Grenwald. "And there's no sack-cloth-and-ashes on you, either. Mrs. Nielson wasn't a rabbit, you know!"

Grenwald mopped his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "It's terrible, of course. And, Mr. Nace, we're naturally shocked. But I've only seen this Mrs. Nielson a few times in my life. I didn't come up here from Chicago very often. And Joan has been in Europe for almost five years. You can't expect us to—"

"I fixed the telephone line before I came back!" Nace eyed them both. "I can have the sheriff over here, and the troopers, in forty minutes."

Grenwald looked beaten. He said to the girl: "Well, Joan?"

Joan Grenwald nodded. Her eyes stayed on Nace's face.

"Put it in writing," Nace said curtly. "Ten percent of whatever money I dig up for you. Both of you better sign it, too."

"It's robbery, Mr. Nace," Grenwald said angrily.

"It's murder," Nace said.

Arthur Grenwald and Joan Grenwald went out the door together. They were whispering. Nace heard them going downstairs. He shut the door, put the knife back on top of the bed canopy, and looked closely at Mary Nielson. She was asleep.

Nace went to the four windows in the room, opened them, one after another, looked up and down, using his light. The room was a corner one. There were no drain-pipes outside near any of the windows.

He shut the windows, locked them, drew down the shades, went to the door. There was a key in the lock. He turned out the lights, went out into the hall, locking the bedroom door, pocketing the key. Then he went downstairs into the room where the enormous fireplace was and where he heard voices. Grenwald and Joan Grenwald were at a desk.

"There!" Grenwald said angrily and blotted his name.

Taking the pen, Joan Grenwald wrote her name in round, startled letters. Nace picked up the paper, read it, waved it back and forth, holding one corner between thumb and forefinger, looking steadily, moodily at the girl's throat.

Still waving the paper slowly, he asked: "How long has Bartmeyer been gone?"

"He took the car," Grenwald said, "about an hour after you went out, about fifty-five minutes after Rye went away with that trampish-looking fellow." His eyes sharpened. "Come to think of it. Mr. Nace, Bartmeyer was going through the house, locking windows and doors, about the time my niece says the knife was thrown. I was down in this room, looking for the two revolvers I knew my brother kept in the house. I found them in this desk drawer."

"How far away is the nearest doctor?" Nace asked.

"It's about twelve miles to Morganport, from the lake bridge," Grenwald said. "From the bridge to this house is less than a mile."

Nace looked at his wrist watch. "Bartmeyer's been gone now two hours and a half. How far would he have to go before he found a telephone?"

"It's four miles to Lott's Corners, on the road to Morganport," Grenwald offered, "but there wouldn't be anybody up so late, I suppose."

CHAPTER FOUR

Fog Phantom

NACE folded the paper in his hand, pocketed it. Car lights coming up the drive hit the windows. A motor with a leaky exhaust muffler chugged outside.

Joan Grenwald said: "That's Bartmeyer and the doctor."

"Not with that muffler," Nace replied. "You two stay here."

He went to the front door, opened it. Two men in uniform were coming up the steps. One of them was short and young. The other was older, taller and his face, in the light, was tired, sad.

Nace stood in the doorway. "You're state troopers, aren't you?" he asked. "What is it—an accident?"

The tall, tired man said in an indifferent, mournful voice: "Yeah. Radio patrol car. We got a guy with his throat chewed up. He's dead. Found him down by the bridge. Wouldn't bother you, but our radio's gone on the fritz, so I got to phone in about it."

"Not a very pleasant pick-up, trooper," Nace said. He stayed in the doorway, blocking it. "There's a sick girl in the house and we're waiting for the doctor."

"What we got in the car don't need no doctor," the tall trooper replied. "So somebody's sick here now? That's tough. Last week it was murder. We was all over this place last week. Well, I won't make no more noise than I can help."

Nace stood aside. The trooper went into the first room on the right, opposite the room where Grenwald and his niece were, and snapped on a light. He went straight to the telephone.

Nace crossed the hall, stuck his head inside the room where Grenwald and Joan Grenwald were standing near the door, alertly listening.

"It's all right," Nace said. "Two troopers telephoning."

He shut the door on them. The shorter, younger trooper, watching him from the front doorway, eyed the room door suspiciously.

Nace went toward him. "Shut the door," he said. "You're letting all the fog come in." He reached the door before the trooper could step clear inside and close it. Pushing the shorter man out onto the porch and going out with him, closing the door behind, Nace said with friendliness: "Was the man in your car killed or was it an accident? Maybe an automobile hit him."

"If it was a car," the short trooper said youthfully, "it was running on its spokes, from the looks of his throat. Take a look yourself, if you can stand it."

Nace went down the steps, across the gravel driveway, to the troop car. The trooper, drawing out a flashlight, followed him.

"If you live around here," the trooper said, "maybe you can identify him. I was telling Joe there might be a tie-up with this bird and the Grenwald murder. We was up here on that."

"Yeah," Nace said. "Let me have your light."

Bending into the car, he shot light on the canvas top cover from one end of which worn, dusty shoes, unnaturally twisted in posture, protruded. At the other end a black cloth cap was partially visible.

NACE pulled the top-cover off, tossed it onto the rear seat. The dead man lay huddled on the floor, on newspapers. His suit was old, patched. The coat was torn at one shoulder. The throat was torn, mangled, the neck tendons exposed. There was a deep cut on the head. The face was partially covered by a black beard.

"Was there plenty of blood where you found him?" Nace asked. Then he jerk-

ed open the car door and kneeled inside astride the body.

The trooper grabbed him by the shoulder, demanded harshly: "Hey! What the hell you think you're doing?"

Nace shook him off irritably. "Or don't you want an identification, if you can get one?" he rasped. "I asked, was there much blood?"

The trooper let go his shoulder. "You ain't supposed to monkey with him," he said. "That's the coroner's job." He stopped talking, looked at Nace with awed interest, then answered: "Sure, some blood, but not a hell of a lot. It was like he ran, bleeding, and then fell down and died where we found him by the bridge. There wasn't no blood tracks, though."

Nace pulled the body into a sitting position, feeling stiff arms, stiff legs, stiff torso. The right arm and the left leg were broken. Three or four ribs were caved in. There was blood on the dirty white shirt, none on the suit. The necktie was missing.

Nace growled deep in his throat, cursed, put the torch close to the deep head wound. He swore again, took his hands off the corpse.

The dead man did not collapse but remained sitting, hard eyes staring in surprise but not terror above the black beard. Nace put the top cover over the body, got out of the car, slamming the door. He glared at the youthful, shorter trooper.

"Identify him?" the trooper asked and blinked in the torchlight.

"No!" Nace spouted. His tone was angry, bitter. He tossed the flashlight to the trooper, went across the driveway, went up the stone porch steps.

The taller, sad-faced trooper came out the front door, saw Nace, and said with mournful indifference: "Thanks for the phone. The repair car will pick us up at Saint Cloud. I gave a description of the stiff we found. It's probably a guy named

Ramp who broke jail tonight at Little Falls. I'm dropping him off with the coroner at Morganport. Little Falls is too far off our route. Sorry to bother you."

He went down the steps, got in the troop car with the shorter man. The starter whined. The broken muffler racketed, the car swirled, shot down the drive.

Nace kept swearing, softly, earnestly. Finally he went into the house, bolting the front door. Arthur Grenwald came out into the hall; Joan Grenwald followed him. Their faces were question marks.

"That fellow," Nace said, "who called for Rye is supposed to have been hit by a truck or something down at the lake bridge—killed. The troopers took him away."

Grenwald asked nervously: "What—what about Rye?"

Looking at Arthur Grenwald sharply, Nace said: "It wasn't the same tramp. And he wasn't killed by a truck. I'm telling you this so you both will do as I say. Go to bed and lock yourselves in."

"Who will take care of Mary Nielson?" Joan Grenwald asked.

Nace tapped himself on the chest.

Grenwald said grimly: "If it's that dangerous, I want a guard around this house. I want a guard right now!" He started for the telephone.

Nace blocked the doorway. "You've got a guard!" he snapped, tapped himself on the chest again. Then he moved his head toward the stairway. "Go on up to bed, both of you. Get some sleep." He went up the stairs ahead of them, not looking over his shoulder.

HE STOOD at Mary Nielson's door while they came up and went into two different rooms down the hall. He waited until he heard two keys turn in their locks, then unlocked the door in front of him and went inside, closing it but not locking it after him.

Mary Nielson was still sleeping. She hadn't moved. Nace opened a window, found a table lamp, turned it on, and sat down near it. He took off his hat and felt his head. Sitting, doing nothing, the throbbing came back dully.

He took from his pocket the revolver Arthur Grenwald had fired, ejected the shells and snapped the trigger until the first chamber came around again on the cylinder. The hammer spring was unusually powerful. The hammer catch acted thin, treacherous.

He got out his pocket knife, took the gun apart. The gun was old, but the hammer spring was new. The safety catch was filed so it was useless. The hammer catch had been filed down so it caught and held by a hair and luck.

Nace ran his tongue around his lips, looking across with pale, angry eyes at the vague outline of the sleeping girl in the bed. He put the gun together again, not reloading it, pocketed it, and sat rattling the five live cartridges and the empty one gently in the palm of his hand. Through the open window the same wolfish howl he had heard before sounded close, startlingly abrupt. And he thought he heard a sharp *crack* as though somebody had stepped on a twig, snapped it.

Twisting off the lamp, Nace put his hat on, closed and locked the window. He tip-toed to the door, slipped out, locking it and taking the key again. Then he went down the hall without noise, listened at the two doors through which Arthur Grenwald and Joan Grenwald had gone. Restless stirring came faintly through the panels of each.

He came back silently, stood at the stairhead, looking down. The hall light was still on below; the hall clock bonged three times.

Nace started down, quietly, but not stealthily.

The tick-tocking of the clock sounded

like mallet blows in the silence. Nace held his revolver in front of him, near his hip. As he came down he moved faster.

He speeded up as he reached the stair bottom, ran quickly to the front door. He opened it, sprang through, and, side-stepping suddenly, flattened against the darkness of the outer stone wall of the house.

Mist drifted coldly past him into the hall. The fort-like porch was empty. The grounds, fog-wrapped, were silent.

NACE stood against the wall for about five minutes. At intervals he tossed, one by one, the cartridges from Grenwald's gun out into the black-and-gray patches of blankness beyond the porch—each in a different direction. The falling shells made distinct sounds, striking the damp earth. There was no response to them.

He stepped back inside, shut the door, locked it. Then he swore softly and craftiness came into his pale eyes. Moving noiselessly, he crossed the hall to the room with the fireplace.

The fire was almost out, just a bed of glowing coals. He turned off the lights, sat in a chair in the front inner corner of the room where he could watch the door, the front windows, the side windows, and the second door that evidently led into a dining room. He held his revolver in his lap, kept his hat on, his overcoat on. The craftiness stayed in his eyes, spread over his lean, angular features.

A final, thin flame in the fireplace came to life, licked up a sliver of wood, died down, glowed, winked out. Nace did not look at the flame at all, or the glow, or the fireplace. He stared with restless eyes at a swirl of thick mist outside a side window across the room. The mist went up and down, slowly, went on to the next window, floated there, came closer to the pane.

Nace brushed a hand across his eye-

brows. The mist floated back from the farther window, floating upward, disappeared, reappeared at the nearer window where he had noticed it first. It came closer, swaying, bobbing. There was blackness over the lower half of the window, then whiteness as the misty outline settled lower, took shape, became a blurred, gray half-figure with arms but no head.

The half-figure wavered, came almost against the window pane, swaying weirdly. A dried, parched face appeared on the grayish shoulders. It was the face of an aged hag. It rolled, rocked from side to side, leering. Then the apparition swayed back from the window, on bobbing shoulders, drifted upward, disappeared.

Nace cocked his revolver, got up from the chair, went across the room silently to the window. He unlocked it, shoved it up. Mist drifted in, swirling eagerly, damply. The gray half-figure, its face rolling, was floating backward across the wet grounds about ten feet above the earth, swaying, growing less visible.

The gun in Nace's hand bellowed three times like a salvo.

The figure wavered to the left, drifted off in the mist toward the front of the house.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rye

JOAN GRENWALD screamed upstairs as Nace banged the window shut, locked it. Unshod feet were running along the upper hall as he reached the front door, snapped it open.

Arthur Grenwald's voice shrilled: "Nace! What is it?"

Going through the front doorway, Nace barked over his shoulder: "Come down here and stand by this door!" He went across the porch, down the steps.

Ahead, along the drive, the grayish figure bobbed, swayed, disappeared. Nace started running after it. He ran two hundred feet and stopped. There was nothing to chase but fog. He went back to the porch, using his flashlight.

Grenwald stood in the doorway, wearing only silk pajamas, shivering. Joan Grenwald, wrapped in the bathrobe again, stood behind him. Their faces were tense, their eyes held terror.

"What was it?" Joan Grenwald asked in a throaty whisper.

"I couldn't see much," Nace said, not looking at her. "Another tramp, maybe. I should have waited. I scared it off."

"It?" Arthur Grenwald piped.

An automobile motor rumbled.

"I said a tramp," Nace answered, putting false conviction into his voice. Then he watched the car headlights glow faintly, twin yellow eyes coming up the drive with more speed than caution.

The coupe slid to a jerky stop and a little man with a grayish mustache got out carrying a small black bag. He scurried up the steps.

"Is this the Grenwald place?" he asked. His voice was tired but excited. "I'm Doctor Marsh, from Morganport." He peered at Nace and at the two Grenwalds back in the doorway.

"Right in here," Nace said.

The doctor looked at the revolver Nace still held. He eyed Nace suspiciously, hesitating at the open door.

"I'm a detective," Nace said, "from Minneapolis. It's all right, Doctor. We thought there was somebody trying to break in." He indicated Joan and Arthur Grenwald. "This is P. W. Grenwald's brother and daughter. The sick girl is a neighbor. She's upstairs." He took the room key from his pocket, handed it to Arthur Grenwald. "You and Miss Grenwald show the doctor up," he said. "He may need you."

"This way, Doctor," Arthur Grenwald said, taking the key.

He started up the stairs. Joan went along with him. The doctor stood in the doorway, looking sharply at Nace.

"A Mr. Bartmeyer came for me," he said in a loud, nervous voice. "I was just leaving for a maternity case. That's why I am so late getting here. I'm sorry I couldn't get here earlier."

Joan and Arthur Grenwald were out of sight up the stairs.

The doctor said to Nace: "Bartmeyer didn't wait. He started right off again in a sedan." His voice lowered. "I saw something, just as I slowed up to read the entrance sign down below." He swung the black bag in his hand toward the drive. "It sounds incredible. Perhaps I'm too tired to be truthful, if you know what I mean. My eyes might deceive me, due to fatigue." He peered alertly at Nace.

Nace said flatly: "Go on. You saw what?"

"Something white, floating in the air, going up the roadway that leads to the estate across the highway from here. I saw, or think I saw, a grayish torso and flopping gray arms, but no legs. There was a face, like a witch's. It looked like a dead face. The whole thing floated over the ground, in the fog, and disappeared. Probably I didn't see any such apparition at all. That maternity case was a Caesarean. The mother and the child both died. I'm very likely on the ragged edge right now, but I thought I'd tell you."

"Which way," Nace asked in the same flat voice, "was this thing you think you saw going?"

"Toward the other estate," the doctor said. "Away from here."

"Thanks," Nace said. "But you'd better not mention it again. The case upstairs is concussion, I think. If you can bring her out of it, so she can talk, it

would help. She's been out three hours I guess." He put a hand on the doctor's shoulder, pushed him politely inside. "I don't think you're crazy, Doctor."

HE watched the doctor go up the staircase. When he was out of sight, Nace stood a moment, then he took out his flash, went out onto the porch, closing the door quietly.

He walked round to the side of the house where the white mist had first materialized into torso and flopping arms. He held the beam of torchlight on the ground, keeping away from the side of the stone building, but working up toward it.

The grass was wet, greenish brown, matted. When he found no footprints, he turned back, retracing his own, still looking at the ground. Gray, damp mist swirled idly after him, clinging coldly. Nace started moodily down the drive.

A low voice-sound, part moan, part curse, came from the blackness beyond an indefinite outline of brush and trees at the right of the driveway. The sound faded out completely, came again, faded once more. It was so low that he couldn't spot its source. Standing still, Nace swung his flash up and down, turning his body slowly with each movement of his left arm. The light hit a slight movement in the bushes. He went toward it.

From the brush muddled words sounded. "Gom—dam—gom—"

The brush moved noticeably, making crackling sounds.

Nace went into the brush, bent low. His flash hit a fully laced, high leather boot. The light traveled up a leg, spread a yellowish dazzle over the heavy torso, stopped on Jake Rye's dark, unshaven, completely battered face.

Looking down at him, Nace asked without sympathy: "Who in hell's been working out on you?"

Jake Rye blinked stupidly up into the

light, tried to get to his knees, fell down again, cursing, moaning. His bristly jaw was matted with blood. Some of his teeth were gone. His cheek was cut; one eye was swelling. There was a cut on his head, not very deep, and his hands were bloody and muddy.

Nace bent down, hoisted Rye into a standing position. Getting round in front of him, he let Rye collapse over his shoulder, carried him back to the driveway, on up to the porch. He carted him into the house, dumped him in a chair in the room that had the big fireplace, turned on lights.

Rye's chin was down on his chest. He rubbed his hand over his chin, wiping away dried blood. Then his eyes rolled upward, settled on Nace. He opened his mouth, let it hang open.

Nace looked around, failed to find what he wanted, went into the dining room toward the rear. He came back carrying a decanter and two water glasses. Pouring out two stiff drinks, he put one to Rye's mashed lips.

Rye drained it, shivered. Nace took back the empty glass, drank from his own slowly, tasting the liquor with each swallow.

With the whiskey inside him, Nace said evenly: "You're a hell of a deputy sheriff! Do you let every little tramp who comes round give you a shellacking like this?"

Expression came back into Rye's one good eye. "What the hell!" he exclaimed. Then, "How do you like this?" and stood up, wobbling a little. He took several steps, eyeing Nace belligerently, retreated to his chair, sat down again. "If it'd been just one man, he wouldn't walk for a week. I had to lick four men."

"Why didn't you?" Nace asked.

"By God!" Rye swore, doubling his fist. "You don't believe it?" He bent forward in his chair and glared at Nace. "This sawed-off tramp came here to tell

me he'd run onto a liquor still. I went outside to talk it over with him. There were three more men there, hiding. I didn't see them until they had me covered. They walked me over onto Jarno's property, across the highway. They tried to tie me up. Maybe they were going to toss me into the lake or the swamp. I started to fight. I had two of them licked and then one of them hit me on the head with a rifle butt."

"So you woke up a mile away, over here where I found you," Nace said, grinning slyly. "Or maybe they carried you, so you wouldn't have so far to walk?"

Rye stared up glassily at Nace. "Hell!" he said in a thick, rasping voice. "It ain't funny. You ever see a ghost?"

"So we've got a ghost now," Nace said.

Rye reached for the decanter, poured himself another drink. "So—yeah! You don't believe in 'em? I don't myself. But I chased it just the same, by God I did!" He downed the drink. Liquor trickled over his blood-smeared jaw. He shook himself, shivered.

"It come from Jarno's," he said hoarsely. "I was seein' if I could walk, after comin' to. When it floated past me, I thought it was part of the crack on my head. I started comin' back here, an' it stayed right in front of me, disappearin' an' appearin' again. I would of shot at it, only I couldn't find my gun when I woke up."

Rye refilled his glass, said, "I seen it next comin' back from this house, floatin' off through the trees in the fog. I got mad an' run after it. I ain't afraid of no ghost. I must of hit a limb of a tree with my head an' got knocked out again. Then you found me." He drained his glass dry, coughed. "The ghost went back to Jarno's," he ended.

"Did you hear any shooting, just before you saw your ghost the last time?" Nace asked.

Rye gulped from his glass, leered one eye at Nace, said with slow effort: "Sure. There's deer in the hills round here. It's out of season, but some people—" His head wobbled to one side, lay on his shoulder against the chair back. His one eye slid shut.

Nace took the glass and decanter from him. Footsteps came down the hall staircase. Going to the door, Nace motioned to Doctor Marsh, shut the door when the doctor came in.

"The patient isn't badly hurt," the doctor said. "She'll be able to sit up when she awakens. But I'd let her sleep now." He looked sharply at the slumped figure of Rye in the chair, sharply at Nace. His eyebrows went up.

"Another patient," Nace said. "He got drunk and fell down. Fix him up, Doc. He's a deputy sheriff."

WHILE the doctor cleaned up Rye's face, Nace reloaded his revolver, at the same time eyeing the three empty cartridges with stubbornly maintained sourness, eyeing Rye's battered features with malicious pleasure. The doctor talked, asking questions.

Pocketing the reloaded gun, Nace answered: "He says he saw the apparition you saw and chased it. He hit a tree with his teeth. That's his story and he'll stick to it."

Nace got up, went to the door, adding: "I sent for a nurse but I guess I won't need one." Then he went out into the hall, up the stairs.

Looking in at Mary Nielson's room he saw Joan Grenwald sitting in a rocking chair, watching the girl in bed. He went in, looked down at the bed.

"Doctor Marsh thinks she will be all right in the morning," Joan Grenwald said. "I'm so glad it's not worse. Have you found out who did it?" She slanted tired eyes upward at him.

"Sure," Nace said easily. "The same person who threw the knife." Then he smiled sardonically and asked: "Where's your uncle?"

"In his room. I hope he's asleep." Fear came into her eyes. "Do you think—there'll be another attempt?"

Nace put his hands in his pockets. One hand came out holding the small revolver he had taken from Joan Grenwald. He handed it to her. As she took the gun, he said: "Just in case. And lock the door when I leave. The key's in it."

She gasped softly, staring at the revolver.

Nace closed the door and went down the stairway. He opened the door into the room where the doctor and Rye were, but did not go in. Rye was standing, swaying a little, looking sleepy. Neither of them noticed Nace.

"I don't want no bandages on me," Rye said thickly.

"Very well," the doctor agreed. "The wounds are all superficial, but you should have one on your head."

"To hell with it!" Rye exclaimed.

"Very well," the doctor said again, crisply. "It's your head."

Nace shut the door softly, went out onto the porch, down the stone steps into mist and then across the driveway to his car. He changed the battery in his flashlight for a fresh cylinder.

CHAPTER SIX

The Empty Room

A MOTOR rumbled briefly. Headlights yellowed the fog down toward the highway, brightened coming up the drive. A second pair of lights followed the first. The two cars drove up, pulled to one side, stopped. The first was Grenwald's bulky sedan. The second car was a smart, roomy, convertible coupe. The four car lights went black.

Bartmeyer pushed out from the sedan's front seat, slammed the door, went back to the convertible. A man of medium size got briskly out of the coupe. Nace went over, using his torch on them.

They looked into the light and the smaller man said sharply: "A little of that will go a long way." His voice was cultivated. He was very neatly dressed. He had poise, like an actor, and he looked and moved like one. His light fawn overcoat had burrs on it.

"Mr. Kanoyer in person, not a sound picture," Nace said unpleasantly. He put the light on Bartmeyer, on the muddy shoes, the muddy knees. "I thought, Bartmeyer, maybe you'd found Grenwald's dough, or part of it, and taken it on the lam." He shut the torch off.

"What do you mean, part of it?" Bartmeyer asked suspiciously.

Kanoyer came over to Nace, eyed him closely. "Shut up, Bart," he said. "You've fouled enough already. Now, Nace, just to keep things straight, your crack about part of it sounds to me like a proposition." His voice was a murmur. "Would you hold out on me?"

Nace asked: "What part?" Cunning darted in his pale eyes.

"The same screwy Nace," Kanoyer said. "Out in the open all the time like a mole."

The house door opened and Dr. Marsh came out, carrying his bag. He looked through the mist at the three men and as he got into his car he called to Nace: "He'll be all right if he doesn't find that whiskey. I hid the decanter under the hall staircase."

The car growled, crunched gravel, turned and slid down the drive.

"How's the girl?" Kanoyer asked. "Bart was telling me—"

"Swell," Nace answered, "Sleeping it off." He squinted evilly at Bartmeyer.

"Your pal Rye bit a tree and lost some teeth."

"What do you mean, tree?" Bartmeyer asked with surprise.

"Maybe he took you for one," Nace said. His eyes slid to Kanoyer's face, held there curiously.

"Screwey, like you said, chief," Bartmeyer said to Kanoyer.

Kanoyer answered calmly: "So you didn't find Grenwald's dough, Nace. You used to be smart, when you worked for me. Who do you guess stole it and knocked off the old man, right under Bartmeyer's nose?"

"Not the guy who's got it now," Nace said. He stepped away quickly, went to Grenwald's sedan, then to Kanoyer's coupe, putting a hand on the cold radiator of each car. When he returned he said: "How was it, prowling Jarno's place? Pretty dark and sticky?"

"I was coming to that part," Kanoyer chuckled. "Bart met me at Morganport, piloted me up here and we decided that since the troopers and the sheriff's men hadn't found the money on Grenwald's property, it might be over at Jarno's. So we parked up near the Jarno house—ask me, is it a castle?—and did a job on it."

"Well," Nace said, "I fixed the telephone line so it works." He grinned sourly at both men. "We'd have this place practically repaired if Bartmeyer would quit tearing things down."

"This guy's getting to be as dumb as Rye!" Bartmeyer grumbled and barged round behind Nace.

Nace swished sideways, spinning. His torch flared and he had a revolver in his hand again. The torchlight caught Bartmeyer's thick arm swinging down through air.

Kanoyer's sharp voice, not very loud but loud enough, barked: "Bart! Lay off!"

Bartmeyer straightened, glowered at Nace. In a growling voice he replied to Kanoyer: "This mug and Rye gripe me."

Kanoyer turned, started toward the stone porch.

Nace shut off his flash. "They're all asleep," he said. "If you wake them up now they'll never get to sleep again tonight."

"I'm working on this case," Kanoyer snapped. He kept going.

Nace looked angrily down the drive. Bartmeyer was following Kanoyer. Their feet scraped the stone steps. Twin lights made twin yellow splotches suddenly down at the highway and a motor moaned.

"Kanoyer!" Nace called. "Wait a minute. Here comes my nurse."

"You need one," Bartmeyer growled, but stopped.

Kanoyer came back down the steps. "Nurse?" he asked, looking surprised.

"For the girl who got slammed," Nace explained.

The yellowish lights glowed on the driveway, swerved. The car halted. It was a small coupe.

"Shut off your lights," Nace called and went to the car swiftly. Opening the car door, he leaned inside. "It's tough. Be careful," he whispered.

The driver sniffed, whispered back: "Must be. You smell like a distillery." Then the driver got out of the seat.

A flashlight in Kanoyer's hand hit them both, showing Nace holding a small overnight bag. Beside him stood a figure with an oval face, brown eyes and brown, unbobbed hair beneath a small, pert hat. The white of a nurse's uniform was exposed at the throat of a dark, flowing coat.

Nace went toward the porch. "The doctor has been here," he said. "It's a concussion case, and not much to do. The doctor said the patient was resting well, sleeping. This is a case of criminal assault, so if the patient wakes up and

talks, you are to take down whatever she says."

Kanoyer let them pass him on the steps. "You'll want a witness, miss," he said, "in case she wakes up and says anything. Mr. Bartmeyer here and myself are detectives. Call us. We'll be here."

Nace opened the door. "That will be just fine, Mr. Kanoyer," he said over his shoulder. "Won't you come inside and meet Mr. Rye?"

He held the door open until they were all in the hall, then closed it and went to the door on the left. "In here, Mr. Kanoyer," he said. His voice was polite but had mean humor in it. His eyes sharpened as he opened the door and looked into the room. Anger came on his face.

He lifted the corners of his mouth and showed white teeth and said as Kanoyer and Bartmeyer entered the room: "Mr. Rye must be washing his hands. I'll send him right in." Then he shut the door, pointed upstairs urgently, went up first himself, two steps at a time.

The nurse followed him, running.

At Mary Neilson's door he rapped gently. "It's Mr. Nace," he said.

A key clicked, the door opened. Joan Grenwald stood trembling, holding the small revolver in one hand. Nace went into the room. The nurse came in behind him. Nace shut the door and put the overnight bag down.

"This is Miss Grenwald," he said irritably to the nurse. He turned to Joan Grenwald. "The nurse will stay here now. You'd better go to bed. And thanks for watching her."

"There's somebody hiding out on the grounds," Joan Grenwald said. "I opened a window for some air and saw him."

"Rye?" Nace asked.

"Not Rye," Joan Grenwald replied. Fear was in her voice. "A tall, thin

man. He—he had a rifle. He stood under a tree and looked up at me and then went behind the tree out of sight. There was a hole in the mist and I could see him distinctly.”

“Recognize anything about him?” Nace asked and slid cold, angry eyes at the nurse,

“There was something familiar about him,” Joan Grenwald answered. “But—but I can’t place it. I’m sure I’ve seen him before.”

“Thanks,” Nace said. “Now go to bed. The nurse is here and she seems to be a very competent person. Mr. Kanoyer, the detective Bartmeyer works for, is here, too, downstairs.” He ushered her to the door. “She hasn’t come out of it yet, has she?” he asked, motioning toward the girl in the bed.

“No.”

Nace took her down the hall to her own room. “Lock your door again,” he smiled at her. Then he went back to the sick room.

THE nurse was standing by the bed, spinning a flat automatic on a forefinger, when Nace came into the room.

Nace spoke rapidly, earnestly, yet in low tone. “Keep the lights off. Don’t kill the patient, or the girl who just went out, or Arthur Grenwald—you’ll know him by the pink silk pajamas—or me in the dark. Anybody else is meat.”

The nurse snapped off the light. “You might have written me a nice long letter with all the dirty little details. What makes you think the pay-off is tonight, and here?”

The room was entirely dark now.

“There’s two and a half hours till daylight,” Nace replied sourly. “There’s a fog that’s as good as made-to-order outside. There’s a dead woman laying round somewhere—and that’s the mistake.”

“You write me the letter,” the nurse

said sweetly. “It’ll be clearer. Remember, I’m only a nurse.”

“Nuts!” Nace said, the note of sourness leaving his voice. “It’s a mistake leaving a body laying around because in the morning the troopers will start tearing up acres until they find the dead woman. There’s about two hundred thousand in cash kicking around here, that might still get dug up by accident.” He tapped on his chest where the paper the two Grenwalds had signed lay in his suit-coat pocket. “I got sore and took a cut of what we find instead of a fee. Sore like a fox. If that money isn’t still here somewhere, this is a Fourth-of-July carnival with fireworks and I’ll go back to truck driving.”

“So I sit up here and twiddle my thumbs,” the nurse asked.

“You do,” Nace replied. “I don’t know whether your patient knows anything or not, but somebody thinks she does, which amounts to the same thing for her. That’ll keep you busy. Grenwald’s money will be moved before daylight, and that’ll keep me busy.”

The nurse said, as Nace turned the doorknob: “I hope you guessed right. I hate to work for nothing. Kiss me before you go.”

“Go to hell!” Nace swore. He stepped into the hall, leaned back into the darkened room. “If you don’t like ghosts, shoot low,” he said.

As he went away he heard the key turn in the lock. He went on down the staircase, across the hall to the big fireplace room. He opened the door, stood on the threshold moodily a moment or so. His pale, slightly bloodshot eyes ranged about the room. It was vacant.

There was some mud on the carpet, about in the middle of the room; gray, drying mud that had come from shoes or boots and had been walked on. A small, dark, purple gob had been flattened by

a sole. It looked like a miniature pancake, blueish in spots where its drying had made its color lighter.

A shot crashed nearby, outside the house. Nace ducked, jerked out his revolver and skidded to a window. From upstairs came Arthur Grenwald's frantic shouts—

"Joan! Joan! Help! Mr. Nace! Help!"

Nace lunged back into the room, across the carpet to the door, jerked it open. He hit the stairs three at a time, pounding them hard. When he thudded to the top step, Mary Neilson's door opened. A gun poked out.

"What the hell?" came the nurse's voice from behind the gun.

"Back inside!" Nace called without stopping. "I got it!"

HE WENT down the hall. Arthur Grenwald was beating frantically but ineffectually against Joan Grenwald's door with pudgy fists.

"My God!" Grenwald wailed. "She won't answer." He said this over and over, punctuating it with futile thuds at the door panel.

Nace banged to a stop. "Shut up, Grenwald!" he ordered harshly, then stooped down to the keyhole.

"My God! She won't answer!" Grenwald said again.

Nace tried the door once, using the knob. When it held he swung up his revolver and stepped back. Shoving Grenwald aside he fired. Wood and metal racketed. He shot again and kicked at the door. It swung open, banging against the wall. He went in, gun balanced in his hand.

The room was empty. The heavy bathrobe was on the floor. The windows were closed, locked. Nace went through a door to a bath, came out again, stuck his head into two closets.

"My God! Joan was here a few min-

utes ago," Grenwald cried, pounding fist against palm. "I heard her!"

Nace shoved for the doorway, turned, stared at Grenwald. "Hell!" he said. "You wouldn't know!" Then he swiveled into the hall.

He held to the banister, swirled down the staircase and ran through the hall, out the door, down the stone steps. Fifty feet from the porch, on the gravel, he stooped and listened. There was no sound, no rustling wind. Gray mist, black beyond, blanketed the trees and shrubs. Light came dimly from the ground-floor front room of the house.

Nace took a hurried torchlight shot at the cars, Grenwald's bulky sedan, Kanyoyer's convertible, below it the nurse's coupe, and on the right his own roadster. His torch snapped black. He moved to the running board of his own car, opened the door, got in, fumbled with keys, still listening.

The roadster was facing down the drive, on a slope. He eased off the brake, slipped into high and rolled ahead with the ignition on. As the motor caught he made the headlights blare against fog.

With a visibility of thirty yards ahead, Nace tromped on the floor throttle. The wheels threw gravel. He hit the main highway at sixty, braked, skidded right, straightened, then slowed. A sign in fairly bright gold letters against black read—*Oswald Jarno*. He skidded left into the turn between cement pillars, then droned ahead at forty on slippery, twisting black macadam between rows of poplars.

The driveway went half a mile, went even beyond, but a chopped tree made a thick barricade across it. Nace skidded as he slammed on the brakes. The car lights blinked. He cut the ignition and leaped out.

He listened a full half minute, but heard nothing. Then he vaulted the tree trunk

and following the road, keeping on the grass at its edge, he half ran, half walked for a full quarter mile. He came out into an opening with smooth grass and gray blotches of uniform hedges. Beyond, as he trod ahead, a building loomed grayly. He skirted a large concrete pool, saw steps going up to what would, in daylight, be brown-stone. There were empty, dark windows.

A melancholy wail, wolfish, weird, vibrated through the fog. It crescendoed, trailed, faded without echo. Nace stood still, at the first damp stone step. He held the revolver and torch. Half-turning, he stood, poised, on the balls of his feet, alert.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blue Mud

LICKING his lips, Nace slid around the steps, circled the house. A rear door was invitingly open. He toed the steps, went up.

His coat was soggy with dampness. Sweat trickled down his neck, down his back.

Light poured from his flash, covered sink, stove, pantry, a door. He went through the door warily, stood listening, holding his breath, hearing heart-beats thumping in his ears. More torchlight hit pantry shelves, dishes, another door. He eased through it, carefully, stood in a half-furnished dining room.

He stood stock-still for a minute, light off, gun gripped. The wolfish howl floated indistinctly through doors, windows, walls.

Nace said aloud, "Nuts!" and, flashing his light, went ahead boldly, seemingly without care, to the door across the room. The door opened against a piano that made a hum as it brushed against the instrument. He strode in, like a man about to say "Hello."

A light winked once, like a firefly, distantly through the glass of a window, across misty blackness outside.

Nace stopped, crouched, darted to the window and overturned a small table that splintered as he tripped. The crash of wood and Nace's body on the floor echoed vibrantly.

He lunged to his feet and reached the window. A shadow sped swiftly away and merged into the heavier shadows of the poplars.

Reaching up, shoving at the window, fingering for a lock, Nace felt resistance. Apparently it was nailed shut. He brought his right arm up. His gun smacked the window pane. Glass tinkled.

"God damn!" Nace swore aloud. He shoved out the rest of the window with his elbow. Jagged glass projected like saw teeth from the frame. He skirted the teeth, eased himself out, quickly and expertly, dropped to the ground.

Lancing light from his torch hit leafless shrubs, trees, a statue of a horse's head with a spigot sticking from the whitely chiseled mouth. Beyond, low shrubs again; farther yet, only blankness.

Skirting the horse, the first shrubs and trees, Nace vaulted a low barricade of branches. He hit ground two feet lower than the ground from which he had sprung. He stumbled and skidded on his face. Getting upright again, sticking a finger into the muzzle of the revolver to clear it, he went on, plunging, hurtling more brush, dodging trees.

A rifle crashed, barking an echo against the wooded hills.

Nace whirled, spotted the dying flash. His gun came up, hammer back. But he let the hammer down again softly, ran forward, dodging more trees.

A blurred shadow, struggling under weight, popped from the earth ahead of him. Nace heard heavy feet hit ground, stagger, run. He put on speed. His body

smashed into a rail fence, went over in an arc. On his back, Nace saw mist sweeping down on him. He staggered up, swearing, gripping flashlight and gun.

The shadow was gone. But a gray circle showed opaquely. He staggered into it, still swearing, and bounced against stone, concrete. A soft, discouraging "Oooff" came from him. He clung there, flashed his torch.

OVER the circular wall, leaning on it, peering down, Nace's light hit concrete, rocks rounding out of concrete. At the bottom was gray stink, dry but putrid. He held the light there, pointing down into it.

"Geez!" he said spontaneously. He said it again and stared.

"Coming down!" he called. Sudden hysteria was in his voice. His eyes were glassy, frozen.

"Stand up!" a voice ordered.

Nace stood up, his back braced against the cistern wall as he turned round.

"Put the arms up high," the voice directed.

Nace lifted his hands, letting torch and gun drop.

A lean, tall, starved figure with a rifle came through the mist toward him. The rifle muzzle prodded him in his hard stomach.

"You killed my wife," the nasal voice said behind the rifle.

"You're screwy!" Nace said. "Look down yourself. She's alive. Alive, I tell you!"

"I see no proof," the tall, gaunt figure said. His rifle was cocked.

"You've got me in a spot, fellow!" Nace said, speaking grimly, watching the rifle hammer. "All I ask is, look down that damn cistern. You'll see your wife! And you'll see something else. Another woman, for instance. She's down there and she knows you. Her name's Joan

Grenwald. Go down there and talk to her."

The man kept the rifle smuggled against Nace's stomach. "I've got a daughter, too," he said. "Where is she now?"

Nace answered in the same tense voice. "I've got a nurse looking after her, fellow. Up at Grenwald's. Somebody made three passes at her tonight, trying to kill her. I called a doctor, and now I've got a nurse for her." He eyed the man with the rifle hopefully. "She won't have to work any more, nor you, if you'll pull that rifle out of my—" Nace's right hand, waving, moved down.

"You're too young to die," the man said. "I read it in a book."

Sweeping downward, Nace's palm hit the rifle barrel. At the same moment, he slid aside, stooped and came up quickly, with his own gun.

The rifle crashed, spurted flame.

Dropping his hold, using the butt of his revolver, Nace knocked the rifle from the man's hands angrily.

"Now, farmer," Nace said sharply, "behave! You're wife's dead all right in the cistern, but there's somebody else there alive. I won't argue. We get them both out. I've an idea who killed your wife, but I can't prove it yet. Play along with me and maybe we get somewhere." He picked up the torch, ran it over the lank man and said: "Or don't you understand the language?"

"I want my wife," the man said grudgingly.

"I'm talking to an idiot. Your wife's in the cistern."

The man paid absolutely no attention to the gun in Nace's hand. "I'll see," he said, turning to the cistern rim. He stared down dully. "I can't see anything," he wheezed.

Nace straightened his overcoat and hat. Then, holding the revolver indolently, he said: "You win, farmer!" He went to

him, shoved the gun against the man's side, turned the torchlight into the cistern.

"Anna!" the man said, strangling on the name.

Down in the cistern a white, silent, unclothed figure lay sprawled against the rocks. Sitting beside it, bound, Joan Grenwald stared up at the light with stark, bewildered eyes. Her face was numb. She wore only a torn robe and nightdress.

A thick rope dangled from the wooden V over the well. Nace said to the man: "Climb down and bring them up."

The man said nothing. His jaw hung open. He took an end of the rope and slid over the concrete and stone well-lip. Nace put his end of the rope around a wooden V support, let the man down slowly, carefully. The distance was about forty feet.

Pulling up was work. Nace sweated. The man came up with the naked dead woman first and laid her out on the grass. Meaningless words and phrases drooled from his quivering lips as he caressed her tenderly.

"The other one now," Nace said. "And be careful. She's alive."

THE man went down again. He came up with Joan Grenwald thrown over his shoulder like a sack of meal. She was moaning but not out.

When he put her on the grass, Nace wrapped her in his overcoat, put her arms in the sleeves. She looked up at him, scared.

"You're O. K., miss," Nace said. "Who took you?"

She shook her head. "I didn't see," she replied.

"O. K.," Nace reiterated and turned to the man. "You!"

The man looked up from his wife's body.

"Blue mud," Nace said. "Where around here is there blue mud?"

The man pointed toward Grenwald's estate, looked down at his wife again. His expression was vacant, despairing.

Nace swore under his breath, lifted Joan Grenwald and began carrying her toward the driveway, picking his way carefully. "Blue mud?" he asked again, but kept walking more rapidly.

Joan Grenwald looked into his face, wide-eyed. "Blue mud—across the lake from our house," she replied. "It's the hill. Why?"

"I don't know yet," Nace admitted. "It may be a—"

A wolflike howl wailed from down near the highway.

Nace carried the girl around the fallen tree across the driveway without speaking again. He got her into his car and started it, turned it around. With the girl beside him he roared down the macadam, turned left at the highway and rumbled across the lake bridge.

"Go slower," Joan Grenwald requested.

He slowed. The mist was thicker here.

"Stop," the girl directed.

Nace wheeled the car off the road, stopped, got out. "Can you walk?" he asked.

She nodded, went ahead of him into brush, over a rail fence. "The blue mud starts here," she said. "I remember."

"What's round here?" Nace asked. "There's nothing much. The family graveyard."

The wolfish howl sounded close, piercing. Nace took out his revolver and his torch, put a hand forward, caught Joan Grenwald's arm and held her.

"I've got an idea you'd better go on back," he said.

She shook her head again, tugged free of his hand, went ahead. They climbed a low hill, making noise in the brush.

"It's at the top," the girl said quietly. "What am I bringing you up here for?" She moved forward, a close shadow.

"It's some place to go to," Nace replied.

A blurred streak hit Joan Grenwald, bowled her down. She screamed frantically as she crashed in the brush. The streak came on, sliding through Nace's flashlight beam, hit him.

He lurched and went over. His gun roared, drowning the girl's screams. His torch touched gray, lop-sided crosses, gray grass mounds; one fresh, earthy mound had a bulk bending over it.

Fur, white teeth snaked back at him, slashing, making snarling sounds. Nace shot again, the gun muzzle prodding fur. The snarling ended in an agonized yelp. Weight thudded on damp earth, thrashed, lay still.

Nace leaped to his knees, stumbling, using the light. Joan Grenwald's body lay huddled, curved on the ground, blood seeping from a bare shoulder.

The bulk from the earthy mound sprang. A knife gleamed, darting down. Nace rolled, head low, like a tumbler. The knife dug dirt, flashed up again.

Nace flattened and fired.

The bulk spun away, straightened. A harsh, rasping voice swore. The knife came through the air, through Nace's coat, through his shoulder flesh, hit bone. Pain twisted his face, making it a lean, satanic snarl of distorted muscles.

HE lifted the gun, took aim, and the upright bulk collapsed in a swearing, broken heap. Nace lowered the gun, unfired, stumbled to the girl on the ground. She looked up, white-faced.

"Pull it out," Nace said and turned the torch on his shoulder.

Joan Grenwald stood up, swaying.

"Pull it out!" Nace repeated through tight lips.

The girl reached a hand, gripped the

knife-hilt, shut her eyes, jerked away. Blood spurted where the knife had been.

"Thanks," Nace said grimly, then went to where the hulk was draped across a fresh, partly opened grave, flashed the torch on it. "Where'd I get you, Rye?"

Jake Rye began swearing again. "In the guts, damn you!" he said between curses.

Nace's light hit a spade, shifted, hit money—bills and gold in a canvas sack in the grave hole. Part of the money was spilled out on the wet smelly earth.

Joan Grenwald swayed to the grave, staring down, sobbing softly. The temporary cross on the grave read—*P. W. Grenwald*.

"There's your money," Nace said to her. He prodded Rye with the gun muzzle and asked: "Did you get it all, Rye?"

"Yes," Rye said. Then swore and asked: "Am I going to die?"

"Maybe," Nace said. His voice was flat, hard. He put the torchlight back on Rye, found a large soft bulge under Rye's coat, near the spot where blood leaked out. When he opened Rye's coat, a dirty white flannel underwear shirt, beginning to be blood stained, fell out. "Where'd you find the money first?" Nace asked as he unrolled the undershirt. It had long, floppy arms and there was wrapped in it loosely a Hallowe'en mask of a witch's face.

"Bartmeyer found out why Grenwald hired him," Rye growled. "Then the dirty dick found the money and began stealing it."

Nace held up the mask and undershirt. "So you're the ghost, Rye," he said. "What did you use, tree branches to hold this up?"

"Two branches," Rye admitted. "One for the shirt, a forked one. Another for the head." He swore slowly. "It didn't work."

"What didn't work?" Nace asked.

"The damned shirt and mask—the ghost. Nobody chased it far enough." Rye stopped, swore. "By God!" he switched abruptly. "You got to get me to a hospital. I got to have a doctor."

Nace put the shirt against Rye's belly where the wound was, tying it tight around him with the shirt's floppy arms. "Talk first!" he said. "You're hard to kill."

"Bartmeyer stole the money from Grenwald," Rye answered.

"You said that." Nace pocketed his revolver and looked at Joan Grenwald who was still sobbing at the grave's edge. Then he looked back, down at Rye.

"Bartmeyer stole the money a little at a time," Rye grumbled, "and hid it in the basement of the Jarno house. I trailed him there one night and found the stuff in canvas sacks. I thought he was just another poacher at first. He never saw me."

"So then you stole it from Bartmeyer," Nace commented.

"By God!" Rye rasped suddenly. "I guess I'm dying. It hurts!" His voice was low, but harsh with anger, vibrant with emotion.

"You'll live to do 'life' in that swell new stir at Stillwater," Nace said. "You'll make plenty of binder-twine before you die!"

"I didn't kill nobody!" Rye said and swore horribly with his hands pressing his stomach. "I'll only get ten to twenty years."

"That's 'life' in Stillwater," Nace said.

"Bartmeyer did all the killing," Rye growled sourly. "When President Roosevelt said in the newspapers that hoarders would be hunted out, old Grenwald got scared and decided to put his money back in the banks. So Bartmeyer had to kill him. He shot Grenwald with a rifle, through a window at night, and had an alibi that he was visiting Mrs. Niel-

son. She said he was at her place hanging a door for her."

"But he wasn't," Nace said.

RYE paused, took several labored breaths, then went on. "No, Mrs. Nielson lied for Bartmeyer. Then Bartmeyer started paying attention to Mary, so her mother threatened to talk unless he quit bothering Mary."

"Bartmeyer shot Mrs. Nielson tonight," Nace said grimly, "to keep her quiet. He tried three times to kill Mary tonight, too, because Mrs. Nielson might have told her what she suspected about the Grenwald murder. You saw it coming, Rye. You could have stopped it."

"God!" Rye shrieked. "I couldn't!" His voice rose, harsh. "I'd hidden Grenwald's money in the Jarno cistern by that time, and I was moving it over here, burying it in Grenwald's grave where the ground was already fresh dug. I was stuck in the damned mess then."

"You're still stuck," Nace said. "Plenty!"

"I wouldn't have been," Rye retorted hotly, "except that Bartmeyer threw Mrs. Nielson's body in the swamp down the hill near here! He used barrel staves strapped to his feet so he could walk on the bog. I found the staves and the body. I knew you and the troopers would dig until you found her, and in the dark I might have left some tracks up here that would make you dig up the grave and find the money.

"So I had to get her body away, where you'd find it. I washed her off and carried her over to Jarno's and stuck her down the cistern. There was still one sack of money left there. I thought I'd leave the sack with the body, because I was down at the Lott's Corner store about the time Mrs. Nielson was killed, and after that I was with you; it would put me clear of the shooting, and wouldn't

cost much. But I took the last sack out, anyway, when I put Joan in the cistern."

"That makes sense," Nace said. "But I didn't follow your ghost far enough, or I'd have found the cistern, the body and the last sack."

Rye rubbed his jaw. "So I had to double back, let you carry me into the Grenwald house, and then I kidnaped Grenwald's daughter. I hid in her room. When you brought her to her door and left her, I grabbed her as she came in. I locked her door and took her downstairs and outside right then. I fired a couple of shots, too." He eyed Nace. "That fetched you!" he said.

Joan Grenwald, hearing her name, stopped sobbing.

"I talked enough," Rye said. "Now Goddamn get me a doctor!"

"Try to stand up," Nace said.

Rye struggled upward, pawing air, growling. Nace held him.

"You ain't a bad feller," Rye said. "I'll tell you something else. There wasn't no three men beat me up, like I said. The tramp done it himself. He wanted to know where I'd hid the money. I don't know who he was or how he found out I'd stole it from Bartmeyer. He beat hell out of me and knocked me out. My dog smelled him out and —"

"Take it easy," Nace said. "Your hound chewed the wrong tramp, but the fellow was dead before your dog got him." He let Rye sway alone an instant, only an instant. "No, you can't walk," he snapped. "I'll have to carry you."

A grating voice sounded from the brush: "You won't have to carry nobody! Get 'em up, Nace! Right now!"

"Now here's Bartmeyer," Nace said, raising his hands. The torch in one elevated hand shot light up through stark tree branches.

Rye fell down again.

GOING directly to Rye, Bartmeyer bent over him, a flash in one hand showing a gun in the other. Nace stood where he was, shifty, watching Bartmeyer's revolver.

Feeling Bartmeyer's gun against the back of his neck, Rye shrilled hysterically: "God, Bartmeyer! Don't do—"

Bartmeyer's revolver crashed. Rye's head jerked and the rest of his body twitched, then lay still on the ground.

Joan Grenwald whimpered, fell softly to earth.

Nace said with his hands still up, "Bartmeyer, you're a sweet—" and finished off swearing.

"Now you," Bartmeyer rasped and came toward Nace. "You and him had a nice chat. This one won't go through your windshield." From behind the leveled revolver, aiming it at Nace, coming nearer, he said: "Take it and like it, you—"

Nace twisted cat-like. A rifle, very close, banged. Bartmeyer jerked, spun around, pitched to the damp earth. His legs wiggled, kicked, then lay ash still as Rye's.

Nace stopped his own body twist, took out his revolver.

Nielson approached, saying plaintively: "I guess I got him." He came into the circle of light from Nace's torch, carrying a rifle from which smoke curled and faded upward. "He won't kill no more," he said.

Kanoyer came up right behind, in Nielson's shadow, holding a flat automatic. Kanoyer's suit was no longer pressed. His overcoat was damp, soggy. He put the flat automatic against Nielson's spine.

Nace took one step forward and swung down his revolver. The barrel, hitting Kanoyer's head, crunched. Kanoyer sagged, went down, looking sick, but his automatic belched noise and flame. The slug spurted up dirt and dried twigs.

"No you don't," Nace said softly, bending over. He swung his revolver down again on Kanoyer's skull.

Kanoyer, half sitting, rolled over on his side, then on his face, breathing faintly into the damp dirt. Nace took the flat automatic from him, another from a shoulder holster. Nielson, watching blandly, said stupidly: "He told me to kill him. He told me Bartmeyer shot my wife and tried to kill my daughter. I'm plowing for a neighbor and he came tonight and brought me here. What was he going to do to me with that gun?"

"You stick to your plowing," Nace said and took the rifle from Nielson.

CHAPTER EIGHT

3.2

MORNING light, still misty, seeped through windows, making Grenwald's heavy furniture stand out palely where electric light did not reach far enough across the carpet.

Nace said to the nurse: "Easy now, or I'll sock you."

The nurse stood away, eyed the shoulder bandage. "You won't sock for a few days, pal. Boy, am I a nurse! Look at that job!"

"If Joan Grenwald and the Nielson girl are all fixed up." Nace said, "you can quit being a sissy anytime, Grace."

"I quit now," Grace said, and took off the wig. Short, light hair showed beneath, the face becoming handsomely masculine. Pulling up the white nurse's skirt, Grace said: "Excuse me while I go put on my pants."

Arthur Grenwald, still in his pink pajamas and dressing gown, waited until Grace was gone and asked: "About this Kanoyer and his agency, Mr. Nace—"

"I can't pin a thing on Kanoyer," Nace said stolidly. "But he's the bird who

cut your telephone line and slugged me. He picked up the tramp, the escaped prisoner the troopers found down by the bridge. Well, he either picked him up or hit him by accident with his car. Anyhow, Kanoyer changed clothes with him—his name was Ramp, the trooper said—but forgot to change shirts. I saw both shirts, the one on Kanoyer just before he slugged me, and the one on Ramp when I looked his body over in the trooper's car. That's where I got a lead on all this."

Arthur Grenwald nodded. "I see. So—"

"So Kanoyer," Nace explained, "dressed as Ramp, did that job on your telephone line, and one on me, and a honey on Rye to make Rye tell where the money was hidden. Bartmeyer put him up to that. I don't think Bartmeyer would have let his boss in on it if he could have found the money again himself. He couldn't, so he had to call in Kanoyer. But Kanoyer couldn't beat it out of Rye, and by the time Kanoyer got back to Ramp, Ramp was dead. He changed back into his own clothes, dumped Ramp near the bridge, and Rye's dog had a meal on a dead man."

"Shouldn't I inform the state authorities about this man Kanoyer?" Grenwald asked.

Nace shook his head, stopped, felt of his shoulder. "You could publish it in the newspaper, too, and get sued just as quick. I know Kanoyer. I used to work for the dirty chisler. Leave him be. He's driving back to Minneapolis right now with a bump on his head that won't wear off overnight. I got real pleasure giving him that!"

Grenwald put fingertips together, said pointedly: "I am as well satisfied, Mr. Nace. And now about your fee—"

Nace said, "Yes, sure, the fee," and took from a pocket the sheet of paper

Joan Grenwald and Arthur Grenwald had signed.

"Ten percent," Grenwald said, eyeing it. "That's quite steep, Mr. Nace. Quite steep indeed. But you have it there in writing, and of course if you insist—"

"That was a trick," Nace said. Holding the paper between thumb and forefinger of each hand, he tore it across once and said: "I had to find out if you knew, or thought you knew, where the money was hidden. If you did, you wouldn't have signed away twenty thousand dollars of it to get back what you already had, or thought you had, tucked safely away. You might have hired me just to solve a murder, you know."

"But I didn't know where the money was," Grenwald said. "And I don't think, now, that your usual fee is adequate."

Still holding the two halves of paper, Nace said: "I've been kicked around some here and I'll be laid up for a few days, maybe a week or more. All that costs me money."

"Yes?" Grenwald lifted eyebrows.

"How do you like the new beer?" Nace asked.

"It's rather pale," Grenwald admitted. "Pale and thin." He watched Nace and the paper halves curiously. "I suppose that it is fair enough, though. Why—"

"Fair enough," Nace said. "Because my fee is three point two per cent of what I dug out of your brother's grave. That is, in round figures, considering the stolen cash fell a bit short of two hundred thousand, five thousand dollars in round figures." Arthur Grenwald's face brightened. He said: "Fair enough." Nace put the two halves together and tore them into squares.

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

A Tense Detective Thriller

— By —

OSCAR SCHISGALL

It was a strange tale of masked terror the girl whispered to Detective Taggart. But stranger still was the night of crimson horror when the big dick found that awesome package

WRAPPED FOR MURDER

and dared tear loose the strings! There's mystery, action, and breath-taking suspense in this smashing yarn.

DECEMBER 1st DIME DETECTIVE

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MURDER à la carte

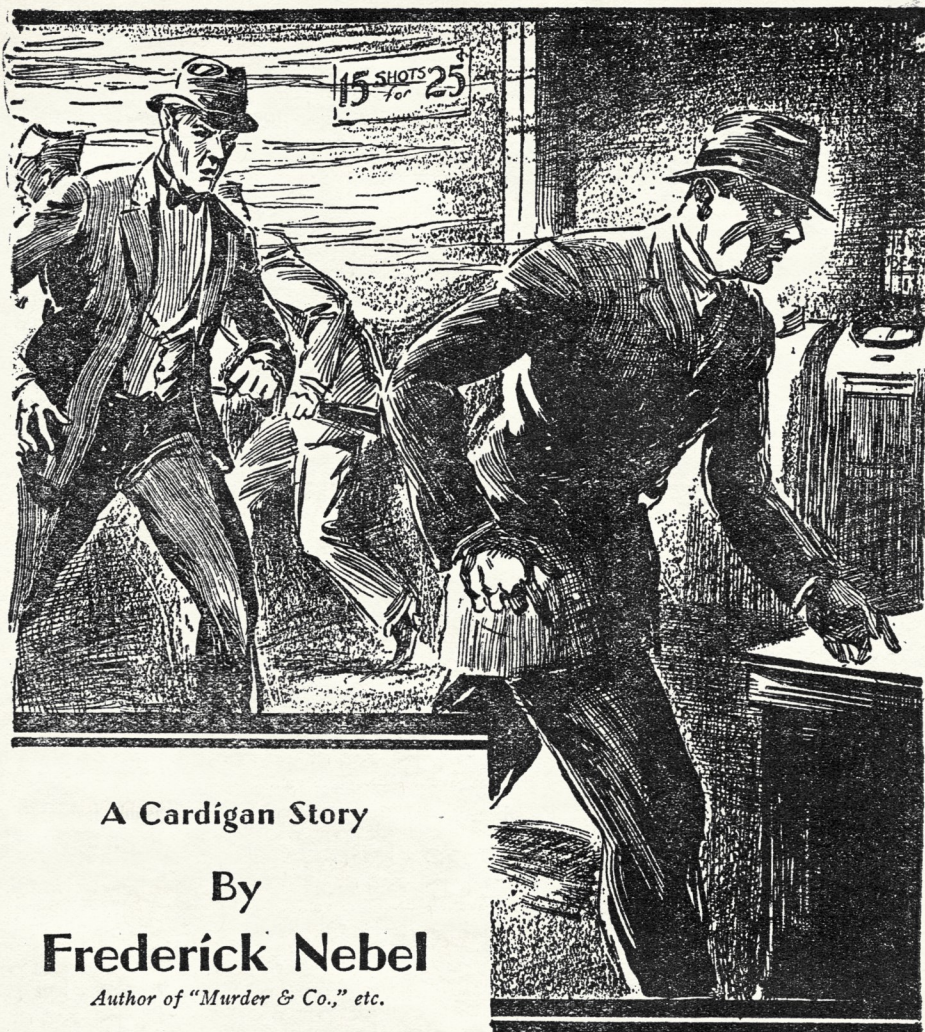
Hardesty was as dumb an egg as they come—but boy how that baby could pitch ball. So when he tangled himself all up in a murder net it was up to that big dick from Cosmos to pick the knots. Or else— But there just wasn't any "or else". Cardigan had laid too much hard-earned dough on the Series to permit his favorite hurler to fumble himself into the hot seat.

CHAPTER ONE

The Girl In Room 1205

THE jangling of the telephone wakened Cardigan at seven, and he turned over, scowled at it, considered the clock, the dim daylight com-

ing through the open window, and remembered that he had told the hotel operator not to ring him before eight. He had mixed drinks the night before, got in late, and his head felt like a balloon—loaded with lead. When his scowling at the phone failed to stop its ringing, he



A Cardigan Story
By
Frederick Nebel
Author of "Murder & Co.," etc.

Cardigan saw him make for the door.

ripped out an oath, grabbed the instrument, hauled it back into bed with him, and growled upward into the mouthpiece.

"Yowssuh!" He nodded to himself, bared his teeth and droned, "Oh, so it's you. Maybe you're on Chinese time or something. . . . Oh, no; you didn't wake me up. Go lay an egg!"

He slammed the receiver into the hook, set the instrument back upon the table and yanked the covers over his head. He had begun to breath normally, and was slipping back to sleep, when the phone jangled again. He sat bolt upright,

kicked the covers over the bottom of the bed and grabbed the instrument, yelled into it.

"Listen, you fat-head! There's no use ringing me, because I'm not civilized until I've had eight hours sleep! What? . . . Well, that's just too bad. Try using your head for a change. I tell you, Sam— Now listen; I don't give a damn who— Huh? . . . Who? . . . Well, why don't you know? . . . Oh, you were? You were cockeyed drunk, eh? Suppose Carmicheal found out his ace pitcher was hitting the bottle

a week before the World Series? . . . I should think you would! . . . Of course, I've taken a drink in my day. Last night I took seventeen, but what's that to you? . . . Oh, I know, I know. Good old Cardigan, good old horse's neck Cardigan. . . . Well, I suppose I may as well, if you're going to keep this phone hopping all morning. . . . Soon as I can."

He hung up, got out of his wrinkled pajamas and went into the bathroom growling, "Damned fool!" He showered as cold as he could take it, groaning, grunting, and gasping meanwhile. He used all the towels in the bathroom to rub himself dry, then dressed, removed bills, change, penknife and watch from the bureau and shoved them into his pockets. He looked at himself in the mirror. He didn't, he saw, look so swell.

DOWNSTAIRS in the restaurant, he ordered a full pint of tomato juice and into it he put a tablespoonful of tabasco. It burned its way down like fire. Then he ate wheatcakes, two lamb chops, fried potatoes, three rolls—and drank two cups of black coffee. He felt a little better by the time he reached the lobby, but not yet equal to a cigar. He compromised on a cigarette and set out on foot. Sam Hardesty's hotel was not far distant, and Cardigan reached it in fifteen minutes, kicked his way through the swing door.

A green elevator hoisted him to the fifteenth floor, and he went down a corridor long-legged, his tie a little to one side, a few superfluous dents in his fedora, his vest buttoned wrong, and his face not jovial.

The door of 1510 was opened by a tall, muscular man who held an ice-bag on his head and looked the worse for wear and tear. He grimaced. Cardigan made swearing movements with his lips.

"Hello, Jack," Hardesty gulped.

"Hello yourself. If you think misery loves company, you're screw-loose." He strode in, scowling, and went on into the large bedroom while Hardesty closed the door and followed like a man in the first stages of the bends.

"Hell, Jack, I'm in a tough spot, I think.

Cardigan sat down, keeping his hat on, and thrust his hands into his pockets, shot his legs out straight, crossing them at the ankles. Hardesty was drinking Canadian ale as a pick-me-up, and he sat down painfully on a chair, holding the bottle in his right hand, by the neck. He looked worried and pale and sallow; not at all like the famous pitcher and speed king the baseball diamonds had come to know.

"Jack, I got tangled up last night. I couldn't think of anyone to call but you, seeing as how we went to school together, played as kids together—"

"Chuck the album, Sam, and get to the point. You may have a hangover, but I've got one myself and it's a pip."

"Well, it's like this, old sock. I went to a night club, met a jane, took her to her flat and then things happened. And that's the trouble. I can't remember what happened. Usually if I get awful tight, I write out a lot of checks."

"Did you write any last night?"

"That's it! I don't know! I carry the blanks loose around in my pocket and I can't remember how many I started out with. Usually I mark down what I write out, but sometimes I forget. Honest, Jack, I haven't been tight since I was married last year. I'm scared as hell. Marjorie gets the bank statement each month, and if she sees a big withdrawal—Hell, maybe I even wrote a check for everything we have! O-o-o, am I in a spot!" He touched his head, took a long swig at the bottle of ale.

"So what?" said Cardigan.

"Look, can't you do something? You're a private dick. You know your way around."

"Who's the jane?"

"I don't know."

"Where's she live?"

"I"—he swallowed—"don't know."

"Oh, I see. You don't know if you wrote out a check to a jane you don't know at an address you don't know. That's what I call a swell lead for me to start on."

"That," breathed poor Hardesty, "is just about how it stacks up, you might say."

"I might say! That's a good line too." Cardigan leaned forward, shed his air of sarcasm, got down to business. "Can't you remember just something of what happened?"

"Uh-uh. It was dark and raining and I didn't remember where we got out. I was pretty tight then, Jack, but it was in her apartment I got blind, and I remember kind of dimlike there were some guys there. I couldn't tell you what they looked like. Then all's a blank till I wake up here at five this morning." His face was working. "I tell you, Jack, something happened. I feel it in my bones. I didn't mean any harm. I was just lonesome and I danced with the jane and— Listen, if I wrote out a check, Majorie'll see it. I've got to get that check back. If I have to pay, I'll get cash. I can hock myself to get the cash—"

"Wait a minute, Sam." Cardigan was calm now. "Take it easy. Don't get all steamed up. Let me think. . . . See here, one thing you must know. What night club was it?"

Hardesty nodded. "Yes, I remember that. It was the Club Medallion; it's up in East Fifty—"

"I know where it is. They charge a buck and a half for a cocktail you can get in the Forties for four bits, and you get

charged ten percent extra because the waiters, all of them South Brooklyn da-goes, say '*Merci, monsieur,*' instead of plain 'Thank you.' . . . D' you remember anybody there?"

"A tall guy, with silky gray hair. He got me to write an autograph on a menu—"

"McQueston. He runs the scatter. He collects autographs. Usually keeps a stiff eye on his place. Well"—Cardigan stood up—"pull out of the hangover and for crying out loud lay off the booze. You've got a couple of World Series games to pitch and I," he added sentimentously, "have bet a couple of centuries on any game you pitch."

"Honest, Jack, it was the first time I fell off the wagon since I was married. I'd go nuts if Marjorie thought—if I hurt Marjorie. And if Carmicheal finds me like this—"

"Listen," Cardigan cut in slowly. "Take this key. Go down to my place and sleep it off and you'll be O. K. by tonight." He chuckled. "Hell, you look funny, Sam."

"Funny? If you knew how I felt. ."

Cardigan was on his way to the door, saying: "By the way, do you remember her name?"

"I—I think it was Priscilla."

"I suppose she wore curls and old lace and lisped and supported a rheumatic mother in Hoboken who had to take in floors to scrub." Cardigan laughed raucously, rasped out, "Mammy!" and left the room.

He left the hotel by a side door.

BEN McQueston was eating breakfast at a card table in his living room overlooking Central Park. He was an unusually tall man with a pink-cheeked pale face, aluminum-colored hair, neatly parted, and fragile nose glasses. His small, neat mustache matched his hair. He

looked very dignified, almost like a minister; and his apartment had a rarified atmosphere, with its books, its framed autographs and its good paintings.

McQuestion never showed surprise. "Oh, hello, Cardigan. Haven't seen you around the Medallion in ages. Well, I guess you weren't around. That's what I thought. Have an egg."

"Uh-uh."

"I suppose you came up to look at my collection of autographs."

"No."

"I didn't think so. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't like it even if it was nice."

"M-m-m! Indigestion, huh?"

Cardigan flopped down in the divan, slapped his hat on his knee. "You run a nice joint, Ben. You soak a guy four times what anything's worth, but that's O. K. Your liquor's pretty bum, but they forget that when the girls come out in tights and the lights go low and somebody hauls off with a torch song. So it's pretty funny when a guy walks in, has himself a good time and is dragged home by a pick-up.

McQuestion blinked brightly. "Go on."

"I am looking for an autograph, Ben. An autograph on a check."

"I'm still interested."

Cardigan leaned forward. "Sam Hardesty was in your place last night."

"The baseball player? Sure. I got his autograph, Jack, but not on a check."

"I'm talking about the jane who took him out of your place."

McQuestion put knife and fork neatly together on his plate and dabbed at his lips with a napkin. He kept his small blue eyes intently on Cardigan, compressed his lips and reached for a cigarette.

He said: "If you're intimating that I've a flock of chiselers in my scatter, you're off your trolley, boy. I charge

like hell for everything I sell, and I get people who can pay out, but outside of that any guy's as safe in my place as he is in church." He lit up, tilted back his fine head, and eyed Cardigan levelly. "Come down to brass tacks, Jack, or politely pick up your hat and take a walk."

Cardigan grinned. "I'm looking for the jane took Hardesty home last night."

"I'm sorry, Jack. When I got his autograph, he was alone."

"I don't give a damn what he was when you got his autograph. A jane took him home. He got liquor somewhere after he left your place and it was hopped up. He was pretty tight when he left the Medallion, too, because he doesn't remember the address the jane took him to. He thinks he signed a check, and if he did, then there's chislers running loose in your place and if you don't want headquarters to get wind of it, stop looking down your damned nose at me and talk sense!"

McQuestion puffed. He did not take his eyes off Cardigan, and for a long moment he made no reply. Then he rose, went across the room to a telephone saying, "Chiselers, eh? I'll call my headwaiter." He put through a call.

A moment later he said: "Louie? . . . This is Ben. Listen. Hardesty—you know, the baseball player—was in last night. You remember? . . . He came in alone, didn't he? . . . O. K. Who'd he leave with? . . . Do you know her name? . . . Did she come in alone? . . . Who'd she come in with? . . . Three guys, eh? Well, what about the guys? . . . Don't know, eh? Well, it's a hell of a fine state of affairs when you don't know who's coming in these nights! . . . Shut up! Call Otto. See if he put them in a cab and if he got the address. If he didn't, see if he remembers who drove the cab. . . . Never mind. You heard

me. Do what I say and call me back."

He slammed the receiver back into the prong, swiveled. There was higher color in his cheeks, and he said: "Chiselers, eh? Not while I know anything about it!"

Ten minutes later the telephone rang and McQuestion grabbed it, talked for several minutes and then hung up. "O. K." he said, turning. "We don't know who the jane is, but Otto, the doorman, remembers Hardesty and remembers putting him and a jane in a taxi. The driver asked Otto where he should take 'em and Otto stuck his head in back and asked them and the jane said the Drexel Tower. That's in West Sixty-fifth Street. . . Now look here, Cardigan. I'm sore. I'm going to fire Louie. My joint's always been on the up and up—"

Cardigan rose. "I know, Ben. That's why I came around."

McQuestion took off his glasses, blinked his eyes. "I don't want this to get in the papers."

Cardigan was on his way to the door. "It won't."

HE went downstairs, walked out into the street and climbed into a taxicab. It took him up Fifth Avenue, through the Park by way of a transverse, and westward through Sixty-fifth Street to the Drexel Tower. The building was tall, narrow, white, with a short glass marquee. The lobby was rectangular, with a small desk at one end, and behind the desk a very young man with a dazzling haircomb.

"How do you do," said the clerk, without looking up.

"How do you do," said Cardigan, disapproving of the haircomb.

He laid his identification on the desk and lit a cigarette while the clerk perused it with lifted eyebrows.

Then Cardigan said: "This is kind of funny. Last night a woman resident here called up the agency and asked to have a

man sent up this morning. The clerk who took the message lost the memo, and all he could remember was that the address was this and the first name of the woman was Priscilla. So I don't know her full name, but I don't think you'd have a flock of residents here all named Priscilla."

"We have one," said the clerk, quietly.

"I'd thank you to tell me her whole name and her apartment. It'd look bad for the agency if I fell down. The guy was dumb to lose the memo, but we all make mistakes."

"There is a Priscilla Ferne in Twelve-o-five," the clerk said. "Shall I ring?"

"No. She told us to come right up."

He thanked the clerk and swung his long legs across the lobby, entered a small elevator and was hoisted noiselessly to the twelfth floor. He got out and slapped his big feet down the corridor, shooting out his shaggy head to read the door numbers as he went past. He came at last to 1205, listened with an ear pressed to the panel, and hearing no sound, worked the brass knocker. He waited, tapping his foot, and then knocked again; and when no reply came, he took out a bunch of skeleton keys, and the fifth try gained him admittance to a large, opulent apartment. He went from the foyer into the large living room, noticed that the shades were three quarters down. Listening, he moved across the living room and reached the bedroom doorway. His scalp tightened.

A girl lay on the floor beside the bed. She wore sheer blue silk pajamas, and bronze hair streamed out on the rug. The light was bad, so he pulled up one of the window shades, and now he saw that her face was discolored, but not so much so that he could not be certain of her beauty. She was, he saw, very beautiful. And she was also dead. Strangled. . . .

He drew down the shade again, shak-

ing. He thought of Sam Hardesty, who could not remember what had happened, and a thin chill knifed through the flush that had welled up in him. His own breathing, thick and heavy now, was the only sound in the room. He turned on a light and bent to study her face closely, and then he switched the light off and returned to the living room.

He wrapped a handkerchief around his hand and searched her purse and the desk, thinking of Hardesty's check. But he did not find it. However, he found Hardesty's card, and shoved it into his pocket. He saw an empty glass standing on a tray, and wiped off the glass. Hardesty would have written out the check at the desk, so Cardigan wiped off the desk. Then he went around clearing chair arms, tables, the bed posts, of possible fingerprints. At last he returned to the door, wiped his own prints off the knobs, outside and in, and left, locking the door. Heat throbbed in his chest, and when he reached the lobby he said to the clerk: "I guess she's not in. I'll try later."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder à la Carte

WHEN Cardigan swept into his own hotel room, he found Sam Hardesty on the bed.

"Hell," said Hardesty, "I can't sleep. I can't—"

"You won't now, sweetheart."

Hardesty did not miss the hard note in Cardigan's tone. "What—what—"

Cardigan took off his hat and whacked it into the nearest chair. "No, you won't sleep now, Sam, and that's a fact. Now I want it straight." He slapped his hands on the bed post, and his big face was dark, tight-drawn, and his dark eyes bit down at Hardesty. "The jane's dead," he said suddenly.

"Dead!"

"Don't yell."

"But good God!"

"I know, I know. I know all about that. Lay off the third-act cracks. Tighten up. Keep your pants on and sit quiet. The jane's dead. That's a fact. We know about it. And we know that you were so lousy drunk last night that you can't remember what happened. You think you signed a check, and off I go waltzing to do my stuff—and what do I run in to?"

Hardesty stood up, suddenly grim. "Listen, if you think I knew she was dead when I sent you there, you're nuts!"

Cardigan looked bored, and waved a hand. "Don't get tough, Sam. I believe you didn't know she was dead, but still that doesn't help matters. She's dead. You were there—drunk or drugged or something—and next morning, tra-la, she's dead."

"My God, I didn't do it!"

Cardigan muttered soberly: "How do you know?"

"How do I know! You know as well as I do that I wouldn't go around killing people!"

"You forget, Sam, that for a little while you were blotto. Maybe she teased you. Maybe you were blind-drunk and let her have it. It's possible. Now hold on—pipe down. We'll say you didn't kill her, just for the sake of argument. Still where are you? When the cops land on you, where are you? You can't remember a thing. You see, you can't remember a thing. Cram that in your pipe, smoke it, and sit quiet."

Hardesty slumped back to the bed, his mouth slack. "I get you, Jack," he muttered. "I get you."

Cardigan went on. "I searched the place. I didn't find any checks authored by you. I wiped off all the furniture, a glass, and the door—for fingerprints. Understand, I used a master key to get

in the place. I left and told the clerk I didn't get an answer and that I'd try later. I thought of calling in the cops, but I wanted to think things over, and talk with you, and I knew the cops would haul me eventually anyhow."

"You?"

"Sure. The clerk will remember I stopped by. Now you and I don't know if you killed her or not. I believe you were tricked, and the point is, whether you murdered her or not, we've got to get you out of it. We can't even have them suspect you did it. I don't believe you'd kill anybody, Sam, but the odds are against you and we've got a tough row to hoe."

Hardesty got up and tramped the length of the room. "Hell, Jack, if I'd thought I'd be hauling you into a mess like this—"

"That's done. I'm in for it. If this thing breaks up your alley, you're out of the World Series, you're out of baseball for good. And if you're out of the Series, that ball team of yours is going to lose two games—and the pennant."

"What could I tell my wife? What could I tell Carmicheal? How could I make them understand?"

Cardigan heaved a dark sigh. "I don't think you could. Sam, you're in a spot—a tough one, and no fooling. And I'm in a spot. I'm in a spot because the cops are going to call me in and ask me things and I'm going to have to shadow-box all over the place to keep you out of it."

"Nix. I'm not going to drag you in, Jack. By God, I'll go right over now and make a clean breast of it!"

Cardigan was sardonic. "A clean breast about what? You're going over and tell the cops a bed-time story. You can't remember a thing. What can you tell them?"

Hardesty groaned and held his head in his hands.

Cardigan spoke with a hard calm. "Get back to your hotel and act natural. Leave this to me. You're not in it yet. McQuestion won't talk because surer than hell they'd close up his club. We're safe there. And McQuestion can shut up the taxi driver that took you and this Jane to her apartment. So far, you're safe. The thing we don't know about is the check. And we don't know who the guys are you said you thought were there. They must have been friends of hers. They must have been the guys brought her to the Medallion. So you see what we can bank on, and what we can't. Who are these guys? What part do they play? If one of them was her boy friend, and she double-crossed him by giving you the boudoir eye, he might have strangled her. But I can't see it that way because they were all there when you were there. . . . O. K. Dress and shoot back to your hotel."

CARDIGAN saw Hardesty off in a taxi, and then took one to the agency office. Pat Seaward and George Hammerhorn, the chief, were in conference, but Cardigan broke in and said: "Excuse the interruption, but this is important."

Hammerhorn said: "Indicating, I suppose, that what Patricia and I are talking about isn't."

"Honest, George. This is hot, red-hot. Listen, both of you." He slapped his hands on the desk, bracing his arms. "Sam Hardesty is a friend of mine. We grew up together, and he went his way and I went mine, and every now and then we'd run across each other in some city and go on a bender together. Sam could never hold a lot of liquor—"

"Comparing him with yourself, of course," Pat put in, smiling sweetly.

Cardigan inhaled, looked down at her. "You'll please keep that affected humor to yourself, precious orchid—"

"Now, now," George Hammerhorn said. "None of that. Get on with your story."

Cardigan did, and gradually Hammerhorn and Pat leaned forward, their interest growing. Cardigan finished and his listeners sat back and Hammerhorn, reaching for a cigar, said: "So what?"

"So it goes on the records that this Priscilla Ferne called up last night and asked us to send a man up early this morning. The memo was lost, but the man on duty here remembered her first name was Priscilla and that she lived at the Drexel Tower. I went up and talked to the clerk as I've explained. Then I couldn't get an answer from Priscilla's apartment, so I left, intending to come back later."

Pat said, "I never saw a man like you! Always getting into hot water on somebody's account but your own! Phooey!"

Hammerhorn was frowning. "Little irregular, Jack."

"Of course it is. But I've got to be cleared! I can't drag Sam's name in it! I've got to keep him in the clear too!"

"How do you know," Pat said, "he really deserves it? How do you know he didn't kill her?"

Cardigan rasped, with gestures: "How do I know! How do I know!" And he leaned forward, asking: "How do I know that you're really Pat Seaward? Can I prove it? Can I prove that's your name? No! I only know it because you told me! How do I know Broadway is Broadway? How do—"

"Oh, dear me, now you're off again; now I've started something. Let's call it a day."

Hammerhorn, broad, placid, fanned himself. "Well, well, children, I'm glad recess is over."

Cardigan suddenly hit the desk so hard that a glass cover jumped from an inkwell; and he shouted: "By God, I've

given the best years of my life to this agency, and if I can't get help to lend an old pal a hand when he needs it—"

"Damn it!" roared Hammerhorn. "This is no hall! This is an office! My office!"

Pat held her ears.

The phone rang and she pulled it toward her and said: "Yes, this is the Cosmos Agency. . . . Oh, hello, Lieutenant O'Mara. . . . Yes, this is Pat Seaward. . . . Oh, you old naughty mans, you. . . I beg your pardon? . . . Why, yes. That is, we had a call, but the memo was lost, but the clerk remembered the first name and the address, so we sent up Cardigan. He phoned back to say there was no one in, and Mr. Hammerhorn ordered him to try again, later. I'm sure he'll turn up any minute. . . . Thank you, Lieutenant O'Mara!"

Hammerhorn sighed, leaned back, lit his cigar. "Well," he said, "so I guess it's in the records."

"But," said Pat, sliding the phone to the middle of the desk, looking up meaningfully, "there's a fox on the case."

THERE was a great amount of activity in the Drexel Tower apartment when Cardigan arrived. Some reporters were there, a police photographer, a man from the D. A.'s office, half a dozen uniformed policemen, Detective "Knucks" Hermann, loud-mouthed, dramatic and dumb. All these men had something to say to one another, and the result was a continuous babble, worse than a debutante party. In a far corner of the room, remote, looking slightly absent-minded, sat Lieutenant Chauncey O'Mara; he sat on the arm of a wing chair, small, slight, debonair, with black hair, a black mustache, a thin bony face with high, red cheekbones and a good-humored mouth.

"Ah!" roared Knucks Hermann above

the general uproar. "As I breathe and live, if it ain't not Cardigan. Hey, Chauncey; look what the wind blowed in!" He grinned widely, chewed on a great wad of gum.

"You look well, Knucks," Cardigan said drily.

"Yeah? I don't mind if I do."

O'Mara had not moved, though he began swinging his leg idly. "Hello, Cardigan," he said, his blue eyes twinkling. He nodded to the bedroom. "Looks like a case of beauty and the beast."

"What happened?"

"Take a look. She's in there."

O'Mara rose and sauntered into the bedroom, and Cardigan and Hermann followed. O'Mara closed the door against the babble in the living room, lit an Egyptian cigarette and looked down vacantly at the body.

Hermann advised: "She was choked."

"I see," Cardigan said. He said no more, determined to let O'Mara take the lead.

O'Mara did. "I hear the agency sent you up to see her this morning."

"If she's Priscilla Ferne, yes."

"She is."

"I came in and— You see, the mug down at the office lost the memo with her name on it. She called the agency last night. All I had was her first name and the address. I got the rest from the clerk downstairs. Came up here, knocked for a while and got no answer. Then I went away."

"Didn't suspect anything, huh?"

"Why should I? I didn't even know what she wanted. How long's she been dead?"

"Helvig says about ten hours. She got it about midnight or one A. M., say. Whoever did it was wise. We noticed everything wiped off—chairs, desk, and so on. She's been living here a month. A guy from The Herald-Star says her

real name's Mamie Pulofski. She won a beauty contest in Iron City four years ago, got a month on the vaudeville circuit and then vanished. She was a ham actress. She used the Priscilla Ferne on the stage. This guy says she was in a mess in Buffalo a couple of years ago. At a party in her hotel rooms, a guy fell from a window and killed himself. Nothing criminal, of course—just messy. Then about a year ago, he says, she was beaten up by somebody in Boston. In her hotel room. Nobody knew who. She never told. Kind of a girl, I guess, that drove guys nuts. Maybe she was a teaser. The Buffalo jam was a kind of *antipasto*, the Boston the fish course and this the *entrée*. Looks as if she ordered it all *à la carte*, but didn't wait for the dessert. The dessert'll be ours—the guy who killed her."

"Any leads?"

"Night clerk said she came in with a fellow last night. He didn't bother looking much. Just a big guy. He doesn't remember when or if they left, or what he looked like. It looks a smooth job to me. It looks like a planned job. If a guy went nuts and killed her, he would have run out without bothering to wipe away his fingerprints. There's nothing—no letter, no marks, nothing. I thought maybe you'd be able to give me a steer."

"I'm dead in the dark, Chauncey."

O'Mara sighed. "Well, I guess we ship her back to Iron City, if she's got relatives there. Bum homecoming, huh? I hate to see 'em go young like this, Cardigan—good or bad, I hate to see 'em go young."

CHAPTER THREE

Hardesty Calls His Bank

SHE did not get much space in the metropolitan newspapers. A small stick on the third page, and no picture; though back in Iron City she doubtless

made the headlines. Cardigan walked into the Medallion at the cocktail hour and knew by the look in McQuestion's face that he had come upon the news. McQuestion moved his head and Cardigan followed him into a back room and McQuestion, with a steely look in his eyes, said: "What the hell kind of horseplay is this?"

"So you call it horseplay."

McQuestion looked very elegant in evening clothes, and his thin nose glasses shimmered. "You didn't say anything about murder this morning."

"I didn't know there was murder, Ben."

"I've got an idea you're playing ring-around-the-rosie," the tall man challenged.

"Pack up that idea and put it in mothballs. All you have to do, Ben, is keep your mouth shut, keep Otto's mouth shut, and all the other guys who work for you. And that taxi driver."

"I've talked to him."

"Swell."

McQuestion compressed his lips. "But I'm not playing fiddle to any murder. What I did is only temporary, until—"

Cardigan darkened, snapped: "Until what?"

McQuestion colored, thinned down his eyes.

And Cardigan went on, deeply: "This guy Hardesty is an old friend of mine. He was tricked, trapped—he was made somebody's fall-guy, and he hasn't got a leg to stand on—except mine. Now that jane picked him up in your place. It all started here, and if you start shooting off your mouth to the wrong people, I can make a mountain out of that mole-hill. Hardesty is up against it and so am I, and this jane was a tramp. How do I know Hardesty didn't get knock-out drops here?"

"Damn you—"

"O. K. Damn me. But if you want to

keep this joint swanky, if you want to stay on the lee side of the law and keep your name out of the papers—play ball. This is no affair of yours, and it is an affair of mine. You're a nice guy, Ben, but sometimes you start acting like the preacher you look like. Keep your nose out of it. Keep Otto and the rest and the taxi driver dumb. I don't know how this thing will break yet. So far, Hardesty is in the clear—but there were three other guys in it, and I can't figure them or how they'll move."

McQuestion, keeping his lips tight, stared at the floor. Then he said, "O. K."

"I knew you'd listen to reason, Ben."

"I just hate to get tangled up."

"Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"I'll buy you one."

NEXT morning Cardigan was on his way down to breakfast when the ringing of his phone stopped him in the doorway. He went back and grabbed it, spoke for a moment, hung up, and then went out, his brows bent. He did not stop for breakfast, but boarded a cab outside his hotel and drove north, to Central Park. Fifteen minutes later he walked in on McQuestion, and McQuestion, sitting at the card table and smoking a cigarette, said: "See this morning's paper?"

"No."

"Look at this. Second page."

Cardigan took the newspaper and said: "What?"

"Third column."

"This picture? . . . Oh, I see. Casey Smith. What about it?"

"Read it."

Cardigan sat down and read that at eleven the previous night Casey Smith, the gambler, was found dead in West Forty-eighth Street, with two bullets in him. It had occurred near Fifth Avenue. No one had seen the shooting. Patrolman Kopf had heard the shots, come upon the body five minutes later.

"So what?" Cardigan said.

"Louie called up and said Casey Smith was one of the three guys that came in with the dame the other night." He stood up. "This is getting close, Cardigan! Too damn close for comfort!"

Cardigan's thoughts began spinning. "Hold everything, Ben. Keep your shirt on. This is a hot lead!"

"Hot lead hell! I've got an idea I'm headed for a jam and—"

"Ben," Cardigan said, spreading his arms, "you wouldn't let me down, would you?"

McQueston made an exasperated sound. "You're a damned nuisance, Jack—that's what you are!"

Cardigan tossed the paper to the table, said, "I'll be seeing you, pal," and stretched his legs out of the apartment.

HE found Chauncey O'Mara, Knucks Hermann, and two other men in an office at police headquarters. He said: "I didn't think you were busy, Chauncey. I just dropped in to see if you'd picked up anything."

Hermann said: "Didja read about how Casey Smith up and got himself a one-way ticket to parts unknown?"

"Oh, that. Yeah, I saw it in the paper."

"These guys," went on Hermann, "was his pals, as you might say. Wasn't they, Chauncey?"

O'Mara seemed satisfied with his nails. "Cardigan, this is Tom Spinack and Carl Bounds. Boys, this is Cardigan, a private dick."

"Yeah," blurted Hermann, grinning widely. "This is the gazabo that was almost on that Priscilla Ferne job, only she was all choked up by the time he got there."

Mr. Spinack and Mr. Bounds laid blank, ancient eyes on Cardigan, and both nodded politely. They were fairly young men, about forty, but their eyes were an-

cient—eyes that had no connection whatever with their thoughts. Mr. Spinack was a swart, chubby man, with a moon face, and Mr. Bounds was tall, hatchet-faced, with a ramrod nape and a beaked nose.

"I think I read about that in the paper," said Mr. Bounds, politely.

"You can go, boys," O'Mara said.

Mr. Spinack and Mr. Bounds rose, bowed and went out.

"Smoothies," commented Hermann, wise-eyed.

O'Mara sighed. "Well, these gamblers get it some day. This case looks open and shut and is on its way to the pigeon hole already. Casey Smith was a big gambler, and for a time I thought maybe these two pals of his had something to do with it. But Casey wasn't as big as Spinack. Last year they cleaned up on the World Series. They hit the prizefighters too, and the races. Spinack and Bounds were in Gus's, off Madison, when the shooting happened, and Casey Smith was on his way to meet them with a couple of grand they were placing on the Series. The dough wasn't touched. I checked up on all that. It's one of those things. What I'm interested in, is this other case. It's so damned airtight. It gets me—makes me mad."

"I just berl over!" Hermann growled, making a fist.

"Well," Cardigan said, "I'll be getting on. Let me know if you get a break."

CARDIGAN walked to Canal Street, following Spinack and Bounds, and after a while they got in a taxi. Cardigan flagged another and told the driver to follow them. The tail led uptown on the West Side; ended in front of a hotel in a Midtown side street. It was a small hotel, crowded on either side, with a flashy lobby, small, noisy, theatrical.

Bounds was buying a newspaper at the stand, and Spinack was waiting. When they turned away from the counter, Car-

digan blocked them and said: "I want to talk to you guys."

Bounds, the tall man, looked annoyed.

Spinack lit a cigar and said: "Talk."

Cardigan made a motion and they walked to the rear of the lobby, took seats in a divan behind a flat pillar.

Cardigan said: "You guys afraid to come out in the open about the Ferne dame's killing?"

Spinack looked at his cigar. "What's the connection?" he asked flatly.

"Plenty."

Spinack looked disagreeably at his cigar and Bounds folded his paper and stared at a point on the wall.

"Well?" said Cardigan.

"Well," said Spinack, "nuts."

Cardigan said: "What happened? Did Casey rub out the jane and did you guys have Casey rubbed out for pulling a boner?"

"Listen!" Spinack said, poking Bounds. "Listen to him!"

"Funny. Funny as hell," Cardigan said. "If O'Mara knew the connection, you guys wouldn't be so funny."

"I didn't notice you telling him," Spinack said, holding his cigar in front of his mouth.

"You came in the Medallion night before last with the woman. She left with Hardesty and you joined them later. Do you mix the badger game with gambling?"

Spinack said after a moment: "You know a hell of a lot."

Cardigan nodded.

"Come up to our room," Spinack said.

They went up in an elevator and entered a small two-room apartment, cheaply but flashily furnished. Spinack chewed deliberately on his cigar and Bounds took a seat, unfolded the paper and pretended to read. Their eyes, Cardigan noticed, never changed.

Spinack said: "You're working for Hardesty."

"That's as good as any."

"I said you're working for Hardesty."

Cardigan smiled. "O. K."

"So what?"

"So what kind of a frame did you guys plant around him?"

"I see. You're not telling O'Mara about us because that would drag in Hardesty." He laughed, drily.

"That's one point," Cardigan said.

"O. K. If O'Mara doesn't suspect a connection, what the hell are you beefing about?"

"I want the check Hardesty wrote out."

"What check?"

"Do you suppose I'm going to believe he was taken to the dame's apartment because she liked him?"

Spinack chewed on his cigar. "My advice to you, Cardigan, would be pack up your troubles and go home. Let things lay."

"You can take your advice and chuck it out the window. This is not just a case to me. Hardesty's a pal of mine and he was taken in by a dame and some lousy grifters. I'm not getting a cent out of this. He was not taken for fun. There's a reason. There's got to be. We can't settle this at headquarters. That's O. K. by me. Hardesty was doped, and he was doped for a reason. I want to know that reason."

"I'm sorry, Cardigan. You're all wrong. He picked her up and took her home and we joined them. We took her to the club, and we naturally wanted to see she was all right. She said she was, and we left her with Hardesty. What happened after that is none of our business."

"Who knocked off Casey Smith?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine."

"Suppose I did tell O'Mara there's a connection?"

Spinack raised his cigar. "Do you want to hang a murder rap on your pal?"

"He didn't kill that dame!"

"Who'll prove he didn't?"

Cardigan bit his lip.

And Spinack said: "I'd hate to get tangled up here, but if you tell O'Mara, I'll have to be. Bounds and I'll have to tell him the last we saw of Priscilla alone, she was with Hardesty, in her apartment, and him blind drunk." He took a leisurely puff. "So if you want to hang your pal, go to it."

Cardigan was coloring. He twisted his mouth, muttered, "You win," and went to the door. He added, "So far—you win," and went out.

HIS neck felt red and hot, his throat dry. He walked into a speakeasy up the street, polished off four beers and ate a sandwich.

Then he took a cab and drove to the hotel where Hardesty lived. He found Hardesty pacing the floor like a caged animal.

"Jack," he said, "I finally called my bank on long-distance."

"I told you, damn it, to lay off your bank!" Cardigan snapped.

"I know, but—"

"You know! You know a hell of a lot! I told you to lay off the bank because you can't afford to arouse any curiosity. You've got to keep your name out of this. If that check was made out to Priscilla Ferne, and you demanded your bank to stop it, they'll remember the name. Otherwise, it would slide through and they'd hardly notice the name. Suppose your wife does get it? Hell, you've got to make a breast of it. Either that, or get mixed up with John Law—"

"But listen. I long-distanced the bank but I didn't mention any names. I just asked if one of my checks for any large amount had come in. So they looked at my statement, and what do you think? My god, what do you think?"

Cardigan scowled. "I'm sick and tired of bad news. I just had four beers. Give

me a shot of rum to take away the taste—and then maybe I can bear up."

"But, Jack, for the love of crapes—"

"The rum first, Sam. Keep your head. Life's a bowl of berries, with a lot of razz in 'em. Do you think I'm going to let you break me down? . . . Calling up the bank! Fat-head!"

CHAPTER FOUR

O'Mara Misses the Dessert

CARDIGAN, learning that Spinack and Bounds were in their apartment, camped in the lobby, far back. It was the pre-dinner hour, and in a little while Spinack and Bounds came down. Both wore tuxedos. The lobby was crowded, noisy with the tinny voices of second-rate women, thick with the smells of tobacco and cheap perfume. The two gamblers stood for a few moments lighting cigarettes, and presently Cardigan saw a small man, with long arms, dressed in a baggy suit of dark tweed, rise and go out, mixing with a crowd of half a dozen. Then Spinack and Bounds walked out.

Cardigan tossed a dime, caught it, pursed his lips. He picked the small, tweed-dressed man for a punk or a bodyguard. Going out first that way, on the arrival of Spinack and Bounds, would place him as a bodyguard. This, Cardigan saw, would make things difficult. Walking ahead, the bodyguard would spot trouble, give a signal. Spinack and Bounds would detour. The trouble would start after them, and the bodyguard would fall in behind the trouble and break it up. The baggy tweed suit made good coverage for a couple of big guns.

In a moment Cardigan left the lobby and spotted Bounds and Spinack heading toward Sixth Avenue. They turned north. In the next block there was a shooting gallery, and slot peep-machines. The twenty-twos were smacking flatly,

and the place was a bit crowded. Bounds and Spinack drifted in, strolled among the slot-machines to the rear, where the shooting was taking place. A dozen men, mildly tight, and wearing organization ribbons, were cutting loose.

Cardigan got behind one of the slot-machines and saw Spinack and Bounds idly enjoying the display of bad shooting. The dozen men were lined up, and they seemed to be playing a game in which all lined up and began shooting at once. Spinack grinned and stepped up to the counter and Bounds joined him; both took up rifles. Onlookers crowded in behind. The little man in tweeds went up to the counter also and took up a twenty-two automatic pistol. The onlookers, crowding in, obscured Cardigan's view. There was a lull, and the dozen visiting delegates raised their rifles. One shouted "Go!" and the twenty-tvos began blazing.

The blast ended and the man in tweeds turned and walked rapidly out of the establishment. The crowd broke up, and Cardigan saw Spinack still leaning against the counter, holding his rifle, his elbows braced on the counter. Someone bumped against him and Spinack turned and fell down. Bounds took one look at him, then spun, made an outcry which Cardigan did not hear, and broke into a run.

Cardigan slipped after him. He caught sight of Bounds walking swiftly up Sixth Avenue, and ahead, a block beyond, he saw the man in tweeds turn west. Bounds followed, and Cardigan followed Bounds. No one ran. It was a walk, a fast, businesslike walk, and the passing pedestrians took no particular notice. Occasionally the man in tweeds looked back, but did not move any faster; he knew, doubtless, that Bounds would not break into a run—not yet, at least, in this crowded district.

The walking chase led westward, past Broadway, past Eighth Avenue and toward the dark, dismal hinterland of

Tenth Avenue. Here the bright lights faded away, here the streets grew darker, Here there were drab houses.

Into one of these houses the man in tweeds darted. Bounds followed.

Cardigan reached the vestibule, listened, and then ventured into the hall. Above, he heard climbing footfalls.

HE went up slowly as far as the top hallway, and stopped with his ear cocked, his brows bent and his eyes wary. And then he heard a voice, so close at hand that it startled him. But the voice was behind a door, the door nearest to him. It was Bounds' voice.

"You see I'm unarmed. I followed you to see what it's all about, to make a deal. You put the finger on Casey and you put it on Spinack. No doubt I'm number three. Make a deal. Call your openers."

There was a moment of silence, and then a dry cackle, and, "You can't make a deal with me, fella. I got Casey Smith and I got Spinack and now I'm going to get you. How'd you like the way I got Spinack? Took that twenty-two and while he was leaning on the counter, I let him have ten shots right through the left side of his chest. How'd you like that, huh?"

"Neat," said Bounds. "Sappy—but neat. Now use your head and make a deal. I've got five thousand dollars that's yours if you take the finger off me."

"Thought you were wise, following me here, huh?"

"I ask for a break. I never saw you before and I don't know what your grudge against me is—"

"I know!"

"I guess you do, but listen to reason."

"To hell with you. You and me are going for a short walk, and then you get what your pals got. Move over!"

Feet scuffled, and then Cardigan heard the doorknob turn. He saw the door open,

saw the man in tweeds backing out into the hallway, covering Bounds with two big guns. The little man backed into the muzzle of Cardigan's gun and Cardigan said: "Raise 'em, sweetheart."

The little man hissed through his teeth, crouched, and his guns quivered.

Cardigan jabbed him. "Deaf? Raise 'em!"

The hands rose, holding the guns aloft.

"Get in," Cardigan said. And then. "You, Bounds, back up."

Cardigan entered the room, closed the door and leaned back against it. The small man still stood with the guns raised, his back to Cardigan. Bounds' face was very gaunt, very gray—but his eyes were the same, ancient, expressionless.

"I'll call my openers," Cardigan said. "And I'm talking to you, Bounds. You'll listen. Punk, keep the guns up high and keep your back to me. Get fancy and you'll rate a smashed back. Now, Bounds. You're in a tough spot, you'll never be in a tougher one. So what? So you'll tell me the whole story. The story regarding a certain check, a certain dame, and certain mysterious happenings."

"What check?"

"Hardesty called his bank."

Bounds said: "How do I know you're on the level?"

"You don't. But a guy like you, on a hot spot right now, shouldn't worry about a thing like that. I don't feel called upon to make any rash promises. I'm just telling you that if you come across, you walk off the spot. Beyond that, you'll have to take care of yourself. Get started."

THE little man sighed, and his fingers moved on the guns; a convulsive shudder shook his body.

Bounds said: "We were laying dough on the World Series. We knew the teams were on par, evenly matched, and big bets were unsafe either way, unless we fixed

things." He spoke slowly, with an effort. "We figured that Hardesty would pitch two games and win two, but that the other team could even that. With Hardesty out, the other team would be a certain bet."

The little man was beginning to grunt like a caged animal.

Bounds was beginning to sweat. He went on: "We put the girl on him. She knew what it was all about and she was to get a grand for her part. We spotted Hardesty for a couple of weeks, and finally saw him go out alone and wind up in the Medallion. We picked up the girl and went to the Medallion, and she went after him, telling him what a swell pitcher he was. He asked her to have a drink. She smeared it on, and Hardesty swelled up and drank quite a bit. Then she asked him to take her home, she didn't feel well."

Bounds took a large breath. "We joined them later in her apartment—about half an hour later—after she'd mixed Hardesty a drink and dropped in some powerful medicine. It hit Hardesty like a brick. He got goofy. Then we began asking him for his autograph. The girl asked him first, and then Casey asked him, then Spinack. On sheets of paper. Then I asked him. He could hardly see, but he wrote down his name from habit. The one I asked him for, he wrote on a check. He didn't know it."

"And so?" Cardigan said dully.

"The girl asked him to take it easy, and helped him off with his coat. In his pocket, she found the name of his bank and a couple of deposit slips. We took two slips and made out an original and a duplicate and stuck them with the check into an envelope and addressed the envelope to his bank, air mail. The check was for five grand."

"Who made the check out?"

Bounds bit his lip.

"Who made it out?"

"I did."

"You made out a check for five grand to Hardesty. That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Bounds was running sweat by this time. "Evidence. I was to take it to Hardesty's manager the day the Series opened, showing it had been endorsed and deposited by Hardesty. I was to say that Hardesty had promised to fake illness and stay out of the Series. We knew that with evidence like the check, Carmichael would not only put Hardesty on the bench, but fire him. We'd have laid a lot of bets on the other team, through various fronts, and would clean up at least a hundred grand."

"And who chucked the wrench in the business?"

Bounds tongued his lips.

"What finally happened to Hardesty that night?" Cardigan asked.

"Well, we took him out of the girl's apartment. Took him as far as his hotel and shoved him in the front door. Then we went home and sat around talking it over. It was open and shut then. But there was no killing on the bill. That wrecked everything."

Cardigan said: "I want the canceled check."

Bounds reached into his pocket, withdrew it and laid it on the table.

"That," said Cardigan, "clears Hardesty. Now who killed the jane?"

Bounds took a deep breath, then kept his lips tightly shut. His eyes shimmered.

THE raised guns in the hands of the small man shook. "You know damned well I killed her!" he cried. "And I'm proud of it. Same as I'm proud I killed Casey Smith and Spinack, like I'm going to kill you. I killed her. Why? Because when I went up to stir, I left her ten grand to keep for me till I come out, and

ten for herself. And what happens? She spends it all. And not only that. When I come out, I get the go-by off her. She's being set up swell by you three guys, and I don't even get a look-in.

"I used to watch her going around to all them swell places, looking like a million dollars. I didn't have the dough to go to them places. I hadda live in a dump like this, and once I was in the dough. It drove me nuts, seeing her looking swell and knowing you guys swiped her off me. So the other night I busted wide open. I choked hell out of her! I couldn't stop! And then I went after you guys, that swiped her!"

He spun on Cardigan. "What right you got to butt in? You ain't got no right, you lousy bum!"

"Punk, learn how to talk to your betters."

"Punk, am I? Damn it, I was a first-rate rod till that woman ruined me! Let me give this guy what's coming to him! I got rights! Damn it, ain't a citizen got rights any more?"

Bounds said: "I've got to get out of here, Cardigan."

"And I think no more of you," Cardigan growled. "You tried to ruin one of the finest pitchers in the leagues. Not just for this Series, but forever. He can't do anything but play baseball. You didn't think about that. You meant to ruin him, chuck him out of the leagues for good. This little guy is a punk and rat, but so are you, and so were your pals!"

Bounds' voice shook. "You said you'd give me a break!"

"I'd give any rat a break!" He reached up and ripped one of the guns from the little man's hand. "You'll take this rod, Bounds, and go out. You'll both go out. I can't turn him over to the cops without telling the whole story. And I can't afford to tell the whole story. I said, Bounds, I'd get you off this particular spot. Well,

I am. Beyond that, look out for yourself. Both you guys, put your guns in your pockets. Walk downstairs with me."

They left the room and marched down the stairs and Cardigan said: "There's no choice between you. You're both rats." They reached the street and Cardigan said: "Bounds, start west. You get a start of a block. Get walking."

Bounds strode off, and Cardigan kept his gun trained on the little man, and he said: "My advice would be to forget it, for he'll forget it. But I'm no judge, and I'm no law. You're dumb and he's smart, but underneath it all you're both rats and a menace to society. Take my advice or leave it. O. K., you can go now."

He stood and watched both men disappear in the darkness, and then he headed east. In his pocket was the check, and

that was settled—Hardesty was in the clear. But he was not happy, he did not gloat. He kept walking eastward, and soon the bleat and blare of Midtown enveloped him, the lights twinkled, crowds pushed and shoved.

He went into a speakeasy and took up a diet of Scotch, feeling that it would be better to be tight and in the dumps than merely in the dumps.

After a while a couple of men strode in, ordering drinks, and one said: "I hear two guys just shot it out over on Eleventh Avenue. Emptied their guns. Put out each other's lights."

Cardigan mused aloud: "Well, O'Mara missed the dessert."

"Huh?" said the bartender.

"Another Scotch."

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DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
for
DECEMBER 1st

OUT
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Paul Pry's blade parried the knife.

The Cross-Stitch Killer

A Paul Pry Story

By

Erle Stanley Gardner

Author of "The Crimson Scorpion," etc.

Millionaires were that hunter's only game, and when he'd bagged them he sewed their lips up tight for he knew that even dead men sometimes talk. But Paul Pry, professional opportunist, was a tailor of sorts himself, with a needle as sharp and deadly as the cross-stitch killer's—an avenging sword cane to darn living flesh!

CHAPTER ONE

Murdered Millions

PAUL PRY polished the razor-keen blade of his sword cane with the same attentive care a stone polish-

er might take in putting just the right lustre upon a fine piece of onyx.

"Mugs" Magoo sat slumped in a big overstuffed chair in the corner. He held a whiskey glass in his left hand. His right arm was off at the shoulder.

Eva Bentley sat in a small, glass-en-

closed booth and listened to a radio which was tuned in on the wave length of the police broadcasting station. From time to time she took swift notes in competent shorthand, occasionally rattled out a few paragraphs on a portable typewriter which was on a desk at her elbow.

Mugs Magoo rolled his glassy eyes in the direction of Paul Pry. "Some day," he said, "some crook is going to grab the blade of that sword cane and bust it in two. Why don't you pack a big gun and forget that sword cane business? The blade ain't big enough to cut off a plug of chewing tobacco."

Paul Pry smiled. "The efficacy of this sword cane, Mugs, lies in its lightness and speed. It's like a clever boxer who flashes in, lands a telling blow, and jumps out again before a heavier adversary can even get set to deliver a punch."

Mugs Magoo nodded his head slowly and lugubriously. "Now," he said, "I know why you like that weapon—that's the way you like to play game, jumping in ahead of the police, side-stepping the crooks, ducking out before anyone knows what's happened, and leaving a hell of a mess behind."

Paul Pry's smile broadened into a grin, and the grin became a chuckle. "Well, Mugs," he said, "there's just a chance there may be something in that."

At that moment, Eva Bentley jumped to her feet, picked up her shorthand notebook and opened the door of the glass-enclosed compartment. Instantly, the sound of the police radio became audible.

"What is it, Eva?" asked Paul Pry. "Something important?"

"Yes, she said, "there's just been another corpse found, with his lips sewed together. Like the other one, he's a millionaire—Charles B. Darwin is the victim this time. His murder is almost identical with that of the murder of Harry Travers. Both men were stabbed to death;

both men had been receiving threatening letters through the mail; both men were found dead, with their lips sewed together with a peculiar cross-stitch."

MUGS MAGOO poured himself a glass of whiskey. "Thank God I ain't no millionaire!" he said.

Paul Pry finished polishing the blade of the sword cane, and inserted it in the cunningly disguised scabbard. His eyes were level-lidded in concentration, and his voice was quick and sharp.

"I presume the police are making quite a commotion about it," he said.

"I'll say they are," Eva Bentley told him. "They've broadcast a general alarm telling all cars to drop everything and concentrate on finding this mysterious murderer. It seems to be a question of money. In fact, the police are certain of it. Evidently they have some information which has not been given to the press. However, it's common knowledge that both men received letters demanding that they place a certain sum of money in an envelope and mail it to a certain person at a certain address. Both men disregarded the request and turned the letter over to the police."

"Any information about any other men who have received similar letters?" asked Paul Pry.

"None. The police are simply giving instructions to the cars. They're assigning cars to the district in which the body was found."

"Where was it—in a house?"

"No, it was found in an automobile. The man had evidently been driving an automobile and had pulled in to the curb and stopped. He was killed seated at the wheel. The officers place the death as having taken place at about three o'clock this morning. They are inclined to believe there was some woman companion in the automobile with him, and they're

trying to find her. They think that she knows something of the crime, or can at least give some clue to the murderer."

"Anything else?" asked Paul Pry.

"That's about all of it," she said. "You don't want the detailed instructions which are being given the automobiles, do you?"

"No," he told her, "not now. But make notes of everything that goes over the radio in connection with this crime."

She returned to the booth, where she closed the door and once more started her pencil flying over the pages of the shorthand notebook.

Paul Pry turned to Mugs Magoo. His face was fixed in an expression of keen concentration. "All right, Mugs," he said, "snap out of it and tell me what you know about the millionaires."

Mugs Magoo groaned. "Ain't it enough for me to know about the crooks?" he asked, "without having to spill all the dope on the millionaires?"

Paul Pry laughed. "I know what you're trying to do, Mugs," he said. "You're trying to keep me from taking an interest in this case because you're afraid of it. But I'm going to take an interest in it just the same."

MUGS MAGOO tilted the bottle of whiskey over the tumbler, drained the last drop from the tumbler, smacked his lips, then turned his glassy eyes toward Paul Pry.

Those were remarkable eyes. They protruded slightly and seemed dead and expressionless, as though covered with some thin, white film. But they were eyes that saw much and forgot nothing.

Mugs Magoo could give the name, antecedents, connection and criminal record of almost every known crook in the United States. Moreover, he had but to look at a face once in order to remember that man indefinitely. All gossip, all information which ever reached his ears;

all occurrences which took place within the range of his vision, remained indelibly impressed upon his memory.

At one time he had been camera-eye man for the metropolitan police. A political shake-up had thrown him out of work, and an unfortunate accident had taken off his right arm at the shoulder. Feeling that he could never return to the police force he had indulged his desire for liquor, until, when Paul Pry found the man, he had been but a sodden wreck, begging a mere pittance as a cripple, by selling pencils on a street corner. Paul Pry had cultivated the man, gradually learned something of his history and the remarkable gift which had made him so valuable to the police. He had given him food, clothes, money, and an allowance of whiskey, which served to satisfy the keen craving of the man's insatiable appetite. From time to time, he used such information as Mugs Magoo could impart by drawing upon his encyclopedic knowledge of the underworld.

"Mugs," said Paul Pry, "what do you know about Charles Darwin?"

Mugs Magoo shook his head. "Keep out of it, chief," he said. "Please keep out of it. You're mixing with dynamite. This isn't the sort of a case where you're up against some cheap crook; you're dealing with a homicidal maniac here."

Paul Pry waited for a moment, then said again with slow emphasis: "Mugs, what do you know about Charles Darwin?"

Mugs Magoo sighed. "To begin with, he's a millionaire who made his money out of the stock market when the stock market was going up, and didn't lose his money when the stock market went down. That means that he's got brains or is lucky.

"He married one of those cold-blooded, society-type women, and the marriage didn't take. He got to playing around.

Mrs. Darwin never played in her life; she didn't know what play was. Life was a serious proposition with her, a question of just who she should invite to the next tea, and what sort of a bid she should make when she picked up her bridge hand.

"Darwin wanted a divorce. She wouldn't give him one. She hired detectives to trail him around, so that she could get enough on him so that he couldn't get one. He could never get anything on her, because there was never anything to get."

"How do you know all this, Mugs?" asked Paul Pry curiously.

Mugs Magoo regarded the empty whiskey glass with a speculative eye. "Those glasses," he said, "don't hold as much as the others; they—"

"Never mind the glasses, Mugs. How did you find out all this about a millionaire's matrimonial mix-up?"

"Oh," said Mugs wearily, "the detective that Mrs. Darwin got hold of was an ex-con. I spotted him, and he was afraid I was going to turn him in, so he spilled the beans to me about what he was doing."

"Well," said Paul Pry, "you're still not telling me what happened."

"Well," Mugs Magoo said, "he was a clever bird. He wasn't like the ordinary private detective. Naturally he wasn't, because he'd been a high-class crook in his time, and he knew a lot of angles that only a crook would know. As a result, he got quite a bit of stuff on Darwin. He found out where Darwin was keeping a love nest."

"A love nest?" asked Paul Pry.

"Well, that's what the tabloids call it," Mugs Magoo said. "It was just an apartment he kept without letting his wife know about it."

"But his wife found out about it?" asked Pry.

"Not this one," Mugs said. "The detective found out about it, but he was too wise to report the information to the

agency. He realized that all he'd draw from the agency would be eight dollars a day, perhaps a bonus of a suit of clothes, or something. So he went to Darwin, put the cards on the table, told Darwin what he had, and offered to sell out for five thousand dollars. Naturally, he got the five grand."

"And what did he tell the agency?" asked Paul Pry.

"Oh, he told the agency enough to let them make a pretty good report to Mrs. Darwin. As a matter of fact, I think he fixed it up with Charles Darwin so that the report was sufficiently complete to give Mrs. Darwin most of the evidence she wanted."

Paul Pry squinted his forehead thoughtfully. "Where was this love nest, Mugs?" he asked.

Mugs was pouring whiskey into the glass. Abruptly, he stopped and straightened. His eyes blinked thoughtfully. "Hell!" he said. "I've got the address of the place somewhere in my mind, but—by gosh!—it was out in the west end somewhere. Ain't that a break?"

Paul Pry reached for his hat and coat. "All right, Mugs," he said, "pull the address out of the back of your mind, because I want it."

CHAPTER TWO

Paul Pry Turns Peeping Tom

THE APARTMENT house had that subtle air of quiet exclusiveness which is associated with high prices, but not necessarily with respectability.

Paul Pry moved down the deeply carpeted corridor like some silent shadow. He paused in front of the door and inspected the lock. Then he selected a key from a well-filled key ring, inserted the key and exerted a slow, steady pressure. A moment later there was a click as the lock slipped back.

Paul Pry moved on through the door, into the apartment, and closed the door behind him.

He had, he observed with satisfaction, reached the place ahead of the police. Doubtless, the police would, sooner or later, find out about this expensive apartment which was maintained by the millionaire play-boy who had figured so grimly in such a blood-curdling murder. Right at present, however, Paul Pry was on the job, and in the position of one who is one jump ahead.

Paul Pry did not switch on the lights, but used an electric flashlight. He sent the beam darting about the apartment. He saw that the windows were covered by expensive drapes; that, in addition to the drapes, there were shades which were drawn down, making it virtually impossible for the faintest flicker of light to be seen from the street. There were expensive carpets, deep over-stuffed chairs, a well filled bookcase which seemed, however, more to furnish background than a source of reading material. There was a bedroom with a beautiful walnut bed, a tiled bathroom with the spaciousness which indicated high rental. There was a second bedroom which opened on the other side of the bath. There was a kitchen and dining room which opened off the room which Paul Pry entered.

Paul Pry moved through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Then he walked back to the bedroom, turned the flashlight into the closet.

THE CLOSET was well filled with clothes of expensive texture. They were feminine garments, and it needed no price tag to show either their quality or their high initial cost.

Paul Pry looked in the bureau drawers and found filmy silk underthings, expensive hose, silk lounging pajamas. He left the bureau and entered the other room.

Here he found a closet well crammed with masculine garments. There was a writing desk in this room, and a check-book in a pigeon-hole of the writing desk. Paul Pry took out the checkbook and looked at the stubs.

The stubs were virtually all in a feminine handwriting. They ran to an alarming total.

He was putting the checkbook back in its compartment, when his eye caught a letter with a special-delivery stamp on it. The letter was addressed to Gertrude Fenwick and the address was that of the apartment house. It had been very neatly typewritten and there was no return address on the envelope.

Paul shamelessly inserted his fingers under the flap of the envelope, took out a sheet of typewritten paper and proceeded to read:

My Dear Miss Fenwick:

I dislike very much to involve you in this matter, but I am addressing this communication to you in order that it may reach the eyes of Mr. Charles B. Darwin.

I feel that when Mr. Darwin realizes that even the carefully guarded secret of this apartment is known to the undersigned, he may, perhaps, be more inclined to give heed to my requests.

My last request was turned over to the police, despite the fact that I warned him that such a course would be disastrous. I am now giving him one last chance.

If he will make a check, payable to bearer, to an amount of twenty-five thousand dollars, address it to Fremont Burke, at General Delivery, and make certain that no attempt is made to follow the person who is to receive that letter and cash the check, and in no way to seek to trace such a person by marked money or otherwise, and if he will further use his influence to notify his friend, Mr. Perry C. Hammond, that he is making such a remittance, and that he feels it would be well for Mr. Hammond to make such a remittance, then he will be unmolested. The secret of this apartment will remain a secret and he need fear no physical violence from the undersigned.

If, on the other hand, he continues in his course of obstinate refusal to comply with my wishes, if he continues to unite with Mr. Hammond in employing private investigators to seek to learn my identity, his fate and that of Mr. Hammond will be the fate of Mr. Harry Travers.

Very truly yours,

XXXX

The letter was unsigned, except for the diagram of several interlocking "x's" which formed a rude diagram of a cross-stitch, similar to the stitch which had been placed across the lips of the dead body of Harry Travers, and, later, across those of Charles B. Darwin.

Paul Pry whistled softly when he had read the letter, folded it and thrust it in his pocket. He had directed the beam of the flashlight once more upon the desk, when his ears caught the metallic click of a key being inserted in the lock of the door which led to the corridor.

Paul Pry switched out the flashlight and stood motionless.

He heard the sound of the door opening, then closing, and the noise made by the spring lock as it snapped into place. Then he heard the rustle of garments, and the click of a light switch.

Paul Pry slipped the sword cane down from the place where he had held it clamped under his arm and moved on furtive feet, stepping noiselessly upon the tiled floor of the bathroom, to where he could look into the bedroom.

There was no one in the bedroom, but a mirror showed him the reflection of the person who had entered the apartment.

SHE WAS perhaps twenty-six years of age, slender, well-formed, gray-eyed, blond, and exceedingly nervous. She had carried two suitcases into the apartment, and the suitcases now reposed on the carpet near her feet, one on either side.

For a moment, Paul Pry saw her re-

flexion in the mirror clearly. Then she moved out of his range of vision, and he suddenly realized she was coming directly toward the bathroom.

He flattened himself in the shadows just back of the door and waited.

The light switch clicked in the bedroom. There was the sound of swift surreptitious movement.

Paul Pry waited for more than a minute. Then, curiosity getting the better of discretion, he peered round the edge of the door.

The young woman had divested herself of her outer garments, and stood attired in filmy underthings, looking at herself in the mirror. As Paul Pry watched, she picked up a dress from the bed, slipped it on, and surveyed the effect.

She nodded to herself with evident approval at what she saw in the mirror, then pulled the dress off over her head.

The dress which she had worn when she entered the apartment, a gray affair which displayed to advantage the curves of her willowy figure, lay upon the bed. Paul Pry waited for her to put it on. Instead, however, she took lingerie from the drawer of the bureau, held it against the satin smoothness of her skin and once more surveyed the reflection with critical inspection.

At length, she picked up the gray dress, slipped it over her head, adjusted it in front of the mirror, then walked rapidly to the living room, where she picked up the suitcases and carried them into the bedroom. She laid the suitcases on the bed, opened them and started folding the garments into them.

Paul Pry, watching from his place of concealment, saw that the suitcases had been empty when she took them into the room; that she carefully folded the gowns, packing the cases as tightly as possible; that she also put in the elab-

orately embroidered silk lingerie which she had taken from the bureau drawer.

When both cases had been packed to the point of bursting with the most modish of gowns, the most expensive selection of underthings and accessories, the young woman struggled with the straps, trying to get the suitcases closed.

It was at that moment that Paul Pry, his sword cane held under his arm, his hat in his hand, stepped into the bedroom.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

She gave a sudden scream, jumped back from the bed and stared at him with wide, startled eyes.

PAUL PRY bowed courteously. "It happened," he explained, "to be in the bathroom. I couldn't help watching you. Perhaps it is a 'Peeping Tom' complex that I have. I didn't know I possessed it until just this moment, but you were beautiful, and I was curious. Need more be said?"

She was white to the lips. She stared at him wordlessly.

"But," Paul Pry went on, "having been permitted to invade the privacy of milady's boudoir, I recognized the obligations which are incident to the benefits. Apparently you need someone to assist you in closing the suitcases. May I offer my services?"

Words came chokingly from her lips.

"Who . . . who . . . who are you, and what do you want?"

"The name," he said, "really doesn't matter, I assure you. It doesn't matter in the slightest. When people get acquainted under such charmingly informal circumstances, I think names have but little to do with it. Suppose, therefore, that I shall call you Gertrude, and you call me Paul?"

"But," she said with swift alarm, "my name is not Gertrude."

"No?" he asked.

"No," she said. "My name is—"

"Yes, yes," he told her, "go on. Only the first name, if you please. I am not interested in last names."

"The name," she said, "is Thelma."

"A remarkably pretty name," he told her. "And may I ask, Thelma, what are you doing in this apartment?"

"I was getting some clothes," she said.

"Your clothes?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Then," he said, "you must be aware of the untimely death of the person who is maintaining this establishment."

"No! No!" she said. "I don't know anything about that. In fact, I don't know anything about the place at all."

"You just left your clothes here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'd just moved in. You see, I subleased the apartment."

"From whom?" he inquired.

"From an agent," she said.

He laughed. "Come, come," he said "you'll have to do better than that. Let's be frank with each other. This apartment was maintained by Charles B. Darwin. Darwin recently met a very violent end. You have doubtless heard of the death of Harry Travers. The circumstances surrounding the death of Darwin were almost identical. The lips, if I may be pardoned for speaking of such a gruesome matter, were sewed tightly shut with a peculiar cross-stitch. Now, it is quite apparent that a person who sews lips of a man, does so with some motive. Were the man living, that motive might well be to insure temporary silence. But there are much better and less painful methods of insuring silence. To sew the lips of a dead man has nothing whatever to do with the powers of speech. One would judge, therefore, that the sewing of the lips was either by way of warning to others, or as a gesture, to make the

murder seem the more gruesome. It might also well be a warning to others who had been approached along certain lines not to communicate the facts to the police."

She swayed slightly.

"You're faint?" he asked. "Do sit down in one of these chairs."

She shook her head in tense silence. "No," she said, "I'm all right. I'm going to tell you the truth."

"I wish you would, Thelma," he said.

"I'm a model," she said, "in a dress-making establishment. I know the lady by sight who accompanied Mr. Darwin when these dresses were purchased. I happened to meet her on the street just an hour or so ago. She told me that owing to circumstances over which she had no control, she was leaving the city at once; that she had left a very fine wardrobe here, and that she knew the dresses would fit me, because we were almost identical in size. She gave me a key to the apartment, and told me to come up and take whatever I wanted."

"Why didn't you bring a trunk?" asked Paul Pry.

"Because," she said, "I didn't want too many clothes; I just wanted some of the pretty things that would give me a break."

"And she gave you her key to the apartment?"

"Yes."

"Is it at all possible," Paul Pry inquired, "that you are, perhaps, drawing upon your imagination?"

She shook her head.

"And you're not the young woman who occupied this apartment?"

"You should be able to figure that one out for yourself," she said. "You stood there and watched me trying on the things." She lowered her eyes.

"Are you, perhaps," asked Paul Pry, "trying to blush?"

Her eyes flashed with swift emotion. "You should be ashamed of yourself," she said, "standing there and watching a woman dress that way!"

Paul Pry bowed his head humbly. "Please accept my most profound apologies," he said. "And would you, perhaps, let me see the key with which you entered the apartment?"

SHE INSERTED her fingers into a small pocket in her dress, took out a key, started to hand it to him, then stopped suddenly.

Paul Pry's eyes were hard and insistent. "The key," he said.

"I don't know who you are," she said, "and I don't know what right you've got to ask for the key."

Paul Pry moved toward her. His eyes were cold and hypnotic. "The key," he repeated.

She stared into his eyes for several seconds, then slowly opened her hand.

The key dropped to the carpet.

Paul Pry stooped to pick it up.

At the moment she moved with swift speed. Paul Pry swung himself to one side and dodged as a small, pearl-handled automatic glittered in her hand.

"Stick them up!" she said savagely.

Paul Pry lunged forward, caught her about the knees. She gave a half-scream and fell forward, the gun dropping from her hand. They came together on the floor, a tangled mass of arms and legs, from which Paul Pry emerged presently, smiling and debonair.

"Naughty, naughty," he said. "I really should spank you for that."

He took the automatic and slipped it into his hip pocket. Then, as the young woman sat on the floor arranging her clothes so as to cover her legs, Paul Pry searched until he found the key, held it up and smiled knowingly.

"I thought so," he said. "A skeleton key."

She stared at him wordlessly.

"You are," said Paul Pry, "in the eyes of the law, a burglar, a person guilty of making a felonious entrance and taking property which does not belong to you."

She said nothing.

"Under the circumstances," said Paul Pry, striding easily across the room, "I think I will have to telephone to the police."

She remained as he had left her—motionless, silent, and with a face which was drained of expression.

Paul Pry approached the door which led into the corridor, turned and smiled. "Upon second thought, however," he said, "in view of the most charming display of feminine pulchritude which you unwittingly gave me, I am going to let mercy temper justice."

With a swift motion of his arms and hands, he flipped back the spring catch on the door, pulled the door open, stepped into the corridor and slammed the door behind him.

There was no sound of pursuit, no commotion. The apartment remained completely silent.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wooden Fish

PAUL PRY was faultlessly attired in evening clothes when he pressed the doorbell of the magnificent residence of Perry C. Hammond.

A dour-visaged butler opened the door. Pry met his sour look with a disarming smile.

"A gentlemen," he said, "who refuses to divulge his name, wishes to see Mr. Hammond at once upon a matter of the most urgent nature."

"Mr. Hammond, sir," said the butler, "is not at home."

"You will explain to Mr. Hammond," said Paul Pry, still smiling, "that I am a specialist in my line."

"Mr. Hammond, sir, is not at home."

"Quite right, my man, quite right. And, will you please add to the explanation you make to Mr. Hammond that my particular specialty is in disorders of the lips—disorders which have to do with a permanent silence, brought about through mechanical means."

Paul Pry's smiling eyes locked with those of the butler, and suddenly the smile left Paul Pry's eyes. His face became cold and stern.

"You will," he said, "convey that message to Mr. Hammond immediately. Otherwise, I will communicate with Mr. Hammond in some other way, and explain to him the reason my message was not delivered personally. I don't mind assuring you that Mr. Hammond will consider you have committed a major indiscretion."

The butler hesitated for a long moment. "Will you step this way, sir?" he asked.

He ushered Paul Pry through a reception hallway, into a small entrance parlor. "Please be seated, sir," he said. "I will see if, perhaps, Mr. Hammond has returned."

The butler glided from the room, and the door had no sooner closed upon him, than Paul Pry, moving with noiseless stealth, jerked open the door and stepped once more into the reception corridor.

His quick eyes had detected a small enameled box for out-going mail, and Paul Pry's deft fingers raised the lid of the box and explored the interior.

There were three letters addressed in a cramped, angular handwriting. Paul Pry flipped the letters, one over the other, in rapid succession, scanning the addresses. The third envelope was addressed to Fremont Burke, General Delivery.

Paul Pry stuck it in his pocket, returned the others to the mail box, and then moved on furtive feet back into the reception parlor.

He had barely resumed his seat when the butler entered through another door. "Mr. Hammond," he said, "will see you."

Paul Pry walked across the room, followed the butler down a passageway and went through a door the servant indicated.

A man with great puffs under his eyes, a look of infinite weariness upon his face, stared at him with expressionless interrogation. "Well," he said, "what was it you wanted?"

"I have reason," said Paul Pry, "to believe that your life is in danger."

"I think you are mistaken," said Hammond.

"I have reason," said Paul Pry, "to believe that the same fate which overtook Charles C. Darwin may, perhaps, be in store for you."

Perry Hammond shook his head. "Whoever gave you your information," he said, "misinformed you."

"In other words," said Paul Pry slowly, "you deny that you have received any demands from a person who has threatened you with death or disaster in the event you fail to comply? You deny that you have been threatened with death, under circumstances similar to the threats which were made to Mr. Charles Darwin?"

"I," said Perry Hammond, slowly and deliberately, "don't know what you're talking about. I saw you because I thought you might be interested in getting some information about Mr. Darwin. As far as I am concerned, you can get out and stay out."

Paul Pry bowed. "Thank you very much," he said, "for your interview, Mr. Hammond." He turned on his heel.

"Wait a minute," said the millionaire in a cold, husky voice.

"Are you a newspaper reporter?"

"No," said Paul Pry without turning.

"Then who the devil are you?" asked Hammond with sudden irritation.

Paul Pry turned to face the millionaire. "I am a man," he said, smiling affably, "who is going to make you extremely sorry you lied to him."

With that, he turned once more and strode steadily and purposefully down the carpeted corridor.

MUGS MAGOO looked up from his whiskey glass as Paul Pry latched the apartment door. "Well," he said mournfully, "I see you're still with us."

"Temporarily, at least, Mugs," Paul Pry retorted, smiling.

He hung up his hat and coat, crossed to a closet and opened the door. The closet contained a collection of drums, drums of various sorts and descriptions.

Mugs Magoo shuddered. "For God's sake," he said "don't start that!"

Paul Pry laughed lightly and fingered the drums with the attentive care that a hunter might give to the selection of a gun from a gun cabinet.

Mugs Magoo hastily poured liquor into the glass. "At least," he said, "give me fifteen minutes to get liquored before you start. Those damn drums do things to me. They get into my blood and make the pulses pound."

Paul Pry's voice was almost dreamy as he picked out a round piece of wood which seemed to be entirely solid, save for a cut along one end, with two holes bored at the end of the cut.

"That, Mugs," he said, "is the function of drums. We don't know exactly what it is they do, but they seem to get into a person's blood. You don't like the sound of drums, Mugs, because you are afraid

of the primitive. You are continually trying to run away from yourself. Doubtless a psycho-analyst could look into your past and find that your taste for whiskey had its inception in an attempt to drown some real or fancied sorrow."

Mugs Magoo let his face show extreme consternation. "You're not going to take me to one of those psycho-analysts?" he asked.

Paul Pry shook his head. "Certainly not, Mugs," he said. "I think it is too late to effect a cure now, and, in the event a cure was effected, Mugs, you would lose your taste for whiskey.

"Drums, Mugs, do to me exactly what whiskey does to you. If you could cultivate a taste for drums, I think I would endeavor to cure you of the whiskey habit. But, since you cannot, the only thing I can do is to let you enjoy your pleasures in your own way, and insist that you allow me an equal latitude."

Paul Pry sat down in the chair which faced the big fireplace, took a long, slender stick, to the end of which had been affixed a rose-bud-shaped bit of hard wood.

"Now, Mugs," he said, "here we have a *Mok Yeitt*, otherwise known as a 'wooden fish.' The wooden fish is a prayer drum used by the Buddhists in China to pave the way for a friendly reception to their prayers. If you will listen, Mugs, you will get the remarkable delicacy of tone which the better specimens of these drums give. They are cunningly carved by hand. A hole is made in either end of the slit, and the wood is hollowed out with painstaking care. . . ."

"For God's sake!" said Mugs Magoo, "don't! You're going to drive me crazy with that thing!"

Paul Pry shook his head, started tapping the wooden stick against the bulge of the drum. A throbbing sound filled the apartment, a sound which had a peculiar

wooden resonance which trailed off into vibrating overtones.

MUGS MAGOO frantically downed the whiskey, poured himself another drink, gulped it, then shivered and sat motionless. After a moment, he placed his one hand against his ear.

"I can shut out half of the sound, anyhow," he said, at length.

Paul Pry paid no attention to him, but continued tapping upon the drum at regular intervals.

"What's the idea of all the drumming now?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"I'm trying to concentrate," said Paul Pry. "I think I almost have the solution I want."

Abruptly, he ceased drumming and smiled benignly at Mugs. "Yes, Mugs," he said, "I have the solution."

Mugs Magoo shivered. "It'll be another five minutes," he said, "before that whiskey takes effect. I was spared five minutes of torture anyway. What is the solution?"

Paul Pry set down the *Mok Yeitt*. He reached into the inside pocket of his coat, pulled out an envelope, the flap of which had been steamed open, and took out a letter and a tinted oblong of paper.

"Mugs," he said, "I have here a letter bearing the angular signature of Perry C. Hammond, a multi-millionaire. Let me read it to you.

"Mr. Fremont Burke,
General Delivery,
City.

Dear Mr. Burke:

I herewith comply with your request. You will find enclosed my check for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer. I wish to assure you that no attempt whatever will be made to interfere with the cashing of that check. On the other hand, I have notified my bankers by telephone that the check represents the transfer of consideration in a bona fide business deal, and that they are to promptly honor the check when it is presented.

Trusting that this complies in full with your demands and that I may now be at liberty to consider the matter closed, I am,
Very truly yours,
Perry C. Hammond.

Mugs Magoo stared at Paul Pry. "A check," he said, "for twenty-five thousand dollars?"

Paul Pry nodded. "And don't forget, Mugs," he said, "that it's payable to bearer."

"But," said Mugs Magoo, "who is the bearer?"

Paul Pry got to his feet, replaced the wooden fish in the drum closet, closed the door, turned to Mugs and smiled once more. "Mugs," he said, "I am the bearer."

Mugs Magoo stared at him with eyes that seemed to pop from his head. "My God!" he said. "You've been mixing into things again! You're going to have the police after you for theft, Perry Hammond after you for fraud, and probably the man who pulls the cross-stitch murders after you, hammer and tongs, trying to kill you and sew your lips up!"

Paul Pry pursed his lips thoughtfully, then nodded his head.

"Yes, Mugs," he said, "I should say that that is a very fair statement of the probable consequences. In fact, I would say that it is a somewhat conservative estimate."

SMILING, he crossed to the writing desk and pulled down the slab of heavy wood which served as a writing table. He explored the pigeon holes which were disclosed in the back of the desk.

"You will remember, Mugs," he said, "that at one time I secured a long, purple envelope, with a red border. You asked me what the devil I wanted with such an envelope, and I told you that I was keeping it because it was distinctive."

Mugs Magoo nodded. "Yes," he said, "I remember that."

Paul Pry took a fountain pen from his pocket and addressed the purple envelope with the red border.

"Mr. Fremont Burke, General Delivery, City," he said when he had finished writing. "The red ink shows up rather to advantage on that purple background. It makes it quite harmonious."

"What's in the envelope?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"Nothing," said Paul Pry.

"What's going to be in it?"

"Nothing."

"What's the idea?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry smiled. He took from another compartment of the desk a stamped envelope. He addressed that envelope also to Fremont Burke, General Delivery, City.

"What's going in that envelope?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"In this envelope," said Paul Pry, smiling, "is going the best forgery of this check which I can make, and I'm satisfied, Mugs, that it will be quite a clever forgery."

Mugs Magoo stared at Paul Pry in wordless contemplation. Then, "You're going to cash the original check?" he asked.

Paul Pry nodded.

"How about the forged check?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders. "That, Mugs," he said, "is a matter which lies between the bank and the man who presents the check."

"But," said Mugs Magoo, "suppose the forged check should be presented first?"

Paul Pry smiled patronizingly. "Come, come, Mugs," he said, "you must give me credit for a little intelligence. The original check will be cashed before the

forged check ever reaches the post office."

"And what," asked Mugs Magoo, "is the idea of the two letters—one in the colored envelope and one in the plain envelope?"

"That, Mugs," said Paul Pry, "comes under the classification of a trade secret. Really, it's something that I can't tell you unless you permit me to do a little more drumming."

Mugs Magoo shook his head violently from side to side in extreme agitation.

"What's the idea of the shake?" asked Paul Pry.

"I wanted to see if the whiskey had taken effect," said Mugs Magoo. "If it had, I'd let you drum some more, but I see that I either didn't get enough whiskey, or else I misjudged the time it would take to make me dizzy. I can't stand the drumming, so you can keep your damned trade secret to yourself."

Paul Pry chuckled and thrust the envelopes into his inside pocket. "Tomorrow at this time, Mugs, I'll be twenty-five thousand dollars richer. Moreover, I'll be embarked upon an interesting adventure."

"Tomorrow at this time," said Mugs Magoo, with solemn melancholy, "you'll be stretched out on a marble slab, and a coroner and an autopsy surgeon will be staring at the cross-stitches that are placed across your lips."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Second Check

PAUL PRY, wearing an overcoat which was turned up around the neck, a felt hat which was pulled down low over his forehead, and with heavily smoked glasses shielding his eyes, shoved the check through the cashier's window.

The cashier stared at Paul Pry's smoked glasses, looked at the check,

said, "Just a moment," and stepped from his grilled cage. He consulted a memorandum, looked at the check once more, sighed, and, with obvious reluctance, picked up a sheaf of currency.

"How," he asked, "would you like to have this?"

"In hundreds," said Paul Pry, "if that's convenient."

The cashier counted out hundred dollar bills in lots of ten, stacked them all together and snapped a large elastic band about them.

"You'll take them that way?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You wish to count them?"

"No," said Paul Pry, and turned away.

His long overcoat flapped about his ankles as he walked. He could feel the gaze of the cashier striking between his shoulder blades with almost physical impact.

Paul Pry went at once to the post office, where he dropped the two letters through the slot marked for city mail. Then he went out to lunch, and, after lunch, he strolled back to the post office.

He managed to stand where, without seeming to be too conspicuous, he could watch the window marked "General Delivery—A to G."

Shortly after two thirty, a young woman, stylishly gowned, presented herself at the window.

Paul Pry, standing some thirty feet away, at the end of a corridor, saw the clerk at the general-delivery window hand out a long envelope of purple tint, with a red border. The young woman took it, looked at it curiously. A moment later, the man behind the grill slid another envelope through the window. The girl took it, stared curiously at both envelopes. A moment later she moved away from the window, paused to open the envelopes, staring with puzzled countenance

at the empty interior of the purple envelope.

Evidently she expected the check which was in the second envelope, for, as she removed the slip of paper, a look of relief came over her features. Paul Pry, standing where he could observe her every move, saw that she was laboring under great tension. Her lips seemed inclined to quiver, and her hands shook as she crumpled the purple envelope, held it over the huge iron waste basket as though to drop it. Then, apparently she thought better of it, for she uncrumpled the envelope, folded it and thrust it in her purse.

She walked from the post-office building, down the granite steps to the sidewalk, where a second young woman was waiting in an automobile.

Paul Pry, following behind, yet careful lest he should seem too eager, was unable to get a clear view of the woman who drove the automobile. But he saw the young woman who had taken the letters from the post office jump into the car. The car immediately drove off at high speed.

Paul Pry ran down the post-office steps to the lot where he had left his own automobile parked. He started the motor, then divested himself of the overcoat, the dark glasses, and shifted the slouch hat for one with a stiffer brim, letting the engine of his car warm up as he was making the changes. Then he stepped into the machine, drove at once to the bank where he had cashed the twenty-five thousand dollar check earlier in the day.

He made no effort to find a legitimate parking place for his car, but left it in front of a fire plug, certain that he would receive a tag, certain, also, that the car would be located in an advantageous position when he wished to use it once more.

HE WALKED through the revolving door, stood in the ornate marble foyer looking at the long corridors with their grilled windows, the desks of executives, the customers crowding about the stand on which counter checks and deposit slips were kept.

Paul Pry went at once to the end of the longest line he could see, stood there fumbling a deposit slip in his fingers.

He had been there less than five seconds when he saw the young woman who had taken the letter from the post office walk with quick, nervous steps to the window of the paying teller. She presented a check and was promptly referred to the cashier. Paul Pry watched her as she thrust the check through the window to the cashier, saw the hand of the cashier as it took the check and turned it over and over while he studied it intently.

A moment later, there was the faint sound of an electric buzzer. A uniformed officer who had been loitering about, watching the patrons idly, suddenly stiffened to attention, looked about him, caught a signal from the cashier. He moved unostentatiously forward.

During all of this time the young woman had stood at the window, apparently entirely oblivious of what was taking place about her.

Paul Pry walked to the telephone booths, dropped a nickel and called the number of Perry C. Hammond.

A moment later, a feminine voice announced that Mr. Hammond's secretary was speaking, and Paul Pry stated that he desired to speak with Mr. Hammond concerning the matter of a twenty-five-thousand-dollar check which had been issued to Fremont Burke.

Almost at once he heard the sound of whispers, and then Hammond's voice came over the wire, a voice which was dry with nervousness, despite the million-

aire's attempt to make it sound casual.

"How are you this afternoon, Mr. Hammond?" said Paul Pry cordially.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?" asked the millionaire.

"Oh," said Paul Pry casually, "I just wanted to advise you that I had stolen twenty-five thousand dollars from you and that I trusted the loss wouldn't inconvenience you in any way."

"That you had what?" screamed the millionaire.

"Stolen twenty-five thousand dollars from you," Paul Pry remarked. "I don't think that there's any occasion to get excited over it. From all I hear, you can well afford to spare it. But I didn't want you to be embarrassed on account of the theft."

"What are you talking about?" Hammond demanded.

"Merely," said Paul Pry, "that my name happens to be Fremont Burke. I was flat broke and had tried to get five dollars from my brother in Denver. I called at the post office to see if there was any mail for me, and a letter was delivered to me. I opened it and saw there was a check enclosed for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer.

"Naturally, I thought the thing was some sort of a joke, but thought perhaps I might be able to get the price of a meal out of it, so I took it to the bank. To my surprise, they cashed it at once and without question. I realized then, of course, that I had, fortunately, stumbled on a remittance which was intended for someone else. Not wishing to disappoint the someone else, I forged your name to a check, put it in an envelope and mailed it to Fremont Burke, in care of General Delivery."

The millionaire's voice was almost a scream of terror.

"You did what?" he shrieked.

"Come, come," said Paul Pry. "There's

no need of so much excitement. I forged your check for twenty-five thousand dollars and put it in the mail. It occurred to me that the person who received that check might have been expecting a legitimate business remittance from you, and would probably put the check through his bank for collection, or might possibly present the check at the cashier's window.

"Under the circumstances, the check would probably be branded as a forgery. I did my best to make the forgery a good one, but, you understand, even a large bank will look carefully at a second check for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer, which is presented in the course of one business day.

"It occurs to me, therefore, that if the bank should advise you someone has forged a check and is presenting it for collection, it might be advisable for you to refuse to prosecute that person on the ground of forgery. You see, he might be acting in perfect good faith, and . . ."

There was an inarticulate exclamation at the other end of the line, followed by the slamming of a receiver on the hook. Paul Pry figured that Perry Hammond had cut off the connection in order to rush through a call to the bank.

HE STROLLED from the telephone booth, walked across to a desk, filled out a deposit slip and strolled to the window which was nearest to the cashier's window.

The uniformed officer had moved up and taken the young woman by the arm. She was white-faced and trembling.

"I tell you," Paul Pry heard her say, "I know nothing whatever about it, except that I was hired to get this check out of the mail and cash it. After I had the money I was supposed to call a certain telephone number, and I would then be given instructions as to how I should proceed. That's all I know about it."

The telephone at the cashier's elbow rang sharply and insistently. The cashier picked up the telephone, said, "hello," and then let surprise register on his countenance. After a moment he said: "Yes, Mr. Hammond, late this morning. I remembered particularly that you had left instructions about the matter, and . . ."

The receiver made squawking, metallic noises which were inaudible to Paul Pry's ears, but the face of the cashier flushed with color.

"Just a minute," he said. "I think you're nervous and excited, Mr. Hammond. If you'll just . . ."

He was interrupted by more squawking noises from the receiver.

The line at which Paul Pry had been standing moved up, so that Paul Pry found himself at the window.

"I wish to make a deposit," he said, thrusting the deposit slip through the window, together with ten of the one-hundred-dollar bills he had received from the bank earlier in the day.

The man at the window was smiling and affable. "You should go down to the fourth window," he said, "the one marked 'Deposits—M to R'."

Paul Pry looked apologetic and embarrassed.

"Just right down there where you see the lettering over the window," said the man, smiling unctuously.

Paul Pry walked slowly past the cashier's window. He was in time to hear the cashier say to the officer: "It's quite all right, Madson. We can't cash this check because the signature is irregular; but Mr. Hammond promises that he will rectify the matter, so far as Mr. Burke is concerned. It seems there's been a very serious mistake, for which the bank is in no way responsible. It's due to the carelessness of a customer in mailing checks payable to bearer . . ."

There was more, which Paul Pry could

not hear because it was delivered in a lower voice, a voice which was almost surreptitiously confidential, and because appearances required that Paul Pry should move over toward the window which had been pointed out to him.

He did, however, see the young lady move away from the window, in the direction of the telephone booths. She dropped a coin and called a number. She talked rapidly and excitedly, then paused to listen for several seconds, at the end of which time she nodded her head and hung up the telephone.

Paul Pry followed her from the bank, down to the curb, where he saw the same car which he had seen parked in front of the post office. The young woman got into the car, which at once drove off.

This time, Paul Pry's car was parked where he had no difficulty in getting into an advantageous position directly behind the coupe which he was trailing. He ripped the red police tag from the steering wheel, thrust it in his pocket, and concentrated his attention upon following the car ahead.

It was not a particularly easy task. The young woman in the car ahead was a good driver, and she was evidently going some place in very much of a hurry.

The car stopped, at length, in front of a building which apparently housed a speakeasy. The young woman left the car, walked across the curb with rapid, nervous steps, rang a bell and stood perfectly still while a panel slid back in the door and a face regarded her.

A moment later, the door opened, and the young woman vanished.

The coupe left the curb, and, as it sped away, the driver turned for one last look at the door where the young woman had been admitted.

Paul Pry started nervously as he saw the face pressed against the glass in the rear window of the coupe. It was the

face of the young woman he had met previously in the apartment which Charles B. Darwin had maintained so secretly, the young woman who had been trying on clothes in front of the mirror. However, it was too late then to do anything about it. The coupe continued on its way, and Paul Pry began to put into operation a certain very definite plan he had in mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cross-Stitch Killer

THERE was a drug store across the street, and Paul Pry stepped across to it, purchased a woman's purse, a lip stick, compact, handkerchief, a package of chewing gum. He paid for the purchases with one of the hundred-dollar bills he had received, and thrust the change into the purse. He also folded two more of the hundred-dollar bills and pushed them into the purse. The drug clerk watched him curiously, but said nothing.

Paul Pry walked back across the street to the speakeasy. He rang the bell and a panel slid back.

"About four or five minutes ago," said Paul Pry, "there was a young woman, a brunette, wearing a blue skirt and a small, tight-fitting, blue hat. She got out of a coupe and came in here."

"What about it?" said the frosty voice of the man who regarded Paul Pry with hostile eyes through the wicket in the doorway.

"I've got to see her," said Paul Pry.

"You got a card?"

"No. But I've got to see that young woman."

"You can't see her."

Paul Pry fidgeted. "You see," he said, "she dropped her purse. I picked it up and intended to return it to her. Then

I looked inside of it and saw what was in it, and the temptation was too much for me. I started to run away with it. You see, I've got a wife and a couple of kiddies who haven't had anything much to eat for two or three days now. I've been out of work and my savings are completely used up. I had to do anything I could to get by. When I saw the money in this purse, I decided I wouldn't return the purse. Then, after I'd walked half a block, I realized I couldn't steal, so I had to bring it to her."

"All right," said the man, "give me the purse and I'll take it to her."

Paul Pry opened the purse. "Look," he said, "there's almost three hundred dollars in it."

"I'll take it to her," said the man in the doorway.

"Like hell you will," said Paul Pry. "She'll probably give me a five spot, or perhaps a ten, or she might even get generous and give a twenty. That would mean a lot to me. I couldn't take the purse, but I sure as hell could take a reward."

"If she wants to give you a reward, I'll bring it to you," said the man.

Paul Pry's laugh was mocking and scornful.

The man on the other side of the door seemed undecided.

"You either let me in and I take it to her personally," said Paul Pry, "or she doesn't get it. If you want to keep a customer from getting her purse back, it's all right by me; I've done my duty in trying to return it. If you won't let her have it, I'll put an ad in the paper telling the whole circumstances."

"Look here," said the man who glowered through the opening in the doorway, "this is a high-class restaurant. We put on a floor show, and the young woman who just came in is one of the girls who works in the floor show. Now you've

got that purse and it belongs to her. If you try to take it away, I'll call a cop and have you arrested."

Paul Pry sneered. "A fat chance you've got of calling a cop," he said. "I'd raise a commotion and tell the whole cockeyed world that this place was a speakeasy; that I was trying to get in to return the purse and you wouldn't let me in, but started calling a cop. If you're a respectable restaurant why the hell don't you open your door so the public can patronize you?"

The bolts slipped back in the door.

"Oh hell," said the man, "come on in and get it over with. You're just one of those damn pests that show up every so often."

"Where do I find her?" asked Paul Pry.

"The name is Ellen Tracy. She's in one of the dressing rooms up on the second floor. I'll have one of the waiters take you up."

"And want to chisel in on the reward," said Paul Pry. "Not much you don't. I'm on my way right now."

He pushed past the man and ran up the stairs.

THERE was a telephone at the man's elbow. As Paul Pry was halfway up the stairs he heard the telephone ring, heard the man answer it and then lower his voice to a mere confidential mumble.

Paul Pry would have given much to have heard that conversation, but he had no time to wait. With his sword cane grasped firmly in his hand, he took the stairs two at a time. He walked rapidly across a dance floor, pushed his way through a curtained doorway, walked up a flight of steps. He saw a row of doors, one with the name "Ellen Tracy" painted on it. He tapped with his knuckles.

"Who is it?" called a woman's voice.

"A package for you," said Paul Pry.

The door opened a few inches. A woman's hand and bare arm protruded. "Give it to me," she said.

Paul Pry pushed the door open.

She fell back with a little scream.

She had slipped out of her dress and was attired in underwear, shoes and stockings. There was a costume on a stool beside a dressing table and a kimona draped carelessly over a chair. The young woman made no attempt to pick up the kimona, but stood staring at Paul Pry, apparently entirely unconscious of her apparel.

"Well," she said, "what's the big idea?"

"Listen," said Paul Pry, "I came from him—the man who got you to get that check from the post office. You know what I mean."

Her face was suddenly drained of color, her eyes dark with alarm. "Yes," she said in a low, half-choked voice.

"What did they tell you at the bank?" said Paul Pry. "It's important as hell."

"Mr. Hammond," she said, "said that he would make the check right. He wanted the bank to cash it, but they wouldn't cash a forged check. He said that he'd make the check good. I telephoned a few minutes ago and explained the whole thing. You should have known."

"There's some question about that," Paul Pry said. "You telephoned to the wrong number. Somebody else seems to have got the information. Are you sure you telephoned to the right number?"

There was a puzzled frown on her forehead. She nodded slowly.

"What was the number?" asked Paul Pry.

She fell back from him suddenly, as though he had struck her. Her face was deathly white. She seemed to shrink within herself. "Who . . . who . . . who

are you?" she asked in a voice which was shrill with panic.

"I told you who I am," Paul Pry said.

She shook her head slowly. Her eyes were wide and dark. "Get out of here!" she said in a half-whisper. "For God's sake get out of here while there's still time!"

Paul Pry took a step toward her. "Listen," he said, "you either know what you're mixed up in or you don't. In any event. . . ."

A woman's scream, shrill and high-pitched, interrupted his sentence. The scream seemed to come from one of the adjoining dressing rooms.

PAUL PRY stood still, listening, his eyes slitted, his mouth a thin, straight line. The scream rang out again, louder and more insistent.

Paul Pry stared at the woman. "Who's that screaming?" he asked.

She could hardly answer, so great was her terror. Her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. Her throat seemed paralyzed. At length, she stammered: "It's Thelma . . . that's her room next to mine."

"Thelma?" asked Paul Pry.

She nodded.

"Tell me," said Paul Pry, "was that the girl who drove the coupe that took you to the post office and the bank?"

She nodded once more.

Paul Pry jabbed his finger at her as though he had been stabbing her with a weapon. "You," he said, "stay right there. Don't you make a move. Don't try to go out. Don't let anyone else in. When I come back you let me in. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

Paul jerked the door open.

The scream from the adjoining dressing room sounded once more as Paul Pry jumped through the doorway into

the corridor, and flung himself at the door of the next dressing room.

The door was unlocked.

Paul Pry pushed his way into the dressing room, then, at what he saw, kicked the door shut behind him.

The young woman who had given him the name of Thelma, when he had caught her trying on clothes in the millionaire's apartment, was standing in the far corner of the room. Her waist was torn open at the throat, ripped for its entire length. The brassiere was pulled down from her shoulders. Her hair was in disarray. Her skirt was lying on a chair. Her step-ins were torn in two or three places. She held a gun in her right hand. As Paul Pry kicked the door shut, she screamed again.

Paul Pry stared at her and at the gun.

"O. K., Thelma," he said. "What's the trouble? Quick!"

She swayed toward him. "C-c-c-can't you see?" she said.

"I can see plenty," he told her, looking at the white of the girl's skin, a white which showed angry red places where, apparently, blows had been rained.

"Did you see the man who went out of here?" she asked.

Paul Pry shook his head. He was staring at her with eyes narrowed.

"I c-c-c-can't tell you," she said. "Come over here and let me w-w-w-whisper to you. It was awful!"

Paul Pry moved toward her.

She shivered. "I'm c-c-c-cold," she said. "I'm going to faint. Take off your coat and put it around me. I'm so c-c-c-cold. Put your coat around my shoulders." She swayed toward him.

Paul Pry jumped forward and caught her by the shoulders. He spun her abruptly, brutally, jerking the gun from her hand as he did so.

She staggered halfway across the small

dressing room, dropped to a chair and sat staring at Paul Pry with startled eyes.

"All right," said Paul Pry, "now give me the low-down and do it quick!"

"How did you know?" she asked.

"It was too raw," he told her. "Give me the low-down."

"I don't think I could have gone through with it anyway," she said. "But my life depended on it."

"All right," he said, "I think I know the answer, but tell me what it was."

"I saw that you were following us," she said. "I recognized you. I telephoned the information to the party to whom I make my reports. He told me to rush up to my dressing room, pull my clothes off, make it look as though I had been attacked, and scream. When you came in, I was to shoot. He gave me the gun, but he didn't trust me. He only gave me one shell in the gun. I was to fire that one shell when you were so close I couldn't miss. When he heard the shot, he was to come in. I was to swear that you had tried to attack me."

"Then what?" asked Paul Pry.

"That's all," she said, "if the sound of the shot attracted any attention. If it didn't, I wasn't going to figure in it. I wasn't going to have to say anything. He was going to dispose of your body some way; I don't know how. All I had to do was to pack up my things and take a long trip around the world. He was going to give me the tickets and everything."

"And if you didn't do it?" asked Paul Pry.

"Then," she said, "neither one of us was to come out of here alive."

"You know of the murderous activities of this man you're working for?" asked Paul Pry.

She hesitated a moment, then nodded her head. "Yes," she said slowly, "I know now. I didn't until a few minutes ago."

"And," said Paul Pry, "he's here in this restaurant?"

"He owns the place," she said.

PAUL PRY flipped open the cylinder of the gun. It was as the young woman had said—there was but one shell in it.

Paul Pry pushed the cylinder back into position. "Let's get out," he said.

She shook her head. "You can't do it," she said. "He's waiting outside, and he's got another man with him. They're going to kill us both unless I go through with what he told me to do."

"Suppose no one from the outside hears the shot?" said Paul Pry. "Then what?"

"Then," she said, "I think . . ."

"Go on," he told her, as her voice trailed away into silence, "tell me what you think."

Her voice came in a whisper. "I think," she said, "he's going to sew up your lips and dump your body somewhere."

She shuddered and trembled as though with a chill.

Paul Pry stood in front of her, staring at her with level, appraising eyes. "Look here, Thelma," he said, "if you're lying to me it's going to mean your life. Tell me the truth. If no one hears the shot, he's going to dispose of my body that way?"

She nodded, then said, after a minute, in a dull, hopeless tone: "But it's no use now. We're both going to die. You don't know him. You don't know how absolutely, unutterably ruthless, how unspeakably cruel. . . ."

Paul Pry moved swiftly. He took the dressing table, tilted it to a sharp angle, pulled open one of the drawers, inserted the revolver and pulled the trigger.

The gun gave forth a muffled boom.

Paul Pry toppled the dressing table to the floor. It fell with a bang which shook the walls.

Paul Pry, stepping back, tossed the

useless gun to the floor, took the razor-keen blade of his sword cane from its scabbard, held himself flat against the wall, just to one side of the door, so that the opening door would serve to conceal him from those who entered the room.

There was a period of silence.

Thelma put her head in her hands and started to cry.

Slowly, the knob on the door rattled into motion. The latch clicked; the door opened slowly. Two men entered the room. Paul Pry could hear the sounds of their shuffling feet, but could not see them.

A masculine voice said: "Where is he, Thelma?"

The sobbing girl said nothing, but kept her face in her hands, sobbing hopelessly.

The men moved further into the room. One of them walked toward her.

Paul Pry took a deep breath and kicked the door shut.

Two pairs of startled eyes stared at him. One of the men was the man who had been on guard at the door of the speakeasy. The other was a man Paul Pry had never seen before—a well-dressed man with curly, black hair, eyes that glinted with dark fire. He had a saturnine cast to his countenance, and his face seemed to radiate a sort of hypnotic power.

Both men had guns which dangled from their hands.

The man who had guarded the door of the speakeasy was nearest to Paul Pry. He raised his gun.

PAUL PRY lunged forward. The slender blade of his sword cane, appearing hardly stronger than a long darning needle, flicked out like the tongue of a snake. The glittering steel embedded itself in the left side of the man's chest.

The man wilted into lifelessness. Blood spurted along the stained steel of the cane

as Paul Pry whipped it out and whirled.

The man with the dark, curly hair fired.

The bullet clipped past Paul Pry's body so close that it caught the folds of his coat, tugging and ripping at the garment as though some invisible hand had suddenly snatched at the cloth.

Paul Pry's slender steel flicked out and down. The razor-keen edge cut the tendons on the back of the man's right hand. The nerveless fingers dropped the gun to the floor.

With an oath, he jumped back, flung his left hand under the folds of his coat, whipped out a long-bladed knife.

Paul Pry lunged once more. The man parried the lunge with his knife. Steel grated on steel.

Paul Pry's light blade was turned aside by the heavy knife. The momentum of Pry's lunge carried him forward. The dark-haired man laughed sardonically as he turned the point of the knife toward Paul Pry's throat.

But Paul Pry managed, by a super-human effort, to catch himself just as he seemed on the point of impaling his throat on the knife. His adversary recognized too late that he had lost the advantage. He thrust outward with the knife, but his left hand made the thrust awkward and ill-timed. Paul Pry jumped back from the thrust. Once more the point of his sword cane was flickering in front of him, a glittering menace of steel which moved swiftly.

"So," he said, "you know how to fence?"

The dark-haired man held the heavy knife in readiness to parry the next thrust. "Yes," he said, "I know how to fence far better than you, my friend."

"And I suppose," said Paul Pry, "that is the knife which accounted for the men whose lips were sewed together."

"Just a little trade mark of mine," ad-

mitted the man with the knife. "When I leave here, your lips and Thelma's lips will be sewed in the same manner. I'll drop your bodies. . . ."

Paul Pry moved with bewildering swiftness. The point of his narrow steel blade darted forward.

The man flung the knife into a position to parry the thrust. "Clumsy," he said.

But Paul Pry's wrist deflected the point at just the proper moment to slide the slender steel just inside the blade of the heavy knife.

The dark-haired man had time to register an expression of bewildered consternation. Then Pry's flicking bodkin buried itself in his heart, and his face ceased to show any expression whatever.

CHAPTER SIX

Fifty Grand

MUGS MAGOO stared with wide eyes at Paul Pry as he entered the apartment. "Say something," he pleaded.

Paul Pry smiled, took off his hat and coat.

"What shall I say?"

"Anything," Mugs Magoo said, "just so I can tell that your lips aren't stuck together with cross-stitches."

Paul Pry took a cigarette case from his pocket, took out a cigarette and inspected the end critically. "Well, Mugs," he said, "suppose I smoke? How would that be?"

"That'd be all right," said Mugs. "Where were you last night?"

"Oh, just around doing things," said Paul Pry. "I had a couple of young women I had to see off on a plane."

"Good looking?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"Well," said Paul Pry, "they had mighty fine figures, and if they hadn't been so badly frightened they'd have been pretty good lookers."

"And then what did you do with the early part of the morning?"

"I had to cash a check," said Paul Pry.

"I thought you cashed that one yesterday."

"I did, Mugs, but you see, there was a misunderstanding about the check that I left in its place, so Mr. Hammond sent another check for twenty-five thousand to the same party at General Delivery."

"And why didn't the party get that one?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry sighed. "That," he said, "is rather a long story."

Eva Bentley pushed open the door of the glass compartment where she had been taking down the radio calls. "There's a lot of hot stuff coming in over the radio," she said, "about this cross-stitch murder."

Paul Pry puffed complacently on his cigarette. "What is it?" he said. "Can you tell me what's happening?"

"Yes," she said. "There's a broadcast out for the apprehension of two women. One of them is Ellen Tracy and the other is Thelma Peters. They were employed as entertainers and floor girls in a downtown speakeasy."

PAUL PRY'S face showed no expression other than a mild curiosity. "Indeed?" he said. "And just what have these two young ladies been doing?"

"The police think," she said, "that they can give valuable information about the cross-stitch murderer. In fact, they think the girls might have been implicated in the murders—perhaps unwillingly."

"And what," asked Paul Pry, with that same expression of polite curiosity in his face, "gives the police that impression?"

"Because," said Eva Bentley, "the police raided the speakeasy on a tip this morning about ten o'clock. They found two bodies in the dressing room which had been occupied by Thelma Peters. The men had evidently fought with a knife and pistol, and there may have been an-

other man present in the room. In fact, the police think there was.

"On one of the bodies the police found a surgeon's needle and some thread of exactly the same kind which was used in making the cross-stitches on the lips of the murder victims. The police started an investigation and are pretty well satisfied the man is the cross-stitch murderer. They found evidence which tied him up with a wholesale murder plot. It seems that he'd been collecting money from half a dozen different millionaires, threatening to murder them if they gave the police any information whatever. The two people who were killed were those who had given the police information, but the cross-stitch murderer figured that he'd kill a couple of millionaires anyway, in order to get the newspaper notoriety which would strike terror into the hearts of his proposed victims."

"Rather a neat scheme," said Paul Pry. "And, by the way, have the police any trace of the two young ladies?"

"Not yet; they've just broadcast a general description."

Paul Pry looked at his wristwatch.

"Doubtless," he said, "by this time, the young ladies are far, far away, which, probably, is just as well. Possibly they were intimidated, by the man for whom they worked, into taking certain isolated steps in connection with a murder campaign, but didn't know just how those steps were connected up at the time."

"Perhaps," said Eva Bentley, staring at Paul Pry curiously. "The police have a description, however, of a young man who entered the speakeasy just about the time when the autopsy surgeon estimates the two men were killed. Would you like to hear that description?"

Paul Pry yawned and shook his head. "No," he said, "I don't think so. Really, Miss Bentley, I'm not particularly interested in the cross-stitch murders any more."

Mugs Magoo stared at him with stupefied wonder for a moment, then suddenly reaching out, he grasped the neck of the whiskey bottle in his left hand, and, disdainful the use of a glass, tilted the bottle to his lips, letting the contents gurgle down his throat.

Featured in the Next Issue

WINKING DEATH

by

ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

—and we're covering all bets that you won't be able to guess why the electric sign on Eva Fitch's sanitarium spelled "DEATH" at the moment her body was dragged from the river. Or why the numeral "7" was drawn in the very center of the pool of blood on the carpet. Or why the murderer climbed a tree.

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GROWING PAINS

OUT in Iowa, in the heart of the corn belt where things really begin to sprout when the weather gets right, the natives will tell you that on a hot night you can go out in the fields and *hear* the corn grow.

We've never had a chance to test out their assertion, and we haven't the faintest idea what kind of noise fodder might make as it burgeons. But we have had ample opportunity to observe the growth of this magazine. And while *DIME DETECTIVE'S* increase in stature has been a reasonably noiseless process—with the exception of an occasional cheer from enthusiastic readers—and quite independent of the weather or any limited section of the country—it has been a very visible one. And we're willing to bet that that's more than even the most loyal booster in the corn belt can say about his favorite crop. We have yet to hear anyone say, "Come out in the south forty and *watch* the corn sprout by moonlight."

But we'll extend an open invitation to anyone, by day or night, to take a squint at *DIME DETECTIVE'S* growth since it sent up its first shoot two years ago. Month by month it's increased in popularity; increased in size—do you remember when it came out only once a month?—and what's more important still, increased its determination to print the very cream of detective and mystery fiction and nothing else.

Issue by issue we have tried to add new authors to our contents page who would

help strengthen the magazine, make it even more of a thrill treat than it was before. This time we have dragged Russ Meservey into the fold with what we thought was a swell horror yarn.

Let's let him introduce himself.

Born St. Patrick's Day, 1898, Mankato, Minn. Raised along north border states, Wis., Minn., N. Dak., Mont. Wisconsin U '20. Tried to join R.A.F., Toronto, 1915, but Ma caught me by the seat of the pants. Retaliated by bumming for six months from Mont. to New Mex. and back. Swell time on an empty stomach. Joined U. S. Air Force, 1917. Flew through the battles of Kelly, Selfridge, Mitchell, Hazelhurst (now Roosevelt) Fields. Citation for beer consumption. H. D'd. January, 1919. Aviators drug on market. Back to Wis. U and became interested in writing, but campus hill wore me down. Oil fields of Oklahoma. Osage Indians,

tarantulas, rattlers, sweat, gambling, five bucks a day. Wrote on the side for nothing. Twin Cities, Minn., again. Wrote a book on character analysis. It'll be an heirloom when I die. Starved into barnstorming. Starved barnstorming. Flew a bit of rum from Canada. Married. Came east. Managed a traveling theatrical stock company in New England states. Wrote a play. Terrible! Put it with character analysis book. Stranded with wife in N. Y. C. Xmas morning, '25. Got job posing for George Luks, N.A., as a mug, fifteen a week. Wrote short stories. Met writers, artists—a mad mob. Got another job, flying instructor, Curtiss Field, L. I. Took an editor up one day. Maybe scared him into buying some air stories. After while quit instructing. Ten to sixteen hours a day at typewriter, sometimes. Sometimes 0.

Thanks, Mr. Meservey. And it's up to you readers to let us know whether he put a couple of extra thrill pounds on the magazine. How about it?



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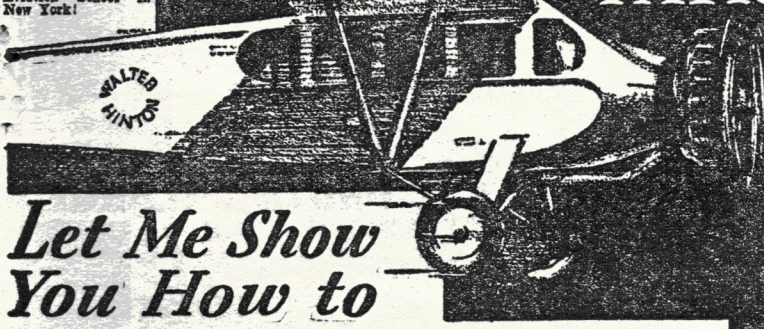
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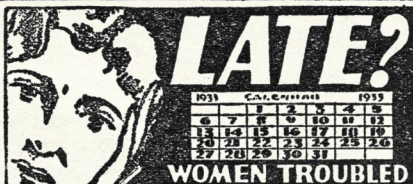
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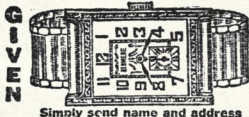
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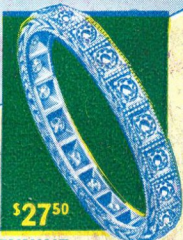
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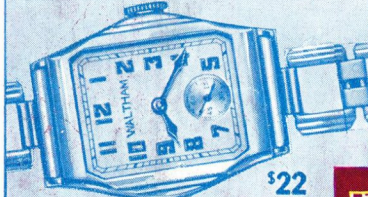
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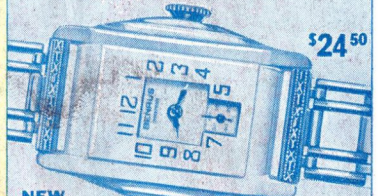
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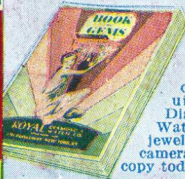


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